**There Be Dragons, Harry**

**by Scioneeris**

**Summary**

Harem!Fic Harry inherits a creature "thing" from both sides of his parents and somehow that leads to weird sleeping habits, conversations with Theodore Nott and finding himself caught up in a world of Dragons, elemental powers and new creatures he's never heard of before. Dragons? Mates? Very AU. Contains all kinds of slash.

**Notes**

**Timeframe:**
Sixth Year at Hogwarts-1996.

Pairings:
At the present 50th chapter, the pairings are currently,
Harry Potter x Theodore Nott x Charlie Weasley x Quinn Kalzik.
Draco Malfoy x OMC x Severus Snape
Hermione x OMC

Disclaimer:
I do not own any Harry Potter anything. That belongs to J.K. Rowling. I just like playing with Harry in my own little world of storyville. I make no money by writing this fanfiction. All original characters are my own.

Author's Notes: Starts out extremely angsty and with mentions of abuse/depression. Please beware of this!
A creature!Harry fic where I'm taking as many liberties as I can get away with-it is AU after all. (things like Cho being in the same year as Harry, etc) Updates are based on what I have written and when I have time to update. I am a busy student. Pairings are currently Harry/Theo/Charlie/OMC/?

See the end of the work for more notes.
The pains started shortly after his birthday.

Harry remembered staring at the clock and feeling absolutely nothing when the numbers flickered over to what they ought to be. It had been a horrible day. The worst birthday yet—and the worst summer he'd spent at the Dursley's so far. Today hadn't been any exception.

A shudder wracked his body as he lay on his stomach, fighting to control his breathing in even, slow draws. He felt completely helpless and dirty.

Everything had just gone all wrong since he'd returned this year. A tremor wriggled through him and Harry clenched his teeth together, tight. A sudden wave of pain washed over him, once, twice and then a third time.

His thoughts and musings went elsewhere as Harry felt himself slipping. He only remembered a few precious moments of sanity—and then the real pain began.

At first, he thought it might drive him mindless, but that thought flew out the window when he distracted himself by recounting every single painful incident that had ever happened to him in the course of the few years he'd been alive.

Well, granted, sixteen years wasn't really a few—but it was the principle of the thing.

Harry drifted in and out of the painful haze, writhing, twisting and screaming, though it seemed as if his screams went unheard. No one came—and no one complained either. Harry felt himself grow weak as his throat ached and his voice grew hoarse with all the screaming.

The pain was worse than even the Cruciatus curse several times over and Harry could remember that moment all too well.

At some point, he exhausted himself, physically—there was simply no strength left within him to lift his limbs and it seemed as if even thinking hurt his very being. His magic waned and dribbled away and Harry was helpless to stop it from leaving.

He felt a terrible coldness seep into him and then, a sudden, striking emptiness.

It was gone.

His mind was too befuddled to properly process that, but it didn't stop more tears from welling up in his already burning eyes. He snuffled into the thin sheets of his bed and that was it.

When Harry woke the next morning, the night's events felt like a distant dream.

Attempting to rouse himself from the awkward position of half-on and half-off the bed, tangled up in the sheets, Harry discovered just how distant that particular dream was.

A whimper sounded as he tumbled to the floor and somehow managed to spring up on shaky hands and knees, when his body collided painfully with the wooden floor. The sudden movements did nothing to ease his discomfort and after several moments of careful shifting, Harry gingerly stretched upwards to his feet.
He made it about halfway to his bedroom door before the pain grew too much and he collapsed on the cold, wooden floor and blacked out.

When Harry woke again, he wasn't sure how much time had passed. He was relieved to find that his body no longer protested every movement or thought and doubly happy to note that there was practically no pain left at all.

He yawned and stretched up from the floor and found himself making up the bed before the rest of his sleep-fogged mind caught up to him. It was cold in the room and he wasn't wearing anything.

A scowl presented itself and Harry rummaged around to find a new shirt, shorts and pants. He found socks last and slowly put them on, wondering what had happened to his pajamas during the night. He'd seen a few small scraps of fabric as he'd made up the bed, but nothing big enough to verify that it had been his pajamas.

He sighed. An urge to get to the bathroom made itself known and he padded over to the door and tested the knob.

The locks were open and he pushed the door out, stepping into the hall. It seemed about midday, if his guess was accurate and Harry made his way to the bathroom, listening carefully for any sound from the Dursley's.

He heard none.

He slipped into the bathroom, feeling rather smug with himself and went about his morning business. He stood in front of the sink, washing his hands when he finally caught sight of his face.

He wasn't wearing his glasses.

Bright green eyes stared back at him.

Green eyes with black-cat-like slit pupils.

Harry choked.

The garbled, strangled sound seemed stuck in his throat and Harry bent to splash several handfuls of cold water on his face.

When he surfaced again, the reflection hadn't changed.

In fact, Harry was sure he could see even more changes now.

His creamy skin was even paler than he remembered and his messy hair now curled at the tips. His ears were now slightly pointed and a pale silver-peach tint seemed to run all along them. He reached up, tentatively stroking the colors, shocked when his fingers touched, cool, small scales.

They were icy to the touch and they rippled as he stroked them, first one ear and then the other. Panic nearly set in, but as Harry began to worry—the scales faded into his skin right before his eyes.

Harry ripped off his shirt and stared.

The familiar battery of scars and bruises—Uncle Vernon's weekly present—were gone. Even the few scars he'd accumulated thanks to Voldemort, were conspicuously absent.
Harry swallowed. He was, by no means, a vain person, but a certain thrill ran through him as he took in the smooth, unblemished skin. He'd wondered a few times, what it would be like to look normal—normal as a regular teenage boy without battle scars and other injuries.

He admired himself for a minute, before he realized the soft, silvery-white glow that came to his skin. Careful examination showed that he had the same silver-peach scales decorating his sides. As he focused on them, the scales grew more prominent and he could see how well they covered his body.

From the tops of his shoulders, his arms and then the sides of his torso and his back and then they disappeared into the waistline made by his pants. Harry hummed to himself as he shimmied out of the rest of his clothes to see what other secrets his body had to show him.

There was a maze of tattoos down his back. It was as if someone had simply decided to trace an entire set of swirls, circles and knots all across his body, ending in a pointed swirl right above his tailbone and never reaching the tops of his shoulders or the more colorful scales on the sides of his torso.

A pleased sound rumbled in his throat and Harry found himself smiling at his reflection. A smile that melted away to a look of horror when he realized that a fine smattering of colored scales now decorated the sides of his face and neck and his hands had turned into strong, pointed, claws.

The squeak that left his lips was quite undignified, but Harry was too startled to speak. No sooner had he realized the reality of his claws, before he felt his feet curl and then his socks were shredded away and Harry realized that even his feet had morphed to show the powerful claws.

Twin strips of fire ran up and down his back, along his shoulder blades and then a muffled cry drew Harry's attention back to the mirror.

He stared in awe.

Two large, scaled wings had burst from his back and the last traces of any human skin had been swiftly covered by the silver-peach tinted scales. The wings were bloody and wrinkled, and instinctively, Harry worked to pull them close to him and to stretch and soothe the appendages.

He found himself slipping into a strange sort of daze as he took a shower without a single thought as to what his dear Aunt Petunia would think if she knew 'the freak' was using her precious bathroom.

He took his time with the shower, washing his wings and his entire body. When the shower was over, he towed himself dry with a the softest specimen he could find. Aunt Petunia would certainly throw a fit. He snickered and continued his careful toweling.

The very process seemed to do wonders for the winged appendages as he was able to spread them almost entirely. They remained painfully sensitive and it wasn't until Harry worried how he'd hide them that he saw them shrink and recede into his back, amidst the tangle of moving tattoos.

Moving tattoos.

Harry stifled a moan as he felt a flicker of himself return. Strange things always happened to him. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was turning into some dragon-wizard hybrid.
A twinge of unease registered at that and Harry hurriedly dressed and retreated to his room. He was puzzled by the strange emptiness of the house and the distinct lack of noise. His curiosity got the better of him and Harry went downstairs to investigate—after checking the driveway from his window.

It seemed as if the Dursley's had gone out.

Where, Harry didn't know and quite frankly, didn't really care.

They'd left him—though that was nothing new—and he was hungry!

In a sudden fit of near rebellion, he yanked open the fridge and began to pull out items at random. He made himself a sandwich of sorts, before his stomach gave an impressive rumble and Harry found himself sitting at the table, gorging himself on the raw meat from the fridge.

By the time he caught up with his actions, the deliciously full sensation of his stomach swiftly overrode any thoughts of disgust and repulsion. Harry then meticulously cleaned up the mess he'd made and went upstairs again.
Heading to Hogwarts

Chapter Summary

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He took another shower—just because he could—and retreated upstairs to his room. Hedwig appeared at that point and Harry opened the window to let her in. She nipped his fingers affectionately and stuck out one foot bearing shrunken parcels.

He took the parcel and carried her to the perch on his desk. It took a moment to fill her cage with water and food and she hooted her approval as he went to investigate what she'd brought.

Harry eagerly dug into the packages to find a letter from The Burrow and a box of delicious foodstuffs. He nibbled on a few things, glad to see that Mrs. Weasley had cast a standard preservation charm over the goods and then settled down on his bed to read the only letter.

He'd felt a little down that Ron and Hermione hadn't written as they usually would have, but he pushed those thoughts away as he realized that nearly everyone at The Burrow had had a hand in writing his 'birthday letter'. He could make out the scrawls of Ron and Ginny, along with Hermione's neat print and the Twins wrote in the same way they spoke and Harry found himself simultaneously laughing and crying as he folded up the parchment.

He missed them!

He missed them all so much it hurt.

He learned that it had been nearly two weeks since his birthday and that Hermione had his present and would give it to him at school. Ron explained that they'd sent owls only to have them return.

They'd worried and spoken to Dumbledore, who had assured them that Harry was fine as far as he could tell.

Harry wondered how he knew, but pushed that thought away for later perusal as well. He eventually ate some more and hunkered down for bed. It was early in the afternoon, but he could feel his body beginning to shut down.

His mind was wide awake however and so Harry forced himself to think and chose a sensible course of action.

Reading.

Of course. He thought, wryly. That would help. He rummaged through the textbooks in his trunk.
and the few gifted books from Hermione. He searched and was relieved to find one on Magical Creatures—courtesy of Hagrid's class.

"How lucky." He muttered, flopping back onto the bed and cracking the book open.

He skimmed through the pages, having searched the index for 'dragons'. A slight hitch caught in his throat as Harry found several entries under "D" with reference to dragons. He read through the first three, Dragons, Dragoon, Drakken's and finally, Dragel's—an entry marked with an asterisk. He wondered why as he traced his finger to the page number and flipped to the necessary chapter.

The words seemed to swim before his eyes and Harry found himself reading with the feeling in his stomach growing worse with every line.

Dragel's are an extinct breed of a humanoid-elemental-dragon hybrid. Believed to be the result of a triad bonding between a powerful wizard, a Saurdahn warrior and an equally powerful and sentient dragon from one of the four elemental clans. The four elemental dragon clans have been hunted to extinction shortly after closing themselves off from wizarding and human society.

It is believed that the magical spirits left behind by these powerful creatures are the roots of all elemental powers today. Dragel's were considered to be powerful and beautiful creatures of grace and lethal skill. Often in a human form, Dragel's have anywhere from four to six alternate forms and a true form, which shows their complete dragon self.

In their true form, a Dragel's massive physical size and magical power poses a severe threat and as such, the Ministry of Magic forbade them to appear in their true forms. When such measures were protested, Dragel's were consequently classified as magical creatures and treated as such, in spite of their attributed power and intelligence. Dragel's are known for manipulation of wild magic—untamed, raw, magical power. Their ability to harness and control it made them targets for power-hungry poachers and political parties, as a Dragel's life is stake on honor and loyalty.

Dragel's are fiercely protective of their circles—immediate family and friends—and will gladly sacrifice anything to keep their circles safe and sound. and during the earliest history of wizarding wars, Dragel's were excused from combat due to the potentially unlimited amount of destruction they could cause in their true forms. As Dragel's are loyal to their own kind, they refuse to fight with each other, unless there are no other options or their nature deems otherwise.

Dragel scales, hairs, fluids and organs are invaluable in potions and rituals, particularly Blood Magic, due to the residual magical energy that resides within them. Dragel's are considered to be borderline dark creatures and it is speculated that it is the sole reason they were hunted to extinction. There are several specimens on display in the Magical Museum of History. Dragels remain as creatures of legend and are often used in children's fairytales.

Dragels use circles to classify their mateships. There is always a minimum of three, an Alpha dominant, a Beta dominant and a submissive Bearer, to produce young. A mateship is initiated by the submissive, who emits a call of a certain intensity. A heartcry will summon potential mates and a soulcry will summon soulmates. Elaborate courting rituals vary by elemental clan and there are four stages beginning with a courtship, an engagement period, and a bonding, following by the mating. A mateship is formed based on the potential elements in a submissive and the intensity of the submissive's magical signature.

The largest known mateship was twenty-seven bonded which produced twelve Dragel children. There are no other details on this Dragel circle. Dragels are very affectionate and colorful creatures. Unmated Dragels can become extremely dangerous and depressed if they do not find suitable mates. They thrive and feed on the love and approval of their circle and the lack of such
closeness can cause many issues.

If an important mate dies, the entire circle will mourn and all scales turn black for a period of time. If a disobedient mate is disowned or banished, Dragels will attempt to remove the mating mark given to them at the expense of their own life.

Dragels grew to be fragile creatures during their final years of existence. It is said that this weakness is what caused their extinction. They are still regarded as legendary creatures.

Harry stared at the pages.

It could almost sound right and perfect, except for—extinction?

Harry shuddered.

He didn't even want to think about this.

He really didn't want to think about it.

So he didn't.

By the time September came around, Harry was back to his almost normal self. He learned that the Dursley's had gone on vacation when he hadn't come out of his room for a week and Uncle Vernon couldn't get in, so they'd simply left.

They'd returned a week before school had started and had been shocked, surprised and outraged to learn that he was alive.

Harry hadn't cared a whit.

He'd just wanted to get to Hogwarts and to their library. He'd also learned that he was most likely a Dragel, extinct or not and he'd have to start being a little more careful until he could get his hands on the necessary vital information.

Amidst the yells and shouts of his relatives, he'd hissed at them that all he needed was a ride to King's Crossing and that he wouldn't be back the next year.

That had quieted them—temporarily.

Harry sat scrunched up in the backseat as they drove to the train station. He'd let Hedwig out and knew she would find him when he got to Hogwarts. He was trying to keep as far away from Dudley as possible—the boy kept poking, pinching and prodding him—and concentrate on school.

When they reached the station, Harry hauled his stuff out as quickly as he could, grateful for the extra touch of strength his new self had granted him. He didn't look back as he plunged into the crowds at the station and aimed for platform 9 ¾.

He didn't see Ron or Hermione—strangely enough—and when he got on board the Hogwarts Express, he shuffled all the way down to his usual compartment, only to find that everywhere was full—well, at least all the usual Gryffindor compartments were full. It didn't miss his attention that most of the students this year were rather subdued. Many of them were reading the Daily Prophet and a few spoke in whispers when he passed.

Harry wondered what he'd missed, but he didn't dare ask. Something didn't feel right about asking.

Biting his lip, Harry pressed onwards towards the Slytherin territory. He tried not to look too
closely at any of the compartments. The last thing he wanted was to meet a certain blond prat and his cronies.

Moving further down, Harry was relieved to finally see an empty compartment. He practically dove into it in relief. Taking up his usual position by the window, Harry drew his knees up to his chest and hugged them tight.

He took several slow, careful breaths and worked on chiseling away at the feelings of contained-panic and unease. He'd learned a lot about himself over the summer. Thankfully, the Dursley's had given him the best present of peace and quiet by taking their vacation and leaving him behind.

Harry had been able rest and eat to his heart's content. His new self was extremely pleased at that and Harry had even begun to do a bit of research on his 'condition' via books through Owl Order. He'd discovered an affinity for raw meat nearly every four days and a hankering for nuts and a craving for heat, walking barefoot and drinking lots of water.

He made notes of all the changes and things that had happened and then he'd battled and wrestled with himself over whether he ought to mention what had happened to anyone at all. He had brought his glasses with him—knowing that Hermione would be the first one to pick up on the fact that he didn't need them as much as he hadn't thought of a good excuse yet.

Not meeting them on the platform had sent several stabs of loneliness through him, but finding an empty compartment had cemented the unwanted feelings of despair and shame. His change had left everyone thinking he was a freak.

No! He thought, viciously. It wasn't even obvious to everyone else that he'd changed—he'd worked hard through the summer to be sure that he could maintain his human appearance as best as possible. He'd even looked up glamour charms, intending to cast one as soon as possible, only to realize that his magic had refused to cooperate.

That had sent him into a minor panic attack, but he'd pushed it aside in favor of more rational thinking. This was simply another instance where fate had decided to play with his life and as such, he'd just have to make the most of it. That had been the reason he'd ventured into Slytherin territory to find a compartment.

The door to the compartment slid open and Harry jumped. He turned and stared, even as he shrank back from the newcomer.

Tall, thin and rather pale, the boy's face was set off by striking chocolate brown hair and very thin lips and a rather pointed nose. He stared at Harry for a moment, blinked, then stepped out of the compartment, looked around and then stepped back in. His hazel eyes narrowed to points and he took a deep breath and opened his mouth to speak. His eyes grew wide and he shut his mouth with an audible click and stepped fully inside, closing the compartment door behind him. He then went about pulling down the shades and turning the lock to keep any others from entering.

Harry suppressed the urge to shiver, as the Slytherin moved to sit opposite of him, the honey-gold eyes never straying. He tried to place the face and after several minutes, he could.

Nott. Theodore Nott.

The elder Nott was a known Death Eater. Harry swallowed. He didn't know much about Theodore, except that he stood apart on his own and was careful in his associations. Careful by the fact that he could hold a civil conversation with Draco Malfoy, but would not stoop down to the blond's level in terms of Crabbe and Goyle.
Theodore continued to stare and Harry had to look away, shifting uneasily under the piercing gaze. This was going to be a long ride.
"Harry, isn't it?" The boy spoke, after a long silence between them. "Harry Potter? I am Theodore Nott, I don't believe we've been formally introduced." He said, politely.

Harry's head snapped back around to stare at him. Of course, his creature inheritance had healed every single mark on his body except for the only one that he'd wished it had. That stupid cursed lightening bolt. It was probably the only thing that would haunt him for the rest of his life—at least, at present. He eyed the other boy warily, mentally making a running set of notes in his head. The Slytherin was watching him, but hadn't offered his hand or anything like that.

Not like Draco Malfoy had on that first day.

Something had always bothered him about that—as if he'd managed to somehow jinx himself and start their rivalry by ignoring the polite gesture that day on the train. Of course, there was no way he would've been able to take that hand—not after Malfoy had insulted the Weasleys, but Ron had actually had very little to do with it.

Harry just couldn't stand bullies—and Malfoy had all but physically cut Ron down to 'size'. He couldn't have ignored that.

The silence in the little compartment strained a bit longer than was strictly polite.

"Well, are you?" Theodore prompted, not seeming the least bit bothered by the silence.

Harry swallowed again. He didn't know too much about Nott, just that his father had been arrested and thrown in Azkaban and possibly scheduled for the Dementor's Kiss. Harry was rarly able to keep up with all the news in the wizarding world—especially during the summer when he lost contact with virtually everyone and everything the moment he returned to the Dursley's.

He reminded himself that Theodore was speaking—no, had spoken—and an answer was probably required. Harry mentally backtracked, something he had been working on over the summer and retrieved the last question. Oh, right. He did have to answer to that.

So Harry merely nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak just yet.

Theodore didn't seem to mind at all. "Wonderful. It is a pleasure to officially make your acquaintance." The honey-gold eyes softened and a faint smile touched his face. "Might I inquire as to how was your summer? I'm afraid mine was a bit of a headache. Lots of paperwork to set straight since…Father was arrested." He casually pushed up the sleeves of his uniform before he made a slight motion that seemed like a cross over his chest.

Harry took notice of the movement and realized what the boy had just shown. His wrists were bare and there was no trace of the dark mark—at least, not that Harry could tell. He didn't think the boy was under a glamour, but he wasn't about to check just yet and if he didn't know better, he'd swear the boy was Catholic and had just crossed himself for speaking ill of a parent. Harry had known a few muggle children like that—he'd gone with Dudley to school a few times—before the Dursley's had discovered the wondrous world of Smeltings and decided that he'd had education enough.

Something sounded off in the back of his mind and Harry immediately pounced on the mental distraction. His new instincts were screaming at him to be careful and alert. Out of habit, he took a cautious sniff of his own and his brow furrowed as he tried to puzzle out what his instincts were telling him.
He'd gotten a teeny bit of practice in the past week—once he'd figured out that he could distinguish most scents—and had been able to pick up when his relatives were lying through their teeth, when they were terrified of him and when he ought to run. At the moment, the reaction filtering through him after a good whiff of Theodore's scent had him relaxing. His Dragel body processed the scent as something familiar and soothing—something that he didn't have to be afraid of, regardless of whether Harry agreed with it or not. It also had a slightly sweet scent—one that Harry couldn't quite place. He really needed to find more information on this Dragel thing.

"Are you alright?"

The question was completely unexpected.

Really unexpected.

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Are. You. Alright?" Theodore repeated, this time with deliberate emphasis. There was no bite to the words though, only a genuine curiosity. "You seem a little...lost. Do excuse me for asking."

"I'm fine." Harry bit off, unable to help himself for giving the curt reply. He didn't like the fact that other boy might've picked up on his current state of confusion—nor did he think it was anyone's business how he was really feeling. Mr. Theodore Nott could take his nosy questions and jump out the train window if he liked—as far as Harry was concerned, no one but his circle had the right to know how he was really—oh Merlin!

The thought had Harry consciously digging his hands into his oversized jeans with a death grip. He was thinking of a circle—Merlin's beard! He hadn't even met any potential—no, he wasn't going to let his head go in that direction. It'd only been a few weeks—okay, a month—if he counted correctly and surely that wasn't enough time to leave him thinking of things like Dragel circles and mateships and—Harry swallowed hard. He was sixteen! Sixteen! That was not old enough for this kind of...thing.

A soft groan slipped through his lips. Harry mentally resisted the urge to bang his head against the back of the train seat.

"Good." Theodore said, neutrally. He didn't seem to notice the groan, or if he did, was too polite to call attention to it as he then directed his gaze elsewhere and reached for the little knapsack he'd brought with him and drew out a large, hardcover book with gilded pages and scripted writing on the cover.

A soft whoosh of energy seemed to roll off of the tome and Harry realized it as being a special protected book. He'd heard of those. Hermione had often indulged in daydreams of owning or being allowed to read one. Harry had only half-listened to her.

He squinted slightly, drawing on his new, enhanced sight to make out the title of the book. It was a giant encyclopedia of magical creatures. Harry felt his mouth grow dry. He didn't recall that title in all his searching through the bookstore catalogues. Though from the very feeling of old, ancient magic that radiated from it, he could guess that the book might be a family heirloom—after all, most protected books were—at least, according to Hermione anyway.

A slight tingle rippled through him and Harry wished he could read it. The magic already left a rather pleasant feeling behind and Harry knew that there would be nothing dark inside of it or nothing harmful anyway.
They sat in silence for a bit.

The snack trolley went by and Theodore didn't look up, obviously engrossed in his readings, honey-golden eyes roving across the page, his lips occasionally forming the words he read.

Harry's stomach rumbled and he stood up to purchase a few snacks. He wouldn't be able to wait until dinner in the Great Hall if he didn't get something now. The ache in his stomach reminded him that sweets weren't really what he wanted, but it was the only option he had right now. So Harry purchased quite an armful and carried the sweets back to his seat and proceeded to devour practically all of them, pushing away the thought that he was literally gorging himself of pure sugar.

"That's quite a bit of sugar." Theodore commented. He looked up from his book at last, an expression of amusement on his face. He reached into his knapsack and drew out a wrapped parcel that he unshrunk and then proceeded to unwrap.

Harry's mouth watered as he caught the scent of seasoned, dried meat. Jerky. Fresh jerky. Not the packaged, processed stuff. His head popped up and he found himself staring at the rich, dark colored strips of dark meat. His teeth and gums ached, a warning that his fangs were threatening to make and appearance. It took a supreme effort of self-control for Harry to will them away, but he couldn't help staring after the wonderfully smelling strips.

Theodore's dark brows arched upwards into his hairline as he took in the expression on Harry's face. "Trade you some for a chocolate frog." He prompted, when Harry simply stared and said nothing. It wasn't difficult to read the expression on the boy's open face and Theodore felt a slight pull to rescue the boy from what would be a socially awkward moment if there were others present. He was all too familiar with the little nuances of the wizarding world, especially the social games played in the pureblooded circles. Games that he'd played a little too much due to his position and prestige.

He could tell with a glance that Harry Potter didn't play those games—visual confirmation for those particular rumors had been wonderful—for that reason alone, he'd dropped the usual mask that his name all but demanded of him when he'd pulled down the blinds on the compartment windows. It was nice to know that the purported savior of their world didn't just take things at face value.

Harry blinked as the words registered and then looked at the scattering of empty wrappers. A soft whine of distress slipped through his lips as he rifled through the mess. There really weren't any real leftovers, except for maybe a few half-eaten bites that he'd overlooked in his haste to fill his stomach.

Theodore's eyes darkened by several degrees to a rich golden brown. The whine of distress from Harry prompted a response in the way of the soft sound he made in the back of his throat, that served to smooth over the furrow in Harry's brow.

Harry's head of messy hair snapped up and for a moment, he smiled, before the expression turned bewildered.

Theodore offered him two strips of the jerky.

Harry hesitated. "Would you take a rain check on the chocolate frogs?" He asked, even as he reached for the jerky. He had to have it—rain check or not.

"Rain check?"
"Er…it's a muggle expression."

"Ah."

"It means…that, I'll get it for you later?"

"That's fine." Theodore handed over the jerky. "Make it two frogs." He retrieved another book from his knapsack and began to flip through that one. He caught Harry's gaze lingering on the book, but didn't say anything else.

They arrived at Hogwarts and Theodore held him back as he reached for the compartment door.

"Just a moment." He said, in answer to Harry's unspoken question.

"Why?"

Theodore gave a little jerk of his head and a moment later, Harry could hear Malfoy's voice ordering Crabbe and Goyle to clear a pathway for him through the usual gaggle of students. Theodore frowned, his head bent down, as if he were listening a little harder.

Harry found himself subconsciously mimicking the actions and he flinched at the amplified voice of Draco Malfoy. The customary arrogance he was used to was rather subdued and almost non-existent as he directed his cronies past and followed in their wake. It seemed as if it were merely a matter of course than the pleasure pastime that Malfoy often indulged in.

Soon they were on the ground and making their way to the carriages. Harry sucked in a breath as he saw the thestrals. A painful stab in his chest reminded him of the reason why he could see the creatures in the first place and he sucked in a breath and blew it out forcefully.

He didn't need to dwell on that now. There were other things to be worrying and thinking about. He looked around, searching for the heads of red hair that always helped to center his world. When he didn't see Ron or Hermione's usual bushy head of brown hair, he frowned.

"Something wrong?" Theodore swung himself up into a carriage and then waved him over. "You're welcome to ride with me if you like. I do not mind in the least."
Carriage Ride

"Actually, I-" Harry began. He wasn't quite sure what to answer to that, but he had a feeling that riding up to the castle with a Slytherin as a carriage mate wouldn't go over very well with some of the Gryffindors.

"Harry? Oi, mate, over here!" Ron's bellow carried easily over the crowd.

It was just the distraction that he needed. "Ron?" Harry turned and braced himself for the armful of bushy-haired witch that usually followed. It didn't come. He was mildly surprised when Hermione didn't launch herself at him the way she usually did. A closer look showed that, in fact, she wasn't even near him yet. She held Ron's hand as they approached and was busy looking over her shoulder into the crowd for something that Harry couldn't figure.

"Harry?" Ron tried again.

"Hi Ron." He managed.

Hermione turned around and her eyes lit up as they landed on Harry. "Harry!" She gushed and promptly swallowed him in a hug. He flinched, but barely—he knew she wouldn't notice it. She never had.

He gave a soft sigh as he felt the temporary tension melt away while he hugged her back, relieved to find comfort in the familiar routine. "Hey Mione." He murmured.

"I brought your birthday present." She said, releasing him. Her face was a happy flush of red and her hair was in its usual wild curls frothing about her cheeks. "Did you finish all of your summer-"

"I did!" He interrupted before she could get started. That was the only way to spare himself a lecture. "I did every single assignment and except for one halfway-essay that I'll finish tonight, I'm all done. I just couldn't finish it on the train." He added the last bit when he saw her about to comment on it. It worked, for she blinked and promptly changed course with whatever she'd been about to say.

"See, I told you, Ron." Hermione turned to the redhead who wore an expression of longsuffering on his freckled face. "I told you he'd do the smart thing and finish his work. I hope you at least did your reading, because I'm not letting you copy off of my-"

"Harry!" Ginny came barreling through the throng of students and she also flung herself at the green-eyed boy and hugged him tightly. She pretended not to notice his usual flinch. He pretended that he didn't know she knew. She'd never said anything. She certainly wouldn't start now. "I brought your birthday present too!" She crowed, giving a little bounce as she held him. "How was your summer? Are you okay? You look...different. Why do you look different when you—oh! Where's your glasses? Did you get taller?" She reached out with a hand to check his height in relation to herself. "Yeah, you did. You look...good, I think. Ron—how could you walk off and leave me all by myself to-!"

"I guess I knocked them off." Harry lied, fumbling to grab them out of the pockets in the folds of his robes. He slipped them on and grimaced. His vision went all haywire and he scowled. Thankfully, Ginny was too busy arguing with Ron to even pay attention to his lame excuse.

"Harry?" Hermione waved a hand in front of his face as she caught sight of his expression. "What's the matter?"
Harry squinted and then stared in surprise as his vision adjusted itself and he could see fine through the glasses that had just given him a near headache moments before. That was wonderful. He'd never guessed he'd be able to do something like that and it sure went a long way in making sure that he could keep up appearances in spite of his creature inheritance. That was wonderful. Most definitely quite wonderful. "Er, it's nothing, Mione. I just…had a moment." He smiled, knowing he'd have to distract her quick before she decided to pry. "C'mon, we'd better get a carriage quick." Harry looked up as Theodore's carriage lumbered off, filled with a few Slytherin second and third-years to make it up. He felt his stomach give a little twist at that and he pushed the feeling away.

He shouldn't have any feelings towards that at all.

None. Zip.

He shook his head.

Whatever it was—if there was a whatever—he'd deal with later, right now, he needed to keep his head clear and focused. He couldn't afford to give himself away.

They found a carriage and managed to catch each other up on the summer. Harry was very careful not to say much of anything, and the new version of Ginny was far more animated than he ever remembered her being—that worked quite well for him—until she finally ran out breath for a long moment.

"You're awfully quiet, Harry." Hermione eyed him critically. She hadn't given it up after all. She'd merely been biding her time waiting for the right moment. "Did something happen?" Her question drew Ron's questioning gaze and even Ginny's own concerned one. "Is there anything you need to tell us—"

"What? No, no, no! I'm fine." Harry stammered out, avoiding the brown eyes that drilled meaningfully into him. "Really, it's just been a really long…" He trailed off and pounced on the next logical thing that slipped into his head. "Actually, I couldn't find you guys on the train and it kind of threw me off. We always sit together, I mean, even when you have prefect stuff to do. Where were you? Was everything alright?" At that, both prefects blushed a bright red.

"Ah, er, never mind it, Harry. We were fine." Ron tried to smile, but he suddenly couldn't look his best friend in the face. "I guess we were distracted…too. So, ah, have you seen the latest Quidditch—"

"Is that Malfoy?" Hermione interrupted as she half-stood in her seat, craning her neck to see out. She nibbled her lower lip, her brow furrowed in concentration as she strained to see something that was too far away. "Bother that, I can't tell! Ron, is that him? Take a good look!"

"Where? Why?" Ron stretched his neck to see. "What for?"

"Didn't you hear? His father's been thrown in Azkaban with all the other Death Eaters from that recent raid, but last week there was almost a huge breakout. Again."

"Again?" Harry frowned. "What do you mean again?"

"Remember the first time the Death Eaters were released?" She perked a brow. "Bellatrix and all that? That time. Apparently, it was something like that again, only it didn't succeed. Word has it that Mrs. Malfoy is missing and up until this morning, so was Draco, but Dumbledore said that he was coming back and I haven't-"

"I saw him on the train-!" Harry began.
"I'm pretty sure that's him up there though." Hermione frowned. "Wait, you saw him on the train? How did he look?"

"What? Mione, you're not making any sense." Ron looked at her, reproachfully. "And why are you so-"

"Oh hush up, Ron." She smacked his knee, a gesture that seemed more familiar than it would've been since the last time the Golden Trio had been together. "Rumor has it that it wasn't a regular breakout in Azkaban. No one got out, but they say that something…" Hermione swallowed and lowered her voice. "Something got in."

"Something really bad." Ginny picked up. She twisted her hand together on her lap. "They say they let loose a real…monster on them. Mum wouldn't say anything else, just told me to be real—careful—this year. Said to look out." Ginny wrinkled her nose. "She had us all stay in the living room for the night too, wouldn't let us out of her sight."

Ron stifled a shudder. "I've never seen her like that. Thought she'd start crying on me or something when we had to leave. Left Fred and George to deal with her."

"Ron!" Hermione smacked his arm. "It wasn't that bad. She's just worried and I can't blame her. Whatever it is, it's got to be bad if it's got your Mum that-"

"Dementors?" Harry said, confusedly. "I thought that they couldn't-"

"No, Harry." Hermione said, patiently. "Dementor's may have some corporeal existence, but there's no way they could've done the kind of damage that Azkaban claims. It's something worse. Real monsters. Something with sharp teeth and claws and a lot of really dark magic. I think Dumbledore might know what it is, but he won't tell us. He hasn't said much of anything lately, just that this year's going to be very dangerous and different." She nibbled on her lower lip, her brow furrowed together.

Harry stared at her until she looked away uncomfortably. She knew something else, but she wasn't telling him yet. He knew that look too well and a few careful whiffs gave him all the scented confirmation he needed. She wasn't lying to him, but she'd come awfully close. A few more whiffs helped him to organize her in his head. It pained him slightly to notice that their scents had changed—how he knew they'd changed, he didn't know—but he was certain of it.

They smelled just like Ginny did and while Ginny was a friend, she'd never been as close as the other two. It didn't escape him that Hermione was set in one of her modes—he knew that look as well—Dumbledore was hiding something from them and she didn't like it. Of course, Harry reasoned, she would probably be the only one to really pick it up—and if Dumbledore had been obvious for Hermione to pick up, well, Harry didn't like that at all. He resisted the urge to shake his head to clear it. He tried to focus instead on something in the present instead of the speculations chasing each other 'round in his head. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because Dumbledore stopped at The Burrow a few times." Ron shrugged. "He didn't sign your birthday letter though, he had to leave while we were packing the parcel, said he felt something important was about to happen. We haven't seen or heard from him since-"

"Why was he there?" Harry interrupted.

"He said that Malfoy decided to come over to the side of the Light." Hermione took a deep breath. "He asked us to keep an eye on him and see if he really meant it and if he did anything…unusual."
"Unusual how?" The feeling of unease turned to ice in Harry's stomach. "Mione, what aren't you telling me?"

The redness flew from her face and Hermione took on a rather pale hue. "Er…not here, Harry." She said, at last, when it looked like he was about to demand more. "Not safe enough." Her smile was strained.

Harry forced himself to nod in return and turned to stare at the scenery until they reached Hogwarts.

Safe.

He wondered exactly how safe was safe—new Dragel attributes and all. This year was certainly setting itself up to be a miserable headache.
The welcoming feast went well.

Harry didn't remember much of it. The entire event was something of a colorful and slightly loud blur.

There were eight new additions to the Gryffindors, four to Ravenclaw, two to Hufflepuff and five to Slytherin. Harry clapped politely for them all and wearily followed his housemates to the Gryffindor tower when the meal was over.

He was exhausted.

It seemed as if all the energy he'd gathered up over the summer had evaporated within seconds of being around Hermione, Ron, Ginny and the others. He didn't get it. He thought, if anything, that he'd do even better. Being around the Dursley's had drained him—in the usual way—but that hadn't been anything out of the ordinary. Usually, the moment he was back in his friends' company, his magic levels would restore themselves thanks to the usual auras of good-will and intent.

Harry stifled a yawn and blinked, willing himself to focus. It had been a little while since he'd had to sneak away. Thankfully, his sneaking skills weren't the least bit rusty.

Now, he sat out by the Astronomy tower, wrapped in his invisibility cloak and staring up at the starred sky. He'd listened to Hermione's explanation. He'd watched Ron's embarrassed face. He'd ignored Ginny's interjections and finally, when they were all through, he had to get away.

It had taken him almost an hour to wait on Ron to fall asleep and then a little extra wrangling to slip out, undetected. But he'd done it. It hadn't been as bad as he'd thought. Just a matter of getting back into his groove.

But once he was through, it was easy to slip around the darkened castle and retreat to his favorite haunting place. Gripping his wand tightly in one hand, he tried to cast the simplest spell. "Lumos!"

Nothing happened.

Harry bit his lip. A sinking feeling had wormed its way into his stomach and taken up residence. He had a feeling—no, he had a very bad feeling—that this could not be good. He'd tried to cast a glamour earlier in the summer—uncaring as to whether there'd be anyone jumping down his throat for underage magic, but he didn't think that the Ministry of Magic would care to keep an eye out for such little blips as that.

Besides, a glamour didn't hurt anyone and shouldn't have taken much magic at all. Just like a simple lighting spell. Harry sighed. "Lumos!" He tried again and scowled when that failed to produce the desired result.

Something was really wrong here. He tried to close his eyes and think of his magic and how it was faring. Sometimes, he was able to simply relax and feel it swimming through his very veins, other times, it was almost as if it wasn't there at all—but it had never refused to show itself as it was doing now.

"Lumos!" Harry cried again.

Still no result.
He slammed his fist into the nearest wall and winced when the rough stone bruised his skin. That was an unwanted side effect. He turned his back to the wall and slid down to sit on the floor, bracing his back against the cold stone.

He didn't know what else to do. There really wasn't much else he knew to do. His first thought would've been that having a creature inheritance had somehow detracted his magic. But as far as he knew, no one had ever lost their magic simply because of a mere inheritance. Harry twisted his hands together and then tucked away his wand. He was going to have some issues in class tomorrow—that was for sure!

He thumped his head lightly on the stone walls, careful not to make it hurt. He didn't want a headache on top of the aching bruise, but he also wanted the solidness of the rock to provide him with the sliver of normality he craved.

Everything felt so horribly out of whack. Eventually, he was able to push his thoughts away and sit in uncluttered silence. Harry sat there, quietly, staring up at the night sky until his stomach rumbled.

He grimaced remembering that he hadn't had much of an appetite at the table—being unable to concentrate thanks to Hermione's mysterious words—and had consequently been unable to eat as his overexcited mind wouldn't allow him. His stomach had positively rebelled at the thought of food—especially when he saw all the cooked meats and dishes laid out for them. He knew he'd never be able to stomach it.

This had been one of the four days in his 'meat cravings' that he'd been able to pinpoint. He certainly hadn't been able to satisfy it at the Dursley's, a feat that had only gotten more difficult as the summer had worn on. He hoped it would be easier to handle now—at least, seeing as he was at Hogwarts and there were other options than stealing raw meat out of a 'fridge in the middle of the night.

Harry considered visiting the kitchens for a moment and then pushed those thoughts aside in favor of simply calling for Dobby.

The excited house elf appeared in seconds and immediately hushed at Harry's express wishes. He promised to bring the quiet boy a few slabs of rare meat and disappeared with a soft pop. Harry gratefully wrapped the picnic blanket tighter around his shoulders and then settled the invisible cloak around it a little more securely.

He felt the familiar longing to spread his wings and fly—a nightly occurrence at the Dursley's residence—one that he could never risk. Dobby reappeared a moment later with a large plate, knife and fork and two hefty chunks of rare meat.

"Thank you, Dobby." Harry murmured, gratefully. "You can go now. I'm sorry to disturb you so late in the night."

"It is no trouble for Master Harry Potter, sir." Dobby exclaimed. "I be happy to get anything Master Harry-"

"This is all, Dobby. Thanks. If you'd just pop up here in a bit and collect the plate, that'd be great." Dobby grinned. "I be doing that then, Master Harry-"

"Night, Dobby."

The house elf disappeared with another pop and Harry sighed. He set the silver cutlery down and
then placed the plate in front of him. The barely cooked meat didn't seem anywhere near as appetizing as a fresh kill—not that Harry had ever had one—but it was all he had for the moment and he'd have to make do with it.

He sucked in a breath and lengthened his hands into the claws he'd slowly grown accustomed to. Within seconds, he tore into the meat with fangs, claws and happy sounds from his throat as he stuffed his face.

When he finished, he went through the usual ritual of cleaning all his fingers and face, then set the plate in a corner with the knife and fork for Dobby's retrieval. He curled up in a little spot near the railing and yawned.

He thought about Hermione's words and wondered how many more Slytherins were slowly converting to the side of the Light. He wondered how the Light was faring and what horrors he'd have to face this year.

A wave of loneliness washed over him and Harry made a soft, sad chirring sound in his throat as he closed his eyes and turned his face to the moonlight. There was no answer to his call, of course, it was barely even a whisper and Harry was too worried that he'd be discovered if he dared make any noise beyond breathing—and after all, there was too much of something at risk. He didn't want anyone to know he was some strange extinct creature. It was just another nail in the coffin of his supposed freakishness.

Harry swallowed hard. He repeated the sound without even listening for answer. He knew there would be none, but he couldn't keep himself from calling. The Dragel inside of him knew that he craved the community of his own kind and the special kind of love and support that would come with a mateship. The dark-haired boy wearily gathered himself up and shuffled down back to the Gryffindor Tower, it'd be a long, busy day tomorrow and he'd need his sleep. If there was anything he'd learned at all during the summer, after his creature inheritance, it had been the need to rest and to rest well.

Harry disappeared into the darkness without a backward glance, his steps angling to Gryffindor Tower.

He never saw the tall, shadowed figure lurking the background, who looked from the plate to the direction of the retreating footsteps, shadowed hands clenched at the sides.
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The first day began with the usual, breakfast in the Great Hall. Harry was usually pleasantly sandwiched between Ron and Hermione. Usually. But the current seating arrangement changed just enough for it to be Hermione, Ron and Harry on the other end.

He tried to pretend it didn't really bother him, but it did. He felt it plainly like a definite stab of loneliness that pierced through his stomach like as if it were a knife twisted and left there. He picked at his food and felt the 'knife' twist even deeper when Hermione didn't harp on him to eat more as she usually would.

Not that he could've really eaten much. His appetite had upped and left the moment he'd seen the new seating arrangement. It had thrown him off-kilter in a way he hadn't expected. Arguing with himself over such a little detail did more harm and so Harry gave it up and settled for making shapes and goals with his breakfast plate.

At least he'd look busy, if nothing else.

His morning melancholy was interrupted by the arrival of two familiar voices and two identical heads.

"Morning Harry! How-"

"-are you? It's good to-"

"-see you again. You look like-"

"-you didn't get enough sleep or-"

"-something. Worried about-"

"-your first day back?"

The typical twin-esque introduction was normal enough for them that Harry should've been able to accept and decipher it by now. He should have. Instead, he found himself staring at them, managing a weak smile belatedly in reply when both redheads stared expectantly at him.
"Harry-" George drawled, his blue eyes roving curiously over the pale brunet.

"You look as if-" Fred picked up, mirroring the same penetrating gaze as his twin.

"-you're about to be-"

"Sick." George finished. He clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Eat yet?"

"Er," Harry managed, eloquently.

"Eat up." Fred nudged him, reaching for the platter or scrambled eggs. He put two scoops on his own plate and two on George's knowing that his twin likely had the same breakfast cravings as he did. His twin was already returning the favor with syrup-coated waffles and Fred was happy for that. Sometimes he hated getting syrup on his fingers. "Harry?" He paused in mid-action of scooping a spoonful of the fluffy golden eggs on the dark-haired boy's plate. He often did that as well—at least, when either Harry or Ron sat on his other side—more so out of the habit of having grown up with younger siblings and knowing that the dining table was always chaos at mealtimes because their mother was always frantically trying to keep everything together. Helping siblings on both sides of him usually resulted in happier mealtimes. It was a habit he didn't intend to outgrow and as far as he knew, no one really complained about it.

George nudged Harry's foot under the table and the brunet swallowed visibly, as if being jerked back to the present from wherever he'd been in his head. "Not too much." He managed. "I'm not really-uh-hungry." The smile was forced. "Thanks."

Harry dug his fingernails into his hands to produce the customary spike of pain that would help him keep his head straight and clear. It was a trick he'd learned early on and it had yet to fail him. He couldn't afford to slack off and let something odd show through now. He'd managed to keep everything together for the past sixteen years—surely he could continue to do so for a good while longer. After all the major things were done—and his life wasn't in some sort of dire straits in regards to Voldemort—Harry figured he could hang on until then.

Harry's immediate lack of response prompted Fred to redirect the spoonful of eggs to his own plate. The redhead shared a look with George, but neither twin said a word. The redheads dug into their breakfasts with gusto and Harry found himself nervously picking at the food all over again. This time, he worked to move the bits of egg into even piles around his plate.

Now he really didn't have much of an appetite at all. The bright yellow eggs only served to make the nauseous feeling a dozen times worse. Harry swallowed hard. His stomach clenched tight and a faint image hovered in his head. Well, at least he didn't have any appetite for any of the food on the table.

"So Harry-" Fred started. He was between mouthfuls.

George immediately swallowed his current mouthful in preparation to finish the sentence.

Harry mentally braced himself for a round of twinspeak. It was a carefully choreographed dance that he could never quite fully understand, but somehow knew it suited them both.

"-have you heard that-" George picked up.

"-Charlie's coming down from-"

"-Romania for a visit, because-"
"-of, well, we can't say why, but-
"-He'll be staying for a few weeks or-
"-so, Mum won't let him run back-
"-to Romania right away, so he'll be-
"-staying at the burrow for-
"-at least a week. You'll come to-
"-visit, won't you?" Fred finished. He happily took a swig of Pumpkin juice and beamed at Harry. "You haven't see him in-
"-years and he's sure to have some good stories to tell." George mirrored Fred's smile.

Harry managed a small smile in response. His mind whirled, prompting him that an actual verbal response was needed. He threw out the first thing that registered in his brain. "That's nice."

"Nice?" Fred spluttered. "Oi, Harry. I think-
"-that maybe you ought to-

"Aren't you boys finished yet?" Hermione's disapproving tone sliced through the chatter. She'd stood up, with her bookbag slung over one shoulder as Ron grabbed one last sweet roll from the breakfast platters and took a large bite out of it. "We can't be late to the first class of the school year on the first day!"

Harry immediately swung his legs over the bench and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'm all ready, Mione." He forced a smile, this time. "We won't be late. First class is transfiguration, right?" And without waiting for her confirm it, he made a beeline for the doors before the others could even slide free of the bench.

One puzzled bushy-haired girl and three redheads stared after him.

"Good morning." Professor McGonagall greeted them stiffly, her head held high as usual. She took a quick scan of her present students and made several notes on the hovering piece of parchment beside her. "Today we're going to be transfiguring…"

Her voice continued on and Harry tuned her out. He was remembering a peculiar incident earlier in the summer and then later on when he'd arrived in the dorms last night. He remembered having a wand and the sudden inability to cast a simple lumos.

"Mr. Potter!" Professor McGonagall said, stiffly. "Is there something the matter?" She looked pointedly at his washcloth that should've been a throw pillow.

He opened his mouth to speak, but no answer came out. He couldn't think of a single excuse as to why his magic wasn't working—and to tell a lie to his head of house—well, Harry had a feeling that this little lie wouldn't go over well. In fact, if he had to trust his new Dragel senses, they screamed at him to be careful of which side he was on with this stern woman.

"Well, Mr. Potter?"

Harry tried.
He really did.
He said the incantation. He made the correct movements.

Professor McGonagall's brow furrowed. "Try again." She said, briskly. "With feeling!"

He did.
The result did not change.
The washcloth seemed to mock him.

At one point, the washcloth shuddered and then suddenly shot upwards and slapped Professor McGonagall in the face.

Harry stared at her in horror.

She plucked it from her face with two slender, wrinkled fingers, her mouth set in a line. "That, Mr. Potter, is quite enough!" She turned away with a huff. The rest of the class resumed their practicing at a single glare from the elderly woman. A few sniggers from the Slytherin side didn't help matters any.

Harry sat miserably until class was over. She hadn't taken points or assigned a detention, but the very fact that she hadn't done anything, left him with a rather bad feeling. He had noticed that some of the others had some trouble with the assignment, but none of them to the extent that he had—magicless, that is. Malfoy seemed to be the only one out of the bunch with some difficulty, but he'd managed to transfigure the washcloth in the end, so Harry pushed that moment aside.

He wondered which of his fellow classmates had come into any sort of inheritance over the summer. He couldn't see anything obvious, but perhaps they were like him—hiding it from prying eyes. He made a mental note to up his awareness by a few notches. It certainly couldn't hurt.

The moment class let out, he was on his feet and ready to go, hoping that Professor McGonagall wouldn't hold him back to ask any questions. His magic was probably just upset for a bit and would settle down on its own. He was sure of it—almost. After all, it's not like an inheritance could cancel it all out.

Unless he did something big and horrible and terrible or something equally big and terrifying and wonderful, there was no reason for his magic to be anything but simply what it was. He could be a squib—if he did something on such a large scale that he exhausted himself, but as far as he could recall, Harry knew he'd done no such thing.

He'd simply have to give it time—and hope that no one would really notice.

After all, surely there were other students who'd come into inheritances and were sure to cause some sort of ruckus in class.

He hoped.

It was a gamble he'd take for now.

In the meantime, he'd have to start thinking up some believable excuses.

His musings cut into his usual trip time, and Harry looked up to realize that Ron and Hermione were nowhere in sight. He muffled a sigh and tore through the corridors, hoping he wouldn't run
into anyone who'd order him to slow down. He could practically feel the seconds ticking away as he rushed to the next class and skidded to a stop before the door.

He was late—but Professor Flitwick merely gave him a look as two other late students came stumbling in after him. Harry gratefully hurried to a seat saved by Neville as Ron and Hermione were sitting together again and whispering heatedly to each other. Whatever it was, Hermione pulled away with a huff, crossing her arms and looking to the front. Ron tried to plead with her for a moment, before Professor Flitwick cleared his throat and class began.

Harry quickly found himself in the same predicament from Transfiguration. There was only so far he could go before the absence of his magic caused a bit of an issue. Professor Flitwick didn't call him out on it, but his disapproving frown said more than the little man himself, might have.

A slightly apologetic smile was the most that Harry could muster at that point. It didn't escape his notice either, that he was not the only one having trouble—Zabini had struggled some and so had Malfoy. Harry soon found that eyes sought them out every so often, regardless of whatever he was doing or trying to do in class. It was almost like a knee-jerk reaction, one that he couldn't control.

Thankfully, the little professor didn't seem to notice anything and Harry wasn't about to draw his attention to it. Relief was like a drink in the middle of the desert—and Harry took hold of it with both hands. It didn't take a genius to see that Ron and Hermione were engaged with each other the moment class let out and Harry knew to hurry to the next classroom before he resumed his earlier stream of convoluted logic. At least, he wouldn't be late.

The next class was DADA and there was some chattering amongst them all for the new professor had not shown up for the welcoming feast, nor had they been present at the staff table for breakfast this morning.

Harry felt a faint shiver run through him as he fought the urge to squirm in his seat. All of his Dragel senses were screaming at him that this room was not safe. He had far too many bad memories associated with it—and the past DADA professors—well, with the exception of one Remus Lupin. He couldn't help feeling that this year would be just like all the others. There was nothing to suggest it would be otherwise.

He fought the urge to shiver and pushed it away, feeling a slight chill creep over him. The room was cooler than any of the other classrooms so far and he didn't like it. He much more preferred when everything was nice and toasty. A scowl visited his face and stayed there.

Several long minutes passed by and the student shifted restlessly.

The Gryffindors began to whisper amongst themselves and the Slytherins began to look rather uneasy.

Harry took note of both sides. To occupy himself, he took up his earlier musings and began to double check them.

As a matter of course, he darted a glance to Hermione and Ron who were engaged in another one of their whispered battles. He'd expected that and while he did wonder, briefly, what they were arguing about, he didn't care to ask them. It hadn't piqued his curiosity as it normally would, and his Dragel instincts had no particular inclinations towards them, so he ignored it. If it was important, then he'd know.

Neville was busy listening to something going on between Dean and Seamus that sounded like it might have had something to do with Quidditch or some other sports related thing. The rest of the
Gryffindors didn't seem to be doing much that warranted his attention, so Harry shifted his attention to the Slytherin side.

In stark contrast, every one of them seemed highly strung up—particularly Draco Malfoy. In fact, as far as Harry could recall, the blond had gotten progressively worse through the first two classes. He'd been all wonderful at the breakfast table and now as lunch approached, it seemed as if he was going to pieces.

To date, Harry couldn't recall having seen the white-blond ever that pale. If he didn't know better, he'd swear that Malfoy was trying his chances on becoming a ghost—and from the looks of it, doing a swell job. He was holding a single cord of black in his hand with two beads in which he worried between his fingers and his steel grey eyes remained fixed on some invisible point on the classroom wall. He didn't move.

Crabbe and Goyle didn't seem to think anything of it, as they didn't engage him in any way, but Harry had a feeling they were probably on orders to leave the blond alone and so were doing exactly that. It did bug him that the rest of his usual group was doing the same thing—including the mile-a-minute-mouth, Pansy Parkinson. She sat, calmly, to Draco's left and stared straight ahead at the classroom wall, just as he did. If he didn't value his life to some degree, Harry would have told her what a great impression of petrification she did.

He didn't though. He didn't think she'd appreciate it.

Harry did notice that not one of the Slytherins were talking, but rather, they were all fidgeting—barely—but fidgeting nonetheless and growing more tense by the minute. They went from sitting in perfect, polite form to varying degrees of well, petrification. Head's straightening up, shoulders settling further behind, backs ramrod straight and feet firmly planted on the ground.

It was rather unnerving.

Harry had never seen them do that before—of course, he probably hadn't paid that close attention to them before, so it could be normal and he simply didn't know it. He did take careful note of the Slytherins that he knew, the tanned and generally good-looking Blaise Zabini, appeared relaxed, however, every so often, his left eyebrow would twitch as if the very act of sitting still and pretending that everything was just fine was one thing too many.

Theodore was calmly reading something on his desk and Harry knew at once it was the giant encyclopedia that he'd had on the train. He wondered how he might get his hands on it. It certainly looked interesting if the look of concealed delight on the reader's face was anything to go by.

Millicent Bulstrode was sneaking glances at Pansy Parkinson and adjusting her figure each time she did. Crabbe and Goyle did a fine impression of two lumps and nothing else.

Everyone jumped when the the classroom doors suddenly burst open.
A New Professor

There was nothing much to see at first, just a gaggle of trunks, parcels and long poster-sized parchments that entered the room, completely hiding the figure bearing them.

The professor in question appeared several seconds later—when he set the items preceding him on the ground. He was a young man of fair build, his hair some indefinite shade of black and brown, settling out with snips of both colors speckled throughout with sea-blue-grey eyes and hands that were very small and very thin. He was dressed as a muggle, in black trousers and a blue hoodie-styled sweatshirt, with his teaching robes thrown over the crook of one arm and he looked quite definitely flustered.

"Ah, er." He gingerly set down the armful, turned and closed the door and muttered something at it, before he turned 'round and began to gather up the parcels. "My ah, apologies." He said, politely. "I did not expect to be delayed and something came up. Just a moment." He carried everything to the little door at the top where the little door let to the personal quarters. He disappeared inside and shut the door firmly behind him.

Whispers started up the moment he disappeared from view.

"Did you see him?" Lavender Brown squealed. "He looks positively dreamy!"

"Those eyes." Another girl gushed. "Oh I hope he can teach us everything-ow!" Someone elbowed her. Several heated whispers started up in their corner of the room.

Pansy Parkinson gave a regal sniff from the other side of the room, but she didn't make a single disparaging comment to the other girl as she usually would. Her eyes, however, remained fixed on the recently locked door. A ripple of murmurs passed through the Slytherins and Harry followed Pansy's gaze to Draco, where the blond had finally moved, sitting straight up with his eyes locked on the recently closed door.

He realized that all the Slytherins were now sitting straight up and more relaxed than they'd been several seconds before. He also realized that a wave of warmth had filled the room as the new professor had walked past. In fact, Harry'd been close enough to almost touch him and it was if the man had been a walking fireplace! Harry swallowed. He could still feel the tingling of warmth all the way down to his toes. It felt good, very pleasant and rather satisfying, seeing as he'd been almost shivering just moments before. He tucked that detail, and a few more, away for later. Today was certainly proving itself to be a day of surprises and strangeness.

Or perhaps he'd simply never bothered to pay much attention to it before, Harry mused.

"Temptrificus Portgas!" A strong voice rang out.

He twitched, the closest his body allowed to an actual startled movement. It was almost as if it were ingrained into him to draw as little attention to himself as possible.

The students flinched as a whole and then nearly everyone leaned forward in their seats and stared.

Atop the desk, a glowing blue ring had formed and turned to a solid blue circle from which, the head and shoulders emerged of their new DADA professor. The rest of said professor immediately followed, this time, clad in his teaching robes and decidedly more wizard attire than the trousers and hoodie. He stood atop the desk for a moment, fixing his cuff sleeves and then raised his eyes to survey the room as if he'd just realized his students were there.
"Hello." He said, simply. "My name is Terius. I expect you to use it, if you have any questions. I prefer the title of Teacher, over Professor, but that is a personal preference and I will answer to both for now. I am your new teacher for Defense Against the Dark Arts. I shall try my utmost best to teach you something new and useful for a future point in your lives."

Terius folded his arms neatly across his chest. "This classroom setting will be distinctly different than that of your other classes. I expect you to show up on time and with all your materials, or you can spend the class period outside in the corridor." The blue-grey eyes narrowed. "Teaching is a part-time profession for me and if I am taking time out of my busy schedule to teach you, I expect you to show up on time. You will be responsible for any missed work or class teachings, if you miss a class, I expect to see you as soon as you are able. You will only be excused under extreme circumstances and by extreme, I do mean extreme with the accompaniment of a note for your resident healer." He frowned. "Or Medi-witch, whichever term is more familiar to you." He bent to a crouch and uncrossing his arms, effortlessly swung himself from the desk to stand in front of it. "Firstly, what is taught in this classroom, remains in this classroom. There are some spells, experiments and subjects we will be covering that is not fully sanctioned by our dear Minister of Magic, however, in light of our current status at the reality of a possible wizarding war, I have been granted allowance to teach you wall what I see fit, in preparation for the future. You will not be practicing any of the spells learned here anywhere else, but in this classroom. If they are cast anywhere else for anything other than to save your very life, I will know and you do not want to know what I shall do about it." A few students squirmed and several of them looked as if they were about to speak, when Terius lifted a hand. "In addition to the Minister of Magic, I also have Headmaster Dumbledore's explicit permission for what will be taught here. This is a significant responsibility that is being placed upon your shoulders, however, you are capable young adults and I expect you to show a modicum of common sense and sound logic in regards to this knowledge. You are your own person, so I expect to see intelligent questions and interactions, not what you think I expect of you. It has been made clear that your past professors of this subject may have been less than satisfactory, so I will be attempting to remedy this in my own way. Now, secondly, there will be practical exercises and demonstrations as mentioned earlier. You will all participate. You will only be excused if you have a signed permission slip from your parents, legal guardians and…"

The rest of the class went on and Harry found himself wishing he could disappear into the floor.

There was something about that man that made him feel as if he were looking straight through him. Harry didn't like it at all. He had begun to wish he'd taken a seat somewhere in the back—never mind that it might have others talking about it. His scar didn't hurt from the intense stares though, and Harry was thankful for that, hoping that perhaps, the new professor didn't have anything to do with old moldy-shorts. It would be a more than welcome relief.

It was tiring to have to worry about his death every time he set foot in a classroom where he should've been taught ways to save himself. Terius' introduction had served to worry rather than reassure him, particularly with his mention of permissions from both Dumbledore and the Minster of Magic. Harry didn't want to know why exactly the man would need permissions.

Thankfully though, Harry could tell within minutes, that he'd be able to get away without using magic, for at least the first few weeks as Professor Terius outlined his curriculum. He certainly did have a very different style of teaching and Harry hoped that was a good thing and not a bad one.

He scribbled a few notes on his parchment and tried to pay attention, but his stomach was now making its displeasure known and he could literally feel his body threatening to shut down on him. That was definitely not good. He pinched his arms and then his thighs, trying use the small sparks of pain to keep himself awake. He was getting really, really tired.
One surefire way to give this entire act away on the first day was definitely to faint in the middle of what should've been his favorite class.

Harry gritted his teeth. He willed the Professor to hurry up and stop talking already. He just wanted out and he wanted lunch!

Several long, agonizing minutes later, Professor Terius glanced at the clock on the far wall, muttered something and then turned his back to the class. "You are dismissed early today, because I have a great deal of things to attend to. Read chapters one and two in your textbook and be ready to answer any questions. Dismissed."

The classroom began to clear.

"All except for Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Zabini, Mr. Nott, Mr. Henry, Mr. Potter and Miss Dawn. A word, if you would?"

Hermione hovered in the doorway, as Ron took up residence beside him. They both shot worried looks at Harry and he could only shrug in response. He didn't have to be a genius to know that being singled out on the first day of class was a bad thing—not to mention the names that had been called with him. With the exception of Ryan Henry and Jennifer Dawn, the rest were all Slytherins.

"That does not include you, Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley." There was a bored note in the professor's voice as he began to tap out the chalkboard eraser without getting dust on his dark teaching robes.

Ron's eyebrows arched clear up into his hairline and he dragged Hermione out with him, along with a pantomimed apology to Harry.

The boys in question slowed their movements and reluctantly made their way up to the professor's desk. He continued his decidedly unmagical method of erasing the giant chalkboard and turned them after the room had emptied. His piercing gaze swept quickly over the group and then he frowned as if what he saw didn't agree with what he was about to say. "Mr. Potter, you may leave." He made a dismissive wave with one hand and his gaze flickered next to Mr. Henry.

Harry didn't wait to figure out why. He left as fast as his legs could carry him and burst through the classroom door, smacking right into a solid body.

"Whoa, where's the fire?" Lee Jordan caught him lightly around the shoulders as he came barreling through the classroom doors. He threw a curious look over Harry's shoulder into the near empty classroom. "Harry?" He looked to Harry. "Hey, are you alright? You look a little-"

"I'm going to lie down until the next class period." Harry interrupted. He could feel the words tumbling out before he could double check them. He hoped he sounded normal. "Tell Ron or Hermione I'm fine, if they ask."

Lee blinked. He was more likely to tell Fred or George, seeing as they were in the same year, but he didn't say that aloud. Instead, he cheerfully slapped a hand over Harry's forehead. "Are you alright? Dizzy? Fever? A little too much-"

"I'm fine, Lee. Really." Harry flashed a smile and jerked away from the hands as quick as he could. The very touch of them made his head spin—in a bad way—and it was almost as if his Dragel side was screaming at him to get as far as way as possible. Harry didn't have the energy to puzzle out why. He could feel his stomach threatening to rebel and knew he needed to get out the hallways and somewhere safe as fast as he could. "I just need to lie down. It's a headache. A little one. I didn't get to sleep much last night. 'Scuse me." And Harry bolted.
Harry felt the familiar prickles of unease dancing just out of reach through his exhausted body. He could feel the older boy's eyes on him, even as he rounded the corner of the hallway and hurried on to Gryffindor Tower. He didn't like them. It was as if the eyes were trying to see deeper than the surface, to find out what was going on with him.

It should have bothered him.

But as his stomach began to rebel, Harry, for once, absolutely didn't care.

Harry spent the next several minutes heaving over a toilet in the boy's lavatories.

There was precious little to come up, but his stomach wasn't happy until it had tried its best.

Exhausted, Harry sank down on the floor of the bathroom stall and worked to pull himself together. He was feeling so incredibly tired, he couldn't think straight. The moment he was able, he headed for Gryffindor tower. Lunch could wait—indefinitely.

Harry skipped lunch. His formerly protesting stomach had no questions about that the moment he considered sleep over food. It was as if his body immediately agreed and began shutting down just as it had threatened to in DADA.

No further thought was needed, Harry just flopped onto his bed and moaned for Dobby with the last tendrils of his consciousness clinging to him. "Wake me up before the next class." He instructed, wearily, when the house elf seemed about to launch into a barely contained panic attack. "I gotta sleep, Dobby." Was all he managed to get out before his eyes rolled up in the back of his head and Harry Potter had gone to the land of nod.
Potions Class and Dinner

Chapter Notes

The Twinspeak will fade eventually, as it is hard to follow who is speaking when/why/how.

An anxious Dobby woke him with fifteen minutes to get to his next class. Harry begged the house elf to find him some Pepper-up potion and a snack. A doubly anxious Dobby returned with a corked vial and several sections of a chunky purple fruit on a long skewer.

"Dobby?" Harry eyed it suspiciously.

"This be good fruit for Harry Potter, sir." Dobby pushed the skewer to his unwilling hands. "Dobby be helping in a good way!"

The strange fruit, surprisingly, wasn't too bad. It filled his stomach and soothed his dry throat. Harry hoped he wasn't coming down with anything serious. The very last thing he wanted to do was visit the infirmary and see the disapproving glower of a certain Madam Pomfrey.

Relieved and somewhat more awake, Harry made it to the next class of the day managed to stay somewhat awake. The final class of the day was potions and Harry was not looking forward to it. He had a feeling Snape would see through his foggy mental and physical state and find some way to make a mockery of his entire effort to be there.

He didn't know if he could stand it.

Harry was surprised to find that he was not the only one walking slowly towards the dungeons. There were a few others and one of the laggers happened to be a certain blond Malfoy. The blond moved slowly and carefully, his silvery eyes occasionally shifting to take stock of his surroundings as he moved. Without the usual accompaniment of his cronies or Pansy Parkinson, there was something decidedly off about the Slytherin and something different in the way he moved. His footsteps were light and his posture was far too relaxed for it to be natural.

Harry quickened his step and trotted past, unable to keep from sneaking a sideways glance. For a moment, emerald eyes locked with pure silver ones, a look of pure fright cracked through the pureblood's mask. Then, as quick as it had appeared, it flickered away and Draco turned his eyes straight ahead as if he'd never seen Harry at all.

The unusual moment was enough to prompt Harry to look back, but when he did, Draco's mask was stubbornly back in place and his head was held high once more.

Brushing it off, Harry continued on. He couldn't afford to waste his precious waking moments thinking—being awake simply cost him too much at the moment. He was so tired! The Pepper-up seemed to be fizzling out just as fast as it had given him a boost. He grimaced and sighed, remembering a the night of his inheritance and then the fact that he'd apparently slept for nearly two weeks afterwards. He'd woken exhausted, cranky and feeling drained, in spite of the temporary woderment over his new Dragel attributes. His magic had probably left during that time, he mused.
Visualizing the weariness as something he could stuff in a box, Harry mentally gathered it up and shoved it in a corner. He willed the Pepper-up to hold him out for just a little bit longer.

The door to the potions classroom came into sight and Harry quickened his step with energy he could barely spare.

Potions was harder than Harry could ever remember it being.

For the first day, it wasn't really that bad. In fact, everything was the usual mix of chaos and confusion that he'd come to associate with Hogwarts and the first school day and consequently, the first school week. It was always like that and the normality of it should have provided some semblance of comfort—not panic and a short temper.

Harry found himself becoming snappish and increasingly furious as the last portion of the day wore on. Potions, it seemed, would be his last straw. He couldn't understand it at all, but he didn't have time to puzzle through it. It was hard to keep his temper in check and hard to keep from saying things that he knew wouldn't go over well. He couldn't remember if Ron was always this annoying, Hermione always so frustrating and Ginny always so irritating. He was thankful he'd been spared their company at lunch and that Ginny wasn't in the same classes as he was. He didn't think that he would've been able to handle it.

As it was, when Professor Snape split them up and paired them with Slytherins, Harry was more than happy to be away from his fellow housemates. There was a restless undercurrent traveling through them and he didn't like the unease that his new instincts screamed at him. It was constantly warning him that something bad loomed ahead. Harry hoped it was just a feeling not an actual premonition.

He tried to focus on the lesson, grateful that the Pepper-up at least allowed him to be awake enough to make an effort. The mental trick for his exhaustion seemed to be working—somewhat. He only hoped it would last.

His attention returned to the present and Harry realized that he didn't really know the tanned fellow he was paired up with, but he knew the name associated with the face. That realization was enough for him to maintain a civil front for the sake of appearances. Blaise Zabini, was, by Harry's own admission, a handsome enough fellow, with lovely golden skin and inky black hair. A closer look showed that Zabini's dark eyes weren't really black, but rather a purple so dark it was almost black and they seemed to sparkle to life when they caught Harry staring.

Blaise winked, breaking the stare and the faintest twitches of a smile graced his face. "See something interesting, Potter?" He teased. There was absolutely no hint of condescension in his voice, merely a touch of warmth and something else.

Harry found himself blushing and then scolding himself for having such an obvious reaction as he looked away. He'd never found an accent that sent shivers straight through him like that. "Nothing." He swallowed. "Nothing interesting." He tried to focus on the words on the page between them bearing the potion ingredients. The words were starting to dance together before his eyes.

"You wound me." Blaise murmured. "And here I was about to congratulate myself for charming a lovely little lion from the-"

"I'll get the other ingredients." Harry said, hastily. He was on his feet and gone before the other boy could protest. He took his time rummaging through the cabinet and extracting the necessary
bottles, before he cradled them carefully in his arms and began to walk back to the shared table with Zabini's.

He thought he saw the flicker of movement before it registered that someone had tripped him. Harry felt his breath catch and everything slowed to a point where it felt like life was playing by in slow-motion. He knew he would fall and ruin the ingredients in his arms as well as his entire day—there was no way a simple fall like that would result in anything else but injuries from sharp pieces of glass. He'd end up in the infirmary, in spite of his careful hopes to avoid it and he'd be subjected to Madam Pomfrey's tender mercies.

He closed his eyes for the impact that never came.

Strong, slender arms caught him about the shoulders and braced to take his weight, before easing him upright.

Harry's eyes flew open and he found himself staring into a pale face with unreadable grey eyes and a familiar—but muted—sneer. "Two left feet, Potter?" He said, snidely. The blond steadied him with a hidden hand. "Do try and put one foot in front of the other. It'd be a waste of potions' ingredients otherwise." Draco nudged him in the direction of Blaise's table and stepped out into the aisle moving up towards the ingredient cabinet to retrieve his own necessary ingredients.

Harry snuck a glance around the room to see that others had noticed the little exchange and it was only Hermione who eyed him with pursed lips, while Ron seemed torn between saying something and keeping quiet. Harry hurried over to the worktable and carefully set the ingredients down. He tried to focus on the potion and the instructions, but his mind was elsewhere, replaying the precious seconds in Malfoy's arms.

The earlier incident had piqued his curiosity. Something had been off there—and he wanted to know what it was. There hadn't been a hint of the fright that he'd seen in Malfoy's eyes earlier and it was almost as if he'd gone through a complete transformation from the moment he'd entered the Potion's Classroom. There was also a familiar scent to the boy that Harry also couldn't place, but his mind was too tangled to puzzle it out in the middle of class.

"Potter, Potter—Harry!" Blaise snapped his fingers in front of his face. He perked a brow when Harry flinched and leaned away. "Never mind." He sighed, the faintest furrow in his brow. "You're really pants at Potions, aren't you?"

"Well excuse me for-" Harry began, pushing away from the table to glare at him.

Blaise caught his hands and held them over the cutting board. "Just dice these up and don't do anything else." He instructed. "I'm sure you can cut little bitty squares, yes?" He prompted when it looked as if Harry was about to object.

Harry didn't answer. He just yanked his hands back and began to viciously dice said ingredients.

Blaise chuckled. "This isn't a punishment, little lion." The teasing tone returned to his voice as he leaned down to whisper in Harry's ear. "I'd simply prefer not to get blown up today and somehow I think you would like the same, hmm?"

Harry felt himself blush again as warm breath gushed over his ear and he quickly bent his head over the cutting board and began to dice the wrinkly brown root in as even squares as he could muster. It was cold in the dungeons, as usual, but simply being near to Blaise seemed to chase the coldness away.
Surprisingly, they managed an acceptable potion between them and Harry managed to slip out of the room without any further incidents—as far as blushing went anyway.

"Hiya Harry!" Terry Boot, from Ravenclaw waved at him as he passed in the hallway. "Is it true that you-"

"Hey!" Seamus glared at him. He'd appeared at Harry's side the moment class had let out. "He doesn't need to hear about that rubbish from the likes of-"

"Harry, mate!" Ron stood at the end of the hallway looking flustered. "Hurry up!"

And so Harry hurried.

For the rest of the day, Harry tried and failed to piece together what it was that everyone was supposedly not asking him about, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He only knew that something was slightly off and he didn't think it had anything to do with the issues at Azkaban. He'd have to figure it out on his own later. For the meantime, he just needed to keep everything together and Hermione from trying to pry all his secrets free.

In the midst of dinner however, Hermione finally had her chance. She'd managed to sit between Harry and Ron and once her redhead-friend was stuffing his face, she turned her attention on the smaller boy. "Harry, what did Professor Terius want this afternoon? Is everything alright? Where were you during lunch? We saved your seat and you didn't show up and-"

"He didn't say." Harry said, quickly filling his mouth. He knew one of the best ways to distract Hermione was either through a forceful change of subject or something equally visually distracting. Stuffing his face as Ron did might make him sick for a bit, but it would certainly send Hermione into a different kind of fit. "He looked at me and then said I could go." He shrugged. "I don't know what he wanted. He never said."

Hermione frowned. "Why would he call you and then send you away without saying anything?" She elbowed Ron. "Chew with your mouth closed." Her gaze flickered back to Harry. "You too, Harry, that's disgusting!" She wrinkled her nose. "We should all keep an eye on him. There's something strange about him and we need to know what it is." She nodded across the table to Ginny, who was tucked up with the Twins, as usual, the Weasley's eating together out of habit. "Did he do anything strange in your class, Ginny?"

The redhead girl shook her head in thought. "Not really, but I didn't see him do anything. He mostly talked."

"Didn't use a-"

"wand though." The Twins chorused.

"Thought it was odd, Gred."

"Thought so myself, Forge."

The twins beamed at each other and went back to their respective dinners.

"Didn't use a wand?" Hermione mused, her eyes glazing over as the mental wheels began to turn. "Wandless magic is dangerous and very difficult to perform. I don't think I've ever seen another professor use wandless magic—not even Professor Dumbledore."
Harry stifled the urge to roll his eyes. That was somewhat true, but when you had tremendous amounts of magical power at your disposal, wandless magic helped to burn off the excess—at least, that was what Dumbledore had once told him—and Harry had seen the old man use it a few times on occasion. Maybe he was lucky. He'd always wished he could learn it for himself. It'd looked like fun.

"Now that I think of it, most professors use a spell to write on the boards." Hermione mused. "He wrote with his hand and he didn't seem very accustomed to it either. He also didn't use charms to clean the board." She frowned into her dinner plate and began to mutter book titles beneath her breath. An evening of research was certainly in the works.

Harry was glad for that. It meant that she'd likely end up in the library on the grounds of research. He felt a yawn coming on and stifled it, impatiently. The Pepper-up had barely managed to get him through classes, though the minute he thought of dinner, his body seemed to revive itself. He hoped the temporary awareness would last long enough for him to get some other things done. For now, he could trek along to the library with her and get in with the same library pass to take a look on what Hogwarts had to offer about Dragels.

He could use all the information he could get!

Another yawn threatened to come and Harry forcefully willed it away as he focused on emptying his dinner plate. He was busy with his own musings and thoughts and never noticed the twin redheads watching him intensely from the other side of the table or Ginny's pointed frown in his direction.
Breakfast Drama

Three weeks passed before anyone noticed that Harry's magic was missing.

He was getting tired again.

Quite frankly, Harry didn't know how he'd really managed to get away with it for so long. He'd expected Hermione to pick up on it first and most certainly, he'd expected to find himself in Dumbledore's office within the first week, where his unexplained fits of drowsiness had left him crabby, snappy and irritable. When neither of those realities had come through by the second week, Harry didn't know what to think.

He knew that there were eyes watching—goodness, he could practically feel it in his every waking moment—yet, somehow, the eyes hadn't gotten him into any trouble, nor had they given themselves away. Harry didn't know what to think. On one hand, he was grateful for the reprieve, because he honestly had no way to really explain it without mentioning his creature inheritance and that was one tidbit of news he was not willing to share.

On the other hand, he was definitely disappointed. He'd hoped that his magic would've come back by now and as far as he could tell, with what little information he'd gleaned in the library, there shouldn't be any reason why he was magic-less. He'd managed to work out a little bit of a routine and so far, he'd been managing. He'd used Pepper-up potion to strategically keep himself awake during the first week when he was all but tripping over his own feet for being so exhausted.

The second week had left him with little improvement and a very short temper, to the point where Ginny and Ron had both teased him that all he needed was red hair to be able to claim the 'famous Weasley temper'. Harry hadn't found it very funny at all. Neither had the twins.

But his temper had blown over and he'd had to nearly grovel in his apologies to Hermione and bribe Ron and Ginny to keep their friendship intact.

He'd also noticed that his fellow housemates weren't as open and friendly as he could recall from the previous year. At first, he'd thought he was imagining things. Then there had been little moments, like being excluded from Seamus and Dean's private conversations, suspicious glances from the girls—Lavender and Parvati—whispered conversations that stopped when he entered a room and then, Harry'd had enough. He scented and catalogued them each individually, disappointed to find that apart from the twins, there weren't any others that he felt comfortable enough to trust. Even Ron, Hermione and Ginny's scents were fading on him—fading into something that he didn't like at all.

Apart from the house drama, there were other interesting things to note.

In the meantime, he'd learned that Professor Terius really did prefer Teacher or simply Terius and that he had the ability to run his classroom with an almost military precision. His assignments were standardized and he had students write down their questions to ask after the lecture—he didn't like being interrupted—something that bugged Hermione to no end. There was absolutely no messing around in his classroom and you didn't dare so much as think of sleeping. For some reason, whenever he entered the classroom, all thoughts of sleeping, exhaustion or hunger simply fled. Harry didn't know what to make of that, but it had begun to become a little bit of a safe haven, he liked feeling normal for the short class period and he longed for things to go back to the way they'd been.
Sometimes, it was a pain to realize things, such as the changing scents of his friends, how some people thought it was okay to lie straight to his face and how annoying it was to be cold all the time. He couldn't even cast a simple warming charm, though he had managed to coax Hermione to do it for him a few times. He'd considered buying clothes with charms installed on them, but then that had seemed like too much trouble and he knew when he returned home for the summer, his dear Uncle Vernon would either pitch a fit and get rid of them or both.

Harry also continued to keep his eyes and ears open. In doing so, he found that Theodore Nott was a very likable young man and they'd managed to enter a suitable bartering system of chocolate frogs for the delicious jerky sent from home. Harry was relieved to find that it helped with his cravings for raw meat and Theodore didn't seem to mind at all. He also noted that Theodore smelled quite a bit of chocolate and oranges and closer in trustworthiness than the twins.

Harry soon found himself running into said Slytherin on a regular basis to the point where he felt comfortable to ask about the family heirloom the dark-haired fellow lugged around with him. Theodore chuckled and told him to ask the next time they ran into each other, before heading off to his next class. Harry had thoughtfully made a note to do so. The Slytherin was quickly changing his opinion of Slytherins in general and the more he looked, the more Harry found that they weren't really that different.

On the other note, Blaise Zabini had become an incurable flirt. At least, that was the only excuse Harry could conjure for the Italian. While Harry couldn't deny that it felt, well, nice, to have someone actively paying attention to him in that way. Blaise had an uncanny knack for getting him flustered, embarrassed and aroused at the absolute worst possible times—in Potions class! Nothing Harry had been able to do or say convinced the Italian to turn his eyes elsewhere—not in the three weeks he'd been trying, anyway. Of course, the closer Blaise was, the less cold it was in the dungeons, it was an internal tug of war as Harry alternately suffered from frozen fingers and toes or the heat of embarrassment. He didn't know how Blaise could stand to say such embarrassing things aloud.

Of course, Harry had suffered more than enough Snape Death Glares in the first two weeks it had taken to adjust to the tanned boy's brand of teasing. He didn't know how he'd manage the rest of the year, but at least, he was sort of learning something about potions. Blaise had immediately taken it upon himself to be sure that Harry did an equal and fair amount of work, even if it was just preparing the ingredients and reading the instructions out loud. Most of the time though, Harry had to admit that Blaise really didn't help at all, at least, not where it would've counted.

It most certainly didn't help when Blaise muttered to himself in that sexy Italian whisper of his and when his wandering hands occasionally found themselves in places on Harry's person that left Harry red in the face just thinking about. He'd all but dumped their cauldron on the Italian's head the last time he'd found Blaise's hands wandering a little lower than he'd liked. What said hands were doing on his person in the first place, well, Harry didn't care to think that far. He was sure he'd worn a permanent blush on his face for the remainder of that day.

Harry shook his head to bring himself back to the present of his thoughts. He was on his way to the breakfast table in the Great Hall and he couldn't afford to zone out so early in the day. He sighed to himself as he trooped along obediently behind Ron and Hermione. From their scents, he was easily piecing things together—the two were obviously dating or at least doing what some dating couples did—and he could smell it. He wondered why they hadn't said a word to him yet, but figured that perhaps they were simply waiting for something. He reasoned that they would tell him on their own time.

The past week, he'd also noticed a new change, scent-wise. Fred and George now had drastically
different scents from Ginny and Ron. Ginny's scent had also begun to change over the past week to something that Harry didn't know what to make of as yet. He tucked the detail away as a mental note to decipher it later—he'd gotten better at doing that. Fred and George were now smelling rather acceptable and—for lack of a better word—delightful. Harry had caught himself subconsciously sneaking a few good whiffs whenever they were around and smiling a little more when happy buzzes sang through his body at the pleasing scents.

A blur of blond hair out of the corner of his eye caught his attention and Harry turned to see Draco Malfoy surreptitiously moving along with the shuffle of breakfast bound students—without his usual gaggle of cronies. Harry followed him with his eyes until Malfoy reached the Slytherin table and then, almost instantly, a seat opened up for him between Blaise and Pansy Parkinson.

Harry frowned. It was a common enough gesture for the Slytherins, they were careful and kept to their own, but it was Malfoy that Harry had his eye on. He hadn't been able to figure out the blond at all. Some days, it seemed as if Malfoy was on fire and every inch the cold, heartless bastard that Harry had pegged him for, yet, in other moments—small fleeting moments—Harry had seen him almost vulnerable, with a look on his face that he hadn't thought the Slytherin Ice Prince was even capable of knowing.

A hand on his elbow guided him forward and to a seat. Harry snapped back to the present to realize that he was sandwiched between Fred and George and they were both giving him a look that promised a serious conversation somewhere in the future. Harry smiled weakly as his stomach rumbled. He snuck a good whiff and felt his clenching insides relax ever so slightly. He'd avoid their serious conversation as long as he possibly could, but he would definitely take advantage of being smothered with the lovely scents wafting off of them as long as they were close.

Hermione didn't seem to care that he was whisked away by the twins, though Ginny grumbled at having to sit next to her brother and his bushy-haired girlfriend. She had taken to grumbling about nearly everything lately and now, the youngest Weasley sulked through the entire morning meal with only the occasional glower in Harry's direction. It was a glower that froze in fright when Fred matched it with one of his own and George followed up. Ginny resumed sulking and switched her glowers to her breakfast plate.

"Morning, Harry." Fred had sat him down with a deliberate pressure on his shoulders. "Did you-"

"-sleep well? You look a little tired-"

"-as if you're not getting enough-"

"-sleep again. You aren't sneaking out-"

"-to cause mischief without us, are you-"

"-because if you are, we-"

"-certainly have something-"

"-to say about it." George finished. He slid into his seat beside Harry and began to reach for the nearest breakfast dish. Between him and his twin, they effectively filled Harry's plate and provided a bit of a buffer between their sister and a certain bushy-haired witch.

Harry made himself sample each helping on his plate beneath their watchful gazes. "I'm fine." He spoke around a mouthful of cubed fruit. "Really." He shrank somewhat when Fred pinned him with a look, punctuated with an arched eyebrow. Harry snuck a look at George, only to find the
matching redhead sporting the exact same expression. He gulped and focused on his plate instead. The twins getting serious was serious! Harry forced himself not to squirm under their sudden scrutiny.

Loud shouts from the Slytherin table, drew the attention of every student, ending with a red-faced Pansy Parkinson towering over a certain blond Ice Prince.

"You what?" She screeched. "How could you do this to me? We were supposed to be married!" She shrieked. "How dare you go and get yourself bonded without even-!"

Draco leaned away from her, and reached for his goblet of pumpkin juice as if her verbal temper tantrum wasn't really happening at all. He was calmly going about his usual breakfasting motions.

That only served to make the girl all the more furious. She grabbed him by the shoulders and yanked him around to face her. "I've been brought up my whole life to do everything just perfect so I'd be a proper Malfoy bride and you went and got yourself-" she swallowed. "-Got yourself bonded and you can't even tell me who's the lucky bitch?"

A few gasps were heard.

"My private life and what I do with it, is absolutely none of your business, Parkinson." He said, coolly. "If you cannot control yourself then--"

"You disgusting, filthy, back-stabbing-!"

"Leave him alone!" Millicent Bulstrode shot to her feet, an uneasy glance flickering between her two housemates. The larger girl rarely spoke up and the very fact that she was speaking now drew attention from their own housemates. "Pansy, please, leave it be."

"Shut up, Bulstrode!" The brunette glared at her. "You've lost it, haven't you, Draco? Just because your father's no longer head of the family, you're bent on dragging the Malfoy name through the dirt to suit your own nasty little-"

In a blur, Draco was on his feet and his face was inches away from the angry girl. "Take it back. Parkinson!"

"Hit a nerve? I didn't realize you were so helpless with Mummy and Daddy out of the picture. I would think you'd want to honor your father's wishes for us to be married. I suppose with him gone now you feel that you can simply-"

Draco's hand flashed out and Blaise seemed to appear from nowhere as he stepped in and caught the pale wrist before said hand could connect with Pansy's face. The dark-haired boy shot a warning look to the furious blond and frowned at their housemate.

"Pansy, you're making a-" Blaise began.

Pansy stared at him for a moment and then her own hand flashed out and slapped Draco across the cheek. "You've bonded with Blaise Zabini?" She nearly screamed as she wrenched Draco's wrist out of Blaise's hand and stared at the duo incredulously. "How dare you! How could you?"

Both boys stared at her in a mixture of confusion and befuddlement and then looked at each other and back at her. Blaise shifted slightly so he turned his back to a simmering Draco.

Pansy was huffing for breath her face seemingly unable to turn anything else but darker shades of
red as her fiery temper continued to spew. "You insufferable git! You were leading me on this whole time! Did you think it was funny? Were you trying to humiliate me? What were you trying to prove? And w-with him?" She exclaimed, shoving Blaise away as he took another step towards her. A hand went to her mouth in horror. "This can't be happening. You can't do this! You bloody insufferable…!"

The rest of her sworn insult was ignored as Harry snuck a glance at the Head Table, unsurprised to see the teachers whispering disapprovingly amongst themselves along with an untwinkling Headmaster. His attention was caught by a certain glowering Severus Snape who threw his napkin into his plate as he rose silently from his chair. The look on his face was dark and decidedly murderous.

Harry shrank down a little further, grateful to be sandwiched by the twins—two of the taller students at the Gryffindor table. He felt that he was more than lucky for once, not to be the unfortunate victim of Snape's volatile temper. The man could make you wish you were a single-cell organism with one single glare from those inky eyes. The very fierceness of his temper, the sheer intensity of it, would have you wishing he'd explode or at least react in a more visible way, rather than the consequent darkening of his visage and the icy tone of voice that spelled imminent doom. Yes, Harry was very glad he was nowhere near the dark descendent of the dungeons that now swept towards the table of his beloved Slytherins.

All uninvolved parties caught sight of their Head of House sweeping down towards them and almost instantly, the spaces beside the arguing students cleared out and all students were studiously engaged in their respective breakfasts when Severus Snape glided to a halt beside a still fuming Pansy Parkinson.

One long, thin, bony hand settled on her shoulder with a vise-grip. "Miss Parkinson," he ground out. "Cease embarrassing yourself and drawing attention to your situation with this childish display of immaturity." His voice was smooth as silk and twice as deadly with the promise it held. "We are Slytherins and we do not react with such…vulgar displays of displeasure, no matter the situation." His dark eyes swept over a near furious Blaise and a bright red handprint on the pale skin of Draco's face. He smiled, thinly. "I believe breakfast is over," His grip tightened and he turned her towards the doors, intent on marching her out of the Great Hall and into a more private setting.

A single glare at the rest of the Slytherin table had all the other students immediately shuffling their belongings together and preparing to leave for their first classes, breakfast now a forgotten thing. All heads were bowed as if the entire house was in disgrace for the actions of one, beneath the stern, impassive Head of House. Some of the older students snatched fruit and breakfast rolls, wrapping them in napkins for the younger students and quickly gathering up their things.

Harry blinked as Snape marched Parkinson out of the Great Hall. He could've sworn that he saw the dour man touch Draco's elbow on the way out.

Almost.

"Well, that was certainly-" Fred mused.

"-interesting. I wonder what-"

"-brought it about. Wouldn't have-"

"-thought Malfoy would-"

"-be the perfect morning-"

Harry looked at him, expectant.

"At least eat the applesauce-" Fred sighed and bopped him gently on the head.

"-if you can't eat anything else." George finished. "You hardly-"

"-eat enough as it is." Fred frowned.

Harry scowled, but did go about shoveling spoonfuls of the bland applesauce into his mouth. He'd have to be more careful. He certainly couldn't eat as the others would, his stomach was still adjusting to the fact that he had food to eat and his Dragel side was constantly protesting as it went through its cycle of demanding meat and fruit in alternate days.

Harry mentally replayed the incident. Draco hadn't reacted at all—well, apart from the slap that he'd never landed, thanks to Blaise—though now that Harry thought of it, he considered it somewhat odd.

Blaise was never around Draco the way that Pansy was and yet he'd stood up between them. Though, now that he thought of it, Harry wondered what part of what she'd said had set the blond off. Certainly, he'd never pegged the boy as one to hit a girl, but then again, Lucius Malfoy had been a Death Eater.

*You shouldn't judge him by his parents.* The stray thought curled through his mind. Harry frowned. He looked down at his plate to see that more applesauce had been added. He scowled spectacularly, but neither twin would meet his eyes.

Harry unhappily shoveled another spoonful of applesauce in his mouth as he stared across the room at the red handprint still visible on Malfoy's face as the Slytherins silently filed out of the Great Hall.

By the time they turned up for Transfigurations, Harry had grown tired of the chattering amongst the students in regards to Malfoy. He didn't care to really know why or what had happened, but the more he thought about it, the more it annoyed him. It wasn't anyone's business really, if Draco decided to bond to someone else other than Pansy—and if it was Blaise, well, the only thing Harry had to say to that, was that the Italian needed to quit flirting with him if he was serious about Draco.

If he wasn't, well, Harry would deal with it when he came to that point. He didn't see anything wrong with the equation, though he did admit that it was the first time he'd ever seen or heard anything of the sort towards an all-male bonded pair in the wizarding world. He heard of such things, but didn't see much of it in real life. He'd yet to really see it anywhere.

Draco and Blaise had been a bit of a shock.

Harry resolved to ask the Italian at Potions before dinner. He wondered, faintly, what Snape would do.

Then he shuddered and broke into a trot to keep up with Hermione and Ron.

It suddenly felt as if all his luck had run out.
All Day Drama

Transfigurations was a nightmare.

Harry knew it was all going downhill the moment McGonagall's sharp eyes zeroed in on him. Her scent dipped sharply in a way that heralded trouble. He'd managed to slip by her for so long and now it was as if she'd suddenly realized something. To his relief, she didn't call him out on it in class.

But as she'd done the first week, she came by to personally inspect his efforts or rather, his lack of visible progress. She'd turned away to scold Ron with face set in an expression of extreme disapproval as class continued on.

Harry had sat in his seat, feeling worse as the minutes ticked by.

The moment class was over, he was on his feet and ready to run.

He didn't get very far at all.

"Mr. Potter, a word?" McGonagall's voice cut through his temporary bubble of happiness.

Harry swallowed. This wouldn't go over well, he could practically feel it.

Ron shot him a sympathetic look as Hermione dragged him out the door to the next class.

He shuffled up to the desk and waited. She scribbled something on a piece of parchment and then peered up at him over her glasses. "Is something the matter?"

"No, Professor McGonagall." He answered, politely.

"I see." She eyed him meaningfully. "You've had this kind of a…reaction before." She sniffed. "In the first week, correct? I've noticed your recent lack of progress in class. I have meant to ask and should have said something sooner. Have you come into any magical inheritance this year, Mr. Potter?"

Harry's jaw dropped. "Professor?" He squeaked.

She perked a brow at his reaction and made another scribble on the parchment. "I thought not."

"Professor?" He tried again, unable to help himself.

"Of course, you might not be aware of it, but most young witches and wizards find themselves with a magical inheritance on their sixteenth birthdays." She sighed. "Some do and some do not, but it depends on family bloodlines. Your mother received hers as a sudden, inherent ability to manipulate charms at will, I do believe she was not a pureblood, however, she did possess a significant amount of raw magic and that may have had something to do with it."

She held up a hand. "Before you ask, I have no idea what your father's was, I do know that it did help to settle him down just a bit. He did have quite some trouble controlling his magic for a few weeks until it settled down. Whether you did inherit something or not, it is quite normal for your magic to rewrite itself on an auspicious birthday." She scribbled something else on the parchment. "As I don't believe you've ever had this sort of issue before, I would suggest visiting Madam Pomfrey. She can help, if there are any symptoms you have noticed or at least, you will have a
proper excuse from classes if there is something wrong."

The stern professor handed it over. "I do not think I should have to impress upon you the seriousness of this matter." She peered at him over her glasses. "This is serious, Mr. Potter. Now, Poppy can also give a better explanation than I, as to why your magic may be…reacting, if that is the case. Run along now. This should excuse you from your next class."

So Harry left.

He made his way down to the next class and stuffed the note in his pocket. The last thing he wanted to do was go and see Madam Pomfrey. He'd managed to avoid her for three weeks after all. The matron was never quite happy to see him—probably because disaster usually followed shortly afterward—but as far as he knew, he was fine, well, except for the lack of magic part, but that wasn't really much of an issue—sort of. If Professor McGonagall had thought his inheritance to be an excuse for it, then he'd let her go right on believing that. He hadn't confirmed nor denied receiving an inheritance. There was no real need to correct her assumptions and it was her own fault for making them in the first place. She hadn't given him much of a chance to answer.

He wouldn't answer.

He didn't have to. It was no one's business but his own.

With that reasoning hammered out in his head, Harry trotted off to Charms class. His mind flickered back to his mother and he wondered what it must have been like for her. He'd heard once, that she was extremely gifted in Charms. It was one of the few treasured tidbits of knowledge he knew of her. It was news to him that her gift had come as a magical inheritance. He'd treasure that new tidbit and silently thanked McGonagall, even though she didn't know what it meant to him. He found himself wondering if the same would work for him—after all, a magical inheritance had to come from one's parents and if his mother had talent in charms, then perhaps he wasn't entirely screwed for the moment.

Maybe.

His magic was just as nonexistent in there as it had been everywhere else for the past nearly two months. He wondered if Professor McGonagall's mention of his magic redirecting itself had anything to do with it.

Perhaps he ought to see Madam Pomfrey after all.

Perhaps.

His stomach twinged in unease and he shoved that thought away.

No, absolutely not.

He'd avoid it as long as he possibly could.

Charms was just as awful as Transfiguration.

It seemed that Professor Flitwick had kept an eye on him and he made his move right before Harry could bolt for the next class.

"Mr. Potter?"
Harry stifled a groan. He turned to see the short fellow waiting, expectantly. "Yes, Professor?"

Professor Flitwick beckoned to him as the rest of the class filed out. "If you are not feeling well to participate in class, please visit the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey will set you straight to rights. You wouldn't want to fall behind…" The sentence trailed off and then the little professor returned his attention to the stack of summer homework on his desk.

Harry nodded, quickly, nervously and backed out of the room. He knew a dismissal when he heard one and if the Professor hadn't ordered him to see Madam Pomfrey, then there was no reason he really had to.

DADA class was strange.

Professor Terius seemed to be in an exceptionally dark mood. He altered the expected lesson of a practical example in favor of a textbook reading. The selected a passage dealt with types of magical creatures and basic summaries of what they were and what they were capable of. He had them take turns all around the class reading it out loud. He moodily interrupted to correct speech and grammar several times in short, sharp phrases, but didn't make a single comment beyond that.

He paced the length of the classroom and up and down the aisles a few times.

At one moment, he lingered in front of the empty desk where Pansy Parkinson would have sat. His frown said more than he might have, but he didn't He then resumed his pacing and at the end of the passage, scowled magnificently.

"Any questions regarding today's readings will have to wait. I shall answer during the next class period. Choose one question that puzzles you and address it an essay of fourteen inches, due immediately upon the next class period." He frowned. There was still roughly about twenty minutes left of class time. "Chose a question with merit and reread this passage thoroughly to find supporting statements for your argument. Dismissed."

A slightly stunned class began to pack up and move out. They weren't about to complain of getting out early—well, none besides Hermione, that is—and she had learned with time not to speak up out of turn in this particular class.

"Mr. Zabini, Mr. Malfoy, a word?"

Harry was swept up with the crowd and out into the hallway. He turned back in time to see Draco turning his head to show off the bruise on the side of his face as Blaise circled 'round the desk to stand with his friend. Harry wondered why Draco hadn't visited the infirmary for bruise salve. But as the blond approached the agitated professor, the door swung shut before Harry could see more.

He found himself wondering what the professor's reaction was.

A new burst of energy sang through him at being let out early. Harry charged along with the usual flow of students, thinking general happy thoughts. He had an idea of what to write for the essay and he had a sudden craving for fruit again. Halfway towards the Great Hall, Harry stifled a groan as he began to feel an all-too-familiar tiredness creeping into his very bones. The burst of energy had only been temporary—a warning at best, if he chose to look at it that way. He was not looking forward to carrying around Pepper-up Potions and napping at every available moment.

This week was sure to be a pain in more ways than one. He hoped no one would notice—without the usual rush and bustle of the first school week—it would definitely be a little trickier.

Harry grumbled to himself as he moved along to the next class and ran smack into Theodore Nott.
The dark-haired fellow caught him easily by the elbow and steadied him with a smile. "Morning, Harry." He greeted. "You're out early."

"Morning, Theo." Harry returned, pleased to be able to use the boy's first name and in shortened form no less. "Teacher Terius let us out early. Can I borrow your-"

"Lucky you." Theo praised. "For four chocolate frogs, you can have it tonight and return it tomorrow in Potions." One honey-gold eye winked. "Or four chocolate frogs whenever you get them and you can borrow it for the same amount of time. Anything longer than that and we might have to work out…new arrangements."

Harry found himself blushing. "O-only four?"

"Shall I ask for more?" Theo chuckled. "Harry, Harry, really, whenever you're offered a good deal, take it quietly and do not complain." He smirked. "It is that self-sacrificing habit you Gryffindors have that always cost you in the end. You should never ask a Slytherin if you've paid them enough." He winked. "When you have the frogs, I'll have the book."

"You really shouldn't eat so much of them, you know." Harry heard himself say. He was frantically trying to think of something else to keep the conversation going. The few snatched moments they'd had to talk had never satisfied him at all. Not to mention that if the twins smelled delicious, then Theodore's scent was absolutely divine.

Theo chuckled and the sound sent happy shivers through Harry. "Are you worried for my sugar intake? How touching. I assure you that I am-"

"Shut up! It's not my fault if you suddenly turn into a hyper-"

"Harry?" Ron stood in the hallway, staring at him a mixture of confusion and uncertainty. "Why are you talking to one of those slimy snakes?"

"I'll just be taking my leave." Theo's eyes frosted over and he turned away, sharply. "Harry." He said, with a nod and was gone in the passing flow of students.

Harry stared after him, feeling his absence as a very obvious loss that made him want to run after the boy and do…something, he didn't know what.

"Harry?" Ron was beside him, closer this time. "Harry, mate, what's going on? Are you alright?"

"What, Ron?" Harry jerked around to glare at him. "Yes. I'm fine. I was fine." Perfectly fine until you interrupted. He thought, darkly.

"Hey!" Ron held up his hands. "You know, you've been acting really strange lately." His eyes were accusing. "You hardly ever hang out with Mione and me now and now you're getting all cozied up to-"

Harry tuned him out. He had to. If he listened, he had a feeling he'd punch Ron in the face, just to hear the sound his fist would make when it collided with the redhead's nose. Or jaw. Or head. Either of them, he wasn't going to be picky.

Potions was a curious affair.

Pansy was present.
Draco was paired with Millicent instead of her. The bruise on his face had disappeared and he spoke in quiet, deliberate tones, avoiding her seemingly without effort. His fellow Slytherins immediately moved independently between them, keeping them apart without a word from their still glowering Head of House.

Harry shrank slightly into Blaise when the scowling professor prowled the classroom, inspecting the individual cauldrons.

The Italian had barely spoken so far and he looked, curiously at Harry for a moment, before directing the ingredients to the other side of the table. "Check if they need to be diced or sliced." He instructed.

Harry eyed them warily and then cautiously bent his head over the book, skimming for the necessary information.

"Something troubles you, little lion?" Blaise murmured when Harry bumped into him for the half-dozenth time they were standing beside each other.

"Harry." The green-eyed boy corrected automatically. "Why can't you ever use my name?"

"Har-ry, then." Blaise purred.

Harry felt his face heat and knew he was turning several shades of red. He should've kept his mouth shut for that point. He looked away as Blaise chuckled softly beside him. "You shouldn't be flirting with me if you're with Draco." He snapped.

Blaise stiffened beside him. "Excuse me?" The warmth faded from his voice.

Harry swallowed. "If you're with Draco, you shouldn't be…with me." He licked his lips, nervously.

Blaise's hand clamped down on his shoulder and turned him around. Dark purple eyes zeroed in on shining emerald orbs. "Listen close and listen well, Potter." He whispered, darkly. "I am not with Draco nor anyone else. I would advise you to keep your suspicions of my personal life to yourself."

Harry blinked. The Italian seemed to have done a complete personality change. He didn't like that. This side of Blaise wasn't very nice at all. "I said, if." He lifted his head a little higher. The height difference between them wasn't too noticeable, but he knew that Blaise stood tall on purpose to get his point across. He'd do the same. "If. I didn't say you were."

The hand on his shoulder squeezed painfully tight and then, Professor Snape cleared his throat from somewhere nearby and the offending hand gentled and fell back to Blaise's side.

Harry swallowed and edged away a few inches as he began the usual ingredient preparations. When he finished, he read out the instructions in a quiet monotone and let Blaise do the rest of the work.

An awkward silence settled over him as the time torturously ticked by.

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear." Blaise said, quietly. They'd reached the halfway mark for the potion and he directed Harry to start reading the instructions once more. "Especially among Slytherins."

"Obviously I know that now." Harry shot back. He glared at the taller boy.

Blaise offered a rueful smile, hands extended in apology. "My apologies, little lion. I did not mean
Harry snorted. "Keep your hands to yourself."
The class ended without further interaction or question between them.

"Time is up. Bottle and label your potions, leave them here on your way out." Professor Snape barked. He folded his arms into the sleeves of his robes and glowered at each student as they passed by his desk to do as he'd asked. "And Miss Parkinson and Mr. Malfoy, a word."

The two Slytherins in question were the last two left in the room as Harry waited for Blaise to leave first and caught the tail end of the crowd.

"Something the matter, Harry?" Theo fell into step beside him, a steady hand on his shoulder when Harry jerked around in surprise.

"Theo. Oh." Harry found himself relaxing almost at once. "No, I just…it's nothing."

"Nothing doesn't leave a frown like that on your face." Theo's smile didn't quite touch his eyes. "Did Blaise say something to you?"

Harry blinked. Theo had been paying attention. "No. Why?"

"Good." Theo said, calmly. "Did he do anything?"

"What? No!" Harry sputtered, the moment his mind caught up to the insinuation.

"Wonderful. So what did you say or do that leaves you like this?"

"I didn't do anything!" Harry snapped, defensively. "Just-" Theo's hand lightly brushed against his and a warm tingle shot through him, temporarily fudging his bolt of anger. "I—it's nothing." He swallowed and jerked his hand away.

"If he ever does, tell me." Theo murmured. "A snake vs. a snake has a better chance of winning. Good evening, Harry." And he melted into the crowd in his usual way and was gone before Harry could puzzle through that parcel of information.

He was left subconsciously holding his hand and wondering what exactly had just happened there.

Harry shook his head and trotted towards the Gryffindor Tower. It was dinner time and then homework time and then bedtime. He yawned. He'd go with bedtime and leave everything else for later. It had been too strange a day and he didn't feel like sitting through the leftover drama that was sure to be inside the Great Hall.

Somehow, he didn't think his stomach would mind.

Another yawn came through and Harry didn't bother to hide it.
It was three days before a certain pair of professors caught on to the fact that he hadn't visited Madam Pomfrey.

Professor McGonagall didn't quite scowl at him through the entire class, but he could feel her eyes following his every move.

Professor Flitwick responded in similar fashion and frowned pointedly as Harry scooted out of class before anything else could happen.

Professor Terius was back to his normal self, literally the day after the Pansy-Draco attempt, though he did shoot Harry a few annoyed looks every so often as if he were a particular wrinkle that he couldn't quite iron out. Terius had charged back into classes as usual the very next day afterward and since then, the class had begun to discuss one topic that had Hermione ranting and raving through every meal since—Blood Magic. Harry hadn't cared. It had sounded interesting and even though he'd listened to Hermione's complaints, he felt a strangely alluring call towards the sheer power that Blood Magic promised. It was personal, intimate and so beautifully dark.

He shouldn't like it—or so he felt the whispers in his ears—but oh, how he did love to think and dream of it.

He couldn't wait until they touched on the practical points. Terius had all but promised them that they would see actual Blood Magic in action and in a safe environment, courtesy of Headmaster Dumbledore. It was sure to be a very interesting lesson. Of course, that wasn't the only interesting thing he had to focus on. Harry had ordered a new box of chocolate frogs and eagerly awaited the chance to trade them for Theo's mysterious encyclopedia in Potions that very afternoon. He was itching to get his fingers on that book, sure that the creature encyclopedia would have something on Dragels after all of the books in the Hogwarts library seemed exempt from the very term—well, at least in terms of useful information. Nearly all of them had the same textbook definition as his Care of Magical Creatures textbook and they all had less than flattering things to say of the dearly departed creatures.

Nearly every other text he'd gotten his hands on, seemed to be written from the viewpoints of authors that wished they knew how the extinct race had lived, breathed and survived. There was nothing really useful or concrete between all the speculation scribbled there and Harry couldn't help feeling as if the Dragels had been some sort of very secret society, complete with special passwords and secret handshakes.

It was as if he didn't know the password and because of it, he wouldn't be able to learn the handshake.

It was certainly confusing.

Thankfully, none of his other professors seemed to really be worrying or paying attention to other things—such as his new lack of magic—but then again, he didn't necessarily need magic in Herbology and it wasn't like Professor Binns would care as he droned on about the Goblin wars. Harry was more than grateful for that. It allowed him some leeway and he didn't have to act as much as he did in other classes.
A long yawn sneaked out of his mouth and Harry sighed to himself. He hated feeling this way—so strung out and exhausted and out of sorts, he wanted the week to be over so he could sleep in for the weekend and fix it. For all the wonders that his Dragel inheritance was supposed to be, it was starting to become a little bit of a royal pain. With some effort, Harry pushed the depressing thoughts away and tried to focus on more enjoyable things.

Such as talking to Theo.

Borrowing books from Theo.

Possibly having a longer conversation with Theo—minus a certain redhead's interruption.

Harry sighed.

He was looking forward to spending the afternoon reading and he'd carefully stowed his stash of chocolate frogs in his bookbag, with a smile to Theo as they'd passed in the corridor to let his friend know that he'd gotten his hands on the necessary sweets.

Theo's soft smile in return left him blushing.

Harry ducked his head and skittered off to the next class.

If he had a silly grin on his face for the first period, no one commented on it.

They probably didn't even notice.

It was in Potions that his luck first ran out.

Harry didn't realize it until it was far too late, though it figured that it would only be Snape who would notice. The man never seemed to miss a detail. A familiar twinge of unease slithered into his stomach as Harry rose from the shared workstation and carefully cradled the finished potion to his chest as he got in line to reach the professor's desk.

Said Professor didn't even glance at him as he placed the completed and labeled potion on the desk. "Potter, a word, if you would." He said, stiffly. He waited until the other students had placed their potions on the desk and then he began to gather them up, speaking in Harry's general direction as he did. "The Headmaster wishes to see you in his office directly. Go. Now!"

Harry did.

In the opposite direction.

He bolted from the dungeons and headed for Gryffindor Tower. He did not feel like talking to the overly cheerful wizard and he most certainly did not want to put himself in a position where he might give too much away. The last thing he wanted to share with anyone was the fact that he'd become a—well, an extinct creature—there was simply no good way to slip that into a conversation, anyhow. Harry shuddered. He had a feeling that talking or being in a room alone with said wizard would most certainly do that and he did not want to be blurring out things that were best kept under wraps. He was tired enough to know that he couldn't afford to take that risk—not now anyway.

Maybe if he had a little nap…

A wave of tiredness overtook him and Harry gritted his teeth. Why now of all times? He forced
himself to keep on walking, knowing that he'd probably end up sleeping through dinner as he'd done the first week of school, until he'd been able to sleep through the weekend.

He'd almost reached the safety of Gryffindor Tower when his breath suddenly hitched in his throat. It was always the prequel to that lovely, unwanted twinge of unease in his stomach.

Harry bit back the groan of disappointment. He knew that feeling—thanks to his lovely, wonderful, brand-spankin' new Dragel instincts. Something bad was going to happen.

It was going to happen right now.

"Mr. Potter." The Potion Master's silky, dark voice made him stiffen into a statue. "The Headmaster's office is in the other direction. I would hope that the potion fumes have not affected your usually muddled brain to the point that simple instructions are too difficult for your feeble mind to comprehend." The man stared down at him with a mixture of a glower and a scowl in place. "Your head of house has worried about you to the point of mentioning it to the headmaster. Of which, I was selected to personally escort you to his office, just in case you forgot the password or some other equally inane excuse."

Harry swallowed. He could feel his Dragel instincts beginning to act up and scream at him. He didn't like what they were screaming at him. They were warning him away from the older man and telling him that he was threading on thin ice.

"Shall we?" The taller man gestured with over-exaggerated politeness.

Harry held his head high as he turned on his heel and began to retrace his steps. He made sure to keep an even distance between them. If Snape noticed, he didn't let on.

They neared the Headmaster's office with a high-pitched scream made Harry clutch at his ears and whimper.

Snape's head snapped to the side to look at him and then the Potions Master went rigid for a split-second before he broke into a dead run, whatever color he possessed already leaving his abnormally pale face. His robes billowed impressively behind him as he literally flew through the corridors.

Harry grimaced and jogged after him once he discovered that the unearthly scream had only sounded once. That was good. He didn't know if he could handle hearing a second one. It was as if that scream had all but ripped every empathic feeling from his body and shoved it down his throat in a way to make him feel complete, utter despair. A strange hollow emptiness that reminded him almost of the Dementors. Only worse. Harry shoved the thought away as forcefully as he could. *How could something be worse than those wretched creatures of darkness?*

The scrap of black fabric flickered around the edge of the wall, ahead and Harry hurried after it. He flinched as a powerful ripple of magic surged outward from the corridor. He rounded the corner and gave a squeak of surprise when the haunting scream was repeated and simultaneously interrupted by something akin to a screech.

He didn't know what else to call it.

It was immediately followed by a ground-shaking roar that urged him to drop to the ground and make himself as small and inconspicuous as possible.

Harry didn't know who roared.
The sight before his eyes was something he wouldn't be able to forget any time soon.

The scent of blood flooded his senses and his first reaction was to gag, swallow hard and then to start up a mental chant in his head. Blood had never smelled quite so...strange before.

But then again, he'd never seen what was now right before his eyes.

Draco Malfoy lay on the ground, clutching his bloodied middle. The trim body was contorted in an awkward position with smears of blood decorating most of his visible figure. Professor Terius knelt beside him, minus his teaching robes which had been used to form a makeshift pillow to prop up the blond head. His hands hovered about Draco's face, before the blond opened his mouth to cough up blood. Terius lifted him enough to turn his head to the side for the liquid to trickle out the side.

At their approach, Terius jerked upright and his grey-blue eyes flashed with power and anger as Snape approached. His lips curled back and an audible snarl filled the corridor.

Snape jerked around to look at Harry, his black eyes going impossibly darker and then he twisted back to look at Terius and gave a low growl, his gaze now fixed on Draco's prone form.

Harry stumbled backwards and fell when another powerful wave of magic snapped out, all but throwing him to the hard ground. He stared in fascination as Snape purposefully strode closer to the duo and easily shrugged out of his own robes with the intent of covering Draco's injured body.

Terius growled at him again as he wrapped his arms protectively around Draco, his grey-blue eyes sparking with emotions that Harry couldn't even begin to understand.

Snape growled in reply.

Terius answered with a faint hiss that trailed off to be something like a whine.

A low rumble sounded from the Potions Master.

Two answering whines of distress came from the Draco-Terius pair on the ground.

Harry felt his breath catch in his throat. He didn't dare breathe. The urge to fall to the ground hadn't really lessened, but seeing as he was already flat on the ground, Harry simply stayed where he was. He wished desperately he had his magic back. But the bizarre scene continued to play out in front of him. Harry couldn't tear his eyes away as Snape drew nearer to the duo and draped his precious teaching robes over Draco's form. Within seconds, his wand slid out into his hand and he began casting spells. In between of the hastily whispered words, the Potions Master hissed and growled at the younger professor. Terius bowed his head, leaning away from the angry sounds, but continuing to support and rub warmth into the pale pureblood. In what was merely a matter of minutes, but somehow seemed to be much longer, Snape rose in his usual dramatic way, cradling Draco in his arms as he scowled at the bloody floor.

Terius followed his gaze as he slowly rose, keeping a cautious eye on the older man. When Severus scowled at him, Terius waved his hand at the mess and it disappeared.

A curt nod from the Potions Master was the only sign of approval.

Harry swallowed hard. There definitely had been no wand involved with that. The entire episode seemed rather surreal as if such a thing could never happen. But Harry found he still couldn't look away as he watched the drama play out between the three. A faint, stirring of hope sparked through him as his Dragel self identified with fellow creatures of its kind.

Terius cast the same cleaning charms on himself and waited while his clothes were cleaned of the
blood. When he was finished, grey-blue eyes zeroed in on Harry's surprised form. "Mr. Potter." His voice was strained as if it took too much effort to speak in slow, measured tones. "Follow." The DADA professor turned and instead of hanging back, he started forward and squinted down the corridor. A quick glance around seemed to satisfy him and he motioned to Snape to move first.

Surprisingly, Snape did.

Terius fell into step, intent on keeping himself between Harry and the other two before he realized that Harry wasn't following. "Is there something wrong with your feet?" He snapped, returning to stand a few feet away, but making no move to aid Harry. The sea-blue-grey eyes were wary with something hidden in their dark depths. The expression on the young professor's face gave little away. Harry stared up at him. "I have no intention of carrying you anywhere, so I would suggest you walk now unless you would prefer to be, what do you call it here—ah—obliviated?"

That worked.

Harry was on his feet in seconds and glaring at the man he had almost come to respect. There would be no one carrying or obliviating him if he could help it—regardless of whether he had magic or not.

Terius merely gave a curt nod and turned around, breaking into an even trot to keep up with Snape's long strides. They passed by Dumbledore's office, at which the Gargoyle leapt to the side and the aged wizard in question appeared at the bottom of the steps.

"Severus!" Dumbledore called out, cheerfully. "And Professor Terius! To what do I owe the—oh dear." The smile and twinkle faded at once as he caught sight of Severus' armful. "Poppy?" He suggested, switching instantly to a serious mode as he falling directly into step with a billow of bright blue and silver brocaded robes.

Snape walked right past him without a word or glance. Terius followed suit. Draco whimpered and curled further into the arms holding him.

Harry trailed along, finding himself walking directly beside the Headmaster. He gulped. The uneasy feeling hadn't faded yet. He didn't want to even think of why.

The Headmaster seemed not to notice.

Chapter End Notes

Plot picks up around ch 13.
They found themselves in the infirmary in rather short order.

Thankfully, it was empty of other occupants.

"Poppy!" Dumbledore called. The older wizard seemed the be one with the closest human sounding voice.

Snape immediately angled towards the closest empty bed, with a tense Terius trailing behind. The tall, dark figure attempted to gently ease Draco to the pristine white sheets. Almost at once, the blond became more vocal, with loud whimpers and whines, his eyes shut tight even as his body thrashed, protesting.

"Hold him!" Terius rasped, glowering at the black-haired man. His voice held more of a hiss and less of a human touch to it. "He'll tear open what little work I've been able to cast and-"

"Albus?" Madam Pomfrey emerged from her office, wiping her hands on the front of her orderly apron. "Whatever is the—Mr. Potter? Already?" She sighed, with her hands on her plump waist. "It's barely been a month, though I suppose it was too good to ask for that much-"

"Not Potter, you daft woman!" Snape practically snarled as he jerked around to face her. "Here! Help him now!"

"Severus Snape, don't you dare take that tone with me-" The medi-witch began, her words trailed off and the matron gasped as her mind caught up to the sight before her. She swallowed hard. "Is that Malfoy?" There was horror in her voice as she bustled forward. "Set him down." She drew her wand from the smock-front pocket and began to wave it in the usual movements for her diagnosis. "I can't tell you what's really wrong or help unless you set him down, your magical signature always interferes whenever you're within the slightest-" She reached for Draco only to hear two simultaneous hisses and the audible click of Draco's teeth before Snape stumbled backwards, aided by a timely tug from a glowering Terius.

The two men glared at each other for a moment. Then Terius released the arm after a pointed look from the man it belonged to.

Poppy stood a few scant feet away, a rather worrisome feeling beginning to make itself known. She'd just escaped certain death, or so it felt. There was definitely something off here, though having the Headmaster show up with such an unlikely bunch of company was certain to be the cause of any unusualness.

"Ah, Poppy." Dumbledore started forward. "This is not quite what I had in mind when I called you a moment ago. But it seems that young Mr. Malfoy has run into a bit of trouble."

"A bit of trouble?" Snape bit the words off one at a time in his usual fashion. "A bit, Albus? This was no accident!" He nearly trembled with rage. As it was, the angry energy surrounding him all but permeated the air. A few things rattled in the background.

Poppy looked as if she wanted to speak, but Harry hoped she wouldn't. He didn't think it was safe for anyone to speak right now—not with the darkened scowl on the Potion Master's face.

Instinctively, Harry found himself slipping behind the Headmaster, just in case. He should've just run when he had the chance. He should have. But he'd feel the connection between them. Even if
his senses screamed danger at him for being so close to Snape, even if it meant nothing to anyone else in the hospital wing, he'd craved that feeling for however brief it had been. His Dragel self rejoiced in finding its fellow kind and urged him to continue to bask in their presence, at least until they told him otherwise. He wasn't about to complain when it made him feel so good.

The tiredness eased enough for him to recognize the faintest threads of warmth. They cared—even if they didn't know it themselves—he could tell that much and he was so tired of being alone and overlooked. No matter what he did, his life was a torrid, tangled mess and it would always stay that way. The chance to enjoy even a few stolen moments of hope was too great a temptation.

Harry was rudely jerked from his musings as a new flurry of snarls, growls and hisses came from the odd trio of Snape, Terius and Malfoy. His Dragel instinctively shrank back within him. Outwardly, he fought to remain at least as physically unaffected as possible—it'd be a dead giveaway now if he dared to let anything slip. At least, he knew the reasons why his reactions simmered so close to the surface. It didn't take a book to explain it. At least one or both of the professors were dominant to him in some way or another. He was unclaimed. Though they seemed to have formed their own circle, there was guarantee that they'd leave him be. That alone, naturally made him wish to be anywhere near them in their present state.

It didn't feel safe at all.

He really should have run.

"Fine!" Snape finally ground out. His voice was still angry and hard as he shifted the armful as gently as he could and lowered Draco to the bed amidst the boy's weak protests and heart-wrenching cries of distress.

The cries, Harry soon found were muffled. He didn't like it. While his instincts had told him to run from either professor, the rest of him was coaxed back with the thoughts that he couldn't leave Draco on his own.

*Draco.*

Harry blinked.

When had Malfoy suddenly become Draco?

He snuck an upwards glance at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore winked and twinkled down at him before he glided forward and gave a slight wave of his hand. The familiar tingle of magic that passed through him let him know that the elderly wizard had cast some privacy charms. *About time.* Harry thought, annoyed. He inched forward, still careful to keep a respectful distance between himself, Snape and Terius. He felt the faintest of tugs towards Draco again and he nibbled his lower lip as he watched the protesting boy and Madam Pomfrey's frantic attentions. The dear lady was trying, but true to her word, it seemed as if all her magic went haywire the moment it was even remotely directed towards Snape.

A flicker of movement caught his eye and Harry turned to stare at Terius in puzzlement. The younger professor had taken a stance slightly behind Snape and Draco, just apart from the rest of them, but close enough to be near. At this moment, the man literally quivered as if he were about to lose control of something very soon in the near future. The sea-blue-grey eyes glittered before the round orbs morphed into something decidedly more reptilian.

*Dragel!*
Harry's new senses screamed at him.

But he could only stare as the DADA professor clenched hands that morphed into claws, so tightly that he drew blood. The dark rivulets streamed down and dribbled on his trousers as his shoulders twitched.

Suddenly, Harry knew what was coming next. He backed away, feeling the suppressed aura fanning out through the infirmary. Professor Terius was far more powerful than he'd ever let on. The sheer flicker of that much raw magic literally screamed at him.

That was definitely a Dragel. He didn't need any more confirmation. In fact, he'd be happy if the confirmation went away. Harry scooted back the first few inches he'd taken forward. The fact that he was considering the Headmaster as a potential shield was lost to him. He was only aware of the powerful and upset Dragel just within his line of sight.

As if sensing the severity of the situation, Dumbledore shifted back as well. He nearly stumbled over Harry, but managed to keep his balance with his twinkling gaze flickering over Harry as if trying to read something that wasn't there.

Harry studiously avoided his gaze as the sound of tearing fabric and a feral roar literally shook the room. The wards trembled and Harry suppressed a shiver. He knew in his very fibers that a cry like that promised pain—death, certainly—pain, at the very least.

And he knew, this time, who had roared. It was Terius. The other time had to have been Snape. This roar was different.

Ripping fabric and a satisfied groan captured his attention once more. Harry stared.

Wings.

A pair of large, grey, red-scaled wings arching out from his back and curved upwards as Terius moved forward to the smaller figure on the hospital bed. The leathery texture was smooth and scaled in the way that belied the actual use and familiarity of the appendages. They fluttered, stirring a powerful, magically charged wind. The sheer volume of energy seemed to crackle and snap around him and Harry was surprised to see Snape back down.

The Potions Master took one look at the furious, transformed man and grabbed Poppy's elbow, dragging her away from the bed and towards Dumbledore and Harry.

Draco keened pitifully, his twitching body trying vainly to convey his displeasure and panic. His cries were muffled and then immediately silenced when Terius reached him and those strong, broad wings curved around the bed, hiding all from sight in a winged cocoon. Tense silence filled the room for several, long minutes.

Snape shifted restlessly, Madam Pomfrey alternated between wringing her hands and glowering at the Headmaster and the elderly wizard in question drew out a handful of lemon drops from the sleeves of his voluminous robes and offered one to Harry.

Emerald eyes stared at him incredulously.

Dumbledore smiled, sadly. "I do not mean to make light of it, Harry, my boy." He sighed. "But it would be extremely unwise to interfere at this time. We must let them do what they will." The words seemed meant more for Severus however, and the surly man merely gave a grunt in response, his dark eyes fixed on the winged cocoon that he could not yet approach.
The silence continued to hang thickly between them all. There was nothing else to be done.

Another wave of magic pulsed outward from the bed and there was the sound of a muffled curse as Terius' wings shifted and moved, before they shrank down and melted away into his figure. The claws and face scales began to disappear as the professor scowled at the boy on the bed. He cuffed him lightly on the head with one hand. "Language, Draco. That was uncalled for." He scolded, but there was no real emotion behind the word. The sea-grey eyes had yet to show any trace of feeling as they roamed over the now calm body.

Draco sat up and rubbed his head. His clothes hung off from him in bloody rags, but the skin beneath was smooth, unblemished and just the right shade of pale. He didn't look at all as if he'd been attacked—well, except for the detail of the bloody, shredded clothes. "It was my favorite shirt!" He pouted at the DADA professor. "My favorite! I don't have another one like that and it's not like I asked for them to attack me and-

Snape growled and shot forward. He couldn't help himself anymore and was at Draco's side in an instant and almost at once, Draco reacted—but not in the way anyone else would have predicted.

His grey eyes grew wide and he scuttled to the opposite side of the bed, reaching backwards, blindly with one hand to grab hold of Terius, who was in the middle of charming his clothes to repair themselves.

Wandlessly, Harry noted. He wondered what exactly had Draco so terrified of his Godfather and what exactly said Godfather was going to do to his Godson, as it seemed that the dark glower on Snape's face spelled certain doom.

"S-severus." Draco licked his lips, nervously. "I-it was an accident, I swear. I would never dare to-

"Do. Not. Lie. To me!" Severus hissed. His hands had wrapped around the bed rails on the sides of the hospital bed and now they creaked dangerously as the unnatural grip threatened to wrench them from where they'd been bolted. "I told you to never walk those halls alone, especially now that you are-!

Draco squeaked and turned away from the angry Potions Master to literally leap into the arms of a resigned Terius. He clung to the older man with all the energy he could spare, it seemed. The younger professor merely sighed and tucked the blond head in the crook of his neck, beneath his chin. Terius hummed softly for a moment, the sound sending a pleasing vibration through the entire room.

An answering purr came from the blond and the tense figure seemed to melt into the arms cradling him close.

Terius gave a faint nod to a furious Snape who seemed to be struggling to keep his temper in check. A battle, thankfully, that the Potions Master seemed to be winning. Sort of. The glaring match resumed for a moment, but Terius merely waited for a moment, and then tipped his head to the side. Snape didn't need any further invitation. He was soon hugging both men and sniffing carefully along every inch of Draco that he could reach in Terius' arms, his shoulders giving the occasional twitch as if his own pair of wings would have liked to make an appearance.

The two older men held a wordless conversation over Draco's head and Snape broke eye contact first, with a deep frown of concern marring his unique features as he looked from the perfectly defenseless Draco to the headmaster and company. He stepped in front of Terius as they turned to face the other occupants of the room. Terius rolled his eyes as his wings burst out from his shoulders once more, fluttering forward to shield Draco from view. He didn't seem to care that he'd
shredded the robes he'd just meticulously repaired. The protective stance was clear and from the slightly bored look on his face, no one dared say anything about it. His protection included both Snape and Draco.

"Albus." Severus began, tiredly. "As you can see, I have safely escorted Mr. Potter to your immediate presence. If you would, I take my leave. Terius?"

There was an answering grunt. The grey and red wings fluttered, gently, but Draco remained hidden from view.

Harry blinked. *They were just going to leave? Just like that? And, and-!* He opened his mouth and then shut it when twin glares came in his direction. Coming from Snape, it was bad enough, but the new layer of steel and ice he'd seen in Terius' eyes made Snape's black-eyed glare all that worse.

Harry was sure he'd somehow missed something. He'd been there the entire time, but something significant had happened and somehow, he'd missed it.

The men shifted, but the Headmaster wasn't even looking at them, instead, his twinkling blue eyes were fixed on a certain, messy-haired Gryffindor. "Ah, Harry. Lemon drop?" He offered, again.

Harry blinked. That was not what he expected. He heard Snape snort in the background and a low growl that probably had come from Terius. The DADA professor was quite vocal in his growls. A pink blush dusted across his cheeks as his thoughts somehow diverted to a completely unwanted train of thought. Harry gulped and hurriedly summoned up his Gryffindor courage. "No thank you, sir." He said, politely. "Professor Snape said you wanted to see me, sir?" He asked, politely. There didn't seem to be a safe way out of this prickly situation.

"Actually, Harry, I wanted to ask you to visit Poppy for a check-up. Minerva tells me that your-"

Poppy was finally released from Snape's silencing spell and binding spell with a flick of Dumbledore's wand as the Headmaster continued his conversation. She glared at them both. "What, exactly, was that for, Severus!" She demanded. "I wouldn't have-"

A muffled sound from Terius' corner had her stopping in midsentence. She frowned at him, the memory of Draco's fangs snapping too close to her hand resurfacing. "I mean you no harm." She said, deliberately and slowly. She was not used to dealing with this kind of volatile situation. Most confrontations were over quickly and easily enough. This was starting to wear on her nerves and the very volume of magical energy in the room was beginning to give her a headache.

The DADA Professor merely glared at her, tightening his grip on the sleeping armful of Draco Malfoy.

The medi-witch nibbled on her lower lip for a moment and then sighed. "Which one of you do I need to ask to see to Mr. Malfoy?"

Terius gave an audible growl this time, his teeth bared in her direction, pointed fangs showing.

She retreated by a few steps and then turned to the Potions Master who seemed to be relaxing and somewhat amused. "That would be me, Poppy." He said, stiffly. "And I think that Draco is fine for now."

"Fine?" She perked a brow. "You walk in here with a blood-covered student, Severus! You place him in one of my beds, then pick him up and suddenly, everything is fine?"

"It is a private matter and will be handled." The dark figure retorted.
"Handled?" Poppy repeated.

He didn't answer, but he gave the faintest tilt of his head towards a certain elderly wizard still in the nearby vicinity.

"Albus?" She rounded on the unsuspecting Headmaster with a huff. "I won't have my hospital wing turned into a-" She swallowed. It seemed the rest of the Dragel drama was catching up to her. "What was that? What just happened?"

"Now, now, Poppy." The Headmaster twinkled at her, cheerfully. "I did warn you at the start of the school year that there might be a few surprises."

"You didn't tell me Severus Snape would be one of those surprises!" She snapped, hands on her hips. "And this young man!" She gave a jerk of her head towards Terius. "Absolutely no manners! Of all the nerve, Albus! Of all the nerve!" She spluttered for a few minutes. "I don't even want to know what he is!" She then frowned as her attention flickered to the rumpled hospital bed and she began to cast the necessary charms and spells to set it to right out of pure habit. It seemed as if no one would be offering to answer her questions any time soon, so she continued about her usual things. She stiffened a moment later when her wand spat out a result she hadn't been prepared for. "Albus." Her voice was dangerous.

"It is quite all right, Poppy." He said, genially.

She stared at him, tempted to ask if he was barking mad. The temptation was nearly impossible to resist. She managed—barely. "Traces of Blood Magic is not quite all-"

Dumbledore's smile didn't waver as he moved forward to inspect the bed and gave a half-hearted flick of his wand. "Ah, what traces?"

The matron stared at him. The reading from her wand changed. Her mouth opened and closed, and then she turned away with an indignant squeak.

Harry inched towards the doors. He was close. So close! No one would notice if he were to slip out now…

His back rested against the heavy doors and he fumbled, quickly, behind him for the door knobs. All he needed to was to grab one of the-!

And of course, classically, his luck ran out.

Almost as if they were one, all eyes in the room turned to look at him, from professor to medi-witch and Headmaster. every stern gaze all but physically pinned him to the door.

Harry gulped. He really should have run.

*Why did his luck have to end now?*

Harry found himself sitting on the newly made bed, with his hands tucked under his thighs as Madam Pomfrey waved her wand up and down him, with pursed lips. She looked even more displeased than usual as she tended to him. He managed to gather a small collection of scrapes and bruises from where the first backlash of Snape's angry energy had thrown him to the dungeon floors.

Harry was trying his best not to squirm under the twin glares of the two professors who had yet to
leave the infirmary. Why they were still there, Harry didn't care. He was just glad they were. He wanted to ask them some questions—and he wouldn't be taking no for an answer!

"A Dragel inheritance." Dumbledore said, at last. He stood off to the side, careful not to interfere with a bustling Poppy, who briskly murmured healing spells and rubbed a few daubs of bruise salve into the injured areas. "I had hoped you would be comfortable to speak to me about everything, Harry. Do you understand what has happened?"

Harry looked down the wand being waved in front of his legs, from the tip of his shoes to the tops of his knees. He hoped Poppy was about done. He shrugged in answer to the Headmaster's question. There wasn't anything he wanted to say to that. In fact, if it were up to him, he would have rather left the Headmaster in the dark.

"This is quite serious." The white-haired wizard commented, when Harry offered no input. "This should not have turned out this way." The twinkling blue eyes shifted to the odd trio, still standing a respectable distance away, but seemingly lost in their own little world.

Harry frowned. One piece of the puzzle clicked into place. "Is that why you hired Professor Terius?" He studiously avoided the gaze of said professor as he dared to ask the question. The man had looked up at the mention of his name.

Dumbledore smiled in that usual infuriating way of his. "It would seem as if you two are not quite...getting along."

If Terius heard, there was no reaction.

Harry snorted. As nice as the DADA classes were and as interesting as each lesson was, there remained a deliberate barrier between him and the professor—one that was not helped in the least by this most recent development. Of course, now that he could see that they shared a rather obvious thing in common, Harry could feel his Dragel self pushing him to be polite, respectful and to do whatever he could to get and stay in the good graces of the small circle in front of him. His Dragel wanted, craved—no, needed—acceptance! Harry struggled inwardly with it, forcing the voices to quiet down and working his best to keep the natural instincts at bay.

"Mr. Potter, do you mind?" Madam Pomfrey looked at him in exasperation. "Kindly stop trying to block me! I cannot perform the slightest scan if you do not allow me to read your magical—"

"I'm not doing anything." Harry stared at her in confusion. He couldn't. He didn't have any magic. Not a single scrap!

"He doesn't know he's doing it." Terius interrupted. He still scowled and now said scowl seemed as if it were permanently etched in his features. He was rocking side to side, ever so slightly with a sleepy Draco in his arms, the grey and red wings having folded away once more. Soft, contented noises occasionally came from the resting blond.

The sight might have been amusing if Harry hadn't seen Draco's bloodied body just moments before. If he hadn't realized that said blond was part of a mated Dragel circle—he might have laughed his head off and gotten rid of a bit of tension in the air and in himself. As it was, instead, he could literally feel his own soul crying out for the same tenderness that was obviously displayed in the way that Terius and Snape hovered over Draco. They cared about the pureblooded brat in a way that defied all logic that Harry could piece together. They were even at each other's throats for him. Even now, Snape still kept a hand on Draco's shoulder, uncaring that he was partially wrapped around the younger professor to do so.
Harry found himself wondering which was which in their mated hierarchy. He wasn't sure yet. It seemed as if the answer should be painfully obvious, but he was distracted by Poppy poking him with something in the side. An undignified yelp came out in response.

Two answering hisses made him relax and then tense when he realized the effect said reassurances had on him. He'd panicked and reacted and just like some of the odd dreams he'd had, there'd been an answer in return. Harry gulped. "I'm not doing anything." He said, at last. The Headmaster was giving him a disappointed look and while it didn't have the same effect as one of Snape's Death Glares, it did make him squirm nonetheless. "I can't. I don't have any…magic."

Silence reigned for a long moment.

"No magic?" Dumbledore repeated. "How is that even—Harry, that can't be true. Dragels are extremely powerful and your inheritance should have magnified your natural abilities to-"

"I haven't had any magic since my birthday. I didn't try much magic until I came here." Harry found himself shrinking away under the calculating gazes. "It's just—it's not there."

Poppy's frown grew worried. "I don't like that." She said, at last. "Harry, your magic can't be completely gone, but I can't tell what's wrong with you because I cannot get an accurate reading on your-"

"Must you do everything with magic, woman?" Snape glared at her. "He is fine! He walks and talks and is just as insufferable as he's always been. There is nothing wrong with him."

"Now, Severus. There is no need for that." The Headmaster admonished. "This is a disconcerting thing, to be sure, but, Harry, I'm sure we can think of something."

"There's nothing to think about." Terius interrupted. "Just leave him be."

"I cannot, in good conscience do that, professor." The Headmaster said, calmly.

The conversations all tangled up from there.

Harry was asked to prove that he didn't have any magic, something that wasn't very difficult at all. Poppy tried several things before finally throwing her hands up in despair. She even tried muggle means, via stethoscope and a few other items, before declaring that she'd done all that she could.

Snape's snarkiness went down by several notches with each increasingly disappointing result. He seemed almost frustrated that there wasn't some sort of instantaneous fix for Harry's current dilemma. Though of course, it could have something to do with the headmaster's insistence that there had to be a cure, particularly when the Potions Master was ordered to help in any way that he could.

It had ended with another one of Terius' pointed remarks to which Snape had glared at the younger man again.

"W-what do you mean?" Harry heard himself say. This entire episode had worn on him. He didn't know how much more he could take and his body was already running through the last bit of adrenaline and returning itself to its previous state of exhaustion. He wouldn't be able to stay awake much longer unless he—a yawn escaped. "I haven't done anything to-"

Terius paused for a fraction of a section and the sea-blue-grey eyes hardened. "Precisely. You have not done a single thing." He said, coldly. "I do not acknowledge you, because you do not
acknowledge yourself."

That was the last one.

A sharp pain stabbed through him.

One that he'd felt a few times already.

Harry felt the last vestiges of energy well up inside of him and he ran. He slid off the bed and bolted before anyone could react.

He ran.

Harry didn't know where or how long. He just ran as he felt his emotions simmering and threatening to burst out of him. This was how it always turned out. It didn't matter what he did, even if he 'did' nothing, his freakishness would always find a way to turn any potentially good thing into another horrible mess.

The sharp pains coursing through him had lessened the farther he'd run and now, it was just a dull ache.

A throbbing, dull ache.

Harry rounded the corner and smacked full-on into a solid, warm body.

He gave a grunt and a squeak as the momentum toppled him backwards and the figure came crashing down on top of him with an exclamation of their own.

"Harry? I didn't think you were that excited about a book and-"

The distraught boy raised his eyes to find, warm, honey-golden eyes fixed on his face, a pale brow creased in worry.

"Harry, are you alright? You look as if you've—Harry?" Theo stared down at the suddenly shaking figure beneath him. Harry was staring up at him with the most pleading expression as mere words couldn't begin to express what he wanted to hear. "Harry!" This time, more insistently. "I didn't see you there. Are you alright? Did I hurt you with-"

Quivering, pale pink lips parted in answer. The sound that came out was the softest, quietest, heart-wrenching cry that the Slytherin had ever heard. The warm golden eyes darkened by several shades and a look of complete horror registered on Theo's face. He half- jerked upright and immediately clapped a hand over Harry's mouth. "Harry, no!" He swallowed, rapidly. "Don't. You don't know what you're doing. Don't!" There was the faintest tremor in his voice.

Brilliant emerald eyes clouded and then faded with light, almost lifeless as shiny tears welled up within them.

Theo swore. "No, Harry. That's not what I mean, I-!" His hands fell away from Harry's mouth to grab his own hair, twining in the chocolate colored strands in frustration.

Harry whimpered and then the soft cry repeated itself.

"Harry..." Theo breathed, raggedly. "I can't. I couldn't do this to you. You don't know the-"

The tears spilled over, streaming down the pale face in great, big tracks. The cry repeated itself, the
intensity fading as Harry's body began to grow limp.

Conflict warred across Theo's strained face. His hands fell to his sides and he carefully shifted so he now hovered over the fallen boy, instead of literally half-squashing him. He grimaced, stretching his jaw. A saddened tinge materialized in his honey-gold eyes as he bent his head and nuzzled gently along Harry's neck. "You don't understand, my treasure." The voice grew more rasping. "You deserve so much better than this."

The cry began to repeat itself and was interrupted halfway.

Harry twitched, struggling feebly for a moment, before relaxing.

Warm lips had covered his own and effectively silenced him, providing a different, pleasurable sensation instead. The soft lips continued to move and press gently, insistently, and Harry didn't protest when the kiss deepened and rough hands slid into his hair. The sudden, overpowering scent of sweetness flooded over him, enveloping him in sudden, safe, warmth. The lovely lips pulled away and Harry struggled to pull himself together as sleep began to tug harder on him.

"T-theo?" He managed.


The tears began to flow again and this time, they were hot and angry as they trailed down his face. Harry sniffled. This would all go pear-shaped in another few minutes. There was no way that anything good could ever happen in his life and especially now, when he really was alone after all. He'd always be alone and—another keening cry slipped past his lips.

Theo's control snapped. He snarled and the hand in Harry's hair tightened at once, roughly jerking the younger boy's head to the side as he lay, unmoving on the ground.

I knew it. Harry almost smiled. I knew it…there will never be anything good or worthwhile and

Theo's hands morphed to claws and shredded through the fabric of the upper half of Harry's Gryffindor uniform.

There was no warning.

A sharp pain stabbed through Harry's neck and shoulder. He began to struggle with, the last fragments of his energy and consciousness. A low growl sounded at his ear and Harry froze. Something inside urged him to relax, not to fight it. His own dark thoughts coaxed him to do just that. His life was messed up as it was. It would be fate if he were to simply fade off and away from everything now.

A final, hazy thought registered that someone was biting him.

No, Theo was biting him.

Theo had fangs.

Very sharp fangs and very soft lips.

The softness worked gently to ease the sharp points fastened at the juncture of his neck.

Blackness swam at the corners of his eyes and Harry surrendered.
He didn't care anymore.
Harry woke in an unfamiliar bed, wrapped in unfamiliar arms, surrounded by a very familiar scent.

He stiffened as he realized he was shirtless, though thankfully his lower half seemed to have retained a pair of pyjama bottoms. The hands splayed over his chest and torso were warm and soft to the touch. A tiny thought nagged him in the back of his head, taunting that he should know where he was and who was holding him.

Harry didn't dare move yet, trying to remember what had happened before he'd blacked out. He couldn't recall anything specific, just walking through the dungeons and feeling extremely tired. He thought maybe it was after he'd left Potions Class, but he couldn't be sure. He couldn't remember. What he did remember was the lovely scent wafting over him, its source being the one holding him from behind.

Theo.

He twitched faintly, in shock. This was one of those odd fantasies that had played out in his dreams. He'd never thought of something like it could ever occur in real life. This had to be a dream. It would explain why he couldn't remember anything and maybe, just maybe, he could have a few moments of sanity—enjoyable sanity—where he could be himself without anyone trying to kill or maim him.

As if sensing his morbid train of thought, the arms holding him close, tightened.

Harry swallowed hard. He squinted up in the darkened surroundings and puzzled it out. From what he could make out, he was comfortably tucked into a bed in the Slytherin dorms. There was too much green and silver for it to be anything else but Slytherin. Thankfully, the curtains were drawn shut around the bed and only a sliver at one corner near the head, allowed a trickle of light to show in.

Huh. He'd never had a dream that led him to the Slytherin dorms before.

He shifted enough for a bit of cold air to slip down the blanket and it brought a shiver. Harry wrinkled his nose. Cold was bad. He much more preferred it be warm and soft.

Hm.

Warm and soft.

There was currently a very warm, comfortable thing snuggled up to him—a thing that didn't make sense, until said thing moved and a confused Harry equated it to a person.

Theo.

It was him!

This could turn out to be the best dream ever!

There was a chuckle from somewhere behind him and Harry twisted in the arms holding him tight.
His first reaction was to run and the second was to stay. The reactions battled it out between themselves as Harry tensed for the outcome.

"You're thinking too hard." Theo's quiet, rich voice whispered in his ear. "And you are most certainly not dreaming."

All thoughts of running promptly extinguished themselves.

If he dared to think this wasn't a dream, then he'd hold onto this for as long as he could.

Theo shifted and somehow Harry found himself half-sitting up and held carefully on the Slytherin's lap, tucked between the older boy's legs and cuddled close to a warm chest and soft pyjama jacket. It was comfortable and comforting. His sleep-foggy mind suggested that if it wasn't a dream, he ought to go back to sleep.

Harry nearly rolled his eyes, but that seemed to take too much energy. He was tired. Again. It felt as if he'd slept and the sleep had helped, but he was tired, as if the rest hadn't helped at all. Everything was so mixed up!

Theo? He tried to say. But instead of actual words, a faint whine of distress came out.

A soothing rumble sounded nearby. The chocolate-haired beauty leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the side of Harry's forehead, just beside that troublesome scar. His long fingers curled and stroked as they carded through the messy mop of black hair.

Harry felt his eyelids slide halfway closed. Dream or not, he didn't care. This was nice. A soft, purring sound bubbled out as he yawned and buried his face back in the softness of Theo's stomach. He was so tired, but now it didn't feel quite as bad, more like just a happy tired. He winced as a spike of pain shot through his right shoulder.

"Harry?" Theo bent to nuzzle his head, breathing soft, warm breaths through the tufts of hair as the hands now shifted to rub in soothing strokes over the tired body draped over him. "How are you feeling?"

Harry began to move in answer and stopped almost at once when putting any pressure on his shoulder made the pain intensify. He didn't remember that and it hurt! It really hurt! His mouth opened and again, instead of words, a panicked trill turned into a pained whimper.

"Mmm." Theo murmured, noncommittally. "I am sorry about that. I could not help myself. Not when you called so...desperately." The warm hands stroking up and down inched to up to the aching shoulder and skittered lightly over the sensitive soreness on his shoulder. It took the edge off of the sharp darts of pain. Harry made another muffled sound, a mixture of confusion and surprise. Theo smiled. "You were irresistible, treasure of mine."

Harry blinked up at him. Me? A Treasure? No. Theo was certainly talking of someone or something else. Harry stifled a shudder. He didn't like that thought. He didn't want Theo thinking of anyone else. Not when he was holding him close and speaking so nicely. He shivered.

"Still cold?" Theo's voice held a hint of amusement and he drew the blankets up around them, careful to leave it off of the aching shoulder.

Harry couldn't stop the purr that came forth once more, especially now that he was warm and mostly comfortable again. Everything was delightfully mixed up and confusing, but he didn't care. If this was a dream, then he'd enjoy every last second of it to his heart's content. He sighed and snuggled closer, the tension slowly leaving his body. His shoulder twinged faintly and suddenly,
the warm stroking hands, began to move and shift him.

A distressed whine was his only protest, until Harry realized that Theo was now shirtless.

_Huh._

He liked that new adjustment.

Willingly sinking back into the welcoming arms, Harry nestled himself in the new warmth and breathed deeply. The scent was more discernible in this state. It was something faintly of chocolate and oranges and perhaps a hint of steel. His mind argued that someone couldn't really smell like steel, but Harry didn't care. If that's what Theo smelled like up close, then that was exactly what Theo smelled like. His nicely ordered thoughts could go take a hike if they intended to mess up his dream! He took another good whiff, breathing deep. The chocolatey scent was perfect.

_Probably from all the chocolate frogs_, Harry thought, tiredly. He yawned against the smooth skin and without thinking, licked it.

At once, he was awake.

The taste was exotic and sweet, nearly exploding on his tongue as his sleep-fogged mind bustled into activity. He liked that taste. He liked it very much. Harry tilted his head and took a bigger, more experimental swipe of his tongue, to feel the arms cradling him, tighten quite nicely and a soft hitch of breath from somewhere above his head.

Ooh, that reaction was nice.

Harry did it again.

Theo shifted.

Harry almost laughed.

"Har-ry." The name was breathed as a groan. "Just do it, don't...tease."

Harry blinked innocently up at him, even though he knew that the older boy couldn't quite see him. Theo shifted and Harry was suddenly presented with a perfect bicep just in reach. His eyes twitched and flickered and he knew they were shifting to their natural, Dragel state. He couldn't be bothered to worry about it, because—just as suddenly—his fangs were morphing out of his gums and the only thing he really wanted to do was to take a good bite out of that arm...

Theo flinched when the fangs sunk into his flesh. The bite was awkward and inexperienced, but he really wouldn't have it any other way. The moment Harry was completely engaged, he shifted his attention back to the bite he'd inflicted the day before. To seal the claiming mark, he needed to tend to it after Harry had reciprocated in kind. He licked, sucked and kissed the abused, inflamed patch of skin, noting that there was a perfect, round circle instead of two crescent shapes. _That was nice._ He thought, absently.

The redness on Harry's shoulder faded, the pain disappearing with it as the mark remained, though paler than it had been before. It would be sensitive to his touch, always—and would provide him with the opportunity to provide greater pleasure or comfort to his new mate.

"That's enough, Harry." Theo tapped gently on the head, trying to ignore the feelings stirred up by the faint sucking motions and Harry's equally soft lips. It wouldn't do for his body to respond to the tender ministrations just yet. It was quite normal for submissive Dragels to grow addicted to the
taste and scent of their mate, particularly when a fine, liquid sheen of said scent would display itself on the dominant's body when aroused, but this wasn't the time. To Harry, blood wouldn't taste like blood to a creature that was literally half the essence of blood magic. It would be more like Ambrosia. Theo flexed his hand, waiting. He wanted to have some time with Harry before their instincts took over, at least, he wanted to give himself some preparation time before their circle expanded and his body would take on all the dominant alpha traits, if Harry chose a beta.

Harry made a sound in the back of his throat, happily drawing on the wound.

Theo sighed. He caught one pale ear between two expert fingers and gave a light twist, just enough to catch the boy's attention.

At once, Harry's fangs slid free and he leaned away from the touch, eyeing him suspiciously. He hadn't done anything wrong, had he?

Theo had to chuckle at the adorable expression. "You didn't do anything, I just needed to do this." He traced one finger in the bloodied bite and drew a circle, adding a few dots and then crisscrossing it with three lines. He muttered softly beneath his breath and Harry twitched, faintly. The bleeding circle turned instead, to a complicated tattoo done in a deep, red ink. The wound melted away to clear, unblemished skin and only the tattoo remained.

Harry's eyes grew wide and then he hissed, as a burning sensation rippled on his formerly aching shoulder.

"Harry, Harry, shhh!" Theo soothed, drawing himself up and catching the flailing arms and legs, effectively trapping the smaller body beneath him. "It's fine. It's fine, my treasure. Everything is fine." He soothed, layering, gentle kisses along Harry's face and neck, before finally nuzzling the new tattoo in experimentation. Harry went boneless beneath him, with an audible chir of pleasure. Theo chuckled. "Oh, you like that, do you?" He repeated the action. A flurry of happy noises came from Harry, punctuated by a little wiggle and followed by a sudden, perplexed frown. He really wanted to talk and yet, his voice simply wouldn't cooperate. Another laugh came from the golden-eyed boy. "You cannot do that, until I do this..." The hands found their way a little lower than before and Harry's eyes grew wide.

For a moment, he turned his head away, pressed into the sheets, turning red with embarrassment and shame as the long-fingered hand slipped into his pyjama bottoms and straight into his pants where they fondled and stroked, taking interest with a rather sensitive portion of his anatomy. The long fingers handled him with expert care, pulling, teasing and fisting with just the right amount of pressure. His body burned pleasurably as Theo's head bent to his neck and bit down, lightly, on the tattooed mark.

That was all Harry needed.

He keened in pleasure as he came to completion and his body arched upwards off the bed as his mind happily blanked out for several blissful moments. When he returned to himself, a fierce, mortified blush danced over his face and he couldn't quite look the other boy in the eye. But even as he looked away, he was willingly soothed and adored by Theo's magic hands, as the red faded to a manageable pink flush all over his pleasured body.

"Say something now." Theo murmured. "That should've done it."

"Done what?" Harry said, hoarsely. His green eyes grew wide as he heard his own, rich voice and then realized that he really was speaking and not in the jumble of sounds he'd been making since he woke. He sound quite different now.
"That." Theo's laugh sounded again and he shifted to settle them comfortably together. "Until I show I care for you in an intimate way, your Dragel side would have you resort to more drastic measure to grab my attention, seeing as I am your first mate. Temporarily pushing your Dragel instincts to the front, forces you to communicate in your natural way. It means I cannot ignore you." He smiled at the look on Harry's face. "No unclaimed Dragel of dominant nature would be able to refuse you like that. You are quite lucky it is a weekend, you know." He said, conversationally. "If it were any other day of the week, this might not have been so easy."

Harry wriggled faintly in response. He had to ask, even if it came back to bite him later. "I'm not dreaming am I—ah."

The expert fingers dug gently into the sensitive skin and wrung a pleased moan from the smaller body. "Definitely not dreaming." Theo breathed. "Go to sleep, Harry."

_Sleep?_ Harry wanted to protest. His head was brimming with questions. His mind was a lovely, jumbled mess. His body was all but screaming for something that literally made him feel as if his face was on fire and Theodore wanted him to sleep? He could have cried and laughed at the same time.

But the same expert fingers gently stroked that sensitive mark and Harry yawned. A wave of tiredness washed over him and his eyelids began to droop.

"Sleep." Theo whispered, again.

Harry was out like a light.

Chapter End Notes

Harry is submissive, in that, Submissive is his position in his mateship circle, but these are Dragons we are talking about, (well, elemental hybrid dragons) They do not submit—well, unless they are fighting a duel to the death—but even so, they die in those cases, rather than submit/yield to the attacker. They simply build up circles(friendships) and nurture them in different ways, such as, you'd kiss your mate full on the lips, but you'd kiss your mum's cheek goodnight. Harry is reacting to Severus and Terius, because he is running on pure instinct as a 'child' Dragel, with no magic, and is understanding that there are older 'parent figures' present, who can protect him and might be persuaded to do so, if he is 'good'. They are also the only full, adult Dragels that he's come into contact with yet.

Part of his reasoning is from living with the Dursleys and trying to keep his head and sanity together, while having to do all sorts of other things that normally, no other ward would do, especially under the care of a relative. The other half has to do with the fact that he has no magic in him, Harry is magically sensitive, so he's just reacting. For my Dragon society, it's similar to, for instance, Native American culture, where a great deal of respect is given to the elders and expected from the children towards them, simply because they've lived for a long time and have seen and learned many things. Dragels are 'dragons' that have lived for centuries, Harry will definitely run into quite a few important ones and this will affect him to some degree, but he's not about to become a good little submissive. As a 'human' child and of barely 16 years, Harry is considered a 'child' even though he is of legal age.
At the end of the last chapter, Harry kind of flipped out a bit, (not finding a family to fit into right away, as most Dragels are adopted in some way or another and he's feeling the absence of being alone) and decided that was it. He wound himself up so completely that when he ran into Theo, his Dragel came to the forefront to protect him and ended up initiating a mateship via a heartcry instead. He didn't realize it though and as such, figured that Theo was going to kill him and decided that he was fine with dying. For this chapter, Harry thinks he's dreaming half of this, so he doesn't care what Theo is doing or why. It doesn't register. He's just basking in the truth that someone might want to cuddle him, kiss him and that he can go back to sleep.

Anyhow, thanks for reading along so far!
Harry woke several times over the weekend.

He didn't register much.

Just that there were a few freshening charms cast on him and nothing more. He slept, rested and enjoyed himself. A few times something would startle him from sleep. He'd wake with an inquisitive sound in the back of his throat and would snuggle back into the blankets at a reassuring growl from Theo. A few times he woke to stretch and roll over before promptly going back to sleep. It was a nice cycle.

At one point, a nice smell stirred him from dreamland and Harry opened his eyes to discover Theo sitting cross-legged on the bed beside him, his honey-gold eyes alight as he pawed through a large bowl of cubed fruit. He'd looked up at Harry's sleepy inquiry and then patted the bed beside him. "Fruit." He said, by way of explanation. "Hungry?" He shifted to share the bowl and Harry realized that Theo's hands had shifted to claws and he was spearing random chunks of fruit before chomping on them. His fangs were slender and delicate to the eye, until Harry saw him take a good bite out of a rounded specimen.

Harry eyed the bowl and his stomach rumbled, reminding him that he wasn't taking care of it—as usual. He struggled to sit up with sleep-weary limbs. He was so tired—and hungry!

Theo frowned and speared a chunk of peach and held it out. "Eat something before you sleep again. It'll help."

Harry yawned—and as he did so, opened his mouth and squeaked when the chunk of fruit was pushed in. He scowled at the older boy who didn't seem to notice as he continued to explore the large bowl of fruit. He ate until he felt comfortably stuffed and sticky with fruit juices. Theo muttered a spell as he sprawled out on the sheets and Harry was happy for his fingers to unstick themselves. He hadn't felt comfortable eating fruit with his claws as Theo had, but he supposed it was because he wasn't just used to it yet. The little detail wasn't missed either—Theo had thought to cast the charm for both of them—Harry was grateful. Sometimes, he really missed having magic.

They slept some more.

Harry woke to Theo's insistent shaking and peered blearily up at the shadowed figure. "Theo?" He mumbled, nestling back into the pillow as the now familiar hands carded through his hair. That felt very nice. He knew the hands and loved the sensation. Now that his curiosity was satisfied, he could go back to sleep.

The hands stopped abruptly and Harry's eyes flew open with a growl forming in the back of his throat. He'd really been enjoying that—it was a completely new experience and he hadn't wanted it to stop. He stared at the amused face, completely unnerved by the humor glittering brightly in the honey-gold eyes smiling down at him. "S'not nice." He managed and resisted the childish urge to pout.

"I could have used a bucket of water, Harry." Theo said, mildly. "Believe me, that was very nice. Now, it's time for you to be up. I'm sure you don't want to be late." Theo rose from the bed and snagged a two-toned scrap of fabric. In minutes, he began to knot his silver and green tie before
tucking it into his jumper. "Breakfast is starting in twenty minutes and while I don't mind escorting you up from the dungeons or sharing my wardrobe, you are a Gryffindor. I'm sure the distinct lack of red and gold would give us away."


"Remember something?" Theo asked, too innocently.

Harry snatched the sheets up around him and glared before a sudden flicker of panic set in. He could deal with the conflicting emotions and thoughts later, right now he wanted his head to work. "It's Monday, isn't it?" He swallowed hard. His last lucid memory was somewhere around Friday—Friday afternoon to be precise. His mouth was moving and words were spilling out. He'd slept through the weekend—again—that couldn't possibly be good and now there were sure be rumors flying about and questions that he couldn't answer and then there was Theo and oh joys! Harry ground his teeth together. His life was just one brilliant thing after another. His hands shook faintly with the emotion as he clenched them tight in the bunched sheets. "How long was I…I mean, has no one even…did we-?"

"I told Terius. I think he told Severus. Which probably means that Dumbledore knows and that is probably enough." Theo reasoned, calmly. The pureblood easily ignored the embarrassing half of the question as he reached into his trunk and then brightened. "On second note, it seems the elves are making themselves useful. Your uniform's here and it's clean." He held out a stack of clothes. "A few freshening charms might help."

Harry eyed the stack of clothes and then looked away. "Maybe."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Har-ry." The name was drawn out with the faintest flicker of exasperation. "Less than twenty minutes to breakfast. I'm hungry and I'm sure you're the same as you hardly ate more than an apple and a pear put together."

"A what?"

"Inside joke." Theo said, briskly. He reached for the sheets and whisked them away, levitating Harry's newly cleaned clothes into his surprised lap. "Clothes. Dress. Now!" He added, when Harry yelped and made to cover himself as he sat in nothing but his pants. Theo rolled his eyes. "Not that I don't appreciate the view, but it is nothing I haven't seen already." He winked. "And miraculously, I was able to control myself." His stomach rumbled and the pureblood winced. "Would you just hurry already?"

A slightly red-faced, pink-cheeked Harry did so. He stumbled out from the nice, curtained bed and then blinked as Theo caught him, gently, with a arm around the waist. The taller boy hugged him close for a moment and then kissed the top of his head. Harry felt himself flush from the tips of his toes to the tops of his ears. "Harry." The quiet voice was serious. "There is nothing to be ashamed of. We are what we are and nothing will change that." Harry stiffened in his arms.

_Freak._ The word echoed in his mind. _I'm a freak. I'll always be a freak and-"_
"I cannot change answering your heartcry and you cannot change having called for me. My objections to your initial cry was only that I didn't wish for it to happen under the circumstances it did." Harry turned away, but one of the arms holding him close loosened to allow a hand to cup up and turn his face back to meet the serious gaze of his new mate. "You deserve the world, Harry." He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the side of that famous scar. "I'd give it to you, if I could."

The expert hands began to run up and down Harry's mostly bare body in a rhythm that spoke of familiarity. "I understand there is a great deal we have to discuss but…"

Harry swallowed as Theo's voice faded into the background noise of his head. This was a lot to take in, but he understood some of it—and he was remembering plenty. The conversation with Snape, hearing Draco's cry of distress, learning that Terius was a dragel—and discovering first-hand just how difficult it was to be rejected by his own kind in any way. Running into Theo. The hazy conversation. Being bitten. Being held. Being cuddled, kissed and tenderly cared for. A certain passage about mateship circles in his Care of Magical Creatures textbook. Theo's gentle dominance. Those wicked, wicked hands. The conversation taking place while he zoned out. He came back with a start and heard Theo's quiet chuckle in his ear. It prompted a rush of heat that made him want to shove the other boy away and simultaneously hold him close so he couldn't see the horrible blush.

"Harry?"

The green-eyed brunet gave a grunt in answer, not quite trusting his mouth to speak and ruin whatever fragile fairytale this was.

"As much as I'd love to explain everything and answer any questions you have—I, well, I suppose you'll learn all of my bad habits in short order, so I'd rather warn you of them first. Breakfast is soon and I tend to lose my patience if I do not have something to occupy my fangs. We can talk later, this afternoon, perhaps, get everything sorted out."

The phrasing almost made Harry giggle. As it was, the very thought of giggling brought his nervousness to the front and he ducked his head, not knowing what to say. Breakfast would be anything but fun, this morning. He could practically see the way Hermione, Ron and Ginny would pounce on him and want to know where he'd been, what he'd done and why he didn't tell them anything. The twins were sure to be there and they most certainly would go about overfilling his plate and urging him to eat more than his stomach could handle—not to mention that he'd probably get that serious conversation they'd promised him.

Yes, if he could avoid breakfast he would.

Something warm and soft distracted him and Harry blinked to realize that Theo was kissing him and doing a rather wonderful job of it. His eyelids fluttered shut in pure enjoyment and by the time the kiss had ended, Harry found himself grinning and unable to feel the slightest touch of embarrassment. It felt right. It felt right in every single way that he could think of and that was enough reason to let go of what little doubts he had.

The textbook had told him a little bit about mateship circles—nothing definite, but something. Some clues had instantly filled themselves in and that, coupled with some of Theo's reactions and words, had helped. He knew for certain now, that he was a submissive—after all, it was said that submissives initiated a mateship circle and Theo said he'd answered his heartcry. Harry mused over it for a moment, wondering what that made Theo—his alpha or his beta? He was inclined to think of the taller, older Slytherin as the alpha, simply because of the quiet, commanding air that the other wielded around him, without so much as a blink.

Another kiss drew him out of his thoughts and Harry gave into that one with a happy purr. He
could think later. This was far more enjoyable to—the kiss ended and Theo finished with a light peck to one cheek.

"Clothes, Harry." He murmured. "Before I decide to eat you instead of breakfast."

That did the trick.

Harry pushed him away as his face heated up to royal temperatures. Theo didn't protest and backed up the handful of steps, allowing him some space. Harry took that moment to look at the clothes that had been in his hands moments before and were now in a folded pile beside his feet. He bent down to scoop them up, consciously aware of the eyes studying him. He studiously ignored them, settling for taking a quick look around his present surroundings, something, he reminded himself, that he should've done earlier.

Of course, he hadn't really been awake or standing up straight to take in much of the room and now that he did so, he could see that there were three beds, instead of four in a typical Gryffindor dorm and there was plenty of space all around with extra privacy curtains for the occupants to draw around their corners of the room. Harry turned back to see Theo waving his wand at the bed. The sight made him pause. He didn't have the pureblood pegged as someone who would care about making his bed. Knowing Draco, Harry had surmised that purebloods simply relied on house elves to do such things.

Theo looked up, catching his eye. His face softened into a smile and he straightened. "If I turn around, would it help?" There was a teasing note in his voice.

"Where are the others?"

"Others?" Theo sounded puzzled.

"Turn around!" Harry shot back, hugging the clothes to his chest.

Theo snorted, but his figure was hidden from view by the curtains on the bed.

"The room."

"What-oh. Draco's actually." Theo shrugged. "That's why there's an en suite." He gestured to the bathroom, a slender door half-hidden beside a tall wardrobe. "He was head boy, but after the entire mess with...everything, they gave the title to Blaise. Seeing as the three of us are the only Dragels present among the Slytherins, we share. It keeps Terius and Severus from breathing down our necks."

Harry blinked. That was news to him. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why'd they, you know?"

"No. I don't."

"Terius and Snape, why'd they care."

"Snape—as you so eloquently put it—is Severus and he is my—our—head of house. He takes good care of us and we return the favor to him in any way that we can. As for Terius, well, he is mated to Severus and Draco is their sub, so they form a triad in a mated circle. As such, they don't like to have Draco out of sight for longer than it takes to keep up appearances. As Blaise and
myself were unclaimed, we offered to keep an eye on him in the interest of keeping the peace and the safety of Hogwarts." Theo rose from the bed. "Finished?"

"Yeah." Harry scrubbed a hand at his head. His hair was hopeless enough without making it worse. "Safety of Hogwarts?"

"Have you done any research on Dragels?"

Harry shrugged. "I tried. There isn't much out there."

"I assume you tried the usual, common ways—Owl Order or Hogwarts library?"

Green eyes narrowed in response.

"I don't mean anything by it." Theo sighed. "Even dark texts wouldn't have had much to share though. I suppose I'll have to share my encyclopedia for free."

"What?"

"You can keep the chocolate frogs. I'll lend it to you today—seeing as we are mated now, you may borrow it whenever you like. I would suggest reading the entries on Dragels—memorizing them, even. Didn't your mentor provide you with anything?"

"What mentor?"

Theo blinked. "Your Dragel mentor—everyone has one."

"Everyone?"

"I've never known someone who didn't."

"Ha." Harry scoffed. "Just another one…"

"Harry?"

"There wasn't anyone." He said, bitterly.

"No one?" Theo asked, sharply.

"No one." Harry squirmed under the intense gaze. "C-can we leave now?" A hand strayed to his stomach, as if to reinforce the hunger factor.

"No charms?" Theo perked a brow. It was beyond him how Harry could skip a simple charm after sleeping through nearly three days. Well, the charms and another important detail.

"Can't. No magic." Harry braced himself.

Nothing happened. Theo wrinkled his nose. Oh. Well that explained it. "How awful." He said, aloud, and slipped his wand from a sleeve holster and tapped it against his leg. "May I?"

Harry shrugged.

A tingling, stiff feeling sprinkled over him. His mouth dropped open in surprise when he felt the lingering taste of mint.

Theo grinned. "Satisfactory for you?" He replaced the wand and checked the clock. "I believe I
covered everything, but one particularly pressing matter that doesn't seem to have registered yet."

"What?" Harry stared at him. It took a moment longer. Then he flushed deep red once more. "Just a moment." Harry scrambled to the bathroom and shut the door firmly behind him.

The pureblood laughed after him.
PREVIOUSLY:
Theo grinned. "Satisfactory for you?" He replaced the wand and checked the clock. "I believe I covered everything, but one particularly pressing matter that doesn't seem to have registered yet."

"What?" Harry stared at him. It took a moment longer. Then he flushed deep red once more. "Just a moment." Harry scrambled to the bathroom and shut the door firmly behind him.

The pureblood laughed after him.

The walk up from the dungeons was easier than Harry had thought. Theo cast a disillusionment charm on him, at his request, and made sure to keep himself close to Harry as they made their way up to the Great Hall. The other Slytherins joined them in the usual, quiet, dignified way that they were, the occasional muffled yawn and quiet conversation filling the air.

As they neared the Great Hall, Theo stepped sideways and gave his shoulder a little squeeze. "I'll see you in Defense." He murmured.

Harry stared at him, the unexpected touch welcome, before he realized the weight of the words. Theo didn't seem to have an issue with him being in Gryffindor, or setting at the Gryffindor table—surrounded by fellow Gryffindors. It was almost as if he didn't care. It didn't matter to him that he'd be with others or that he could possibly be in danger—well, possibly—Harry couldn't be sure, they were his fellow housemates after all, but he couldn't help but feel disappointed. There was a sudden, new emptiness that washed over him at the fact that his new mate didn't want to sit next to him to share their first official meal.

"You don't want me to sit with you?" Harry looked at him in confusion. He didn't know much about any of this whole mate and circle thing, but he was just lucky that Theo had gotten stuck with him. Theo had been nice enough when they were back in the rooms. Yet, now, it seemed like Theo didn't want to be around him. He really must have done something to mess up the entire-

"What?" Theo blinked, staring at him with an equal measure of confusion. "I don't mind if you want to sit with me. I'd be honored, but I do understand that you have your own life and friends and I doubt they'd understand if you decided to visit the Slytherin table or if I returned the favor to your house table. It would simply be less stress all around if we didn't change anything too much right now." His brow furrowed. "Harry, did you want to sit next to me?"

Harry stared at the ground, puzzling through the words. It made sense. Sort of. It wasn't a lack of care, but rather a bit of trust. Theo trusted him to manage on his own and he seemed to mean what he said—at least, with a careful whiff, Harry could tell that the boy certainly wasn't lying. But all the warm, happy feelings he'd had a minute ago had disappeared into nothing. He felt empty and hollow—like he had on the first day of summer just a few months ago when he'd turned up at the Dursleys.
Vernon had beat him black and blue for simply showing his face. Harry hadn't had any choice. There wasn't really anywhere else he could go without causing a fuss and the very last thing he wanted to do was cause trouble for people. The summer at the Dursley's had started out bad and gotten worse. What happened after that was a blur. The kind of blur that Harry didn't really want to deal with. He squared his shoulders and straightened up. He could do this. He could manage. He'd done it for years and it was almost two months he'd managed with his Dragel Inheritance. He could do it.

He always had.

*Always.*

"N-no. It's fine. I just wondered. I wasn't sure if this was like, a uh, you know, like Veelas. All possessive and stuff."

Theo smirked. "I can be very possessive if I need to." He murmured. "But I won't smother you, if I can help it and if there's no reason for it."

Harry blinked. He didn't know what to make of that.

The smile on Theo's face upped a few watts and he caught the smaller boy with an arm around the shoulder and drew him close for a quick kiss to the side of his head. "Enjoy your breakfast." The arm fell away and Theo was gone in his usual way as the charm wore off and Harry was now visible. He stumbled, awkwardly righting himself, a sudden, silly grin plastered on his face as he straightened his unnecessary glasses and fumbled to straighten his robes.

Theo had stopped them in a corner where they wouldn't be immediately visible and he was thankful for that little detail. Righting himself, Harry stepped out from the corner and melted into the flow of students heading into the Great Hall. The little, insignificant kiss had said enough—it wasn't some deliberate snog to distract him or a casual peck on the cheek, it was a soft, tender gesture that chased away all depressing thoughts.

Harry grinned, goofily for a moment.

Breakfast sounded like a brilliant thing.

He'd be sure to enjoy it.

"Harry!" Hermione's shriek made him wince. "You're alright! Where were you? What happened? Why didn't you tell anyone you were going away to-"

"Harry!" Ron's voice joined in the babble. "You had us worried." His blue eyes narrowed, suspiciously. "Where were you? What's going on?" He turned to look Harry from head to toe.

"I want to know too!" Ginny joined the fray. "You just disappeared and someone said there were strange noises going on all weekend and I thought that you might've been-" The rest of her sentence was muffled as she threw her arms around him and hugged tight.

He flinched. She didn't let go. After a moment, he cleared his throat. "Er." Harry said, eloquently. *Strange noises?* He made a mental note to ask about it.

She finally released him, but her dark eyes promised one of those serious kind of conversations that Harry always tried his best to avoid. "I'm fine, Ginny, everyone." He ducked his head. "I was just…really tired."
"Tired?" Hermione pursed her lips. Ginny and her exchanged a meaningful look.

"Yeah. Remember a few weeks ago?" He snapped. Their scents had spiked sharply and he didn't like the look passing between them. They knew something that he didn't think he'd like.

The bushy-haired witch frowned. "Harry…" She trailed off warningly. Ginny frowned.

His actions seemed to be confirming whatever their silent conversation had been about. "I already visited Madam Pomfrey." Harry said, hastily. "I'm fine. She couldn't find anything wrong with me." He hoped his voice didn't sound too off. He was already noticing it seemed to hold a new, almost musical quality to it and he didn't think there was much he could do to disguise it. The best thing to do was avoid speaking as much as possible.

It shouldn't be too hard.

He'd managed to do it for a while anyway.

Hermione looked as if she'd like to say something more, but she didn't get the chance as the Twins made their morning appearance and the usual bustle of chaos settled down at the Gryffindor table. Ron pulled her down to sit beside him and Ginny took her other side, effectively trapping the Head Girl from continuing her interrogation.

"Morning, Harry." Neville smiled as he passed him to take his usual morning seat. "Good to see you again."

"Morning, Neville."

"Harry!" The twins chorused.

Harry was all but physically lifted and rearranged as the twins inserted themselves beside him, one on each side, prompting all the others to have to move and shuffle to regain their original seating order with the new additions.

"Harry." One voice whispered in his ear. "We were worried."

"Very worried." The second voice whispered in his other ear. "Eat some fruit."

"And toast. Toast is good. Tea?"

The voices were very quiet and very serious.

Harry gulped. He'd never heard the twins break out of their twinspeak before. There was something vaguely terrifying about it.

"Moring, Fred. George." He said, softly.

"Morning, Harry." They both repeated the greeting, in unison. "Eat."

Harry wished he could turn invisible as the taller redheads began to reach around him and the table, filling his plate in their usual way. He was starting to wonder if it was some odd quirk of theirs, but knew better than to call them out on it. He liked having someone to worry over him, every now and then, it was nice.

It made him feel wanted.

Just like Theo did.
He snuck a glance towards the Slytherin table, squinting to make out faces, so his eyes would adjust through the glass lenses. He spied a sleepy, yawning Draco sandwiched between a cheerful Blaise and Theo. The brunet looked up for a split-second and his face shifted, changing expression as he winked and then returned his attention to his place.

Harry felt a rush of heat dancing up to his face. Hastily, he crammed in a mouthful of applesauce.

The morning blurred through. Harry didn't remember much of it. Transfiguration was a bit odd. He was privately excused by McGonagall at Madam Pomfrey's orders and with Dumbledore's explanation—and so was given two essays to write instead. Harry had accepted with a grateful smile that the stern witch hadn't called him out on his lack of magic, nor had she made a big deal of handing him an alternate assignment.

It didn't seem that anyone but Hermione noticed that something had happened.

Harry pushed that away for later thought. He didn't want to deal with her and the questions that were sure to come. Charms was about the same, just extra essays and no deliberate special attention and Harry knew that the Headmaster had certainly had a hand in it. He wondered how he'd fare in his other classes if this was how it was all turning out.

When that was over, he trailed along with the others to the next class and slunk into the DADA classroom and find that Theo had taken up the desk to his left. The tall brunet greeted him with a warm smile that immediately sent his nerves packing. Harry slid into his seat and managed a tiny smile in response, before hurriedly focusing on his things, just in case Hermione was paying closer attention than he wanted. It was none of their business what he did—it wasn't like they'd really cared that much, lately.

His thoughts were jolted elsewhere when the classroom door banged open to show a certain, scowling professor.

Terius entered, his face set in the same scowl as he'd worn back in the hospital wing. He snapped out orders and soon everyone was standing and the desks were moved to the side and stacked and he was setting things out on the floor before them. "Today is going to be a practical example. I trust you will all be sure to pay attention and keep you awareness about you at all times. Today's example will feature a protection spell, known as a protection circle or tattoo, depending on how you wish to view it. It can be transferred to another surface, such as skin—the reason it is noted as a tattoo—or it can be placed in the main room of a house to protect all who enter and those who reside within its walls. I will repeat this again—pay attention!" Sea-blue-grey eyes roamed over every student, nailing them where they stood, a silent reminder that nothing was to go wrong during this class period.

Nothing did.

They learned how to create a temporary protective tattoo that would guard the wearer from harm or provide additional defenses to a home when a spouse was traveling. Harry had to admit there wasn't anything dark about the ritual, just the fact that blood was required from the one leaving the home or the possible protector and then from the ones left at home or the intended wearer. It was rather brilliant and Harry tucked the thought away for later use, remembering a vague memory and the taste of something deliciously exquisite…

"Class dismissed!"

The class ended too soon, it seemed and Harry began to pack up his things. He felt awkward in the
classroom, having occasionally felt the professor's gaze resting on him and being unable to do little more than recall the final, cold words spoken in the hospital wing.

"I do not acknowledge you, because you do not acknowledge yourself."

It echoed hollowly in his mind and sat heavily in his stomach as if he'd eaten something that didn't agree with him. He didn't know what to do about it and his Dragel instincts didn't help much in their general consensus that he apologize to get into the good graces of the older man.

"I can't believe we have to learn this as if it's real magic." Hermione fretted. "Blood magic is so unpredictable, suppose the protector was protecting someone that didn't want-"

"Oh come off it, Hermione." Ron sighed. "What's it matter? It was kind of cool." The bushy-haired witch shot him a look and continued to grouse about it all the way out of class, so caught up in her fumings that she didn't search out Harry the way she'd been doing for the past week.

Harry somehow found himself tucked up against Nott and hidden from view as the classroom quickly emptied. He was about to protest when Theo silenced him with a warm kiss. "Be nice." He admonished, catching Harry's wrist and drawing the other boy forward.

Harry quickly understood the words when he realized that they weren't quite the only ones left. The names that Terius had called out on the first day—all of them were there, Ryan Henry and Jennifer Dawn from Gyffindor as well as the respective Slytherins, Blaise, Theo and Draco. They all looked at him curiously as Theo pulled him up to join the uniform line that had formed in front of the DADA professor's desk.

When the sea-blue-grey eyes raised towards them, inquisitively, the entire group made a two-fingered salute and cross over their hearts, before offering a formal bow from the waist up. Theo stood beside Harry, motioning for him to do the same. Harry did—somewhat awkwardly. He was rewarded with a smile for his efforts.

Terius gave a curt nod in return as he turned his attention to the chalkboard over his shoulder. He waved his hand and it was instantly cleaned. "How are you faring today?" The question was simply phrased and innocent enough.

Harry wasn't prepared for any of the answers.

"I have a stomachache."

"There's something wrong with my back and I didn't sleep at all last night."

"I want a hug."

"Do you have any meat?"

The headache was Malfoy—Harry could pick out his specific whine virtually anywhere—and the rest were a bit of a quick jumble. Blaise wanted meat, Ryan had back problems and Jennifer wanted a hug. Theo hadn't made any request, but rather, he drew Harry close to him, holding the smaller figure from behind and resting his chin on one deceptively slender shoulder.

"Would you object to a potion first, Mr. Henry?" Terius suggested. "You are still more used to wizard means and if you are receptive to them, I do not wish to interfere just yet with Dragel methods. It would cause unnecessary stress."

The Gryffindor shrugged. "I guess a potion's fine then. I'm used to them."
"How used to them?" Terius wanted to know. "If you have used them and they have not worked, then I will fix this right now."

Ryan shrugged. "Used enough. I mean, sometimes they work and sometimes they don't and sometimes, I don't like them." He shuddered, visibly.

"They lock you in dreams you want to escape from." Terius corrected. His gaze softened. "I shall ask Severus for something and you will find it on your pillow tonight. Try it and let me know tomorrow. If that does not work, I'll carve a pendant for you this weekend and we shall see what can be done of it."

"Thank you, Teacher." Ryan shot the man a grateful look as he stretched, gingerly. "What about my-?" He turned his neck slightly and winced at the movement the taut muscles prevented.

"Lean on the desk to brace yourself and let me move your arms." Terius instructed. He waited while the boy did as he was asked, then took the unresisting limbs and twisted and pulled them together. "Breathe in" there was a sharp, quick yank and an audible crack in the room.

"Ow!" Ryan yelped.

"And breathe out." Terius said, smoothly. He released the arms and rubbed them briskly, before allowing them to fall back to the boy's side. He ran a steady hand up and down the length of the boy's spine, pausing to press in two places. Ryan winced for both moments and then brightened.

"Better?"

"Much." Ryan rotated his shoulders and leaned back a bit. "Thank you!" He leaned forward into the hand that ruffled his hair.

"You're quite welcome. Pay a little more attention the next time you decide to lend a hand to the Quidditch team. Don't let them take advantage of you and just because you have the strength, does not mean you need to use it, hmm?"

"Yes, Teacher." Ryan grinned and repeated the salute from earlier and scampered from the classroom.

"Meat?" Blaise asked, hopefully. His fangs peeked over the corners of his plump, pink lips and his purple eyes glittered as he stood next in line, waiting, expectantly.

Harry found himself licking his lips at the thought of meat, his gums aching, a warning that his fangs might make their own appearance as well. He could remember every tasty morsel from Theo that he'd traded chocolate frogs for. Theo chuckled softly in his ear as if following the same train of thought. "Don't worry. I'm sure Terius will share."

Harry stiffened at that and then worried his lower lip between his teeth. He seriously doubted that. The DADA professor really seemed to hate him and as far as he could tell, he hadn't done anything, beyond exist. He shrank back into Theo's arms. The taller boy frowned down at him, but rubbed one arm reassuringly.

A sizeable stash of jerky was produced from the deep desk drawers and Blaise happily helped himself. "Eat it slowly and chew carefully." Terius instructed. "Make sure you eat dinner in your room tonight and order what you want. I cannot hunt for some time, you will have to make do with this."

"Mmmhmm." Blaise mumbled. He tore into strips with a new light in his eyes chewed quickly. It didn't seem as if he'd heard anything the professor had said the moment he'd taken the first bite.
"Miss Dawn?" Terius opened his arms and allowed the young woman to literally throw herself forward. He held her tight and murmured several soothing endearments in her ear. It seemed to do the trick, because she straightened a moment later and teary-eyed, thanked him. He offered her a clean kerchief and suggested that she eat more fruit. "It will balance your energies for now. You have to remember your element is very delicate, once you have it aligned, you should do your best not to upset it."

"I know, Teacher." She sighed. "It's just hard and I wish...I wish that I had my own..." She bit her lip and looked away. "I wish I had my mated circle. Is it wrong of me to want something I can't have?"

"Depends on what you speak of. You will find and have your circle soon, I am sure, if you desire it greatly enough, then it will happen sooner than later."

"W-what if I don't want a Dragel mate?"

Terius gave her a long, good look. Then he shrugged. "Then that is your choice."

She blinked. "That's it?"

"That is your choice." He repeated. "You need not take another Dragel as a mate, though it is best if you do. There will be certain things you will never experience because of it."

"But it's not...bad, is it?" She fidgeted under the

"That would depend on your definition, Miss Dawn. Your magic will bind itself and never fully reach its full potential. Your Dragel self will understand that you have cheated it in some way or another, because it craves the bonding and acceptance of others of its own kind. Any children that you may have run the risk of becoming squibs, the Dragel gene will be somewhat suppressed, unless you choose to carry the child, instead of your partners." He frowned. "As a dominant, you would survive it, but it would wear heavily on your magic and your physical self, if you choose to do so your partners would not be able to provide you with the necessary...things. It is entirely your prerogative, however. There are no taboos against it in our kind. You would, however, need to defend them a little more vigorously than usual and there will be different, family dynamics rather than those respective to a mateship circle." He paused. "I would be willing to speak to you of it later, if you feel you have any further questions."

"Thank you." She whispered. The girl then turned and fled the classroom without another backward look.

The next in line was a certain blond Slytherin. "Terius." Draco's whine repeated itself and he rubbed his stomach with a pout. The childish expression made him appear younger than his sixteen years.

"That was for eating something out of turn." Terius scolded. "You know better than to eat something that isn't on your list. I didn't write it all down to torture you." The older man studied him for a moment and then sighed. "I can't give you a potion for the stomachache and you know it." He said, at last. "Come here." The blond readily did so, unbuttoning his robes as he approached and the buttons on his jumper. By the time he reached the desk, his smooth, white stomach was on view.

Harry started when the older man drew a shining, silver knife from the folds of his teaching robes and laid the flat of the blade on the unmarked stomach. Theo's hand immediately found its way up Harry's shirt and to the mark on the side of his neck. It traced the edge, faintly, sending soothing
spikes of calmness through him. "He's fine, Harry, he's fine." Theo murmured. "Terius won't hurt him. He loves him." Harry squeezed his eyes shut. The Slytherin eyed him in concern and twisted so he could better hold Harry, tucking the dark head securely beneath his chin.

Draco whimpered.

Terius hummed soothingly.

A thrum of magic rippled through the room.

"Better?" Terius prompted. He wiped the blade clean with a cloth from his desk and waved a hand that sent a wandless spell to right Draco's clothes to their original state. Relief showed plainly on Draco's face and he hugged the older man in thanks. Terius responded with a hug in return and a light kiss pressed to the perfect blond strands.

Harry stared, painfully aware of the contrast between the figure before him and the man he'd seen in the hospital wing. He squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to see more or to even consider it. This was too much and too confusing. Everything the man did was contradictory. He didn't like it. He wanted this day to be over already.

Theo reached a hand towards Blaise who held out the sack of jerky. He selected a piece and waved it temptingly under Harry's nose. One emerald eye popped open and tracked the movement of the snack with surprising clarity. Theo inched it closer and without warning, Harry gave up his snuggle to take a large chomp out of the treat, his fangs closing with a quiet click. Honey-gold eyes shimmered with laughter, but Theo waited for the rest of Harry to catch up to what he'd done. A moment later, he saw it. A rich pink blush that dusted across the younger man's face and the green eyes grew wide. "Impressive." Theo praised. "You even managed to avoid my fingers." He nodded towards the bag in Blaise's lap as the other pureblood perched on the edge of Terius' desk and happily gorged himself. "Blaise will share. Go try some." Harry shook his head.

"Theo." Terius said, quietly. "And your grievance?"

"Harry said he didn't have a mentor."

Those piercing eyes immediately drilled into the younger boy being held protectively in the pureblood's arms. "Did he now?"

"Yes." Theo frowned. "I thought you said everyone had one."

"They do. It is impossible for it to be otherwise." The eyes continued their dark look at Harry, who now studiously fixed his emerald eyes on the sack of tempting jerky beside Blaise.

Theo growled, faintly. "Harry wouldn't lie. He has no reason to." He wrinkled his nose.

Terius scowled. "I was not implying that he did, merely that it was impossible for a mentor not to have arrived." The student perked a brow. Terius sighed. "Knowing what you do of Dragels, child." He turned away. "What possible, conceivable reason could you offer me for a mentor not showing up?"

Theo paled rapidly in a matter of seconds. He swallowed. "I see your point."

"Indeed." Terius frowned. "That does not excuse him, however. Did you need anything else?"

Theo released his lovely armful, giving Harry a nudge towards the relaxing Blaise. "I wish to ask
you to excuse, Harry."

The older man didn't answer straight away.

Blaise slid off the desk and met Harry halfway, taking pity on the boy, whose conflicted emotions seemed to scream out loud, before being slowly and meticulously locked away, behind a smooth, expressionless mask. The Italian offered the bag, wordlessly.

Harry eyed him, warily, then tentatively reached a hand towards the bag. He hesitated, but the bag remained. He then quickly stuck his hand inside and withdrew with three fat strips.

Blaise winked. "This batch is very good."

Harry blushed, but quickly polished off his retrieved handful, chewing thoughtfully as he tried to reason whether he should eat more or save room for lunch. The twins were sure to notice if he didn't eat as much as he usually did and the last thing he wanted to do was give any of them reason to suspect that something was different.

"Will you overlook it, this once?" Theo prompted. "He is my mate."

The head snapped up at once and Terius frowned. "You took him?"

Theo tilted his head slightly in confirmation.

There was a muttered string of words in another language and Terius finally glared at the young pureblood wizard. "What did you have to do that for?"

"I could not resist his heartcry." Theo returned, solidly. "Will you? Please, Terius."

There were a few more muttered phrases and finally, the older man shrugged. "Do not interfere." He said, abruptly, wheeling about to scowl at Harry. "My dominant would have me apologize to you, Mr. Potter." He began. "On the grounds that my words may have been harsher than necessary. Your dominant would have me forgive you as well on the basis that your mentor has not taught you how to avoid the social blunders you have already made. Exactly what do you have to say to that?"
PREVIOUSLY:

There was a muttered string of words in another language and Terius finally glared at the young pureblood wizard. "What did you have to do that for?"

"I could not resist his heartcry." Theo returned, solidly. "Will you? Please, Terius."

There were a few more muttered phrases and finally, the older man shrugged. "Do not interfere." He said, abruptly, wheeling about to scowl at Harry. "My dominant would have me apologize to you, Mr. Potter." He began. "On the grounds that my words may have been harsher than necessary. Your dominant would have me forgive you as well on the basis that your mentor has not taught you how to avoid the social blunders you have already made. Exactly what do you have to say to that?"

For one long moment, Harry seemed too small, too thin and too everything else. Then his hands felt to his sides, clenching the jerky tight as his green eyes flashed and flickered with emotion. "I would refuse, sir." He said, stiffly. "I don't need your apology."

Blaise's blue-violet eyes grew wide and he looked from the professor to Harry, then to Theo who merely folded his arms and waited.

"Good. Because having said that, I will not apologize for saying the truth." The scowl melted away and Terius surveyed him critically for a moment.

Harry blinked. Then he shrugged. "That's your choice then."

Terius yawned, showing twin fangs, with gleaming points. His lips curled back and he growled.

Harry met the gaze, steadily and he stood tall, unmoving.

The older Dragel suddenly lunged for him and Harry froze.

His automatic response was to react immediately, to dodge the attack, to defend, to fight back. But in the moment where he'd stared into those dark, blue-black eyes, something else told him not to move.

Something that softly coaxed him to trust.

Harry did. He closed his eyes

He felt the impact as he was tackled, knocking the breath from him and he tensed, expectant for the hard, cold floor.

It never came.

He was held against something warm and solid and the impact was muffled as he fell downward.
A moment of silence passed.

Harry dared to open his eyes and found the same intense gaze staring up at him. He blinked and twisted to look around, his mind adding up the obvious to spit out a clear result. He'd been tackled—but in a rather different way. The professor had grabbed him and twisted in mid-air to take the brunt of the impact, cradling Harry close in strong, steady arms. His wings had burst forth and Harry was painfully aware of the fact that they were quite alone in the darkened cocoon those broad wings made.

He licked his lips, unable to tear his eyes away from the stare that seemed to pierce through his very soul.

"I'm sorry." He managed, the words tumbling out whether he agreed with them or not. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm-" One warm finger pressed gently against his lips, silencing him.

They sat in silence and near darkness.

Harry swallowed hard. He didn't dare move. Panic was starting to set in, very faintly, but still there nonetheless. The professor was waiting for something and he didn't know what it was. He wanted to do it—whatever it was—he could practically feel it, as if it was something itched in his bones, urging him to do anything to get back in the good graces of this powerful creature currently holding him.

Urging him to do one thing.

A quiver of suppressed emotion rippled through him and Harry willed his wits to return to him as he shifted, unconsciously leaning closer to the older man.

The silence stretched out.

A sudden urge popped into Harry's head and he tried to ignore it, a task that swiftly became more impossible with each passing second and suddenly, he couldn't help himself. He leaned forward and butted his head against the pointed chin, eyes shut tight and hands clenched in the tangle of robes between them. He nuzzled the warm neck and then tilted his head back, with a soft whine as he exposed his throat.

"Very well done." Terius' quiet voice came from above and the arms holding Harry tightened into a firm embrace. He tipped Harry's head forward and gently touched their foreheads together, closing his eyes as Harry did.

For a moment, Harry didn't dare breathe. Then, relief spread through him like fiendfyre. He sagged into the arms as Terius allowed him to bury his head in the side of his neck. The hollow emptiness was suddenly half-filled. He could have cried from sheer relief. As it was, his head swirled with questions, answers and things he couldn't figure out. He clung to the figure that cradled him close, drinking up every ounce of warmth and safety that fairly oozed from the older Dragel.

A soft chuckle caught his attention and Terius shifted, lifting them both as he rose to stand, the wings unfurling and exposing them to the audience of Theo and Blaise. Blaise was smirking, his hand still buried in the bag of jerky now between him and Draco. Theo seemed to be working to keep himself from smiling outright, but his eyes glowed merrily as if he'd known the outcome beforehand. Harry found himself wanting to curl back into those arms and return to the calming darkness from a few seconds ago. Terius gave a soothing rumble. "Don't think so hard of it, dragonet." There was the faintest hint of amusement in his voice. "You apologized and I accepted. For that, I apologize as well." He bent and nuzzled the side of Harry's neck.
Instinctively, Harry reached up to wrap his arms around the man's neck and tugged him down to touch their foreheads together. It happened before he could react and when his arms fell slack to his side, there was a mixture of horror and confusion on his face.

"Thank you." Terius said simply, his eyes had lightened and they now flickered to Theo. "I suggest you take your mate to lunch, Mr. Nott. I believe he is hungry."

"What about me?" Draco pouted. "I'm hungry!"

"That was it?" Harry squeaked, as Theo hurried him along towards the Great Hall for lunch. He brushed dust from his robes and winced a few times when the Slytherin moved a little faster than he could hurry. "But I didn't even do anything to-!"

"It's a great insult to someone of his position and age to refuse to acknowledge him." Theo explained. "You didn't do it on purpose—I kind of figured that out, when it seemed like you didn't really realize it, but you pretty much gave him the equivalent of-" The pureblood flashed a sign with one hand then shrugged it. "You're lucky he accepted your apology—you're lucky he even apologized. I didn't expect that. He didn't have to."

Harry snorted.

"Harry." Theo scolded. "Believe me, he did not have to. I respect him for doing it all the more. He was returning the favor in good faith, after you apologized. There's a difference. There's quite a few things in Dragel society that you'll want to be aware of. You're lucky he chose not to demand formalities of you. Instinct is easy, once you give into it, you'll always know what you should do and you'll have the opportunity to decide if you want to do it or ignore it. I'm glad you took it. But if you read this, you'll spare us both. Trust me. There's a great deal you've missed. A mentor would have covered basic etiquette within the first few hours of your meeting each other. Respect is something you cannot withhold."

"Respect should be earned." Harry shot back.

"True. But, Harry, there does not always need to be a reason for it." Theo grew serious. "Terius isn't even an Elder. You'll meet others, I'm sure, and they will be centuries over you. Respect is demanded for them, it is only fitting. They do not abuse it, but they do require it of us. It isn't always that black and white and sometimes, the reactions you'll find, such as Terius—he's more than earned the right to ignore you for your…mistake on the first day."

"But-!"

"Harry. He's in a mated circle and holds a reasonable position in Dragel society. He's also well into his first century!"

Harry shut his mouth. That did skew the picture in his head, somewhat. The man didn't look as if he were anywhere, but his early thirties, if not late twenties. There was no way a century could've passed through him.

"Don't think about it." Theo advised, catching the look of confusion on his mate's face. "I didn't believe him the first time he said it either, but you do not simply repeatedly trample all over certain sets of rules. Did you never notice that every time he called us for a meeting, such as that, his eyes always stayed on you?"

Harry shook his head. He'd been trying too hard to be invisible.
"They did. All you had to do was accept—if you'd looked him in eye, you would've felt the pull. He all but offered you a few times to join us, without being too obvious since you didn't acknowledge any of us on the first day. Since you didn't acknowledge him, he could not offer you anything else, because it would not be his place." Theo offered a reassuring smile and handed over the shrunken encyclopedia. "This will help. Follow the index and read every page you can. We can talk about it whenever you're ready." He hesitated, as Harry's hands ghosted reverently over the ancient tome, finally able to touch it. "Harry, I'd like to ask you to read this where Granger can't get her hands on it, hmm? It's not hers to read and she doesn't need to know what's inside these covers. Please be careful with it."

Harry opened his mouth to protest and then shut it, realizing that he really didn't care if Hermione was allowed to read the book or not. He wanted to read it to find out more about himself and he didn't really feel compelled to show or share his true nature with the others. Hermione would no doubt try to get her hands on it or at least to guess what he was reading. But he could also sense that Theo was serious. He'd be serious too then. "I'll be careful." He took the book and hefted it in his hands. It should've been heavy, but it was light. A charm was probably cast on it. His brow wrinkled as he thought further along that strand of reasoning. "Doesn't it have charms on it?"

"It does and it is blood-figured, as we are mated, it will allow you to read, carry and summon it. However, my concern is more for the protections that are on it. They are very old and very… vicious. I do not say this lightly. They will not be kind to someone whose curiosity decides to investigate."

"Oh." Harry tucked the shrunken book carefully away, understanding all that was not said. They neared the Great Hall and he found his steps slowing again, knowing that a repeat of breakfast was about to happen. He didn't want to go and sit by himself at the Gryffindor table. He wanted to sit next to Theo take comfort in the warmth and magic that seemed to roll off the Slytherin.

As if on cue, Theo turned and backed him right up against the stone wall, with a quick look up and down the hallway, before bending his head to kiss him thoroughly. Harry willingly gave into the kiss, parting his lips to allow better access to the warmth of his mouth. When Theo finally broke to allow him a breath, he finished with a light kiss to the center of Harry's forehead and then a small smile before he glided off towards the door.

Harry stared longingly after him, feeling the happy bubble beginning to spring up inside him as Theo disappeared behind the doors to the Great Hall.

"You have it bad, Potter." Draco drawled with a snicker as he trotted ahead of Terius following them up from behind at a sedate pace.

Harry didn't have the heart to snap at him. He was still replaying the moment in his head and enjoying every second of it.

He was going to skip dinner.

There was no way he was going to go through this again—mind-blowing kisses or not, Harry thought, grimly. He didn't understand what was going on with Ron, Ginny and Hermione. He'd thought there was something off there, but now, it seemed to have gone so far off that he couldn't keep track of it.

Ginny had wanted to sit next to him, but the twins had interrupted.

Hermione had tried to quiz him again, but Ron had interrupted.
Everything seemed to be oddly out of place.

The twins hadn't said a word to him at lunch—but he'd still been sandwiched between them and his plate had been filled. He'd eaten sparingly, unable to make himself stomach the food. He'd also avoided the worried gaze that Theo had given him from across the room. There had been so many things happening today that all he wanted to was to just go to bed and deal with it later.

He slipped into Potions class a little earlier than usual, just wanting to get everything over with and knowing that if he were to skip a class—it couldn't be Snape's. The Potions Master would probably hunt him down and skin him.

Harry blinked.

He didn't know where that thought had come from.

"You're thinking too hard." Blaise said, cheerfully. He took up his usual position beside Harry and grinned. "Something the matter?"

Harry shook his head, carefully. He didn't know yet.

"That's fine." The Italian hummed softly beneath his breath as he turned and took stock of the current students settling in. "It seems like—oh. Well." The phrase was said with a flicker of contempt. Harry blinked up at him. "It seems your…mate, would rather join you for today's lesson, rather than to subject you to my awful company."

It was the way he said it. Harry nearly choked on the giggle that managed to make its way past his mouth. It spilled out before he could clap a hand over his traitorous mouth and it drew the attention of nearly everyone in the room—the surly Potions Master included.

The dark eyes seemed to glitter and before Harry could protest, he found Blaise replaced with Theo as the taller brunet placed a hand around his neck, long fingers slipping past his collar to gently stroke the mark on his neck. Familiar spikes of calmness flowed out from the mark and Harry automatically relaxed.

"Theo?" He managed, hoping that no one was really paying attention.

"Mmm." There wasn't an actual answer, but the brunet's hand remained around his neck, stroking and rubbing, gently. A moment later, Theo caught him gently in his arms as Harry yawned and felt the strength leave his body. He was barely conscious of the fact that Snape came over at Theo's request and he was moved from the classroom to somewhere else.

It blurred together and then, a lovely, blissful blackness claimed him.
"Harry?" Theo's rich, warm voice filled his ears and soothed away any fears.

"T-theo?" Harry croaked. His throat was dry and everywhere ached all over. He opened his mouth to speak again and whimpered instead. It hurt to speak.

"Shhh, my treasure." Theo soothed. "You fainted in Potions, they took you to see Madam Pomfrey and Terius intercepted on your behalf, so we're in Draco's Head Boy rooms again. It's alright. Everything is fine." Theo slipped an arm around the slender shoulders and eased him upright. "You've been out for over a day. Everything is fine. Water?" He held up the glass to parched lips. "Drink slowly or it will cramp your stomach and I do not have any stomach-cramp-reliever to spare."

Harry tried, but it was hard not to gulp the cool liquid as frantically as he wanted. The rest of him processed his new surroundings and the fact that he was neatly tucked in bed, in clean pyjamas and cuddled up against Theo as he'd been a few days ago. Huh. Then Theo had said something else about sleeping for over a day. Harry nearly groaned. He thought he'd managed to get out of that over the weekend. He'd forgotten to take his usual doses of Pepper-up to pull him through the week. It would figure that that his luck would run out in the one class where he didn't want it to. He hoped he hadn't caused too much of a scene, but then again, his life seemed to revolve around drama, it would only figure that he had.

A faint blush colored his pale cheeks and he twisted away from the nearly empty glass.

"Enough?" Theo set the glass aside and wrapped his arms around him once more, offering warmth and comfort without hesitation. "Are you awake now or still tired?"

Harry thought about it. He nodded.

"Awake?" Theo prompted.

Harry nodded.

"How are you feeling?"

Harry glared at him.

Theo chuckled softly. "I take that as a negative."

"Oh Really?" Harry rolled his eyes, sarcastic.

Theo's smile softened. "No, really, Harry. How are you? Is there anything I can do to help?"

Harry clenched his hands in the warm sheets. He didn't know how he felt and he didn't really care. He was just tired and cranky and frustrated. This whole sleeping randomly everywhere business was wearing on his last nerve and he didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep it together. It didn't help that Theo seemed to think that he could help. He couldn't. Harry was sure of it. If there was someway to handle the sleeping fits, he would've found it by now. It seemed his best hope was just to wait it out. "M'fine." He muttered.

"You don't look fine."
"I'm fine." Harry repeated, a little clearer. Couldn't Theo just take a hint? He didn't want to deal with this now. Things were always complicated when other people were involved. Maybe he'd be able to make a trip to Madam Pomfrey and asked about...something. He didn't know what and he doubted she did either, but he couldn't go on like this.

Not for very long, anyway.

"...Harry!" Theo waved a hand in front of his face, worry creasing his pointed features. "What's wrong?"

"Everything?" Harry retorted. "Look, I'm fine!"

"If fine is snapping my head off, then I suppose you are." Theo frowned. "What's wrong?" No answer. "Please answer, Harry. I'd like to help if I can."

"You can't!"

"You don't know that."

"Yeah I do!"

"How?"

"Look, I'm just tired, okay? Dead tired! I'm exhausted and I can't even think straight. I just want to get some rest, can't you see that?"

Theo's frown deepened. "Dead tired?" He repeated, with some trepidation. "Harry, that's not... normal."

"Of course." Harry sneered. "How could it possibly be normal when it comes to me? I'm never normal! I'm just an abnormal freak who can't keep a handle on his freakishness and-"

"Harry!" Theo interrupted, the worry now fully pronounced as he felt Harry's forehead and then his neck, even as the smaller boy batted his hands away. "You shouldn't—that's not true. You're not a freak and I don't know whatever gave you that idea, but right now-"

"Right now I just want to go to sleep! How hard is that to understand?"

"Not hard at all!" Theo ground out. "I'm just trying to help. You shouldn't feel like this since we've already-"

"Since what? Since I found a mate? So now my life's supposed to be all roses and perfection because I-"

The bitter edge in Harry's voice made Theo's expression darken by several degrees. "That is not what I meant and I will not allow you to change the subject or use a temper tantrum to cover-"

"A temper tantrum?" Harry sputtered. "I'm not—I—how dare you!" He fumed. "You hardly know me! You don't know anything about-!"

"I know right now that something is wrong and you won't let me help you."

"As if you could help." Harry mocked. "How could you help? Huh? How could you help? I don't even know what the-"

Theo growled, faintly.
Harry swallowed and silently forced himself to count to ten and breathe deep. This conversation was getting out of hand and he was too tired to deal with it. He might end up saying things that he wasn't ready to handle—things that probably shouldn't even be said, considering how tired he felt right now. It hadn't been anywhere near this bad the last time he'd had the sleeping fits. He swallowed the groan that threatened to come up. His life really was some screwed up television drama. "Look, I'm tired, okay?"

"I understand. I'm not trying to-"

"I don't care what you're trying to do! Just leave me alone!"

Theo pressed his lips together and silently rolled his eyes skyward. That had to be the most contradictory statement he'd heard out of Harry yet. The boy still clung to him, half-wrapped around his waist and half-buried in the sheets. In spite of the words coming out of his mouth, Harry's body was singing an entirely different song. "I will—as soon as you tell me what's wrong? What's going on, Harry? Please, just talk to me!"

"M'tired!" The exclamation was whiny and frustrated. "I just want to sleep!"

"And you will. How long have you felt like this? Has it happened before?"

"It's nothing new." Harry mumbled into Theo's shoulder. He didn't want to keep talking about this, but he liked the thought of giving up his cuddle even less. Theo hadn't pushed him away yet.

"I didn't quite catch that." Theo prompted. "Harry?"

"Long time."

"Is this the first time?"

"No."

"Second?"

"Don't know."

"Third?"

"Don't know!"

"But you've felt it before?" Theo tried. This was harder than he'd expected, but he was Slytherin, surely there was a way to make this work out without causing so much stress on both halves. "Harry?"

"Yes."

"Did anything else happen?"

"No."

"Harry, I need you to tell me-"

"Leave me alone already!"

"...I'm not trying to force you to tell me anything you don't feel comfortable sharing, but your health is my concern."
"I didn't ask for your concern!" Harry pulled away. "I don't want it! I'm fine! I've always been fine. Just...just leave it!"

Theo didn't force him to stay, but he did growl again to voice his displeasure—a little louder than the first time.

Harry froze, but then ignored it and continued. He didn't care. It wasn't any of Theo's business—not yet, anyway—he had no real right to be asking that. No real right. His mind whispered. Just the fact that he's your mate...and your alpha...and you should probably stop twisting things around to make it all look right in your head. Nothing else happened. He wriggled out from the comfortable position inside Theo's arms to rest on a cool section of the bed, turning his back to the older boy. He didn't want to deal with this now. He didn't want to deal with it period. It was confusing and frustrating. Everything was frustrating.

Another yawn came up and Harry snuggled into the sheets as his tired eyes closed and sleep claimed him once more.

Maybe it was all just a bad dream.

When he woke again, Harry found himself cuddled in those familiar arms, with soft whuffs of breath ghosting over his face. A careful examination showed that Theo was fast asleep and Harry realized that he'd shifted at some point in time and gone back to the warmth and comfort of his mate's arms. He hesitated for a moment, surprised to find himself wide awake after all the exhaustion he'd been through.

After a moment, their previous conversation registered and suddenly, Harry felt ashamed. Theo had only been offering to help and he'd been more than rude. Sure, he'd brushed off Ron, Hermione and Ginny—even the twins—several times before and they'd always backed down and left him alone. He hadn't expected Theo to be so persistent—then again, the boy was Slytherin and Harry should've known that the snakes didn't like secrets kept from them. He nibbled on his lower lip for a moment. He'd been rude, yes, but he'd done it on purpose. He'd just wanted Theo to leave him alone—to stop asking the questions that led to answers that he didn't want to consider yet. To answers that hurt.

He was lucky. Very lucky. Theo seemed to have a world of patience at his disposal—Ron and Hermione had blown up at him a few times before they'd even got a quarter as far into the conversation as Theo had. Yet, Theo hadn't minded and even though Harry had been the one to pull away, Theo had let him snuggle back up without question.

A bitter taste curled at the back of his tongue and Harry fretted. He didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve it at all. The guilt grew deeper and wound around him until Harry finally struggled against the arms that suddenly seemed to be ten-times heavier than he could recall. He squirmed, wriggled and fought, but the arms remained tight around him and Theo seemed oblivious to his movements.

A sound bubbled up in his throat and before Harry even realized it, he'd shrieked in his displeasure—a harsh screeching sound that nearly made him wince, despite the fact that he'd been the one to voice it.

The sound of distress had Theo awake within seconds and suddenly, forcefully, hovering over him, with Harry flat out on his back and Theo with his Drigel wings stretched out in full span, his lips curled in a half-snarl, threatening, ready to tackle whatever threat had dared approach his mate. He took a few breaths, the magic tangling visibly in the air as it swirled around the duo.
For a moment, both boys blinked at each other.

Then Harry blushed and tried to look anywhere else but at that gorgeous expanse of defined chest and abs.

Theo offered an apologetic smile as he carefully straightened, leaning back from where he'd straddled Harry a moment before. His wings began to recede into his back and for the first time, Harry could truly appreciate his mate's beauty, even as those gorgeous deep brown wings fluttered away. He reached for them, without thinking and suddenly, they came forward again and he could touch them, stroke them and feel them. Shiny golden scales of various hues were sprinkled along the lower half of each wing and along each ridge, the wings themselves were cool to the touch, smooth and hard.

They fluttered delightedly at his touch and Harry found himself fighting the urge to nuzzle over every available square inch within reach. He didn't think Theo would appreciate it—not yet anyway—and the very fact that he processed the thought made him drop it.

For a moment, neither said anything.

Harry reverently ran his fingers up and down one knobbed ridge, marveling at the texture and the rippling muscles as they flexed in the soft light within the room. He watched as Theo's body morphed to take on the other traits, the face scales, the claws and the cat-eyed pupils. His jaw dropped when he caught sight of the slightly pointed ears and two silver rings in each lobe. Those most certainly weren't visible in Theo's human form. Tentatively, he reached for them with one hand.

A happy, rumbling purr filled the room as Theo leaned into the soft touch.

They stayed like that for a minute and then Harry couldn't help himself anymore. He leaned forward and gently nuzzled Theo's neck. He breathed in the heady scent of chocolate, orange and that hint of steel that he couldn't ignore—when no response came immediately, he nosed the column of pale flesh a little more insistently and whined.

Worry began to set in and he turned his attention to his alpha's face, pressing his cheek to Theo's warm one, he rubbed insistently, back and forth. Then, he gave a small lick to the underside of that pointed chin. Another whine escaped, this one a little louder than the first. Why didn't Theo respond? Harry buried his face in Theo's warm neck and fought the sudden stinging in his eyes that warned him of tears of come. This was ridiculous! He didn't even—it was just like it'd been with Terius. He couldn't help himself. He drew in a shaky breath and began to straighten up to pull away as the depressing thoughts cascaded inward in full force. What had he been thinking? Of course Theo wouldn't accept, Harry didn't deserve to be this close if he was such a horrible mate and-

Familiar long fingers slid upwards to tangle in his hair and held his head straight. Theo gently rubbed his cheek in return and then pulled away, in spite of Harry's whine, keeping the smaller Dragel still with the hand fisted in his hair. "Oh Harry." He sighed. "I have already explained that I will not smother you. I have no desire to cage you or break you in any way." Serious golden eyes locked onto shimmering emerald ones. "However, there is one thing I will never compromise on. Harry flinched, reflexively. Theo pretended not to notice, but the hand in Harry's hair, gentled—faintly. "I will never compromise on your health. You may dislike this, you may resent me for it, you may hate me for it, but I will never change this. I would ask that you do not lie to me in the future. When I ask you, how you are feeling, how you are doing, or if I inquire after your health—I do so in all honesty. I would rather hear, 'I have a headache' than, I'm fine. So that I can fix that headache and then you will be fine." He began to stroke the wayward locks of hair. "Your health is your wellbeing and your wellbeing is extremely important to me. I ask you, because I care. I want
to know the real answer. I don't want to hear whatever excuse you may have rehearsed in private and even if there is nothing you think I can do—I will do all that I can, anyway. Do you understand this?"

There was a long pause.

Harry squirmed a bit and looked away a few times. Then finally, he leaned his head forward to escape the hand in his hair.

Theo let him.

Harry nibbled on his lower lip and then, finally he twisted his hands in his lap. "I don't want to hate you." He said, finally. "I don't want to dislike you or resent you…I….I just don't."

"I did not say that you would. I said you might." Theo explained. "You very well may not. I only wish to impress the seriousness of this upon you."

Two delicate fangs peeked over the edges of Harry's sorbet lips as he nibbled them in thought. "You just want to take care of me." He said, at last. "You would do this…that…because you care?"

Harry really didn't like the way this conversation was going. Perhaps he'd been a little…snappish, than he'd intended, but it was hard to break a habit that was now sixteen years strong. No one had ever really cared what he ate, when, why or how and he'd been fine with that—mostly.

Those slender hands suddenly caught his shoulders in a surprisingly strong grip. "Yes."

"You really care?"

"I care for you more than anything, my treasure. I merely want you to know that I do not want this to happen again."

"This?" Harry blinked up at him.

"This is our first…disagreement, of sorts." Theo said, kindly. "I understand that there will be many more, for we are different and there are still things we do not know of each other and of what we are. I understand that. You were correct. There is much we have to learn about each other, but it will take time. I do not wish to handle our disagreements in the way you chose just now."

Harry blushed.

"I would rather you simply explain that you do not wish to discuss it or ask me to change the subject—clearly. I do not like being manipulated or patronized any more than you do and I know you understand that. We are both mature enough to speak our minds to each other and trust. We cannot expect anything worthwhile to come out of this mating if there is no trust between us. I am not going to make up some list or lecture you, but I do expect you to at least hear me out on my own point of view. My only point at this time, is your health. Do not think I have not noticed that you do not fill your own plate and that you eat even less of what is put on it? Or that you've been swallowing energy-potions like candy every now and again? Or that you're much thinner than even some of the third-years in Slytherin house?"

Harry swallowed and looked away.

Theo let him. "You need to be eating some form of raw meats as well and I have yet to see you partake in any of that, nor have the elves that serve us, have anything to say on the subject."

"Elves?" Harry straightened. "What elves?" His thoughts immediately flickered to Dobby. He
hoped the little house elf hadn't gotten into any trouble of any kind. He'd always managed to bring Harry whatever he requested, no matter how bizarre or what time of day.

"Toppy and Middles." Theo frowned. "My apologies, I forgot that you wouldn't know. Terius brought them with him—sort of. They bring us foods we are more used to eating, at least, foods that our Dragel forms find acceptable. You need only call for them and the password is Leifborne. Then simply request what you wish to eat—meat, fruit, nuts or such and they will bring it for you." The honey-golden eyes narrowed faintly. "Your inheritance is new, isn't it?"

Harry fought the urge to scowl. This conversation had taken an odd turn, but he could still feel a faint itch tugging at him. Making him want to go back to nuzzling Theo's neck and further along the lines of seducing his alpha rather than paying attention to the current conversation. That train of thought made him blush spectacularly and he looked away, hoping Theo wouldn't, but knowing that he wouldn't fail to notice the sudden redness on his face. "Yes."

"You need to be eating more." Theo sighed. "Simply try to eat a little more than you are at present." He gently squeezed the thin shoulders. "It would be a bad reflection on me, if I could not keep one mate properly fed."

Harry almost smiled. "It's not your fault."

"But it is now part of my responsibility." Theo countered. "Which brings us back to my point. Your health, Harry. Do you understand this? There is no argument here. No negotiations of any sort. I will not change on this. Understood?"

A small pout appeared, but Harry reluctantly agreed. "Yes."

"Good." Theo brightened considerably and he drew Harry forward, tilting his head back to kiss and lick the newly exposed throat. A trail of soft kisses were planted along the soft, vulnerable column and Harry visibly relaxed. His alpha hadn't forgotten—in fact, his alpha had accepted his apology—his whole apology! The itchy feeling melted away and he snuggled into the embrace as Theo's arms came up to wrap around them and then, those warm lips covered his own and Harry easily lost himself in the pleasurable sensations that followed.

The snogging session that followed was quite enjoyable in virtually every possible way, until Theo pulled away, leaving a rosy-cheeked, flushed and panting Harry staring at him with a stricken expression. Theo chuckled. "You are irresistible, my precious treasure." He murmured, leaning forward and easing Harry downward to the bed. "And you are tempting me far beyond what little restraint I possess."

Emerald eyes blinked innocently up at him, imploring, almost in their earnest gaze.

Theo smirked. "Not tonight." He hummed. "I refuse to take this any further until I know there is some semblance of understanding rattling around in that blissfully empty head of yours." He settled back on the bed, sitting on his heels, to one side of Harry.

"Hey!"

The insult was soothed with a kiss to the side of the scar on his forehead. "Accio lightspeed glasses." Theo snatched up a pillow from the bed and held it up as something thwacked into the soft material. It fell into his lap and he plucked it up with two fingers. "Take those off and put these on." He waved towards Harry's glasses. "Why are you wearing them anyway? Surely your sight was corrected with the arrival of your inheritance." He frowned. "Then again, I suppose it ignored the scar for a reason."
"Curse scars don't just vanish." Harry said, softly. He obediently slipped the gold-rimmed glasses off and held his face steady as Theo slipped the new pair of ruby-red rimmed optics on. "Maybe... some day." He blinked and squinted, waiting for his eyes to adjust as they should. "What are these for?"

"Exactly what I said." Theo waved his hand in the air. "For quick reading. You, my dear, need a crash course in exactly what a Dragel is. Accio Nott family complete encyclopedia." The book flew through the air and landed solidly in his expectant hand. He cracked it open, flipping quickly through the pages. "Read from here, to here." He pointed and held up a section of the gilt-edged pages. "Shouldn't take more than a minute." He added the last words when Harry gave him The Look. "Just read it, Harry." He huffed. "Don't even tell me that you're not the slightest bit curious about why you've been so tired, what's going on with-"

"Why can't you just tell me?" Harry glared at him.

"Because some portions of the book are spelled so that only a submissive may read them."

Harry blinked. What?

"It is part of the protection." Theo shrugged. "So that others cannot take advantage of those with Dragel heritage. There are always those who would do everything that they could, to see that those books that declare us extinct tell the truth. Just read the book, Harry! You'll find answers I can't really give you—or ones that you probably would not believe even if I did tell you." Theo said, dryly.

Harry gave him The Look again, but after a minute, Harry turned to the book and the moment his gaze fastened on the pages, they began to turn rapidly at an inhuman pace. The glasses glowed a faint red hue as Harry all but absorbed the knowledge trapped within the ancient pages.

It was a long moment before he finally took the glasses off and handed them over to Theo. The older boy took them wordlessly and then the encyclopedia when Harry handed it over as well.

There was a long silence.

Then Harry reached for him.

"Want to talk to Terius or would you rather go back to sleep?"

Harry nibbled his lip. "Those my only options?"

"Your well-being, my responsibility." Theo murmured. "Either take a nap or we'll talk to Terius."

"He's probably in class."

"Then you can nap until he's out."

"Theo!"

"I did not just give you that book for sheer entertainment value." He tapped Harry's nose, lightly, with one finger. Then those long-fingered hands slipped from his hair to rub little circles on his temple in gentle, soothing motions. He didn't say a word, but then again, he didn't have to.

"Fine, fine. I'll nap." Harry stifled a yawn. That felt nice. It felt nice in lots of ways. He was still tired, but it wasn't worrying him as much as it had some time ago. The book had helped—some. He could follow Theo's train of thought, faintly. Talking to Terius would help, if he could. There were
some things he wanted to know.
There was something very soft and warm wrapped around him.

Harry wriggled comfortably for a moment, before an unfamiliar scent teased at his nostrils. His brow furrowed in his sleep and his breathing hitched, the once relaxed body gradually tensing.

A soft, rumbling chir filled the room and Harry's head popped up, eyes wide, head whipping around.

Emerald green eyes caught sight of Terius sitting on a stool beside the sofa end table, his broad grey wings flared out in their indoor form, the burgundy scales catching the light of the fire and reflecting speckles of pink light around the room. He made an inquisitive noise in his throat. Those lovely grey wings fluttered and Terius hummed in response.

Neither said a word for the first few minutes. The silence was tangible and comfortable.

"Have a nice rest?" The older Dragel asked, after Harry had settled back onto the sofa, watching him with waking, curious eyes.

Harry blinked at him. He thought about it for a moment and realized that he suddenly felt energized as if he'd finally gotten enough sleep at last. He perked up quite visibly and nodded, snuggling back into the warmth provided from the couch and then realized he'd kicked off a nicely knitted blanket by his feet.

"Good." Terius waved his hand at the table and a cup of steaming tea appeared a few inches away from Harry's hands. "Have something to drink—your stomach will want it in a moment." Harry accepted the cup, holding it carefully in his hands. "Theo tells me you finally read that helpful little book of his."

"Little?" Harry nearly choked on the mouthful of tea he'd been taking. If it weren't for the charmed glasses, there was no way he'd have been able to breeze through the thick section the older boy had selected. "There's nothing little about that-!"

Terius chuckled. "He's just left for classes." He explained, noticing Harry's furtive glance around the room. "Do you mind? He will return as soon as he can."

Harry opened his mouth and then shut it, thinking carefully. He did mind that Theo wasn't there, especially since Theo had been there when he'd fallen asleep, but if Theo had thought he was fine with Terius, Harry didn't have much of a complaint. He wanted to ask the man some questions, so his current situation was mostly acceptable. He still felt uneasy—there was simply something about being around Theo that made peace and quiet seem as natural as breathing—so he frowned.

"It's natural." Terius said, quietly. He sipped his tea with an air of elegance. "It is simply your awareness of him. It will fade comfortably over time."

"Fade?"

"Dim just enough so that it doesn't bother you. It is amplified with every mate that is added to your circle—it starts out fairly mild, but can give you a bit of a headache over time. Some circles
develop telepathy, mindspeak or magic-mingling from it. It is nothing to worry over."

But the words flew conveniently over Harry's head. He was focusing on something Terius had said earlier. "Theo's in class?"

"Potions, actually. Severus and Draco were both whining over it. They all left only a few minutes ago. I figured Theo's leaving might wake you. It did."

Harry nearly laughed at the thought of the dark Potions Master whining. It didn't fit the image of the dark figure he knew. "How did you-?"

"You rested enough." Terius said, simply. "Theo stopped worrying about several minutes ago—he didn't want to leave your side for even a second, but then he just calmed and packed up his bookbag and I knew you'd wake when you were ready."

"W-why am I—all the time. I mean, I read the book and-" Harry paused. "You're not a-"

"I am Pareya." Terius said, smoothly. "We have certain privileges that the others do not, because part of our function in a mateship circle is to protect the ones we love and care about."

"You're not a beta?" Harry stared at him, confusedly.

"Mmm." Terius returned. "I thought that book might have left some things out."

"Such as?" Harry wanted to know.

"Important things, but the usual kind that ought to be spoken aloud and not written on parchments." Terius nodded towards the cup. "You will want to drink that soon."

"What is it?"

"An herbal tea for clarity of mind, settled stomach and energy."

"I feel fine."

"This will keep it that way."

Harry resisted the urge to shrug. He liked the tea. It tasted nice—and that was without cream and sugar added to the golden liquid. "What's a Pareya?"

"Do you know the positions in a mateship circle?"

"Alpha, beta and sub." Harry recited, quickly.

"And in relation to you…?" Terius prompted.

"I'm sub, Theo's alpha…I don't have a beta."

"I would suggest finding one fairly soon. It always eases the transition from a human-raised to Dragel culture—and you will crave the security and attention that comes with having more than one mate around you." Terius paused. "Do you know what Pareya is?"

Harry shook his head.

"Pareya stands for Protector. There can be up to three heads of Pareya in a circle, and it can expand outward from there. First, there is simply Pareya or Protector, as you would say Alpha or beta."
Once there is one Protector, then there can be another, in this case, there is Pareya Deracle, which protects the entire mateship circle, but not the submissive. Pareya Toracle solely protects the submissive and the Deracle and no others. When there are more than one, they tend to look after each other, so the Toracle would be dominant to the Deracle and you'd have a bit of a sub-circle there."

"How?"

"Simple. The protector, protects. The alpha will fight if, necessary, but the protector's job first and foremost is to protect their circle—alpha included—at all costs."

"All costs?"

"Their lives, Harry." Terius said, quietly. "Meaning, if something were to threaten Draco or Severus and I could not protect them, I would die trying."

Harry's grip on the teacup tightened. "That's not…." He swallowed. "I don't-"

"You do not have to agree, but I do ask that you attempt to understand." Terius soothed. "It is in our nature, our very blood. We cannot deny it any more than you can deny the fact that you are a wizard."

"What if I don't pick one?"

"It doesn't quite work that way, but-"

"What if I don't pick one?" Harry demanded. "Why would I want someone to give up their life for-"

"You're worth it, you know." Terius interrupted. "Whether you agree or not and while you could refuse them, it would effectively destroy them from the inside out. They would then wish death on their own selves in order to give you the peace of mind you would seek by refusing them." The weight of his voice made Harry look at him.

"Why?"

"Why not?" Terius countered. "Every one deserves to be loved, Harry." He sighed. "And you are distracting me. After Pareya, there are other positions in the circle. There is Rheyo, which is a second alpha, in this case, if a higher alpha takes over the circle, the former alpha becomes beta and the new alpha chooses their own beta—or, the circle as a whole, may choose the one they want to hold the position. It helps to prevent arguments and fights, especially since a beta or Rheyo are often mediators between the alpha and the rest of the circle and they help to keep things together in harmony." Terius explained. "Other available positions within a circle include, a Healer, a Carrier—if the sub does not feel comfortable carrying a child to term—an Advisor and an Ambassador. Afterwards, there is Gheyo, which is a fighter, whose sole purpose is to fight. You will find that Dragel society is very different than you would expect. Fighting is a something of a sport in Nevarah—our Capital city—and it is quite a spectacular and enjoyable pastime. Most circles take on a fighter for defensive purposes and to protect the alpha from accepting potentially deadly challenges, as a Gheyo's prime function is to fight and an alpha's is to protect."

Harry opened and closed his mouth several times before he finally spoke. "Your circle's not that… big."

"Draco has no further inclinations at the moment." Terius gave a slight shrug, his wings fluttering faintly. "As such, he only has Severus—our alpha, and myself, Pareya."
"And he doesn't need anyone else?"

"Not necessarily. He is simply content with what he has at present. Most require a beta in some form or another—I would not be amiss to adding another to our circle, but Severus is fine with Draco and Draco is fine with Severus, so for now, there is nothing else needed."

"What about you?" Harry asked, softly.

Terius smiled. "What about me?" He murmured. "Have you had any other inclinations?"

"I-I don't really want another one." He swallowed, looking away. "I'd rather just be happy with Theo."

There was an audible snort from the older man's corner. "That is because you haven't completed your mating. Just because there are four stages, does not mean that you have to wait for all of them before progressing any further and you cannot possibly be fine with Theo until you are fully bonded—then you'll know, otherwise, you have no right to claim solitary."

"Solitary?"

"The refusal of a triad. If a third member is not found straight away, sometimes pairings prefer not to add a third, even when the third is found. It is a cruel practice, if the third is summoned through a heartcry or soulcry, though if the circle extends to others. Then the rejected member can be accepted by another. In your case, I would say you definitely have more than two or three, at the very least." His eye narrowed. "You have not completed your mating, have you?"

Harry blushed fiercely. "W-what do you mean?"

"I suggest speaking to Theo to sort that one out, but you know the four stages, I am sure. That much of us is at least recorded in magical texts." Harry blinked at him. Terius sighed. "The courtship, the engagement, the bonding and the mating." He recited. "The courtship is initiated by either party, either an interested alpha or sub, in your case, I would believe it is you. Then a set of gifts can be exchanged. Gifts are not necessary, but it helps to mark the progression towards a secure place in a mated circle. The engagement is usually another round of gifts and a mark where the intendeds may now spend more time together and usually, one would test the receptiveness of their magics and a claiming mark is placed. The claiming mark can be done during the courtship, as well, if both parties are serious, as it wards off any potential suitors until it is completed."

Harry's fingers absently reached up to the mark on the side of his neck and he ghosted his fingers over it, thinking back and remembering that lovely moment in Theo's arms. Terius followed the movement of the boy's hands with his eyes and hid a smile at the prompted reaction. Now he could tell just how far along those two were. "The bonding is a little more complicated—usually, it is where they allow each other to see an alternate form, such as their wings or indoor transformations and often, they begin sharing quarters and eventually, it leads to the actual mating, regardless of formal ceremony. A formal ceremony is merely for the public's benefit—namely, a wizarding or muggle public, as once a mating is complete, us Dragels will know straight away by scent—and the fact that most submissives wear their claiming marks in full view, so it cannot be mistaken that they are very much taken. How about anyone else? Have you felt any specific inclinations towards anyone beside Mr. Nott, any suggestive feelings or attractions towards someone that you could not explain?"

"Er, no." Harry blushed.

"No?" Terius' eyebrows arched upwards into his two-toned hair. "That is a bit unusual. Generally
Once you initiate your mateship circle by choosing the first mate, you will seek out enough to complete your circle and ground your powers."

"I don't have any powers."

Terius deliberately rolled his eyes. "Of course you have powers, child." There was a patient tone to his voice. "Just because they are not currently present does not mean you do not have them. They will come and if I am not mistaken, the fact that you've already sought and taken a powerful mate—Mr. Nott—suggests that your inheritance may be a big one."

"How big?" Harry straightened.

"Hard to say. It is not something I can guess, though I would mention that your choice of Mr. Nott over say, Mr. Zabini or Mr. Henry or Miss Dawn is not surprising at all."

"How so?"

"Ask him when you see him." Terius took the final sip from his cup and rose to reach for the teapot. "More tea?"

Harry shook his head. "Why is it surprising?"

"Mr. Nott has had more time to deal and develop his Dragel talents. You would've consciously known that Draco was taken, so you would've overlooked him, the others are fairly new to their inheritances, much like yourself."

"I bet most of them don't lose their magic."

"Oh ye of little faith." Terius quoted. He refilled Harry's half-full teacup anyway, along with his own. "Most submissives seek a mate based on their power levels and psychological cravings." He shrugged. "It is a process I could never begin to explain. Have you had any inclinations, any at all?"

"Most of the time, I just want to get away from everyone. I don't know if that counts."

"It could." Terius allowed. "Do you feel the urge to run from anyone in particular?"

"I'm not running!"

"Bad choice of words." The older Dragel corrected, quickly. "Anyone that made you feel uncomfortable in a way that did not... feel right."

"Is everything based on feelings?"

"At the moment, your feelings are intertwined with your Dragel instincts. It will take you some time to sort through them and figure things out." Terius explained. "Therefore, it is simply easier for me to ask you about your feelings than your direct reactions."

Harry blinked. "Oh."

"So?"

"Erm... no."

"That is good—very good. How about as potential mates?"
"What?"

"Harry."

"I really don't think this is helping much." Harry squeaked. "It's just too-"

"Fine then. How do you feel about your fellow Dragels here at Hogwarts? Excepting myself and mine."

Harry blushed a bright red. "Blaise jokes too much." He shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know Ryan very well."

"What about Miss Dawn?"

Harry's blush grew more pronounced. "…not interested." He said, quietly.

Terius chuckled. "Just checking. If that is the case though, then I'd like to offer my home in Nevarah, if you feel up to a visit during your hunt."

"Hunt?"

"Searching out the rest of your circle." Terius chuckled. "There will be plenty of unclaimed passing through and residing in Nevarah right now. The matching season begins next month, getting in early and making a few friends would be to your benefit."

"What did you mean I'd chose based on how much power they have?" Harry set the teacup on the table and slid from the sofa to sit on the ground, scooting a little closer to the fire.

"Theodore Nott's elemental line holds significant power." Terius said, simply. "Remember the hospital wing?"

Harry flinched, instinctively. "What part of it?" A wave of raw magical energy washed over him. He shrank back, turning worried eyes to Terius who sat calmly in his corner, still sipping tea.

"That part." Terius rose from the corner and set the cup down, drawing the energy back to him and pushing it away. "That was a taste of my energies—I'm sure you've noticed that Draco seems to have a little more power behind some of his spells?"

"Yes…"

"A submissive has access to some of their mates' powers—Dragel powers—through a mated circle. The more mates you have, the more powers. The different elements they have—the different elements you have."

Harry brightened considerably. "So…if my magic never returns."

Terius snorted. "If." He said, matter-of-factly. "Then yes, you would still be able to use some a type of magic and you would have quite a significant amount at your disposal, depending on your mate's inherent powers."

"Elemental magic?" Harry had to classify. He shivered.

"Elemental and Dragel." Terius corrected, he moved to sit on the floor beside Harry and his tall, greyed wings stretched out, one curling slightly around Harry to provide a semblance of comfort, while reflecting the heat from the fireplace.
Harry stiffened, for a moment, then slowly leaned towards the older man.

Terius smiled down at him and summoned a bowl of fruit. He picked up an apple and with a flick of his claw, sliced it in sections and offered it to Harry. The green-eyed teen took it with a sad smile.

Chapter End Notes

http://www.fanfiction.net/forum/There_Be_Dragons_Harry_Forum/108964/

Is the online forum for this fic, featuring a couple of extras, ficlets, spoilers, polls and explanations for things like a mateship circle the positions within the circle and what they do.

Dragel Rankings/Rankings Within a Circle and titles:

A quick Break-down of the ranking system in a mated Dragel Circle, in order of their ranks to each other. Every individual starts out as a Sub, but by the time they are of age, certain circumstances determine what they will be. The list below is a tiered map with the maximum ranks (5 Pareya, 7 Gheyo) outlined for a basic circle with no inclinations:

*The Asterisk denotes rankings falling below the current main title.
"-" denotes mates on equal standing

Alpha - Sub (on the same level, technically, as an Alpha, they are equal)
*Dru Sub (in the case of twin subs, is dominant to the Lyte Sub/Twin)
*Lyte Sub (is lower in ranking to Dru Sub)
Beta and/or Royal (also on the same level, an equal standing like the Sub and Alpha) Pareya.
*Pareya Deracle (protects entire circle except for Sub. Will actively protect all in the face of danger, but is submissive to the Toracle).
*Pareya Toracle(Protects submissive and Deracle only. Will actively ignore other "mates" in the face of danger).
Advisor
Healer
Gheyo ACE-(For the following Ranks, Gender does not matter to hold the title of King, Queen, etc, it is given in according to skill)
*Gheyo King
*Gheyo Queen
*Gheyo Prince
*Gheyo Princess
*Gheyo Joker
*Gheyo Squire.
Companion
Carrier

If the circle is "overtaken" or merged into another circle, then the new rankings are as follows.

Alpha-Sub
Rheyo (elected Beta by all, to help bridge between the old and new circles, sometimes it is the former alpha, if the authority is not to be shared)
Beta (former Alpha or former Beta),
Eta-if former Alpha takes the title of Beta, then the Beta becomes "Eta" this is rarely used however, because most circles try to keep the chief rankings solid, to minimize upheaval.
Pareya
Advisor
Healer
Gheyo
Companion
Carrier

Reasons for a Circle Merging:

A circle might merge if an important mate dies.
If the entire circle is wagered in a duel.
Political maneuvering.
Wishes of both Subs
Wishes of both Alphas
"Theo!" Harry was off the sofa and barreling towards the Slytherin the moment the trio came through the doors of Severus' personal quarters. He narrowly missed Draco who was scooped out of the way by Severus and greeted by a less enthusiastic Terius. Relief spread through him the moment he was able to comfortably wrap his arms around the taller boy. He didn't want to analyze that, it was too much. For now, it felt good and that was good enough.

"Harry." Theo mumbled into the mouthful of short, messy, hair. He tried to pry Harry off him and then settled for simply standing and waiting until Terius' quiet chuckle drew his eye. "Did I miss something?"

"You weren't here when he woke." Terius winked. "I think he missed you."

"Ah. Right." Theo eased his bookbag to the floor, glad that Harry had at least allowed him to step into the private rooms and not to be stuck outside in the hallway. It didn't look like his lovely mate intended to let him go any time soon. "Harry?" He tried again. "Did you sleep well? Did you eat anything?"

The vise-like grip loosened and brilliant green eyes shimmered up at him. "I-" His stomach rumbled.

Theo perked a brow. "Dinner first." He decided. "and I expect you to eat enough of it—even if I have to spoon-feed it to you!"

Harry blushed and Terius smirked. "Dinner's about done, if those lovely smells are any indication of it." He tilted his head. "Stay for it?"

"I don't see why not." Theo allowed.

Harry reluctantly let himself be pried off and followed the others to the kitchen. He didn't want to think about a logical reason for his sudden clinginess, just to enjoy the fact that Theo was here. This whole inheritance thing was really set on twisting his life up.

"Did you and Terius have a nice chat?" Theo prompted, guiding Harry to the table and selecting their respective seats, once the others were busy in the kitchen.

"He said to ask you about sorting out our stages."

Theo actually blushed. "Really?"

Harry nodded, seriously. "He also said we should talk more and that I'd get some of your magic soon."

"Ah. Of course." Theo paused. "You will, as soon as one particular thing is taken care of. Did you wash up already?"

"Yeah."

"Just a minute, then."
"Your cooking is improving." Draco commented, happily shoveling his stew into his mouth.

Terius snickered into his mug. "I did not make that, Draco." He said, smoothly. "But I am glad you are enjoying it."

Silver eyes narrowed at once and the spoon was lowered, cautiously, slowly. "Who did?"

Harry swallowed.

Terius merely smiled. "It's perfectly harmless. I would not give it to you otherwise."

Severus muttered something from his corner of the table, but gave Draco a look when it seemed like the blond wouldn't eat any more. His dark gaze flickered towards Harry for a moment and he gave a stiff nod.

Harry didn't know what to make of that.

"Long day?" Terius inquired. "Or bad students?"

"Bad students." Severus muttered. "Incompetent dunderheaded-!"

"Drink your coffee." Terius interrupted, a warning gleam in his blue-grey eyes. The men exchanged a look and after a moment, an awkward silence settled over the table, broken only by the sounds of silverware on china.

"I ah, brought your homework along with mine, Harry." Theo ventured, after several long minutes.

"Thanks." Harry smiled. "I hope you remembered notes too."

"Plenty." Theo chuckled. "And a Ravenclaw noticed you were missing—she offered hers as well."

Harry stiffened. "Was her name Cho Chang, by any chance?"

Theo shook his head. "Loony Lovegood." His face colored. "I meant-"

"Luna." Harry corrected with a glare. "And she's no more loony than you are. Don't call her that again!"

Draco's eyes grew wide for a moment and the three other figures stared at the green-eyed boy.

Harry shifted uncomfortably for a moment and then snuck a glance upward. "What?"

"Do you fancy her?" Draco exclaimed, seemingly horrified.

"What?" Harry dropped his spoon—in the bowl of stew, thankfully. "I didn't—what—Malfoy!"

"That's a rather fierce defense of someone not in your circle." Terius said, carefully. "And it is Snape now, actually. But he still answers to Mr. Malfoy as your dear Headmaster had some issue with our relationship being common knowledge."

"Public knowledge." Severus corrected with a scowl. "There is a difference between public and common knowledge and I agree with him on that point. This whole—thing—is dangerous in-"

"And yet, nothing has happened to prove that." Terius said, quietly. "You simply cannot take my word that nothing will happen, can you? I will not allow it."
"You allow far too much-!" Severus snapped. Draco looked worriedly between the two, opening his mouth to interrupt when both men turned to frown at him. "Eat your dinner, Draco." The Potions Master snapped, he stood, abruptly from his chair and stalked from the room.

Draco wearily picked up his spoon and watched the retreating figure. He turned accusing eyes towards a sighing Terius. "Did you have to start that now?" He demanded. "Do you have any idea how long it took me to calm him down from this morning?"

Terius rose from the table and flicked a hand at the unfinished dinners, banishing them with a flicker. He didn't say a word.

"You'd better be leaving to apologize!" Draco said, heatedly. "He didn't do anything to-" The words died in his mouth when those piercing, blue-grey eyes deliberately locked onto him. After a moment, he broke the stare and began to focus on his food, mechanically filling his mouth with stiff movements.

Terius silently exited the dining room.

Harry stared after him in shock and then to Draco. Somehow, he'd thought dinner might be a happy affair, at least for a mated circle. But a rather sad look had fixed itself to the blond's face and he was still eating his dinner as if on autopilot. Feeling Theo's eyes settle on him, Harry quickly picked up his spoon and began to eat. There was no way he'd allow himself to be spoonfed in front of Malf-Snape, of all people!

"Did you get enough sleep?" Theo inquired, after a moment. "I think I asked before, but I didn't quite hear your answer and I was hoping that you'd have-"

Draco perked up. "How long's yours?"

"What?" Harry said, eloquently.

"Your realignment cycle." Theo filled in. "Didn't you and Terius cover that? You wanted to know why you were sleeping everywhere all the time when you were fine. It's because of that. Didn't you two talk about it?"

"Er…no."

Theo gave a dramatic roll of his lovely honey-gold eyes. "Why ever not? Pray tell, what exactly did you two discuss?"

"Stuff?" Harry suggested. His gaze flickered towards Draco. He hadn't felt comfortable discussing his possible vulnerability with Terius—no matter how kind or understanding the older man was—it just hadn't felt right. But now, as he looked at Draco, he could feel a flicker of sudden kinship. Draco was a sub just like him. Sort of. Surely he could answer this question. He opened his mouth to speak and then shut it abruptly. Even though they hadn't been insulting each other for this year, the history between them kept him from speaking up just yet.

Draco snickered. Theo glared at him and the blond immediately straightened up. "It was just a joke." He said, defensively.

Theo blinked. "I didn't mean any-"

"Mine happens to be every three days." Draco wrinkled his nose. "It's a bloody pain-in-the-arse!"

"Language, Draco!" Terius' voice filtered in from somewhere.
Draco stuck his tongue out in retaliation.

"Draco!" Severus growled.

The blond rolled his eyes. "So, spill, Potter—what's yours?"


"Choice?"

"We subs." Draco gave a tilt of his head, gesturing between Harry and himself. "Are allowed to choose the circle name. We can either keep our own or take on that of the alpha." He shrugged. "Father all but legally disowned me and Mother didn't really care, so the Malfoy name's nothing right now. I took Snape's because." The blond shrugged, then froze in mid-motion as if he realized the action wasn't dignified enough. "I still use Malfoy, because it is expected, but legally, I am Draco Snape." A rare smile stole over his features, softening the look of the Slytherin Ice Prince. "Feels nice not to be a Malfoy, even if only in secret."

Harry found himself agreeing. It sounded rather tempting to be a Nott rather than a Potter, but he'd have to think about it—really think about it. He frowned. "Wait, what did you mean, every three days?"

"Realignment cycles are what subs go through to ground their circles." Theo explained, with a glance towards Draco, who nodded in affirmation. "For every sub, it is a bit different. Usually, it is a draining of your energies to the point where you're so physically exhausted, you need to rest." Understanding dawned as Harry dropped his spoon again, gaping at the two Slytherins. "It also has to do with the fact that Drigel magic is unpredictable and very volatile, we are all but dragons, after all. To control the energies and the sheer volume of it all, the sub acts a bit like a valve." Theo frowned. "I guess that's the easiest way I can explain it, Draco?"

"More like a storage vault." Draco suggested. "For me, Terius has even more magic than Severus and he's has quite a bit." The blond finished up his stew and began to toy with his buttered rolls. "During a realignment, a circle…sleeps together. Our magical cores realign and rework themselves, then they sort of reset." He nibbled on one crusty edge. "You wake up energized and ready to take on You-Know-Who himself."

Harry rolled his eyes at the nickname, but let it go, he wanted to know more about this. Theo nudged his foot under the table and Harry shot him a look, but obediently picked up a roll and followed Draco's nibbling example. "And you couldn't tell me this before, because?" Harry growled.

"It wasn't my place." Theo said, simply. "Besides, would you have even listened?"

Harry thought about it for a moment. He wasn't sure.

"Save it for later." Draco murmured. "As I was saying, as your cycle comes to an end, the only thing you want to do is sleep, but it won't be peaceful or restful unless your mates are around you. How much you have to sleep, depends on the cycle itself. There is some formula to it, at least in the beginning, after that, it takes a while and depends on your mates. I usually just to sleep for about…" Draco did the calculations in his head. "A day or so? At least twenty. I usually can't count it. I just need to sleep and I do. Terius and Severus come and when I wake, they wake." He yawned. "I try not to think of it much. Terius, do you know?"
"Twenty-four!" Both men chorused back.

Draco smirked.

Theo perked a brow.

"They're apologizing." Draco stage-whispered. Two identical snorts came from the direction of the sitting room. "Bonding over grading homework." He explained, in a quieter tone. "So, spill already! What's yours?"

Harry had stopped nibbling and was now looking rather pale. It explained more than he'd expected and now, he was starting to feel the first inklings of panic. From the eager look on Draco's face, he had a feeling that this bit of information was supposed to be very, very important. "I-I don't know!"

Theo's nearest arm immediately draped itself around Harry's shoulders. "That's fine, Harry. Calm down. It isn't a big deal if you don't know. I'm sure we can reason it out."

"I slept for weeks!" Harry burst out, the calming arm doing very little in terms of calming him. "I slept the whole week or two after my birthday. I don't remember." He twisted his hands, anxiously. "Then when I came here, the whole first week-"

"I remember that." Draco mused. "You tripped right into me. Severus was furious, treated me like glass for the rest of the day." Another snort came from the sitting room.

"I didn't trip on purpose!" Harry shot back, his eyes flashing angrily. "Someone else did and I-"

"Harry…"

"A whole week. But I couldn't sleep, there were classes. I had to keep taking-"

"Harry."

"Then this week—I!" Harry gulped. "How long was I out?" He jerked away from Theo's arm and turned on the boy. "How long did I sleep?"

"Harry, please calm down." Worry began to show in Theo's normally set face.

"He won't calm down." Draco said, matter-of-factly. "I did the same until Terius counted it up. You just have to count how much sleep you've gotten and see the ratio between it and how long you manage to go without falling asleep on your feet."

"Draco gave quite the headache too until we figured it out." Terius' head popped 'round the corner. He took one look at the distraught teen and frowned in disapproval. "Harry, calm down." He said, firmly. "This is not something to get confused over. It is very simple to calculate and I'd be happy to help you figure it out. Draco, if you've finished, you may leave the table and join us for tea. Harry, Theo, you are welcome to stay for that as well."

"Tea sounds wonderful." Theo slipped out of his chair and coaxed Harry to do the same. He frowned up at the elder Dragel still hovering in the doorway. "Is there any way to…?"

"I can see." Terius offered. "Would you like me to calm him?"

"Ah…no." Theo managed a small smile. "I can do that, but thank you." He slipped a hand down the collar of Harry's shirt with the intent of using the calming property of the claiming mark.

Harry immediately jerked away from him, accusingly. "Don't do that without my permission! I
can't calm down! I don't want to calm down! How can you expect me to calmly handle this?" He snapped. "My whole life is a huge-!"

With a slight twitch, Terius stepped into the room, with his wings unfolding to immediately wrap Harry within, drawing the younger man towards him. Their voices were muffled and only when Draco was on his feet with an audible growl in their direction, did Terius finally shift his wings to allow better visibility. His hand was on Harry's shoulder and Harry was standing with his back to the doorway, his head bowed, his hands clenched at his sides.

They settled in the sitting room, Draco cuddled up on Terius' lap, with the occasional frown in Harry's direction as if he couldn't understand or process something that remained unsaid. Severus sat in his favorite armchair by the fireplace and served the tea without complaint and a steady hand. There was a thick pile of parchment on the small end table near the chair and a quill accompanied by a pot of red ink. From the copious slashes of red on the top essay, it could easily explain the still present scowl on the tall man's current mood. He was grading and still had quite a pile to finish.

Theo allowed Harry to pick a seat—which happened to be on the rug in front of the fireplace—and opted to sit on the sofa when Harry hissed in warning. Draco and Terius observed with some amusement, Severus with annoyance.

"It is not his fault that he cannot answer every single question you dream up, Potter." Severus scowled. "Some of these things must happen in their natural way."

"What Severus means, Harry, is that there are some things I cannot tell you and others that Theo can't." Terius supplied. "And Severus, he answers better to Harry." Severus glowered at him. Terius grinned. "Perhaps you should try some tea, Harry." He changed the subject.

Severus' scowl softened and he waved a hand towards the tea service, floating Terius' cup over to the matching end table beside his armchair. Draco already had his, fingers curled tightly around the warmed cup. The man inclined his head in appreciation, accepting the floated cup.

Harry scowled, ignoring his own cup and saucer beside him on the floor. A slight puff of sweet scent filtered by him and after a long moment, Harry reluctantly picked up the cup and saucer, settling cross-legged on the floor. It didn't take long for him to try a sip and the happy flavors exploded on his tongue. Several moments later, he felt the earlier anger ebbing away. He opened his mouth and shut it a few times, then looked to a content and slightly sleepy Draco cuddled on Terius' lap.

Suddenly, that position seemed rather nice. He pouted when his mind connected the dots that he could cuddle if he wanted to, but that Theo was across the room, slightly, and on the sofa. He licked his lips, lost in thought for a moment and drawn back to the present by Severus' rich voice.

"If you are through with your little panic attack, I wish to inform you that I will not tolerate any future interruptions in my classroom merely because you feel the need to share your newfound tricks."

Harry blinked at him in confusion. He was sure there was an insult in there. Somewhere. Maybe. He couldn't be definitely sure.

"He wasn't aware of it, Professor." Theo said, politely.

"Aware?"
"I gave him the encyclopedia to read a few days ago, but he didn't mean anything by in class on Monday. He didn't know."

"Which is why my warning is meant for future interruptions, Mr. Nott."

Terius rolled his eyes. "Harry, do you remember what happened on Monday?"


"You fainted in Potions." Theo prompted. "After you released your voice for the first time—a very dangerous thing to do in a room full of unprotected young witches and wizards—don't do it again." He frowned. "You didn't want to wake up that morning either and you slept through the whole weekend. I stayed with you and ended up sleeping the entire time as well, but I set an alarm for classes on Monday and woke you accordingly. I didn't realize it was your realignment rest."

"My voice?" Harry asked, faintly.

"Dragels have access to different branches of music." Terius explained. "Blood magic, for one. Musical manipulation for another." He sighed. "So you was sleeping for at least three days?" Terius confirmed.

"Two." Theo offered. "Saturday and Sunday, from dinner on Friday onto that. I think I woke him a few times and we ate fruit for dinner at one point and well..." He shifted uncomfortably. "I woke him to finalize the claiming. So he didn't really have a straight sleep."

"Then an entire day in the hospital wing." Severus supplied. "Poppy wouldn't leave me alone about dangerous fumes in the classroom." He snorted. "As if anyone else had the urge to simply faint!"

"Mid-way class or at the end?" Terius asked.

"Before the brewing even started!" Severus snapped. "Albus had the same lecture to share."

"How kind of him." Terius snorted. "So he was out for a night and then, what, a day?"

"Yes, a whole day before he woke and then-" Theo looked away.

"Then?" Terius prompted.

Harry pouted. "Then we had a fight." He said, dramatically, his eyes opening wide and he nodded his head in long wide strokes for emphasis. "But we made up." He grinned, sloppily. "I said sorry." The green eyes blinked innocently. "You accepted, Theo. Right?" He leaned forward, the teacup forgotten. "Right? That was fun!"

Terius sighed. "Severus, didn't I tell you to use the same one that we give Draco?"

"I did!" The black-eyed man glowered at him. "It is the exact same calming draught I have mixed for the past two and half months. I do not know why he's acting like an imbecilic-" He frowned. "Then again, it is Harry Potter, why would this be any different than usual? Potter, have you been taking any other potions?"

"Wha?" Harry managed, intelligently.

The Potions Master muttered a few choice words and then turned to Theo. "Mr. Nott, have you noticed him taking anything? Speak quickly!"
"Pepper-up." Theo recited. "and an energy replenisher, once or twice. I couldn't see which level, just a really pale blue one time and a really pale green another."

"When?" Severus asked, sharply.

"First week of school and I think a Pepper-up on Thursday."

"You think?" Severus said, icily. "You are not certain? Have I not taught you better than that, Mr. Nott?"

"Yes, sir." Came the prompt reply.

"Think again!"

"I did not really see him last Friday, sir. I had to take care of some business with the family solicitor." Theo frowned. "I was going to meet him later though, that same afternoon when we ran into each other. I was going to lend him my book in exchange for chocolate frogs."

"How generous. Those should not really affect him, unless he has been taking them for an extended period of time, which would mean he needed access to such potions regardless of time or place." Severus frowned. "Continue, Mr. Nott."

"I ran into him in the hallways earlier, it seemed like the youngest Mr. Weasley didn't approve of our talking between classes. He upset Harry."

"Mr. Weasley leaves a great deal to be desired lately." Severus mused. "Terius?"

"I'd say that's roughly about four and a half days at the moment. What else am I missing?"

"We argued on Wednesday morning and it bothered him, so he woke at dinnertime to apologize. I suggested meeting with you and he fell asleep and I brought him over here this afternoon."

"Nearly five days." Terius murmured. "Approximately. So he slept through the entirety of Thursday as well. I cannot be entirely sure, but four solid days of sleep, at least, then all the snatched afternoons and mornings, it would almost make up a week. Almost." He frowned. "Impressive, Harry."

"Really?" Harry beamed.

Severus winced.

"I thought this was a calming draught?" Theo inquired. "Not a cheering potion."

"Severus' idea." Terius supplied. "And it is a calming draught. It shouldn't be having this effect on him though. It's been modified for Draco, meaning it shouldn't affect him in this way. It should have just dimmed his emotions for a bit."

"Dim?" Harry's brilliant green eyes watered. "I'm not dim!" He wailed. "Theo!"

Draco stirred in Terius' arms and he sniffed the air for a moment, then shifted, sliding off the warm lap and easing himself down to the floor where he crawled over to sit by Harry and leaned into the boy's side, strands of blond hair mixing with short tufts of black. "S'okay." He slurred, sleepily. "They's always like that. You tired?"

Harry blinked owlishly at him. "Ye-ah!" He gave a half-hearted cheer.
"Good. Me too." Draco yawned, widely. "Think my rest is…starting." He yawned again, then turned, imploringly to Terius. "Tired!" He said, by way of explanation.

"Bedtime, then." Terius murmured, shifting from the chair to stand on his feet. "My room." He said, when Severus fluidly moved to his feet. "Don't get any ideas." Severus didn't answer, but he took the tea tray towards the kitchen and paused to open the door on one of the bedrooms.

"You're welcome to stay, Theo." Terius bent down to scoop up Draco into his arms. "I'd suggest taking a good hold on Harry. I'll puzzle through it and get an answer for tomorrow."

Theo hesitated. "Right. Thank you." He frowned, thinking of how to get Harry into the Slytherin dorms for the night and up to the Head Boy rooms. Blaise would no doubt be up there and he didn't really want an audience for what he had a feeling he'd have to do.

"Stay." Severus snapped. "Don't think so hard that it's that obvious."

Theo ducked his head. "I wouldn't want to impose."

"How considerate, seeing as you already have!" Severus retorted. "You know where the guest room is. Goodnight, Mr. Nott."

"Enough, Sev." Terius yawned. "It's catching. We've got about five minutes, give or take." He turned weary eyes to Theo. "You cannot let him continue in this vein much longer."

"I know." Theo bent to pick up Harry, hefting him easily in his arms. "I will take care of—"

"I—we—understand." Terius murmured. "Do what you must, before this situation goes out of hand. It will do him more harm than good if you—"

"Thank you." Theo interrupted. "Goodnight, Teacher, Professor."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Harry is OOC here, as the calming draught Severus gave him is actually having a pretty bad side effect. This is mostly because Severus assumed that Harry had access to Theo's element and didn't realize the truth until it was too late. Harry just needs to sleep it off.
Be Harsh With Me, Please?

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Chapter contains light lemon scenes, D/s themes and is heavy on the angst. A Dragel claiming/mating can be more harsh and brutal on account that they are pretty much dragons. This is a "skippable" chapter for anyone who does not wish to read as to how Theo gets Harry to his 'senses'.

THIS IS NOT RAPE in any way shape or form. I am personally against rape (and writing it! [never mind reading it], in any form, I firmly believe in a right to choose and I understand there are a dozen different definitions for it all around the world) Harry is under a compulsion here, that makes him start to try and reject Theo and his dragel self up to this point. Theo tries to break it by reverting both of them to their dragel instincts. This is the ONLY time this happens in this fic, and while it appears as implied dubious consent, it IS consensual on both parts. Instinct-wise, Harry and Theo are already bonded(this really isn't their first time) and if Harry wanted to fight back, he could. A Sub is ALWAYS more powerful than the Alpha when it comes to something like this. They have more authority and above all, the right to say no and be respected for it. Theo, holding Alpha's rights, if Harry claims protection or otherwise, he will NEVER violate that. To him, Harry is literally a precious treasure.

Now, as I am literally writing this entire fic on the fly (no real planning, lots and lots of notes, reader suggestions taken into account, no active betas, and for stress relief in the middle of my crazy RL), things like typos, plot holes and other bumps, will be taken care of in the rewrite. I intend to rewrite this piece FIRST when I finish the fic, but one reader mentioned a trigger warning would be nice to have, so here it is. If I stop to rewrite it now, I may simply end up never finishing the fic (I have done this before and every time I decide to rewrite one piece, I end up abandoning a fic, so I want to try to just write all the way through here, this time), so please bear with me and as I said before, you can skip this chapter.

Anyone wishing to avoid the direct lemony bits, it's rather implied and glossed (emphasis on light!) over-you won't miss anything by skipping this chapter, but the paragraph break at the end will let you know what happened. You can skip to there, if you wish.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry woke in a tangle of despair and muted emotions. He felt the artificial fog lifting somewhat as the rest of him processed that he was curled up to Theo and currently warm and comfortable. He wriggled around for a moment, waiting for the rest of himself to catch up to speed. The previous night's events came back to him in neat snatches, here and there.

He tried to sit up, only to find himself trapped—as usual—by Theo's heavy arms. He scowled. How dare he-! It was starting to frustrate him, the little things like this. The night's events remained perfectly ingrained in his head and all he could think and see was a mixture of confusion and helplessness. Snape had drugged him with a weird calming draught. Terius hadn't answered all his questions and even Theo hadn't been able to answer some of them!
Harry huffed, working on concentrating on moving Theo's arm. The concentration paid off when he managed to slip out from the steady weight and out from under the covers and off the bed. A self-satisfied air came to him and he stepped out to find the bathroom. He fumed through the routine of taking care of business and washing his face and hands with soothing, cool water.

None of them had any right to drug him, to order him around and to treat him like a little kid. They didn't understand! None of them! They didn't know what it was like to be without any kind of magic. They didn't have any clue how he felt. They didn't even try to understand what it was like to be in his shoes and dealing with scales, claws and then there was the whole thing of being extinct —yet other Dragels were all but falling out of the woodwork—and then he'd gotten himself tangled up with Theo.

Yes, Theo. Harry thought, darkly.

It'd been nice at first, after all, he'd just craved having the closeness, the gentle affection and the company. It'd been hard to get along since Hermione, Ron and the others had slipped into their own little world. It was hard since Sirius was gone and of course, Remus was always off on Order business, it wasn't like he could write him the kind of letters that Sirius had allowed. Then of course, there was Dumbledore—the old wizard seemed hellbent on manipulating his life for the rest of whatever few years he had.

Harry snorted.

The years would be few.

Voldemort hadn't done anything yet for this year. That meant that something big was sure to happen fairly soon. Harry could practically taste the bitterness that would come from a fight he couldn't yet win. That stupid prophecy echoed in his head, one line haunting him a little more than the others. Sometimes it seemed as if dying might just solve all his problems—but with his luck, Harry could only think that the afterlife might be worse—especially if death could no longer present itself as an option.

He shut off the taps and swabbed his face dry with clean, fluffy towel.

The reflection staring back at him seemed to hold every ounce of distress he felt.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! He chanted in his head. Why had he thought that anything could be different? He was still just as much of a freak as he'd always been and only now, was it causing him a bigger headache than usual.

Harry yanked open the bathroom door and stalked forward into a very bare, very warm and very solid chest.

The scent told him it was Theo, but the figure standing before him shimmered brilliantly in every inch of Dragel glory.

His breath caught in his throat as Theo reached for him, clawed hands wrapping firmly around his wrists and pulling him forward.

"Hey!" Harry protested, straining against the pull. "W-what—let me go!"

"I will not. You are doing it again." Theo's voice took on a deep, musical quality, sharp in its deliberate tones. "I wasn't going to push you, but this is it. I cannot overlook this. After everything that is in front of you, still you cannot accept what you are?"
"I-I'm not-!"

"I want an answer, Harry!"

"I don't have one!" Harry jerked against the strong grip once more. "And I don't have to answer to you! Let go of me! What part of that is so hard to understand?"

"The part where you are left to your own devices and that morbid train of thought threatens to ruin everything that we've made so far."

"There isn't any 'we'!" Harry snapped. "This was all a mistake. This entire-!"

Theo hissed. His lips curled back and twin, wicked points gleamed. "A mistake?" He whispered. His dark voice curled through the air and Harry felt it wrapping around him like chains of displeasure, anchoring him to the floor where he didn't dare move. He'd never seen Theo like this. Never. He hadn't known that Theo could look like this, more reptilian than human, covered in those dark, chocolate-colored scales, with flickers of gold, his sleep pants riding low on his hips, his eyes full-on-gold, bearing the trademark slit-eyed pupils.

Harry swallowed. "Yes." He shot back, fiercely. "A mistake! That's what all of this has-"

Theo released one hand and jerked him forward, down and along the hallway to where the bedroom was.

Harry stumbled after him, a sudden new fear sprouting inside of him. He'd crossed an invisible line—a line he hadn't even thought would be there.

Theo simply dragged him through the doorway and then turned around to lock and bolt the door, before he pushed Harry up against it. "You may not have known what you were doing, a week ago." He whispered, leaning in to speak directly into Harry's ear. "You may not have had a clue what you were doing, but if your Dragel side had not accepted—had not cried for this—it would not have happened. I never would have continued in this vein. This." His formerly free hand wrapped around Harry's throat and his claws lengthened even further, one, long, clawed finger scraping along the tattooed claiming mark. "This is proof." He hissed. "This is proof that you are alive—this is proof of who—what you are. You cannot deny this."

"Yes, I can!" Harry forced the words out, even as the hand 'round his throat squeezed gently. "This is all just a-"

"Enough." The kiss that followed was harsh and punishing, demanding everything and taking what it desired.

Harry felt his body grow rigid as his arms were twisted up above his head and Theo's patience broke. He couldn't move, he couldn't protest and just the thought of resisting, hurt deeply.

When Harry couldn't breathe, Theo finally drew back, allowing him the few precious breaths. The dark, golden eyes smoldered with an unearthly flame that only added to the ethereal figure intent on claiming him.

And he would be claimed.

Another bruising kiss seemed to suck the very life from him and Harry whimpered.

There would be no way to escape this final fate.
Fear was a mundane reaction, he discovered.

Harry found himself falling into a realm where it seemed like time itself, had stopped. He didn't know anything, but that which was in front of him, he didn't care of anything, but that which was happening to him. He was free and bound in the same instant. The body pressed tight against him, preventing all movement, anchoring him this moment, yet the sensations rippling over him coaxed forth, a freedom he'd never known.

Every harsh kiss was punctuated by softer, gentle brushes of the lips on his eyes, cheeks, nose, forehead and a few times, a hot, wet tongue laved over that cursed scar.

When the hand holding his wrists tightened, Harry didn't fight the kiss that claimed him next. He parted his lips of his accord and titled his head with what limited movement he could, allowing Theo the access he demanded and trying to give freely, what was taken.

Shame and guilt welled up, from somewhere deep inside and Harry found himself wishing the nightmare would end. He'd have to let this happen. Then he could get his revenge later. Yes, that was a good plan.

At that point, he heard a growl—an animalistic snarl—and suddenly he was yanked from the hard wooden door and thrown towards the bed at the center of the room.

Pain rippled down his spine and shoulders and the sound of ripping fabric alerted him to the fact that his pyjama jacket was no more—and that his wings had finally come out without his express consent. He felt the rest of his body shifting and morphing to take on the Dragel characteristics that were his own. The fall had knocked the wind from him, but Harry didn't have a moment to recover.

Theo's eyes glowed as he approached, the tangible power in the air, all but crackling with each ominous step. The room grew dark inside, as if all light slipped away from within and swirled up and into the darkened figure approaching him.

Harry felt his heart skip one beat, two beats and then, he was pinned to the softness of the bed and his lips were claimed once more even as he whined low in his throat.

Snatches of sensation trickled over him.

When Theo pinned his arms above his head again. When Theo settled his weight just right on his lower half, grinding their groins together. When claws scraped along his chest, cutting close to one pebbled nipple and traveling further up to rake trails of thin fire along his throat. When his pyjama bottoms were removed. When his pants shortly followed. When Theo's hot tongue connected with one, stiff nipple. When the coldness of the room only enhanced the blazing fire of Theo's body.

Any protests he might have made—thought to make—or wished to make, were swallowed in hungry, possessive kisses.

Stealing his breath one moment and his sanity the next, Harry felt himself slipping away.

There was no mistake that tonight would be fulfilled in every possible way.

The gentleness was gone, but the expertise remained.

Theo's hands played over his body with a familiarity Harry couldn't fathom. His body betrayed him in more ways than one. He shuddered when he felt those wickedly talented fangs sinking into his skin—deliberate, painful bites that were pressed over his body as if in punishment. A bite, a suck, a lick. Then a kiss. He felt every instant when those fangs slid beneath his skin, biting hard enough
to pain and bleed, followed by soft sucking to take a mouthful of blood and then, a lick to close the wounds and a kiss to soothe away any lingering pain.

Within minutes, his body was on fire in more ways than one. Painfully aroused from the well-placed marks and quivering with the healing sting from every bite. Flames ate him alive, consuming him from head to toe. His cries were tearless and soundless as Theo painstakingly tended to him with vicious, perfect accuracy.

Pain.

It sang through every fiber of his being, the very blood in his veins crying out for more, even as his mind protested.

This was not how it was supposed to be.

It isn't! He thought, fiercely. But this was always how it ends up in my li-!

Then he heard it.

An angry roar from above him, so dark, so terrifying and so furious that he shrank back into the soft sheets and covers and wished desperately to be anywhere else, even as his body cried for something he knew not what to give. It screamed at him on a level he could barely comprehend. He only knew that he had done something wrong and it was never to be done again.

The roar seemed to deafen him.

A numbness stole over his body. A chill followed at once.

Something in the back of his mind, stirred. It pushed away at the feeble thought constructs in his consciousness and burrowed deep within the shadows of his mind, searching, seeking for something. Seeking for hope.

A breath of fresh air came with the settling of his thoughts and Harry felt the hot, burning hands trailing and stroking over his body. He arched upwards into the firm strokes as those wicked, wicked hands slipped down below his waist to that place where he desperately hoped that they would not go. Humiliation crawled over him as those hands slipped between his legs and fondled what was there. Cupping his balls, squeezing that warmed length, the hands tended to him with erotic thoroughness. Firm, sure tugs brought him to completion in short order.

Harry gave a silent scream as his body seized and spasmed, arching off the bed as his wrists were now released from the tight grip. He couldn't move of his own accord, it was as if his body reacted purely on instinct. He was no longer in control. He didn't think he should be. He didn't feel that he had to be...and somehow, that didn't seem like such a bad thing after all.

Those deep, golden eyes burned into him, the searing gaze seemingly to coax the fire running through his body to burn brighter and hotter with every passing second. When one slender, fingered hand was presented to his mouth, Harry sucked them in and coated them as generously as he could, suckling every soft fingertip and joint.

The mental fog was clearing—slowly.

In the back of his mind, that something pushed a little harder, tearing down at the carefully built walls to coax forth a hidden secret behind.

When the first finger entered him, Harry didn't know it.
His cock twitched in interest, his body singing and humming with the promise of more pleasure to come.

His mind trapped him in the haze of confusion and desperation, urging him to dive deeper into the tangled mess he desperately wanted to avoid, forcing him to acknowledge the torrid mass of chaos. To find it, see it, hold it and then destroy it.

A slight, stinging burn, registered when Harry was conscious of the fingers twisting and stroking inside of him. Harry squirmed, instinctively, at the sudden, intimate intrusion of those talented fingers. They lazily explored within him and suddenly, brushed against a hyper-sensitive bundle of nerves.

It brought the first, audible gasp to his parted lips.

Theo swallowed the sound hungrily, nipping along the soft, pale skin of Harry's jaw.

A thin strip of fire sprouted along the left side of Harry's stomach and the scent of blood in the air, darkened.

Harry felt Theo's fingers trace through the wound and then lightly dance across his stomach, accompanied by a burning tingle reminiscent of Madam Pomfrey's healing magic. A cool tingle flickered inside him.

A lubricant spell, possibly.

One powerful wave of magic washed over him as Theo entered him in one full stroke, pausing just for a fraction of a second.

That was all he needed.

Harry cried out as the the last bit of wall crumbled away.

The barriers ripped apart and the crying, aching spirit burst forth.

Harry felt it as hot tears streaming down his face and a fierce, wild power that sang through his veins.

Cleansing, purifying and healing as they spilled forth, freely, the tears gave him the final release.

He willed his arms to move, desperately.

They did, strengthened by this new, strange energy.

He reached upwards for that beautiful, terrifying figure and slid his arms around the warm, scaled shoulders, feathering by the strong, fluttering wings, pulling Theo closer to him. His eyelids fluttered shut as Theo kissed and licked away every tear, even as they continued to birth and fall. He felt those fangs graze along his collarbone once more and he stilled, obediently, head tipping to the side to grant access to what his dominant sought.

When those fangs slid into the sensitive skin of his claiming mark, Harry screamed through his second climax.

A soothing rumble calmed him and Harry was lost in a sea of pleasure as another wave of magic rippled through the room. He felt the tattoo burn as it had when Theo had first healed it, this time, the burn was ten times worse and the bite the deepest one yet.
Harry squeezed his eyes shut as he felt something presented to his lips. He opened his mouth and gave a lick to the smooth skin offered. A purr of happiness slipped out as he bit into the proffered limb and felt the magic swirling around them, rearrange and bind them both.

*Eternity.*

The word echoed in his mind.

"Mine!" Theo growled, meaningfully. "You are mine. Mine to take, to claim in any way whenever and however I please. Mine to hurt, to heal, to keep, to punish, to protect and to destroy. Know this, mate. You will never fight me on this—because you belong to me. I am just as much yours as you are mine. Always! This was and is no mistake."

"Yes." Harry whispered in answer. "Mine. Yours." The hot tears continued to come and Harry gave himself over to Theo's care as the magnificent, sweat-slicked body shuddered and climaxed within him. Another burst of warmth and pure, raw power rippled through him and Harry knew that no matter what came or happened next, Theo would forever remain in his very soul, as his first. His one and only. His.


To be so thoroughly claimed, left no inkling of any doubt in his mind.

This was what he had wanted.

This was what had been missing.

This was what he'd craved.

The heartcry that ripped from his throat echoed throughout the room, shaking the very walls of the dungeons.

Harry blacked out.

The rest of the weekend was a bit of a blur—a rather erotic blur—but quite frankly, a blur just the same. Theo gentled after that first, harsh lesson and they made love so many times that Harry lost count. The things he learned and the things he craved were precious, dark secrets he tucked away for later. There was something deliciously satisfying about every tender caress and every painful twinge that Theo drew from him with painstaking accuracy.

It was just what he wanted, just when he needed it.

Theo healed him several times over. Harry vowed to learn the blood spell himself as he lost to the sensations of pleasure and pure, unadulterated lust. His Dragel self was more aware and outspoken than he had ever expected.

*Power,* Theo had simply explained.

Harry liked that answer quite a bit, so they went for another round. Hips grinding upwards and hips grinding down. Kiss-swollen lips meeting in a clash of tongues, teeth and blood. There was nothing really civilized about it, but there was nothing lacking from it either.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Harry's got his head together now. Wonderful! This scene was important for two reasons-Harry needing to accept his real Dragel self (He is obviously not human anymore and this conflict has been causing him half of the trouble right now), and next, to complete the final stage of four, the mating-which, by Dragel standards, can be rough and brutal in more ways than one. Some important bits to come. Severus being summoned, Draco's little 'secret' and some explanations.
Harry woke to the comfortable darkness of his wings wrapped around Theo, wrapped around him. It was the most pleasant feeling he'd ever experienced before. Something whispered to him that he might be able to enjoy it many times more in the future. He smiled and watched his wings flutter gently as he eyed them. He yawned widely, feeling his jaw pop.

He was sated and blissfully exhausted in the best possible way with a few sore spots in all the right places as proof for all that he'd endured and enjoyed. As strange as it had first seemed he could find nothing wrong with his current situation and present moment in life. He was alright. Theo was alright. They were both fine. They would be, anyway.

Some things would remain unsaid and others they would speak of. Harry flushed pleurably as he remembered some of the things he might have screamed out during certain moments. It made him flush a deep, rich red to the very roots of his hair, but he didn't care. Theo had been his first.

And it had been bloody wonderful.

The Dragel in question was currently still fast asleep, his arms locked around Harry in their usual unbreakable death grip. It brought a fond smile to Harry's face and a wave of gratefulness. Theo cared. He really did. This was more than proof of that. "Mmm, Theo?" He leaned forward enough to nuzzle the mark on the tattooed bicep draped over his bare chest.

The arm shifted and removed itself at once, as requested. A murmured, muffled reply was spoken into the sheets.

Harry smiled. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the chocolate-curled hair. "Thank you."

One golden-hued eye popped open to survey him, sleepily and then Theo woke the rest of the way with a sigh. "Harry." He kissed the hand cupping his face. "Morning. How are you feeling?"

"Brilliant." Harry stretched, gingerly, with a slight wince. "Sore, but brilliant."

Theo's laughter was muffled in Harry's shoulder and he sat up, offering a one-armed embrace. Harry eased himself upwards and scooted back into it, leaning against the broad chest and relaxing as one clawed hand made a quick slice in his side and traced a few bloodied letters along the pale skin. "Watch the signs." He instructed. "Memorize them."

"Healing, softness, gentleness, vanity?" Harry read the runed shapes aloud.

"Healing for the injury itself, softness for the strength of the spell, gentleness for the draw of the blood and vanity so it is scarless." Theo explained.

"Nice." Harry marveled, feeling the distinct soreness melting away from him in a neat, even draw. That was definitely one spell he intended to master—regardless of whether his magic wanted to agree with him or not. "I've have to learn that one."

"I'm sure we can practice." Theo smirked. "Practice makes perfect, yes?"

Harry had to laugh. "Hey Theo?"

"Mmm."
"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"We're in the same year."

"True."

"What happened?"

"My father's family didn't like him very much. They chose to poison me in order to teach my father a lesson. It resulted in a rather unusual result."

"Your inheritance came early?"

"And so did my mentor."

"What was it like?" Harry fiddled with the sheets pooled in his lap. He twisted his head to the side to see Theo's contemplative look. "What was it like to skip...this." He gestured towards the sheets and them.

Theo kissed the top of his head. "Painful." He said, softly. "Very, very painful."

"It didn't hurt that much."

"Liar."

Harry smiled. "You weren't doing it to hurt me."

"Perhaps. But I wasn't nice about it either."

"You have more patience." Harry slid his hand into one of Theo's free ones. "Your element—it's earth, isn't it?"

"Did the eyes give me away?" Theo's laugh made the room vibrate with a very visible ripple of golden-white energy.

Harry gave a gasp of surprise. The vibrations spiked and petered out in sync with the sound. "Wicked."

"Indeed. Do be careful of it though, anger management is practically a perquisite."

"Is it alright to be scared?"

"Always. It means that the heart inside of us beats and the soul still lives."

"I'm scared then." Harry admitted, his voice quiet and soft as if Theo might somehow not hear him.

"I won't leave you."

"I know, but sometimes I think I won't be able to do it."

"You will."

"I don't think I'd be able to rest if I couldn't."

"Then you're welcome to haunt me all you like."
The bed shook.

The ground rumbled.

Harry swallowed hard.

For a moment, he could've sworn he'd imagined it.

After all, there'd been that faint rumble from earlier, but he'd brushed it aside, after all, it couldn't have been anything and Theo hadn't said a word, so surely…

But then he turned to look at Theo who stared at him with an expression of immense pride painted across his narrow features. The Slytherin crushed Harry into a hug and then proceeded to quite thoroughly and deeply kiss him in the middle of the bedroom.

"T-theo!" Harry didn't fight it—why would he want to?—but he did want to know what had brought it on. "What happened? Did I-?" He hesitated. It had felt a little strange, but also, very, very right. He'd felt magic—magic had come back to him.

"Very proud of you, my treasure." Theo murmured, tugging Harry close to bury his face in that mop of tangled raven hair. "We are completely bonded now—and you have all access to my element, should you ever need it."

"Element?" Harry tried. He winked one eyelid shut as Theo gently kissed it. A goofy smile spread across his face.

"I believe I agree with your sentiment from before."

Harry smirked. "Wicked." He fist his hands in Theo's hair and drew him down for a hungry kiss. "Now hurry up and reward me."

Silence lingered between them.

"Your mentor…when did they come?"

"Eleventh birthday." Theo shifted, restlessly beneath the sheets.

Harry curled up closer to him, resting his head on the smooth chest and listening to the faint heartbeat. "When you got your Hogwarts letter?"

"Something like that. My mentor arrived the same day it did. She sent it back with a request to try again in two years. It all went to the dogs after that."

"What was he like?"

"She." Theo corrected, slipping his hands into the silky black hair. "Her name is Ilsa. Ilsa Gorgens. You'll like her. She walked into the room and hexed both my parents, then everyone in the house. She moved me to a guest room downstairs and kept the windows open. She told me I was a Dragel and gave me a book to read."

"Our book?" Harry verified.

"Yes, our book. She then told me that to purge the poison, she'd like to bring my natural form out earlier than usual. Said it would hurt, but that I'd live. I didn't want to die." Harry purred
comfortingly. The grip around his shoulders tightened. "It took two weeks. She pulled it out of me bit by bit. I thought I would go mad from the pain alone. The magic made it worse. There was so much blood, I should have died many times over, but somehow, I didn't." He sighed. "We found out the hard way what element I held. The transformation completed itself and I brought the entire manor down around our ears."

"Parents?"

"She'd expected something like that. She built it all back with a wave of her hand." His voice trembled. "A wave of her hand, Harry and the entire manor just flew together as if I'd never blown it apart."

Harry danced his fingers soothingly up and down Theo's side, unconsciously pressing himself even closer to offer what little comfort he could. It was important to hear this story—he'd need to know it to fully draw on Theo's elemental gift. He'd loved the feeling of having magic back inside him. Theo's magic was strong, well-tested and ran just as deep as the Slytherin himself. It explained some of his mate's patience—if the earth was calm, then it was calm—there would be only something of tremendous significance to ever anger it. He liked what that said about Theo. Merlin knew he could use a steady, calming influence of any sort—one that wasn't trying to manipulate him anyway. "Then what?"

"Then she sat me on the edge of my bloodied bed, took my chin in her hands and looked me straight in the eye. Listen close and listen well, child, she said. You are no longer a human wizard." Theo laughed, shortly. "I didn't believe her. She repeated it until I couldn't deny it, because I didn't know how to refute it any more. Then she pressed her hands into those red sheets and painted my face. Then she kissed my forehead and ripped down every single shield I'd ever had."

"What then?"

"We ran away for two years." He sighed, softly. "She took me with her to Nevarah. I was raised there as if I were her own, instructed in the ways of the Dragel and had my magic bound until I would be of age."

"To a child!" Harry hissed, sitting up. "It should not have been called out so early." Theo soothed, shifting to sit up and draw Harry back to his arms, seeking the comfort that the smaller man offered so easily. "It was better. It helped. I learned about my element, I learned about our culture." He smiled. "I learned how to hide."

In that moment, Harry knew. Just as how everything had clicked into place, just like the way that fitting into Theo's arms felt like perfection, he knew. "They never died. None of them!"

"No. But we tired of being hunted. So we hid."

"They hid? All this time?"

"We hid." Theo corrected. "We—you are one of us, Harry. Sometimes it is best to run so you can live to fight another day."

"So we live to fight?"

"No, if we fight, we would do more than tear this world apart." Theo murmured. "We would kill more than we would help. So we hide and bite our tongues to keep silent when the scales do not tip in our favor."
Harry gave a shuddering breath. "Two years?"

"Two years." Theo confirmed. "Then I entered Hogwarts as a first year and that was that. Consequently, Ilsa did not approve of my father and his alliances, so she arranged it so I would always have a way out and neutrality, should I need it."

"So you are the Nott heir?"

"I am. Will you keep your own name? It suits you."

"What advantage does taking yours give?"

"How Slytherin." Theo congratulated. "The earth element runs deep in our lines. It lives every ninth generation. Taking on our name grants you the bloodline of the first earth elemental clan leader for the dragons and Dragels."

"How do I use it?"

"The same way you use anything else—with great care and much practice." Theo yawned. "My focus memory is sitting on the bed with her hands on my face, cold, sticky and her eyes—so bright, gold and full of life." He shuddered. "Eyes that haunt you. Do not take my name, perhaps there is a line of power in your own bloodline. Use the words to call on my reserves instead. The words to unlock—" his soft lips pressed to Harry's ear. "Orbis terran kal."

"The earth runs deep." Harry translated, automatically. He blinked. He'd understood it, even though the words were spoken in Dragel. He smirked. It was nice to have his barriers down and out of the way. This is what had been missing. Now everything was different—in a good way. He kissed Theo's chin in thanks. The password would unlock all of Theo's power, channeled through him, should he ever have need of it. It spoke volumes of the brunet's trust in him now. He would do his best to never disappoint. He thought of this Ilsa Gorgens and let his musings take him for a moment. He could remember seeing his mother in the mirror of Erised, her face, though happy, the eyes haunted him. He would forever remember her that way.

"Theo?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Why didn't my mentor come?"

"...don't know, love." Theo drew him near and held him tight. "I'm sure there's an explanation, we just don't know it yet."

"Really?"

"Really. Don't you even think of blaming yourself for one moment."

"Yes, alpha." Harry teased.

Theo pounced on him and tickled.

Laughter rang out through the bedroom, followed by Harry's gasping, giggling cries.

"I suppose it isn't morning anymore." Harry paused in his meticulous nibbles along Theo's left arm. The older Dragel was swimming in a pleasurable haze, having finally allowed Harry to take and
taste on his own. The blood sharing had definitely progressed into more pleasurable activities and when they'd surfaced, a content Theo had permitted Harry to have his way with one arm.

"Definitely not." Theo yawned. "Something the matter?"

"Mm…no." Harry snuggled into the arm and focused on the little irritating bubble. "I have an itch." He said, at last. The realization had just settled in. He'd been thinking of the wonderful and quite thorough ravishing he'd been subject to just an hour before. It had left him feeling happy and full.

Now there was a distinct emptiness.

Something was missing.

Harry frowned.

He should know what it is…

The thought nagged and twisted and bothered him and he finally gave a huffy sigh.

Theo hummed softly. "Figure it out?" He prompted.

Harry grunted.

"Ah. I see. So soon?"

Harry tried to shrug, but couldn't. It was hard to do that lying down. He rolled his eyes and sat up. The faint emptiness registered enough to be annoying as he slid from Theo's embrace to step off the bed and stand on his own two feet. The moment it clicked into place, he turned to face his alpha. He knew this call and it had come sooner than he'd liked. Theo merely nodded, seeming to read what was on his face. "A beta." Harry rubbed his face, annoyed. "I'd hoped for more time."

"Time is rarely what we ever wish for." Theo rose from the bed and pressed a kiss to his brow. "I daresay if we do not show our faces to our hosts, they may blast the door in." He chuckled. "I can feel Terius' worrying from all the way over here."
When Harry stepped out into the sitting room, the contrast was more pronounced than he could recall since his inheritance. His senses were heightened and the feel of magic back inside of him hummed happily through his veins as he entered the room ahead of Theo. He spotted Draco at once. The blond sat comfortably on the floor beside Severus, holding a stack of essays in his hand and his own quill. He looked more alive than the last time Harry had seen him and his fine, silky white-blond hair had been pulled into an elegant topknot with a simple strip of black ribbon—just like the shadowy Potions' Master.

"Pot—Harry." The greeting changed in mid-utterance as Severus spared a glance from the stack of parchment in his lap to the entrance of half of his houseguests. He smirked at the green-eyed teen, his dark gaze running deliberately over the young man, taking and noting the changes before he returned his attention to his marking.

Harry gave a short nod in response. Of course Severus would notice the change. He didn't expect anything less from the man, though he did wonder what element was shared between the trio. He'd never gotten much of a read on Draco and so there was little for him to compare it to. The same for Terius and Severus and as neither of their eyes betrayed them—as Theo's had done—Harry didn't know where to venture a guess.

He took a few careful whiffs, replacing his original memories of their scent with this new improved version that his heightened senses saw fit to give him. Theo shuffled in after him, rearranging his shirtsleeve cuffs and running a hand through his tangle of chocolate curls. The older boy gave a polite nod to Draco and a slightly deeper one to Severus who acknowledged him with the same stiff nod he'd given Harry.

From the delicious smells wafting through the kitchen, Harry could guess that Terius was cooking as he was the only one of the trio missing and the sounds coming from the kitchen suggested movement. He was puzzled for a moment, wondering why the Pareya would go to so much trouble when there were house elves about, as a new, fainter scent tickled his nostrils. His eyes grew wide and they met cool silver ones, before the blond smirked in answer.

"Took you long enough." Draco said, smugly.

"Fame isn't everything, Draco." Severus murmured, nudging the boy at his feet with one foot. "If you are not going to mark those, then do return them so I might actually finish them sometime before tomorrow."

Draco rolled his eyes and bent his head over the stack of parchments. "Keep it to yourself, alright?" The words were spoken lightly, but they were punctuated by a dark glower from the Potions' Master over his young Submissive's head.

Harry gave an awkward nod to that, seating himself on the sofa across from the duo. Malfoy was pregnant. He'd never expected that Malfoy would be pregnant. That certainly explained a lot of the oddness between the trio's interactions. It also explained the incident in the hallway just a week or so ago. Draco had been clutching his stomach half of the time and Harry simply knew that the reactions and interactions between Terius and Severus had been purely out of fear and worry for their sub and unborn child.

A new flicker of respect shone in his eyes. He'd never have pegged Draco for that, but now that he looked, carefully, he could see how the blond sat carefully on a pillow on the floor, braced against
Severus' left leg and with a tall glass of water and a vial of potion to one side, accompanied by a few strips of dried jerky. It also explained those stomachaches and Draco's recent whining towards food of all kinds.

Harry resisted the urge to bang his head on any nearby flat surface. He was supposed to be keeping an eye on things—he should've noticed on his own. Slender fingered-hands slid onto his shoulders and squeezed briefly. The physical reassurance prompted a smile and Harry leaned into the arms, enjoying the moment.

"Dinner is about-" Terius broke off, stepping fully out into the sitting room. His gaze zeroed in on Theo's calm expression and Harry's radiating aura of sheer power. It was certainly the beginning of what would be a very powerful circle. "Congratulations on your mating." He said, formally. "You are welcome to dine with us, if you so desire."

Theo looked to Harry.

The emerald-eyed beauty smirked in answer.

Dinner was wonderful.

As the newly mated pair prepared to leave, Harry was stopped by Terius' gentle hand on his shoulder. He turned, expectant, to see Terius looking over his head at Theo. The golden-eyed boy gave a faint nod.

"What?" Harry wanted to know.

"I was asking permission to cast a spell on your behalf." Terius flexed his right hand and a ripple of wind danced through the room as his hand lengthened and curled into the respective claws of his kind. "If I may-" he gestured towards Harry.

"What for?" Harry looked from him to Theo and back.

"You've been missing for over a week." Terius said, mildly. "And at least a weekend. You passed out in Potions class, if I recall correctly and I highly doubt you've concocted a decent cover story between yourself and Theo. At least if you had, I would like to think I would have been included in it somewhere and therefore warned."

"Ah. Oh." Harry realized.

"Yes. Oh." Theo quirked a smile. "Let him cast it, would you?"

"Sure." Harry wrinkled his nose. "How?"

"Shirt." Theo prompted, leaning over to tug on Harry's shirt. "Your stomach or back is the largest expanse of skin available when casting on a short notice. Your arms are probably the best for drawing."

Harry tugged his shirt out of his pants and held it up while Theo worked on rolling up his shirtsleeve on his left hand. He winced when Terius' claws sliced through the perfect skin of his arm and drew blood. The bloodied claws then painted on several runed shapes before sealing it with a wave of elemental magic.

"There. All done."
"What's it do?" Harry began to tuck his shirt in after the burgundy lines and shapes had faded into his skin.

"A simple misdirection and spacing spell." Terius explained. "They can ask you harmless questions, but if they start to pry or give you a hard time, they'll suddenly find themselves apologizing and offering you some sort of bribe for the sake of peace."

"Bribe?" Harry squeaked.

"Think along the lines of chocolate frogs and such." Theo winked. "Not the other kind of bribes. It's more the kind of spell that will just remind them to think of more important things other than reaming you out or asking questions you're not ready to answer yet."

"Oh. Okay. I guess that makes sense." He offered a smile to Terius. "Thanks."

"Not at all." Terius inclined his head, then focused on his claw, returning to the natural shape of his hand.

"Can I ask what's your element?" Harry rolled down his shirt sleeve and let Theo button the cuffs. He always hated trying to button his own cuffs and had no complaint of letting that particular annoyance be handled by someone else.

"May I." Draco corrected, absently. He shuffled over to Terius with a yawn. "M'tired, T." He mumbled.

"Then I think we ought to get you to bed." Terius wrapped an arm around him and smiled, fondly. "Air, Harry." He said, quietly. "Our element is Air."

Theo's eyebrows danced upwards in a mixture of surprise and awe. "Air?" He repeated. "All three of you?"

"Indeed." Terius tipped his head. "Goodnight, Theo, Harry."

The week blurred by.

The spell worked beautifully.

Harry made it through classes without falling asleep once—surprising, considering that Theo didn't really give him much time to sleep—though that was mostly Harry's fault as he couldn't quite give up on his new addiction to those wickedly talented hands and the way they made him feel. Their nights were spent in a pleasured bliss and their days in a tangle of strategic thinking and classwork, homework and testing.

Avoiding certain well-meaning friends and an insistent medi-witch was much easier after the spell kicked in and granted both of them the sanity that they needed. Terius' spell subtly directed all questions, inquisitive friends and fellow lions to more pressing matters than grilling the Boy-Who-Lived on his most recent activities. It was cast to last for a week to give the newly mated pair a chance to settle in without causing too much fuss in the way of overprotectiveness or any unwanted scenes resulting from too close classmates and fellow Gryffindors.

It worked, Harry discovered, quite wonderfully.

It was all back to normal.
As normal as things could get for him, anyway.

Ron and Hermione arguing in their usual way. Ginny smiling at him from the other side of the table. The twins spooning applesauce onto his breakfast plate. Madam Pomfrey even smiled at him when she'd come down to retrieve him, only to be redirected thanks to the spell.

Harry had to admit that the small smile on the medi-witch's face was vaguely terrifying. He'd never seen it directed at him before and the medi-witch was always more inclined to scold him than smile at him. With a slight shudder, Harry pushed the thoughts away and tried to focus on his day. There was certainly a lot he had to do and for once, he was doing his homework without any help at all.

No Hermione, no Ron and no anything else. Theo would read over his Potions and Herbology essays, if asked and make a few marks on it. Harry had quickly discovered that Theo had a knack for writing and that automatically made him Harry's proofreader. In return, Harry checked over his Care of Magical Creatures homework. It was a good trade-off.

As the week progressed beyond the first two days, Theo ended up turning to Terius for an explanation for Harry's recent, headaches and muscle tremors. Terius, in his infinite wisdom, had suggested some training exercises, explaining that while Theo had control of his powers, that control did not necessarily trickle over to Harry.

Harry would need additional training.

Theo would be the best one to see to it.

Harry had been simultaneously awed and annoyed by this new revelation and curious as to what kind of training and when it could be done. Terius left that to Theo's discretion and Theo, Harry learned, had a certain time turning spell taught to him by Ilsa. It was only to allow four hours of extra time and only for the sole purpose of training Harry's inherited powers.

Harry immediately took him up on the offer and learned quickly just how much power his mate had within the first ten minutes. If he was accessing only a fraction, Harry shuddered to think of what would happen if Theo were to really lose his temper. It would certainly bring about a spectacular end to the world as everyone knew it. The young Alpha had the patience of a saint and Harry was grateful for it.

There were many nuances to having and holding an elemental power. Some of them more subtle than Harry had ever expected. Theo stood behind him through every session, never once losing his temper and never once showing any sign of frustration.

"Why can't I-!" Harry nearly exploded.

Theo leaned over and kissed his cheek—a trick that worked to effectively flip the atmosphere for the current session. "Do not try so hard that you forget how to simply exist, Harry." He gestured to the Room of Requirement that had presented them with a tall, white space and little else for their practicing. "This isn't the kind of magic you're used to. It isn't even blood magic and I've made sure to use it on you several times to help your body accept it. This is different. Elemental magic ties into the very life force of everything around us. It's raw magic. That's why there are people who would kill for this power or kill to be sure it never fell into the wrong hands. When you make your peace with what you are and what you are capable of doing, you'll find that the magic does not scream at you the way it is doing now."
Harry eyed him wearily, wiping the sweat from his forehead with one shirt sleeve. "How do you know it's screaming at me?"

"Because you're screaming right back at it." Theo smiled, gently. "You cannot expect to master this in the space of a week. As it is, raw magic is considerably more difficult to handle than regular magic and for good reason. It will take a considerable amount of time and practice. Constant practice and thought to remember that this is what you are capable of and this is why you will choose to use it or not."

Harry took a deep breath and blew it out. "But what if I need to use it sooner than-"

"You won't."

"But what if I do? The prophecy says that it's a power that he knows not and I doubt that he-"

"You will not need to use it sooner than you can control it." Theo murmured, effectively cutting him off. "Regardless of what any prophecy says, the elements will not let you destroy yourself for the sake of saving a world. They will fight if they feel you are not ready to hold them—for elemental magic to work, we become a vessel to it." Theo bowed his head. "From the vessel, we are a channel and nothing more. Once the magic is freed, it will do what it will."

"Then why even bother with-!"

"If you work to merge your mind and soul with it, then your wants, needs and worries all become the same, yes?" Theo prompted. "If that is the case, then even though you are the channel, the end result is what you both wish and it will be fulfilled."

Harry slowly nodded. That made sense. He shuddered.

Theo reached out and snagged him with one arm, drawing him into a hug. "It is a little disconcerting at first, but you'll get used to it." He explained, rubbing gently up and down Harry's chilled arms. "You'll know when it happens." He nuzzled Harry's ear. "And when it does, you'll know what to do. The elements are like that."

And Harry knew he was right.

The elements were like that.

Just like wild magic.

It was wild, untamed and resisting at every possibility opportunity.

It was potent, rich and terrifying in its absoluteness.

Somehow, it thrilled Harry to the core.

"Harry?" Theo stuck his head around the corner of the Head Boy bathroom door. "Did you steal my towel?"

"Towel?" Harry said, innocently.

"Prat." Theo retorted, pushing the door open and strolling out into the now empty room, shaking his damp hair to set it straight. Blaise had already left with Draco, so the two of them were alone for what precious few minutes remained before breakfast time.
Harry drank in the sight of the toned body and the ripple and flex of the muscles beneath the skin as Theo approached him on the bed. He stared up into those golden eyes for a moment and then his gaze traveled lower to be level with a certain, well-endowed package. He licked his lips in a sinfully slow swipe, careful to keep his own green eyes locked on Theo's.

Theo's eyelids fluttered faintly. "Harry, don't." There was a faint hint of amusement in his soft voice. "I won't have time to return the favor and I refuse to sit through breakfast listening to you gripe about it." He squeezed his eyes shut and Harry jerked back with a yelp as clothes flew out from several corners of the room and Theo needed only to hold his arms out and raise his feet one at a time, so the clothes could dress him quickly and properly.

"How'd?" He managed.

"I'll teach you later. It saves time."

"It does." Harry muttered, surprised and frustrated at the same time, before another thought overtook him. "Hey Theo?"

"Hmm?"

"D-did you ever—I mean, you didn't have to-"

"I almost forgot. Yes," Theo cut in, he whirled around, drawing something from the sleeves of his robes and suspended it with two fingers.

Harry's jaw dropped. A thick, silken cord the same shade as Theo's chocolate curls, holding a single rich, brown scale, turned half-gold at the edge. "I-!" He tried and failed to say. It was the expected gift.

It was the perfect gift.

"Tradition." Theo murmured, dropping a kiss to the top of Harry's head. "I already have yours."

"What?" Harry's head snapped up as he slid the necklace over his head and tucked it into his shirt. "When? I didn't give you any of my scales-"

"You were too out of it to notice last time." Theo smirked. "And whenever I stopped scratching your wings, you would start to whine and pout and-"

"I don't whine or pout!" Harry shot back, his face coloring instantly.

"And then you feel asleep right afterwards. I should have been insulted." Theo teased.

Harry shoved him, lightly. "I didn't feel a thing and I don't-"

"You weren't supposed to." Theo reached into his shirt to show an identical necklace with a black-ebony cord and a silver and peach tinted scale that seemed to shimmer all shades of the rainbow in the room's light. "Your other gift will come sometime tomorrow."

"Another one?"

"Of course." Theo said, with a regal sniff. "As if I would hold back."

Harry laughed all the way down to the Great Hall.
"It's beautiful." Harry managed. A simple band of silver with a golden slash cut into the smooth surface. No gems. An inscription inside simply read 'treasured'. It was perfect. "Thank you." He punctuated his thanks with a chaste kiss to the thin lips.

"Wear it always." Theo murmured, holding up his own hand to show a matching ring with a slash of emerald cut through the smooth surface.

"Do you always buy everything in pairs?" Harry teased.

"Only when it comes to you." His mate chuckled. "When our circle agrees on a crest, you can alter it later, if you wish."

"It's fine. I like it just the way it is."

The next kiss was decidedly anything but chaste.
"A knife?"

"A good knife makes up for many indiscretions."

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"It's the final gift, you prat." Theo nudged him with one shoulder. "I thought you'd like it. Besides, Severus is good at knife-throwing, it's a skill you can pick up, if you want to. I do not think he'd refuse you, especially if it keeps Draco occupied."

"It's getting worse?"

"He was a Malfoy. They are known for horrible mood swings." Theo suppressed a chuckle. A pregnant Malfoy was giving both Severus and Terius quite a run in the past few days with everything from his mood swings to his food cravings and the sudden, unpredictable lashes of power, as Draco had spent more time sleeping than practicing with his respective element.

"...Theo?"

"What?"

"Here." Harry shoved the box in his hands and took a step backwards.

The brunet looked from the small wrapped package to Harry's pensive expression. He unwrapped the box with care and popped open the lid on a small, gilded box. A small, smooth stone of clear amber fell out into his palm. A single streak of black slashed through it, lending a look of something to a cat-eyed gem. Theo held it carefully between two fingers, checking it in the light. Harry took the empty box and wrappings from his hand. Theo reached into his shirt and drew out the necklace with the single silver-peach scale, he murmured something and pressed the stone to the black cord. It twisted and moulded itself at once, to give a small hole near the top, allowing it to hang as a pendant with the scale resting atop it.

"Your first stone?" Theo asked. He remembered asking Terius to 'port them out into a place where they wouldn't be disturbed and the older Dragel had taken them to a mountain top and left them there for a few hours. In trying to calm down and grasp the elemental energy, Harry had inadvertently created a canyon instead. Theo had worked with him to close the rift in the ground.

Harry shrugged. "Reminds me of your eyes."

When Professor McGonagall came to escort him to Dumbledore's office, Harry right before lunch, Harry had figured the time for their confrontation—oops!—conversation, would have come sooner than later, so he was willing to deal with it for now. He was slightly surprised that the elderly wizard had been so accommodating and accepting of his Dragel status and probably wasn't aware that he'd chosen Theo.

Well, on closer thought, Harry reasoned, he probably knew it all and just hadn't thought to mention it to Harry. He held a healthy respect for the elderly wizard, but not much more after recent events. There were too many things that pulled at him in the wrong direction and as far as Harry was concerned, the greater good could just go screw itself.
Professor McGonagall gave the password to the gargoyle and he quietly rode up the spiral staircase with her. They entered the Headmaster's cluttered office and Harry took his usual seat.

"Hello Professor Dumbledore." He greeted, politely.

The elderly wizard eyed him with that frustrating twinkle in his eyes. "Harry." He said, warmly. "It's good to see you. I'm sorry to interrupt your lunch." He snapped his fingers and a house elf appeared, bearing two full lunch trays. "I just wanted to have a little chat. I'm told that you've been feeling under the weather lately, but Professors Snape and Terius seem to think that you are-"

Harry reached into his shirt and drew out the pendant bearing a glittering chocolate-brown and gold scale. "If this concerns my Dragel talents, I need to have someone present." He said, smoothly.

"Present? Whatever for?" The surprise seemed genuine as the Headmaster poured himself a cup of tea from the steaming tea service before him. "Tea?" He looked from Minerva to Harry. The old witch gave a stiff nod and took a seat opposite of Harry.

"I'd feel more comfortable," Harry said, simply. "Do you mind?"

"O-of course not. Shall I send for-"

"I'd prefer my mate or Professors Terius or Snape," Harry picked up his fork and poked at the entrée on his lunch tray. Somehow it didn't look very appetizing at all. "Probably Professor Terius." He amended, thinking of the ever present bag of jerky the Dragel seemed to walk around with. He could do with a few slices of that."

Professor McGonagall straightened up at once. "Professor Terius?" She blinked. "Mate?" Her confused eyes turned to Dumbledore who smiled, calmly.

"Now, Minerva, there's no reason to get excited." He said, cheerfully. "Harry actually has come into quite a good turn, recently and-"

A flicker of greyed magic rippled through the room.

It set Harry's teeth on edge and made his hackles rise to the unspoken challenge. "Professor Dumbledore?"

The sparkle was gone and a look of worry creased the elderly wizard's face. "Minerva-"

"I felt it too, Albus." The old witch was on her feet in an instant. "Be prepared!"

"It's passing through." The Headmaster murmured, squeezing his eyes shut, one wrinkled hand tightening on his wand. Harry hadn't even seen him draw it. He wondered what he'd missed as the old wizard spoke. "It is passing us by…I do not understand…" He frowned. "Harry, I think that-"

"That I need to be going now." Harry spoke, deliberately weighting his words with the musical curve as Terius had taught him. If he couldn't leave—because it certainly didn't feel safe outside the office doors—then he'd call whoever he could to him. Something was wrong and he wanted to know what it was and why-!

Dumbledore blinked at him in confusion. "Harry…" The tinge of wild magic—musical magic—had thrown him for a loop. He would know what it was, but not what was happening on account of it.
Harry wasn't inclined to enlighten him. "Sir?" He said, innocently. It was best to pretend innocence at a time like this. A time when his Dragel senses were screaming at him to find his mate and get out of there to somewhere safe.

Wherever that somewhere was.

"Perhaps you could-" Dumbledore's words were cut off by a flash of blue light in one empty corner of the cluttered office before a shimmering blue circle of energy burned into the ground. A moment later, a tall, slender figure rose from the ground.

"Temptrificus Portgas." Terius murmured the words softly as he stepped off the blue disc and the light disappeared, the floor returning to normal. "Albus. Minerva." He blinked, looking from the old wizard to the old witch. "Harry." The understanding dawned at once. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. What's going on?"

"Never mind that right now." Terius turned towards the Headmaster. "Severus sent me to tell you that he's been summoned. He delayed as long as he could, but said that there was something a bit off about it. Is there anything you need to do? Is there anything I can do? I must stay with Draco, but perhaps if I may be….")

Dumbledore's confused expression melted away at once, the blue eyes growing hard. "Just now?" He demanded. "Severus was summoned just now? With that wave?"

"Yes." Terius frowned. "I don't know about the wave, but yes now. He's told me he's never summoned in the day. Why now? Why in the middle of the day? The weekend begins just tomorrow, he's never been called out on Friday and—I thought you said everything was fine."

"Everything is fine." The Headmaster said, stiffly. "I do not know why Voldemort choses to do some things and not others." He ignored the glare the older Dragel threw at him. "That grey magic, the wave, it's a surveying spell." He frowned. "He's used it before. To scout an area before an attack." He frowned.

"Albus, if that's what—the children!" Minerva drew herself up. "For the sake of the children, Albus."

The Headmaster frowned.

Sudden heavy thumps announced a newcomer and Hagrid stumbled into the office, panting and oblivious to the occupants, save for the white-haired wizard. "Something's fallen in the forest." He gasped out. "Something's fallen!"

"Fallen? In the forest?" Dumbledore swept around the corner of his desk and guided the half-giant to a chair. "Sit, Hagrid." He urged. "Now slow down, tell me from the beginning. When? How? Just now?"

"Yes! I heard that screaming sound again." He cocked his head to the side. "You know, that one you told me to tell you about if I ever heard it again." He gave a decisive nod. "I heard it again." He announced. "And I came to tell ya of it. I heard it loud and twice and then there was this awful crashing and breaking and burning." He wrinkled his nose. "Smelled quite horrible too. But the scream was something awful and then there was nothing, but I saw the whole forest shudder." And here, the half-giant shuddered as well. "It isn't safe. Something's off. Something's wrong. Got to… Headmaster, you can't-!"

Another powerful ripple of magic sang through the castle. A groaning shudder came from
Hogwarts herself, as she weathered the unwanted intrusion.

The Portraits began to clamor.

A dizzy house elf popped in, shrieking of terror and doom.

Hagrid shuddered and shook his head from side to side.

Terius' wings had burst forth and he immediately snatched Harry close to him, shielding them both with his soft grey-red wings. Harry didn't fight him. It felt safe within those confines.

"For the sake of the children, Albus." Minerva's voice was cold as ice. "I would say a temporary evacuation is in order." Her voice warbled slightly at the last word, but her head was held high and her hands clasped primly before her.

The Headmaster bowed his head.

Evacuation.

An eerie chill stole down Harry's spine. Somehow, he knew just how bad this was. It didn't escape his notice, either, that this was something Voldemort had never done before.

Never.

He didn't give warnings. He simply was the warning.

Something was horribly wrong here.

No.

This couldn't be happening.

They'd send him back to the Dursley's if this was the kind of evacuation he thought it was.

No.

He couldn't let this happen!

There was no way he was going back there, no way!

His hands slowly curled into fists and he barely registered Terius' gentle hands on his shoulder, the warmth suddenly seemed cold.

He couldn't let this happen—there had to be something he could do.

Theo.

Surely Theo could do something.

Surely there was another option.

The evacuation began to happen in short order.

Terius was efficient and level-headed in the face of a possible disaster. He kept Harry all but plastered to his side with one strong arm as he shouted out quick directions and suggests in the
midst of Dumbledore's arguments to Minerva's suggestions. The students would be sent home—those who could go on such a short notice—the others would be sent to a large ballroom, courtesy to the Ministry of Magic, where it would become a temporary rest stop until other relatives and arrangements could be met and made.

No one mentioned the Dursleys and Harry didn't bring it up.

For now, it seemed as if everyone was too busy to notice that little detail and so help him, he wasn't about to bring it to their notice. Another faint shudder traveled over him and Harry gritted his teeth, hating how the very action made him feel weak.

"It isn't weakness." Terius squeezed his shoulder, offering some semblance of comfort with the gesture. "It's a reaction to the fact that you only have one mate and only access to one power. You've never faced The Greys, have you?"

Harry shook his head, uncertainly.

"Grey magic. The finest line between dark and light." The older Dragel murmured. "I should hope you never have to." He frowned. "Stay close."

Things became a little more complicated when Theo and Draco burst into the office, followed by Professor Flitwick.

"Filus, how is it?"

"The dark mark." The short charms professor said, grimly. "It hovers over her." He made a motion beside him.

"Where's Severus?" Draco's trembling voice cut through the sudden, awkward silence in the office. He instantly crossed the room, grabbing Harry out of Terius' embrace and shoving him towards Theo before pressing himself into the previously occupied arms. "Terius, where's Severus? What's going on?"

"Hush." Terius murmured, planting a soft kiss to the side of Draco's forehead. "There may be a possible attack and-"

"He called him, didn't he?" The tremor was more pronounced. "Didn't he, Terius?" Wild eyes turned to glare at Dumbledore. "This is all your fault!" He shrieked. A sudden, sharp gust of wind slashed through the office, throwing things to the floor and rattling the portraits on the walls.

"Draco!" Terius' voice was sharp and commanding. "Calm yourself, love." He murmured, softly, into one ear. "Yes, Severus was summoned. He had to go."

"He doesn't have to do anything that he-!" Draco raged.

Terius calmly slipped a hand over his mouth and tilted the angry face up to look at him. "I tried to stop him, Draco. I did. He did not listen. You know there was nothing else I could do."

The anger seemed to fade somewhat and Draco looked away.

Terius removed the hand with a careful nod across the room.
The icy blond glowered at the Headmaster, still. "He'd best return in one piece and alive!" He spat, angrily. "If you'd never made him into a spy, this wouldn't have happened!"

Harry willingly let himself be wrapped in Theo's safe, comforting arms, instinctively seeking out the natural calming presence that his mate would have on his elemental gift. He didn't want to know if the actual rumbles in the ground were his own doing or Hogwarts herself, being a little more strained than usual. He didn't like any of this.

"Are you okay?" Theo ran his hands up and down Harry's shoulders in quick, careful strokes. "I've heard bits and pieces. Severus told us to evacuated the dungeons. The Slytherins are gathering in the Great Hall, the Ravenclaws too, at Filus' say so."

Harry nodded, simply. "An attack?"

"Not yet, thankfully." Theo drew him close, resting his chin on Harry's head. "I can't take you to the Manor. It isn't safe there."

Harry stiffened in his arms.

"I will not be going there anyway, so it does not matter." Theo frowned. "Can you stay with someone from here? A Neutral or a Light family that won't draw too much attention?" He rubbed Harry's rigid shoulders. "I am sorry I cannot accompany you." He pressed a kiss to Harry's forehead, the gesture of affection hidden from the eyes of the others in the room thanks to their little meeting in the corner.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked, dully.

"There's been some trouble with the estates." Theo explained. "The Nott inheritances and a few others, I should've straightened it out last weekend, but ah, I had better things to do."

Harry pulled away and blinked at him.

"You." Theo said, simply, attempting to draw him back.

"Theo-!"

"I'll be with the goblins." Theo sighed.

"Why can't I-?"

"I don't think Dumbledore would agree to let you come with me, never mind that with the goblins, you'd probably be safest at present." He frowned. "Also, the Nott family isn't necessarily neutral or light." He sighed. "I, as the current head and heir am neutral—but there are many things in the past that do require an answer. I'll be answering for them today—and possibly all weekend, or longer." He sighed, raking a hand through his hair and allowing Harry to pull away fully. "Harry, I'm sorry. Even if you could come, it wouldn't be best."

"Why not?" Emerald eyes flashed dangerously.

"Because your magic is too new and it's only elemental—it isn't your own natural Dragel gifts. You should have a Dragel inheritance just like regular magic, but at present, you only hold the spillover of my element. What I will be doing will most certainly taint it. You are not ready for that."

"You can't just decide that-"
"No, Harry." Theo frowned, slightly. "You could stay with the Zabinis." He thought for a moment. "They are neutral and if there are no objections, I would rather you were there. Terius will likely send Draco there as well. You will have company."

A breathless Ron burst into the office, a tear-streaked Lavender Brown accompanying him.

"Harry?" Ron craned his neck trying to see through the growing crowd in the room. "Harry, mate, are you here? Professor Dumbledore-"

Harry took the opportunity to free himself from Theo's grasp and escape the unpleasant conversation before it could go any worse. He didn't like this. He didn't want it.

He couldn't believe Theo would leave him like this.

Especially in the present time like now.

He realized, belatedly, that Hermione was nowhere in sight. He frowned. "Ron?"

"Harry!" Ron nearly tackled him, settling for a tight grip to the forearm instead. "We couldn't find you." He hesitated. "Hermione's gone, I don't know what happened to her and I thought she might've been with you and-"

Ron's babbling continued. Theo growled from somewhere in the background. Harry was frozen, having heard only two words. 'Hermione's gone'. He'd noticed something was off about the curly-haired witch, but hadn't thought anything of it. He'd had more...important things...to deal with himself and he'd figured it was simply the fact that she hadn't brought up her relationship with Ron yet.

A relationship that seemed slightly odd in the face of Lavender Brown who was now clinging to Ron like a limpet, her eyes wide with fear and uncertainty. Harry was further saved from speculation and thought when the Twins were the next to join the growing circus in the Headmaster's office. He listened as it somehow was all sorted out and then the Twins volunteered The Burrow as a temporary stay for Harry until the threat was neutralized.

Harry couldn't have hugged them to death.

He settled for throwing them his most grateful smile.

They beamed together as one bright beacon, before continuing to ply their case before the Headmaster.

A case they inevitably won.

Harry stepped towards the floo only to be jerked back by Theo's strong—and angry—hands. He fixed a glower on his face, intending to direct it to his alpha when he was half-slammed into a bookcase and pressed up hard against it. He twisted his head to the side as Theo bent down to nuzzle his neck, pressing his warm body even closer.

Before he could protest, Harry caught sight of Draco just a few feet away, being subject to the same treatment by Terius. He realized, belatedly, that the repeated nuzzlings and soft whufflings was merely the dominant's method of scenting them both.

Draco's inherently bored expression gave truth to that, along with the fact that he made no move to
fight off Terius, in spite of what had to be a rather uncomfortable position. Instead, the blond allowed himself to be properly and easily manipulated.

Harry took a hint from that and managed to hold his tongue and glare, though he did squirm as Theo rubbed insistently against him. The Slytherin finished with a tight hug and a deep breath blown out over Harry's head. It made his hair stand on end, with a faint tingle left behind. Theo then proceeded to quite thoroughly and deeply snog him before breaking away and striding to the fireplace.

"Gringotts!" He intoned and disappeared in the green flames.

Harry was left standing in the office, one hand reaching halfway up to his lips, his emerald eyes staring incredulously at the fireplace where his mate had just disappeared.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Terius asked, he hugged Draco tight and repeated the same motion of blowing softly over the blond's head. Draco seemed content to linger in his arms and the older Dragel did not extract himself just yet.

He didn't trust himself to answer.

"Theo will be fine. He'll come back and if you need him, call for him."

Harry's head snapped up, the unspoken question written plainly on his face.

"You will know how." Terius smiled. "Draco, time to go." He gently disengaged himself from the now pouting blond. "I shall be with you as soon as I possibly can, stay with Blaise and be careful!"

Instead of pushing Draco to the fireplace however, Terius spun a ball of blue energy on his fingertips and held it over Draco's head. "Temptrificus Portgas!" He intoned. "Zabini Manor, Oresgaurde."

"Harry." The Headmaster spoke from his corner, having been quiet during the Dragel interactions. "You'd best hurry before the Weasley's begin to worry." His twinkling blue eyes narrowed, faintly. "You did not mention that young Mr. Nott was one of your mates."

Harry swallowed. "I didn't have the time, sir." He managed, snatching up a handful of floo powder. "Thank you for letting me stay with them." He ducked into the fireplace and shouted out "The Burrow!"

The floo ride was just as horrible as he remembered it being, in fact, if he had to compare it, Harry would insist that they grew progressively worse each time he dared to brave it.

He coughed and sputtered with a mouthful of ashy residue as he tumbled out of the floo and into a pair of strong, comforting arms. He rubbed at his face with one sleeved arm and then half-choked when he caught sight of a vaguely familiar face. A thick red ponytail and rich blue eyes that danced merrily announced Charlie as the dragon tamer held him a little longer than was polite with a wide grin on his face.

"C-charlie!"

"Harry." Charlie finally released him when Harry scrambled to get free. He made no comment on the rosy blush that decorated Harry's pale face and instead clapped him heartily on the shoulder. "Still doesn't agree with you?"

Harry nodded fervently. "I didn't know you were coming this week."
"You were keeping tabs?" Blue eyes grew wider.

"Er, the twins said they'd-

"Ah. I had a bit of a scuffle with fangs and claws." Charlie scratched his right shoulder and then turned to show Harry a long, jagged, shiny burn that ran the length from his wrist to his shoulder. "They figured they'd send me off early and save on the sick leave." He shrugged. "Mum pitched a fit clear through the roof." He grinned. "But it's fine now. I just have to keep rubbing some scar and bruise salve on it and it'll be gone in a bit."

*Fine indeed.* Harry thought absently, resisting, just barely the urge to reach out and run his hands along that smooth, discolored stretch of skin.
"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley smothered the green-eyed boy in one of her famous hugs. "Oh Harry! I'm glad you're alright and you're staying with us and-" The plump redheaded witch paused with a frown. "Where's Hermione?" She peered over Harry's head as if the bushy-haired witch might be hiding behind her best friend. "Ron's already-"

"Ron says she missing." Harry managed. He allowed the hug even as his Dragel senses began to scream at him for being too close. He tried to push those thoughts and feelings away, because as far as he'd figured before, the Weasley's were the closest thing to family that he'd ever had. Really.

Yet, somehow, being hugged by Mrs. Weasley only made a faint ache in his chest as he thought of the taste of a mouthful of hair that would usually announce the armful of bushy-haired Herimone that followed. That seemed more right than this.

Harry stood stiffly until the warm arms released him. He couldn't put his finger on that thought, just that it didn't really sit well with him.

"Missing?" Mrs. Weasley's eyes grew wide and round and she murmured a blessing beneath her breath. "The poor child."

"I'm sure Dumbledore is doing all that he can, Molly. Hermione will be fine. She's a smart witch" Mr. Weasley joined the greeting group with a one-armed hug to Harry.

It also felt off.

"A very smart witch." Harry murmured.

Thankfully, he didn't have to put too much effort into acting normal or interested, for Ginny appeared next with Dean Thomas, Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnegan trailing behind her. They were loud and boisterous in every way that Harry was quiet and wishing he was invisible.

No one else said a word about Hermione.

Harry wondered what had changed.

Charlie sat next to his mother in the seat of honor and his siblings jostled around him for the perfect seat. He snagged Harry out of the group and seated him to his right with a simple smile.

Harry blushed and kept his head down.

The chattering and usual drama of a Weasley-style dinnertime swallowed him up.

Harry felt as if he were in a fog, watching things happen around him and being only vaguely aware that it was almost as if everything was normal.

Everything was normal.

Except for Hermione was missing.

Except for something mysterious happening in the forbidden forest.

Except for Voldemort marking Hogwarts.
Except for Theo leaving him alone.

Harry stiffened as Charlie's hand brushed over his arm as he reached for a helping of mashed cauliflower and spicy lentils. It was a dish he couldn't place, but one that the ponytailed redhead seemed to enjoy as he generously scooped out a portion onto his already overloaded plate.

"Want some?" Charlie offered, suspending the bowl close to Harry's plate. "I discovered it in Romania from one of the tamers who spent time in India." He maneuvered a smaller scoop into the serving spoon. "It's very tasty and it's not too spicy."

Harry tried to make his mouth work and only succeeded in giving a small nod.

Charlie smiled and added to the spoonful to his dinner plate, then went back to his own business.

A moment later, his hand, warm and roughened from work, slipped beneath the table to rest on Harry's thigh. He gave it a firm, comforting squeeze and continued on with the conversation around them, never once missing a beat.

Harry ate the gifted spoonful and nibbled at everything else, before he stopped eating altogether. His head began to ache and his stomach began to churn. He didn't really care to analyze that beyond the fact that there was simply too much of everything. There was too much noise, too much light and too many scents.

It made him somewhat dizzy and his gums ached, proof that his body was craving raw meat and those strange fruits Terius and Theo had both been feeding him.

A faint shudder rippled through him and Harry abruptly popped up from his chair.

The motion drew the attention of everyone at the table and he blurted out the first phrase on his lips. "I'm tired."

"Er, okay?" Ron said, from the other end of the table. He shrugged. "You can crash where you usually-" He stopped. There were more guests than usual here and he looked to his mother for help.

"Wait!" Mrs. Weasley interrupted. "Ginny dear, you'll have to share with Miss Brown and let's see. Mr. Thomas can stay in-"

The bedroom pairings began and Harry suppressed another shudder. It felt as if the ground was shifting and moving beneath his feet. He wanted out and away from here.

That particular thought brought on a new slew of feelings and emotions he wasn't ready to tangle with.

Charlie's warm hand dropped on his shoulder. "I claim Harry!" He spoke up, just loud enough to be heard through the chatter. "He can stay in my room with me."


"He's the smallest." Charlie squeezed Harry's shoulder, gently. "And you know it's crowded in there right now." He turned Harry towards the doorway and then to the stairs. "We'll see you all in the morning. Night, Mum, Dad." He inclined his head and his grip on Harry's shoulder tightened faintly as he pushed the brunet forward.
The climbed the stairs to Charlie's room in a strange silence. Charlie had removed his hand at once, the moment they were out of view and Harry had shifted away from him—faintly.

"Harry?"

Harry grunted. He didn't trust his mouth to speak for him right now. He was all hot and ruffled and bothered in a way that made him feel a little cranky. Just a little.

"I didn't mean...I'm sorry." He changed. "I guess I just trust you a little more than the other boys." He shrugged. "You'll see." He stopped and the bedroom door and pushed it open.

Harry stumbled a few steps backwards.

A literal heat wave seemed to blast him as he stood there and Charlie glided into the room.

It was filled from ceiling to floor with shrunken boxes and parcels in neat, even stacks, with nearly every corner crammed full of something or the other. A thin, narrow passageway allowed Charlie to turn sideways and inch through the stacks to get to the far end of the room where a set of dresser drawers and a space dictated a bed.

Harry copied his example and turned sideways to inch through the passageway, to find himself on the other end and shocked speechless at the sight of Charlie yanking his short-sleeve shirt over his head. Scars littered the well-muscled expanse of chest and abs, with defined shoulders and a strong, corded neck. The red-hair seemed a few shades darker in hue as Charlie tugged the ponytail free of its confines and hurriedly ran his fingers through the layered mane. He made a few twists with his hand and succeeded in partially pinning the hair up and off his neck as the heat in the room seemed to coax a fine sheen of sweet to his skin.

"Sorry about the heat." He gestured towards the bed where a towel-wrapped in a bowl-shaped position cradled an egg. "They let me off early, but figured I'd be stable enough to see one last hatchling out."

Hatchling? Harry nearly choked. As it was, he backed into the boxes behind him and swallowed hard.

Charlie shrugged. "I didn't think you'd mind, seeing as you helped smuggle Hagrid's Norbeta to the Astronomy tower in the pitch black of night." He winked. "She's doing fine by the way. Do tell Hagrid when you can. Something tells me I won't be able to visit Hogwarts while I'm here." He sighed and then frowned, settling on the bed, cross-legged and drawing the towel-egg-nest to his lap. "I think there's an hour left before this one hatches." He nodded towards the egg. "Do you mind?"

Harry wasn't sure yet.

He took a cautious whiff, reading the mixed scents that came rushing at him. He could smell old, musty things, some odd exotic things and then, there was the dragon egg—it certainly smelled reptilian and friendly, if the definition following that scent was anything to go by. And then there was Charlie. Harry sucked in a big breath and squeezed his eyes shut to calm himself.

The scent of pine and wood seemed to fill the air, with the just faintest tinge of musk and iron.

Charlie almost smelled like Theo.

Harry coughed as he made the connections in his head.
"Harry?" Charlie eyed him worriedly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Harry found his voice. "Nothing at all.

"Is the heat too much?" Charlie began to shift as if he were to get off the bed.

Harry hurried forward, shaking his head. "N-no. It's fine." And it really was. To his Drigel self, the heat was a lovely addition and it was making him sleepy—content and sleepy. He stifled a yawn. There were things he should do before he slept. Important things.

Brushing his teeth for one. Washing his face for another. Finding his Pyjamas, at least.

But somehow Harry crawled onto the foot of the bed and settled down, leaning against a stack of boxes as he sat opposite of the redhead. "So, a dragon egg?" He tried and failed for levity, but the effort was picked up by the blue-eyed Charlie.

"Ah, yes. We're not sure exactly what kind of a dragon though."

"Really?"

"Mmm." Charlie carefully nestled the egg in the towel nest and eased it from his lap to the bed. "Count out a minute for me?"

Harry's shoulders drooped. Having Theo's elemental magic had certainly helped with his recent feelings and worries, but it was still strictly elemental magic at the moment. He didn't know how to use it for things such as a tempus or a simple accio.

"Harry?" Charlie had one elbow resting gently at the top of the egg's peak and the two fingers from that hand pressed to the wrist of his other, an awkward looking way of reading a pulse via the muggle way. "Tempus." He prompted.

Harry's face colored furiously. "I can't." He looked down at his hands, inwardly bracing. "I don't have...that kind of magic anymore."

Charlie stared at him for a long moment then straightened. His expression grew serious and finally he frowned. "Does Dumbledore know?"

"Yes." Harry said, simply.

"I see." Charlie's frown grew more pronounced. "How long has been missing? Were you hit by a curse?"

Harry shook his head. "Since before school started."

The blue eyes grew comically wide. "That long—Harry!" The exclamation was filled with worry. "That can't be—have you, has anyone do any-"

"Everyone says it'll come back." Harry shrugged. "The professors have been looking out for me." He waved it off. "I'm fine. I just can't cast a tempus for you right now. Sorry."

Charlie blinked. "Don't be." He said, automatically and then the rest of his senses seemed to catch up to him and he managed a small smile. "I suppose you caught off guard for a moment there." He mirrored Harry's earlier shrug. "Are you alright with that?"
Harry wrinkled his nose. "I have some magic." He defended. "And I've plenty of charms on me."

Charlie snorted. "How charming."

Harry glared at him. "And I just said I couldn't cast a tempus. I didn't say that I couldn't-

"I'll cast it and tell me when a minute's about up." Charlie leaned to the side and snatched up his wand from the nightstand table. He quickly cast the charm and set Harry to counting. The process was over in a matter of minutes and Charlie was frowning again.

"What's wrong now?" Harry wanted to know.

Charlie rolled his eyes. "I'm probably imagining it, but it doesn't—it's a bit too fast." He gestured towards the egg.

"What are you doing?" Harry shook his head at the near answer from the redhead. "Not that, I mean more like, why? What are you measuring, I know it's not a pulse."

"A pulse?" Charlie blinked at him. "Er, no. Whatever gave you that idea? I'm measuring magical tremors or, I suppose you could call them pulses as well." He shrugged. "It allows me to see how well it's faring." He gestured towards the egg. "And sometimes it can tell me whether it's a boy or a girl."

"Which is it?"

"Boy, I think." Charlie shook his head. "But it's too fast. I can feel it. It doesn't feel like a dragon."

"What do you mean?"

"Here. Feel." Charlie reached over and caught his hand, pressing it gently to the surface of the egg. "Don't feel for something physical, feel for something—yes, like that!" He brightened. "How—strange."

"What?" Harry looked from their intertwined hands to Charlie's faintly blushing face. He didn't know Charlie could blush. It looked good on him. That thought, of course, made Harry blush and he hoped it wasn't too obvious. "Oh!" His face lit up at once. A soft, tickling brush of magical energy sparked at his fingertips and rippled over his body.

It.

He could feel it.

It was definitely a boy and it definitely was reptilian.

How Charlie knew it wasn't a dragon, Harry didn't know. He sure couldn't tell. He just knew that the egg was happy and content for the moment. Happier now that Harry was nearby and actually touching the egg.

"I think he likes you." Charlie grinned. "This is definitely an odd one."

"Hey, don't pick on him!" Harry batted Charlie's hand away from the egg. "He doesn't know he's odd!"

"Defending him already?" Charlie half-smirked. "You do know he can't stay here, right? Mum would pitch a fit."
"Where's the heat coming from?" Harry asked. He'd gone through his nightly preparations while waiting for time to pass and the hour had come and gone, leaving Charlie vaguely puzzled and somewhat worried. "Maybe it's still not warm enough?"

Both young men were now sprawled out on opposite ends of the bed and watching the egg in the makeshift towel nest with worried eyes.

"It's plenty warm enough." Charlie grumbled. "Any hotter in here and I'll die." He waved his wand and produced two glasses of cool water. "Drink up." He prompted. "I'm using a heating stone." He nodded towards one open crate in the only uncrowded corner of the room. "We use them on the reserve. It charges with the sunlight and gives off a steady heat source through the night. It's quite handy."

Harry rolled over on the bed, propping himself up on his elbows to squint at it. Now that he thought about it, he could feel the heat emanating from that corner of the room and spreading easily over everything else.

"Don't get too close, it's right nasty when it's freshly charged." Charlie turned his wand on himself and muttered a drying charm to get rid of the sweat and then the sweat-dampened sheets.

"Mm-hm." Harry murmured, straightening, while his eyes remained fixed on the swirling, pulsing red and orange stone. "Where you do find them?"

"You hunt them." Charlie yawned. "There are some treasure hunting folk, say like Bill for instance, who work with the goblins and all that and when he finds odd things sometimes he shares them-" Charlie shrugged. "I told him if he ever found anything useful to let me know and make a deal with the devil for them."

Harry blinked.

"The goblins." Charlie clarified, seeing the expression on his face. "They can cheat you out of nothing, if they've a mind to. Thankfully, they like Bill and that means I get to have useful things every once in a while." He gestured towards the parcels and shrunken crates. "Though this might be overkill."

"Might?" Harry waggled his eyebrows at him.

Charlie had the manners to blush and shrug, sheepishly. "Half of this is for the Order at least." He rolled over to rest on his back, staring up at the ceiling. "I have to double-check and catalogue it though, before I can even consider mentioning it to Dumbledore." He wrinkled his nose. "Bill gave me a whole stack of written warnings to go along with them. Mum didn't want me to bring them in the house. She's convinced half of them are cursed."

"Are they?"

Charlie shook his head. "Not coming from Bill. If there were any, he would've broken them already." He grinned. "Nice guy, that brother of mine."

Harry joined him for the chuckle. A comfortable silence lingered between them and after a moment, Harry spoke up again. "So how are your dragons? Any interesting stories?" He twisted and craned his neck to keep Charlie in his line of sight.

"Stories?" Charlie lit up at once. "Plenty!" He shook his head, suddenly. "Ron and the twins will kill me for telling you first."
"Let them." Harry said, cheerfully. "Tell me first and I'll forgive you for calling me small."

"Forgive me?" Charlie smothered a laugh. "But you are small, a lovely little-" He jumped when Harry pinched him. A very well-placed pinch. "Ow! What a way to repay a fellow." He mocked, rubbing the side of his neck.

Harry smirked and pantomimed another good pinch.

Charlie quickly rolled out of reach.

Charlie fell asleep first.

Harry was faintly surprised. He was glad because it allowed him a teensy bit of thinking time and slightly annoyed at the fact that he couldn't pick of up anything else off of the redhead apart from his delicious scent.

With Theo, he'd caught underlying tugs of magic and the steady calming presence that had easily extended to include him any time the brunet was nearby. Charlie's quiet humor was appreciated and well-received, as far as Harry was concerned, but he couldn't even feel anything beyond that. With Theo, he had felt a few tugs and pulls in the right direction.

His Dragel senses told him that Charlie would make a good beta—and he was quite obviously in the market for one—but it didn't offer any further useful information beyond that. Harry scowled up at the ceiling. He didn't know what else to do beyond that. Seducing wasn't really one of his strong points and just the thought of seducing—or trying to seduce Charlie Weasley—made more than just his face burn with embarrassment.

Yep.

Seducing was definitely out of the options.

Harry nibbled on his lower lip, lost in the usual complicated maze of thoughts. He missed Theo. In spite of his earlier anger, in a moment like this, here and now, Harry truly missed him. There was something about the calmness that simply surrounded the Slytherin that was somehow as natural as breathing, yet the quiet way that Theo had about him was now replaying in his mind's eye along with the fact that he'd yet to be sleeping alone for the past two weeks.

Since Theo had claimed him and especially since their mating, he'd easily fallen asleep in his mate's arms.

A natural, dreamless sleep that didn't require any potions.

Harry swallowed.

That was one thing he definitely owed Theo. He'd thought the dreams would drive him mad. It was hard enough to make do with trying to manage Occulemency and other mind magics. He'd just never been able to do it and while Snape may not have been the best teacher, the man had tried. He'd finally suggested that Harry find a good protection amulet and charm it to be irremovable.

In the end, Harry had done that.

But it'd given him some horrible headaches, so he'd taken it off and hidden it away.

While his resting period did require sleep, it wasn't always dreamless.
Granted, the dreams were lovely and well, graphic, in certain ways, Harry had welcomed them over the moments where he'd shared Voldemort's mind or been subjected to scenes of death and torture that were so difficult to ignore in his waking moments. Even when they'd argued that first time, Harry had pulled away and the dreams had taken a dark turn.

He'd sought Theo's arms frantically in the wake of a set of dreams that had been nothing more than nightmares. The moment Theo had held him close, the dreams had run away, tails tucked between their legs.

Harry had nearly cried in relief. Especially when it seemed that Theo hadn't even woken to accommodate him, but rather, had simply snuggled him close and continued right on sleeping.

Yes, he definitely missed Theo.

His fingers searched 'round his neck and drew out the cord bearing his mate's scale. He stroked the warm scale and clutched it tightly in one hand. There really hadn't been any plans made. No concrete plans anyway. He only knew that they were together and that was it.

Then, it had been enough.

Now, Harry wasn't sure what came next.

It made his chest ache.

With a faint shake, Harry drew himself back to the present with a slight frown. He had a definite feeling that everything was anything but fine and he realized, belatedly, that he had no other way to contact anyone he'd gotten to know in the past few weeks. No way to reach Severus, Draco or Terius and most certainly, no way to reach Theo.

That particular thought made him scowl and glower all over again.

_Idiot dominant!_ He thought fiercely. _Can't even remember to give me a to contact him in case of an —oh screw Terius, how am I supposed to know how to call him when I don't-!

Harry scowled and glowered some more before the overwhelming urge to sleep came over him. The lovely warm room, Charlie's quiet, even breathing and the reassuring magical pulses from the egg had him yawning and relaxing all over again. He curled up around the egg nest, unsure of why, but figuring there was nothing to lose from it.

He was sure he'd wake up if the egg started hatching.

With a yawn, emerald eyes dimmed and winked out as Harry fell asleep.
Harry awoke the feeling of little pointed paws padding all over his face.

It was immediately followed by Charlie's quiet hissing. "Hey! Stop that, if you wake him up just because you're trying to make me-!"

The desperation in his voice was something Harry had never heard before and he took a moment to process that before the rest of him caught up to the fact that there were *paws* padding around on his face. He woke with a garbled yell.

His eyes popped open in time to see Charlie grabbing something small, black and squirming out of mid-air. "Shh! Easy little guy." Charlie crooned, holding the little thing up to his chest and cradling it close. A series of babbling and gurgling noises came from the creature and Harry sat up as his jaw dropped. That was one sight he'd never thought he'd see.

"Uh, Charlie?" Harry sputtered and then dragged the sleeve of his pyjama jacket across his tongue as he realized one of those little scaly feet had just happened to step into his mouth. A rather cute little black scaled thing that was currently blowing him a raspberry with a wicked gleam in those round black eyes. Harry couldn't believe it. His emerald eyes narrowed. "You little-!" He started, furiously.

Charlie immediately danced out of reach. "Whoa, easy Harry!" He quickly held the little squirming creature out of reach. "Harry!" He protested, backing into the solid wall of boxes.

Harry stopped when he was plastered chest-to-chest with the redhead and blinked up at him. Well, mostly chest, his pyjama jacket prevented the actual skin on skin contact. Harry scowled, darkly.

"It's…it's harmless." Charlie said, lamely. He didn't dare lower his arm.

Harry perked a brow at him.

Charlie swallowed.

"Why didn't you wake me up for the hatching?" The brunet demanded.

"Er, it already hatched when I woke up?" Charlie suggested.

Harry scented the lie for what it was and his green eyes shimmered for a moment, before one hand shot out and tickled Charlie's exposed underarm. The results were priceless. Charlie definitely hadn't expected that. He reacted with a yelp and the most delightful set of shrieks and dancing moves that Harry had ever seen come out of a Weasley. The young dragon tamer barely managed to keep his hold on the newborn creature that was still babbling and cooing as he hurried to put some distance between him and Harry.

He was distinctly at a disadvantage in the crowded room—especially on account of being shirtless.

Charlie stashed the little creature atop one box just as Harry pounced on him.

The tickle fight that followed ended when Charlie rolled on top and slipped one rough hand
expertly up the bottom of Harry's pyjama jacket and teased the sensitive skin below. A delightful red flush covered Harry from head to toe and finally, between breathless gasps of laughter, he reached up and yanked Charlie down to a hug.

"Uncle!" He cried. "I give!"

The tickling hand stayed and Charlie half-collapsed on him, the hand between them trapped, his head half-pillowed on Harry's shoulder. He breathed softly across the newly flushed skin and for a moment, neither young man had anything to stay.

The quiet babbling turned into a series of soft, musical chirps and then the little creature tumbled off the boxes and onto the tangled couple. It trotted over Charlie's heaving form and wriggled into a little space between redhead and brunet, settling down like a cat as if for a nap.

Blue and emerald eyes stared at it together and then at each other incredulously.

"Er, Charlie?" Harry ventured after a moment, breaking the stare, he looked away focusing on the mountain of boxes instead.

"What?"

"Your hand's up my shirt."

Charlie blushed as red as his hair.

He'd slept longer than he'd thought, but thankfully, he hadn't missed breakfast. Opting for a shower first, Harry left Charlie and their newborn...thing, to their own devices as he slipped out into the surprisingly quiet hallway. Yes, a shower sounded just fine, thank you very much.

Nearly a half hour later, Harry stepped into the room, toweling his hair half-heartedly. He'd just come from the bathroom and realized that he hadn't brought any clothes with him on the sudden spur of the moment venture. He'd then pulled on his trousers and after a quick peek through the hallway between the bathroom and Charlie's bedroom, he'd darted across, shirtless. "Hey Charlie?" There was a murmur from the other side of the boxes and Harry turned sideways and inched through to the other side. "Can I borrow a shirt?"

"Huh?" Charlie reached a hand up to his shoulder where he stroked the little head of the thing on his shoulder. "Ron might be more your size." He managed, eyes flickering over the object in his hand, brow furrowed.

Harry snorted. "I doubt it. He's practically a head taller than me already." He huffed. "Besides, I'd need someone to resize it for me." He waited. Charlie didn't answer.

Harry snorted. "I doubt it. He's practically a head taller than me already." He huffed. "Besides, I'd need someone to resize it for me." He waited.

Charlie didn't answer.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Charlie!"

The redhead was staring at the scrap of parchment in his hand and then at the box and back at the object in his other hand.

"Charlie?" Harry crossed the small space to stand beside him. "What is it?"

"A bloodstone." Charlie breathed, awe coloring his voice and face. He stared up at Harry for a moment. "For vampires." He explained. "This could...this could grant the Order an alliance with
the vampires, if we were able to-" He dived back to the crate and rummaged through the straw packaging. "There's three of them." He gasped. "And Bill sent them all…"

Harry felt his respect for the eldest Weasley son rise by several notches in leaps and bounds. That was very admirable. Good Bill. Bad Charlie. Harry blinked. Bad Charlie. Right. "Charlie, I am going to borrow one of your shirts and a pair of pants and you are going to shrink them for me."

Harry weighted his voice with the musical tinge, hoping it would work.

Charlie never budged.

Harry stepped around him and rummaged through his available options in the barely accessible closet. He chose a pair of comfortably worn dragonhide pants and a matching, wide-necked shirt. He slipped into them, tossing his school trousers to the pile with the rest of his school clothes on the floor. Charlie still hadn't looked up. Harry wished for a mirror and then frowned, remembering, belatedly—his tattooed mark on the side of his neck.

*Drat!*

He exchanged the wide-necked shirt for a sleeveless and collared option. The clothes hung off his skinny frame and he was careful as he made his way over to Charlie and handed over his wand. "Charlie?"

The redhead wizard turned, faintly, his mind still on the crate.

"Clothes. Spell. Resize?" Harry held up one baggy pant leg.

Charlie's face reflected a lovely shade of light pink as his blue eyes immediately darted away and then strayed back before he sighed and waved his wand, quickly. The clothes shrunk before the rest of Charlie caught up to him. "Is that my favorite pair of pants?" He looked from the pants to Harry's unrepentant face. "Harry!"

"You weren't paying attention." Harry shrugged, bending over to scoop up the armful of clothes he'd deposited on the floor. He completely missed the look on Charlie's face and the way the redhead swallowed hard when presented with that lovely, moulded version of Harry bending over. "Laundry?" Harry requested, standing up.

"Behind the boxes, over there." Charlie pointed.

Harry followed the line of sight from Charlie's finger, squinted, took aim and tossed the armful.

Charlie smirked. "Impressive."

Harry rolled his eyes. "So what exactly is that?" He pointed to Charlie's shoulder. "And don't you dare tell me that it's a dragon!"

At that, Charlie shook his head, slowly. "It isn't." He said, at last. "But I don't rightly know what it is." He held one hand out and the snoozing little thing opened one eye to look at him before tumbling off his shoulder and into the flat palm of his hand. "He's smaller than I thought he'd be." Charlie licked his lips and frowned. "I've checked through all the books I have and there's only a few mentions that years ago, there might have been creatures like this, but they're supposed to be extinct."

Supposed to be extinct. The words echoed in Harry's head and his emerald eyes grew wide. "Really? Where?" He hurried to the bed and pushed the crate to the side, taking the bloodstones from Charlie and wrapping it in the parchment before putting it back in the crate. "Which book?"
Charlie stared at him, amused and then shrugged. "Let's see." He turned and waved his wand, murmuring Accio, beneath his breath. A stack of books flew to him and with another series of waves, Charlie soon handed him the books with the passages he'd found.

Harry read them quickly, murmuring the words beneath his breath before he frowned. Perhaps it would answer to parseltongue. It was certainly worth a try. "Give him to me."

"What?" Charlie blinked.

"I need to see something." Harry reached for the creature. It snapped at his fingers. Harry growled at it. It bared its teeth in return and snapped at his finger again—succeeding in drawing blood before Charlie's expert hands caught it around the jaws and pressed lightly to pop the little mouth open and free Harry's finger.

Charlie tapped it gently on the nose. "We do not bite wizards." He scolded. "Sorry, Harry." He reached for his wand and tapped it lightly on his knee, still holding down the little creature with his other hand. "Let me see it."

'Stupid idiotic wizard...I wasn't going to eat him, I just had to taste his blood. How else am I supposed to speak to him when we're unbounded and—ow!' The exclamation came as Charlie had tapped its nose.

Harry made a squeaking sound in the back of his throat. He'd heard that. He'd seen it. Merlin help him! "You can speak!" He exclaimed.

"What?" Charlie looked from the little creature to Harry. "What-can, Harry?" The little thing began to fight beneath the strong hand holding it down. It nipped at Charlie's fingers, freed when Charlie released it with a frown. "You have the manners of a pregnant Horntail." He muttered.

"You spoke just now, didn't you?" Harry demanded, completely missing the byplay between Charlie and it. "Come here!" Harry held out a hand.

The soft blue eyes swirled to a deep, dark purple as they grew wide and then the little black-scaled head swung between Charlie and Harry, before it cautiously inched over to Harry. It peered over its shoulder back at Charlie, a somewhat forlorn and guilty expression on its face.

"You can go back to him just now." Harry sighed. "I just want to see something." He licked his lips and then hissed softly.

'Can you understand me?'

A squeak of surprise came from the little creature.

'Well, can you?' Harry hissed.

The creature seemed to give a little huff. 'I just did, didn't I?'

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Great. It had a smartmouth. 'You can understand what I was saying before then. Before now.' He gestured to himself.

'Yes.'

Harry's jaw dropped, he stared at Charlie who stared back at him in equal surprise.

"Well?" The redhead prompted, after a long moment.
"It speaks."

Charlie settled back on the bed and stared with a mixture of amazement and interest as he watched the hissed conversation taking place between Harry and the little black un-dragon. To see Harry speaking parseltongue first-hand was a twist of fate he'd never anticipated. It stirred something inside that made him faintly hot and bothered.

Just faintly.

Charlie swallowed and shoved those confusing thoughts aside to focus on their current situation. The mystery creature now cavorting between them. He continued to watch, curious. He felt a slight kinship towards the little creature, even though everything he knew, told him that it most certainly was not a dragon.

There were feline characteristics to it in the way it curled up into a little ball as it sat on Harry's lap and the way a forked, pink tongue occasionally flickered out to clean its face, paws and tail. He was puzzled by the soft, feathery wings that were too small for anything remotely useful, seemingly there as decoration, yet sensitive enough to feel the soft scratches from Harry's hands as he stroked it.

The face was intelligent, somewhat broad-shaped and the tail held three armored spikes. All the teeth were canine and pointed and there were double pupils in the wide, slanted eyes. Charlie swallowed hard as one of those eyes flickered towards him, piercing in its dark intensity. He recalled the earlier, lighter shade of sky blue and mentally made a note of the transformation.

If he'd discovered a new creature, this was certainly something worth cataloguing.

He'd awakened some time during the night to find Harry wrapped around the egg, the towel discarded and cradled in the pale arms instead. He'd watched them for a while, brushing against the egg a few times to test the magical pulse and reassure himself that the creature within was fine. He could feel strong waves of magic rolling off of Harry and disappearing into the egg, filling the room with an almost manic, crazy haze of humming energy.

It swirled around the room and eventually dissipated when Harry began to squirm and groan, before his breathing sped up and panicked whimpers escaped his lips.

Nightmares.

Charlie had rescued the egg from Harry's thrashing form and quickly stashed it on his pillow, turning only to see the green eye open, wide, lifeless and dulled as the lithe body writhed and twitched as if tortured. He'd tried to wake him. He'd shaken him. Called to him. Thrown water on him. Tried an Ennervate. Almost gone to wake his parents.

Almost.

The egg had hummed to life and cracked open to reveal the small, coal-colored scaled creature that tumbled off his pillow and right into his waiting hands. He fed it a pulse of magical energy, sensing the creature was more magic than creature and then had watched in amazement as the little thing had grown from the size of a rat to the size of a small kitten.

It had instantly gone over to Harry and begun to wash his face.

Harry had stopped thrashing about at once.
His body had grown still and his eyelids had slid shut once more.

The little thing continued in its ministrations until Harry was breathing normally again. Then it came prancing back to Charlie and grinning with a gumless, toothless smile. A smile that had quickly become toothed when the little thing had sneezed. A moment later, it had bit his finger, hard enough to draw blood and suckled long enough for a few mouthfuls before he'd been able to pry it off.

Charlie had immediately scrambled to find some food for it.

He tried waking Harry again, but—as before—nothing worked. He couldn't panic, mostly because the little thing had taken up residence on his bare shoulder and begun purring up a storm that simply made it hard to hold onto any single emotion. He had then settled down on the bed and napped on and off for the rest of the night.

The little thing had woken him some time later—and then done the same Harry before he could grab it.

He'd never been so relieved to see the green-eyed boy up and responsive.

A dull ache in his chest made itself known when he realized that the young man made no mention of his nighttime terrors and while he didn't outright flinch at any of the quick movements around him, it was a reflex barely contained.

Charlie didn't like it.

There was simply something about Harry that made him want to hold him and love him in any way possible. Something to take away the stress lines etched into a face too young. Something to erase the shadows within bright green eyes that hinted at the darkness and deepness beneath. Something to heal the hurt that seemed to linger behind that smile that never quite shone bright enough.

Yes, Charlie resigned himself, he might be forming a bit of an attachment to a certain brunet wizard.

A certain famous wizard.

He mentally slapped himself and went over invite himself into the private moment of mystery creature and parseltongue. "Find out anything...Harry?" The words trailed off as Charlie caught sight of a flicker of magic and then a simple, silvery band on Harry's left hand. A ring. A ring on the finger on the hand that usually meant that one was bonded.

A sharp pain stabbed through his chest and when he shook his head and looked again, there was nothing there. Just Harry's hands, slightly small and pale as they usual were.

Charlie watched as the green eyes flickered gold and Harry held out one hand, his brow furrowed in concentration before a thick, fat book materialized out of thin air.

"Sit back." Harry's head snapped up. "Ah, just give me a minute." He rifled through the thick, ancient pages with a gentle hand, searching systematically for something before finally tapping his hand on the index and murmuring a few words. The pages rippled on their own, flipping to the correct entry before resting flat in his lap.

"Is that an heirloom tome?" Charlie couldn't keep the excitement from his voice. "One of the ancient encyclopedias?"
"Er, maybe?" Harry colored slightly. "Uh, it's a-"

Charlie held up his hands. "I don't need to see it." He said, regretfully. "I'm sure it's got plenty of protections on it, doesn't it?" He sighed. "That's fine. Just let me know what you find out?"

"Of course!"

They had a bit of a roundabout conversation, something that it explained after Harry's repeated pestering to the fact that the little thing could understand him in plain English just as well as parseltongue.

'What are you?' He tried.

'That should be obvious, Master.'

'I'm not your master'

'Then why did my master give me to you?'

'What?'

Harry followed the gaze from himself to Charlie. Ah. 'I just wanted to talk to you.' He faltered, finding the little face beginning to grow on him. 'You can still belong to... Charlie.'

'You do not want me?'

'er, more like you weren't mine first?'

'But you are better suited for me.'

'What?'

'His blood sings like yours, but he cannot hear me. You are better suited.'

'Sings for... wait, what do you mean?'

The little creature snorted. 'I mean what I say.'

It was little help then. So Harry did the only other thing he could do at that point, the wheels and gears of his mind shifted into a more interesting track and without even thinking, he held out his hand and silently summoned the Nott family heirloom encyclopedia to him. It landed in his hand with a solid, hefty thunk and he scooped the little thing out of the way and sat it on his shoulder so it could see the pages as well.

He hoped the protections didn't include zapping defenseless baby dragon-creatures.

Thankfully, nothing happened as he began to carefully turn the pages, running purely on the instinct shuffling through his whirling brain. His fingers ticked down the index and then suddenly, he felt the magic bubble under his hand and he quickly yanked his hand back and waited while the book turned for him. It found the appropriate entry and Harry felt his jaw drop.

He skimmed the page rapidly, drawing on his Dragel gifts to make sense of the entry.

Nytura. The entry read.
Nytra is the result of a deliberate concoction of dragon essence and Grim using Shadow magic forced through a blood seal, resulting as an individual creature. It was first crafted by Oredo Menitis, a Dragel who endavoured to create a creature that would protect and accompany his children and mates during his absences. The result was a strictly loyal and extremely intelligent creature.

Nytras hatch when they have gathered enough magical energy and feed on shadows, elemental magic and blood. They are pack creatures and prefer to run free out of doors under the cover of night. It is common for an entire pack to live amongst a mated circle and they are protective of their own. Nytras possess a pair of ribbed, armored wings that appear when their chosen Master is in mortal danger and their claws can secrete several types of venom. They can sense emotions and danger through their heightened senses. They are part shadow creature and having been borne of Dragel blood magic, they are extremely companionable to young children and will form attachments with the first person carrying even the faintest hint of Dragel nature.

They were used as courtship gifts during the first centuries and often given from the dominant to the submissive as a gesture of loyalty and love, meaning that they will devote their entire self to the submissive mate with the same loyalty ingrained in the Nytra.

Nytras are born according to a centennial lunar cycle and if the pack has grown too large, the mother will hide her egg in a Dragon's nest. The hatchling will remain in a suspended state until an individual with Dragel instincts and suitable magic discovers them. The incubation period lasts as long as it takes for the egg to draw sufficient magical energy and it will hatch when it senses its caretaker is in need of it.

Nytras are born as live young and once the mother is assured of her offspring's health, it is marked by the pack's alpha. If the offspring is unwelcome in the pack, then the residual magic of the birth will form a cocoon—an egg—and suspend the Nytra until it has found a suitable home, after which, the hatchling will feed on the provided magic to attune itself to its new caretaker's magical signature.

All eyes are blue at birth and will take on a violet hue as they mature, turning dark in moments of extreme emotion, such as anger or fear. Nytras mature in an irregular cycle, depending on their surroundings and the intelligence of their caretaker. A caretaker may be a foodsource and parent figure, before becoming their Master.

A blood bonding allows Nytra to converse with their respective caretakers and Dragels. These little creatures develop according to the blood they ingest. An intelligent caretaker of significant magical power can easily converse and simultaneously cast magic with a newborn Nytra after a first feeding or bite. All knowledge is gained through experience or reading through blood. A Nytra will bite with the intent and interest of learning what an individual has to offer and not necessarily to feed.

Harry dumbly closed the book and banished it with a slight thought form his head. He then plucked the little Nytra off his shoulder and held it in his hands. They stared at each other and finally the little thing squirmed and wriggled in his hands, before poking its tongue out to swipe at his left thumb. The soft, wet motion was ticklish and it made Harry smile.

He grinned at Charlie, impishly. "Can I keep him?"

Charlie seemed to forget how to speak, so Harry continued on.

"I will call you, Shadow, alright?" He stroked the little scaled head.
The newly dubbed Shadow gave a delighted purr.

In the cool, shadowy confines of Malfoy Manor, Death Eaters stood in silent, double file in their usual positions as their dark lord paced back and forth on the black marbled floor.

"Hogwarts evacuated?" Voldemort's trademark whisper filtered through the air of his shadowed throne room. "Good, good." He waved a hand at the Elder Goyle and watched him scuttle back in place to the half-line-circle before him. "And what of Potter?"

"There was no mention of him at Hogwarts," Rowle bowed low. "He is staying with the blood-traitors—the Weasleys."

"The Weasleys?" Voldemort drew himself up. "Hypocrite." He hissed. "Go and…stir things up. You have earned this Rowle." He paused and then added as an afterthought. "No restrictions."

Rowle smirked, wickedly.

**FRIDAY NIGHT : HOGWARTS**

Hermione stumbled out of Hogwarts castle following the pull that drug her right past Hagrid's hut and straight to the alluring shadows of the Forbidden forest. This was it. This was her last chance.

She smeared the tears on her face down her cheeks and quickened her step to a near dead run. She stumbled through the pathway and a few choice pieces of underbrush. Despair clung to every inch of her nearly lifeless eyes as she ran until her lungs burned and her feet gave out beneath her in the midst of the darkened forest.

She tripped.

And fell.

She lay there on the soft, earthy carpet of the forest and let the hot tears spill out until she couldn't find any more left to come. She cried out to the earth and at one point, thought she might scream.

But a scrap of dignity remained and that alone stayed her voice.

When it started to rain, Hermione didn't know that the rain would actually reach the ground with such dense greenery overhead. She felt the drops as light stabs of icy wetness that quickly soaked her to the skin. How she managed to be there for so long, untouched, she didn't know.

Her mind replayed everything.

Lots of things.

Overhearing Dumbledore speaking about something called a Horocrux.

Overhearing Dumbledore saying that Harry would die for the greater good.

Overhearing the Minister of Magic demanding that Dumbledore take care of the 'Voldemort Business' within the year.

Overhearing Cho Chang speaking to Katie Bell on how pathetic muggle-born witches were, especially when they couldn't tell they were being two-timed.
Overhearing Pansy Parkinson joking about the Weasley's and how their family bloodlines were so twisted and tangled, it was a wonder they weren't a danger to society.

Overhearing Ron confess his love to Lavender Brown—when he'd spent the night in Hermione's bed.

Overhearing Snape complaining about Voldemort's unspecified plans and mentions of dementors.

Overhearing Ginny Weasley wish that she would just die so Harry would pay more attention to her.

Overhearing the voices in her backyard, all summer long.

And so, Hermione cried.
"Do we have to go down?" Harry yawned, sprawled out fully on the bed with Shadow tucked under his chin, napping. The emerald-eyed boy toyed with a strangely shaped locket, one of Bill's trinkets that Charlie had okayed for The Order.

"Only if you don't want to starve." Charlie said, mildly. "Not that Mum would let us, but-" His blue eyes narrowed and he surveyed the wistful wizard. "You'd rather skip?"

Harry made a gesture that might have been a shrug, but it was hard to tell with him lying down. The dragon tamer read the reluctance in his eyes for what it was and offered the best that he could at that moment. "I could say you're still sleeping, if you like." He suggested. "Any moment now-"

"Breakfast!" Mrs. Weasley's voice boomed, ringing out through every space in The Burrow, impossible to be ignored.

"And there we have it." Charlie concluded. "So, breakfast?" He snapped his fingers, hand extended, waiting.

Harry hesitated. "I...I don't think I could stomach anything right now." He looked away.

"Harry?"

"M'fine."

Charlie frowned, but he didn't push it. He left the room and took his time coming downstairs for the breakfast meal.

"Charlie dear, where's Harry?" Mrs. Weasley paused in her mealtime bustling, a serving tray of buttered, French toast in her capable hands. "Didn't you wake him?"

"He said he wanted to sleep a bit more." Charlie shrugged, apologetically.

"But he needs to eat, all growing-"

"He looked so tired, Mum." Charlie took the platter of toast from her. "I told him to go back to sleep. I'm sure he'll come down if he wants something."

The redheaded Matriarch was silent for a moment and then she sighed. "Take him up a plate when you're done. He can eat and go back to sleep, if he likes afterwards. I won't have people skipping meals in this house if I-"

"Yes, Mum." Charlie cut her off with a light kiss to the cheek. "Everything smells good. I can't wait."

When Charlie opened the bedroom door, he was surprised to see a nice, sizeable pathway from the door to the little space on the other side of the room. He walked through, cautious, to find Harry and Shadow in nearly the exact same place he'd left them. Well, except for the several stacks of unpacked and repacked crates and various odd items decorating the small living space.
He blinked, shook his head and blinked again. Harry had made more progress in the time he'd eaten breakfast, than he'd done when Harry had taken a shower. "Mum sent up a plate for you." He managed. He wasn't sure how he felt about this yet. Harry working with him was one thing, Harry working on his own was another.

He trusted Bill, but there was a reason that his brother chose to send his finds directly to him.

Harry rolled his head to the side, looking at the plate in Charlie's hands and then returning his attention to the old scroll of parchment in his hands. "Thanks. I'm fine though." And really, he was. At the moment, Harry had no particular inclinations to eat anything at all. He had a slight craving in the back of his mind, but knew it wasn't anything that the Weasleys could help him with and for that reason alone, banished the thought and chose to distract himself in a more productive way.

"You're going through the crates on your own?" Charlie frowned. "Harry, I don't really want you--"

"You said Bill would've taken out all the curses and dangerous things, right?" Harry countered, quickly. "Sides, it's pretty interesting." He waved towards a scroll of parchment on the desk. "And I've been slaving over those notes for you." He set the parchment down to catch Charlie's blue-eyed gaze. "No magic quick quotes quills—all by hand." He sniffed, delicately. "Not even thanks for my efforts?"

Charlie sputtered and spluttered for a second and then he walked over to the bed and plucked the parchment from Harry's surprised hands and set the plate down—almost on top of Shadow—who gave him an angry huff and indignant squeak for his troubles. He sighed. "Sorry little guy." He reached for it.

"Shadow." Harry reminded him. He poked a finger at the plate and frowned. He really wasn't hungry.


"It's a Nytura." Harry said, helpfully. Shadow chirped in agreement.

"Eat, then explain." Charlie retorted.

Harry made a face at the redhead's turned back.

Shadow blew him a raspberry over Charlie's shoulder.

Harry came down for lunch and stopped on the stairs the moment he saw Ron and Lavender gliding towards the kitchen. His hands clenched into fists and Shadow broke out in a flurry of angry hisses and squawks. The green-eyed brunet turned, already aiming to retreat to Charlie's room.

"Harry?" The ponytailed redhead asked, worriedly. He took the few steps back up to half-block Harry's path. "What's wrong?"

"Has anyone heard from Dumbledore?"

"Not for today…"

"I don't feel very hungry." Harry flashed a fake smile and continued on up the steps. "I'll take a nap or something…didn't really get much sleep last night."
Charlie hesitated, then let him go. He had watched him—and Harry hadn't had much sleep at all.

"I miss Theo." Harry told Shadow. He stroked the little thing as it pretended to nap on the spot it had claimed on his chest.

'Your mate?'

"Yes."

'Why is he not here?'

"He had some business to take care of."

'More important business?' Shadow blew a raspberry.

Harry rubbed his nose gently to the cool, scaled face. "Something like that."

'Something?'

"You know, I don't think anyone would be happy to see us together." He admitted. "They'd all pitch a fit." But even as he spoke, Harry smiled, his mind locked on the memory of those rich, honey-gold eyes and those, wicked, wicked hands. "They'd yell." He told Shadow. "But I'd laugh." He snorted. "I'd laugh 'cause it wouldn't matter anymore."

Eventually, his stomach did protest and Harry found himself on the last end of his food-craving cycle, wanting some fresh, whole fruit. Normally, he loved Mrs. Weasley's cooking and there was never any reason for him to think of it as anything other than delicious. But then that pesky inheritance bit had come along and the next thing he'd knew, he was scarfing down foods that normally wouldn't have agreed with him.

The birthday box had gone virtually untouched.

He slipped out of Charlie's room and padded down the stairs with the intent of grabbing a few pieces of fruit from the kitchen. He'd already considered a good story to give Mrs. Weasley if she caught him, but he was counting on the fact that they'd all be too busy at the table with their guests and the food to notice him.

At times like this, he dearly wished for his magic and the simplicity and ease that a simple notice-me-not charm would provide. With a sigh, he peered around the corner of the wall into the kitchen and stifled a groan. Everyone was seated around the table, mid-meal, chattering and talking over each other in their usual way.

The only thing out of place was a certain white-bearded wizard—Dumbledore.

Twinkling blue eyes zeroed in on him at once. "Harry!" Dumbledore greeted. "Mr. Weasley said you were resting. I trust you are feeling better?"

Harry reluctantly stepped out from behind the wall as all eyes now turned to him. "Hello Professor Dumbledore." He hovered in the doorway, torn between his stomach and wanting to know if there was any news. "Has there been any news?"

"Oh Harry, come in dear, sit down!" Mrs. Weasley fussled, bustling over to him and ushering him into the room, all but dragging him to a chair and sitting him down in an empty chair beside Ginny.
"I'll fix you a plate." She dived for the stack of clean plates and began to fill the ceramic disc with a little bit of everything.

The elderly wizard sighed. "Unfortunately no." He began. "There hasn't been any reports on Vold-" He stopped, as if suddenly realizing he had the ears of Lavender Brown, Dean Thomas, Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnegan around him. "Ah, just a moment." He slipped his wand out from his sleeve and traced a few shapes in the air, before casting a temporary silencing charm around the four odd student-guests. "There." A moment later, the four in question were chattering amongst themselves again and their attention was back on their meal.

Harry wondered exactly what spell the old wizard had cast. He'd never known a simple silencing or privacy spell could do that. "Is he back?" Harry prompted. Severus. He corrected, mentally, hoping that Dumbledore could take the hint and tell him what he wanted to know. He didn't want to break the Potions Master's cover in some inadvertent way and somehow he doubted that Ron really believed that Severus was a spy for the light. Any conversation here could become dangerous if Ron chose to repeat any of it in the future in a less opportune moment. Harry leaned back as Mrs. Weasley placed the plate in front of him. He ignored Charlie's sudden, piercing gaze and the worried glances from the Twins. He had a feeling that serious talk they'd warned him off would probably happen sometime in the near future.

Dumbledore shook his head, sadly. "No, he has not yet returned to us. Have you had any dreams or visions of-"

"No." Harry cut him off. "Nothing." He ignored the sudden, startled blue gaze that drilled into him from Charlie's corner of the table. "What about Hermione, sir? Has anyone found her? Who is searching? Have they found anything? Can I help?"

"There's nothing to worry about, Harry. There are people searching and I shall let you know as soon as there is any information. Right now, I'm afraid there isn't anything you can do to help. It would be best if you could simply lie low for a bit." Dumbledore's twinkle faltered for a moment. "I am sure Miss Granger is fine. She is a-"

"A smart witch and can take care of herself." Harry finished. "Yes, I know Professor. That's not what I'm asking. I want to know who's looking for her and if they've found anything yet." His eyes narrowed. "And if they haven't found anything, then why? Hermione's smart. She would've left some clue for us to find if she was kidnapped and if she wasn't, then that means that she's somewhere nearby and we should find her!" A sudden, urgency had come over him in regards to the bushy-haired witch. It was almost like a bad premonition and Harry didn't really want to focus on it.

Dumbledore heaved a sigh, but then paused and rethought whatever it was he nearly said, at a sudden, puzzled look from the Weasley parents. "We are doing all that we can." He said, calmly. "Hogwarts is still marked. Everyone on its grounds would be in danger should they venture back. I am sure that if Miss Granger were there, we would have heard from her by now and-"

"When was the last time you saw, Hermione, Ron?" Harry turned on his best friend. His piercing emerald eyes zeroed in on Lavender and she immediately dropped her vise-like grip on the redheaded boy's arm. She might not be able to make much sense of the conversation happening around her, but she could certainly read the unspoken words in Harry's glare. "I left you two at lunch to go and see Professor Dumbledore with Professor McGonagall." He frowned. "She said she was going to go to the library. Didn't you go with her?"

Ron blushed a bright and healthy red. "Er, she was just going to do some research mate." He fidgeted. "I-I didn't want to be in the way. You know how she is when you interrupt her and she
reading."

"How could you have been in the way?" Harry's voice had gone deathly, silky soft. "It's just research. It wouldn't have killed you to read a few books."

A flicker of anger filtered through Ron's blue eyes. "So? It's not like my reading them would've helped." He said, defensively.

Harry perked a brow. "So where did you go then? You just let her go off to the library alone?"

"I didn't just leave her" Ron protested. "She can take care of herself!"

"No she can't!" Harry snapped. "You all know how she gets when she starts reading!" He glowered at his fellow classmates, more perturbed than he'd been in a long while. Hermione had always had a hard time making friends, but Harry had always reasoned that their unlikely friendship was something that would stand strong through anything—even Ron's idiocy. "You know how wrapped up she can be inside a book and forget everything else!" He snapped. "She wouldn't have even noticed that there was something wrong with the-"

"Harry, my boy, calm down." Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat, meaningfully. "The Hogwarts library was evacuated as well and there is no one there."

"Is?" Harry demanded.

"Was." Dumbledore amended. "Both. There was no one inside when we cleared the castle and there is no one there now."

Harry's glare didn't lessen. "So what are you doing to find her?" His Dragel senses had begun screaming at him the moment he'd finally registered the new pairing of Ron and Lavender. The change in scent had confirmed it. There was no hint of Hermione anywhere. It hit him somewhere below the stomach in a spot where Harry hadn't really wanted to acknowledge. Sure, he'd been secretive and distant for a significant portion of the school semester so far, but that didn't mean that he was any less attentive. He'd still made time to do homework with Hermione—Terius' charm with prying questions had made it an enjoyable experience—and he's still played chess with Ron every few days. He still listened to their conversations, even if he still had nothing to add to them.

That was how he knew where Hermione had been going. That was how he knew that Ron had been the last one to see her. That was how he knew—something was horribly, terribly wrong.

"We are doing all we can." Dumbledore repeated.

"Aurors?" Harry demanded. "If her parents weren't muggles, I'm sure they'd insist on-"

"Aurors?" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, her hand went to her mouth. "Albus, is it that serious? I thought you were able to get everyone off the grounds once you saw the-"

"You mean once Professor McGonagall almost lost her temper." Harry half-spat. "You didn't think that it was important enough to get everyone out of the castle with-"

"Albus, is that true?" Mr. Weasley's soft blue eyes had suddenly sparked to life. He was fiercely protective of his large family and mothering wife. The fact that a respected wizard had almost knowingly endangered not only his children, but others as well, didn't sit right with him.

"I was considering alternative options." Dumbledore said, smoothly. The twinkling blue eyes grew hard. "I would not have chosen something that would have put my students—or you children—in
danger." He frowned. "Harry, I did not come here to debate what is already done. I've come to discuss an important matter of your-"

"Hermione is important!" Harry's statement was punctuated by a vicious hiss from his shoulder—Shadow—who chose now to make his presence known.

Mrs. Weasley squeaked from her position on the opposite end of the table. "Is that a-!"

"He's mine." Harry snapped. "Charlie gave him to me." His emerald eyes sparked with a flicker of gold. "His name is Shadow."

"He's adorable!" Ginny gushed, she reached towards the little thing.

Harry swatted her hand away, annoyed. "Don't!" He snapped. "He bites." Shadow chirruped in agreement, yawning to show his pointy teeth. His blue-violet eyes morphed into the darker shade of purple.

Ginny stared at him. As did nearly everyone else at the table.

But Harry's attention was fixed on only one thing. Dumbledore. A low rumble sounded in his chest, birthing in a quiet growl. "She's been missing for a whole night and half-a-day. If Voldemort has her-" he ignored the slight flinches around him. "Then he won't be kind to her."

"I'm sure if she was taken—we will let us know and we will do our best to-"

"What if she's somewhere else?" Harry wanted to know. "Shouldn't you contact the Aurors? Just in case?"

"You know Minister Fudge does not agree that there is a threat at large and-"

"Don't you want to find her?" Almost the moment, he'd said the words, Harry wished that he could take them back.

Dumbledore's expression darkened considerably. "Harry." His voice was weighted with a tinge of magic. The privacy shields flickered out, signaling the end of all private conversation.

Harry swallowed, feeling the touch of magic and Shadow's quivering form as he burrowed into Harry's neck, cuddling up at the collar of the borrowed shirt. Why oh why couldn't he ever keep his mouth shut when it counted?

"I actually came to discuss an important matter with you."

"Important?" Harry managed. What could be more important than Hermione?

"Yes. Your bonding to Mr. Theodore Nott." The blue eyes were hard and piercing.

Harry felt this throat tighten and his stomach clench. He couldn't believe it. But now he had no choice. He had heard it. He could now hear the whispers of the Weasleys and his fellow Gryffindors. "What of it?" He forced himself to speak quietly and calmly. Shadow licked his neck in support. Harry resisted the urge to suddenly and violently destroy something.

"It worries me that you did not think it was important enough to-"

"What has happened between me and my…mate is personal and private." Harry shot up from his chair. "It isn't anyone's business."
"Mate?" Mrs. Weasley's voice grew shrill. "Harry, what are you talking about?"

"Nott?" Ron sputtered. "I know you were going around with those snakes, but you—you bonded to one?" A look of complete horror and utter loathing painted itself on the redhead's face. "That's just...that's disgusting!"

Ginny had gone rather pale and she pleaded silently with Harry to take it all back as her brown eyes misted over.

But the green-eyed boy glared at Dumbledore, his hands clenched at his sides, body literally quivering. "That wasn't your news to tell!" He hissed. "And even if it was, couldn't you have found a better way to do it?" The literal tone of his voice made them all flinch.

All except Dumbledore.

"I cannot disguise the truth." The old wizard said, sadly. "And this something that we all must be aware of-"

"The truth of what?" Harry demanded. He held up his hand, the small glamour flickering off to reveal the thick, platinum band on his left hand. "This? This truth? I'm not denying it! I just don't think it's anyone's business who I choose or not!"

"Harry, dear...you are...are you—bonded?" Mrs. Weasley stared at him, tearing up. "You're only sixteen!" Her hand went to her mouth and her bright brown eyes flickered between her teary-eyed daughter and then at the angry Harry. She gave a slight shake of her head.

Mr. Weasley patted her arm soothingly, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Er, Harry, is this true?"

"Tell me it isn't." Ginny whispered from beside Harry's elbow. "You can't be-!"

"I'm afraid it is, Miss Weasley." Dumbledore said, gravely. "It troubles me, Harry that you did not think to inform me of your changed status and I am worried for your health, your lack of magic and-"

The uproar began.

Harry could only stand there, numbly, the hand coming to rest on the back of the chair where he'd sat just moments before.

"Lack of magic?" Fred exclaimed. He looked at George. "Gred?"

The redhead twin shrugged. "I didn't know there was anything wrong with his magic, Forge."

"You're magic's what?" Ron gaped at him.

Ginny looked simply horrified, her expression identical to that of her parents.

His fellow Gryffindors ranged in visions from horrified to complete shock and barely contained reactions in the wake of such startling news.

Charlie only frowned, his blue eyes looking troubled as he attempted to catch Harry's gaze—yet again.

But Harry was only staring at the white-bearded wizard who didn't seem to care about the upset he'd just caused.
"-your association with your mate, is questionable. Mr. Nott comes from a dark family and his influence is less than acceptable, I must protest this on your behalf. I only have your best interests in hand." He sighed. "This cannot be allowed."

"Do you?" Harry swallowed hard. "Do you, sir? If it were anyone else, would you even care?"

"Harry!" The cries went up around the room.

But Harry wasn't listening any more. "Who would you have chosen for me?" He said, bitterly. "Who would you have allowed?"

Dumbledore ignored the jibe. "Well, there is Mr. Henry in-"

"I don't even know him."

"And there were several girls in Hufflepuff and-"

"I don't swing that way."

"-and even Sev-"

"Don't you dare!"

"-and there are bound to have been other options." Dumbledore's gaze narrowed. "Your Dragel nature will not be content with Mr. Nott for long."

A sharp intake of breath came from one end of the table.

"Dragel?" Mrs. Weasley said, sharply. Her tears vanished at once. "Albus, what's going on here? Harry?" There was an edge to her voice, one that demanded answers.

It made Harry shift uneasily.

"Harry has come into a Dragel inheritance this past summer." Dumbledore smiled, charmingly. "As such, he is currently building his mated circle. There are several declared Dragels attending Hogwarts at present, but it seems that Harry has chosen Mr. Nott, in spite of other available suitors-"

Mrs. Weasley's eyes drilled straight into the short, messy-haired boy. "You can't be a Dragel." She said, at last. "You parents wouldn't have had the-"

"Now, Molly, calm down. It isn't anything to get excited over." Dumbledore said calmly. "I'm not sure how it happened, but it is a most wonderful thing. It may just be what we need to win this war. However, Harry's choice in mates is somewhat lacking. I'm sure you're in agreement that there are more suitable-"

"Not a word more, Albus." The witch whirled on him. "I will not have you stirring up trouble where there is none to be had." Her angry gaze whipped around to drill into Harry. "Is it true?" She demanded. "Is it? Are you happy?"

Harry stepped away from his chair, standing tall. "It is." He said, coldly. "I am mated and happily bonded!" His hand dropped back to his side and curled into a fist. "And you, sir, that was not your —truth—to tell!" Harry had never been quite so furious in all his life as he was right now. He was private enough that the mention of something this intensely personal was nothing more than a grave, personal affront. He had wanted to break the news in his own way—and in a decidedly less
public manner.

The Weasleys were the closest thing he'd ever had to—no wait. Harry literally felt his thoughts jerk to a stop as he realized that his Dragel self was only taking on a rather small count at the moment.

For his family circle, he had Terius, Draco, Snape, Blaise and Hermione.

Not the Weasleys.

The realization slammed into him like a bucketload of bricks.

That was not something he'd been prepared for.

He took a staggering step backwards.

Mrs. Weasley lifted her chin high. She turned away from the seething boy and then to face Albus.

The floo flared to life and Professor McGonagall's voice filtered through the room. "Albus? Albus, he's come back. I think you'd best come quickly!"

The tension in the air was abruptly shattered as Dumbledore rose to his feet so quickly, he knocked over his chair and all but dashed to the floo. "When?" He demanded.


"Stand aside, I'm coming through!"
Of Bonds and Dragon Tamers

Chapter Notes

RECAP: Theo is off at Gringotts signing paperwork. Hogwarts has been evacuated due to a magical attack on the school, resulting in the dark mark now floating overhead. Snape has returned from his meeting with Voldemort. Terius and Draco escaped to the Zabini Manor. Harry is at the Burrow with the Weasleys, who are also housing Lavender, Dean, Neville and Seamus. Voldemort has given Rowle permission to attack Harry. During Saturday Night dinner, Dumbledore appears and has no news on Hermione. When Harry pressures him for more drastic measures, he spills the news that Harry is a Dragel, magicless and mated to Theodore Nott.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

In the excitement of Dumbledore leaving, Harry slipped away from the kitchen and retreated—uncertainly—to Charlie's room. He almost locked the door and then he realized that it would be rude to Charlie.

Smiling, kind and understanding Charlie.

With a bitter smile, Harry moved from the bedroom across the hall and into the bathroom. If he couldn't find solitary emptiness he needed, then he'd have to take what he could get.

He shimmied out of the borrowed clothes and folded them carefully on the sink. It wasn't until he stepped into the shadow and sat down under the warm streams of water, did he hear Shadow's mournful chirps.

"Hey Shadow." He held out a hand.

The Nytura looked at him and turned up its nose, turning away.

Harry laughed, humorlessly and let his hand drop back to his side. He'd managed to alienate whatever few friends and folk that didn't immediately brand him as a hopeless case. He traced a few shapes in the water streaming down on his thighs and then he reached up to the left of his neck and stroked the sensitive tattoo there, willing the slight tremors wracking his body to distract him. At times like now, he wished that he'd seen Theo sooner, then the bond would've been more developed and perhaps he wouldn't be alone right now.

Theo…

His head titled back and rested on the tiled wall of the shower-bath.

A sudden well of sorrow bubbled up inside him and he opened his mouth and cried.

Charlie watched his mother turn several shades of pale in the wake of Dumbledore's departure. He took in his father's confused and somewhat bewildered reaction to it. He noticed the Twin's taking over the smothering care of his other siblings and their present guests. He found himself wondering about something that had never occurred to him before.
Secrets.

His family held a secret.

He was relieved when Dumbledore left. He had been hard-pressed to keep his own mouth shut and not necessary to be reaming Harry out, but to defend the young man with the startlingly green eyes and fiery passion that had nearly made him glow when he'd stood up and held out his hand with that silver ring.

Charlie stifled a sigh. So he hadn't imagined it after all. He had seen a ring and that made some sense as he realized it really had been an heirloom book that Harry had summoned—one most likely from the Nott library, if the appearance of the ring was anything to go by.

A slight pang of jealousy registered as he thought that Mr. Nott was a rather lucky fellow.

He wouldn't mind trading places.

The thought didn't even make him blush.

He could see Harry's pale, lithe body in his arms. To feel what it was like when those green eyes were fixed on him with that same intensity and passion. To know what it would be like to claim someone like him—someone like Harry. To know that everything that was Harry, belonged to him.

The flare of possessiveness startled him.

"….arlie!"

The dragon tamer turned. "George?" The twin looked at him in some concern. "I'm fine. What is it?"

"I—nothing." George hesitated.

Charlie frowned. "Did you ever notice anything? Anything at all?"

"With Harry?" George slowly shook his head. "Not really. I mean, he hasn't been eating and he's been really tired for a while, but this past week, I think everything was looking up. He was a little more like himself."

"This past week?" Charlie prompted.

"Yes. It was almost like, he was…normal."

"Normal?"

"Normal for Harry." George shrugged. "You know how." The quieter twin tugged at a shaggy handful of hair. "You've seen how he is."

Charlie grunted. Seeing how Harry was and knowing how Harry was happened to be two entirely different things. He didn't answer.

George didn't seem to expect him to. "You should probably talk to him or something, you know." He paused. "Or something."

"Probably." Charlie allowed. He started forward and then stopped. "George?"

"What?"
"What's a Dragel?"

The twin shrugged. "Don't know. Freaked Mum out though." He hesitated. "Isn't it that monster in those fairy tales Ginny used to love?"

"Hm. Could be." Charlie nodded and disappeared up the stairs.

Charlie found himself standing outside the bathroom door, holding a sniffling Shadow in his hands. From the sounds he could hear in the bathroom, Harry was taking his second shower of the day. "Er, I take it he's in there?" He tilted his head towards the closed door. "Did he lock you out?"

The Nytnora trilled sadly, then scampered up Charlie's arm and curled around his neck with a quick swipe of a rough pink tongue to one smooth cheek.

"Grew a little, didn't you?" Charlie muttered to himself, noting that the little thing was now able to twine itself comfortably around his neck without falling off. He hesitated for a moment and then turned away from the closed door and crossed the hall to enter his bedroom. He moved through to the other side and sat down on the bed for a moment.

Then he waved his wand and summoned the books to him.

"Dragel…” He muttered. "Fairy tales…”

"Sign here and here, Mr. Nott." The goblin tapped the lines with one pointed finger.

Theo scribbled his signature on the necessary lines after a reassuring glance from his solicitor, Mr. Ames. "Any others?"

"Just a few more." The goblin rolled up the parchments and tied and sealed them. He then took another set from the stack on his desk and began to unroll them. "There are also a few that will require your mate's signature."

"Ah. Of course. Do I need to bring him here or can he sign them at his convenience and I'll bring them by?"

"Either way is fine. As long as it is done before next week. They are necessary for this to go through with minimal-"

"Of course. Thank you. I'll see if I can bring this back by tomorrow, perhaps?"

"Good. Now, for the matter of the joint estates from your grandfather's side…”

Theo stiffened, his hand quivering faintly. "Begging your pardon, might I have a moment?" The smile was forced.

"Go on." Mr. Ames, nodded.

Theo returned the nod, gratefully as he excused himself to the loo and immediately locked and bolted the door behind him, casting a locking and silencing spell for additional privacy.

"Harry?" There was a flicker of irritation in his voice. "What exactly are you doing that-" Theo abruptly crumpled to his knees. The sudden surge of emotional backlash that filtered through their bond left him breathless as he was hit by the wall of intense sadness and anger.
Something had happened.

His hands morphed to claws and he struggled not to wreck anything nearby and to keep the sudden transformation from showing. Usually he was able to control it, but at the moment, he had the sudden urge to brutally destroy anything that crossed his path—or that simply happened to be breathing and handy enough nearby. Theo swallowed hard, forcing himself to center and focus. Destruction of goblin property wouldn't go over in his favor very well at all.

Something had hurt and disturbed Harry in a place where he should've been safe, at a time where Theo couldn't go to him.

His Dragel self raged and roared within, demanding to be released. Theo began to count his breaths and murmur binding oaths beneath his breath to keep his elemental gift from toying with the foundations of Gringotts. That definitely wouldn't put him in the goblins good graces.


He breathed a sigh of relief and then loosened his robes and undid the front buttons of his shirt to see the mating mark on his left bicep. "Oh Harry." The normally dark burgundy-black tattoo was a fierce, pulsing angry red. He drew in a deep breath and sectioned his mind off to find all the calm that he could and channel it through the mark.

He did this twice before the angry red throbbing stilled and then, slowly faded back to its usual color.

Theo leaned back against the door, his head resting on the cool metal as he closed his eyes and waited. There wasn't much more he could do with the mark, not at their current stage of the relationship. It would take time for the other intimate aspects to develop and he'd just have to make do for now.

There was bound to be some sort of feedback through the bond.

Sure enough, it came a moment later.

A torrent of mixed feelings tempered by a sudden, fierce longing.

Theo winced.

When Harry finally stepped out of the shower, his fingers were pruny and his scowl was more pronounced. He painstakingly toweled himself dry and mentally rehearsed a half-dozen different scenarios in his head before he finally decided to make use of what Gryffindor courage was left to him. He redressed in the borrowed clothes and after a quick check in the hallway, shuffled over to tap lightly on Charlie's bedroom door.

He entered, after a moment, and found the dragon tamer in question busy cataloging the abundance of artifacts.

He stood, awkwardly for a long moment and then Charlie looked up and perked a brow.

Harry shrugged.
Charlie shrugged.

Harry nibbled on his lower lip.

Charlie waved him towards the floating quill and parchment. "Start on the last line," He instructed.

Harry did.

They worked in silence for some time.

Shadow uncurled itself from Charlie's neck to flutter across the small space between them and take up residence on Harry's head.

It brought a smile to the faces of both young men.

"Charlie?"

"Mm?"

"You don't mind?"

The dragon tamer shrugged. "It's none of my business, is it?"

Harry blinked in surprise. He ducked his head to hide the faintest makings of a smile. "No, I guess not." He hesitated. "Is your Mum really mad?"

"Not sure." Charlie thought for a moment. "She was more upset over the fact that you didn't eat."

"Speaking of which, you haven't eaten anything-" Blue eyes narrowed meaningfully. "I'm on a special diet." Harry said, quickly. "I can't uh, eat some of the same stuff as the rest of you."

Charlie brightened in understanding. That made perfect sense. "Ah. Right. Sorry. Is there anything you can eat that you'd like?" He gestured towards a stack of books near the headboard of his bed. "There wasn't much information in those, so I'm afraid you'll have to enlighten me." Harry stared at him. Charlie chuckled. "If you need something, ask and if there's something I need to do, then tell me, alright?"

The phrasing made Harry's cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink.

Charlie didn't seem to notice.

They worked for a little while longer.

Charlie eventually accio'd some fruit from the kitchen and set it beside the smaller man as they worked through Bill's gifts. Harry happily helped himself to a few polished specimens when they were placed well within arms' reach.

The redhead took note of that detail with a little prickle of satisfaction and surreptitiously moved another set closer. He hid a smile when Harry continued to nibble away without a pause in his sorting and quiet mutterings.

Eventually, Charlie called it a night. "Mind sharing the bed?" He inquired, handing over a fresh pair of transfigured pyjamas, having already changed over himself.
Harry looked at him quizzically and took the proffered bundle. "Why would I?"

"Usually there'd be room on the floor or something, but Shadow kind of distracted me—us—last night. I never asked and the room was so crowded, well-" Charlie shrugged.

A faint tinge of paleness colored Harry's features as he registered that news and processed it. "Oh." Harry pressed the borrowed pyjamas to his face and inhaled deeply. They smelled like Charlie. Charlie smelled wonderful. "I'm fine—well, actually, it's still a bit cold."

Charlie blinked. "Cold?" He frowned. "I forgot to put the stone out to charge."

Harry turned his back to the mumbling wizard and quickly changed out into his pyjamas. His innocent attempt at prompting a blush from Charlie went entirely unnoticed as the dragon tamer was busy mumbling numbers and figures to himself in regards to the heating stone and possible times. Harry rolled his eyes and climbed into the large bed.

The dark-haired boy wriggled into a comfortable position on one corner and then held up the covers and waved a hand to get Charlie's attention.

"Yes?" Charlie said, expectant—he had stopped in mid-stride and mid-pace.

"It's cold. I'm freezing." Harry said, pointedly. He was getting tired—it had been a long day—and he didn't have the energy to play cute games. Cute wasn't really his style anyway.

Charlie stared.

Harry huffed. "Just get over here!"

The redhead inched towards the bed and after a moment, he climbed in and pulled the covers away from Harry to tuck them around himself. Harry gave him a moment to settle in and then immediately snuggled up to him and closed his eyes. "Er, Harry?"

"Warm." Harry yawned, sleepily.

Charlie swallowed again, a little harder than before. "Right." A flush of warmth washed over the redhead wizard. "Nox." He muttered, a moment later.

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Charlie Weasley did not sleep a wink that night.

Harry Potter slept quite comfortably.

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SUNDAY MORNING

The next morning, Charlie couldn't rouse the brunet—or Shadow—and he finally gave up, trooping downstairs solo again, having left the unlikely pair curled up in bed around each other.

His mother met him on the stairs, an unreadable expression on her face.

"Sleeping in again." Charlie shrugged. "He's really tired, but I don't think that he had any nightmares last night and-

"Don't you make excuses for him, Charles Weasley!" His mother eyed him meaningfully. "He can make his own." She strode up the stairs, a wooden spoon clenched in hand. "Get down to the kitchen and help with the-"
Charlie backtracked quickly after her. There was no way he was going to let her loose in his room full of partially catalogued rarities. There were too many potential disasters that could happen. Well, that and the fact that Harry was currently sleeping in his pants and nothing more, having shed the pyjamas sometimes during the night and was now rolled up in the sheets.

Harry probably wouldn't forgive him for a rude awakening.

"Er, Mum, wait up-!" and Charlie hurried after her.

Breakfast was about halfway through when there was a knock at the front door.

Harry stiffened at once, his entire body going rigid before his head swiveled in the direction of the door and he tensed.

"Expecting anyone, dear?" Mrs. Weasley frowned. Harry hadn't made any effort to eat his breakfast and he was merely toying with the food.

"No one." Mr. Weasley frowned in thought. "I don't think," He started and then stopped. He exchanged a look with his wife. They had taken precautions at Dumbledore's mention of it and most folk they knew, could simply floo through—there wouldn't be anyone who would actually use the front door, much less to knock. Mrs. Weasley popped up from her seat at once, her light brown eyes snapping. She hurried to the door, wiping her hands on an apron—with her wand hidden in the pocket. She opened the door and stared for a moment, barring the doorway with her imposing figure.

A disgruntled young man with thick, wavy chocolate-colored hair stood on the front stoop, several rolls of parchment in his hand, a sharp look in his startlingly vivid gold eyes.

"May I help you?" She drew quickly on her manners and lifted her chin.

"I'm here for Harry Potter." The young man swept her over with a singular glance. "Harry?" He tilted his head to the side and called over Mrs. Weasley's shoulder.

"Theo!" The name came before the speaker did, but even as the newcomer took a bracing step backwards, the emerald-eyed wizard rounded the corner and all but threw himself at the figure. A very noticeable hum of magical energy snapped to life and hummed contentedly around them.

The young man—Theo—winked. He stood stock still while Harry hugged him tight, gold eyes roving upwards to the sky and the overhead awning of the Burrow.

Harry caught himself a moment later and pulled away, anxiously. "Theo?" Worry overtook him at once. His mate hadn't returned the embrace, perhaps he'd missed something. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't-"

Theo tugged an arm free and locked it around Harry's waist before bending his head down to greet his mate with a warm, soft kiss. "Harry." He greeted, politely. "Nothing to be sorry for." He whispered in Harry's ear. "I just wasn't expecting—I take it, there is no need for secrecy?"

Harry melted into his arms, relief coursing through him. He shook his head in answer, burying his face in the sweetly scented curve of Theo's neck and breathing in the calming aroma.

"It's too soon." Theo murmured into the messy bedhead. He tightened his arm around the slender waist and wrinkled his nose at the distorted scent filtering up to him. He didn't comment on it, though a rather obvious furrow settled itself in his brow. The parchment in his hand hovered beside him, freeing said hand which immediately found its way around Harry's shoulder and slipped over
the collar of his shirt to find and stroke the tattoo along his neck.

A soft, humming chir came from Harry.

Theo almost smiled. "Am I allowed inside or…?" He prompted, with a flicker of a smile towards the silent, stiff Mrs. Weasley.
An awkward silence descended when Harry led a tired Theodore Nott into the Weasley's boisterous kitchen. The noise died at once and while Ron went several interesting shades of red and purple, Lavender and the others opted for shades of pale.

"Is this a bad time?" Theo froze in the doorway, refusing to budge when Harry attempted to tug him forward.

"It's fine." Harry made himself say. He didn't care if it wasn't. He'd been missing Theo, wanting Theo and needing him—there was no way he was about to let his mate out of his sight any time soon.

"Harry!" Charlie's warning came a tad late.

Shadow's happy fluttering through the air was mostly on target—it clipped the top of Harry's head and smashed face first into the face of a very surprised Slytherin.

Theo froze—predictably—and then reached up with one hand and gently pried the chirruping creature off his face. He held it up by the scruff and frowned when Shadow squirmed and licked his nose. "Harry?" Theo said, dryly. Harry immediately held his hands out. Theo deposited the creature and then rubbed his face. "I take it you intend to keep it?"

"His name's Shadow." Harry said, helpfully. He cuddled Shadow up beneath his chin, realizing for the first time, the stares he received in relation to his sudden state of near clinginess to his new mate. A pale flush of red began to creep over him. "Charlie gave him to me."

"Charlie?" Theo repeated. "Charlie as in…"

Harry tipped his head in the direction of the ponytailed dragon tamer.


Emerald eyes narrowed faintly. Regardless of whether they were in his family circle or not, the Weasleys had always been decent to him, more decent than others had ever been anyway. "Dragon tamer." Harry shot a glare at Theo. "Charlie Weasley the dragon tamer."

"Dragon tamer?" Theo repeated.


"Pleasure to meet you." Charlie stuck out his hand.

Theo looked at it and then at Harry. There was an unreadable expression on his face. "Nott." The golden-eyed drage allowed. He shook the proffered hand, firmly. "Theodore Nott. The pleasure is all yours, I'm afraid. I've only come on business." The golden eyes flickered to Harry. "Important business." Theo held out a hand and the floating parchments thunked solidly into his open palm.

"What's wrong?" Harry settled Shadow comfortably on his shoulders.

"I have some documents you needed to sign, so I offered to bring them so the rest of the
settlements could be finished today and-

"You didn't come to pick me up?" Harry cut him off. He stared at the older boy with an expression of incredulity on his face.

Theo blinked. "You want to leave?" He countered. That was certainly news to him.

"Leave?" Ron sputtered. "You're leaving us to go with that-!"

"Harry, you're not going to leave!" Ginny protested.

"We didn't even prank him, Gred." Fred's brow creased in worry. He couldn't recall a time the kind-hearted wizard had ever willingly left their home of his own accord—it was always a reluctant affair in every way. As if sensing his tangled thoughts, George nudged his foot under the table and shot him a warning glance. The redhead twin straightened at once.

It seemed like Harry and Theo were having a scowling match.

"We need to talk about this, Harry." Theo's golden gaze hardened. "Now." He held out his hand.

Harry's scowl darkened into a glare and after a moment, he snatched the proffered hand and stalked off, yanking Theo after him as he headed for the stairs and the known privacy of Charlie's bedroom.

The moment they were in Charlie's bedroom, Theo locked and warded the door, throwing up silencing spells and privacy wards as if it were as simple as breathing. To the cautious Slytherin, it probably was.

Harry stood a few feet away, arms crossed over his skinny chest, his chin jutting out defiantly and his shoulders slightly drooping.

"What happened last night?" Theo demanded. He tossed the parchment rolls to the bed and moved forward, gathering a resisting Harry into his arms and holding him anyway.

A soft warm tingle of energy filtered over from Theo's comforting hands. Harry squirmed for a moment, realizing the touch of magic for what it was—a diagnostic spell to be sure that he was alright.

"I'm fine. Let me go!"

"Absolutely not." Theo kissed his cheek and tightened his hold. "You nearly caused an earthquake at Gringotts."

Harry blinked, his emerald eyes wide. "I what?" He spluttered.

"Something upset you, treasure." Theo's voice and expression softened considerably. "I was worried. You were so...tortured." Harry fisted his hands in Theo's robes. "That is why I offered to bring the papers to you, over my solicitor, Mr. Ames. They are expecting me back today. I cannot stay."

Harry huffed. "You just came for my signature and-"

Theo cut him off with a kiss. A right proper snog that left Harry suitably flushed and decidedly speechless. "I came to be sure that you were alright." He countered, stroking one flushed cheek with warm fingers. "Papers that I am filing are to be sure that no one can interfere and take you
away from me." He kissed his favorite spot—the edge of Harry's scar. "The sooner I file them, the better it is and the more protected we are." He pulled away and released Harry, moving to clear a spot on the cluttered bed and then to sit down. He patted his lap and waited.

Harry swallowed, then moved forward and after a moment's hesitation, he straddled Theo's lap, arms resting trustingly on the Slytherin's shoulders.

"You haven't been eating anything." Theo cupped his face with one hand and stroked his cheek with one thumb. "Why?"

Harry looked away. "It doesn't feel right." He whispered.

"How so?"

"I-I don't know."

"Then you're forgiven." Theo reached up to unbutton the top buttons of his high-necked dress shirt and pulled it away to reveal the paleness of his neck. He drew his claw-lengthened fingers over it in a quick slash. Blood welled up at once. He caught Harry's head, tangling his fingers in the short black hair as he guided his mate forward. "Drink, quickly." He ordered.

Harry squirmed, but when the scent of blood caught his Dragel side, he eagerly latched onto the cut and began to suckle. A moment later, contented purrs rumbled out from his chest as he began to rub gently against Theo's clothed figure.

Theo silently counted inside his head, using a slight tug on Harry's hair when he knew his mate had taken enough.

A whine sounded in the back of Harry's throat, but he licked at the wound, healing it over and nuzzling the neck in thanks before he withdrew. When Theo made no move to take from him, Harry's green eyes narrowed and he drew a clawed hand quickly over one wrist and presented it to his mate.

"Harry-" Theo began.

"You're cranky when you don't have something to occupy your fangs." Harry said, softly. "You're not allowed to-"

"Gringotts requires tests in which they need an even keel on magical signature." Theo lapped gently at the wound, loathe to sink his fangs into the perfect, wrist. "When I eat, my body immediately converts the food to energy, a process that can disrupt the signature for the kind of testing that they are doing."

"They know you're Dragel, then?"

"Of course. The goblins know and respect what we are. It is the wizarding world that has issues with us."

Harry pushed his wrist forward a little more, stifling a giggle at the tickling feel of Theo's warm tongue. He could understand with that explanation and he knew enough to know that blood sharing wouldn't affect anything. He could feel his earlier anxiety calming down to near nothing in the wake of his mate caring for him in such a special way. The bond between them sang happily and the thread of elemental energy shared with him, sparked to life and glowed brightly.

Theo didn't take much at all, but he thanked Harry for his offer and healed the slit wrist, watching
as the scar appeared and then faded away to nothing. "We have to talk." He said, a moment later, summoning the parchments to him. "Sign first. The signatures should register from here."

Harry pouted.

Theo gave a small smile. "There's only six." He eased Harry off his lap and quickly opened the roll of parchments. In a matter of minutes, he'd explained things like his monetary inheritance and what joint assets were theirs. Harry quickly signed and then watched as Theo rolled them up and tucked them inside his robes.

He would much more prefer that Theo was taking the robes off rather than putting things into them, when he caught sight of the conflicted expression on the golden-eyed boy's face. "Theo?"

"So you've chosen Charlie Weasley?" There was an air of resignation as he spoke, rising from the bed and moving to stand opposite beside one of the stacks of boxes.

Harry stiffened at once. He'd hoped that perhaps Theodore would show his maturity here and not start up something with the Weasleys. Then again, he nibbled his lip, recalling the revelation the night before. He hadn't included them in his family circle. He also hadn't been able to process a lot of things since he'd arrived at the Burrow. Something was off. Perhaps that was what Theo was hinting at. He hunched his shoulders forward. He might have chosen Charlie, at first, but as far as he could tell, the redhead didn't seem to even notice—much, anyway. "So what if I did?"

"Blood traitors?" Theo sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Blood traitors, Harry?"

"It's not their fault that they didn't choose to follow some sick twisted madman and-" Harry was on his feet at once, his hands clenched at his sides. "...go around killing people for fun and—you don't know everything that they've been through!" He said, hotly.

The golden eyes gave a rather spectacular roll. "Phrasing." He muttered to himself. "I have to work on phrasing. Harry, before we have another ridiculous miscommunication of sorts, allow me to repeat the emphasis. Blood traitors. Do you know what that means to a Dragel?"

Harry blinked.

"It means their blood is like poison to us." Theo watched, waiting as the news sunk in. "If you were to try to access his element or solidify your bond before certain measures are taken, it could kill you. He would not mean to, but ancient magic answers to no one. There is a reason there are such stigmas against blood traitors. It is a warning to those of our kind and similar. I would also have to lay some claim to him in one way or another, to establish our hierarchy and blood sharing would most certainly be necessary—as my primary function would be to care for you, my blood would see him as a threat and eliminate him before anything could be done."

Harry's horrified expression spoke for him.

"Right. I didn't think you knew." Theo eyed him, carefully. "I do not have anything against the Weasleys—any of them. But I do have something against his current state and I'm surprised you cannot smell it. If you intend to include him in our circle, might I suggest claiming him soon?" He watched as Harry slowly sat down on the edge of the bed. "You should be able to handle a few mouthfuls or so, it will not affect you, seeing as you have fed recently. That's why I had you feed in the first place. I thought it might be why you were not eating, but, if you haven't marked him yet—and I could not feel a mark of claim on him—then I would suggest doing so very soon in the near future. It will be easier on all of us." He sighed. "You should also mention that I will be requiring him to undergo a blood purification ritual. It will not hurt him, but it will make him neutral as deep
as blood runs and everything will be fine afterwards. You need not worry, I will make the necessary preparations if you are sure this is what you want."

After a long, silent moment, Harry gave a single nod. He could now understand the significance of Theo's actions and his mind was slowly uncovering a fuzzy snippet of news he'd read in that giant encyclopedia. Dragels were blood creatures. They were blood creatures. He wanted Charlie and he most certainly didn't want to hurt him or Theo. "Please." He said, softly.

"You are certain?"

"Yes."

"Very well." Theo gave a short, stiff nod. "I shall see to it."

"...Theo?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you have to fight?"

"What?"

"The hierarchy thing." Harry swallowed. "I don't want you two to fight." He looked up, imploringly. "Please don't fight."

Theo gave him a long, searching look. "If you do not wish for me to fight, then I shall only engage him if he acts first." He said at last.

Relief spread through the smaller wizard at once. "Thank you." He said, faintly. A sudden giddiness washed over him. This was wonderful news. "Thank you, dominant. I'll tell him, if that's alright."

"It is fine."

"Thank you."

"It is nothing." Theo turned towards the door. "I would do whatever you asked of me, within reason." He nodded. "I definitely need to be going now, there will be much to do and only just enough time to be sure that it is taken care of." He started forward only to be caught from behind by Harry's desperate hug. "Harry!"

"Don't go yet." Harry mumbled into his back.

"I have to hand over these agreements in person and I will now have to see about the ritual with the purif-"

"Just wait." Harry's grip on him tightened. "Please, don't go—yet." Harry winced, feeling a sudden spike of uneasiness in their shared element between them.

Theo whirled around and caught him as Harry's knees buckled under him. "Harry!"

The emerald eyes shimmered. "I'm always causing some sort of trouble, aren't I?" He asked, softly.

"Never." Theo quirked a smile. "As I continually remind you." He kissed the upturned face and whispered against the warm cheek. "Are you tempting me on purpose?"
The shimmering eyes glittered wickedly. "I really missed you."

"So I see."

Harry didn't answer that. He couldn't. He was otherwise occupied.

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**HOGWARTS GROUNDS : CENTER OF THE FORBIDDEN FOREST : SUNDAY, NOON**

Death came walking softly, with shadows and darkness clinging 'round as she glided forth, life flowing into her as the forbidden forest shook in the wake of a lady who knew the world was hers.

She cast a disdainful glare all about, everywhere and then felled a tree for the sole purpose of having a newly hewn seat. The cloaks and silks of blackest black swirled around her as she seated herself and lifted one hand. "Where is it?" Her voice was rough and hoarse as if it were rarely used if at all.

A wisp of a thing, clad in black of course, hurried to kiss her outstretched hand, bobbing in a simply courtesy. "It cometh." The thing squeaked. "It cometh soon, for your ladyship calls it."

The hand was roughly pulled away and the thing hurriedly skittered to the side with a whimper.

Death sat and waited.

The wind howled her displeasure.

The forest quaked.

A moment later, a swirl of shadows before her twisted, stretched and twined into the form of a tall, red-eyed young man. His hair was black with silver highlights in a chin-length bob and he fiddled with the rich silver fastenings on the cuffs of his tight black suit. His face was pale and drawn, his eyes hooded and every so often, he would twitch.

He stared at Death for longer than was strictly polite.

Death rose with a grace and elegance betrayed by the sheer aura of darkness surrounding her. She towered easily over him, the shadows swelling and giving rise to her figure. "You seem well, my pet." She said, at last.

The young man grunted.

She half-smiled. "Did Azkaban not agree with you?" She reached out one long-nailed finger to trail the tip up and down his face, from the center of his forehead, down his nose and to the side of his cheek.

He bared his fangs as her finger traced over his lips.

She laughed. "I would have thought there was enough to satisfy your hunger within their walls."

She sighed.

He snapped at her finger.

The hand jerked away then snapped back and slapped him—hard.

His head jerked to the side.
Her eyes burned with a darkened glow. "You forget yourself." She hissed. "You will regret that."

"I already have!" He snarled.

"And yet you have learned nothing." She said, haughtily.

He shrank back, but his eyes remained bright, defiant.

She turned away, her head bowed. "I have nothing more to say to you."

His head lifted, silently imploring.

"Nay. You have made your bed and so you shall lie in it." Death drew herself up and glided around him. "Your punishment is too light, it seems." She drew a black fan with golden spines out of thin air and waved it about the shadows around her, stirring them up. "Perhaps I should find a way to brand this lesson onto your worthless carcass!"

He whined, low in his throat.

Death huffed. "You disappoint me, pet. I thought you had learned better than this." She turned away, fully and glided forward, from the heart of the forest, towards the edges.

He broke into an easy trot to keep up with her, glaring at the thing that dared to flit between them.

He whined again, as she began to leave the safe darkness of the forbidden center.

She turned back to him with a frown. "Have you not felt that magic? Dark, black magic? Death magic?" She prompted him. He shook his head, worry showing plainly on his features. She sighed. "Someone has called me. One that knows nothing of who I am and what I do." She hummed softly. "He has called me and I must not neglect my duty. I have to go, if only to claim him for such rashness."

His answer was plain and simple. He whimpered and pushed forward to her side, dropping to his knees with his head bent low.

Death almost smiled. She ran one hand through the soft, silky locks of hair. "My disobedient little pet." She murmured. "I will be fine." He shook his head, nosing insistently at the shadowed silks that clung to her. She stroked his head in soft motions and suddenly her head snapped up. She breathed in deeply and then a low growl rumbled in her throat.

He was on his feet at once and standing protectively before her.

She placed a hand on his shoulder and brushed him aside. The shadows carried her forward, swiftly. When she came upon the fallen body, her lips tightened into a thin line. He loped to her side and then stood off to a corner, unsure.

Death circled the young witch, slowly, calculating and then she tapped her chin with one long, scarred finger. "You tempt me, little witch." She whispered, stepping over the fallen body, watching the way the life dribbled out from the small vessel. A lone, pathetic child in a forest where she did not belong, clad in the standard issue dress of a schoolgirl, with the merest scrap of color being the red and gold tie 'round her neck. Death frowned.

She hated unresolved lives.

It gave her indigestion.
She bent to trail her cold fingers along the equally cold cheek.

The child would certainly go into shock soon. It had been there long enough, preserved by whatever spirits or caspers had thought to try and protect it.

Her lips pursed and suddenly, a wicked gleam came to her eyes as she straightened and her gaze went straight to her companion.

He whined, low in his throat, a sound of submission and sorrow.

She laughed, a sound that made him quiver and caused a light blanket of leaves to fall, shriveling as they touched the ground. "I will ease your punishment, pet." She began. "If you will do this." She tilted her head to the side, indicating the nearly-dead witch. "I give you this child. Take good care of it."

He opened his mouth.

She glared at him.

He shut it, meekly.

"I will not hear that you have strayed from her, mistreated her or otherwise abused her." Death's dark eyes narrowed to fine slits. "I will not hear it was you." She turned away. "You may avenge her, if you wish. You may punish her, if she misbehaves. You may possess her if you so desire. I give her to you in her entirety. She is yours to do with as I please. Do you understand me, pet?"

He threw back his head and gave a long, loud howl.

The forest quivered and shook.

Death smiled and the sky darkened.
"...Harry?"

"What?"

"I am serious..." Theo tossed him his shirt from where it lay on the floor. "If he says or does anything else to bother you—anything—tell me."

"So you can do what?" Harry snatched the shirt out of the air and began to shrug it over his shoulders. "It's not like you can-"

"I have more authority than you'd like to think." Theo said, simply. "If he is threatening you or you feel threatened, then I have all rights, as your dominant mate to remedy the situation however I see fit."

"Why do I think that your fit will somehow result in pain and terror for all parties involved?" Harry grumbled. "Where'd you throw my trousers?"


Harry gestured to his pants clad lower-half with one perked eyebrow. He didn't really want to be getting dressed right then, but Theo had mentioned the portkey from Gringotts was timed. The last thing Harry wanted to do was get pulled along with him for the ride.

"Er, vanished them, I think." Theo pinked for a moment. He fumbled in the pockets of his robes and withdrew a handkerchief. A moment later, he handed Harry a newly transfigured pair of decent trousers.

Harry rolled his eyes, but accepted the apologetic kiss to the cheek that came with the new pair. "Those were Charlie's favorite dragonhide pants." He said, casually.

Theo swallowed. "I'll be sure to...remedy that."

Harry snorted. "Do that—and get them properly. He'll know if it's the wrong kind. He is a dragon tamer."

"I don't doubt his dragon taming abilities in the slightest." Theo retorted, slightly miffed. "You, on the other hand...I worry. Have you had any experience taming anything at all?"

Harry blushed spectacularly. "Never mind that! I'm fine. I'll be fine. You don't have to do anything." He looked away.

Theo's golden eyes narrowed. "Nothing doesn't have you all torn up to pieces over-"

"Let it go."

"-something that you don't have any control over-"

"I don't want to talk about it, Theo." Harry said, firmly. "It's my problem and I'll deal with it on my own time."

There was a long pause from the other side of the room as Theo slipped his robes on. "...very well. But, Harry, I am serious."
"I know you are." Harry ran a hand through his messy hair and moved over to get the last of his possible cuddles before Theo was off. The taller wizard willingly wrapped his arms around him in a possessive embrace. "I just don't want...I just..." He sighed, irritated. "I don't know! I just don't want you to-to-you're a Slytherin!"

"Of course."

"Slytherins don't do things in halves."

"Should I be offended?"

"You wouldn't care if it was Dumbledore, Voldemort or what, you'd just—you'd do what you thought was right even if it was wrong...!" Harry trailed off. It had everything to do with being dragel and absolutely nothing to do with being Slytherin, but he couldn't quite make the nonsense in his head make any real sense. If Theo saw something as a threat, there were absolutely no illusions in Harry's mind that said threat would be neutralized or destroyed in short order, especially if one took into account the snippets of things that Theo had to say about his adoptive family circle. His mate certainly had power at his disposal if he so desired it. "I just don't want you to make a-a-"

"To make a muddle of things?" Theo kissed the top of his head. "I'll try, treasure. But I am more inclined to muddle it, if I know you are being hurt by something that should not be hurting you in the -"

"Look, just don't, you know, kill him or anything." Harry mumbled.

"Kill him?" Theo said, innocently. "Me? Kill Dumbledore? Supreme Mugwump and all that?"

Harry groaned. "You would."

Theo smirked. "For you, treasure, I would try my best to keep my temper in check."

And that, Harry figured, was the best he would get out of it.

So he happily spent the next few minutes snogging that smirk off of his mate's face.

When they finally came downstairs some time later, breakfast was over and everyone had remained seated.

The cause of this was the appearance of a familiar, white-bearded wizard.

The very topic of their conversation not moments before.

Dumbledore sat in his seat of honor, a steaming cup of tea before him. He looked up with a smile that froze on his face as he caught sight of Harry and Theo entering the kitchen, their hands linked. "Harry, Mr. Nott."

Harry bristled inwardly and outward, at once. He didn't step backwards, but Theo did step forward and place a reassuring hand on his shoulder, as if sensing what his mate did not outright say. It took a deep breath before Harry could force himself to stand as he normally would and suppress the slightly murderous intent at seeing that smiling face so soon after the secrets it had spilled. The deep breath helped—along with the fact that Theo stood right behind him and that if he dared to falter just then, Theo would probably take some sort of action—and so he didn't answer.
It didn't escape him that Dumbledore had used his name and Theo's student title. He frowned.

Theo's features subtly shifted and rearranged to present an even more neutral mask than his younger mate. "Headmaster." He inclined his head, taking note of the faintly displeased look on the face of the Weasley Matriarch. Something was off there. He mentally filed the detail away for later. "I did not expect to see you here, has something happened?"

The question was genuine and innocently phrased. It hung in the air as the elderly wizard gave a careful shake of his head, blue eyes narrowed faintly. "There are many things happening right now, but it seems that there will not be an attack on Hogwarts after all."

Everyone began to talk amongst themselves.

"What do you mean?"

"No, attack? Then what?"

"What is going to happen then?"

"What about the-!"

Dumbledore held up a hand. "We have received news that the focus of these attacks are all centered around, well," He paused. "Harry."

Theo's face blanked beautifully and Harry grew rather pale and still, his free hand clenched tight beside him.

A quiet, musical trill came from Shadow who leapt off of Harry's shoulder and launched itself onto the table before Dumbledore. It hissed and spat before Harry snatched it up and gave it a slightly disapproving glare. "No, Shadow." He struggled to keep his voice even and calm. "It's not his fault that Voldemort wants me." The smile that was used to punctuate his statement was more forced than anything. "If this is about where I'm staying, then I'll just have to stay somewhere else. I have to do this. No one else can."

Shadow gave a reluctant huff and bit Harry's hand for his troubles. Harry frowned, mildly.

"Harry!" Fred gaped at him. "It's no one's fault and it's definitely not something you have to handle on your own-"

"Do you think he'll come here?" Harry worked to keep the disdain from his voice as he stared down the man who had caused him such grief just a day before.

"It is possible." Dumbledore said, gravely. "The Dark Mark still looms over Hogwarts gate and the magical fluctuations have been causing no end of disastrous-"

"And you're telling Harry this, why?" Theo broke in.

"Because if he's searching for me to attack and knows that I'm staying at here, it'll be a problem." Harry said, quietly. "Haven't you wondered why I'd stay at Hogwarts for the holidays instead of with someone?"

Theo frowned.

Harry sighed. He'd have to deal with that unasked question at another time. This was just a matter of course. He knew that this year couldn't be anything but another horrible trial, but perhaps it
wouldn't turn out to be as bad as he'd figured this time around. At least, right now, he'd have Theo behind him. He also knew what Dumbledore was getting at—he knew the old wizard after all—they'd been through too much for him not to. "Would you prefer that I returned to Hogwarts, sir?"

"Harry, no!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed. "That's far too dangerous for anyone to go back there and-!"

"Harry, I have to agree with Molly. This isn't." Mr. Weasley began.

"You want to go back there?" Seamus sputtered. "Are you insane?"

"There's the what-?"

Protests filled the air until Dumbledore cleared his throat. The clear blue eyes did not twinkle, but they remained bright as they surveyed Harry from head to toe. "Harry, my boy, are you certain of this?"

"That's what you're here for, isn't it?" Harry countered, unable to keep the rest of his accusing words inside. "You came to ask if I'd be bait."

"No!" Mrs. Weasley was on her feet, her face pale, but her body trembling. "Arthur, tell him. Tell him that he can't make Harry do this. It isn't right!"

"There is a war to be won, Molly." Albus said, gravely. "Sometimes one must think of the greater good. Better to lose a battle and win the war than to win a few skirmishes and lose the world." He sighed, laboriously. "It is mere conjecture that perhaps if Harry was present, then we might have an advantage on our side to knowing where the attack would come from. But, our reports verify this as truth. It would be wise to take action on it. Besides, where else could Harry be safer than inside Hogwarts herself?"

"So this might bring him out of hiding or at least force his hand?" Harry mused. It made sense, in a rather twisted way. "Because if he's after me and I'm there, he won't take it out on anyone or anything else." He frowned. "He's never taken this long to attack before."

"Not necessarily." Dumbledore relaxed. "It is about this time that he chooses to make his presence known."

They traded words back and forth until it somehow became decided that Harry would be returning to Hogwarts in accordance with Dumbledore's plans. The younger children and guests had been hustled off and out of the proceedings, courtesy of one upset Molly Weasley. Strangely enough—though somewhat unsurprisingly—Ron was one of those hustled out. He didn't seem the least bit put out as he left with Lavender on his arm, albeit a tad pale at the casual discussion of attacks and counterattacks.

Harry would've thought it might bring out his strategical side. But Ron had only shuddered and scrambled to get up and out when the others had left.

No one commented on it.

Strangely, Dumbledore hadn't said a word to Mrs. Weasley since his arrival. Upon closer look, she hadn't even served him tea, Ginny had done it before leaving.

Mr. Weasley wasn't the least bit happy about the conversation, though it seemed more attuned to the fact that only because it was upsetting his dear wife, who hadn't so much as spoken a word in contribution to the conversation other than her initial protest and there was something akin to a fire
burning in her light brown eyes.

Charlie and the twins spoke up in Harry's defense, as Harry himself wasn't saying much.

They were, unfortunately, shot down by Harry with his own brand of equally logical reasoning. It finally ended with the exasperated exclamation. "I'm going to do this and nothing any of you say is going to change my mind!" Harry snapped. "Can't you even consider how I'd be if I was the cause of everything going-"

"But you aren't causing any trouble," Fred protested. "This is madness! If you don't have any magic, how can you just put yourself up for-!"

"Fred's right, Harry." George spoke up in his quiet way, wary of the untwinkling blue eyes that were riveted on him. "At least, you should wait until there are definite plans before going-"

"I can't wait!" Harry snapped. "You heard what Dumbledore said." He swallowed. The blue eyes had iced over. "Professor Dumbledore," He corrected, quickly, avoiding the penetrating gaze. "The longer I take to make up my mind, the bigger advantage that we'll have-"

"Harry, I'm with Fred and George on this." Mr. Weasley tried again. "It is dangerous, especially if what Albus said yesterday is true. You have no magic and this will be dangerous. I don't doubt Albus' ability to protect you, but Albus-" and he looked to the elderly wizard. "You said it yourself, this is war."

Harry's hands clenched at his sides. He was remembering lines of a prophecy speaking of a power that the 'Dark Lord knew not'. Perhaps that was it. The power to be powerless. No magic certainly equated to that. He sighed. "Mr. Weasley-"

"Harry," Charlie finally interjected. "If you're going through with this, there needs to be a back-up plan of some sort and-"

"No." Theo finally spoke. The weight of the singular word said more than perhaps, a mouthful would have. All eyes turned to the Slytherin who had been standing quietly at the end of the table, just behind Harry, but remaining silent through the recent conversations. It was as if they'd all forgotten about him.

Most of them probably had.

Harry hadn't.

He sat frozen for a moment and then turned around to look at his mate with a flicker of confusion. "No?" He repeated, a tad uncertainly. There was something about the way that Theo had said it, that sounded quite different from any of the other offered protests so far. Harry wasn't so sure he liked that. His green eyes narrowed.

Mrs. Weasley brightened. "I agree." She said softly. "It is too dangerous. Surely you can see this, Albus!"

"I would never risk Harry's life without-"

"Without even the slightest inkling of a contingency plan?" Theo inserted, smoothly. "I have yet to hear one. I do not like the way that this has been presented. It would be extremely foolhardly to follow through on something with no solid direction-"

"It's not," Harry paused. "That's not it!" He frowned. "I-if someone were to come here, to The
Burrow—just because I’m here—then why not let them try it at Hogwarts? At least there, I have the castle. At least there, nothing will really be damaged if there’s a fight and there’s protections on the castle.” He hesitated. "Here, it's just The Burrow." He half-shrugged. "This is home to all of you." He nodded towards the remaining Weasleys clustered around the table. "I couldn't do this… to you…to anyone." He said, at last.

"The answer is still no." Theo said, quietly.

"No?" Harry repeated. "You can’t-" He stopped. Theo stared at him, steadily, bright golden eyes meeting shocked emerald ones. "You can't be—Theo!" Harry exclaimed. This was not happening. Not after all of this. He would not stand back idly and let a home be destroyed simply because his being there meant it would happen. "This isn't something that I'm-"

"It is too dangerous."

Harry's green eyes suddenly flashed with fire and morphed to show flecks of gold. Within a half-second, he was on his feet and facing Theo with an angry expression painted over his normally pale features. "You don't know what you're asking me to do!" He said, furiously. "If it was your family and your home that I was endangering just by being…here!" He nearly stomped his foot. "You wouldn't be like this. You don't understand."

"Then make me." Theo said, calmly. "I do not see how anything useful could come from-"

"I don't care!" Harry hissed, his temper finally getting the best of him. He was tired of people making decisions for him—Dumbledore had started and he obviously wasn't finished, but so help him, Harry wasn't going to sit down and let them continue to order his life around. He wanted to have a hand in it! It was his life after all, not anyone else's! "That's not your choice to make! I am not some helpless child who has to sit down and wait on others to do everything for me." He growled out. "This…this madman delights in ruining everything good I have ever had in my life, he's going to try and take away something that means a lot, to more than just me! I can't stand by and do nothing if standing up and doing something can change this." He boldly stepped forward. "I cannot." He stressed. "Understand this, because I'm not going to repeat myself. I am going to do this with or without your permission—anyone's permission—" and here, he glowered at Mrs. Weasley. "Because I sure don't need it to do what I feel is right. You can accept it or ignore it, but it won't change my mind. I don't care what you do, say or think, this is my choice and I am the one that's going to have to live with it whether I'm right or…wrong."

It was the strangely bemused expression of on Dumbledore's face that made Harry falter. He caught sight of the twinkling blue eyes and then took in Theo's cold, furious ones and understood that his reaction had been exactly what the older wizard had been counting on. Feelings of guilt and shame immediately flooded over him. Again, Theo hadn't really been unreasonable—much—he'd simply been concerned for Harry's wellbeing and Harry had gone off in typical fashion.

He'd snapped at him. He'd lost his temper and told his dominant off in front of an audience, no less. But he would not take those words back. It had been the truth. That was exactly how he felt.

Harry swallowed hard, his Dragel side scolding him at the same time for choosing such a public setting for what should've been a private conversation. He was relieved that his creature self didn't seem to take offence with the fact that he probably was speaking out of turn, but it seemed as if he'd managed to punch Theo in the face.

"If you will excuse me, I must be on my way." Theo said, abruptly.

Charlie's mouth twitched faintly when Theo reached over and plucked the Nytura from Harry's
hands and deposited it on his tanned arm instead. Before he could speak up, the golden-eyed boy looked him over from head to toe with the same appraising glance he'd given Mrs. Wealsey earlier.

"Thank you." He said, at last. "For looking after Harry. Thank you also for the use of your room. I will return for him as soon as I am able, please continue to look after him."

Harry stood, stricken at the end of the table as Theo had circled around him and gone to Charlie. He couldn't take it back—he wouldn't! There was nothing against speaking his mind and he wasn't some damsel that needed to be coddled and pampered and—well, Harry stopped there. He wouldn't really mind the pampering, but that was beside the point and, suddenly Theo was there in front of him again. Harry froze as that lovely head bent down to whisper in his ear.

"That's one, Harry." Theo whispered, softly.

Harry swallowed. He didn't dare speak.

"You have three chances before I lose my temper." Theo murmured. "I'd rather it not be towards you. As such, this is one. There are two chances left. I concede. If you believe so strongly in this, then I will not stand in your way, however, I am unable to accompany you sooner than tomorrow. I would prefer that you did not leave before my return. I also know just what is going through that head of yours. You are not to draw on my element unless you are in mortal peril. You have not had anywhere near enough practice and you will wreak havoc on things that you cannot salvage. Do not use that password unless there is no other option." He straightened and reached out with one hand to tip Harry's head forward. He pressed a kiss to the messy mop of hair and then turned on his heel. "Harry—do not push me on that."

And before anyone could protest, Theo disappeared with a flash.

A few nervous laughs could be heard.

Then Charlie spoke up. "Portkey?"

"So it would seem." Dumbledore said, smoothly. "Harry, my boy, I had no idea he was so demanding of you and insistent on his way. I could speak to the ministry and work out a way to end this-"

"Shut up." Harry snapped, his cheeks burning a bright red flush. He didn't need to hear proof of what Theo had told him earlier. Half of Theo's time at Gringotts had been for the sake of closing legal loopholes that Dumbledore had been trying to use to end their legal mateship. On top of that, Theo's reaction to his outburst had been mild, really.

There were more to Theo's words than any of the others would know. He would most certainly do his best not to push anything—at least, not without sufficient thought beforehand, anyway.

Dumbledore left.

The Weasleys busied themselves with their usual things.

The twins—though subdued—went about creating and testing a new prank powder to produce singing hiccups.

Charlie accepted Harry's help to continue with cataloging the artifacts in his room.

They worked through lunchtime.
Charlie convinced Harry to come down to eat some fruit and eventually, at Mrs. Weasley's insistence, they began to move some of the Order-verified items downstairs and pack them for travel.

Harry didn't recall exactly what it was that set him off.

He only remembered that familiar feeling of dread creeping over him, in the way it usually did right before Snape's wrath would come burning down on his unsuspecting self. He felt this premonition as the first inkling of something about to go horribly wrong.

It was followed immediately by a loud shrieking screech and then an explosion from somewhere in the kitchen or possibly somewhere outside. It shook the ground with the sheer force.

"Death Eaters!" Seamus howled, streaking through the house.

They all gathered in short order and within minutes, spells were flying everywhere as the doors and windows were smashed in and everything went downhill from there.

| Dementors. |

He almost couldn't believe it.

In swirling circles, their raspy, eerie sounds giving way their presence, the guards of Azkaban were very real and very present in their hovering over The Burrow.

"Dementors!" Harry managed to cry, ducking and running from another incoming spell. He had never felt quite so helpless as he did right now. The present lack of magic was more than a mere annoyance, it was downright terrifying.

Harry ran out the backdoor and into the yard, his eyes searching frantically for something, anything that he could use. He could still hear Theo's words echoing in his head in regards to the well of elemental power that was just within his reach. All he had to do was handle it, they'd already sent out alarms and surely there would be help here soon. There wasn't much he could do with Theo's power and he certainly didn't want to bring The Burrow down around his ears.

Whatever the Weasleys were to him, Harry had a feeling that wrecking their home wouldn't mend or break any good bridges between them.

"Well, if it isn't Harry Potter…and all by himself."

The dark voice was far too familiar for Harry to do anything but react. Rowle. The name floated through his mind. Thorfinn Rowle. A monster in wizard form.

Harry backed away, his eyes searching and finding nothing that he could use inadvertently or obviously. "Stay back." He warned, tensing.

Rowle fingered his wand, as if he couldn't decide which curse or hex to use first.

Harry dodged the brilliant flashes of light that came sparking out of that wretched wand. He ran, jumped, twisted, ducked and did a generally decent job of staying directly out of harm's way. He focused by tuning out Rowle's ill-formed taunts and kept his eyes out on the Weasleys who had now all moved out to the backyard and currently held their own against the remaining gaggle of Death Eaters and swirls of Dementors.
He couldn't understand it. The Order should've been here by now and this was practically a full-scale attack!

Mrs. Weasley seemed to be all but literally on fire as she fired off spell after spell with deadly accuracy and a look of righteous anger on her face. "Keep away from my children!" She snarled at one approaching masked figure. The spell she sent hit the figure dead on the center and he crumpled to the ground with a cry as the witch whirled around and continued to fight. She fought back to back with her husband beside her, her children scattered around her and paired up with their guests, casting shield charms and firing off stunners.

Harry saw it seconds before it actually happened.

It was a hazy blur in the corner of his eye and he realized the spell would hit him before he even considered moving out of the way. He wasn't prepared for the little scaled, streak of black that leapt in front of him and morphed to the size of a centaur, the furry wings snapping up to absorb the spell intended for Harry.

"Shadow, no!" He yelled. But could do nothing as the spell hit and Shadow shrieked in pain, dropping and writhing on the ground as his soft, furry wings were engulfed in flames.

The distraction was costly.

In the moment where he'd yelled, Charlie had turned.

Harry caught that movement in time to see Rowle fire off a curse meant for him and intercepted by a timely shield thrown by the ponytailed dragon-tamer.

"Keep your eyes open, Harry!" Charlie barked, dodging and ducking, before throwing off a few nasty hexes that he shouldn't have known, but did, courtesy of Bill. He threw a quick water charm towards Shadow and immediately took up a stance between the Nytura and Rowle. The setting sun glinted off fiery red hair and flashing blue eyes, filled to the brim with energy and emotion, as Charlie expertly threw himself into the fray.

In that moment, Harry thought that Charlie Weasley was perhaps, the most handsome dragon tamer and wizard he'd ever seen.

Well, besides Theo, of course.
By the time his romanticized feelings caught up to him, so did another one of Rowle's spells. Harry could have sworn that time itself slowed for him to see the outcome that he never could have predicted.

When it happened, Harry found himself thinking of two things, one that he was perhaps, a coward and two, that he'd never gotten the chance to kiss Charlie Weasley.

The spell shot towards him with pinpoint accuracy at the moment that Charlie's blue eyes opened wide. He shouted Harry's name and threw a shield that cracked under the lethal magical pressure. Harry tried to scream, but the shield broke and the curse remnants hit Charlie in the chest, knocking him to the ground.

"Charlie? Charlie!" Harry's frantic yells drew the attention of the other Weasleys. He bristled with unrestrained anger and the weight that whatever powers that belonged to him where nowhere near safe enough for immediate use, much less for revenge. "Charlie!" He screamed again, aware that he could not run directly to the body, but unable to keep himself from lurching forward towards the fallen redhead.

"Charlie! No, not my Charlie!" Mrs. Weasley shouted. Her voice rose up, louder than all the others in the fray, demanding to know the truth. Her eyes burned with pure fury and she bore down on the remaining handful of death eaters. Her spells carved up the earthen ground of the backyard and shook the leaves of what few trees still stood nearby.

The shadowed wizards backed off, but did not retreat, even as the witch's fury began to swell and grow.

"Harry, look out!" Fred and George were there, throwing up shields and casting the spells that Harry couldn't.

Harry crumpled to his knees beside the fallen body, his distraught hands trembling as they skinned quickly over the surface of Charlie's clothes and registered the fact that he wasn't breathing.

Charlie wasn't breathing.

For a moment, his throat and chest tightened painfully and the reality echoed.

Charlie wasn't breathing. Not a single breath.

Trembling fingers brushed lightly over the rise of Charlie's nose and closed those, wide, unseeing blue eyes before tracing a shaky outline around his lips.

It hurt.

As if someone had reached inside, ripped his soul out and set him on fire.

Harry didn't think he could breathe either.

He stared, unseeing.

"Harry?"
"Harry!"

Fred and George called his name, but Harry didn't hear them. He only stared at the face of the young man he'd fallen quite certainly in love with over the space of a single weekend.

This was not happening.

This could not happen.

Charlie was his.

Charlie was part of him.

He couldn't live without Charlie.

Surely Charlie wouldn't die on him, not from something like a simple spell. It hadn't even been the killing curse. A dark curse, probably, but Charlie was powerful, a little thing like that wouldn't have killed him. It shouldn't have.

Harry felt his breath hitch.

Didn't Charlie know that he wasn't allowed to die?

A shudder wracked through this body and Harry opened his mouth as his head fell back. He felt the chill in the air and saw the swirling darkness overhead, but everything was bleak and grey. None of it mattered.

None of it mattered without Charlie.

And so he screamed.

An unearthly shriek rent through the air.

Rowle didn't really understand what happened when the ponytailed redhead fell to the ground.

In hindsight, he would count it as a terribly counterproductive move on their behalf as immediately following afterwards, the most soul-stirring, heart-wrenching screech filled the air. The kind of screech that made him nearly jump out of his skin, with intent to hide and never come out. It promised horrible, dark things to the one it was intended for.

He looked up and directly into green eyes that flashed into a vivid gold as angry tears streamed down that anguished face. Lips moved and words were spoken.

Rowle couldn't hear a thing, but he trembled.

He couldn't help himself.

Feared Death Eater, favorite of Voldemort and dark wizard that he was, Rowle saw that expression and felt his own darkness freeze around him in a worthless barrier.

His knees buckled beneath him and his hands and feet scrabbled for purchase.

The ground beneath him—moved.
"Orbis terran kal." The forbidden words slipped past his lips, but now, Harry didn't care.

He had to do something. He couldn't just sit there and do nothing. If Theo was going to ream him out for this, then fine. He could. Later. For now, all Harry cared about was Charlie. This was half his fault. If he hadn't been here, then they never would've attacked The Burrow.

Charlie would've never been hit.

This wouldn't be happening.

*It's not right!* He thought, darkly. *My life may be a joke, but this is Charlie...he didn't deserve this!*

The first tendrils of elemental magic crackled up from the ground beneath him, sending a rippling, tingling sensation through his fingertips.

Harry clenched his hands to fists.

He'd destroy the world, if he had to, at this point.

How dare they hurt Charlie.

"How dare you!" He rasped, struggling to his feet with the weight of the elemental magic nearly crushing him to the ground. He'd never invoked Theo's password before and he was entirely unprepared for the onslaught of pure, raw power as it rushed into him and out of him, causing tremors as his physical body was unable to handle the sudden strain.

It hurt worse than he'd felt a minute ago, as if the very poles of the earth were tugging him in different directions. As if his body would be physically wrenched apart and left in mangled remains.

Ha.

So that was why Theo had warned him.

Harry almost smiled, the very fraction of movement, painful in its conception. If the power tore him apart, then that was fine—as long as he could drag that scumbag down to the pits of hell, he didn't care. He'd take every one of those dark wizards down with him. Death would be welcome, so as long as Charlie's death hadn't been in vain.

"His life wasn't yours to take!" He hissed, with all the anguish that currently roiled within him.

And then he was moving.

Harry saw Rowle's face right before he sucker punched him in the stomach with enough force to hear bones creak beneath his hand, to hear the gurgle as he choked on the customary mouthful of blood, to hear the gasp of surprise at his reaction. The Death Eater went flying across the lawn before he skidded on the ground, his body twisting into an odd, unnatural shape. A guttural cry came from the fallen wizard as it suddenly appeared that his skin was slowly dribbling off and melting into the muddied ground beneath him.

The towering dragel child standing at length, sneered at him, for Harry didn't care. Death was too good for this, for him. He yanked on the tiny tendrils of energy connected to the body through tangled, glowing lines. He yanked at them until only a handful remained, too exhausted to pull them all free, as every movement of his body now took more effort than he could bear.
That was enough, for now. It would have to do.

Golden magic crackled and tangled visibly in the air around him as Harry turned back to Charlie's fallen form. His gaze flickered back to the crumpled bodies around him and Harry stretched out a hand.

"Terran Recro Algoe." He whispered, forming the image of the spell in his mind and willing it to work. He didn't know where the words came from, the urge to speak and craft had surged up inside him the moment he'd invoked Theo's password. Instinct told him it was right, the flow of the magic told him it was right, even as that very magic began to tear at him.

He had already risked enough, what was one more thing?

_Theo... Theo where are you? I need you... why aren't you here? Won't you please come? Please, alpha...!_

The words and thoughts were tangled and primitive in his current state. He only knew one thing and one option. He needed Theo here—needed him now!

The sound of apparition cracks came through to his ears, followed by angry shouts.

Harry was only partially aware of more Death Eaters apparating in and out and back-up arriving from somewhere. He heard Dumbledore's voice. He heard Mrs. Weasley's screaming cries.

He heard the echo of the ground beneath him, crying in anguish. He didn't know how to send the power back. He didn't know how to keep from going with it. He coughed a mouthful of blood and nearly choked on the coppery taste.

A mouthful of blood and bile.

He'd overdone it.

The pain coursing through his veins promised to rip him to shreds even as he fought it by sheer willpower. He would not fall apart, not before Theo came, he couldn't. The powers themselves would punish him, they were angry, he could feel it. It would not be kind, nor pretty.

A whimper slipped past his lips.

Fire burned all through him and Harry felt as if he couldn't breathe and wouldn't live.

The very life was being sucked out of him.

He stretched a painful hand towards Charlie's crumpled figure, wondering how the distance between them was now so great than from when he'd shot forward to attack Rowle. He grimaced at one large spike of pain, hotter, brighter and more insistent than the others.

Without warning, Harry sunk to his knees and promptly keeled over to the sound of wicked laughter echoing in his ears.

Fire burned him everywhere.

_I'm being burnt alive. It feels like a dragon's fire. How fitting._

Charlie thought, darkly amused as he felt himself drifting deeper and downward to the shadows that beckoned him to the underworld. He didn't really want to die, but of course, that wasn't really
much of an excuse for anyone who wished to live. His mother would no doubt be stricken and heart-broken, his family would somehow fashion together a stronger bond in spite of his absence, in his memory. Everything would be fine, whether he came back or not.

But Charlie Weasley did not want to die.

In fact, now that he could think of it—and it was surprising to find thought as a current, active process in his given state—he wondered how long it took to die.

It seemed to be taking quite a long time.

An unearthly screech nearly deafened his ears.

It demanded that he remain among the living, challenging him to dare to live even as darkness loomed on the horizon.

His heart leapt and throbbed, frantically beating as if doing so would return him to life.

His soul ached, longing and burning to answer that eerie, haunting cry.

That cry that called to his very core.

"Terran Recro Algoe." The soft voice came from somewhere above him.

Three soft washes of light popped into existence and Charlie stared in amazement.

Two young men and one young woman, youthful in their appearances, hovered beside his floating figure. They were partial bodies, wispy from the waist downward as if they were genies rather than spirits.

"Terris Sukey." The young woman murmured, gliding forward and touching his chest. "Brindus."

He choked and gasped, soundlessly. It felt as if she'd just stabbed him through the chest with a red-hot iron poker.

"Terris Makindor." Said the taller of the young men, gliding forward and also touching the dragon tamer's chest. "Brindus."

Charlie cried and struggled, though it did him no good. This pain was ten times worse than the previous one.

"Terris Alomath." The remaining young man clenched his hand into a fist and slammed it directly over Charlie's heart. "Brindus!"

The dragon tamer writhed in agony as flames erupted from his chest and his body was literally consumed by hot, angry flames.

The trio of spirits faded.

Pain exploded and race through him in a way that he'd never before experienced.

As his own personal hell began, Charlie lost all ability to think coherently.

Charlie was vaguely aware of the pain after what seemed like an eternity.
There was so much of it, that he no longer was able to process the feeling.

Everything ached. Everything burned and everything just plain hurt.

He knew he was living, somehow, but it seemed as if time had slowed and stopped to allow him this special treatment.

His hands were on fire and at some point, he looked at them, horrified to see that they had morphed into deadly, curled claws.

No… what's happening to me?

The coppery tang of blood and bile lodged in his throat and he felt the fire rushing through his veins as a foreign substance attempting to overpower the blood that kept him alive.

Lines and circles of fire blossomed on his back and centered about his shoulders.

And then, it stopped.

It was almost like someone had flipped a switch.

He'd died. That was the only logical conclusion.

Charlie knew he'd died, but then, he'd lived.

He was alive.

At least, he didn't feel very dead.

The pain settled in him as aches in his very bones and a hot, irritating heat feathered around his neck and shoulders.

Blue eyes popped open with startling clarity and Charlie heard the shouts and cries around him.

He awoke in time to see a clutch of hovering Dementors swirling overhead.

Yes, most definitely alive.

Unrestrained fury welled up within him and ignoring his body's protests, Charlie lurched to his feet and screamed upwards at the filthy monsters.

To his surprise, a volley of flame shot out of his mouth, streaking upwards into the sky.

Angry shrieks and cries filled the air. The Dementors swirled and gathered around, circling as if to attack.

He screamed again.

The flames leapt from his mouth, shooting fireballs through the air and the shadowed guards scattered.

"Charlie?" His mother's voice cut through the air. "Oh my—Merlin—Charlie!" Her scream was frantic and tear-filled as she cried in relief.

His eyes zeroed in on a crumpled figure several yards away, separated from his immediate presence by a large, yawning abyss torn through the ground. A Death Eater. His eyes narrowed and without
thinking, he raised one clawed hand and threw a volley of flame that consumed half of The Burrow's backyard and everything else in that section.

A scorched expanse of smoking black stared back at him.

*Oops.*

Charlie stared in confusion.

His mind had caught up to the havoc his body was happily playing. He was spitting fire—literally!

A pained whimper drew his attention and Charlie hissed as he caught sight of the injured Shadow lying on the ground. Rage boiled and burned up from within him again. He hobbled forward, unsure of what to do, knowing that something ought to be done, but too muddled to puzzle it out. He chirred, softly, sadly.

Shadow made a quiet whuffling sound in answer, between its pained breaths.

Charlie keened softly, painfully aware of a very obvious emptiness inside him, as if two very obvious things were missing. Things that he didn't quite understand, but somehow knew that he needed.

A wave of frustration washed over him as he gave a low growl.

His mental gymnastics were cut short when a sweet, tantalizing scent spiraled up from the ground, teasing at his body. It was the perfect distraction and Charlie discovered that the lovely scent came from the unconscious body lying a few feet away. His mind was muddled and as such, took a moment to process the fact that it was Harry who lay, still and unmoving.

A mournful roar rattled in his chest and bellowed out of his mouth. Everything shook. The fierce sorrow it encompassed demanded silence and respect.

Against his protesting body, Charlie lurched forward the few steps it took to close the gap between them. Panic engulfed him and he dropped to his knees, gathering the limp body awkwardly in his arms, unsure of how to move with claws instead of hands, pausing to bat at the annoying heat at his neck and shoulders, it felt as if his hair was on fire.

*Fire.*

*Hair.*

Charlie nearly dropped his precious armful.

A glance showed that his lovely, wonderful ponytail was now a furious swarm of flames, dancing wickedly behind him.

*Oh Merlin-*!

"Charlie?" His mother's voice cut into the private moment.

A second later, a thick jet of cold water soaked him from head to toe. The flames stopped. A chill remained. Charlie whirled on her with an angry hiss, cradling Harry protectively to his chest and warning her to stay back. He tried to speak, but a rasping growl came out instead.
In a silent, treeless plain, several slabs of dark rocks were pressed into a circular shape on the ground, covered with magical runed carvings, a rich blue glow emanating from the center, forming a shimmering lighted barrier, illuminating one Theodore Nott within. He lay, suspended in the air, by a few feet, his physical body entirely unaware, his mental consciousness rather busy.

"…and so I'd like to ask your help on it. Please."

"Please?" There was a snort from the fuzzy image bearing the woman's face. "Theodore, my dear, you really shouldn't beg, it doesn't suit you." She gave another snort. "I'd be honored. Thank you for asking—very responsible of you to do so, as well, if I might add."

"I have learned something after all these years." Theo retorted, mildly. "So you will come?"

"Naturally. As if I could stay otherwise." She flashed a smile. "I might have to drag some unwanted weight along for the ride, but I'll be there. When would be best? Any particular preference?"

"Not really." Theo admitted. "Just as soon as you are able. I fear the bindings may-ugh!" He shuddered violently.

"Theo? What's wrong, what's going on?"

"…password." Theo choked out.

"You gave your password to whom?"

"…mate." Theo gasped.

"By Arielle's fangs." The woman swore. "He invoked it? Did you not warn him of the consequences—Theo!"

An agonized scream was wrenched from his lips and at once, the mental connection began to fade as Theo's consciousness returned to his body. He began to jerk and twist in uncoordinated moves before his body curled in on itself. He moaned softly.

"Theodore!" Ilsa's scream faded out as the magic invoked to place the long-distance call flickered out and died.

On the treeless plain, a mournful wind barreled through.

The ground shook.

There was a flash of white-gold energy.

And then there was nothing.
and it had to be done and of course, he was the only one qualified to do it.

Or so his newly altered self seemed to think.

Charlie's gaze flickered between Harry's limp form and his mother's worried, stricken face as she stood a respectable distance away, to keep him from hissing and growling at her. There was a pained expression on that lovely face that spoke more than he'd ever wanted to know of her. Charlie subconsciously stifled a whimper in the back of his throat.

His Dragel self was not happy.

It could see that his mother—his bearer and carrier—had done something to him. It understood. Something had been done. Something terrible and horrible that now resulted in his current state.

His heart ached.

His soul bled.

Pain seemed like an old friend.

Charlie sucked in a few deep breathes, wincing when different scents assaulted his newly heightened senses. He hadn't expected that, but it fell in the same category as having claws for hands. He almost gave a wry smile when he caught a good whiff of Harry's scent once more. He perked up, visibly.

Harry smelled wonderful.

Delightful, even.

A mixture of something light and citrusy with a special musk that simply screamed 'Harry'!

Charlie liked it very much.

There was also a faint scent of oranges. Oranges and steel. It made his nose burn and his eyes water.

Charlie wasn't sure he liked that scent at all. It stirred something in the back of his mind, a foggy sort of memory that he couldn't quite grasp. It slithered through his muddled thoughts as if it were something important that he really should remember.

A stab of pain rattled through his chest and he drew in a short sharp breath.

He would've thought everything would've stopped hurting by now, but he didn't really expect it to. Whatever had happened, it would take a lot of time to figure it out and to see what had happened and how to fix it.

Yes. Fix it.

There had to be a way to fix it.

Charlie felt a sudden wave of tiredness wash over him.

He felt exhausted and drained to the bone.

Certain things escaped him, at present.
Things like the fact that his hair had transformed into actual flames before his mother had dared to dump water on them.

Things like how right it felt to hold Harry in his arms and it felt that he'd never let the smaller man go.

Things like how the expression on his mother's face seemed something akin to a plea.

Things like how the expression his father's face seemed something like betrayal.

Things like how cold it suddenly felt and how chilly that water spell had been…

The ground rumbled beneath him and Harry's body twitched.

Charlie growled low in his throat. He was glad that the fight was pretty much over and that he didn't have to fight. He was also grateful for the fact that his family didn't seem particularly inclined to approach him, a detail that was very much appreciated. He felt that he might actually tear them to pieces if they were to come close enough right then.

He realized, with some confusion, that Harry was much smaller than he'd ever given some consideration. In fact, he felt rather fragile and thin as he held him close, unsure of what to do as the small body twitched, jerked and alternately shivered in spasms. Whatever Harry had done, the effects were horrible. It made a soft, sad sound spill from his lips as Charlie, unable to help himself, bent his head and nuzzled that pale face.

His jaws ached and his feet burned.

*More pain. Again.*

*Why did it always come back to pain…?*

The majority of the chaos still reigned, but it was slowly clearing up to the tune of Dumbledore's voice as he barked out a string of orders quickly carried out.

Those that could retreat, did and had.

Most of them could not.

Thus the remaining were taken into custody by the gaggle of Aurors and Order members.

The Dementors now reluctantly dispersed, as a dementor speaker from Azkaban portkeyed in to herd them together. They had remained at first, hovering menacingly overhead, but not venturing low enough to do any real damage after Charlie's fiery attack. Now, they were summoned forward and forced into a shadowy portal that would take them back to Azkaban where they belonged. The thin flute the speaker played, ensured that each of the eerie, darkened specters would obey his given request.

A low rumble in the ground shook them all and warily, Aurors crouched, prisoners in hand, as they all braced for another, unknown wave.

Instead, a small crack in the ground appeared—a few feet away from Charlie and Harry—and a moment later, a great bolt of golden light shot out. It reformed into the tall scowling figure of one Theodore Nott.
A Theodore Nott in full half-ling Dragel glory.

He stood tall, fury rolling off of him in tangible waves, clad in only a smooth pair of trim, black trousers, his upper body bare. His thick, dark brown wings, colored with a smattering of golden scales and armored spines, flared out behind and above him, growing exponentially larger than physically possible from such a small body until they towered well over him. His hands and feet were black, curled claws and his eyes, an angry, burning golden hue.

He scented the air and took in the sight of Charlie and Harry. The scowl darkened and he immediately clapsed his hands together as if in prayer and began to chant in an otherworldly voice. "Terris Sukey. Brindus. Terris Makindor. Brindus. Terris Alomath. Brindus. By the honor of my soul and the stake of my life, to the three guardians of the earth that protect me, I beg of you to spare the life of my disobedient mate. The contracts with you are upheld by my hand and mine alone. I gave access, but meant no disrespect by it. Judge as you wish. I speak no dishonesty. Exact your price upon my body alone. I offer my innocence and accept your binding." His eyes flared bright gold. "Brindus!"

From shadowy wisps on Harry, the little snatches of shadow melted off of the limp body cradled in Charlie's arms. It streaked over to Theo and wrapped around his wrists, ankles and neck, crisscrossing over his chest as if it were a straitjacket, tightening and jerking his body rigid, before they flared gold and then sunk in beneath the skin, away from sight.

Lips pressed into a thin line, Theo immediately turned his back to the duo, holding a protective stance. His magic crackled around him in visible sparks of white-gold power. Thin lips curled backwards into a hiss and then, he spoke.

"What happened here?"

Another tremor rippled through the ground.

Dumbledore was the first one to get up and he strode forward, stopping when Theo's head swiveled to hiss at him, angry golden eyes promising pain with a single breath.

"Do not come any closer, old man! I left him in your care. Do you truly believe I will forget this?"

Dumbledore opened his mouth, but found that he could not speak.

Theo's scowl grew more pronounced as turned away from the elderly wizard and took in the damage from the fight and the obvious changes, such as the large, gaping tear in the ground and the partially scorched yard. He rubbed his forehead and then his face. A heavy sigh left his lips as he stretched a hand out and began to mutter softly beneath his breath.

With a rumble, the tear in the ground came back together—only to swallow the burnt, charred remains of Rowle—before smoothing out to a more level yardspace. A definite improvement on what it had been before. A quirk of his eyebrow had the scorched grass suddenly turning green again, coming in thick and lush, without a hint of the dusty, mudhole spaces there'd been before. A few more waves of his hand, here and there, and things were quickly set to rights.

The aggrieved expression on the young man's face spoke volumes as he took a short, breath and then turned his attention to the soft, pained panting of Shadow, that now drew his attention.

Charlie's water charm had doused the flames of the fire spell that had consumed its wings. Now, Theo surveyed it with a look of respect and interest. "You were brave little one." He congratulated it, bending down to stroke the cold, scaled face. "Will you let me help you?" A wet, forked tongue poked out and weakly lapped at the dominant Dragel's hand. Golden fire flashed in Theo's eyes and
as he rested one hand on the center of the Nytura's face, the golden energy spread outward from his touch, enveloping the entire body.

The feathered wings gave way to broad, leathery ones, and a boned ridge of protective armor rose up from the sweet face. Theo gave a satisfactory smile as he finished, proud of the Nytura's transformation and recovery. "What exactly did Harry call you?" He mused, stroking the swiftly warming scales. "And would you mind returning to your alternate form?"

Pale violet eyes glowed to a deep plum-colored hue and then with a very obvious swirl of black shadowy wisps, a kitten-sized Nytura sat obediently, waiting. Theo smiled. He winced when the little creature suddenly lunged forward and sank an entire mouthful of sharp, pointed teeth into his wrist. He let it. A moment later, the little mouth withdrew and the head cocked to the side.

'You are Harry's mate?'

Theo scooped it up and allowed it to settle on his shoulders. "I am." He admitted. "What was your name?"

'Shadow. Harry has named me Shadow. I like it.' The Nytura tucked itself around Theo's neck, with a half-hearted slap at one exposed ear. 'That was for taking so long to come.' It scolded. 'My master called for you and you did not come!'

'I came as soon as I was able." He reached up with one claw and gently raked it down the scaled body. The Nytura sniffed, but allowed the caress and accepted the given explanation—for the moment.

A soft whimper drew both of their attentions at once.

Theo's head snapped around, the gold eyes roving before they settled on Harry's limp form cradled in Charlie's arm. His patience snapped and his instincts surged forward. "Give me that!" He growled, remembering at once, his reason for earth-traveling straight to this point. His Dragel self had seen Harry as protected and thus allowed him to react to the situation of the ruined surroundings and strange witches and wizards.

Charlie shrank backwards, tightening his hold on Harry at the sight of a very obviously enraged Dragel. Give Harry to that? No way!

Theo growled, low in his throat, a sound that seemed to make the very earth and time still.

"Give me my mate!" He snarled. "He is not yours and you have laid no claim on him!" He'd been content to let Harry rest with Charlie for the more necessary option of righting the wrongs done by the backlash of his elemental gift.

Charlie slowly shook his head, bracing inward and outward. His initial reaction demanded that he yield to this powerful creature, but something inside him now balked at the thought of handing over a defenseless Harry to this enraged figure. Even as he shook his head, Charlie sensed that this was perhaps, not the right answer to give.

"You dare defy me?" Theo hissed. "You think I will let you live with such insolence?" Golden magic crackled in the air once more.

Charlie opened his mouth to protest, but a keening wail came out instead. Horror painted itself across his features. That hadn't been what he'd intended to say at all.

Theo's look softened at once. The wings shrank somewhat to more natural proportions as the angry
Dragel stalked forward. The moment he was close enough, the wings curled forward, hiding their interaction from view. He reached out with one claw and yanked Charlie upright to his feet from where the redhead had knelt, cradling Harry's limp figure. He bent down to sniff Harry's head and then gave a dismissive snort, content with whatever the action had revealed. "Do you know what you are asking?" His voice was weighted.

Charlie whined, softly. He could no longer help himself as ancient blood and power surged through his veins, drawing his Dragel instincts to the forefront.

"You will have to be patient, my dragonheart." One clawed hand stretched out and tenderly stroked one cold, generously freckled cheek. "And it will hurt."

The redhead merely shook his head.

"Don't drop him." A smirk overtook Theo's features and without warning, the claw cupping Charlie's cheek, suddenly slashed downwards, tearing the shirt fabric and baring the pale neck before him. A wicked gleam flickered in those golden eyes and Theo stretched forward and sank his fangs into the supple, unmarked skin. He bit deeper than necessary and held his fangs in the wound long enough to make his point.

He did not drink the blood.

Charlie's eyes were squeezed shut and his jaw clenched tight, but he made no move to fight off the other Dragel. A quiet whine had started and stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

Theo gave a pleased rumble and stood back, loosening his hold to survey his bloodied mark. Yes. That would do for now. How lucky. The golden eyes flashed again and a soft blue circle of light hummed to life beneath the trio.

"Temptrificus Portgas!" Theo intoned, as his wings began to shrink and fold back. "Hogwarts, school of witchcraft and wizardry, Professor Snape's quarters."

In a flash of blue light, there was nothing left.

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**SUNDAY AFTERNOON : HOGWARTS GROUNDS : FORBIDDEN FOREST**

Hermione woke to a warm, wet tongue laving her face. She blinked, squirmed—or rather—tried to do both. Her body ached and burned in a way that warned her that she'd done something foolish that would not be so easily forgotten. With some effort, her eyes opened and she stared upwards into the face of a large black hound.

Her scream was muffled in her throat and she gave a painful, rasping cough instead.

The dog lurched forward and was soon enthusiastically licking her throat.

Panic filled her and Hermione struggled valiantly to regain control of her lax body.

A moment later, the pain in her throat eased.

She gave a gasping breath.

The dog then gently caught a mouthful of her Gryffindor sweater and attempted to tug her upright. She winced and awkwardly tried to flow with the movement. It took some effort and then,
suddenly, she was sitting up. The dog braced against her, allowing the shifting of weight and helping her to sit up as it nosed around her neck and whuffled into her damp, stringy hair.

Hermione pressed her lips together and trembled. The tears came again, in great big rivulets.

"They all hate me." She said, softly, as if in wonderment. "I haven't done a thing to them and they all hate me." She sniffled. "I don't understand." She stared at the dog. "All I do is read. I don't want anything. I just want to read and learn and live." She sniffled again. "I don't want anything from them. Just a little of their friendship. I just didn't want to be...alone." One shaky hand pressed to her lips as if to muffle the sob that broke free. "I just want to learn!" She wailed. "I know I'm not pretty or powerful or rich, but I try. I try to make up for it."

The dog licked her face, swiping at the tear tracks.

She winked one eye shut, trying and failing to lean away from the expert swipes. "I mean, I don't get it." She said, plaintively. "I don't understand."

A squeak escaped as Hermione suddenly found herself suspended about a foot off the ground, held up by her sweater collar. She tried to twist and fight it, when the ground began to move and she swayed slightly, before she realized that the dog was carrying her. Squirming and wriggling only made the ride worse, so she tried to hold still and hoped that if her end was soon to come, that it wouldn't be painful.

Not after all the trouble she'd gone through to assure that it was painless.

It didn't register until several minutes later, that the dog which had been licking her face hadn't been anywhere near big enough to carry her and with that thought, Hermione did a very un-Hermione-like thing and fainted.

Chapter End Notes

NOTE: The spell used by Harry in the last chapter. Terran Recro Algoe-means, "For the earth to repair". Literally asking for the earth to repair what has been taken
HOGWARTS GROUNDS : SEVERUS SNAPE'S QUARTERS : DUNGEONS

The mismatched trio arrived in the Snapes' shared quarters with Charlie and Harry in a tangle of arms and legs and Theo standing protectively over them. There didn't seem to be anyone there or anything amiss as Theo scented the air for danger and finding none, ended the transportation portal and immediately bent to take Harry from the dragon tamer's arms. He growled, meaningfully, when Charlie reluctantly clung to the armful. A moment later, he easily stood with Harry cradled in his arms.

"Stay!" He ordered, with a slight frown, when it looked as if Charlie were to get up and follow him. "This is between us, right now. I will tend to you, shortly."

Charlie slowly drew himself up and sat on the floor, waiting.

Theo carried Harry across the room and placed him on the settee closest to the fireplace. Shadow flew out from around his shoulders and immediately curled up on a cornerstone before the empty fire. Theo bit his wrist and then held Harry's mouth open for the crimson liquid to trickle inside.

Charlie perked up at once. The scent of blood was intoxicating, specifically Theo's blood, and he bit his lip hard to keep from making the sounds that were jumbling together in his throat. The new sensations and inclinations were entirely foreign to him and while he tried to fight them back, they continued to persist. He desperately wanted to speak, but it seemed as if his body would not yet comply with his wishes, no matter how desperate they might be. A soft whine left his lips, a plea almost.

Theo's eyes immediately flickered up to him. "Not now." He said, firmly. "You won't be able to handle this right now and as you've just transformed, I know you're hungry, but there are some other things I'll have to tend to first. I will take care of you when that is completed." Charlie's frown remained. Theo sighed and bopped Harry lightly on the head, when said mate had revived enough to drink on his own. "Enough, mate. You are not the least bit injured and you should not be that hungry. Besides, I haven't that much to spare seeing as I haven't exactly had the time to be eating." A whine of protest came from the waking Harry as Theo gently disengaged his wrist from the plump lips and bent to kiss the slowly forming pout. He straightened and licked the cut wrist, healing it with a murmured incantation as he rose.

A strangely light silence settled on the rooms. It seemed as if there was no one present at the moment.

Theo had moved to the fireplace and cast a spell to start the flames flickering. Shadow gave a happy chirp in appreciation. "Toppy?" He called, to the empty room. The house elf in question popped in at once. "Food for three." He said, quickly. "Three of our kind and a something for a Nytura."

Toppy gave a happy little nod and popped out, returning a scarce handful of minutes later with a large tray and several bowls of cubed fruit and strips of fresh meat. Theo nodded his thanks and took up a plate, fixing it carefully with balanced portions of each, before placing the bowl of remaining meat cubes beside Shadow on the hearth.
Picking up the prepared first plate, he carried it over to Charlie and placed it in the older boy's surprised hands. "There is a great deal to discuss," he began, in slow, measured tones. "But I cannot do all of it myself. I would ask you to trust me and simply relax and wait for now."

Relax. And wait. For now. Charlie blinked, processing that. He found himself immediately agreeing with Theo on the point that the Slytherin was trustworthy. That made perfect sense. Er. No. The redhead shook his head trying to clear it.

Slender fingers caught one ear and tugged it, lightly. "I was not asking for your opinion." Theo said, mildly. "You will have to wait."

Charlie frowned. He hadn't really been disagreeing, his head was just so jumbled that he couldn't make sense of it all. He opened his mouth to try and explain again when Theo's hands morphed to claws and scooped up a few chunks from the plate which he promptly deposited in Charlie's mouth. The redhead gave a mild squeak of surprise and chewed and swallowed. A moment later, he hesitantly opened his mouth again and was calmly handfed the fare on the plate clutched between his hands. He couldn't stop the blush that started, at the thought of being fed like a child, but there was something kinder in the gesture that spoke volumes of the Slytherin.

Theo had nearly emptied the plate, when Harry spoke from the other end of the room, drawing their attention as one.

"T-Theo?" Harry's voice was small and hesitant.

"Yes?" Theo moved away from Charlie and returned to the tray to fix another plate for himself and Harry.

"W-why didn't you come?" A hitch was heard, a near sniffle. "I-I wanted you there and you didn't come! I didn't know how to call you and-"

"Hush, treasure of mine." Theo was at his side in a moment, the food forgotten as he bent down to soothe ruffled feelings with a kiss of gentle dominance. "I did come. I could not come straightaway, because you did something I had warned you not to do." There was a glint in his golden eyes. "And we will speak of this later."

Harry's brow furrowed as he sorted through that and he did pout, this time. "That's not an answer." There was real hurt in his voice. "I needed you and I didn't know how to call you and you said that you'd-"

"And I was coming." Theo said, softly. "You called and I heard you. But I was speaking to Ilsa and making arrangements for now." Harry turned away from him, rebelliously. Theo pretended not to notice. "When I speak to her, since she is in Nevarah, I have to be in a state of trance. It takes time to enter and exit the trance. I ended the call the second I felt your pull. I came as quickly as I could, mate. I could have come faster, if you had not activated my element. That was an extremely dangerous thing to do and-"

"But not quick enough." Harry mumbled. "And of course it's my fault!"

"Harry." Theo sighed. "This conversation can wait." He decided, rising abruptly with intent of returning to the food platter.

Charlie gave an annoyed huff from his corner, to which Theo answered with a clicking sound and a purr.

Harry rolled over, quickly, but not quick enough. He tried to get up as he saw Theo stalking
towards Charlie sitting dejectedly on the ground. A squeak of pain escaped and he writhed on the cushions, trying to process the sudden pain. Theo had said he wasn't injured so the unexpected pain was, well, unexpected. What had happened? He squirmed and winced as any movement began to cause the horrible, aching sensations.

"That is what happens when you summon powers you shouldn't." Theo scolded, mildly. "Give a minute, I'll find one of Severus' potions for it. Please remember this and be mindful of it in the future." He paused in mid-approach of Charlie and directed his steps to the Potions Master's corner cabinet bearing necessary remedies. "Charlie, how are you feeling? Any other pains? Yes or not?" He titled his head in acceptance of the answering shrug.

A moment later, he stood beside Harry again, holding a vial of pain reliever potion to the trembling pink lips. He'd made sure to add some of his blood—again—to the potion, so Harry's Dragel self would accept and process the outside help. He soothed Harry's shaking with gentle hands rubbing firmly up and down his arms and sides. Theo took a blood replenisher for himself along with a basic nutrition potion and settled on a calming draught for Charlie—bloodless, of course—and urged the redhead to keep on eating.

He helped himself to a plate and handfed a very reluctant Harry who eventually dozed off a few mouthfuls into the moment.

With that, taken care of, Theo sat back to wait, a very worried expression set on his face.

Ilsa...

"Temptrificus Ergen! Theodore Gorgens Nott, immediate vicinity!"

A flash of blue light announced the ones that Theo had been waiting for.

Relief spilled through him like a raging waterfall. He was on his feet in seconds and starting forward towards them as two figures stepped out of the transportation circle. The tinge of blue energy crackled and fizzed out, drawing the attention of Charlie and waking the napping Harry with the sound.

Ilisa Gorgens turned out to be a very short and stocky woman, with a crop of bright brown hair, decorated with blackened tips as if it had been singed. She was significantly shorter than Theo, at least by a head and a half and there were very few airs around her, save for a powerful, nearly stifling energy as she stepped fully into the Snapes' sitting room. Her eyes were the same burning hue of gold and she wore a simple pair of form-fitting pants shorts and an open, leather-like vest, unbuttoned, with a few elastic bands drawn over the chest to hold it closed. Scaled skin could be seen from the front, but the vest hugged her sides and moved easily with her. Black and burgundy inked tattoos swirled over every inch of exposed skin, save for her face, hands and neck.

She'd 'ported in with a taller fellow accompanying her, his Dragel wings out in full sight and spread protectively behind her, even as she seemed to stay just a bit too far out of reach for him.

"Theo, darling." She hugged him hard and then stood back at arm's length and tugged him down to slap the back of his head. "That was for your very abrupt end to our conversation." Her lips were pursed. "I am glad to see you are in one piece. You worried me." She snatched him back in another bone-crushing hug. "You have not worried me since you were fifteen." Her piercing gold eyes swept rapidly around the room seeing and taking in everything present. "I take it this was your main reason?"
"Of course!" Theo protested, straightening warily from the reprimand, but enjoying the motherly affection just the same. "I would never 'port out on you for any other thing of importance beyond my mate…mates." He amended, with a glance at Charlie. "This is the-"

"I know. I can tell." She interrupted and then gave a snort of laughter at the affronted look on his face. "So I presume. You are precious, Theo." She drawled. "Do not ever change that." Her nose gave a slight twitch as she took a few cautionary whiffs. "Blood traitor, Theo? Really?" She said, mildly, surveying Charlie meaningfully. "I thought I trained you better than that." One hand twitched and Theo quickly stepped back.

"Harry's choice." The Slytherin said, quickly. "You would have me deny him?"

Ilsa stifled a laugh. "And that silver tongue of yours still works quickly I see." She sniffed the air a little more deeply this time, testing it. "Do forgive me if I ignore you for a while." 

"I would rather you did." Theo smiled. "His transformation is partial and I do not know what triggered it," he gestured towards Charlie's claws. "His element is fire."

"As is obvious by his scales." Ilsa retorted. "I am not blind."

"I did not mean to say that you were. Er, Harry is-"

"I have no pressing urge to greet a disobedient mate." Ilsa cut off, her back deliberately to the sofa.

"Ilsa-"

"Theodore."

Charlie shifted restlessly, setting his plate aside and eyeing the newcomers wearily. He wasn't sure he followed everything that was happening or that he liked the sudden turn in conversation.

"Don't judge what you do not know." Ilsa turned to him. She sighed. "And believe me, child, there is much you do not know." She cracked her knuckles, audibly and then gave a dismissive wave of her hand to Theo. "His pride's been wounded if there's nothing physical, at least slobber on him a bit or something."

"Ilsa!" Theo's pale face took on the faintest hints of a blush.

The short woman ignored him with a toss of her head. "Shoo. Go annoy him. I have work to do."

Theo opened his mouth and shut it.

The second Dragel that had entered, flashed him a smile of comradeship.

Theo shrugged and tilted his head towards the sofa. The older man followed without complaint.

Ilsa didn't seem to notice their absence as she circled Charlie and then knelt before him, offering both of her hands and smiling, gently when he accepted them.

Charlie took it, confused, as she seemed to want him to, and waited, unsure.

"Do you know what you are, child?" Her voice was softer now, coaxing almost. "Do you understand what has happened?"

Charlie gave a slow shake of his head. She really had a knack for changing subject in the oddest of ways. He wondered what she was going to do to him. Somehow, he had a feeling it would hurt—
after all, so had everything else—so far.

"You are a dragel." She said, bluntly.

He blinked. That did not hurt.

Her lips twitched, faintly, as if she would smile. "Do you know what that is?"

Her companion's name was Aracle and he was her circle's Rheyo(Alpha-assigned Beta), seeing as Ilsa held a position of Gheyo(fighter), he was inclined to travel with her to make sure that she did not stumble into any trouble. Once assured that Ilsa would be busy, he struck up a conversation with Theo and aided in healing Harry's shivering body from the aftereffects of channeling an entire clan's worth of elemental power.

"You are very lucky." Aracle scolded. He flicked Harry's forehead lightly, with his free hand. Theo held the other, using the blood from the cut to trace the complicated runed shapes for healing and life. "If Theo's power was not so great, he would not have had elemental titans to protect you and you surely would have died, Dragel or not. There are some things that simply are meant to be left alone."

Harry winced, but didn't try to answer that. There was an entirely new set of feelings and emotions coursing through him. Some that he didn't want to deal with and others that he could not avoid. He felt horribly guilty for the unexpected turn of events and the guilt multiplied when he saw the deep concern and worry etched on his dominant mate's face.

One of them that he could not avoid was the look of devotion and concern on his alpha's face as Theo continued to paint the runes on his exposed stomach and activate them systematically with a burst of magic. He was feeling better by leaps and bounds, the pain and tremors a near distant memory. Some of his confusion was the willingness of the older man, Aracle and his simple acceptance that he was Theo's mate. It didn't seem like something that could be so easily accepted and understood.

At least, not to him.

"You are thinking too hard." Aracle commented, rubbing at the furrow in Harry's brow. "Stop it." He looked to Theo. "Does he always worry so?"

"I'm going grey before my time." Theo retorted. "What do you think?"

"Ah, but you alphas are meant to handle the worrying." Aracle commented, lightly. "I take it that is a lesser dominant?" He inclined his head towards Charlie's sitting, stunned figure, as he listened to Ilsa's words, falling deeper into the trance the older woman was weaving.

Theo half-shrugged. "He is dominant, but I know not exactly what." His golden eyes narrowed, calculating. "I refuse to relinquish my rank, if that is what you are inquiring."

Harry stiffened at once. "You said you wouldn't fight." He said, softly.

Theo looked down at him, his smile thin. "I said I would not fight him unless he were to make the first move."

"But he hasn't fought you or anything!" Harry said, frantically. "Has he?" He began to struggle, trying to coax his exhausted body to move.
"Hush, little one." Aracle held him down, easily, with one warm hand on the center of his chest. "Do you not trust him?"

Harry fought him anyway, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. "You promised!" He managed to say.

Theo frowned. "I did and I have not engaged him." He said, simply. "He, however, is not content with our present hierarchy."

"You don't know that!" Harry snapped.

"You were asleep. You did not see nor hear him." Theo countered.

"That doesn't mean that-!" Harry struggled again.

Aracle exchanged a worried glance with Theo and cautiously removed his placatory hand, allowing the older boy to gather Harry into his arms and hold him tight.

Harry locked his arms around that pale neck and insistently rubbed his cheek on Theo's. "M'sorry, I'm sorry." He mumbled, switching his ministrations to nuzzle Theo's neck, a low whine in his throat. "I only used it because I had to." He said, hoarsely. "I couldn't let him die! I couldn't! You didn't come fast enough and-"

"Hush, treasure of mine." Theo soothed. "If we are to fight, it will be because our instincts tell us to." He kissed away the protest on Harry's lips. "And if we fight, it will not be until he is completely healed. I would never break my promise to you nor would I ever give you up without a fight." He hesitated for a moment and then bent to press a kiss to the exposed neck.

Harry visibly relaxed into him.

Theo sighed. He hated to tear at this when everything was still so fresh and uncertain, but he had to. There wouldn't be another time that would be better, not now, given their current circumstances. "Harry, what do you really know of the Weasleys?"

Pain-filled emerald eyes shimmered up at him. There were more to those words then it seemed on the surface. "Not now, Theo." Harry begged. "Please? I don't want to do this now. I can't-"

"Shh. Then we will not." Theo murmured. He tightened his grip around Harry's thin shoulders and began to card free hand through the tangled mop of damp hair. He frowned. Harry was startlingly cold, a detail that was swiftly rushing to the forefront of his mind. "We will not." He whispered, slipping a hand down the collar of Harry's shirt and gently stroking the tattooed mark. He made sure to distract his mate with a kiss so Harry could not protest and then cast several warming charms before summoning a blanket from the guest bedroom.

A moment later, the small body in his arms went limp at the coaxed sleep and Aracle caught the summoned blanket. "Was that wise?" The Rheyo asked, watching the interaction with saddened eyes. Theo shrugged. Aracle helped him ease Harry back to the settee and wrap the sleeping figure with a blanket. "He will be furious, I expect, when he wakes."

"Perhaps." Theo shrugged. "It was necessary."

Aracle snorted. "Allow me to refuse to comment on that."

"Permission granted." Theo said, graciously.
There was another snort.

"Do you know…?" Theo ventured, after a moment.

Aracle stiffened. He sighed. "It is good you called for Ilsa." He said, at last. "But to the monster that has bound such a child…" He looked away. "I do not blame her for what she would wish to do with them. I only wish that my ranking was similar so that I might be excused whatever revenge I might enact."

"Is it too late?"

The Rheyo gave a faint shrug. "Hard to tell. He is almost too old."

"I know."

"How long?"

"A day."

"You are lucky."

"I am not. I do not think Harry will survive it if he does not."

Chapter End Notes

NOTE: There are four types of 'basic' Dragels and in their true forms, the differences are obvious:

AIR Dragels: dragon-like physique, with smaller bodies and very powerful wings.

EARTH Dragels: dragon-like physique, with more muscular bodies and average to moderately sized wings.

FIRE Dragels: serpent-like physique, small armored wings and heat-resistant scales with larger claws and sometimes, a spiked tail in full form. Tend to be longer and less muscular than air or earth dragels.

WATER Dragels: merkind-physique, two additional alternate forms, no wings, finned limbs. Claws, a powerful tail and sometimes a dorsal fin.
"Aracle, get your idiotic behind over here at once!" Ilsa's voice cut through the morbid musings between the two Dragels.

"Charming as ever, my dear." He drawled, moving away from the settee and gliding towards her. "What is it?" He took in the runes she'd carved in the floor of the sitting room and perked a brow. "Really?" He said, mildly.

She rolled her eyes. "Hang the room, Aracle. See if I care." She dusted her hands, eyes straying back to Charlie's stunned figure. She'd hit him with a mild stunner and then carefully arranged his body how she needed. It was faster. There was the faintest hint of betrayal in his blue eyes as he lay there, unmoving. She snorted. "It's easier this way." She threw over her shoulder, when Theo drew near, mouth open, about to protest. "This is also going to take a significant amount of energy. Where is this place? Can it hold the backlash?"

Theo gave a wry smile. "It may be one of the only places in this side that might." He admitted. "That's why I came here. I knew you'd 'port to my signal."

"Smart boy." She congratulated. "Go protect your sub." She cracked her knuckles. "And plug your ears and all your other senses as well."

"What are you going to do?"

"Unbind him of course." She snapped. "And bleed him. Isn't that what you called me here for?"

"Well, yes. I suppose, but I didn't think that-"

"You didn't think." Ilsa said, very quietly. "Then I suggest you do, seeing as how I despise that particular turn of phrase. You are slipping, Theodore."

"Ilsa…"

She whirled on him, her eyes flashing gold. "I know you, Theodore, so don't you dare start!" She hissed. "You wouldn't tell me what kind of a monster would bind this, but his blood speaks for himself! You do not have a child bearing tainted blood, unless the parent is a blood traitor. No father would have done this to his child, so that leaves the boy's mother. Should I get my claws in her, she would die. You may be wise and foolish by keeping her identity to yourself. The runes are too neatly carved, they were done since birth I doubt the father even knows..." Her hands clenched into fists. "And then you tell me that their status is even public knowledge? Do you have any idea what this means?"

Theo blanched. …? But then that meant that Arthur Weasley was...

Ilsa smiled in grim satisfaction. "Suddenly remember a name, Theo, dear?"

He glared at her.

"Keep your names, keep your secrets. I have never required nor demanded them of you, but when fate is tempted and bribed, it will demand a recourse. I do hope you are prepared to pay. Be warned that I shall not let this go. This is not something that is easily forgotten."
He inclined his head, simply. His mentor was currently thinking in Dragel terms. He was thinking in Slytherin matters with relation to those bloody Gryffindors. The best the thing to do was to tell Ilsa. His Dragel-side screamed at him to do so, to trust his mentor and the woman who had been infinitely more of a mother towards him than his own birth mother.

On the other hand, if he told her, she would most likely hunt and kill them before returning to Nevarah. Her Gheyo status would protect her from any kind of legal retribution and the others would no doubt make sure that it was all carefully handled and taken care of.

Carefully.

He suppressed a shudder. He'd seen Ilsa in action. She wouldn't be kind. He wouldn't wish her justice on anyone, except perhaps, Voldemort. He sighed. Giving away the Weasleys would result in something irreversible and Harry and Charlie probably wouldn't forgive him for destroying their family.

Or their home.

Either one of them.

He didn't think they'd be picky.

Severus Snape stumbled awkwardly through the dungeon hallways, intent on reaching his private quarters. A head poked out from the shadows beside the curve in the hallway that usually led to the Slytherin Dorms and a moment later, Blaise Zabini came rushing over.

"Professor Snape!" He hissed softly, immediately situating himself beside the older man and slinging one thin arm around his broad shoulders. "What happened? Are you alright?"

The Potions Master merely grimaced. "…rooms." He managed. He wondered what the boy was doing there as he tried to piece together the reality that the castle had been evacuated and the dark mark still hovered brightly overhead. Something must have happened to bring the boy back, especially as it seemed that Dumbledore hadn't readmitted anything.

In fact, at the end of their grueling interrogation, at which he'd finally convinced that annoying Madam Pomfrey to leave him alone, Severus had been relieved to see the old Wizard apparate out. He didn't even care when the alarms had gone off signaling that the attack taking place was at The Burrow. He'd simply gathered himself up and together and slunk from the office with all intents of holing up in his quarters and refusing to budge until the rest of his sanity caught up to him.

"Right." Blaise murmured, he began to match his steps to the older man's, working to keep in stride. If Snape didn't feel like talking, then he didn't feel like talking, the Italian hoped that whatever was going on wouldn't cause issues for the rest of the Slytherins or Dragels. They reached the professor's quarters in short order and here, Blaise carefully extracted himself from the carryhold and watched with concern as the pale professor leaned against the doorjamb to his quarters. "Where is Professor Terius?"

Serverus snorted. "He'd better be with Draco."

"Professor…"

"Blaise, if something should happen…keep the Slytherins together. You know what I mean and you know how."
"But-!

"Just do it. Do it for...me, if nothing else. I cannot give you any promises nor will I tell you any lies."

A grave air of seriousness settled over them.

"Professor...are you leaving?"

"I do not know, yet." Severus grimaced again, a hand on his stomach as he leaned forward. "Terius will probably insist on it. But I suppose that is like asking what you are doing here when the castle should be empty."

The Slytherin had the good grace to look away. "Mother's traveling." He said, at last. "There is no...father, this time. I cannot go back to the Manor, because of the protections that were shattered after the first attack-"

"What protections?" Severus straightened with a hiss. "What attack? He—Terius and Draco were with you!"

"What? When?"

"He swore they'd port to the Manor—I couldn't-" Severus swore beneath his breath. "When I get my hands on that-!"

"If they used the password, they were probably flooed into the emergency room." Blaise hesitated. "They would've been able to get out."

Severus glared at him. "Have you been here the entire time?"

The young man shrugged. "Just about."

"Just about?"

The younger Dragel huffed. "Fine. I flew around a bit at night. Hunted in the forest. Nothing that I wouldn't normally do and not without extreme care."

"Why come here?"

"Why not?" Blaise shrugged. "I'm one person. I'm quick as the night and the shadows like me. I've been here the whole time and nothing's happened. There's been no one—well," He stopped.

"What is it?" Severus frowned. "Spit it out boy!"

"There's been some activity at the edge of the words." Blaise allowed. He lifted his chin at the dark glare sent his way. "I did not go cavorting about nor did I attempt to investigate." He said, tightly. "I skirted the area, marked it so I wouldn't stumble over it without some sort of warning and made sure to never be there in my human form."

"What did you learn?"

"I didn't-"

"So what did you learn?"

"Death Eaters, I think." Blaise frowned. "But none that seem...it was strange. It felt like..." He
swallowed. "Death magic." And immediately, the Italian made a traced sign in the air beside his heart.

The Potions Master did the same, his dark brows furrowed together in a thick line. "You're certain?"

"I know what it feels like." Dark violet eyes swirled with emotion. "I know better than anyone else."

Severus gave a short nod. "Anything else?"

"Nothing really." Blaise shrugged. "Beyond that."

"For now, you'd best come in then." He frowned. "It isn't safe."

Blaise hesitated.

The Potions Master eyed him for a moment and then frowned, straightening. "Show me where it is." He said, wearily.

The Italian shot him a pained look.

The dark-eyed glare never wavered.

A moment later, the mismatched duo disappeared down the dungeon halls.

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Harry woke to unfamiliar hands stroking his hair and arm.

He bristled upon hearing a quiet chuckle overhead. It took his fuzzy mind a moment to catch up and then he could see Aracle's face hovering above him, a faint smile on his features. He realized, awkwardly, that his head and shoulders rested in the older man's lap and that the Dragel had been humming softly, a nonsensical tune that Harry couldn't place.

"You're awake." Aracle commented. "How are you feeling?"

Harry stared at him.

The man gave another chuckle. "Theo is right over there." He gave a nod of his head. "And we shouldn't be moving right now, because Ilsa is in the middle of something very important."

Harry scowled.

"The blood purification ritual?" Aracle said, dryly. "I would think you'd like to have it over with as soon as possible." He patted Harry's arm and shifted the hand on his head to rest comfortably on the armrest of the settee. "It requires a great deal of power and concentration. As such, we really shouldn't be in such close proximity, but we don't have a choice. Because of that, Theo is blocking for all of us and as not to break his concentration, I am sitting here keeping you company."

"What?" Harry croaked out. He could see that there was something while and filmy hovering somewhat above him and he was able to make out that they appeared to be under a dome-shaped energy shield of sorts. Harry took slow, careful breaths. He really didn't want to be up, not when his body protested so vehemently.

Amusement danced clearly in the older man's eyes. "Takes you a bit to get up, doesn't it?" He commented. "I have a mint somewhere..." He shifted, carefully, in slow measured movements and
drew out a shiny foil-wrapped candy from his shirt pocket. "Can't get water or an elf right now. It'll disturb the magic and this is very dangerous magic to disturb."

The mint was slowly unwrapped and Harry reluctantly opened his mouth to receive it, when he realized that his arms and legs wouldn't quite move of their own accord.

"Do you have any movement at all?" Aracle's brow furrowed. "I don't think your alpha put you in any kind of a stasis, but it is possible that channeling that much energy can leave residual effects." The frown deepened. "I can't do anything about that right now, not until they're finished over there." He shifted again, so that his line of sight included the redhead and his mate.

"Wha-?" Harry tucked the mint in the side of his mouth. "S'okay." He mumbled. A little pain was nothing to suffer for the headache he'd apparently put everyone through.

"Are you in any pain?" Aracle prompted. "I can splice you, if you are."

"Er, what?"

"Splice. You know." The man looked as if he would shrug if such movement wouldn't cause any major issues.

"No, I don't." Harry scowled. Why did everyone expect him to simply know everything? Aracle blinked. "Didn't your mentor explain it?"

"Haven't got one." Harry bit off.

The man stared at him with an expression akin to shock and disbelief rolled into one. "Haven't got one, he says." He muttered. "Pray tell, child, explain?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't have a mentor." He said, slowly. "Everyone keeps-"

"That's not possible. Everyone has one, unless you're below a Halfling and I know you're not." The furrow in his brow grew deeper. "Did something happen? A falling out?"

Emerald eyes suddenly hardened to ice. "Never had one." He turned his head away.

When Harry woke again, it was to the same broad hands gently rubbing his stiff arms and tense muscles.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them for a long moment. A crackle of energy hinted at a ripple in the faintly visible overhead dome before the scent of blood permeated the air.

Harry swallowed and choked, hastily spitting out the chunk of mint as the very scent made him gag.

"Don't breathe!" Aracle hissed, easing him upwards in slow, steady movements, shielding the act by angling his body towards the entranced duo engaged in the ritual. "You should-" He frowned. "Theodore!"

A moment later, the scents cleared the air and a faint, lingering hint of it, wafted through.

Harry found himself clutching Aracle's arm and holding tight, even as the man began to whisper soothingly in his ear and rub firm, sure strokes up and down his back. The older Dragel finally sighed and simply wrapped Harry in a hug and tugged him over onto his lap. Exhausted, Harry
gave into the impromptu embrace, soaking up the simple comfort it offered and breathing in the more calming scent of musk and spice.

"W-what was that?"

"Blood." Aracle said, simply. "This is a purification ritual."

Harry swallowed, wincing at the memory of the foul stench. "But that-" He shuddered. "What was that?"

"The turning point." Aracle sighed. "You really didn't have a mentor, did you?" Harry jerked within the embrace, only to find the arms suddenly tightening to near impossible bands. "Don't do that! If you break their concentration now, I won't have a mate and neither will you!" Harry stilled at once. "There is a reason this is never done in polite company."

Time passed.

Harry didn't know how much or how long.

He drifted in and out of a troubled sleep as the tense moments passed.

Something niggled in the back of his subconscious and he woke with a weary yawn, tense, waiting. Aracle had gotten in the habit of massaging his aching arms, shoulders and neck, but he would pause every time that Harry woke.

Harry reluctantly admitted to himself that it did help and those big, warm hands were more than welcome to his aching body. He'd never had such a violent magical backlash before, the small ones he'd endured seemed miniscule in comparison to this and all Madam Pomfrey had done at that time, was to give him a dreamless sleep and a pain reliever potion.

For a moment, Harry almost wished that was all it would take to make everything right again.

Whispering chants filled the air and a current moved through the room, a hot, sweltering wave, before a thin, veil of white mist seemed to cloud over, hiding the duo from sight.

Harry wrinkled his nose. He didn't like that. Well, sort of, he didn't like not seeing what was happening, but he was worried enough for Charlie that he stayed where he was, only after a second thought.

"It seems your new addition is a fire element." Aracle commented. "Not a bad choice."

"I didn't choose him for an element." Harry resisted the urge to wriggle as beads of sweat began to form along his flushed face. It was suddenly much warmer in the room than it'd been before and he didn't want to be sitting there, doing nothing. He tried to move and was restrained once more. Harry scowled. He rather felt like elbowing the annoying man in the nose, especially since said man didn't really seem to be undeserving of it...

*A nice good pointy elbow…*

"I didn't say that you did." Aracle's grip loosened, faintly. "A blood purification ritual involves exactly that, a ritual and blood." He tuckered Harry's head beneath his chin. "Breathe, child." The words were spoken with a faintly musical tinge. "I asked you to be sure, because for a mentor to be missing, something very dark and very troublesome must have happened and we take care of our
own." He sighed, a soft, sad sound. "And you should not have come into something this wondrous and frightening—alone. It should not have happened, for that, I am sorry."

_Sorry_? Harry remained silent. That was the first genuine apology he'd received from one of his own kind about what had happened to him. He didn't know what to think of it or what to do about it. He was also starting to find the hug a bit welcoming, there was a soothing hum of energy that was tightly wrapped around the man and some of its gentle warmth curled around him.

The teen shifted somewhat, attempting to make himself a tad more comfortable now that he could see Theo and the rest of his senses had caught up to him. His inner Dragel had calmed the moment that he'd fully wakened and registered Theo's magical signature hovering protectively over him. They were in a bubble. A very special sort of bubble. He took careful, methodical stock of his surroundings and present state.

Theo sat several feet in front of them, cross-legged, his hands clasped as if in prayer, his thumb and forefingers press together and pointing up, a dancing spark of golden energy balanced at the tip. His eyes were open wide—a detail Harry only noticed because the glow was bright enough to form a slight halo 'round his head. The suppression of raw magic nearly made him giddy, settling instead for sending rich vibrations of emotion through his body.

"Intoxicating, isn't it?" Aracle smiled, wistfully. "It's almost addicting."

Theo's magic hummed steadily through the rooms.

It eased the ache in Harry's bones and coaxed him to relax, just a bit.

At some times, it was a visible golden ribbon drifting and floating through the room, occasionally curling around Ilsa or Charlie in alternate moments.

"What are they doing?" Harry wanted to recant the question almost the moment he'd asked it. He knew what they were doing, sort of, anyway.

"Ilsa's using him as a channel."

Harry bristled.

"Sorry, I don't mean using, I mean, they're kind of bouncing off each other." He tilted his head slowly. "See for yourself. Move slowly."

_As if he hasn't told me that a hundred times already!_ But Harry followed the tilt and saw Ilsa sitting at Charlie's head, where he lay spread-eagled on the ground, in a position mirroring Theo's.

A brighter, bigger spark of white-gold hovered above her pointed fingers. Runes carved into the floor were filled with white light and a steady hum of magic reverberated throughout the room. Then, the hum quieted and the soft chanting grew stronger before the white mist blackened and then melted away to reveal the pair.

There, Harry finally saw the reason for the scent that had made him quite sick.

Charlie lay lifeless and unseeing in a pool of what could have been blood, but was far too thick and black to be mistaken for the bright red life-giving substance. Ilsa held a blade to her hand and continually painted one complicated symbol on Charlie's forehead, until the thin black dribbles running down his arms had melted into the finally shadows naturally surrounding his body.
A hollow emptiness thudded in his chest.

A low whimper came out.

Three answering rumbles of reassurance immediately came back to him.

Harry jerked around to stare at the man who now looked at him in all seriousness.

"He will be fine." Aracle said, quietly. "If anyone can help, Ilsa can. She has done this before."

"You are sure?"

"I would not lie."

Harry snorted.

The man looked affronted. "I would not."

"Why?"

One bushy eyebrow arched upwards. "Because I think of you as a friend." He said, simply.

"You don't even know me!"

"I know Theo," Aracle countered. "At least, I feel like I know him and I know that Ilsa knows him, so by default, I know you as well." He smirked. "And if I did not, I would not be sitting here, sharing the same space." The look on Harry's face, prompted him to explain a bit more. "By default, our cautious nature keeps our society well hidden. Because of that, if I did not know you and accept you into a circle, then we would not interact and you opinion of me would probably be something of a heartless bastard."

Harry scowled. "That's kind of…stupid."

"Not really," Aracle explained. "If your life hung by a single thread of revelation, you'd be twice as cautious and thrice as neurotic." His shoulders gave a simple twitch in a way that was his usual half-shrug. "Which is why there are so many different paths of communications, codes and behaviors. Once you are of age and inheritance, a mentor drills these into your head if you are not raised in the Dragel way. If you were, you parents and family circle did it for you and by the time you are of age and inheritance, you can apprentice yourself to a master of your element or craft choice and train beneath them. The period of training lasts anywhere from one to a few centuries. It is simply a part of life and near impossible to comprehend that someone would not have a guide of sorts." He frowned. "We are social creatures in our cravings for affection, belonging and validation. Circles allow us to do this."

Harry scowled. "That's kind of…stupid."

"Not really." Aracle explained. "If your life hung by a single thread of revelation, you'd be twice as cautious and thrice as neurotic." His shoulders gave a simple twitch in a way that was his usual half-shrug. "Which is why there are so many different paths of communications, codes and behaviors. Once you are of age and inheritance, a mentor drills these into your head if you are not raised in the Dragel way. If you were, you parents and family circle did it for you and by the time you are of age and inheritance, you can apprentice yourself to a master of your element or craft choice and train beneath them. The period of training lasts anywhere from one to a few centuries. It is simply a part of life and near impossible to comprehend that someone would not have a guide of sorts." He frowned. "We are social creatures in our cravings for affection, belonging and validation. Circles allow us to do this." He frowned. "And it is not easy to distract a mentor from their intended mentee, which is something that worries me. You have told your alpha of this?"

"Of course!" Harry snapped.

"Has Theo told anyone else?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Professor Terius." He said, at last.

"And who would that be in relation to…?"

"Er, uh, one of the Dragels that lives in these quarters?" Harry bit his lower lip. "He teaches here, at the school."
"Ah." Aracle nodded, thoughtfully. "Terius sounds familiar, I don't suppose you would care to share the whole name?"

"Snape. Terius Snape." Harry supplied. "Do you know him?"

"I know of a certain Terius, but I don't believe his name is Snape and I didn't think that he'd be mated."

Dark eyebrows rose. "How can you tell?"

"You said one of the Dragels that lives in these quarters." Aracle smiled. "And he's scented the rooms. I can tell from there. They are also arranged rather traditionally, there are private quarters for the sub and alpha and a third resting room for the remaining mates."

"That sounds…lonely." Harry mused, he was slowly beginning to warm up to the fellow who was easily sharing the kind of informative tidbits that promised to be useful in the future.

"Only if they are quibbling over some matter." Aracle waved a hand dismissively. "Most subs sleep with their alpha and even if the other mates do not get along, they usually sleep with the sub and so they all end up in the resting room. Did this Terius notify anyone higher? Has he filed any notices or opened an inquiry into your missing mentor?"

"I don't know…"

"Did Theo do anything?"

"He said he would and not to worry about it."

"Hm." Aracle frowned. "Well, he certainly hasn't told Ilsa yet, which worries me. She'll likely have his head for it—and probably yours too. I'll see what I can do to get this rushed along. They'll search for your assigned mentor and until then, if you even think that you may have offended anyone, make a fist with your left hand, touch it to your right cheekbone and say 'please excuse my behavior, my mentor has yet to teach me' ."

Harry stared at him.

The older Dragel was dead serious.

"But-?"

"You'll probably end up in Nevarah in rather short order, I'd expect." He frowned. "At least if Ilsa has anything to say to Theo and I am fairly certain she has quite a lecture lined up for him. You would probably like in Nevarah. It's different, a good kind of different, but there are many little quirks that will likely drive you crazy, until you can adjust. A bit of a culture shock, if you would."

The older Dragel hummed thoughtfully. "This present time is also 'hunting season' as they put it, for those looking to expand their mateship circles and that means there's plenty of short tempers, flaring hormones and pheromones and you may tread on more feet than you'd care to. That is a traditional excuse for someone who has not been in touch with their mentor to excuse what would be gravely impolite public behavior. A mentor can sometimes be more than just a parental teaching figure, they often take on your entire life and any public disturbance, duels engaged and such, can be handled through them, allowing protection of the 'young and foolish' so that foolishness doesn't waste the youth. I will admit that I was quite a handful for mine." The look on his face softened. "You needn't worry of it so, everything will work out in the end, most things do."
The magic in the room slowed to a crawl and crackle.

The tingle of unfamiliar magic made Harry squirm. He didn't like it. "What time is it?" He rasped, licking his lips. He really wanted out of this protective dome and to be moving around. The earlier wave of tiredness had finally been napped off.

"About morn." Aracle furrowed his brow and counted quickly beneath his breath. "Breakfast time, I think." He confirmed, when his stomach gave a half growl. He smiled ruefully. "I should not have skipped dinner."

"Morning? Monday?"

"The ritual takes time."

"How much time?" Harry demanded.

"Usually an entire day. Ilsa is rushing it though. I'd wager a handful of minutes from now. She's changed casting runes and Theo has shifted to accommodate the new wavelength."

Harry just stared at him.

"Almost finished." Aracle translated. "Mint?"

Harry scowled, darkly, but didn't protest. The man seemed to have an endless supply of the candy and it did help, somewhat. His mind shifted to more important things. He'd originally been mildly curious to meet Theo's mentor and know the woman who'd had such a big hand in his mate's life, but his first impression of her was quickly being ripped to shreds. "She doesn't like me."

"She doesn't like anyone." Aracle retorted as he unwrapped a mint and gave it to Harry anyway, taking one for himself as well. "And that's on her good days."

"She has good days…?" Harry snorted. It didn't seem very likely at all.

"I am serious. She is—different. Don't let it bother you. It does take some getting used to, when I first met her, I thought she would kill me. I was rather surprised that she didn't." He smiled, fondly. "Death was probably a happier option then, all things considered. She has a habit of keeping everything at arm's length, she's done it for so long, I wager it is a part of her now. Just know that Theo is everything to her." He paused. "Everything."

"Aracle!" Ilsa's sharp voice cut into the private conversation and through Theo's originally soundproofed dome. "Get your arse over here—alone!"

The man scrambled from the sofa, his dark eyes tinged with worry as he fixed Harry with a look that clearly meant 'stay there!' and hurried over to his mate's side. They spoke in low whispers between each other.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Ilsa cradling Charlie's limp form. He bristled, faintly, underneath, unable to help the pangs of jealousy and frustration that bubbled up inside of him.
How dare she touch him! Charlie belonged to him—he'd stake his claim the first chance he had. Harry slowly turned his head, wincing faintly at the residual pain that still settled in his bones.

He all but ached to get up and move from the settee to snatch Charlie from her hands.

His fingers burned and tingled.

Harry winced.

That lovely scent was back again.

Charlie groaned.

Everything was hurting—again—but that wasn't really anything new.

Then again, there'd been that whole hands-sprouting-claws bit and the redhead was pretty sure that at some point, he'd grown wings, or at least, things that felt like wings. He shuddered and the very movement sent spikes of raw pain shooting through his body. His skin was burning and sensitive to the touch and everything was suddenly too bright and too loud and too hot.

There were words whispered softly over his head and a warm hand gingerly rested on his shoulder.

Welcome tingles of cool, comforting magic trickled into him from that sensitive point.

He screeched in displeasure when he tried to sit up and hands held him back. Something brushed his shoulder and he really did scream, lashing out with uncoordinated limbs and hazy magic that seemed to be dancing 'round his fingertips.

"...arlie. Charlie!"

That voice sounded vaguely familiar.

The protective bubble broke.

Harry wrangled free from Theo's grip and streaked towards a half-naked Charlie. He flung his arms around the trembling dragon tamer and nuzzled that bare chest. A moment later, happy purrs filled the room as Charlie's attention was redirected to Harry who was happily exploring the redhead's new Dragel attributes. Harry's own distinctive Dragel traits had come out to play and the sound of ripping fabric gave way to his lovely, silver-spined wings with the shimmery pearl and peach-tinted webbings. He flexed them, gently, carefully, a please coo leaving his lips as he leaned forward, chest to chest with Charlie, hands reaching up in wonderment to stroke the rich, bloodied, navy blue wings that hung from Charlie's shoulder blades.

Charlie's soft blue eyes winked from round human pupils to the native cat-eyed look of his Dragel heritage. He rumbled in appreciation as Harry's nimble fingers skinned over fresh, sensitive skin. He winced at a faint twinge in his left shoulder. It ached and burned as a reminder of something that swiftly flew out of his head when Harry turned wide, seductive emerald eyes up at him, having paused in his ministrations to Charlie's chest.

The redhead swallowed hard.

Harry's sniffed along his collarbone and then around the ache in his shoulder. He gave a dismissive snort and focused instead on licking and nipping a trail along Charlie's neck, having tugged the
Charlie whimpered for a moment, then winced. The movements weren't helping his shoulders any and—a sudden thrill of pleasure washed over him. He nearly went boneless, sagging back into strong arms that caught and braced him.

"Oi, none of that now!" The bossy voice sliced through the happy haze. "I didn't go through all this trouble for you to collapse on me now. Show some backbone, boy. Stand up! You're not half dead. Trust me, I'd know if you were. You can stand on your own two feet if you've a mind to!"

Harry growled.

Charlie hissed.

Theo gave a soothing rumble in answer.

The Harry-Charlie duo blinked in confusion and a moment later, Theo's footsteps announced his approach before he was visible standing to the side in their line of sight.

"Harry? Charlie?" He asked, tentatively.

Harry chirred softly in his throat.

Theo smiled in understanding. "That's good and yes you're right. He is lovely. Charlie? How about you?"

Charlie didn't answer. He stared quizzically at the other young man, trying and failing to understand the significance of the question and why he ought to answer to him. Harry turned to him expectantly. The arms holding the dragontamer squeezed a tad tighter and Charlie fought the urge to break free. He didn't have that kind of energy yet. He half-shrugged at last, not quite understanding what was wanted of him.

"Your wings need to be stretched and you'll probably want a shower." Theo ventured.

Harry suddenly jerked away from Charlie and bared his fangs in an audible hiss.

"...or not." Theo corrected, taking a step backwards. "Harry?"

A guttural growl in answer, had Theo's golden eyes darkening just a fraction. Charlie leaned weakly against the arms holding him and reached for Harry with a wavering hand. He didn't like that look in the golden eyes. But as he reached for Harry, the smaller figure ducked away from him with a slight hiss in his direction.

Charlie bristled at once. He did not deserve that! He was only trying to help and—OW!

Something smacked him upside the back of his head. He lurched forward as the arms released him and was partially caught by Harry. He turned to glare and the expression froze on his face at the glower from the short, stocky woman standing beside him, her hands on her hips.

"Before you get all wound up and out of hand, I suggest you get the necessary things out of the way. I have not the patience to put up with a pair of hormonal-"

Harry clutched Charlie protectively to him, even as the taller dragel effectively hid him from view.
"You didn't have to hit him!" He snarled, claws tightening into the closest thing to a fist. He wasn't paying any attention to the words coming out of the woman's mouth.

"Er, Harry, she didn't mean anything by it." Theo said, soothingly. "She has a habit of doing that. You're both a little-"

"Sugar-coating it won't change the reality." Ilsa smacked Theo lightly over the head in turn, ignoring the injured look he sent her as he rubbed the spot. "What I was trying to say is very simple. A good shag and their instincts will return to normal, since their bond is currently incomplete. Surely there is an empty room in here somewhere?" She looked to Theo for confirmation.

He sighed. "Guest room. Down the hall, second door on the left."

"Lovely." She snorted. "En suite?"

"Across the hall."

"Good. That wasn't so hard, now was it?" She turned to Charlie and Harry, a frown on her face. "You, sir redhead, need to have your wings rinsed off, if you don't quite feel up to a bath, your wings need to be wiped down, at least and stretched. Also, you'll need to scrub the runes I've inscribed until they bleed the-" she stopped at a very obvious snarl from Harry and a swipe of his claws in her direction. Her golden eyes narrowed, but before she could speak, Theo was in front of her.

"Harry…" There was a warning note to his voice to his mate. "Aracle?" Theo threw over his shoulder. He didn't have to look to see that the older man moved to catch hold of Ilsa. It wouldn't do for anything to get out of hand now.

But Harry now stood fully in front of Charlie, his green eyes holding a slight glow and touch of gold. His glare was solely fixed on Theo, his lips half-curled to show his fangs in a wordless snarl.

Charlie shifted, but now held Harry from behind, his blue eyes weary, his wings weighted, an expression of pain muted on his tanned features, but his own stance was slightly defensive.

"Must we really do this now?" Theo said, exasperated. "I don't really want a repeat performance and I know you won't remember a single moment of this once the haze clears." He huffed and without waiting for an answer, shrugged out of his robes and tugged off his shirt and jumper. A moment later, he stood, bare-chested in the room, as his eyes glowed gold. From the pale skin, his tattoos began to surface, complicated, intricate lines of black and burgundy. They moved and swirled as if they were alive, until he hunched his shoulders up to his ears and then shrugged them down and rolled them back. A soft whooshing sound announced his wings as they emerged from behind, flaring elegantly out behind him.

Charlie growled.

Harry elbowed him.

The redhead made a face, but his wince was barely there, as he swallowed, slowly.

Theo's golden gaze narrowed, faintly. He gave a warning sound, low in his throat.

Silence hung thickly in the air.

Charlie sniffled.
Theo's eyes darted towards him, the annoyance giving way to concern as he took a careful whiff of his own. His expression darkened at once. "Charlie?" His voice was rougher, deeper. "You are in pain…" The words were spoken with a scowl. "I can't do anything about that until-

Harry threw himself forward with an angry snarl, his eyes flashing angrily. "He's in pain! Help him!"

Theo dodged the angry swipe of claws and bared his own fangs in warning. He could partially understand Harry's reason for attacking him. "Not yet, Harry, I cannot do anything until you two have-"

Charlie grabbed Harry from behind, a sudden spike in the room's temperature hinting at his element coming into play and giving him the extra kick of energy that he desperately needed. His new instincts screamed at him to get away from the powerful, confident creature in front of them. He hung onto the smaller dragel even as Harry fought and snarled.

A suddenly, sweet scented breeze washed over them.

Harry froze and Charlie stiffened.

Standing just out of reach, Theo fluttered his wings, a move conscious and seductive at the same time. He'd taken the opportunity to deliberately release a small wave of his signature scent, knowing it would calm the suspicious pair. A smirk settled onto his face. "Har-ry." The name came out as a drawl. "The bedroom is down the hall, the second door over." The golden eyes gleamed wickedly as hazed green eyes focused on him, wearily. "You will owe me for this when your head clears." His laughter was almost musical. "My precious treasure…" He murmured. The amused gaze turned on Charlie. "And I am not going to forget your little display either, dragonheart. Two steps to the left and back…don't take too long."

The moment the bedroom door clicked behind the stressed pair, the haze seemed to clear at once.

Harry found himself clutching Charlie's arms and staring up into the tanned, freckled face as the cloudy blue eyes began to clear.

A moment later, the dragon tamer shook his head as if to clear it. Blue eyes met green. A rich, rosy blush danced across Charlie's face, to match his lovely, dark red hair.

As if on cue, Harry looked away, a blush of his own coming out to play. He dropped Charlie's arms as if on fire and took a step backwards only to bump into the door that had shut behind them. He swallowed hard as his wings shrunk and folded back, melting into his body with a swirl of tattooed lines.

Charlie shifted, awkwardly. Then one claw went to his bare chest and he stared down at it in some confusion and unease. There were dozens of carefully written runes in black, all over his entire front, crusted over as if they'd been actual marks carved into his skin. He ran a shaky claw over the lines, biting his lip when faint tingles of pain came through. His left shoulder twitched and shuddered. He hissed softly as the movement brought a spike of pain and he clenched his teeth with a wince.


The barrage of questions fit the image in his head, so Charlie managed a soft chuckle. "Just my shoulder." He admitted. "Left side."
Harry immediately looked and gave a low growl in his throat when he saw the bite mark, bleeding sluggishly, not quite healed over. He reached over, taking Charlie's hand and leading him to a familiar bed.

He'd been here before.

With Theodore.

The scowl darkened as Harry guided Charlie to sit down and then leaned forward, bending his head to lap at the wound, laving it gently with his tongue. His alpha shouldn't have left their beta in pain like this. His Dragel-self whole-heartedly agreed and promised retribution for the oversight. Charlie's stiff shoulder slowly relaxed with Harry's ministrations and finally, he gave a soft, welcome sigh.

Straightening, Harry licked his lips and didn't bother to hide the blush that was now most likely permanently on his face.

"Thank you." Charlie smiled at him, the expression beautiful and bittersweet at the same instance. His wings twitched faintly and he winced again.

Harry's gaze darted around the room and settled on a wide basin on the nightstand. He went to investigate and took note of the tepid water and the large bath sponge. He sniffed it, delicately, noting healing herbs mixed in the clear liquid.

Charlie looked at him expectantly.

"Can you lie down?" Harry dipped the sponge in the water. "I'll help you with your wings."

Blue eyes shimmered gratefully and wordlessly, Charlie complied.

With one final swipe of the sponge, Harry tossed it into the bowl and bent over to set it on the nightstand that he'd wrestled closer to the bed. An inquisitive noise came from the 'patient' beneath him and Harry almost smiled, as he sat, wearing only his pants, perched on Charlie's strong thighs for easier access. He gave an answering chirr of his own to Charlie's soft, continuous purrs. Cleaning the redhead's beautiful wings had been special and wonderful for them both. He'd washed away the blood and natural fluids before they could harden too much and then he'd stretched and rubbed them, as he'd done to his own when he'd wakened that fateful day in July.

Once he was satisfied, Harry had then alternated between rubbing, stroking and re-washing every inch of those gorgeous blue wings, tipped with bright red scales. His attentions to the sensitive appendages had swiftly turned Charlie into a relaxed pile of humming Dragel, complete with encouraging purrs whenever he stroke a particularly sensitive spot.

Harry smiled, faintly, to himself as he finished with a gentle pat to Charlie's tattooed back. He'd washed off the runes there and all that was left, remained the ones on his front.

"Roll over." He scrambled off from his comfortable perch and poked Charlie in the side.

Charlie moaned something that sounded vaguely like 'why' to which Harry suppressed the urge to laugh. The ponytailed redhead was looking more adorable by the minute and he couldn't help preening inwardly at the thought that such a beautiful creature was bound to be his.

Mine. My beta. He thought, possessively. "I need to reach the front." He explained, aloud.
There was a mumbled string of unintelligible words.

Harry snickered. "C'mon big guy." He teased. "Of would you rather do it yourself?"

Charlie whined in answer, but with some effort, heaved himself upwards. He accepted Harry's help in sitting up, cross-legged and leaning forward until his forehead rested in the crook of the brunet's neck. Harry reached for the sponge, glad that the charmed water continually refreshed itself. He half-squeezed it dry, pressed it to that marked chest.

Rivulets of red streamed down the tanned skin as Harry pressed the sponge into the marks, reaching up with one hand to tangle it in Charlie's messy ponytail, while he gently scrubbed with the other. He repeated the actions until Charlie lifted his head to press his cheek against Harry's.

"Just a few more." He whispered, stroking the tangled, red strands.

A sorrowful, soft sound hummed out of Charlie's throat.

Harry nuzzled that warm, tanned cheek and then pressed a kiss there. As he wiped away the last of the ugly runes, an audible hiss was heard as the black lines began to lift and fade into wisps of blackness that curled away, leaving smooth, carved lines, with rich red blood. The lines of red began to close and heal as the blackness was removed, leaving smooth, unblemished skin behind.

Charlie released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

Harry threw the sponge away and with the hand tangled in Charlie's hair, guided the redhead closer for their lips to meet in the softest, lightest of kisses.

"Charlie." Harry whispered against those trembling lips.

"Harry." Charlie breathed.

They kissed again, softly, tentatively.

Then again, a little harder, a little more insistently than before,

By the time that tongues and teeth clashed together, Harry eased them both backwards onto the bed. He helped Charlie brace against the pillows and waited until the wings were comfortably situated. He sat, straddling Charlie's hips, both of them clad in only pants.

Green eyes met blue.

Charlie smiled. He stretched one weary hand towards Harry and winced, when it tugged at the swollen bite, no longer bleeding.

With a tender smile on his face, Harry caught the hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the palm.

The blue eyes lowered and looked away.

"Shh. No." Harry held the hand to his chest and rocked forward to catch Charlie's chin and coax the face back to look at him. "We are the same." He murmured. With a slight wince of his own, Harry drew his wings forward and flared them out. A thrilling sense of freedom stole over him as the familiar weight settled and hung where it belonged. Taking Charlie's hand, Harry guided it to one pearlescent spine.

Wondering fingers traveled over the smooth, cool webbing and along the strong, silvery-peach spine.
"The same." Harry whispered, moving forward and draping his smaller form over Charlie's.

"I didn't know." Charlie said, hoarsely. "And all those things...they keep saying...Mum wouldn't..."

"Shh." Harry crooned, nuzzling the juncture between neck and shoulder, laying soft, whispery kisses along the warming skin. "It's okay. You're here now. You're fine. You're mine."

"Is it?" Charlie rasped. His shaking hands came up to lock around Harry, holding him close. "Am I?"

"Mine." Harry repeated. "All mine."

"Why would you want something like me?"

"Someone."

"I am not...this is...this is different."

"Isn't everything?"

"I don't deserve this. I don't even understand all of it and-"

"I don't deserve you." Harry corrected, hearing and accurately interpreting the hidden meaning behind the pained words. To see the strength of a hero he'd admired, reduced to the very real pain twined around them, Harry only wanted to make it better. His mind began to cloud over, his Dragel senses heightening as he opened his mouth and threw his head back. The soul-wrenching cry reverberated through the room.

Charlie stared up at him, questions hovering in the lights in his eyes as he bared his fangs and sank them into the nearest available piece of Harry. He could not refuse that call, not that one, the one that brought him back from the edge of death itself.

Oh Harry... Hot tears spilled out as he sucked a mouthful of warm, coppery blood from the new bite.

Harry grimaced as he felt the sharp fangs sink into his left bicep. It didn't hurt as much as the mark that Theo had given him. He nosed the throat beneath him and selected a spot of his own, with a warning lick before he bit down. He sniffed, scenting salt in the air that warned him of tears. It brought a wetness of his own to his eyes.

Charlie... and he worked his lips gently around the bite, suckling the taste of fresh, delicious blood.

Magic swirled around them, teasing and touching as it mingled.

The temperature in the rooms rose by several degrees and the lights within, flickered.

Claws shredded Harry's pants and he returned the favor in kind to Charlie.

Claws morphed back to hands and Harry lost himself in the pleasures that Charlie's work roughened hands coaxed out of him. They ran up and down his sides, heating to temperatures that made him squirm and sigh. They were insistent as they stroked, squeezed and occasionally scratched delightful trails of fire on his flushed skin.

"Beautiful..." Charlie sat up, braced against the headboard, the words murmured into Harry's ear.
"So beautiful." One roughened hand slid between them, palming both erections and fist ing with practiced ease. Harry whimpered and mewled, arching closer and fanning his wings, seductively, pleadingly. His hazy emerald eyes burned with fire and a whisper of the magic binding them together as mates.

There was little preparation necessary.

Harry didn't mind. He didn't care for it. He wanted to feel that pain, that familiar burn. Wanted to feel it to know that this was real, that it was happening, that they were alive and together. When Charlie had stretched a hand towards the nightstand where his wand had appeared at one point, Harry had grabbed it back. He'd shook his head, once.

Charlie had then presented his hand, two roughened fingers, to Harry's plump, pink lips.

Green eyes sparked beneath fluttering eyelids as Harry accepted the fingers, sucking, laving and tasting, as he generously coated them. He leaned forward, bracing himself on Charlie's shoulders, careful of the bites, lifting himself up for the questing, spit-slicked fingers. He cried when the first finger circled, teased and slid in. He tangled his hands in Charlie's thick, sweat-dampened hair when the second finger followed.

The fingers worked him over, expert in their teasing and thrusting, until they began to wring soft, pleased noises from above.

"You deserve the world, Harry." Charlie breathed, slipping his fingers out.

Harry shook his head.

Charlie stopped him with a kiss. "Yes, you do." He whispered, fiercely. "And much more." His hands moved quickly, a flicker of elemental magic coming to his aid as he grasped Harry's hips and situated him just right. "Relax." He nipped lightly at Harry's neck as the brunet tensed. "Relax, Harry…it's just me."

Emerald eyes shimmered upwards. "Just you?" Harry said, hoarsely.

Charlie half-laughed. They were a sight, he was sure, with their tear-streaked faces and flushed bodies. "Just you and just me." He pressed a kiss to the bobbing head of messy hair. "I am me and you are you. That is all there is."

Harry sucked in a breath and gasped as he was moved and filled in one sure stroke. He gave a little cry of surprise and locked his arms around Charlie's head, crushing him to his chest.

The redhead merely fastened his mouth over one conveniently placed nipple and began to shift, coaxing their bodies to move together.

Temporary discomfort gave way to immeasurable pleasure.

When Harry came with a cry, Charlie did too.

The tears and pain were equally shared.

They traded it all, as they made love.

When they lay, panting on the sheets, covered in the remnants of their latest coupling, Harry felt something new flicker inside of him. He tugged on it, lightly, feeling the air heat up around them.
Charlie mumbled something from beneath him and Harry instantly released the tangible grasp on the thread of magic. The temperature dropped at once, to a lovely, cooling point.

A new sudden surge of confidence rolled through him and Harry straightened with a smirk, a hint of his old self.

Charlie shifted, one blue eye opening to look up at him. His own, old smile spread across his face as he gaze upwards at the beautiful creature beside him. "Figure something out?"

"Yeah." Harry reached for his hand. Charlie gave it willingly. "I've decided that I'm going to like this."

"Really?" Amusement mingled in Charlie's soft drawl.


"Again?" Charlie moaned. But there was no real protest in his word as he wriggled playfully beneath Harry's questing hands.

"Always."

"Always for you."
"Harry?" Charlie reached, belatedly for the lithe figure slipping out of bed and scrounging around on the ground for the shredded scraps of clothes.

"Pants, Charlie." Harry's sleepy voice came out as something of a whine.

"What?"

"Want Theo." The words were slurred, the movements partially coordinated. "Hungry." He managed, around a yawn.

With some effort, the dragon tamer roused himself from the comfortable nest of soft blankets and wearily slid out from beneath the sheets. They'd had quite a time and in all honesty, he didn't really want to be up. "Hungry?" He repeated, his mind processing the request as a wizard-turned-new Dragel. His blue eyes flashed faintly. "Come here."

Emerald eyes blinked owlishly at him and then, Harry shuffled close, nuzzling his bare chest and snuggling into the opened arms. "Wha..?" He mumbled.

Charlie bit his lip for a moment. Instinct had compelled him to call, but now that he held the lovely bundle, all thoughts swiftly went south at anything remotely connected to food as skin-met-skin. Harry was warm and enticing without even trying. Charlie swallowed hard. "Er,"

"Food." Harry yawned, pressing a kiss to a section of bare skin. A moment later, his pink tongue flickered out and he lapped at the square of skin with a contented hum.

"Elves!" Charlie managed to get out. "House elves, food…!"

"Liefborne." Harry remembered and straightened. That was the password Theo had told him and the names were easy too. "Toppy, Middles?" There were two distinct pops. The brunet didn't even turn. "Hungry." He articulated, simply. The pops happened again and several seconds later, food arrived. A reluctant Harry released Charlie in favor of stuffing his face with the delicious, brightly colored chunks of fruit and raw cubes of meat. When his belly was comfortably full and slightly rounded, Harry gave one last yawn and straightened up, a flicker of green fire showing through.

The air in the room shifted, visibly and Charlie found himself straightening. "Harry?"

"Theo." The smaller Dragel rose, gracefully and rolled his shoulders, silver-peach scales melting back into skin as he turned towards the nightstand. A stack of fresh clothes awaited them. Harry smiled as he selected his set and pulled them on.
A jealous grumble rumbled through Charlie at the mention of the golden-eyed Slytherin. His instincts screamed at him to keep Harry with him and to stay away from the other Dragel at all costs. The redhead scowled. The Dragel that had given him this bite…he rubbed his aching shoulder, wincing again when fingers came into contact with tender skin.

"Theo can heal that." Harry said, quietly. "He has to."

Charlie perked a brow.

"He shouldn't have bitten you in the first place." Harry began. "But when you didn't accept me right away, he just did what he had to do."

"I don't understand."

"That's okay. We have a book." Harry winked. "You can read it later." Harry held out the fresh change of clothes. He felt more happy and content than he'd been in a while and suddenly, he really wanted to see Theo. Charlie had been marvelous, but Harry was anxious to bring his two mates together and see how it went from there.

A slightly cranky Charlie took the clothes and began to shimmy into them.

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HOGWARTS GROUNDS : CENTER OF THE FORBIDDEN FOREST : SUNDAY EVENING

Hermione woke to the feeling of something warm and furry wrapped all around her. She was comfortable and content for the first few minutes while the rest of her mind caught up to the expected reality and her current state. She sat up with a jolt, working to stem her panic when she realized it was so dark that even her hand in front of her face couldn't be seen.

Hands that suddenly ached and felt weighted. Hermione cautiously felt along her wrists, a cold feeling of dread working over her as her fingers skimmed over thick, cool, metal bands, with intricate line woven through them and a fat gem in the center outside of the band. She could not find a clasp, but was thankful at least, that the cuffs didn't seem to be chained together. Her feet were fine, as far as she could tell, there were no ankle bindings around them.

Taking a quick, mental inventory of her faculties, Hermione was relieved to find that she could move every limb in question and that there were no specific injuries she could place. There were several aches and pains, of course, but those were to be expected. She'd determined that the rest of her physical person seemed to be in usable shape, her mind flickered to the next most important item.

Her magic flickered faintly and she choked back the emotion that threatened to come. *Wand, wand, wand…I did bring my wand…!*

She thought, frantically, beginning to rifle through her sweater sleeves and feeling along her skirt for the wand holster that was usually there. Something whuffled and snorted behind her, prompting the young witch to freeze all movement. For a moment, she didn't dare breathe. Then, a tentative hand reached out to the warm, weighted, softness that pooled on her lap and she choked back a scream.

It had to be an animal of some sort, she could feel fur and the warmth radiating around her, suggested that it was a large creature, most likely wrapped around her. The fear melted away to a touch of desperation. She hadn't come to the woods to be captured by some mystery creature and dragged off to its lair.
She'd come to die.

Hermione swallowed hard, her memory piecing itself together as she remembered losing consciousness in the thick of the forbidden forest and then waking to see a half-wolf, half-dog anxiously nosing around her. Her last recollection had been when the creature had seized the back collar of her school uniform and carried her off.

One hand went to her forehead and after a moment, she rubbed her face and stifled a sigh.

*Pull yourself together, Hermione Granger!* She thought, sternly. *These are not the circumstances you wanted, so you'd best keep your wits about you until they are!*

It took some careful maneuvering, but she wriggled out from under the furry weight, relieved when her actions didn't seem to rouse the creature attached to what she figured was the tail. The steady, even breathing and the faint, rhythmic thumps alerted her to the fact that it was very much an animal and quite large, if her hearing was to be trusted. After some thought, she threw away the idea of the creature being the dog that had discovered her, as she could only recall it being slightly larger than average and certainly nothing unusual enough to warrant any worry.

With that idea firmly fixed in her mind, Hermione felt along the ground for her wand and came up empty-handed several minutes later. After a moment's deliberation, she decided to feel her way forward and use what limited awareness her magic could grant her.

It wouldn't be the first time she'd found herself tangled up in the midst of a dangerous situation. Hopefully it would be the last…

Moving slowly and carefully, she felt around the ground and right up to a wall, inching forward with cautious steps towards the one spot that seemed to somehow be a tad lighter than the rest of the surrounding darkness. She stumbled at one point, and fell forward to her knees, throwing out her hands to break her fall with a wince.

"Ow…" The exclamation was muffled in her jumper sleeve as Hermione swallowed hard. That had hurt far worse than she'd been expecting, but as a sudden wave of fatigue washed over her, she pieced together the answer. She'd left the castle on Friday, there was no telling how long she'd managed to survive where she was and a new dryness in her mouth, alerted her to the fact that her body was now fully awake and demanding what it needed to continue living on.

The even breathing hitched.

Hermione held her breath.

A moment later, it continued on.

She swallowed back the sigh of relief and gingerly eased upwards to her feet once more, gently brushing herself off. She felt for the wall again, before starting forward once more. She took several large steps forward and felt a distinctly cool breeze wafting over her face. It smelled fresh, like the outdoors were wont to be after a good rain on a summer's day.

*Must be getting close to the entrance…*

She reached forward with one more hand and suddenly, the ground gave way beneath her.

The scream that bubbled up in her throat, stubbornly lodged there and a half-shriek, gurgling sound was the only noise that she made as suddenly she was falling. She flailed, desperately, hoping and trying to catch hold of something, anything to break her fall to keep her from whatever lay at the
Another sound escaped her throat and suddenly, she was jerked to a halt. A strong hand caught the back of her uniform and another slipped under her arm and hauled her upright. She was held flush against a tall, warm body and then the hands shifted until one arm was wrapped tightly around her neck and a hand covered her eyes.

She struggled, weakly, as her waning strength began to ebb away. The hand around her eyes moved and suddenly, there was light.

"Ahh!" The soft cry was muffled and the next thing Hermione knew, she sat, perched on a rotting tree trunk, sitting opposite of a brooding young man with very pale skin and very red eyes, clad in very black clothes. There were several feet between them and he sat, perched on a dark chunk of rock, the fading light of day casting the last bit of illumination in their dangerous surroundings.

She could now make out her surroundings as being in nature, with the shadowed trees around, the occasional odd rustle and the eerie spookiness she'd come to associate with the Forbidden Forest. It had been the reason she'd chosen it for her last moments, after all. It had promised to end everything. She'd been counting on it, but now…

The young man moved, a subtle shift from simply sitting, to unfolding his crossed arms and crossing his long, lean legs. She could feel an aura of power fanning out from him, a vaguely suppressed magical signature and it was enough to set her on edge and guard. For all her careful planning and reasoning, something had gone wrong.

_Vampire_…?

Her mind supplied and subconsciously, she curled in on herself, even as outwardly she straightened and sat up tall.

No, that wasn't right. If it was a vampire, then there had been nothing to stop him from taking what he would have wanted and there was surely nothing to stop him now, after all, she didn't have her wand and her physical strength was nothing, considering the lack of food and current lethargy. A shiver rippled over her and she could not hold it back.

His glare seemed to deepen.

A moment of tense silence passed between them and then the young man moved. From the folds of his wispy black attire, he drew out a flash of silver and threw it forward.

Hermione jerked backwards, an automatic reflex she couldn't have stifled, even if she tried. She tried to calm her swiftly beating heart as her eyes took in the form of the object and relayed it to the rest of her confused self.

_A knife._

He'd thrown an ornately carved and decorated knife at her feet, with a gleaming, silvery blade. It was the kind of ceremonial dagger that would've been passed down through generations and treasured as a familiar heirloom. Now, such a priceless treasure seemed to mock her as it stood proudly, half-embedded in the dark earth.

She met his burning, red-eyed gaze steadily.

Then those red eyes seem to burn into a deep burgundy. "I'm sorry," his voice was mocking. "I
thought you intended to kill yourself, so I was merely facilitating the process. Don't let my presence disturb you. I would only stay long enough to retrieve the knife, it is priceless, you know. I have no use for a dead body and a human one at that."

Hermione nearly choked.

Dark eyebrows arched upwards on that pale, aristocratic face. "Ah, I apologize again. You wanted it to be painless, didn't you?" He held out his hand and the knife leapt back to thunk solidly in his palm. He rolled up one sleeve of his wispy, dark robe and drew the silvery blade across the pale flesh revealed. Instead of red, a thick line of black welled up from the new wound. The fellow coated the knife in the black fluid and then blew on the cut and the blade. The cut healed over at once, scarless, while the knife's bright silver gleam dulled to a darkened sheen.

He threw it again, with a flick of his wrist and this time, it embedded itself on the tree trunk to the left of Hermione's hand. "There you go. Perfectly charmed. It should be painless now." He folded his hands in his lap and waited expectantly.

Another moment of silence passed.

"It is quite sharp." He murmured. "It wouldn't take much pressure at all and 'tis only a single cut you would need. I doubt it would take much more, or a stab if you prefer."

Hermione drew herself up, her chin lifted a few degrees upward. "I don't know what you're talking about." She said, coldly. "I don't even know who you are. What do you want with me? And if you want nothing, then am I free to go?"

"What do I want with her, she says." He muttered, looking away. "Believe me, I do not want a single thing to do with you, but you are not free to go."

Trembling hands curled into fists and Hermione popped up to her feet, silently berating herself as she swayed, faintly. "What do you intend to do with me?" She demanded. "Am I your prisoner?"

"I have not decided yet." He returned, evenly. "And if you were a prisoner, make no mistake that you would not be standing on your own this very minute."

"Then what do you want from me?"

"An answer, for one." He rose with elegance and grace from his rocky perch. "There are far more convenient ways to kill oneself than leaving it up to the fates. Tell me, do you still wish to die?"


"Mm, yes, of course, I'm sure." He snorted. There was a blur and flicker of shadow. And suddenly, she was choking. Hermione summoned up her strength, clawing, kicking and struggling against the strong hands that closed around her vulnerable throat.

"Let me go, you brute-!"

The words were thought fiercely, as her voice refused to respond and survival instinct kicked in.

When Hermione woke for the third time that day, the only light around was from the hearty glow of the campfire just a few feet away. She processed the fact that her neck throbbed and burned,
fiercely, along with the fact that she lay face down in the damp, wooded floor, on her stomach. She could feel the points of twigs and brush poking up at her stockinged legs and was suddenly aware of the hunger gnawing in her stomach.

The blissful, blessed silence nearly brought tears of relief to her exhausted body. This silence, she'd craved and so desperately desired, a moment where her head wasn't filled to the brim with the insane babblings and chatterings that had haunted her from the start of the summer. Hermione didn't even try to move just resting there, her body sagging bonelessly in relief. Her hazy mind pieced together the fact that she actually hadn't heard any voices since she'd woken to see the black wolf-dog and also when she'd seen the strange pale man. She sluggishly plowed through the mental puzzle, trying and failing to come up with a workable solution.

There was no way any of it made any sense at all.

No sooner had she drawn that conclusion, then as quickly as that silence had come, a sudden rush of noise flooded through her head, drowning out every sane thought. Her mouth opened in a soundless cry as her hands scrabbled upwards to clutch at her ears, clawing at them, frantically.

She could hear them.

She could hear them all—again.

So many voices. So many beings. So many cries for help. All of them begging, pleading, shrieking for an intercession that she could not grant them.

*No, no, no! I can't do this. Not again. Not anymore…no…!*

She twisted, writhed and thrashed on the damp, forest floor until suddenly, something hard pressed down on her back.

*A foot,* her mind supplied, dimly. *A booted foot.*

There was muttering and grumbling directly overhead and the pressure on her back grew to an uncomfortable weight that she squirmed, but stopped thrashing about, having no other choice given. Cold, slender hands caught her wrists, one at a time and twisted them back behind her, snapping them into cool, metal cuffs.

She tried to resist, despite her position, but the cuffs went on anyway.

The moment they were on, the noise stopped.

Hermione froze.

The silence was back.

Her head throbbed something fierce, but it no longer felt as if it were on fire, about to burst from the sheer sensory overload. The weight on her back was removed and then those slender, elegant hands hooked under her arms and drew her upwards. She found herself being cuddled on a comfortable lap, her head tucked into the crook of his neck, body cuddled close to him.

She realized, belatedly, that she shivered in spite of the flickering fire and she trembled, even as one hand ran comfortingl up and down her back, in sure, smooth strokes. Somehow, her hands fist ed in his overshirt and cloak, somehow, his dark hair formed a curtain that spilled over to provide a curtain of privacy for her flushed face, somehow, the steady, calming beat of his heart, anchored her.
"Silvertongue is not a cursed gift." His voice was rougher, deeper, than she remembered it being.

She shivered. That dark whisper right in her ear, drew all her emotions straight up to the front and laid them bare in the way that her body reacted.

"Not a curse." He continued. "A gift. Certainly not anything to kill yourself over." His grip on her waist tightened, crushing her to him. "A very rare gift, given only to those who are worthy and will not abuse it. To hear the voice of every living being, that is a difficult burden to bear alone, but it is not impossible and to be able to help those who are worthy of such aid, that is a miracle in itself."

She whimpered in reply. A hot thread of magical energy slowly seeped into her, coaxing heat into her chilled bones. She made to move her hand and stopped. This time, she could see the weight on her wrist, a beautiful golden wristcuff, with a glowing, ruby gem in the center of it, intricate carvings adorning the cuff all the way around. There was truly no clasp visible. She couldn't fathom how he'd gotten them on her.


He laughed. The forest shivered.

"That is a gift, my little deathwish." The hands holding her, gentled. "Life is a precious thing that is not easily given nor taken. Consider these a gift," he held up one cuffed wrist. "You do not know the true price of death and you will suffer for it." Her breath hitched in her throat. "Death is not a forgiving mistress. She will laugh in the face of your distress and destroy you in a heartbeat, should it suit her fancy. Destruction by her hand is naught but torture, for if living will destroy you, then she will never let you die."

Hermione trembled again. A magical haze was slowly settling over her and she thought she could hear chanting, vaguely, in the background, somewhere.

"Your mind has drawn unnecessary conclusions, but your body betrays you." One slender-fingered hand stroked up her side, leaving a fiery trail in its wake. "You want to live. You do not wish to die, you foolish, mortal child." The tone was faintly scolding. "However, I cannot let such behavior pass unpunished."

She found her voice as that wayward hand caressed her neck and healing magic pulsed into her raw throat and aching body. Energy and vitality trickled in even as her flickering magic began to draw strength from the new energy being forcefed into her. "Please…please…" The words choked out as a haze of red and black settled over her. She didn't know what she was pleading for, only that she wanted—no—needed this…whatever 'this' was. "Please!"

"Far be it from me to deny you." He said, darkly, amusedly. "Your punishment will be living this very life you've deemed unnecessary." His hand settled on her bare stomach, coolness to the fire racing through her body. Hermione didn't even have time to figure how it had gotten there. There was no time to be embarrassed or mortified either. Things were happening too quickly. "And the price I have paid for you is the cost of your existence."

His cold hand suddenly burned with fire and Hermione screamed, even as the brand sank into the formerly unmarked skin. Her body continued to throb and burn in a pleasurable, painful haze of powerful magic and semi-consciousness. She heard the chanting grow louder and then, there was a faint whisper from over her head.
"Atrum onezus socium!"

Hermione, gladly blacked out—again.

Chapter End Notes

NOTE: Aiden is a hellhound and he has an otherworldly lair, this is where Hermione woke first (Aiden will tell her this later) and when she walked out of that 'realm', he caught her and returned them both to the center of the forbidden forest. He has a fascination with morbid things and he does know Death as one would expect of a hellhound. He hasn't told Hermione his name yet and she hasn't shared hers, hence the lack of 'names' in this snippet and since he's being a bit more hell than hound, we have the scenes above. Hermione is NOT going to be a pushover! But for now, she's hungry, exhausted in more ways than one and expected that she would be dead. She also has a fever and is somewhat delirious, so give her and Aiden a chance.
HOGWARTS' GROUNDS : SNAPE'S QUARTERS : MONDAY, NOON.

"Ward the room you idiot child!" Ilsa scolded, nudging him down the hallway to where the door had closed. "Silence, privacy and healing." She recited, waiting.

Theo calmly moved forward and with his clawed hands began to trace shapes in the air, a thick, glowing line of golden magic coming about before they faded into the woodwork. He then held out his hand and murmured an accio, until his wand thwapped into his hand. From there, he waved it about, casting the necessary charms and wards to reinforce the Dragel magic he'd used.

He then straightened, took one look at his mentor and quickly backtracked to the sitting room to wait. There, he winced, seeing Aracle doubled over, with a hand to his stomach and a grimace on his face. "Ilsa-" He started and the words died in his throat as he caught sight of the absolutely furious look on her face.

"Not a word." She snapped. "Aracle, ward the room for several hours at least, they'll need the time." She ordered her mate, his specialty was time-bending spells and she meant to make use of it. Now, she whirled on Theo who had taken a seat on an armchair near the fire. She'd barely managed to hold onto her temper. Her golden eyes flickered to a dark hazel hue. "Mortalia perileus." She hissed. "Do you know what those words mean?"

Theo swallowed.

"Ilsa, give the boy a break, he is old enough and well within his-" Aracle tried.

"Aracle, quit your moaning and go cast that spell." The words were thrown over her shoulder, her arms crossed over her chest. "I didn't hit you that hard and believe me, I wanted to—and keep your mouth out of this. It has nothing to do with you!"

"Should I be grateful, love?" He quipped, but eased himself up and shuffled down towards the guest room door, his magic crackling around him like a bubble of white-hot light at his fingertips. He moved with the faintest of winces visible on his face. He was more than used to this by now and he'd rather his lovely Gheyo take her temper out on him than on any of those young men. "Try not to chew him up too badly then." He suggested.

Theo threw a glare over his shoulder at the Rhyeo, to which, the man shrugged and disappeared further down the hallway out of sight.

Ilsa drew in a short, pointless breath. "Well?" She demanded. "Do you or don't you?"

Theo bowed his head. "Mortalia perileus." He recited in a classroom voice. "A spell crafted to exchange the life of the caster in exchange for the intended."
"And what is the intention?"

"If invoked, the caster then forfeits their life to that of the intended, with no recourse, no return and no protest."

"What is the main reason to avoid using it?"

"There is no countercurse."

"And by no countercurse, what is meant?"

"There is no...other choice. Not even an expert spellcaster can undo the bindings enough for the caster to say goodbye. It is instant death."

"Good boy." Ilsa praised. "Perhaps some of what I've said has actually lodged somewhere in the lump on your shoulders that ought to house a fully functioning brain! What is the primary base of the Brindus bonds?"

Pained golden eyes locked onto hard, hazel orbs.

"Answer me, Theodore!" Her voice was sharp and cutting.

"Mortalia perileus." He whispered, wincing even as he voiced the words. They were words he'd been taught to fear and respect since the day he'd come into his earthen element.

"And what have I told you about using it?"

"That I was never under any circumstances to invoke it until I was in extreme mortal peril."

"And were you in extreme mortal peril?"

"...no."

"I see. Is there anything you would like to tell me?"

"May I have a minute?"

"A minute?" She repeated, incredulously. "Now?"

"Yes, please. Shadow's getting a bit agitated, I just want to make sure that he's alright."

"Shadow?"

"Yes. There." Theo tilted his head to the hearth where a soft, lavender bubble of energy had been whirling and spinning about the little Nytura. It had been in a healing trance since they'd returned and taken up residence on the hearth near the fire, soaking up the warmth.

"You have a Nytura." It was said as a statement, not a question.

"It's Charlie's actually."

"Charlie's...?"

"The redhead."

"Ah."
"Ilsa-"

"And Charlie gave it to…?"

"Harry."

"Harry."

"The brunet."

The woman snorted in a rather unladylike fashion. "Wonderful. This just gets better and better, doesn't it?"

"Oretta, please." There was the faintest hint of a plea in his nearly whispering voice as Theo locked gazes with his mentor.

She perked a brow, avoiding a verbal answer as she changed the subject. "You know what it means when a Nytura is gifted?"

"I do. I was glad for it."

"Were you?"

"I wondered why he hadn't done anything to Harry, because there was surely enough…time, for that sort of thing and he never so much as laid a finger on him."

"Admirable control."

"He couldn't, Ilsa."

"You're right. Which reminds me, if you can't tell me the name, then please, at least ease my nonexistent conscience by telling me that there are no other children in that house."

"There are no other children in that house." Theo parroted, obediently. But there was no humor in his voice.

She smacked him lightly on the head, her lips giving the faintest twitch of something that could've been a smile. "Shut your smart mouth, you-"

"I know. I love you too." He closed the gap between them and hugged her—hard.

She smiled into his neck. "So now that we're squared away on the fact that you're terrified I'm going to land you in some sort of trouble. I mean it, I know what you did to make me do this—marking him before your submissive did? That is going to give you a bit of a headache, I hope you know that." She frowned. "And I am worried, there are others, aren't there? Another year or so and this one—this Charlie could not have happened. Even at this stage the hours are precious, he could've died, and if I wasn't an earth element, for sure he would've."

"I know." He drew in a cautious breath. "I don't know about the others and I don't want to assume." His grip on her tightened. "I knew you wouldn't let him die."

"Smart boy."

"Not really."

She almost laughed. "I think this is part where I bleed your ears out with a scolding that blisters the
ears from here to Erchwan."

"Do you have to? I rather think you already did."

"I was merely warming up." She thumped him on the head with a closed fist.

"That was a warm-up?"

"Of course not." She said, sarcastically. "Why would I ever need to lecture my perfect, powerful and adorable little apprentice?"

His head bowed, the faintest hint of a shadow crossing his face. "You're really angry, aren't you?"

"Angry?" Her hands morphed to claws. "No, Theodore, I am absolutely furious. Because I thought I had told you to never given that password out. Never. On pain of your own death, as that is what it binds you to me. It is our connection! Do you care so little for you own life?"

"There were extenuating circumstances and if my death was to be the-"

"For which I have given you mine. Why did you not share that instead? I would not have held it against you."

"Wouldn't you?" He asked, steadily. "As if I could've borne the thought of losing you!"

Hazel eyes flickered black.

"Are you done?" Theo ventured, when his mentor had dared to take a breath. Her face was paler than he remembered it and from the angry clench of her claws, he knew she was still furious. Her earth element was simply grounding her enough at the moment that she didn't feel particularly inclined to literally rip his head off.

"NO! I'm not. How could you possibly think that I'd survive afterward? If you think my fading would've ruined you, then take a look at the other side of the coin. This is not a one-way rode. I chose you as my anchor, because I thought it was responsibility you were worthy of. I chose you because I thought you understood the importance of such a position. The entire clan resides on this, Theo—more lives than yourself or mine involved! If Charlie hadn't been there, if he hadn't been a willing body, those bonds would've killed you, then Harry—for invoking them through your name—and then, what else do you think would've happened? There is no happy ending there. Nothing good could've happened. Sheer dumb luck granted you all life this time around."

His face fell. He'd managed to weather the scolding rather well, considering. But there was that one detail he had overlooked. She had given him her summons with explicit instructions to use them at any time for any reason whatsoever. He'd been there when she'd taken his oath and bound them together as master and apprentice, mentor and mentee. He'd watched with every emotion under the sun when she had stepped forward and summoned three elemental guardians to guide and nurture him. He'd been there when she'd sworn them to protect him until death, with the very bindings she'd invented—Brindus. He was there when she had made him her anchor, when she had linked her life to his and thus in turn used him to anchor her, so that her own element would protect the clan she'd been adopted into. To protect, not to destroy, for she surely had the power to do so.

He'd been thinking in the afterglow, seeing and knowing what Harry was and would be to him, but perhaps he hadn't been clear enough when he'd handed the words over so easily. He should have asked her first, should have remembered that his dying would kill her and thus destroy a cornerstone of one of the elemental clans. He certainly would not have been left alive afterward,
they would've sent someone to kill him.

Theo drew in a shaky breath. There was truly nothing he could say to that. "I'm sorry, Oretta." The thought of losing her was almost as bad as losing Harry and now, even Charlie, something that surely would've happened if Charlie had not been there. "I am. But I...I care for him. I meant it in all seriousness that I-are you still angry?"

"Nay, child. Only furious enough that I could still kill you with my own hand." She looked away and rolled her head to the side. "Just." She said, simply. "I would take no satisfaction from it."

"So as long as it were your hands, it would be a pleasure." Pain shone freely in his golden eyes. "He had no magic! I didn't think! I-I remembered things and it was, he was right there and we...I-I couldn't have thought that...I meant to tell you." His hands morphed to claws and he clenched them tight drawing blood. "I meant to tell you. Please, I could not have left him undefended and I could not be there for him at that moment. If I did not file the legal claims to--"

This time, she snatched him into a hug and squeezed hard. He made a soft grunt, expelling air as she squeezed him hard enough to break. He let her, not daring to move or breathe for the greater part of their silence. This was the measure of their relationship.

She finally slackened her grip and blew a soft breath over his head, scenting him as her mentored student-apprentice. He tentatively relaxed, knowing the gesture for what it was. He bent down to nuzzle her neck in apology. She rumbled softly in her throat in answer to his pleading whine as he bared his throat to her fangs. She scraped them lightly over the vulnerable throat and then pressed a chaste kiss to the quiver.

Theo breathed a choked sigh of relief. He was forgiven. He could see it even as her dark eyes lightened to a lovely, lightened shade of gold. He'd scared her. He hadn't meant to, but he had. He'd try his best not to do it again. "Thank you." He murmured, unwilling to let her go just yet.

She grunted in answer and they stood like that for a long moment. "I will be changing your bindings." She said, at last. He made a sound of protest, but she caught his ear with one sharp claw and pricked it, lightly. "They will be changed. You said that Harry had no magic?"

"None. No mentor either." Theo squeezed his eyes shut. His own change had been wretched enough that to think of Harry, with his selfless sort of nature enduring something that terrifying alone, it made him shudder. "I didn't want to leave him, but I had to. They—that man, Dumbledore, the one I've told you about?"

"Yes?"

"He was already filing injunctions and filing warrants for things that—Harry doesn't know. I couldn't tell him. I-I'm scared, Oretta."

The grip tightened again. "You did what you had to. What I've taught you to do." She soothed. "What happened to this missing mentor?"

"Harry said they never showed."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Airelle help us all." The woman muttered, she finally withdrew and held him at arms' length. "You didn't tell him what it would do to you, did you do?"
Theo glared at her. They'd covered that already, he was sure.

"Did you?" She prompted. "Did it ever cross your mind to tell him? Or were you just going to let it all go?"

He huffed and looked away. Harry deserved to know things, yes, but so help him, Theo wasn't about to throw unnecessary burdens on already weighted shoulders.

"He deserves to know." Ilsa said, softly.

"He absolutely does not!" Theo snapped. "It's my decision and he's my submissive." His golden eyes flashed a few tints darker as he glared at her.

Ilsa immediately held up her hands, stepping back. "Fine, fine. Far be it from me to interfere in your mated circle, save to say that I will be changing your bindings within this very hour. I cannot wait until you are home for it."

Theo blanched. "They're fine. Really, they are. I won't touch them, I swear! I can even feel them right now as if—"

"They are not and I will not leave it be. I know you are—sorry—for what has happened, but I cannot take that chance again."

"But-!"

"Do not argue on this, Theo. This is not a punishment of sorts. You know the answer as much as I do. If you cannot anchor me, I need to seek another, besides, you are mated now and I did tell you that I would change it when you were. I only wish I could've done it before something like this had happened. It would be entirely selfish and unfair of me to bind you to my life. You deserve better."

"I don't care if you're selfish."

"Now who's being selfish?" She countered. "Besides, if I don't change it, you'll probably give it to the redheaded blockhead as well."

"Could you not insult my mates?"

"Absolutely not. I hate fire types." But the words were said with a smirk and a hint of fondness in her tone as she cast a glance down to the hallway where Aracle had yet to return.


"Such a good little wizard." She teased.

"Fine. Arielle, then." He grumbled.

Ilsa snorted. "He'll need a mentor. That makes two."

"Two to find?"

"Something like that. So your Harry never had one at all then?"

"He knew nothing, Oretta." Theo said, patiently. He knew his mentor's repetition of the fact was due to her twisted way of thinking and he wondered just exactly what was going through her head. There was something there that she wasn't quite sharing just yet. "We first met on the Hogwarts Express, it was...different. He knew what I was, on a subconscious level, but didn't have a clue
what to do about it and he was just so—unguarded. You could tell. It's harder now, but it was very—trust me. He didn't. You should've seen the reception he gave Terius. There was no one."

"That worries me." The short woman moved to take up a length of floor to comfortably begin pacing.

"Oretta?" Theo ventured, cautious. He was loathe to drop the respectful honorific.

"It worries me deeply. There have been mention of Fabrine in the works again and the Torvak are awakening."

"What? When?" Theo bristled at once, Fabrine was the term for the outcast creatures that fought Dragels at every opportune moment. Torvak were known as the gifted hunters with the Sky Raven's protection. Torvak were the Dragel's version of kidnappers, while Fabrine fit the description of a boogeyman. It had been years since there'd been mention of them.

"You haven't been to Nevarah in a long time, Theo." She turned on her heel and calmly walked back to the other end of her invisible point. "Things have been happening lately. The city borders are under constant attack from all manner of dark things. No one wanted to admit it was the Fabrine. There is tell of prophecy that the Night of a Thousand Years approaches—soon. It is an ill-omen for our generation, to be alive in this time." She sighed. "I am loath to consider what it means on the grand scheme of things, but a missing mentor now? This is not good." She turned the corner again. "This Harry...is there anything I ought to know him?"

"He is famous to the wizarding society."

"How famous?" She countered.

"Pledged to save their world."

"Really?"

"I am Slytherin."

"Hmm." She snorted. "From that dark madman? He'd need Merlin, Morgana and all the fates beside him to—"

"Please don't speak of him that way." Theo said, politely. The tone did not touch his eyes. Hard golden orbs softened, faintly. "You care for him?"

"You doubted?"

"He flinches."

"Pardon?"

"Don't give me that pureblooded twaffle." Her own golden eyes flickering a few tints darker. She stopped pacing, her arms crossing over her chest. "He flinches every time I so much as breathe and when your darling Charlie is going to pieces, he's ready to rip me to pieces over someone else's pain, that's not something that I can ignore when—"

"You do have that effect on most individual—"

"Wash your mouth out with sand!" She shot back. "Theo...Theodore."
"Ouch. No thank you." Theo shuddered. He sighed, quietly. "You have noticed?"

"So have you."

"I have." He admitted. "But nothing concrete. He doesn't hint or speak of it beyond a few occasional bouts of awkwardness."

"Awkwardness?"

"I had to bribe him to replace his wardrobe, everything was rather worn and oversized or undersized...he doesn't really eat much, even though I have taken to putting things on his plate. He's smaller than even an average submissive would be and...and I don't know what to do!" He threw up his hands. "He flinches sometimes, shies away at others and every so often I have the feeling that I've said the wrong thing, but I don't know why, because it sounds fine to me."

The expression of sorrow on his mentor's face had the young Slytherin moving forward for the hug that came readily. He didn't care that he was perhaps, being more clingy than necessary. There was no one there to judge, save for the one that wouldn't judge him.

"Oh Theo." She kissed the top of his head, her body twisting and morphing to a halfling form where she was no longer a head and shoulders shorter, but rather, tall enough to tuck his head beneath her chin. "Why on earth did you have to have such a sensitive heart beneath these carefully constructed walls?"

He gave a snorting laugh and she chuckled, softly.

"Death Eaters?" She repeated, with a scowl on her face. "Only one of them died?"

"Well, only one of them was torched..." Theo faltered. "I didn't stay too long to take a death toll. Dumbledore was there and Harry was out cold. Charlie was holding him, I don't know what really happened, I haven't had the chance to ask. I do think that for the torched body, Harry may have called on the element in regards to him, the body wasn't in a very...well, remember when I didn't know how to control the grains of sand? That day at the beach? The one when I created an abyss without knowing what I was doing?"

"Mmm. He did that? Impressive." Eyebrows arched upwards in admiration.

"Something like that. When I arrived, there were so many cracks in the ground, you'd think there'd been an earthquake."

"and said you had been training him?"

"Yes. He's been really worried about his lack of magic."

"How long's it been missing?"

"Since the inheritance."

"Which was...?"

"Over the summer?"

"Mmm." She shook her head and began to pace. "There's been no notice of it, anything?"

"It's as if it didn't exist."
Ilsa gave another grunt. "Would you be staying at the guest house when you come or with friends?"

"Guest house, probably." Theo thought for a moment. "Unless there is another offer, I couldn't possibly intrude on anyone else at this time, it wouldn't be proper."

"Well, as soon as you are settled, make an appointment with the healer's division—for both of them. Use my name if they won't slot you in soon enough. It is the Second Feast of the Hunting Season and you know how things become once that starts." She sighed. "I've been on the border patrol for virtually my every waking moment. I won't be able to spare the time to see you straight away. Send a missive once you've arrived, I'll answer when I've the time to spare. In the meantime, I'll file the necessary things at the Office of Records in regards to Harry's mentor and I'll see what happened to Charlie's as well. He would've been assigned one, but if he didn't change on the expected birthday, they would've reassigned the mentor elsewhere. I'll have to check if there are any fire holders to spare, that will be the easy part. I am not sure about Harry. If he doesn't have an element, it isn't that easy to simply select someone, even if there are willing volunteers."

"Do you think he is one of the nameless?"

"It is possible, but what you said earlier, with his affinity with your element even with knowing so little of it. It suggests the earth element and…suppression."

Theo shot to his feet, anger immediately radiating from his being. "What?" He said, dangerously. He'd just survived Charlie's reality—barely—and now to think that Harry could be in a similar position and he hadn't even known, that riled him in a way he couldn't bear to handle.

"Calm yourself, love." Her golden eyed gaze flickered to him meaningfully and then away. "Missing magic—natural magic since the inheritance—suggests a seal or a powerful suppression spell. There is no reason for his magic to be missing, unless someone has locked it away." She scowled, darkly. "As to who would bind a child immediately before or after an inheritance of this kind, I would dearly love to have their head and possibly their heart as well." Her claws slashed viciously through the open air. "I will ask around, that is all I can do at present. Just keep a close eye on him. Never let him out of your sight."

"I don't plan to." Theo said, quietly. "…so unfair."

"Life is seldom fair to anyone, Theo."

"You have to change them now?" Theo squirmed, shifting uncomfortably as he stood in the runed circle carved on the sitting room floor.

"Hush." Ilsa murmured. "Aracle?"

"They won't feel a thing."

"Shadow?" She prompted.

The little Nytura gave a huff, but obediently flew from Theo's shoulder over to Aracle's, who now waited in the hallway, to cast a containment spell to hold the magic about to be used.

"Breathe, Theodore." Ilsa soothed.

He pressed his lips tightly together as the burn began to start. "What about chess?"
"When you're through." Aracle promised.

Theo hissed, wings flaring and coming to life as the ritual began.

"Breathe." Ilsa reminded.

Ilsa sighed and threw a scowl down the hallway. "They are taking their time."

"Leave them be." Aracle soothed, he had returned and taken up residence in one of the comfortable armchairs beside the fireplace. "Chess?" He gestured to a playing board he'd set up near the fireplace. Shadow was perched on his shoulder, little wings stretched out, a yawn on his adorable scaled face. "or Food?"

"Ah, there's house elves." Theo brightened. "They'll bring something."

"House elves?" She blinked at him.

"Yes, they'll bring-"

"Is there a kitchen?"

"...yes."

"Good. You play chess. I'll be in the kitchen."

"But-!"

"Chess, Theo."

Aracle smothered a laugh and Shadow made a happy chirring sound.

A bowl of fruit was dropped in his lap and Theo looked up in surprise. He'd been playing wizarding chess with Aracle and the food had been unexpected. He blinked up at her. She'd protested at the very thought and idea of a house elf preparing food, on the basis of not knowing where everything came from. She'd then trooped off to the kitchen and left the two of them alone. Apparently she'd found fruit and that was enough.

Ilsa calmly moved forward and sat on the handle of Aracle's armchair, sliding off to sit, conveniently in his lap. "Eat." She gave a jerk of her head towards Theo. "You look horrible and if you've spent time at Gringotts' then you need to be eating more than that."

He grimaced, but took up the bowl and began to eat, one eye on the chessboard. Ilsa ate quietly, feeding the occasional cube to Aracle as they waited for Charlie and Harry to be finished.

"What kind of spell did you cast?" Theo ventured at last.

Ilsa rolled her eyes. "As if he'd tell." She huffed. "You know he never does, but seeing as I had plenty of time to chew you out, I'd say that it's a nested one." Her nose wrinkled. "Show off." She elbowed him, lightly, in the stomach.

He nipped her fingers on the next offering of fruit in return.

A flicker of fondness sparked between them and then Ilsa turned away, her head cocked to the side. "Sounds like they're finished."
"You were listening?" Aracle poked her in the side, even as she leaned back to thunk her head against his own.

"Shut up."

"Gladly."

Harry burst into the sitting room, brimming with renewed energy and with a singular goal on his mind. He spotted Theo sitting in an armchair by the fire and playing Chess with Aracle. It was a lovely domestic scene that he couldn't take the time the enjoy when his dragel-self came to the forefront. "Theo!" The name left his lips as he launched himself forward. He saw the golden eyes widen a fraction in surprise and then his dominant was up and out of his chair, catching and cradling him in strong, steady arms.

"Harry." Theo murmured into that messy mop of hair. He sniffed, carefully, checking the new scent rubbed on his submissive and drawing his own conclusions from it.

"M'sorry." Harry stretched up to nuzzle his neck in apology. His emerald eyes held firm resolve. "I'm sorry I used your password when I wasn't in danger." He said, clearly. "But I would do it again if I had to."

Theo's grip tightened on the slender body. "You would?"

"For Charlie, yes. I couldn't let him die, Theo. Just like I wouldn't have been able to let you die either."

The final piece of the puzzle clicked in and Theo bent to kiss the newly exposed throat. "Forgiven." He murmured. That made sense, far more sense than the ideas that had been floating through his panicked mind at first. He definitely couldn't hold that against Harry—not that he wanted to, anyway.

Harry sagged in his arms in relief. "You're not angry?" He hadn't expected such acceptance.

Theo hid a smile. "I would've been, if I you hadn't used it." He kissed the tip of Harry's nose. "Are you well?"

"Huh?"

"Any soreness or-"

Harry's pale face blushed a furious and brilliant red. "Theo!" The name came out somewhat of a squeak.

Theo struggled to keep his face straight. "I am only asking, because I don't think that Charlie can carve blood runes as yet."

"He has a wand." Harry hissed, mortified.

"Well, naturally of course." Theo returned, smirking.

Harry flickered several more shades of red as he caught the implication in the words and immediately buried his face in Theo's neck with a low whine. His dominant mate finally gave into the laughter, but rubbed soothing lines up and down that slender back. After a few more whispered words between them, the private moment was broken when Harry pulled away and holding Theo's
hand, pulled him over to Charlie.
Theo, Charlie and Pudding

Chapter Notes

*Arielle is the name of the Saurdahn warrior who joined with the wizard and Dragon that resulted in the first Dragel. Her name is used much like Merlin's and of course, it is mostly used by Dragels, if at all.

HOGWARTS' GROUNDS : SNAPE'S QUARTERS : NOON.

"Theo, Charlie." Harry said, expectantly. "Charlie, Theo." He gestured between the two of them and as instinct dictated and looked directly to Theo. "Alpha." He said, softly, then stepped aside to let his mates interact. He noted, with interest that the air between them wasn't as tense as he thought it would be. That was nice. He liked that.

"Charlie." Theo smiled, patient. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." The dragon tamer allowed. "Except for the ah," he gestured to his clothed shoulder, unable to further articulate his issue with the bite in his shoulder that now throbbed fiercely as he stood before the one who had given it to him.

Theo brightened in understanding. "Ah. Right that. My apologies, if it weren't for the ritual, I would have waited." He began to undo the buttons on his dress shirt and took a step backwards. Charlie blinked. "Skin to skin contact." Theo murmured, softly. "And if I somehow manage to bloody this shirt, Ilsa will pitch another fit. I think she's done enough yelling for today. My ears cannot take any more." There was a grunt in the background, but the mated trio ignored it.

With slightly stiff movements, Charlie began to remove his shirt as well.

Harry moved forward to help, only to be stopped by a warning growl from Theo and a flash of those golden eyes. He froze appropriately and took the few steps back to his original position, watching in puzzlement.

Theo folded the shirt carefully and handed it over to Harry as he called his tattoos up to the surface. The intricate patterns wove through his skin and now, in the room's light, Harry could see that the lines were a colorful mixture of a rich brown to a pitch black.

Admiring green eyes feasted on the lovely details and they flickered to the movement of the dragon tamer baring his own upper torso as well.

Charlie's tanned skin came into view as he finally wriggled out of his shirt and handed it over to Harry in stride. His tattoos were already out and swirling, a lovely mix of black and burgundy. The bite on his left shoulder was red and still slightly swollen, though no longer bleeding sluggishly. Theo's golden eyes darkened a few shades as he stretched his jaw, his fangs creeping through his gums and visible in the way he held his mouth open a tad longer than necessary.

A faint sound of unease came from Charlie, but he stood his ground and watched as the smaller man called forth his Dragel attributes. He hadn't figured out how to summon or return his own, so while his claws had returned to hands and his wings to their tattooed forms, nearly everything else
had remained. The scales, the cat-eyed pupils, the fangs and his somewhat neater ponytail, thanks to Harry's nimble fingers. As Theo continued to draw out his transformation, the unease grew until Charlie couldn't stop the low growl that sounded through his throat.

Theo's dark eyebrows arched upwards in a silent question. He was deliberately calling out his Dragel nature with respect to the ranking that he intended to hold in their circle. The display of power and grace would most certainly set Charlie on edge, but it would make the statement that Harry had denied him in insisting that they did not fight. Now, he stood tall, straightening, not the least bit affected that his head only came up to Charlie's shoulder. His golden-eyed gaze nailed the redhead right where he wanted him. When he ventured forward, Theo kept his movements slow and measured, giving Charlie plenty of time to react as he invaded his personal space. With careful movements, Theo reached up and slid one hand into that thick, red ponytail and tugged the hair tie loose.

Charlie's breathing had stilled to cautious, slow intakes and he swallowed as Theo's hand withdrew, the leather hairtie in hand. The red hair had taken on a slightly darker hue at the roots, the lightened tips still the usual shade of Weasley red. It was cut in feathery layers with several wavy wisps framing that tanned, freckled face, while others brushed the tops of his shoulders and the rest spilled down to mid-back level.

"It suits you." Theo murmured, flicking the tie to land in the armful of shirts that Harry held.

A quiet purr came from Harry's corner as he drank in the sight of both mates looking rather handsome in their respective rights and basked in the feeling that they were both his.

Golden eyes locked with blue, Theo drew one clawed hand up to his right wrist and slashed downwards, watching and gauging Charlie's reaction as blood welled from the cut.

Charlie took a careful breath, but it was still too deep that the scent of blood immediately filled his nostrils and spiked his body's natural response. He felt a whine building in the back of his throat and struggled to tamp it down. He would not give in this easily! He would not! His body quivered faintly, understanding the natural instinct that he had yet to personally decipher.

Theo silently offered the bleeding wrist.

Charlie twitched, his eyes riveted to the crimson liquid, his lips parting as he reached for that arm. Trembling fingers closed over it, feeling the soft warmth from another body and he bent his head towards the cut.

Theo drew closer, allowing Charlie to move his arm. He spoke, his voice dark and seductive. "Do you yield?"

The question registered as Charlie had nearly brought the bleeding wrist to his mouth. A possessive flare of jealousy rippled through him, along with a healthy dose of anger. He'd almost fallen for that trick! A snarl, unbidden, burst from his lips as he straightened, yanking Theo's arm with intent to throw the smaller figure off balance. For a moment, they struggled.

Charlie tried to grab Theo's arms and pin him back, so he could set his teeth on the dragel's neck and thus claim alpha rites within their mated circle. Theo used his smaller figure to dodge most of the movements and his earth element to hold his own against the battle of strength. Charlie hissed and snapped. Theo growled and snarled. Teeth found flesh and blood was flowing.

Harry's content expression immediately morphed to one of panic and horror. "Wait!" He protested. "You said you wouldn't fight and-"
Both Dragels turned on him with identical snarls of displeasure and disapproval.

Harry stumbled backwards in shock as it seemed all human-like awareness had left them. For a moment, he stared, disbelieving, before his temper sparked and he started forward, determinedly, only to be yanked backwards with a strong arm around his neck.

**Ilssa.**

There was a polite smile pasted on her face.

"Now then, little one. Let's leave the big boys to sort it out, don't you think? It's very dangerous to get in the middle of that." Her golden eyes flicked to Aracle. "Make sure they don't destroy the furniture. I don't know who lives here, but if their taste in necessities is to be admired, then I don't think they'd appreciate it if there were claw and bite marks all over the place." Her lips half-quirked as if she were liable to smile when she tracked Theo backing Charlie towards the settee as the redhead's hair burst into a swarm of flame. "On second thought, ward the whole place for fire while you're at it. Scorch marks wouldn't be any less of an issue."

"Where are you-" Aracle called after her as she began to exit the room, half-dragging Harry with her.

"Kitchen." She returned. "Wards, Aracle!"

He scoffed in answer, but a moment later, a tingle of protective magic effectively covered the entire living quarters.

Ilssa slowed her step enough for Harry to awkwardly follow her with the position of her arm around his neck. She immediately released him once they stepped through the doorway and backed him into the kitchen counter, her golden eyes snapping. "Did you swear him not to fight?" She demanded.

Harry glared at her, rubbing his neck with one hand. His Dragel-self bristled quite visibly at the fact that she'd dare to manhandle him, but it also held him in check at the aura emanating from the female Dragel. There was something about her that was not to be crossed. "That's none of your-"

"Never do that again!" She matched his glare with one of her own. "If you did, I won't forgive you for it. They'll fight, they have to, but they won't kill each other. It's necessary." She turned away with a snort. "The only way to peaceably resolve a new addition is if they yield when asked, even though you're a sub, interfering with a dominance fight is a dangerous and foolhardly thing to do. When you're involved, they can kill each other over you, because you'll become a physical bargaining chip between them."

Harry stared at her in growing horror. That was downright horrifying. He swallowed hard. He hadn't known that and the encyclopedia surely hadn't mentioned any of it, save to say that he had all rights to choose his mates without seeking approval from any of his previous ones, alpha included. If he encountered resistance, then he was allowed to insist on the new prospective's inclusion.

"Theo asked. Your Charlie should've accepted, unless it seems he has a particular attachment to you from before his inheritance." The words were said meaningfully, gauging.

Harry half-shrugged. He didn't trust her enough to tell her what he knew. It wasn't her business anyway. His fingers twitched and curled, he was itching to return to the room, to see Theo and to be near both of his mates.
The short stocky woman took a step backwards and eyed him from head to toe. "I am going to tell you something and you are going to listen." There was a no-nonsense edge to her voice and the golden eyes narrowed. "Theo will never tell you until he comes to terms with things first, and personally, I do not believe that it is the proper course of action. Whenever he chooses to tell you of his own accord, he will. You will pretend to know nothing of that, until he does."

Harry frowned, his hands taking to fists beside him. He didn't like where this conversation was going. He started forward, only to realize that he couldn't move. She'd wordlessly and wandlessly cast something to stick him to the wall and immobilize all movement.

"Never use his password again." It was said stiffly and sharply, with a power behind it that promised pain. Lots of pain. "Access his powers however else you like, drain him dry if you must, but never breathe those words again. I don't care that he's given them to you or-"

"That's none of your business!" Harry said, hotly. "And I don't have to listen to you! Theo is my-!"

"My apprentice." She cut in smoothly and offered a thin smile. The expression seemed almost eerie on her carved features. "I have been informed of your lack of a mentor and so I excuse you in this. There was no way you could know, especially if you were not raised with any knowledge of our kind." Her body quivered, as if with suppressed emotion. "Before you ever dare summon him that way, call me first."

Harry opened his mouth and then shut it. He didn't know what to say to that. He hadn't been expecting it. The fight began to drain out of him even as she continued to speak as if she hadn't said a single thing out of the ordinary.

"The words are Erchwan Orbis Brindus." Those golden eyes drilled into him. "Before you ever call him, call me. I will come." The weight in her words, promised that it was the spoken truth. "Whatever you need, whenever you need it, be it for a fight, mortal peril-" and that was said with a snort "-or any other distress requiring such interventions, call me. I will always come. Always."

Harry stared. He couldn't believe it. His face most likely said as much.

She turned away with a half-laugh. "His password exchanges his life for your own." She said, quietly. "We earth types tend to use more sacrificial magic than the other elements. If you hadn't called forth an inheritance from Charlie, the guardians you summoned when you spoke, surely would have killed you. As it was, they split the effects in two. Your Charlie is still suffering from them—I doubt he'll get his wings to fade in any time soon." Her brows furrowed. "And from the way you've been twitching all evening, I'd wager you're still on pins and needles from it, aren't you?"

The emerald eyed Gryffindor pressed his lips together, tightly. His face was pale and somewhat drawn as her words sunk in and were duly processed.

"You do not have to answer me, but I would suggest mentioning it to Theo. A little blood would help with the pain and probably some sugar." She frowned. "Don't hold it against him. He doesn't mean anything by it and he can't help it sometimes, it's in his nature. Most alphas do have some sort of absolute action included in their passwords. His just happens to be preservation of his beloved, even at the cost of himself." She rubbed her hands together briskly and perched them in fists at the side of her hips, surveying the kitchen with a practiced eye. "Now then, those two idiots of yours are going to be rolling about there for a few minutes longer and they'll probably need something to eat when they finish. Ever made pudding before?"

"W-what?" Harry found his voice from sheer shock.
Ilsa rolled her eyes with exaggerated patience. "Pudding." She repeated, slowly. "You know, that sweet you eat in a bowl, with a spoon? Sits nice in your stomach. Doesn't take very long to make. Comes in every flavor imaginable?"

"I-wha-?" Harry shook his head.

"Butterscotch pudding." Ilsa winked, her mood lightening as if she'd flipped a switch. "It's Theodore's favorite."

Harry licked his lips, uncertain. "You're telling me this, why?"

"Because sex can't always get you what you want." She said, matter-of-factly. "And Theo can be stubborn, it's in our nature. But if you can't get in his pants, you can certainly get in his stomach. Never hurts to have a bit of leverage."

Harry sputtered unintelligibly for a few minutes and a slight pinked hue dusted his cheeks. But the words had worked their own magic on him and he had relaxed—albeit very slightly—but he'd relaxed just the same. His gaze flickered to the doorway and then to Ilsa who was waving her hand and waiting as pots and ingredients leapt to her fingertips.

"Stop that." Her back was turned to him. "They need to do that as they're your first two, this fight is more important than any others. It'll probably be longer because you've asked them not to fight and they'll both try not to, even though instinct is demanding it. Or, as it sounds, they'll probably wrestle, instead of throwing punches."

He eyed her, warily. "Why?"

"Because wrestling isn't fighting." She snorted. "Once your alpha has rightfully won his position, the beta will always defend it for him when it comes to new additions, meaning, that your next mate will be less likely to challenge Theo, knowing that Charlie will side with him."

"You sound so sure." Harry couldn't keep the tone from his voice. He didn't think it was fair to Charlie.

She snorted. "Don't you want him to win?"

The blush flared once more and Harry looked away. He did. Charlie was Charlie, but Theo…yes, he definitely wanted Theo to win.

"Ever cooked with magical appliances before?" Ilsa inquired, waving her left hand to have things poured into measuring cups.

Harry didn't bother to ask how she'd simply known where everything was and how to make it go about her bidding. He half-shrugged. "Not really."

"Ever cooked at all?" She prompted.

He shrugged.

"Men." There was a derisive snort. "Half of them couldn't lift a spoon to save their lives." She eyed him. "I should hope that you learn to."

Harry didn't answer.

They measured ingredients to the sound of muffled thumps, snarls, growls and hisses.
A few times, he'd wanted to break away and see what was happening.

Each time, Ilsa circled around and redirected his steps back to the stove with a single, pointed eyebrow. She'd explained, briefly, that the longer the fight dragged on, his presence in their immediate vicinity would prompt the fight to become more frenzied and brutal. That had been reason enough to stay put.

Sort of.

The curiosity nearly killed him. He didn't think he could stand it to know that they might be inflicting serious damage on each other on his behalf. Harry the wizard didn't like that at all, but Harry the Dragel was humming contentedly within. Plain ol' Harry scowled.

"Aracle's watching them, they'll be fine." Ilsa murmured. She took in his expression and interpreted it correctly. "Stop worrying so much. It isn't good for the heart. Stress can kill you know."

Harry snorted. He'd found the best thing way to handle her odd remarks was to simply stay quiet. That way, she didn't have anything to pick on. He did have to admit to himself, that she was a patient teacher as far as pudding went. He'd never had anyone explain the use of magical kitchen appliances before and while he'd had some opportunities to experiment and the like, the whole savior of the world and Moldy-Voldy being after his head, had always cast a damper on any remotely normal side activities. Especially in terms of culinary experimentation.

He carefully measured under her watchful eye and worked to keep himself as indifferent and calm as he could, even when she hovered closer inside his personal space than he was comfortable with. At one point, he sidestepped towards the doorway and she moved to stop him, quicker than he'd thought she could. He jerked around, freezing, even as her hand flashed out.

He flinched, throwing up his arms, a reflex he'd never been able to fight.

A soft towel flumped harmlessly over his arm block where Ilsa had snapped it with a flick of her wrist. It felt like Crookshanks batting at his feet when he wanted to play.

Her golden eyes were unreadable. For a moment, he didn't dare move and neither of them dared speak. The silence stretched and the pot on the stove simmered away. Harry bent his head and refused to meet those brilliant golden eyes as she brushed past, her words were painfully soft.

"That is the hardest I will ever 'hit' you, youngling."

When the pudding was finished, Harry had to admit that the woman knew how to make a good dessert. She also effectively distracted him at a time where it counted.

Ilsa spooned the entire pot between two medium-sized bowls. "Eat it all." She instructed, handing him a spoon. "The sugar helps almost as quickly as blood would. If you are never near your mates and don't trust the blood around you, then get some sugar into your system as fast as you can. It can be converted to energy far quicker than a full meal."

Then, he gathered the bowl in his hand, and snuck another delicious mouthful for himself. Harry couldn't keep himself from stiffening when Ilsa causally gave him a one-armed hug in congratulations.

"Just remember to boil it twice." She said, seriously. With her own bowl in hand, she exited the kitchen.
It was a minute before Harry could follow her. He couldn't stop thinking how such strong arms could ever be so gentle.

Harry stood with a bowl of pudding in hand, frozen at the scene that met his eyes.

Aracle stood near the fireplace, with Shadow perched on his shoulder, looking annoyed with his arms crossed over his chest. He opened his mouth to complain as Ilsa closed the gap between them and happily stuck a spoonful of pudding in his mouth. The expression on the Rheyo's face was comical and a moment later, he gave a moan of appreciation as the spoon was removed and Ilsa kissed his cheek in thanks.

But it wasn't their interaction that riveted Harry to the doorway.

Rather, it was the sight of a flushed and panting Charlie pinned to the floor with his lovely navy wings splayed out on the ground beneath him. The Dragon tamer quivered with the sensations he currently overwhelming him, courtesy of his new Alpha. Theo lay partially draped across him, his fangs deeply embedded in the redhead's neck, while one pale hand disappeared down the front of Charlie's trousers.

Subconsciously, Harry licked his lips, even as a low whine left his throat.

The sound caught Theo's ear at once and he paused long enough to disengage his fangs from Charlie's neck and lick the bite wounds closed, before he straightened to look for Harry. Golden eyes locked with green, as Theo smirked before that wayward hand gave a final stroke and squeeze, resulting in a gasp and a pleasurable shudder from his new beta.

Harry forced his feet to carry him forward, eyes roving hungrily over the scene that really shouldn't be arousing him as much as it is. He can see the claw and bite marks fading away as Theo paused to cast the healing runes on himself and Charlie's quivering form. On Charlie's left, the juncture between neck and shoulder, the once swollen bite mark is now replaced by the same circular tattoo that Harry bears. On the right, Charlie bears Harry's mark, a simpler design with calligraphy-styled detail in the shape of a five-fingered claw. His beta has been marked and claimed quite nicely, Harry is pleased to note. He sniffed the air, sensing only that there has been blood and Charlie's recent release. There was something missing, but Harry couldn't quite put his finger on it yet.

Something hinted that perhaps Aracle had handled damage control as Harry stared in fascination at one deep gash across Theo's back. The wound closed and healed before his eyes, showing smooth, unmarked skin once more. Theo tugged away the towel Ilsa had pushed in the crook of Harry's elbow and wiped his hand, before reaching for Harry and pulling him down, roughly to the floor.

The pudding was set somewhere—Harry has no idea where—because suddenly, Theo was kissing him and shredding his shirt and nothing else really quite mattered after that. He moaned into the kiss, aware that Charlie lay between and beneath them as Theo aggressively plundered his mouth, his hands holding him in place, allowing no refusal or control.

When Charlie whimpered, Theo's grip gentled and a moment later, they pulled apart and he picked up the pudding bowl, which, incidentally, had been perched on the redhead's stomach. Satisfied, Theo rocked back to sit on his heels and with a pat to that tanned stomach, allowed Charlie to sit up. The young alpha watched proudly as it was now Charlie's turn to lay claim to Harry's perfect pink lips and that delectable mouth. A pleased trill sang from his throat as he turned his attention to the lovely dish in hand.

A happy exclamation draws the attention of everyone, a moment later.
When Harry turned to look at Theo, the Slytherin beamed at him in pure adoration.

"T-theo?" Harry was quite nearly blinded by the brilliance of that lovely smile.

"Pudding!" Theo crowed as he spooned another helping of ecstasy into his mouth. "I love you." He hummed, happily, eyes closed in sheer bliss. "Oh Merlin and Arielle, I do. This is perfect, Harry!"

Harry blushed from the tips of his toes to the tops of his ears. In all the years, for all this time, no one ever complimented him on anything he'd ever cooked. Theo's unsuspecting words became the honest balm on a wound he didn't even know existed.

At Charlie's inquisitive sound, the three of them soon sit half-tangled together, with Harry on half-on Charlie's lap, and Theo tucked between them, shoulder to shoulder, to share the pudding amidst quiet whispers.

The happy moment was interrupted by a sudden hiss. Aracle's hold on Ilsa seemed rather pointless as the warrior dragel bristled quite visibly, and nearly all but tore her way out of his embrace. A low growl in her throat sent a warning to Theo, who suddenly leapt to his feet and assumed a protective, defensive stance before his two mates. Charlie's grip on Harry morphed to one of pure iron as his wings stiffened and swept forward to offer privacy and protection, even as Harry squirmed to be free.

All eyes turned to the main entrance of the Snapes' quarters.

Someone was out there.
The Torvak is the Last Creature/New Idea, I intend to introduce in this fic guys, so please hang on. I swear it is on my secrets stash of double stuff Oreos...

NOTES: (for clarity in the second half of this chapter, please read!) Torvak are based off of the Japanese folklore creatures known as "Tengu" demon like beings with avian characteristics, meaning a beak, wings, claws, etc. I am blending a human/raven cross for the Torvak, namely, people with the ability to grow raven's wings and as a means to protect themselves, the ability to use fire or ice. (No elements, simply ice and the opposite, being fire). Torvaks are considered light creatures, because the raven wings can look like angel wings and they are extremely intelligent.

A Torvak cannot fully transform into a bird-form, but their entire body can become lightweight and covered in black feathers. They have excellent night vision and are known amongst other creatures as hunters. The Dragels are considered dark creatures by them, due to their extensive use of blood magic, shadow magic and death magic. Torvak are known as hunters, trackers and warriors, and will hunt and kill dark creatures on sight. This duty recently assigned, is now official, due to a ruling in the Ministry of Magic. Previously, a blood feud between the two races prompted the drastic reactions along with differing views on dark creatures.

Dragels have no real issues with Vampires, Were, Shadow Magic users, Hellhounds, Seawitches, etc, while Torvak considered themselves to be above such 'things' and thus hunted them out of spite. Dragels now refuse to associate with them and have gone into hiding to avoid being hunted, hence the reality where people believe they are extinct. Thinking that there is no need to be hunting any more, the Torvak have relaxed and gone about their daily lives. Minor skirmishes between the races are covered up by whichever side wins, so there has been no mention of them for several centuries now.

For Dragels, the MOM considers them to be dark because of their association with other 'dark' creatures, never mind that the Dragels have been peaceable and absent in all major wizarding wars, etc, to minimize damage.

RECAP: Professor Snape and Blaise have gone to the forbidden forest to investigate something that Blaise has mentioned. Previously, Hermione was woken by a black wolf-dog and carried deeper into the forest, where she spent the afternoon at the mercy of a hellhounds whims. Charlie and Theo's dominance fight takes place while Ilsa and Harry are in the kitchen, they come to an agreement. Harry and Theo have their first simple, triad moment, sharing pudding, before a knock at the door puts everyone on edge.
to buzz a bit louder. There was something wrong and he could practically smell it! He took a few cautious whiffs and a deep frown settled over his tanned features. "Professor…"

The Potions Master held up a hand in warning, mimicking the actions of his companion. Dark eyes narrowed and he took another careful whiff.

"Granger." Blaise ventured.

"Where?"

Blaise sorted through the scents once more and turned his head towards the faintest increase. "There." He gave a sharp jerk of his head.

Within seconds, they blurred off, both traveling by aid of their Dragel senses and gifts. The air currents whipped up into a slight frenzy as Severus drew on his gift and pulled at the just out of reach sensation.

They stumbled across the deserted camp, Blaise standing guard as Severus immediately dropped to his knees beside the pale, barely-breathing body of his student. He felt quickly for a pulse and then for the depth of her current magical gifts. He scowled when he saw the binding cuffs on her slender wrists and Steeleing himself, ran a quick spell to tell if she'd been violated.

Relief spread through him when the spell came back negative. That was good, whatever had happened, whoever had done whatever, at least, they'd left the girl's modesty alone. He bent to pick her up and froze as her jumper inched up a few spaces to show marked skin. The scowl on his face grew deeper as he pushed it up and took in the very visible brand on her pale skin.

"Professor?" Blaise's voice was uncertain.

Severus quickly yanked the jumper back down and rose, swooping her up in his arms. He'd have to wonder and deal with that later. He could feel the restless stirring of the creatures within the forest and while they'd let him and Blaise alone, he knew they were pushing it. "Later." He said, curtly. "Run!"

In the safety of the dungeons once more, Severus strode down the darkened hallways, his grip tightening on the shallowly breathing armful of Hermione Granger. His brilliant mind whirled and sputtered, trying and failing to come up with a decent reason that fit the smart witch that he knew. Sure, she could be an overbearing brat with her constant stream of knowledge, whether useful or useless, but he'd never held it against her. She was decent in everything that she did and had yet to give him any real trouble in potions, so he'd left her alone.

Something had driven her to the point that had led her into the Forbidden forest. He wondered, briefly, what had caught her curious nature, there was no other conceivable reason for her to be there. At least, not the kind of reasons that remained.

They neared his quarters and the Potions Master slowed to a cautious walk, his Dragel senses flaring wildly. "Blaise!" He said, sharply.

The Italian turned in time to take the bundled armful from him. "Er, Professor?" He managed to get out.

"Hold that." Severus snapped, pushing back the sleeves of his robe and lengthening his hands into their native claws. "It seems I have visitors."
"Visitors?" Blaise's grip on Hermione tightened and he hefted her easily in his arms. "Who?"

"Our kind." Severus bristled. "Uninvited."

Blaise growled, lowly. "Where's Terius?" He shifted the armful, uneasily. He didn't feel comfortable holding such a liability at a moment where he knew he'd be of more help if his hands were free. His next thought had been for the DADA professor and Pareya, the man certainly seemed useful in a fight.

"I can fight my own battles!" Severus snarled, his fangs coming through his gums as his Dragel instincts began to creep forward at his urging.

Blaise fought the urge to bare his fangs at the older Dragel. True, he didn't doubt the man's fighting ability, but Severus was an alpha, they could fight, but they were not built for it. Not like Terius was. Terius was definitely a good addition to have, his Pareya nature would automatically put him on the defensive, giving them a necessary edge and then of course, there was the whole DADA thing... "Do you recognize any of the scents?" He ventured.

Severus sniffed the air, his dark gaze seeming to darken even more as he processed the result. There was one vaguely teasing scent that seemed as if it ought to be familiar, but it was masked by a few others that didn't really register. "Stand back." He threw over his shoulder, subtly bracing himself and calling forth his claws as he prepared to burst into the rooms.

He gave a single knock of warning, in the event that perhaps it was simply...someone. But, Severus could sense the occupants on the other side were well aware of him, but he didn't care. They were in his quarters and he most certainly hadn't given out any invitations lately. Blaise's words echoed faintly in his head and he attempted to push them away, even as his mental link to the rest of his mated circle ripped open and broadcasted his current situation.

In the split-second where he threw the door open and entered, wand drawn, there was a simultaneous crack and a sudden downdraft of air, as a shadow above gave presence to Terius as he 'ported in, battle-ready for whatever had triggered his immediate transportation to his alpha's side.

Everything froze.

For a good long moment, a tense silence reigned. Then, surprisingly, Terius was the one to speak, his grey eyes fixed on the defensive figure before him. "Lady Ilsa? Lady Ilsa Gorgens?"

A short, stocky female Dragel, held a protective stance before three shielded figures, backed by a taller male. Her wings were broad and armor plated with sharp ridges and points along the outside, immediately declaring her status as Gheyo. At Terius' words, she stood, stiffly, relaxing them somewhat as she studied him in silence for a moment and then a flicker of recognition showed through. "Terius? The Councilman Terius?"

"Indeed." Terius tipped his head slightly before he strode forward, immediately folding his wings back, his arms relaxed at his sides. "My sincere apologies. I was merely reacting to the situation. I ah, we, weren't expecting anyone to be here..." his voice trailed off and he cast a questioning look over his shoulder at Severus, before he caught sight of Blaise and the armful he held.

"Ach. Never mind it." The woman waved it away, as if he had merely sneezed, adopting a slightly formal air of her own. "Nay, the fault is entirely mine—er, ours, do pardon the intrusion, it was most rude of us." The woman flexed her wings and retracted them, stepping forward to meet him halfway. "I would not have intruded were it not of the utmost importance." They bowed formally to each other, one fisted hand placed over their hearts, gazes locked, the faintest flicker of energy
sparking betwixt them as a silent understanding passed between both political figures. "I do thank you for allowing an explanation."

"Think nothing of it." Terius said, smoothly. "I greatly enjoy having my head upon my shoulders. It serves me much better there. I do not mean to pry, but is everything alright? Not that I would refuse you sanctuary should you be claiming or requesting it."

"We claim nothing, at present. In fact, if you would not object, I actually intended to return to Nevarah. Your quarters are unnaturally warded for one of our own. If you had no objection to sharing it, I would like to use it as a transport point."

"Portgas?" Terius inquired.

"Ergen." She smiled, politely. "I am an earth elemental, as I am sure you remember."

"Of course. How foolish of me to forget."

Ilsa gave a dismissive wave of one hand. "I was not aware that you had bonded. Congratulations on your bonding, though the formalities are belated, I do wish you all the best."

"Think nothing of it. T'was a rather private affair and I have not been…sharing it." Terius countered.

"I see. That was why I could not place you." She wrinkled her nose. "I suppose further introductions are in order."

"If you have no others…?" Terius trailed off, his stance relaxing, faintly.

"None." Ilsa's lips quirked into a half-smile. "I'm sure you remember Aracle and as you two seem to manage the talking better, I will put you at ease and keep my mouth shut. Theodore?" She turned away as the Rheyo stepped forward.

The tension in the room practically evaporated the moment Ilsa mentally dismissed them all.

"Aracle!" Terius grasped his forearm.

"Terius!" The man greeted him, warmly. "Allow me to echo Ilsa's congratulations. It was high time!" He leaned to the side to take in the view of Severus, Blaise and Hermione. "Are all of them yours?" He turned disbelieving eyes to his friend.

Terius did manage a smile. "Not in the least." The humor touched his voice. "The tall dark handsome one, is mine. The other two are students of mine, speaking of which…" He turned to look at Blaise, the puzzlement changing to concern. "Pray tell, what exactly happened to Miss Granger?"

"Hermione?" Harry's voice came out from behind the wall of protective wings, Ilsa having taken up the shielding stance Aracle had held moments before.

"Harry?" Terius' head whipped around, searching for the speaker.

Severus frowned, his dark expression turning a few shades darker. "For a castle that ought to be empty during an evacuation…" He muttered.

Terius shot him a look, but the worry remained on his own face as he heard another familiar voice from behind Ilsa.
"Professor Snape? Terius?" Theo's worried voice came from behind the taller winged fellow, who had yet to relax his stance.

The Potions Master and company watched as the wings folded away to show three rather familiar figures. "Mr. Nott." Severus spoke first.

"Harry?" Terius' repeated again, as his brow furrowed together. "Are you two alright?" He took in the scene of Harry being protectively squashed between two half-crouched young dragels even as the green-eyed teen fought against their grip. The visible markings on the two bare torsos of the young men immediately alerted him to their mated status and current bonding level. He swallowed. A few minutes earlier could've landed them all in a less than pleasant situation, all political connections aside. "Er, Congratulations?" His gaze flickered uncertainly to the unfamiliar redhead. The scent was familiar, but the face was not.

"Charlie Weasley." Severus supplied, accurately reading and interpreting his mate's expression. He frowned, as the rest of the situation dawned on him, a tad longer than it had taken his Pareya. "I suppose some explanations are in order." Theo gave a rueful smile, moving to stand to his feet, even as Charlie protested with a quiet rumble and Harry continued to try and wrestle his way free from the dragon tamer's arms.

"Hermione!" Harry elbowed Charlie in the ribs, ignoring the pained hiss. "Hermione!"

"Hermione?" Charlie shifted to sit up and released Harry the moment his blue eyes fell on the head of bushy hair from the girl being cradled in Blaise's arms. The stricken look on Harry's face said more than anyone could have as he launched himself forward with a loud wail. Severus and Terius half-caught the teen around the shoulders before he knocked over the Italian.

"Calm down." Severus snapped, throwing a glare at the distraught teen and then at Blaise. "For Merlin's sake, put the girl down before he-" He grimaced and jerked back when his fingers suddenly felt as if they were on fire. Terius released the teen not a second later.

Harry fell to his knees beside the limp form, burying his head in that familiar neck, wishing and craving to feel those arms around him once more, squeezing the air out of him. "Hermione. Hermione. Hermione." He chanted over and over in his head, beginning to rock back and forth. Something seemed to rumble beneath them and the temperature in the room upped a few degrees. Harry's head rolled to the side and he screamed in sheer distress, a haunting, piercing sound that made the rooms, and its current occupants, shudder collectively.

Theo and Charlie winced as one, both automatically gravitating towards their hysterical submissive as instinct demanded.

"Oh Harry." Charlie whispered, falling to his knees beside the smaller teen and awkwardly gathering both the crying Harry and the limp Hermione together in his arms. Wizard Charlie didn't know too much about what to do in the present situation. What few healing spells he did know were basics for little accidents on the dragon-reserve and certainly he'd never quite had to master them, as he'd never really needed them. Dragel Charlie egged him on to hold Harry and Hermione as tightly as possible.

Theo moved forward, conflict warring on his face, before he slid a hand between Charlie and Harry and deliberately rubbed the mating mark. Harry registered the movement too late to react, before the forced calmness overtook him and he panted in mid-screech.
Betrayed green eyes turned to meet shining golden ones as Theo knelt beside Charlie, supporting Hermione's head and meeting Harry's gaze, calmly and steadily. "You need to be calm." He murmured, voice soft. "We need to figure out how to help her first. You know her better than any of us, right?" He waited until Harry hesitantly nodded. "Good. We need you then, right? Don't go to pieces on us now." He leaned forward and kissed Harry's scar, before also pressing a kiss to the mark on Charlie's shoulder and prompting a layer of tension to melt away from his beta. His hand stroked through Hermione's tangled hair and he turned worried eyes to his mentor. "Oretta…"

"…she reeks of Death Magic." His mentor snapped.

Aracle calmly moved to stand beside her, wrapping his arms around her waist, embracing her from behind, his chin resting on her shoulder, head tilted to rest against hers. He whispered something in her ear and she seemed likely to elbow him in the stomach again, but refrained herself, barely. She twitched, faintly instead, but her eyes flickered to Terius, Severus and Blaise.

"We found her in the Forbidden forest," Blaise ventured, when the staring happened to go on a little longer than he liked.

"The Forbidden forest?" Charlie stared at the Slytherin in horror. From what he knew of the forest, there were certainly some unusual and terrible things within, but for it to put Hermione in such a state, she must have gone in much further than any sane witch or wizard would. "How deep?"

Severus’ dark eyes finally seemed to bottom out as he meet the blue eyed stare unflinchingly. He read the question within a question and while it had never bothered him before to speak the truth, he found no joy in doing so. "Too far."

Harry's head lolled forward to rest on Hermione's faintly heaving chest. He gave a long, low, sorrowful moan.

Everyone winced.

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**THE BURROW: SUNDAY AFTERNOON: BATTLE AFTERMATH**

Theo's arrival and subsequent departure did not help the Weasley's very much at all.

In fact, it merely served to add more chaos and further complicate things.

That was one detail that Dumbledore took note of and consequently could not ignore as he made his way over to the fuming Weasley Matriarch. He had been hoping for some of the events that had taken place, but he most certainly hadn't expected it all to happen at the same time. He stifled a shudder, squaring his shoulders to project the confidence that was swiftly fading.

All of this trying to save the world for the sake of the greater good was more exhausting than he'd originally figured. He was dearly looking forward to a nice, quiet night with Fawkes, a touch of firewhisky and some over-sweetened lemonade to round it off. And perhaps some mentholated peppermint headache balm for the pounding in his head that was slowly starting to make itself known.

Dumbledore glided forward, hoping he could talk his way through this one, but his gut feeling warned him that it was highly unlikely. He'd have to pick and choose the lesser of two evils and from his current list of choices, they were both rather dastardly options. He doubted either side would be likely to forgive him for it, but he did reason out that they would be better off of it in the long run—as long as they survived.
Yes, survival was always one of those tricky things.

Dumbledore sighed as he drew closer. From the stricken look on her face as she stared at the spot where her second oldest son had been, he had a feeling it wasn't going to be a very enjoyable conversation, all meddlings and musings aside—and Molly had always been a rather talented witch, especially when it came to the rare brand of family magic.

"Molly?" He ventured, cautiously.

The witch whirled on him, her eyes red-rimmed, flushed cheeks stained with tears of anguish. "This is half your fault." She hissed, softly. "Look what you've started! Just look at it! Are you happy? You couldn't leave me alone? You couldn't leave all of us alone? You couldn't leave well enough, to just leave it be? Haven't I always done what you've asked, Albus? Haven't I given enough to your cause?"

"Molly."

"This is my home. Our home. It isn't much of anything, but it is home. We are family. He was my son." The pain was raw and unfiltered in her cracking voice as she glared at him. "He is my son. They're my children, Albus! I would never wish this curse upon them."

"Sometimes curses can be a blessing in disguise." Dumbledore countered. "I didn't start this! I had nothing to do with it. I didn't know they were going to attack here and Severus wasn't in any condition to speak when he-"

"Severus? He's still spying for you?" She snorted. "You have a hand in everything. Every bloody thing! How could I possibly believe you this time?" Betrayal shone clearly on her face. "I thought I gave enough. I thought it was enough. My family, Albus?"

"Molly, I had nothing to do with-"

"With all your spies and double agents, you couldn't even give us fair warning?" She look at him with saddened eyes, her grip tight on her wand. "There were children here, Albus." She gestured towards the yard and her own children helping their guests. "There still are. Children shouldn't be fighting in wars—even Harry."

The sober blue eyes hardened faintly. "Circumstances dictate the situations that fate throws our way." He said, calmly. "And all's well that ends well."

"Ends well?" She echoed. "Merlin help us, Albus!" She snapped. "You think I can't tell the difference between old magic and Dragel magic? Why did you let him come here? You knew what you were doing. You knew fully well! I warned you. I warned you about it, I told you what would happen, but you didn't listen. Did you think I was mad? Fair out of my mind? Old wives' tales and all that?" The laughter was off-kilter. "You foolish, foolish man."

"Now Molly-"

"Don't 'now Molly' me!" She snapped. "If Harry hadn't come here in the first place—if he'd never arrived with that Slytherin boy of his, none of this would've happened."

"Don't say that!" Albus bristled. "You're the closest thing little Harry has to family and-"

"And he's happily mated!" Molly shot back. "I don't care to whom, a mate is a mate. If they're
happy, then he'll be fine. He didn't have to come here."

"I didn't-"

"You could've sent him somewhere else!"

"Where?" Albus shot back. "Where would you have had me send him? I couldn't send him back to those muggles on such short notice, if something had happened, with his lack of magic, there wouldn't have been a fight, it would've been a bloodbath!"

"I thought you said the home was warded. I thought you said it hid him!"

"I did what I had to do." Albus said, coldly. "And I did give you fair warning. A mate may be just that to you, but a Slytherin? A Slytherin is a snake and a true snake never denies its nature."

"Harry's far too light for darkness to tempt him." Molly snapped. "Have more faith in your self-proclaimed savior! Have more faith and leave us commonfolk out of it."

"I could have chosen another family." He said, smoothly. "One with power, prestige and equal vaunts in the Light."

The elderly wizard ground his teeth together. "I could have chosen another family." He said, smoothly. "One with power, prestige and equal vaunts in the Light."

Molly snorted. "Really? Then why didn't you? What stopped you? Hmm?" She jabbed him in the chest with the tip of her wand. "Why?"

"That was my son! My Charlie!" She hissed. "You didn't even try to save him!"

"There wasn't anything I could've done and if I interfered with a-"

"Albus?" Arthur stood several feet away, a worried look plastered on his face, blue eyes emotionless. "Might I have a word?"

"Er,"

"Be careful what you say." Molly said, her eyes gleamed dangerously, her wand still trained on him, though hidden from view for those who weren't watching all that closely. "Be very careful."

The old wizard swallowed hard and gave a quick bob of his head before backing away and heading to Arthur. He was loathe to turn his back to the witch, but avoiding it would only show that he did in fact, fear her and Albus Dumbledore did not suffer from fear, he instilled it, when necessary. He turned his back to the still angry witch and focused on her husband's thinning head of hair. "Arthur," he smiled warmly. "What can I do for you?"

"Besides clearing the yard from them?" The Weasley Patriarch gestured towards the various Order Members and remaining Aurors. The cleanup was going rather slow, as far as he was concerned. "Of course." Albus turned and made a wave with one hand in the air. The current Chief Auror nodded from across the yard to show that he'd seen the signal and those present began to hurry up.

Arthur led the old wizard back a ways towards the house and then paused, throwing up a privacy charm and a distortion one to keep outsiders from seeing exactly what was happening inside the little bubble. "What was that?" There was an edge to his voice that hadn't been there earlier.

*Lesser of two evils. Lesser of two evils.* Albus chanted silently in his head, drawing on the faint, nearly non-existent threads of inherited magic within him. He felt it as a tiny tingle of coolness that
made his fingers twitch and his wand hum. "Pardon?" He said, politely.

"That was a Dragel." Arthur said, clearly.

"Ah, but you knew that already." Albus said, pleasantly. "Mr. Nott and Harry are happily bonded after all and by Molly's say, you gave your blessing."

"I did no such thing." Arthur scowled. "She did and I will not judge her for that." He hadn't really approved of the pairing or the mating, but he'd seen his wife's worry settle into contentment and had opted to hold his silence, relieved that she'd spoken so he didn't have to. There were few issues that he championed, but Dragels and their dark creature status was one of them. "I am not talking about those children, I meant that last one. The fire one. Dragels haven't been seen in over-"

"Technicalities. Mere technicalities." Albus said quickly. His mind whirled. He'd witnessed the partial transformation and it seemed as if Molly had too, but luck had been on his side in seeing that Charlie's father had missed the crucial moments. How lucky. "The Torvak haven't been spotted in the same number of years, if we must be politically correct."

Those dull blue eyes flared to life and flashed dangerously as Arthur's grip on his wand tightened—much like his wife's had just moments ago. "Really?" His voice was light, neutral. "And you've heard something of them?"

"I've kept your secrets, Arthur." Albus retorted. "I think you can stand to keep a few of my own."

"Dragels, Albus?" He hissed. "And a Slytherin?"

"The Nott family is mostly neutral now that Nott Sr. has been-"

"They're dark creatures!"

"They have power! We can use that power!"

"What did you do?" Arthur's blue eyes grew wild. "The Dragel gene has slept for centuries, Albus! There's been a few moments, a few things, it was bad…years ago, a few decades, maybe, but we all did our best to put it to rest. I did my best!" He pointed towards Molly who was now surrounded by her children and their student guests. "I put it all behind me and started up a family, trying to live a decent normal life. We've done—I've done everything you've ever asked of me!"

"And I do not deny it." Albus said, evenly. "I appreciate it and I thank you, even, but battles never won in a single fight on a single day."

Arhtus gave a short bark of laughter. "This is ancient magic, Albus." He looked away with a scoff. "Ancient magic. It rules the creatures, it binds the halves of the world together." He drew in a shaky breath. "It works in checks and balances. Ancient magic answers to no one. It does as it pleases and it is a cruel, sadistic bastard." His wand hand shook with suppressed emotion. "Creatures, all creatures are the result of challenging that which should be left alone." The blue eyes cooled, becoming hardened and more calculating. "But you know this, you would have heard. You cannot mess with things that ought to be left as they are."

The elderly wizard matched his glare with a frigid look of his own. "Sacrifices must be made for the greater good," He said, softly. "You of all of us, should know this best."

"At the expanse of whom?" The younger wizard shot back. "What I am is none of your concern. Do not go there, Albus. I know you."
"You've only known me for a handful of years-"

"And what you are screams so loudly, I haven't needed more than mere minutes to know where you stand!" Arthur snapped back. "Do not dabble in things you don't understand."

"I understand all that needs to be-"

The privacy bubble shook with the sudden pulse of raw magic swirling out of Arthur as he glared at Dumbledore. "You understand nothing! You don't even have an ounce of Halfling blood in you! You're a disgrace to the Torvak!"

"Enough." Albus' quiet, deadly tone made the younger wizard freeze. "I have enough."

Horror overtook his features at once and Arthur grew rather pale at the implications in the words. There had been one time many years ago when the crazy headmaster had proposed a changling spell to bring all creature inheritances to the forefront of every student of age within Hogwarts. He'd claimed it would be good. Arthur couldn't have disagreed more. He'd been relieved when others had agreed and nothing had happened. He'd thought that was the last of it. He'd hoped, anyway. "No…no, that was decades ago, you surely wouldn't have…you couldn't…" There was no sound of protest from the other man. "No!" It was breathed as a pained whisper. "Oh Albus…what have you done?"

Chapter End Notes

To be clear on things-YES, Molly is a DRAGEL, and Arthur is a TORVAK, their kids can be either, Dragel is inherently more dominant than Torvak genes though, however, Molly has been suppressing her children since birth, so there is a greater chance they will be Torvak.

Torvak means they can grow black raven's wings and have grafted powers of fire or ice added to their magic. They have a natural affinity with flying(hence the quidditch obsession in this family!) Power-wise, Arthur, obviously has ice. Molly's element is fire.

No, Arthur doesn't know that Molly is a Dragel, she's never told him and she's obviously gone to a great deal of trouble to hide her children's true nature from him, (at least in Charlie's case!)More explanations, confrontations coming in the next chappy.

^_^
"Ilsa?" Aracle grabbed for the short woman as her body suddenly jerked and twisted as if it had a mind of her own. "Ilsa!"

She twitched out of his hands, her own coming up to grab tufts of her short, two-colored hair. A gasp escaped. "Augh."

"Ilsa, what is it?" He took a cautious step backwards as she backed herself into the wall and threw her head from side to side. "Ilsa!"

"What's the matter?" Terius looked up from where he'd just conjured a cloth for Hermione's forehead. Charlie cast a cooling charm over said cloth, hovering uncertainly at the back of the settee. Severus currently rubbed a light green potion into the girl's newly bared arms, while Harry and Blaise held an assortment of potion-filled vials between them. "Aracle?"

"I think someone's calling her." Aracle swallowed. "It's happened before. The distance is probably too long for the usual mindspeak, so it's straining her. I only hope that it isn't something serious. Ilsa, love, is it-"

"Mauriel, I swear I'll kill you-!" Ilsa broke off, clutching her head as her eyes squeezed shut. "I really will you bloody irritating woman!" She moaned. "The gates…they want me at the gates…something…someone."

"I thought you were off guard duty and border patrol for at least two weeks!" Aracle exclaimed. "You said that you'd be handling paperwork and we could spend some time with-"

"I know what I said, Aracle!" She hissed, golden eyes flying open. "I also know that it takes five of them to fill my single position!" Her eyes glazed over and she straightened abruptly. "South border, number twelve, left gate. Breach." The hazy look disappeared as Ilsa came back with a gasp.

Aracle reached for her, hesitantly.

"We're 'porting back." She said, abruptly. "I'm going, if you can't. I have to go."

"What's the matter?"

"Fabrine. Crawling all over the place." She spat, speaking the term that encompassed dark creatures of all kinds, a darkness tainted with evil. Something rumbled in the distance and Hogwarts herself, groaned under pressure. "They're going under lockdown. We must go now or they will refuse us entry and it is not safe to stay in this realm." Her eyes flickered to Theo and they held a silent conversation before he looked away. "We have to hurry. I do not know…we have to hurry!"

"Ilsa, calm yourself!" Aracle caught her arm and whirled her around to face him. He pressed himself close to her, chest to chest, forehead to forehead and shared a spark of white energy between them. They breathed deeply for a moment and Ilsa sighed. The tangible pressure in the air dropped to a more tolerable level, magic still spiking. "We'll go. We'll all go. Now?"

"I'm fine. It's fine." She pulled away, gently. "Yes now. You can go in straight, I'll 'port in to my post."
"Ilsa!"

"No, Aracle. They need me there."

"Oretta?" Theo eyed the couple wearily. "What do you mean lockdown and what breach?"

"It means, I'll port you in to the main gate and you tell them that you're my personal guests and they'll let you through. By breach, it means I must be on my way, because there's heads to roll."

Her gaze flickered quickly over the chamber's occupants. "I suppose I have to include all of you?"

Theo stifled the urge to roll his eyes. "If you would be so kind." He murmured.

"Including the girl? She's not dragel-kind."

"We're not leaving Hermione." Harry came to stand beside Theo. "She's my friend and I'm not leaving her again." He said, strongly.

Ilsa studied him for a moment and then gave a slight nod of her head. "As you wish. The guest house won't be cleaned, but if you don't mind the dirt, you're welcome to stay there for the time being. Aracle will send someone over to fix it up as soon as he can."

"You are welcome to lodge with us." Terius interjected. He helped the still-unconscious Hermione to sit up, so Severus could coax a potion down her throat. The Potions Master didn't wish to spell it into her stomach, afraid of lingering magic in the brand. "Mr. Zabini, you are welcome to stay with us as well." He extended the invitation and nudged Severus lightly, the two engaging in a silent exchange that validated his claim. "It is my family home and it is along the cliffs, near the Merrow Waters. Has a lovely view and plenty of room."

"Is that where Draco is?" Severus asked, quietly.

"Yes and he is safe. I would not have left his side if he were not." Terius nudged him again, this time, a little gentler, his knee to the back of Severus' crouched figure. It was part of their silent, complicated language between them.

"He'd better." Severus snapped. He rose fluidly to his feet and brushed off a patch of invisible dust before watching Terius ease the body back to the settee, beneath Charlie's watchful eye.

"Will you stay with him?" Ilsa nodded towards Terius, her gold eyes glittering.

"Charlie?" Theo looked to his beta, he didn't have any unfinished business and he doubted that Harry had much—besides taking arms against a certain dark wizard that really needed to drop dead in a gutter somewhere. Charlie was the only one he wasn't entirely certain on, after all, they'd all but abducted the dragon tamer from his home, subjected him to a rather painful and vigorous ritual, engaged in a—and well, Theo stopped thinking there. He had the authority to make the choice, but rather than pulling rank, he simply waited for Charlie to weigh in.

The redhead gave a careful, if hesitant nod and Theo turned with a smile to Ilsa, his arm coming up to wrap around Harry beside him. "We'll stay." He looked to Harry for confirmation as well, just to be sure. This circle would only be as strong as they all were and it certainly needed to start with shared trust among them all, even in the little things. The brunet gave a tiny nod of acceptance. Theo smiled for him.

"Good boy." Ilsa turned to face them, drawing her wings out once more and flexing them. "I'll leave you halfway out, follow Aracle through to the end and be sure to keep a good hold on each other." The last words were directed to Charlie, Harry and Blaise. "I'd wager none of you
younglings have traveled this far via portal before." She winced, her hand going to her head. "Blast it, Mauriel, I heard you the first time." Her hand clenched into a fist. "Just hold on tight, Theo's 'ported before. Trust him. The magic will respond to your emotions and feelings." A shudder rippled through her.

"Ilsa..." There was a hint of warning in Aracle's tone. "If you're going to full, flat-out morph, I don't know how well these rooms can-"

"I'll do it in the portal." She hissed, doubling over. "Just listen, whichever one of you can. I know you'll probably have to go straight home." This was directed at Aracle. "But one of you listen. Speak to Councilman Terius about the girl and hellhounds. I'm sure you can dig up enough to find out what's wrong with her. A hellhound's brand is not something to take lightly. The fact that's it is on her stomach in the very position of the third Chakra means it was done for the sake of control. If the brand was placed there in a peaceable attempt—you should be able to tell if it was wanted or not—there's a spell for it, I'm sure. If it was, then well, I shouldn't air the girl's dirty laundry. It's not mine to speak of." Ilsa shuddered. "Specifically though, that's a claiming mark, meaning that someone's taken her as theirs and since we welcome their kind in Nevarah, you're bound to run into one. I'd advise you to be very careful." She paused. "I also can't say when you can come to see me, but send a note to the house of Ithcar Deveraine once you're settled. You remember." She reached for him.

"I do." Theo tilted his face and accepted the kiss to his forehead without fuss.

Harry blinked up at her in surprise, unable to move away, due to Theo's grip around his shoulders, as she planted a feather-soft kiss on his own forehead.

"Travel safe, by Portgas." She murmured. "Not Ergen. Your mates aren't used to it." She winced as a powerful wave of magic rippled through the room and Hogwarts groaned again. "Don't forget to schedule a healer's appointment as well! For both of them in addition to yourself!" Ilsa shot a final look at Theo and then rolled her shoulders back. Her body twisted and arched, her height nearly doubling as her spine stretched and her dragon-creature began to hum to life. "Aracle?" She called, muscles rippling beneath the stretching, bulging skin.

"Everyone ready?" The Rheyo wrapped an arm around Blaise and Charlie came forward as Ilsa reached one clawed hand up to the ceiling.

"Temptrificus Ergen!" She shouted.

"Temptrificus Portgas!" Aracle intoned.

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**THE BURROW : BATTLE AFTERMATH : SUNDAY AFTERNOON**

"Mrs. Weasley?" Seamus dropped to a crouch beside the reclining witch, worry showing on a face far too young to bear that sort of expression. One hand clutched a thin, golden filigree necklace, bearing a four-leaf clover. He rubbed it, absently, with one hand as he took in the older witch's exhausted state. "Mrs. Weasley? It's Seamus Finnigan, can you hear me? Are you alright?" She blinked, wearily in answer and then again to show that she was following his questions. He smiled, encouragingly and turned to look over his shoulder at the little audience there, tucking the necklace back into his shirt. "She's fine. I think it's just shock or something. Is everyone else alright?" He slipped into the leader-like role among the younger witches and wizards without so much as a blink.

No one protested.
"I'm alright." Lavender quavered. She snuck a glance over one shoulder, searching for Ron. They'd been partially separated throughout the fight and she didn't like it. His absence was now weighing a little heavier on her than she'd realized. She held her right arm stiffly beside her where a fire spell had caught her unawares, burning off the sleeve of her blouse, but thankfully not searing the skin below. It was red and tender, but as long as she held it where it was, it didn't pain as bad as it could have. "Just my arm."

"Arm." Seamus repeated, he turned to Dean who was rummaging through the medicine kit he'd accio'd from The Burrow and with some help from a pink-haired Tonks, they were helping as best as they could. "Lavender."

"Got it." Tonks said, cheerfully. Her pink hair dimmed faintly to a slightly reddish hue as she waved the young witch over. "Over here, let's get a look at it." She tapped her wand on her battered trousers, having weathered the battle fairly well.

Lavender crept over while Seamus continued to take inventory of their little bunch.

Neville was pale and exhausted as he let Ginny help him stretch out on the grass beside her mother. He mumbled a few things and the redhead witch bit her lip before darting a glance to her mother and then shaking her head and bending to whisper something in the boy's ear. Ginny nodded to Seamus who nodded to Dean, who whispered to Tonks, when she'd finished with Lavender.

The sweaty, shaking, Gryffindor calmed faintly when the tingle of healing magic spread over him. A moment later, his body when slack after Tonks had poured a small vial of potion down his throat. "He needs rest." She said, in answer, to the questioning faces around him. "Anyone else in you lot need help?" A tingle of white magic rested on the tip of her wand.

"I think that's it." Seamus flashed a winning grin. "Many thanks!"

Tonks gave a wink and a two-fingered salute, her head jerking up at the barking orders from her Auror superior. Her eyes gave a spectacular roll and her hair went electric blue as she leapt to her feet and tripped off—only stumbling once.

"Ah, incoming!" Seamus said, scrambling to stand behind Dean for better protection as the group of redheads came barreling forward. George, Fred, Ron and a rather white-faced Percy.

Dean gave a snort of amusement, but stood tall as his boyfriend took up residence behind him. The worry on his face was somewhat muted as he moved back a half-step to allow the redheaded siblings to swamp their mother.

"Mum?"

"Mum!"

The Weasley twins came barreling over and promptly swallowed their mother in tight hugs, dropping to their knees beside her. Percy stood awkwardly for a moment and then a few stray tears trickled down his face and he flung himself into the group hug as well. If the normally strong and stout witch happened to cry as she clung to them, rubbing, touching and patting every bit of her children that she could, no one mentioned it.

Something strange, dark and unusual had just taken place.

Certain things were most definitely allowed.

Most of them would never be spoken of again.
"Molly!" Arthur's roar rang out against the emptying yard at The Burrow. He strode towards the group consisting of wife, children and guests, his face a dark shadow as he drew near, hands fisted at his sides. The conversation with Albus had taken a turn that he hadn't even expected and now, he didn't know what to do with that sudden, horrific knowledge.

The wizard in question had dared to cast a spell that was borderline dark for the sake of creating an unofficial creature army from the ungraduated sixth and seventh years in Hogwarts. It would certainly explain the recent flux in registered creatures at the ministry and some of the high society gossip floating about with snickers and sniggers towards pureblooded families suddenly saddled with a child bearing a natural creature inheritance.

Albus Dumbledore was uprooting children, ruining entire lives and bloodlines all for the sake of his greater good.

It made Arthur sick to his stomach.

Hang the secrets were they stood! He couldn't keep that to himself. He'd have to tell, someone—people deserved to know!

The redheaded woman staggered to her feet with some help from her twin sons and stood, half-braced against Percy, with Ginny sidling up to wrap her thin arms around her mother's ample waist. Confusion showed plainly in the children's faces as their furious father advanced. What little color had returned to Molly's face now drained to a pallor the same hue as the unconscious Neville.

"Arthur." She gasped out, her grip tightening on Ginny. She'd seen that look on his eyes a few years before. A look she'd hoped she'd never have to see again. To her immense relief, it softened at once when he took in the sight of their children all crowded around her and of course, her own self.

"Molly." He stopped a few feet away. His eyes were bright, ice blue as they searched over her. He closed the gap and swept her up into a tight hug, half-squashing his own children as he tried to touch them all the same time and reassure him to their current living status. "Oh Molly." He kissed her cheeks, her hair, her trembling hands. "Molly. He said...he did it." His grip tightened to bruising. "I can't believe it. He did it, Molly! All those children...! How could he?" The wizard trembled.

"Shh." Molly soothed. "It's alright. It'll be fine." She murmured the comforting words even as she tried to process what he'd said. The words clicked into place and immediately shuffled her other worries to the side. Oh Merlin help them all! "He didn't."

"He did."

"Oh Arthur!"

He clutched her even tighter to him, clinging to what they had. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. You? I was worried." She snuggled into his comforting embrace, feeling her children retreating just enough to allow her the closeness she needed with her husband. "I was so worried, love." For the next few minutes, they hugged, kissed and clung to each other, seeking the kind of comfort that could only come between a mated creature pair. Subconsciously, she nuzzled his neck and rubbed her cheek against his.

He stroked her hair and crooned softly in her ear, breathing in the sweet, musky scent of her hair. It calmed his nerves, faintly, but his blue eyes narrowed as he watched Albus Dumbledore gliding to
the edge of their property, preparing to apparate. He was the last of the others to leave and it seemed as if he'd planned it that way. Arthur watched with narrowed eyes as he continued off. As long as the wretched manipulator left, he'd let it go—this time, maybe. There were things he'd said that Arthur wasn't about to believe.

*The liar!* He thought, viciously. He knew his family. He knew Molly. She wasn't a Dragel. She'd never kept a secret from him before and most certainly not one like that. He was Torvak after all, pureblooded Torvak and surely he'd have been able to tell if his wife was a Dragel. They were hunter kind. His family line, the Weasleys, had always been the best hunters and trackers amongst the main clan.

Even if she'd hid it, people and creatures alike made mistakes, she would've slipped up somewhere. He would've known. He'd hunted with the best of them after all.

He'd quit, for Molly's sake, she'd begged him before agreeing to his marriage proposal. She'd worried for him, worried for his family and eventually, her own family had turned her out for her association with him. After that, he hadn't even thought twice to quit the family business and wed her within the same week. Sure, things had been stretched and rocky as far as galleons went, but he liked to think that they were happy and content and that was all he ever really cared for.

His father, Septimus, had made sure that his status in the wizarding world was fitting for turning his back on his own kind, but in the face of Molly's warmth, brilliance and strength, he hadn't counted it as a loss. Even when they'd stuck him to work in the Ministry of Magic, at least his father had been kind enough to stick him in a department he somewhat enjoyed, the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office. Life had become rather boring then, but he wouldn't have traded it at all, the moment Molly had become pregnant with Bill.

It had taken nearly two years for the pregnancy to occur and he'd begun to worry until that morning when his wife had stumbled out into the hospital waiting room, her eyes red-rimmed and tears of joy streaming down her face. They'd danced right there, for a moment. He'd been so happy then… and even more with the birth of each son afterwards and even—Merlin bless them—a daughter! Dear, dear Ginny. Life had been good. So good.

How dare Albus Dumbledore try to ruin everything!

He'd given enough—to his own people, to his family, to the first wizarding war. He had every right to live and live to a good end. The same for his children.

Arthur felt his fingers itch and crawl as he watched the old wizard pause, before apparating. He could feel the old, familiar itch in his hands as the feathers residing just beneath the surface of the skin, dying to be released. He could feel the chill behind his eyes, the ice building up, begging to be released. He drew in a shaky breath. Emotions would make his gift run wild, he'd worked for many years to perfect the blank stare and the ability to hold his tongue. Thankfully, Molly often spoke up when he wanted to and it worked out that he'd never had to give into the avian urges that lurked in his very being.

Urges that were now clawing their way to the surface, desperately seeking an outlet. Arthur swallowed hard, his blue-eyed gaze riveted on the apparition point that Dumbledore now stood on.

The old wizard had the gall to turn and wink at him and for a moment, that was all it took.

Rationally took a hike as the mocking smile registered and the younger wizard fully understood. This was a game to him, wasn't it? Hang their secrets. There was nothing left to be lost or gained now. Arthur roughly jerked away from Molly's soft embrace, his blue eyes bristling as a fine
smattering of miniature black feathers began to sprout from the back of his neck and along his arms, his facial features growing sharper and more pointed.

"Arthur?" Molly's hand on his arm, tangled with his jacket sleeve. "Arthur, wait!"

He felt her restraining hand and heard the worry behind her voice, but it was too late for that. His control snapped like an elastic band pulled one meter too far. A freezing, burning ball of icy choked in his throat and instinct took over before Arthur could help himself. With a bird-like shriek, he screamed a volley of white-blue energy at the retreating wizard.

Albus threw up the shield at the same moment that he focused to apparate. He disappeared in a wink.

"Arthur, calm down!" Molly all but wrapped herself around her husband from behind, feeling a burn of her own as long-suppressed traits struggled to the surface. She was too exhausted, too stressed and running too deeply on instinct to fight the pull of the secret she'd kept for well over three decades when it came to this man. The loss of access to her Dragel powers had been a bit of a shock—years ago—now, it wasn't half the headache it had once been.

But the simmering and throbbing of energy, wild energy, humming just beneath her skin as it fought and clawed its way out of the bonds meant to restrain it, pushed one button a little too hard. Her grip on Arthur tightened even as she gasped, softly, seeing the pale skin on her hands turning the shimmery sheen of scales.

She breathed a prayer of relief that her hands hadn't turned to claws, but it was a prayer breathed too soon as she felt the scales taking over. They settled as if they had a right to belong when she desperately wanted them elsewhere. She felt her husband tremble in her embrace as strength rushed to her own limbs and magic crackled tangibly in the air.

Instead of the surge of acceptance in their marriage bond, there was a sudden spike of irrational anger.

A cold fear crept into her bones.

This could only end in disaster.

When he turned in those strong arms, Arthur wasn't quite sure what he was expecting. It certainly wasn't the exotic scaled face with rich brown eyes staring back at him. Red hair had darkened by several tints, whether magically or otherwise, he wasn't sure. There was virtually no recognizable feature, beyond the familiar hints in those brown eyes and the hair that he knew her so well for.

This was not the Molly Weasley he knew.

It wasn't even the Molly Prewitt he'd known.

Danget! His senses screamed and suddenly, the final pieces of the puzzle clicked together. The suggestions Dumbledore had hinted at and the presence of an unknown Dragel. His blue eyes scanned the yard, straying back to settle on the beautifully scaled face before him.

Charlie.

Charlie was missing.

Surely…?
"No…"

"Arthur?" The lovely face grew worried and a near melodious voice sounded forth. "Arthur…it's Molly, I…just a moment."

He stared as those gorgeous brown eyes were hid behind fluttering eyelids and her high-brow furrowed in concentration. With conscious effort, the lovely pearlescent scales faded into creamy skin with a light smattering of freckles across the cheekbones. The hair lightened and returned to its usual frothy, curly mass of fire red and when her eyes opened, the warm, hazel hue was back to its normal circular pupils.

When his wife stood before him once more, her creature nature safely tucked away, he could only feel a sudden rush of anger and then one of embarrassment. Dumbledore had known. He'd known! That miserable old coot had been privy to a personal secret that his wife hadn't even dared to share with him. No wonder he'd been so smug and condescending.

It'd all been a joke on him.

His icy blue eyes flared and burned with the power that sang beneath his fingertips as he turned his fierce glare on that pleading face and saw the pain slip into her hazel-hued gaze. He could ignore it, sort of, kind of…maybe.

But then he remembered the fight, the screeches and the screams.

Charlie.

She'd been screaming for Charlie and then Theo had come. Then things had gotten complicated and then of course, Theo had left.

Arthur stifled a shudder, the last thing he wanted to do was to think of his second-eldest as a dark creature, but that was what he knew. There'd never been a Dragel to prove him wrong, at least, not in the one's he'd hunted and taken. Old memories, feelings and emotions welled up inside as he remembered. And in remembering, came a wellspring of pain.

He'd turned his back on his Torvak roots and his family, for Molly's sake.

All for her.

He'd let go of the friendship of two brothers and their wives, a few assorted nieces and nephews. His parents, Cedrella and Septimus. The Oath he'd taken as a hunter.

For her.

All for her.

The ice flowing through him helped to numb the pain beginning to come from the thought of his wife betraying him.

Torvaks were loyal. Their very nature demanded it, a one for all and all for one sort of philosophy. There were no secrets, no lies and no betrayals. To betray meant consequences far beyond a simple slash in the family tree. But that kind of honesty, that kind of loyalty—it was for life, the kind that let you know that no matter where you were and what should happen, there is never anything to worry of.

"Charlie." He said, simply.
Her face grew pale and drawn. She swallowed once, twice and then those honest eyes looked away, head bowed.

"Were you ever going to tell me?" He asked. He had to know.

She took a deep breath and then blew it out. "There's nothing to tell." Her eyes snapped back to look at him. "I gave it up, same as you did."

"You told Albus."

"He already…knew." She hesitated. "He found out by accident and I-I didn't have anyone else to tell, I'd already-"

"So, never, then?"

"I gave it up!" She leaned towards him, pleading. "I gave it up for you, Arthur!"

"And so did I." He countered. "I gave up everything for you. Everything!" Something caught in his throat and he swallowed hard. "You knew. All this time, you knew. You had—and you weren't going to even say anything? Just let me keep playing the happy fool?"

"It wouldn't have changed anything!" She shot back. "It wouldn't have changed my feelings for you and-"

"And yet you think so little of me that you couldn't share this?" He gestured to himself and then to her. As if on cue, a fine scattering of small black feathers began to sprout near his ears and along the sides of his face. "The children?" He took a shuddering breath, attempting to force the Avian instincts down, even as they flared protectively and he took note of his brood of children. A sudden feeling of cold dread wormed its way into his stomach. "Tell me that you didn't suppress the children."

Those hazel eyes met his gaze steadily.

He turned away with a muttered curse. "They're children, Molly! Children!" He ran his hands through his hair and tugged at the reddened strands in frustration. "It's all—all of them?" He whirled around to look at her. "All of them?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you have any idea what you've-"

"They'll be fine."

"Fine?" He shot back. "How can you possibly think that they'll be fine? What about Bill? He's engaged now and you-" He held up a hand. "No. We can't—I can't—this-" he rubbed his forehead. "I can't do this."

"Arthur?"

"We need, I need," he amended at her sudden glare. That inner fire within, never dimmed. "Some time to think. Clear my head, if nothing else." He sighed, warily. "Can't you give me this, at least? You can't expect me to simply take all of this and-" he gestured to the children and her then to himself, where the feathers were now growing in quite nicely.

"I understand." Her voice was soft. "We can sort it in the morning, then?"
"The morning?" He stared at her in disbelief. "No, no I don't think so."

The pain began to glimmer, a few swatches of it showing on her pale face. "Don't." was all she said, a single word.

His smile trembled. They were married man and woman. Husband and wife. Wizard and witch. Torvak and…Dragel. It nearly killed him to refuse. "I can't."

"…please."

"I would do anything for you, Molly, but this time, I can't. Not this time." He turned, meeting the worried gazes of his children in turn and the uncertain ones of their guests. "Was it a ritual, a spell or a potion?" He asked, at last. She didn't answer. His blue eyes flared with ice. "Answer me!"

She closed her eyes and spoke barely above a whisper. "Spell at conception, ritual at birth…potion afterwards."

An agonized cry left his lips. "All three?"

"I did the ritual on my own. I bore the marks. I would never subject a child to that. I am no monster!"

"Did you take me for a monster, then?" He demanded. "Did you think I'd abandon them? They're my children too! Just as much mine as they are yours! I wouldn't have cared! As long as they were alive and happy and healthy as God intended, Merlin help me woman, I wouldn't have cared!"

"Wouldn't you?" There were tears now filling her eyes as she stood there, her hands shaking at her sides. "Even when they were all going to be like me?"

Arthur froze, the sudden surge of anger fleeing almost as quickly as it had come. "That's not, they—it's a fifty-"

"It's always the dominant gene."

"That's not—take the spell off them!"

She sucked in a breath. "I cannot."

"Molly…!"

"I did not cast it." She elaborated. "I could not. I had help."

"Dumbledore?"

"I would never have let him keep the memory otherwise."

"Really?" He said.

"I obliviated him, six, maybe seven times." She half-smiled. "He always broke it. I wasn't at full strength, so it never held. He wouldn't remember I'd put it on him, but they'd never hold. I didn't mean for it to turn out like this." She twisted her hands in her dress and apron. "I didn't—it wasn't supposed to be like this."

"So you can't take it off?"

"I can release my half of it." She hesitated. "But I cannot-"
"Who can? Who in your family can take it off? Your father? Mother?" He tried and failed to recall any memory of the redhead's family, only able to place Gideon and Fabian, brilliant wizards who had died for the sake of a good cause.

Molly flinched. "No one." She said, at last, so low, he had to strain to hear her.

"No one?" He repeated incredulously. "Your entire family…circle?"

She lifted her chin, a hint of strength returning to her. "I gave them up, Arthur. It wouldn't have been right to ask you to give up everything and to give up nothing on my side. It doesn't necessarily matter though, after Gideon and Fabian, there is no one left."

Icy blue eyes locked with pale hazel ones. He met her gaze, evenly. "Then I suppose it is fortunate that my family may speak to me on our children's behalf."

"Arthur-"

"For their sakes at least, I should hope so." He snapped, turning to the young audience. "Fred, George, Percy, Ron, Ginny." He rattled off their names in a single breath and gave a light jerk of his head. "You're coming with me. This is very important, stay close, please."

"What? Where?" Ron wanted to know, he looked at Lavender, who'd been snuggled under his arm for the past several minutes and then scowled. "Why? What's going on with you and Mum? Why are you sprouting feathers?"

Fred glowered at his younger brother, a look in his eye as if he wanted to bop him one. George elbowed him in the stomach before he could. Percy stiffened, but held himself up, ramrod straight.

Ginny frowned. "What about Mum?"

Arthur forced a smile. "Mum isn't feeling well, Ginny." He said, carefully. "So, we're going to give her some time to get herself together and-"

"I am well within my mind, Arthur. There is nothing wrong with me, but if you think I am unstable then, we have guests." His wife interrupted. "Are you going to take them too?"
The entire floor turned into a shimmering blue pool of energy, slowly swallowing the occupants of the room as they sank into its shimmering depths. There were no ends seen from anywhere, just an endless blue expanse, with maybe a touch of black in the distance. The rich, cold, blueness enveloped them all, clearing after several long moments so that each individual could see their companions. It was like floating weightlessly through a water that was neither wet nor stifling, Harry discovered. He could breathe fine and movement was restricted—though he was pretty sure that had something to do with Theo's vise-like grip on his waist and Charlie's equally strong embrace 'round his shoulders.

Curiosity sparked through him and Harry took stock of his surroundings. They were all traveling in quite nicely, he could see. Everyone simply standing straight and holding on to whomever they'd selected before the portal had been activated. He was surprised to see dirt at his feet, as if there were an actual floor and when he turned questioning eyes to Theo, his alpha grinned.

"Temptrificus is a transportation spell," he explained, nudging Charlie as well to be sure the redhead was also paying attention. "It means to tempt time, literally, to bend time to allow us to travel through and by it. It is the most basic of transportation spells, but it's a bit like apparition lessons, you need to practice and you absolutely must concentrate. The almost suffix at the end, say Portgas or Ergen, are in respect to the guardians whose tunnels you are traveling through."

"Guardians?" Harry repeated. "They're alive?"

"Ah, no, they're quite dead actually." Theo said, thoughtfully. "I can't say I've actually ever been asked that before." He was quiet for a moment and then almost shrugged. "Never mind though, they're dead, but they retain a consciousness and a personality-"

"A spirit then?" Charlie concluded.

Aracle sniggered quietly beside them and Theo shot a glare in his direction. "Er, not quite that either. They're very, well, we call them Caspers. It's a place where they, if they wish to continue being useful, even after death, they can give their soul and their elemental gifts. As such, you have plain Caspers and elemental Caspers, there's no real difference, save for the elemental ones operate with elemental magic. We're traveling through Ergen right now. Ergen is the earth elemental Casper who maintains and oversees this tunnel. It's a he and he is friendly to earth element users only."

"But we're all here," Harry twisted around to be sure of it. He took note of Hermione in Severus' arms and Terius half wrapped around Severus, holding Blaise and Aracle standing between them and Theo, joining both groups through a hand on Theo's elbow and one on Blaise's. Ilsa floated several meters away, her eyes closed, head thrown back, her body completely frozen, it seemed.

"That would be because of Ilsa." Aracle interjected. "She's the daughter of the Earth Clan's Chief, adopted daughter, but that's a mere technicality. All elemental clans, those in either the royal family or the Chief's family, have an additional gift bestowed upon their bloodkin, in addition to their elemental and magic. Prince Rasper, for instance from the Earth's royal line, has an amazing raw power, like him, Ilsa can literally command the Earth element, even Ergen himself, should she need to and as such, she can use his portal freely, with no repercussions. He is aware of her power and strength and also respects something in her—a thing that is found when one trains and
dedicates their entire self to their element.” Aracle smiled at Harry when he said this. "The kind of dedication I think you'd give to your element, when it comes to light."

"What about Theo?" Harry looked to the taller brunette. "He's an earth element."

"But nowhere on that level." Theo blushed, handsomely. "I'm well over a ten, the average is between one and ten, but I'm about a twelve?"

"Fifteen." Aracle supplied. Theo looked away, modestly. "His last measurement by Ilsa was fifteen." Aracle clarified. "Five over the high end average of ten, she was walking on air for weeks afterwards. Actually smiled once or twice."

Theo snorted.

Harry snuck a glance at Ilsa, wondering if she was paying any attention at all to the conversation floating around them. "Does it always take this long?"

"Hm? Oh no." Theo shook his head. "It's just that this is a two-part transportation for a group of more than three who have never been to Nevarah before, I haven't been in a while, at least a few years, so to begin with, it's a long portal and secondly, it's going to have a changeover and a fullstop."

"What's the difference?" Charlie frowned. "It's complicated."

"Sort of, but so was apparition before you started, right?" Charlie gave a slow nod. "But practice made it better?" Charlie grinned. "Same here. I'd wager Aracle has us on a time slowing spell though," he snuck a glance at the Rheyo. "-Nevarah's a good distance from the Wizarding world, it's a nevermore realm, meaning that no point of it actually touches a physical ground in any other realm. It simply exists. Because of that, first trips take a lot of power out of you to get there. You both might feel a bit drained, if you fight it. Can we speed up now?"

Aracle's lips twitched. "I might have."

"Is that why Oretta hasn't moved?"

Aracle sighed. "I wanted to be sure we were all settled first."

Harry gave a sudden, smothered giggle and twitched in the shared embrace.

"Harry?" Theo started, suddenly and then looked down rather worriedly at his younger mate.

Harry squirmed a moment later and then stopped when he realized that the squirming was more from the thing inside his shirt. Tickling, scrabbling little scaled feet. "Sha-shadow!" Harry swallowed the entirely inappropriate giggle as a little scaled head poked out of his shirt. How and when the Nyatura had gotten there, Harry didn't know, but he wasn't about to complain. He'd pretty much forgotten about the little thing.

As if sensing what he was thinking, Shadow stretched up to nip at his ear.

"Down, Shadow." Theo scolded, lightly. "This is a general portal tunnel, do you want to get sucked away?"

Shadow gave a squeak and disappeared back into the safety of Harry shirt. He swallowed another mouthful of giggles and turned away to see Charlie's amused blue eyes fixed on him. When Shadow settled down, Harry ventured to lean a little further out from his twin embrace from his
mates. He wanted to see what Aracle was going to do.

At that moment, the Rheyo looked straight at him and muttered a few words beneath his breath and the blue began to blur, the dirt disappearing from beneath their feet. "Hold on tight." He warned. "Portgas!"

It was as if someone had pressed the play button.

Harry watched in fascination as time began to run naturally again and Ilsa seemed to have launched herself into the portal—and away from the general group. Her body twitched, jerked and stretched as it continued to morph and then, for a half-second, she curled in on herself, before stretching out. A powerful wave of magic rippled through the endless blueness and Harry stared as Ilsa morphed from humanesque woman to a compact, armor-plated Dragon, with strong, pointed wings and lethal-looking claws. A glowing golden band showed around each claw and her neck, as the form continued to grow larger until it was nearly four times the size of the Hungarian Horntail he remembered all too well.

That was amazing.

He was one of them.

He could do that.

Someday, maybe.

The sheer size suggested massive power and strength.

Harry felt the slightest touch of bitterness. If there were creatures like that on the light side, surely Voldemort wouldn't have gotten to the heights where he was now. Surely there would've been less lives lost, if at all. It would only take a few, strategically planned attacks and it would all be over. No needless deaths, no pointless heroics, no collateral damage. Angry tears pricked at the corners of his eyes, but he willed them away with a sudden, renewed strength.

So this was the strength that the Dark Lord knew not?

Fine.

He'd master it.

He'd master every single fiber of it.

Then he'd take Voldemort to task for every single evil deed the bastard had committed.


Yeah. He'd definitely learn all that he could—as quickly as he could.

It felt like hours in what was scarcely a handful of seconds, Harry later mused. He found himself entranced by the realm of the place known as Nevarah.

In the distance a wavy image began to clear and form itself, until Harry could make out a massively constructed city with buildings upon buildings and greenery, with waterspouts from some of the upper levels spilling on down and flowing off into the nothingness. **Iceburg.** He thought, dazedly. The upright portion of the city was almost the same size as the massive earthen underbelly. A floating city at its best, with the water spilling down to nowhere and a cast of thick, white clouds...
floating hover it in idyllic fashion. If he couldn't see the earthy bottom and the cloudy cap at the
top, he might have guessed it was some sort of floating future space-station.

"Welcome to Nevarah." Theo murmured, kissing Harry's cheek and giving Charlie's arm a squeeze.
"Isn't it beautiful?"

"It floats?" Charlie said, skeptically. "I don't see any…Dragels."

"You'll see them." Theo chuckled. "Oh believe me, you'll see them. You'll be surprised. There's no
need to worry about size here. They're massive." His grip on Harry tightened. "Hold on while the
portals change."

"Portgas!" Aracle's voice rang out strongly and the blueness suddenly lightened considerably to a
rather cerulean hue and the endless blueness suddenly tightened in on them like a tube, channeling
towards a large white-grey stone wall. It spat them out on a sidewalk about three feet across,
circling around the tall, stone walls, with occasional hollows for the black gate. Theo landed
somewhat unsteadily and Charlie held both him and Harry up, with a faint look of concern.

The sudden wisps of black clinging to the walls and hovering in the air began to slink towards
them, taking forms and shapes of distorted figures and creatures. A chill began to seep into the air
and a few rattles announced approaching dementors.

A loud roar overhead, showed Ilsa streaking through the sky and towards the far end of the city,
where the sounds of growls, hisses and shrieks could be heard.

"Get down and into the gates!" Aracle shouted, herding them forward. "It sounds bad."

"Talk to the guard, I'll cast them around!" Terius shouted, pushing out his wings as Severus did the
same. He gave a nod to Blaise and the young Italian threw out his own wings, a dark purple and
grey scale and web scheme. "You can cast lightening?"

Mamma and I have been working on that."

"Perhaps you can seek some additional training once we are settled." Terius' suggested. His blue-
grey eyes flared white with magical energy and he shouted a spell that threw out a circle of
compressed air around the entire group, pushing away the few wispy shadows that had begun to
creep near.

Severus' had taken on a slightly grey-hued tint to his dark eyes and wind whipped around him and
Hermione as he created a protective shield while casting a near silent Patronus at the leering
dementors. The silvery white doe leapt gracefully in a circle as Blaise's violet eyes burned bright
and sudden loud pops accompanied a dozen bright bursts of crackling light, fanning out to form the
protective circle for their group.

Aracle stood at the gate, speaking to a guard from behind the massive, wrought-iron gates. The
conversation took place in angry heated whispers.

Theo's golden eyes flared brightly and he released Harry and Charlie, muttering beneath his breath
to ripple the ground. The sidewalk shook and cracked, a few paces away.

"Theo don't." Harry grabbed his arm, seeing the cracking sidewalk. That couldn't possibly be good,
but it appeared in their current state that Theo's element wasn't quite as useful as the others. He
winced into the sharp, cutting gusts of wind and felt inside himself for the two little warm spots
he'd come to figure out as the access lines to his mates. Theo's was simmering and straining against
its bonds and Charlie's was worried, frustrated and concerned. "Charlie!" Harry reached back, blindly, relieved when he caught hold of the dragon tamer's arm. He suddenly wanted both of them close.

Emerald eyes took in the sudden chaos and the swirling powers, both magical and elemental. They zeroed in on the wisps of black and grey shadow and Harry felt his temper tick, trip and snap. He didn't realize when his grip on Theo and Charlie tightened to unnatural proportions as a sudden blaze of fire flared to life in a broad semi-circle, with flames leaping up to form a protective barrier around their little group. The ground rippled and smoothed, allowing the flames to run freely.

"…ry, Harry, Harry!" Theo and Charlie's voices came through the angry flare before Harry blinked and let himself be dragged through the newly opened gates. He sat, panting, on the ground as the giant gates groaned in their closing, aware of Theo talking to him and Charlie holding him close.

"Shock." Someone said from above him. "Carry him. I'm guessing he's never used your element before?" Ah, that had to be Terius. Or maybe Severus. Harry wasn't sure. He simply stared, watching as people rushed back and forward. Not people, Dragels. He corrected, absently. Chaos. Pure and simple chaos…in ordered form. No wait, that wasn't right either. There were Dragels running about, Dragels of all ages, color and size, while others walked in ordered, double-file, along lighted pathways.

An emergency plan.

Ha.

That was lovely.

Harry felt the strength drain out of him and his head lolled to the side to rest on Charlie's convenient shoulder. He didn't even see the blackness that rushed to claim him.

In that lovely blackness, snippets and snatches floated around him and drifted through his ears, swirling around in his crowded head.

Harry felt himself being carried and moved, vaguely aware of an earlier memory replaying from when they'd been in the Snapes' quarters. Charlie's woodsy, citrus scent soothed him as he caught occasional snatches of foreign scents and sounds he couldn't place. A constant stream of calmness poured into him through the mated connection he shared, the majority of it from Theo, feeding patiently through their bond and probably through Charlie's as well, Harry thought dazedly.

"Something's wrong here." Ilsa shifted, restlessly, having taken up pacing the length of the room once more.

Harry watched her make the circuit a slight inkling of worry beginning to filter through his mind as he looked from Hermione's prone form to the agitated Dragel. Something had set her off to start pacing again, but as far as he could figure, it hadn't been anything obvious. His mind insisted that the logical connection would be inside information. Ilsa knew something that the others didn't and it had immediately set her on the prowl. At least, prowling was more what he was inclined to call her rather oddly murderous method of pacing. Harry looked from her to Aracle, a silent plea in his gaze. He didn't dare try to voice the chaotic thoughts and questions jumbling through his head, but he'd always been told he had his mother's expressive eyes.

Please, please, please…ask her…Harry silently pleaded. The day had already been more exhausting physically, emotionally and now, mentally as well. He wanted somewhere quiet and
frozen in time, so he could sort through his thoughts on his own—thank you very much. A place where he could draw his own conclusions and deal with the consequences of his own choices. There were a thousand and one things filtering through his poor brain and he wanted to remedy that!

Aracle met his gaze squarely for a moment and then gave a faint tilt of his head. "Ilsa, love, would you mind-"

"Shut up, Aracle." But the words were said almost if from habit and by reflex. The short Gheyo was literally vibrating with repressed magic. "How is she?" Ilsa whirled on her heel once more and continued down the warpath. Her golden eyes never once strayed towards the settee bearing said patient and said helpers.

"She hasn't been touched." Severus said, after they'd managed to wrestle Hermione from betwixt Charlie and Harry, they'd placed her on the settee. He now stood over her, running the basic healing spells and scans that he knew from training for his Potions Mastery. "But she bears a branding seal, I cannot place it."

"A seal?" Ilsa paused in her pacing, a new look coming over her face. She threw a curious glance towards the settee where the Potions Master dealt with his new patient with precise, impersonal hands. "What kind of seal?"

The interest was there, with a hint of fear, Harry noted. He wondered what it was that had spooked her.

They'd placed Hermione on the settee to be looked over and now Terius rummaged for potions in the corner cabinet at his alpha's request. "Hard to say." Severus said, at last. He'd raised the girl's jumper and blouse, just enough to show the imprinted brand on the skin of her stomach. The edges were ridged and wont to scar, it seemed. It was a complicated brand, a labyrinth with a rose in the center and a rope to border the perfect circle. "It's not a royal seal, the border's like rope, not chain or braid."

"A crested seal?" Terius moved over, a handful of vials extended to Severus, who took two of them immediately and uncorked the first, pouring the liquid onto the scarred flesh and watching as the pale blue color filled in every groove. "No. It's familiar, but I can't place it. I always hated history." He turned away with a disgruntled look on his face.

"History?" Ilsa gave a snort. "What kind of history?"

"The kind where you memorize every honorable family coat of arms since the beginning of time to now." Terius retorted. "I don't suppose you'd care to have a look?"

Ilsa closed the gap and hovered over Severus' shoulder to see the brand. There was a sharp intake of breath and after a moment, she withdrew and took up her pacing once more. "I'm surprised you can't place it, Councilman. Then again, your branch of the council doesn't handle the inter-creature affairs."

"If you would be so kind…?" Terius gestured towards the still distraught Harry now being supported by Theo and Charlie, with the addition of a worried Blaise looking on and Aracle frowning in the corner.

"It's a hellhound's seal." Ilsa said, quietly, very quietly.

Harry could've sworn her voice had trembled. He didn't blame her. A cold chill had crept into his
bones at the thought of Hermione and a shadow-darkened hound from the depths of hell. He hoped that Terius could help. He hoped that Terius could explain and most of all, he'd found himself growing weary of the accumulating questions and the sudden lack of answers. So the Dragels were a secret society, fine! So there were a thousand and one little etiquette rules he didn't know by heart—fine! But would they all quit dithering about it and actually give him a chance? How about explaining for one? How about some answers!

Starting with Hermione for one, that would definitely be appreciated. That and his missing mentor, everyone made it sound like such a big deal and Harry couldn't deny he was quickly becoming rather fed up with the whole thing. So he didn't have a mentor, so what? His life was screwed up. It had always been screwed up. What was one more twisted screw in the cover of his coffin? He'd once thought he'd be lucky to live to sixteen and beyond, but this new inheritance had renewed a tiny spark of hope within. A touch of mad power never hurt—in the right hands. Things were looking up, as far as living to see the next few years. The touch of raw power and possessiveness he'd felt just now, that was just from Theo and Charlie alone.

It had felt bloody wonderful.

A possessiveness like that, he'd never felt nor known before. The wild, raw magic that had rippled through him was a thousand times more addicting than the rush he'd felt when he'd activated Theo's password—and infinitely less painful. There'd been no pain at all involved in this. He'd simply felt the need to react, to protect his mates, to make sure that no one would take them from him and he'd reacted in the only way that he could. His fingers itched to simply punch the man—or woman—when he could finally lay eyes on them. In his opinion, they'd rightly deserve it and perhaps a little more. He'd always been on his own, it wasn't really that big a deal. Even more so, even when he'd come to Hogwarts, there'd been Ron and Hermione and he'd felt them slipping away from them. He'd figured it would happen.

His life had never been in the lucky lanes.


He shivered, suddenly, violently, remembering her lifeless body and the unnatural pallor in her face. Even when she'd been petrified she hadn't looked so…dead.

*Oh Hermione…you're the only friend I've ever had…what did you do?*

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**THE BURROW : SUNDAY AFTERNOON : CREATURE REVELATIONS**

The argument continued on and Seamus found himself gripping the shamrock medallion a little harder than necessary. He was aware of his boyfriend's unease as he stayed beside him, but didn't say anything beyond that. His own worries weighed rather heavily on his young shoulders, the longer the argument wore on between husband and wife.

It worried him to think of the Weasleys in such a light, as he had thought them to be a fairly decent family, in spite of their financial state and as a half-blood, he surely wasn't about to argue on any of that. What was really bothering him was the current conversation taking place before his eyes and ears. The interaction between Mrs. Weasley and Mr. Weasley, didn't quite settle right. From what he could gather, creature blood lurked in their lines—though as his mother had told him, every wizard or witch bloodline had some form of creature blood in it at one time or another—and it didn't agree with them.

He hadn't seen any changes in Mrs. Weasley, but he'd certainly seen those hard, eyes of blue ice
from the Weasley Patriarch, along with the ball of ice he'd screamed and the small black feathers sprouting rapidly along his face. Torvak. Hunter-kind. They'd learned something of them in Care of Magical Creatures and his mother had teased him about it, a few times, at night. Warning him to behave and not set anything on fire, lest the blackbird hunters come to steal him away in the night.

Dean's grip on his shoulder tightened and Seamus dragged himself forward from his thoughts to focus on the present situation. It seemed like Mr. Weasley was about to take the children.

Take the children.

All the children.

Seamus blinked. Well, there were certainly rights he had as a father, but from the heartfelt pleas coming from his wife, it left Seamus feeling more weighted and sick than anything. He thought back to the warm welcome the redheaded witch had given them all. How she'd taken them into their crowded home and easily fitted them into the family routine. How she'd cooked up a feast and made sure they were all well-fed and of general good cheer before ushering them off to bed.

He remembered her cinnamon-scented hug and warm, motherly smile that had meant a lot when he'd been missing his own Mam. That last thought made all the different as he gripped the shamrock medallion lightly and focused hard on her tear-stained face. She was crying now. Crying in earnest as her husband tried to pull Ginny from her grasp. Her sons looked on in something akin to shocked horror, as if they could not process what was happening and as if they didn't dare interfere.

Dean nudged him, gently.

Seamus gave a half-smile for his boyfriend's benefit and then squeezed the medallion hard. "May the mother's heart within your breast, reflect the truth, that you've been blessed, may neighbors respect you, trouble neglect you, the angels protect you, and heaven accept you, wherever you go and whatever you do, may the luck of the Irish, be there with you!" He closed his eyes and kissed the medallion.

A gentle ripple of wind washed outward from the young Irish Wizard and when his eyes fluttered open, they were brilliantly green for several seconds, before fading to their usual, rich blue.

"Seam?" Dean turned him around and drew him close.

The weight on his shoulders—grew heavier.

"I'm not leaving, Mum!" Ginny protested, pulling free of her father's grasp to throw her arms around her mother. She caught Fred's glower, directed towards her stern father and George's worried gaze, directed to her. She closed her eyes and held on tight.

Warm, familiar arms locked tightly around her, and the scent of cinnamon filled her nose. "Mum, oh Mum!"

Agony shone in Arthur's icy blue eyes.
NEVARAH: INSIDE THE CITY: TERIUS SNAPE'S QUARTERS: MONDAY NIGHT

When he did wake, it wasn't to the half-sleep he'd been in all that time.

Harry woke to find himself lying on the ground, curled up to a blanketed body. Someone had transfigured his clothes into pajamas. Or lent him a pair. They smelled vaguely of Theo. And the person beside him. A careful sniff told him that the figure beside him was Hermione and not either one of his mates. A deeper whiff told him that his mates were nowhere around him, but that they were within calling distance.

He pouted and then scowled when the action registered. That had come out of nowhere. He sighed and carefully untangled himself from the blanket and pillow propped up around him.

His eyes adjusted to the lack of light and he could make out her prone form laid out on a makeshift bed and carefully tucked beneath warm covers, her breathing faint and even. A conscious stab of pain registered as he watched her, silently, thinking. There were so many recent things that didn't make any sense at all and he didn't know where to start to find the answers that he desperately wanted.

He'd had enough of this secret society business, it was time to cash in for a lifetime membership. They owed him.

Harry yawned and took another, careful look at his new surroundings. His Dragel self was sleepy and content, a good hint that he was in a safe place, even if his mates were not right around him. That they were able to leave him on his own spoke of the security of this place—Terius' probably, Harry mused. He seemed to be in a sitting room, he could make out some coffee table-ish pieces pushed to the side to clear the center, where Hermione now lay.

He made a mental note to ask Theo. One hand crept up to his neck and began to toy with the slender, corded necklace there. He smiled, faintly and then looked down at the faintly gleaming ring. He'd have to get a scale from Charlie and trade one of his own, not to mention that he'd need to find out how to cut another slash into the lovely ring.

Window. His mind gently reminded him and Harry looked away from the ring, still fondling the scale as he took in the rest of the room. There were three comfortable couches and plenty of space around and between them. It was built with Dragels in mind, the ceiling was tall and the furniture was definitely reinforced. A sitting room for sure, Harry decided, when he could make out some

Harry frowned at that. He would've thought that surely Terius could spare a guest room or two and if he had, then surely there would've been someone to insist on a room for Hermione if he couldn't
speak in her stead. Terius was a councilman, surely that afforded him some bit of luxury. Harry snorted, thinking of Draco, while he'd been holding his opinion of the blond in a relative sort of respect, he couldn't deny that the blond seemed to gravitate towards things of considerable worth, namely, a rich potions Master and now, a councilman.

Taking another whiff of the room, Harry parceled out the scents to who they belonged to and how they seemed to fit. They were scented to Terius and Draco, with a few hints of Severus now and again, as well as a new scent he couldn't quite place. He drew a deeper breath and worked at separating the scents he could actively dismiss until he narrowed it down to a sharper tang that mingled with Draco's.

The baby?

No. Harry shook his head. No, it was too distinct, too individual. It was someone else. Who? Another mate? Harry slowly shook his head again, pushing that thought away for later, he didn't want to consider that just yet. The scent didn't carry undertones of Severus or Terius, so it was highly unlikely anyway. He did recall the blond's admission of being pregnant and he wondered how far along and what would happen. At some point or another, he would likely find himself in a similar state.

He frowned, thinking. Children. Good. Family. Good. Current timing. Bad. He sighed again. The future could hold promise, but for now he shook the thought from his head. He'd deal with that when it came to, though he made a mental note to speak to Draco first. Somehow, the thought of asking Theo about pregnancies and possible prevention spells seemed a little too…embarrassing. At least Draco might know, seeing as he was a sub as well. The book hadn't mentioned anything of the sort and Harry was beginning to wonder if it had been an old edition, at any rate, he had quite a few things he wanted to add to those enchanted pages. He could clearly remember sitting in the Snape quarters and remembering Terius' admission that some things were only passed down to certain types.

Hmm. Draco would probably turn out to be a very useful friendship, if he could stand to cultivate it. His Dragel-self had helped in dulling the less than stellar interactions between them, but the emotions associated with the memories still lingered as if they were nearly fresh. Harry shook himself all over. His thoughts had begun to turn rather dismal and morose all over again and he'd had enough of that!

He stood up and walked around Hermione's still form a few times before the slightly colder air registered and then he made his way back to the former cocoon of warmth and settled down on his pillow, scooting back to brace on one of the sofas. He sat in silent thought for a long while, before a spark of curiosity had him wondering where his mates were, along with their respective hosts.

A yawn escaped and Harry felt a somewhat playful urge building up inside of him. He didn't know where his mates were, but he had smelled them somewhere nearby. He had no interest in poking about in an unfamiliar environment, not when he still felt a faint urge to remain beside Hermione. Cocking his head to the side, he gave a light trill, letting the sound rattle in his throat and slip out through his mouth.

It echoed almost eerily in the empty sitting room.

The silence carried on.

He waited.

He was about to repeat the call when he heard a few muffled thumps and some rather hissed
exclamations. Harry swallowed the almost-laugh welling in his throat and instead of repeating the call, made an inquisitive noise instead, listening intently.

A series of rumbles and growls came back in answer. Two of them distinctly closer than the others.

Harry tugged the blanket up to his chin and focused on what he figured was the doorway. A moment later, he could hear the whispers and the shuffling feet as his sleepy mates made their way towards him, threading their way around the furniture he'd seen pushed to the sides of the room as they grumbled to each other in a series of clicks and quiet grunts. He smiled into the darkness and reached up with both hands.

Theo grasped one and Charlie the other. Harry waited while they settled themselves around him and then felt a cushioning charm cast around them. Charlie, he reasoned, as a conjured blanket seemed to come from Theo's side. The shadows were adjusting and he could see their forms, Charlie's large, wings, tucked close behind him.

"Wings?" Harry inquired, softly. He gently traced a hand along the closest spine.

"Won't close yet." Charlie mumbled, settling carefully on his side and shifting until he could lie down comfortably.

"Couldn't one of them help?"

There was a grunt in answer.

"You're hardly awake." Harry whispered, unable to keep the mirth from his voice. There was a muted growl from Theo's side and he squeezed Harry's hand in answer and tugged him down from sitting, to lying on the newly cushioned and warmed floor. Harry chuckled. He pulled his hands free from his respective mates and then settled himself comfortably between them, snuggling into Theo as Charlie curled around them both from behind.

He wriggled after a few moments, his mind wide awake and no more settled than when he'd awakened before.

"Sleep Harry." Charlie slurred. He yawned into Harry's ear and snuck an arm around Harry's stomach to hold him closer—and to still his movements.

"Not tired." Harry protested. He gave another wiggle.

Theo growled, faintly.

Harry leaned forward and nuzzled his neck, mischievously.

A groan came from the young alpha and one hand reached up, sliding beneath Harry's pajama jacket and teasing faintly as it made its way to Harry's neck.

Neck. Harry blinked. Oh no. He was not going to fall for that again! He knew very well what that hand could do if it found the right spot. He turned to squirm free from that hand, when Charlie's grip 'round his middle, tightened. He felt warm breath ghosting over his face and then, Charlie bit his ear, gently, before kissing his cheek goodnight.

The distraction worked. Harry felt Theo's hand on the mark and the command to sleep filtered through before he could process anymore. He whined, though more from having his fun cut short than any real protest. Both of his mates purred softly in answer and shifted closer to sandwich him between them.
Several minutes later, he was deeply asleep.

Harry did wake on his own the next morning—and well before either of his mates did. Like he had before, he took stock of his surroundings and Hermione's condition. She was just as still and pale as he remembered, but still breathing. He was relieved for that and curious, when his heightened hearing could pick up the faintest sounds of humming from somewhere else in the house. He wriggled around a bit, until he could reach Theo's arm and nuzzled the mark there.

The heavy arm wrapped around his waist retracted almost at once.

Harry couldn't help the self-satisfied smirk as he twisted around to do the same to Charlie.

The Dragon tamer's grip loosened.

Victory! Harry cheered silently. He slid free from the comfortable cocoon between them and then skipped away a few steps to stretch. A satisfied groan left his lips as he felt his shoulders roll and his Dragel-self purr in contentment.

Twin sounds of interest came from the makeshift bed on the ground.

Harry hummed happily in answer.

Theo shifted, rolling over to fill the gap, as Charlie eased closer. A moment later, they were cuddled up, fast asleep.

With that image in mind, Harry took in the present surroundings in daylight. He was pleased to note that his guess of a sitting room was fairly accurate. To his surprise, there were a few muggle contraptions set-up, a large-screen TV and a sound system neatly stacked against one wall. They seemed to be plugged into a solid block of crystal set near the window, now glowing as daylight streamed through the window.

The curtains were a soft blue-grey and the entire room was set in a rather minimalistic style, with shades of blue, grey and muted tans, with the occasional line of black or white. A few plants occupied one corner, their greenery the perfect accent to the room. He could now see that a large throw rug covered most of the floor, while the rest of it was dark brown stone, sanded and polished. Hermione's makeshift bed consisted of a thick bedroll, a clean sheet, Hermione, another sheet and a thin blanket with a thicker duvet on top—with everything in grey with a white accented border. Nice and simple, Harry noted, pleased that they'd taken such care for his friend.

The humming grew louder and Harry visibly perked up as he set off to explore. He cocked his head to the side, listening to the humming and then started off in the direction where it had come from. Curiosity hovered close to the surface and he felt safe enough to be poking about on his own.

What he did discover, sent him into somewhat of a shock.

He found himself in the doorway of the kitchen, while breakfast was making itself to the hummed tune of a dark-haired, tanned beauty. Her hair stuck up in deliberate spikes, every which way, her earrings long and gold, with a perfect smear of red lipstick and comfortable sweats to make up her outfit. The surprise came from the tune she hummed as her hands moved in the air, as if she were drumming on invisible drums, while bacon turned itself in the pan and eggs cracked themselves into a bowl.

Harry stared. He really couldn't do much otherwise.
"Hola! Buenos dias!" Dark eyes flickered to him and the bright red lips curved up into a smirk, followed by another string of Spanish, ending with. "Como estas?"

"Er," Harry blinked. That sounded somewhat familiar…

"No habla espanol?" The dark eyes grew wide. "Ma, ma…." She muttered a few more words then shook her head. "Ach Maria…ay, now? Can you understand me now?"

"Yes!" Harry nodded.

"You must be the one I didn't meet last night." She waved him into the kitchen and he noted that they were roughly about the same height. "Calida. May I?" She snapped her fingers and everything in the kitchen froze. Before Harry could answer that, she'd turned and half-smothered him in a hug that visibly squashed the air from his lungs. Her face was buried in his neck and she took a good whiff, before standing back and holding him at arm's length. There was another murmured string of Spanish, before she ducked her head and released him. "Sorry, I tend to do that. I can't help myself."

She made a face at the kitchen and things began to work again. "Er, I take it you've never met a Carrier before?" At Harry's careful shake, she grinned. "Oh goody, I'm your first. Well, no wait, that's a bad thing. I'm not a good first. I'm actually a very bad one." She nibbled on her lower lip. "That's okay, just pretend that you've never met one before when you meet another one. Oh good grief, that sounds so twisted." She snorted, then turned to the island in the center of the kitchen and promptly hiked herself up to sit on top, patting the space beside her. "Come on, it can hold us both. There's room."

And so Harry found himself sitting beside her, his mind whirling away. "You smell like Draco."

There was a snort of laughter. "I should hope so." She retorted, eyes sparkling merrily. "I'm carrying his child!"

Harry gaped. "What?"

"You really haven't met a Carrier before, have you?" She sighed. "I really am a horrible first impression, but I figured when you went all stiff a moment ago." She began to swing her feet, lightly thumping them on island's lower cupboard doors. "They said you were from the outside, in the muggle-world within the wizarding world." There was a brief spark of curiosity. "You'll have to tell me about it sometime, I think muggles are fascinating little creatures." She winked as she said this, then stage-whispered. "But Draco thinks they're horrible!"

"You're a Dragel, right?" Harry frowned. This was certainly the strangest one he'd met yet and possibly the friendliest one.

Chocolate-colored eyes gave a dramatic roll. "Well of course, hon." She drawled, as much as her accent would allow. "How else could I be a Carrier? Which, by the way, if you don't know, in cases like Draco—an all male harem, so to speak—obviously, he doesn't have all the right equipment for a babe, so that's where I pop in." She patted her stomach, gently and with her smoothing fingers, Harry could now see a slightly formed bump, as she stretched the sweatshirt over it. "A Carrier, carries the child for the sub." She shrugged. "Pretty straightforward. We only have whatever we want to carry and we give birth." She shrugged again. "In my case, Draco will still eat for two, but the energy will be shared with me and in turn, given to the little one." She smiled at her stomach "By whatever we want to carry, I mean that if I don't want any of the symptoms, say, the morning sickness, swollen ankles, mood swings and all that joy, I simply reflect them back to Draco and he'll have to handle it. The only thing I'll ever have to do is pretty
much stay close by, stay out of the way, attend my healer check-ups and then pop it out when the day arrives."

There was a moment of silence.

She dissolved into laughter, holding her sides, shaking. "Oh Arielle, the look on your face—that was hilarious!" She snickered some more, then grinned. "Which is why I say in all honesty that I am the worst first impression for a Carrier. I promise you they are nowhere near as insane as I might seem and they all respectable, mature and experienced women. That's all true, by the way though. Except in Draco's case, we're sharing the sensations and whatnot, since this is his first one and he doesn't have a clue what to expect—and he's really quite horrible at looking out for himself." She sighed. "Then again, I have had to deal with more difficult subs, so I can't complain." She slid off the island. "You want anything specific for breakfast?"

"Not really." Harry shook his head. "Do you need any help?"

"Hmm? Oh no. I'm managing." She snuck a sideways glance at him. "My name is Calida, you can use it you know."

"Calida." Harry repeated, connecting the dots to the first words she'd asked. "What did you say, at first?"

Another smile came his way. "I said good morning! Then I asked how you were doing and if you slept well and if you were hungry." She paused. "And then I asked if you spoke Spanish." She held out a hand. "You can have it, if you want. I'm not picky. Though I can't promise anything for your accent. Draco's is horrible."

Harry looked from the hand to her, his brow furrowed.

She waved it, impatiently, one hand already directing the breakfast that was still cooking itself. "Never shared before?" She asked, turning back to him. At his answer, she frowned. "What kind of alpha do you have? He ought to have melded with you already!" She huffed. "Here, give me your hand. What I'm doing is sharing everything I know of the Spanish language with you, so that when I speak, you'll know what I'm saying and you'll know the words to say to answer, but you won't necessarily be able to speak it as I do. You'd have to practice, but it'd keep you in the loop." She wiggled her fingers. "It doesn't hurt. You'll feel a bit of a mental push, but if you don't fight it and you really want what I'm sharing…"

Harry tentatively splayed his fingers and extended his hand to hers.

Calida gently touched her pointer and index fingers to his own and then withdrew. "Well, did it work?"

"Lovely. Now you're in the loop." She winked and her head snapped around in time to direct the bacon to a serving platter and the eggs into the frying pan, as batter began to mix itself out of the way on the corner of the countertop beside the muggle stove appliance. "On second thought, I'll take your help on the kitchen bits. It's been a while since I've had to cook for more than myself. I don't suppose you know what they eat?" She began to fill a plate from what was already cooked and set it aside. "I can't eat like everyone else," she nodded to her stomach. "There's very little that actually agrees with me when I'm carrying and as I've inherited Draco's picky tastes, that little bit has become even smaller."
"Bacon is good." Harry thought for a moment. He did remember sharing breakfast in the Snapes' quarters and while he didn't recall what exactly Draco had eaten, he did know some of what had been presented for the meal. "I can fry the rest."

"Whoa, hold up there—magic." She caught his shoulder as he started for the stove.

"Isn't too much magic bad for the baby?"

"What? No. The more, the better. It can feed off of it." She blinked. "Wait, don't tell me you actually know how to do it without...well, you're certainly a strange one." She looked him over from head to toe. "Impressive. I didn't know there were folks like you that still existed. You're a rare kind."

His brow furrowed together in a silent question. She sighed. "You know, I'm not a mind reader, if you'd just ask what's on your mind, I wouldn't mind answering." She thwapped him lightly on the shoulder and turned around to direct the mixing bowl, ladle and a griddle over to the stove. "Every individual in a circle has a specific function. The Sub often holds spillover energy in addition to their own powers and whatnot, to burn it off, they handle more duties than other members. Namely, you take care of the cooking, the cleaning and the general banishing, in addition to hosting and whatnot."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"There's no house elves here, darling." Calida moved around him and continued with her work. "And it's a safe and healthy way to burn off the magic. It does build up quite a bit you know."

"Terius had house elves in."

"If we did our magic outside of boundaries like Nevarah, everyone would know we still existed." She wrinkled her nose. "Imagine what a media nightmare that would be. House elves are happy to help when we're not...here."

"This just became better and better." Harry said, darkly. In addition to the pile of etiquette he'd yet to know of, there additional things he was required to know—things that reminded him of ugly memories from a little house in Whinging Surrey on number 4 Privet Drive. He stifled a shudder. This wouldn't be the same, he tried to convince himself. Even if he had to cook and clean, he'd handle it. So far, Theo hadn't seemed to expect any of that from him and Charlie, well, Harry was fairly certain the redhead wouldn't push or press him to do anything. Having lived on his own as well, Harry was certain the redhead knew a few household spells.

"...ry. Harry!" She snapped her fingers in front of his face and jumped back when he scowled at her. "You needn't look so put out about it." Calida nudged him gently out of the way as she continued her cooking-preparations. "It makes sense. The Alphas often handle all the political, financial and social maneuvering and believe me, that's very necessary. Betas are like alpha understudies, they learn to stand in, just in case. Pareya, well, they usually learn some fighting in addition to specific protection spells and defenses attuned to their element, a Gheyo simply fights and they are often directed by the Alpha in the whole handling the political and social bit, so they have offensive spells and intensive fight training, in betweens, well, a Healer is a healer, a Carrier—we can help with some things, like the cooking, as we're originally subs ourselves, who didn't really care to get into the circle thing." She shrugged. "In my case, I just...I was never able to." She drew a deep breath. "But anyhow, if there's a Royal, well so help me, they're like an Alpha and a Pareya rolled into one and if they ever lift a finger—well, I've never heard of it. The pickiest as they come too, that lot." She snorted. "If it's an Advisor, well, they can choose what branch of magical study they prefer, but it'll largely depend on their element and inheritance. If you
have a Seer or a companion added as well, the same to them, with the Seer being more of a companion, in that they'll practically be your shadow." She grinned. "Have I sufficiently confused you for the morning?"

"Just about." Harry smiled, thinly. "So the subs are pretty much-

"Awesome." Calida grinned. "I can practically see it your head. No, they're not like little housewives and all that, they have power, they have attitude and believe me, just because they know a few more spells—after all, you know those in addition to your own elemental or inheritance training—it is very impressive to give a scolding, while you're simultaneously dusting down the flat, doing the laundry, cooking dinner and casting Casper wards." She giggled. "I last carried for Terius' sister, the big one, I forget her name. I'd remember if I saw her face. A lovely baby girl." She smiled. "The woman has a temper, goodness me. There were some wonderful moments there." She snickered.

"Here, take this." She extended her hand again. "It's nothing if you don't know them or use them. There's some places that actually do, but the house elves, well, there are elves in Nevarah and they don't like that their own kind is in a magically bonded servitude. We have free elves working, but—well, why bother when you can simply cast a few spells. It honestly doesn't take much at all. A little practice and if you're keyed to your home, then you can do it with a snap of your fingers. Besides," and here she shrugged yet again. "A circle's function is all for the sake of the sub, everything that's done, it's for the sub, even when children come along. Taking care of the things that matter—such as knowing which mate eats what, when, keeping their favorite spaces cleared, scenting their clothes as they're washed, well, it's a way of thanks, sort of. If you want to teach them the spells as well, there's nothing against it, just that most of them never learn—simply because they don't have to."

Harry stared at her and then at her hand for another long moment and then he went ahead and accepted the transfer. It was a rush of spells, the theory, the history and the practical use, that came rushing through their connected fingertips and slotted away in a corner of his brain.

"You're welcome." She moved around him again and continued on with breakfast. "And I'll manage for now, you don't have to worry about it." She worked in silence for a few more minutes and then paused to look at him. "Some of your general ideas, from the muggle world and the wizarding world, well, we're happy on both sides, but we also have our side. It's complicated, twisted and very difficult to wrap your head around, but when you stop thinking of it, it will make sense." She sighed. "You see Harry, an alpha may make some important choices and is the rock for their circle, but if they were to do something the rest of the circle disagreed with, who would stand up to them?"

Harry thought for a moment. "The fighter? The Gheyo?"

"Oh no, that'd be a death sentence—for both of them."

"Beta?"

"Probable, but no. They'd argue 'til time's end."

"Sub?" He said, at last.

"Two points for bravery." She agreed. "The Sub would, the one who also has the power to decide who is eating, who they are welcoming and just who is in favor. It doesn't make you any less of a person, man or woman." She waved a spoon over and took a careful sip of the gravy. "Blech. More salt." She waved another hand and set about righting it. "It does place a great deal more
responsibility on your shoulders though." She gave a jerk of her head to the left. "Put the placemats on the table, would you? I know I gave you the spell for that…"

Harry almost smiled as he turned towards the indicated doorway. From her point of view, everything should be fine...he nearly laughed. He should have expected something like this, after all, since when was his life ever normal? That thought did bring a smile and Harry let the earlier funk go. It was fine. He could handle it. He'd managed pretty decently so far, hadn't he?

A smirk registered.

And Harry cracked his knuckles, feeling completely devious for a full minute.
NOTE: Nevarah houses not only Dragels but Vampires, Were's, Shifters, Hellhounds, etc. as well as Wizards, while the percentage is rather low and only spikes during Hunting season, for those circles with human/wizard mates, etc. there is a mixture of wizard/muggle items scattered throughout.

RECAP: Blaise, Hermione, Severus, Terius, Harry, Charlie, Theo and Shadow arrive as the great city is under attack and Harry subconsciously accesses both his mate's power to protect them. Once inside the city, the group is hustled off to the safety of the Snape's home, where Harry worries about Hermione and spends the first night snuggled between his two mates. In the morning, he meets Draco's surrogate (Carrier), a Spanish beauty named Calida, who happily shares some Dragel information with him.

By the time the others came in— the scent of food roused them all, it seemed— Calida was a wellspring of knowledge that didn't mind sharing just about anything as she worked around Harry in the kitchen. Anything, whether it was useful or not, she was more than happy to talk—and often in a mixture of English and Spanish, the more excited she became. He'd tentatively mentioned his lack of magic, at which, she'd smothered him in another hug and told him to be a dear, because she'd handle everything else.

She also told him all about what had happened when they'd arrived.

Apparently, he'd blacked out from using Charlie's element, when Charlie himself hadn't used it beyond a few accidental bursts after his awakening and it had exhausted him and left Charlie rather exhausted as well. Theo had remedied that with a bit of blood, but as Harry had been out cold, Terius had suggested they all call it a night. The City was still under lockdown, but the alarms were turned off and most had returned to their usual routines.

Calida happily explained the unusual sleeping arrangements and there, Harry had blushed. Apparently, he hadn't wanted to be separated from Hermione, so when they'd attempted to set her up in the living room to try a healing spell, he'd drawn on Theo and Charlie's elements to push everyone away and leave the two of them be. In the end, only Terius had been able to venture forward to set up Hermione on a bed and had been forced to settle with conjuring a simple pillow and blanket for Harry, as he hadn't wanted anything or anyone nearby.

"Oh it was quite fun." Calida smirked. "Mostly because I can tell that you're so new, it blinds. You'll probably figure it out when you start trusting them a little more, they didn't mean you any harm, but you wouldn't let any of them within five feet of you. Your Beta was quite put out that you wouldn't let anyone near. I think he was hoping for a little bit o' love." She snickered. "Not that I blame him and he is a handsome fellow, if I may say so. I love it when they have long hair." Her grin grew wider. "Ah, but never mind, it was mostly how you say, not to worry of small things, they all fit in the bigger picture." She waved her hand at the look on Harry's face. "On second thought, maybe that's a saying from me own home. Whatever the case, what's done is done, yes?" She patted his shoulder as she headed to the table, a hot pan in hand. "Oh, they're coming.
Her first cheery greeting was in English and to Terius as she greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and a hug that was easily returned. She gave a tilt of her head towards the solid oak table, with a slant towards a specific chair.

"Morning, Calida. Harry!" Terius brightened at once. "You're awake and in…good health?" His fingers twitched as if he'd like to cast a diagnostic spell, but wasn't sure how it'd be received. The concern on his face was rather obvious, as he waited for Harry's response.

"Fine, thanks." Harry managed a small smile. "Hermione-?"

"She's doing alright. I ran some scans this morning with some help and Severus says the potions will run their course in a few more hours, then there's some other things we'd like to try…we would have tried them last night, but ah, well-"

"That's fine." Harry answered, saving him the trouble of trying to explain what Harry himself could not quite remember. "Healers and a medi-witch?"

"I believe Theo made some arrangements, you will have to speak with him. Draco's alignment was last night, so I'm afraid I was a tad preoccupied."

"Of course." Harry heard himself say. Drat. He'd forgotten somewhat, about that pesky realignment stuff, then again, he supposed it was how Terius happened to look so refreshed that morning and not the least bit strung-out as he had appeared in Hogwarts the night before.

"Good morning." Draco's clear, crisp voice carried through the chatter as the rest of the guests made their way towards the dining room. He was impeccably dressed in his usual, expensive, fitted robes, main accessory happening to be Shadow riding on his shoulder. It immediately took flight as he entered the kitchen and headed for the table, only to be caught with a light tug to the tale and Draco's half-frown. "Not on the table or Severus won't eat at all." The Nytura sniffed and settled down on Calida's shoulder.

"Mornin' handsome." Calida offered him a one-armed hug and immediately put a hand to his forehead, her lips puckered. "You hardly slept at all. What were you doing? And no smart answers, I was in the same room as you!" The blond blushed a rather fetching shade of red and he pushed her hand away with a muttered phrase. The Spanish girl tossed her head. "That's wrong. You're supposed to roll the r's, it's an accent, otherwise you're telling me something entirely-" and here she switched to Spanish and whispered the remainder in Draco's ear. He blushed a deep breath as she bustled off to the other side of the large, ten seater table and began to summon dishes and cutlery.

Draco immediately scowled. "Don't do that." He glared at her and then gave a flippant wave of one hand. The table was immediately seat in gleaming dishes with shiny, matching cutlery and two racks of condiments for the ends. "Suitable?"

"Ooh. I didn't know you had these plates." Calida bent over to inspect one with interest. "Where are you keeping them?"

"The cupboard across from the pantry." Draco murmured. "I thought you turned the kitchen inside out yesterday."

"That was when I was looking for chocolate." She sniffed, primly. "Not dishes. Morning, Severus." Her head snapped up and she all but danced around to the other side of the table, not quite avoiding him, but not quite greeting him as happily as she had the others.
The Potions Master inclined his head in answer, but his gaze was fixed on Terius, of which, the other man sighed. "We've been over this before, Severus." He said, wearily. "I refuse to allow Draco to carry our first child beyond a few months. This way is safer, healthier and less stressful on all of us." The perfectly rehearsed phrase was repeated in a near monotone.

"Less stressful on you." Severus shot back, taking his seat at the head of the table. "You're overreacting."

"And you're not reacting!" Terius shot back. "What would it take? A second attack? You still don't know who did what! I won't have Draco or our child in a position like that again."

Severus gave a low growl, black eyes locking with blue-grey ones. "They will not be in a position like that again and they never would have been there, if you had been-"

"You cannot blame that entirely on me. I cannot be everywhere at once and you were in greater danger than he was! This is not something that can be blamed, if you feel so inclined to assign it elsewhere-!"

"I am not assigning anything anywhere." Severus snapped. "I am making a statement in regards to your decisions in my absence!"

"Then by all means do make your statement." Terius folded his arms, eyes narrowing. "Do not let my presence hinder you."

Draco sighed. Loudly. "I don't care." He looked between the both of them, they wore identical expressions that made him duck his head. "Alright! Maybe I did at first. I wish...I would have rather...it would've been best if we were all involved." He admitted. "But I'm...glad. I was...a little worried." He looked to Calida who flashed him her trademark grin. He hadn't been happy to find that Terius had already selected a carrier for him, but when the Pareya had explained the reasoning behind it, Draco had grudgingly agreed. He had been terrified at the thought of his body changing and morphing to accommodate and birth a child, but this had lifted a huge portion of worry from his young shoulders. Calida had immediately taken the child—currently in the form of raw energy, as his body had begun to shift and morph for the change, but hadn't quite settled yet—and promised to do her best by them all. Perhaps for future children he might reconsider, but this first-no, Terius had made a good call here and Draco had been more than happy to yield to it. "Besides, she kind of grows on you."

"That might be what I'm worried about." Severus muttered, so quietly, that if Harry hadn't been standing so close, he wouldn't have heard. Harry watched as Draco took the seat to Severus' left, while Terius sat beside him. Aracle took the chair on the far end of the table while the others seated themselves around. From the look of it, Harry figured they'd worked out the seating the night before, because he could see a space for him between Theo and Charlie, with empty chairs to spare as Blaise took a seat on the opposite side. Harry avoided the morning smirk the Italian sent his way and wondered if there were any others he'd missed. He hesitated, hovering in the doorway, uncertain and not sure what for.

Draco squinted at the dishes and then squeezed his eyes shut in concentration. When they popped open a second later, all the plates on the table were appropriately filled. He cast a quick look around at his guests to be sure that all plates were properly filled.

Harry filed that instance away for later thought and examination. It seemed like Calida's words were true, though he'd never in a million years had thought that Draco Malfoy of all people knew kitchen and hostess spells.
A throat cleared quietly behind him and Harry turned, immediately sidestepping when he caught sight of a tall, thin and exceptionally pale waif of a girl. Compared to her, Draco seemed to sport a tan. The unnaturally pale hair was almost a shimmery silvery white and her high, pointed ears stuck out between the silken strands as she glided into the dining room, her face twisted into a scowl, as if there were something foul in the air.

_Elven?_ Harry found himself wondering. She certainly looked the part.

She did not wear wizarding robes as some of the others did, but rather, a layered, short-sleeved, knee-length dress and matching leggings. There was a jeweled dagger tucked at her waist and a necklace bearing several bright, shimmering Dragel scales as she walked past Harry without a second look. Her right arm was bare from the shoulder downward showed of several dark, tattooed circles and crests.

_Mating marks._

The realization clicked into place quicker than Harry had expected.

_A sub with a large circle._

Self-consciously, Harry looked down at his own arm, where Charlie's mark was now hidden beneath his short-sleeved shirt and Theo's own on his neck. Draco's were quite obviously hidden beneath his luxuriously tailored robes. This new girl was showing off, almost. He resisted the urge to scowl himself and instead, looked to his seat between his mates, willing his feet to carry him forward and relieved when he did.

"Harry." Charlie tugged him down to sit between him and Theo. His wings were still out, but he wasn't shirtless as he'd been during the night. Someone had transfigured a shirt that managed to fit around his wings, while still showing a rather respectable appearance. Harry had to admit to himself that his mate looked good. He did wonder about the wings though, surely they were stressful in their present state. His own had been extremely sensitive to temperature and movement, that he'd stopped drawing them out while he'd been at Privet Drive. "Morning." He gave the smaller hand a squeeze. "How are you?"

"Fine." Harry managed to get out before Theo tugged him sideways for a hug and a diagnostic spell. It tingled pleasantly as it crept over him. "Theo, I'm fine!" He protested, half-heartedly, allowing it, because he wasn't really sure he was fine and partially because it felt good to be fussed over every once in a while. Theo didn't fuss too much, but the ways that he did were mostly acceptable.

"You weren't fine last night." The Slytherin said bluntly. "Forgive me for wanting to be sure." He nudged him, nodding towards the full breakfast plate. "Make sure you eat at least half of that."

Harry looked at his plate. "Half?" He wheedled.

"You need the protein." Charlie countered. He winched and flinched. His chair was more of a stool, with a very small back, to make room for his still extended wings.

"Still can't fold them in?" The new girl eyed him with a mixture of pity and distaste. "Really, it's been a whole night!"

"Good Morning to you too, Bhindi." Aracle smiled, drawing her attention. "Sleep well?"

"No. I didn't. No thanks to anyone." She snapped. Her critical gaze flickered to the plate of breakfast Draco had just served and she wrinkled her nose. "You hate bacon." She clicked her

"She didn't do a thing." Aracle scooted his chair back and reached over to snag her with an arm around the waist, tugging her to sit in his lap. "And we are guests, there is no need to be rude this early in the morning, it's a new day and-"

"and I don't bloody care." Bhindi snorted. She snapped her fingers twice and a steaming bowl of porridge, studded with fruits and nuts, appeared, along with a golden-colored fruit smoothie. She looped her arms around his neck and pillowed her head on one shoulder. "A good host doesn't make assumptions for their guests." She retorted. "And any idiot with a half-head of sense can fold their wings in." Her lips curved into a pout. "You didn't shave." She splayed her fingers over his stubbled face. "And you didn't tell me we were staying."

Aracle sighed, patiently. He threw an apologetic glance to Draco and then to Charlie, as they waited for Calida to say the blessing for the food.

They ate in near silence, half of the conversations were cut short by Bhindi's snippy remarks until Aracle finally whispered something in her ear that made the girl fold her arms across her chest and sit, sulking, for the remainder of the meal.

Harry wished he would've heard what it was, as he found himself beginning to harbor a rather obvious dislike of her.

"Who is she anyway?" Harry demanded, when the meal was over and Theo and Charlie accompanied him back to the sitting room where Hermione lay. Aracle had excused himself and Bhindi, promising that he would have the guest shorehouse cleaned as soon as possible.

From the dark scowl on Bhindi's face, Harry had a feeling it wouldn't be very soon at all, if cleaning spells happened to the specialty of the Sub, she didn't seem anywhere near inclined to be cleaning anything in the near future. But he had thanked the man and accepted the parting mint candy, able to smile—somewhat—when Aracle had 'ported out.

"Sub for Aracle's circle." Theo said, quietly, confirming what Harry had already deduced. "I'm sorry she's...like that."

"It's not your fault." Charlie said. He looked to Harry who in turn stared at Theo in surprise. Neither of them had thought anything of the rude girl in regards to the silent Slytherin.

"It sort of is." Theo half-smiled. "His circle has twin subs, they're one of the rare circles here. She's one, her twin brother, Bahn, is the other. Ilsa's addition to the circle...well, it was solely for Aracle's sake and it's not my place to say, save for, my darling mentor doesn't get along with anyone, as you can obviously tell, even her own circle. Everyone knows I'm her mentored student, as such, the dislike is passed on. You're part of my circle so she's no longer restricting her comments to me, but to you two as well. I am sorry for that. You don't need your first impression here to be sullied with such an inhospitable-"

"Hermione moved." Charlie interrupted, his blue eyed-gaze having been fixed on the makeshift bed on the floor of the sitting room. "Just now, I think she twitched—her shoulder."

Two heads snapped towards Hermione's blanketed figure. "Where?" Harry dropped to his knees
beside her, leaning forward, searching her strained face and closed eyes. A moment later, her eyelids fluttered and her body trembled.

"Severus!" Draco's voice came from the doorway as he stood there, watching, one hand resting on his flat stomach. "Granger's waking!"

Severus appeared almost at once, his dark robes flaring out around him in typical fashion as he entered the room and brushed aside the others to crouch beside the patient. His Potions Mastery had required a base knowledge of healing spells and such, knowledge that now came in handy as he took up her wrist, felt for a pulse and simultaneously cast a spell to check her vital signs and the potions he'd spelled into her. "She should wake in a few minutes." He murmured.

"Should she?" Terius seated himself on one of the pushed-back sofas and leaned forward, worry in his face. "I have already sent for a healer from St. Louralis, but I do not think they can 'port here so quickly, not when it its...that, outside." He gave a nod towards the window and Harry followed the nod of his head.

He was surprised to see colorful streamers, banners and things happening outside. He turned a questioning gaze to Theo who straightened and stood back to allow Severus more working space. "It is hunting season, remember?" He said. "The lockdown was lifted last night and the moment it did, everything went back to the way it was."

"How long does it last?" Harry studied the bird's eye view available to him from the window. He couldn't quite make out the individuals below, but he could see the city now and betwixt all the shiny silvery buildings and other blue-grey windows, he could see the city was dressed for a festival.

"The lockdown?" Terius blinked. "That is up to the Royal Council, they rely on-"

"The Hunting Season." Harry interrupted.

"Typically, about two to three months." Terius answered. "There's three separate feasts, the four arrivals of the four crowns from the four elements, for instance, the crown prince of the Air clan, the reigning princess from the Fire clan and so forth. Ah, there are weekly matching dances, where you have the chance to dance with your prospective interests and hmm, during the week, it is basically a giant festival. Everyone sharing, dancing and well, it becomes rather crowded as folks come in from the Air realms, the Volcanic regions and the Merrow Waters."

"Which one is that?" Harry squinted, willing his eyes to adjust as he made out a thick strip of blue beyond the shiny buildings.

"The blue waters out there." Terius pointed. "They run blue then black, they are magically connected to the waters of Merrow, which is how the water clan reaches us, since they do not fly as the rest of us."

"Why not?" Charlie frowned.

"They don't have wings." Draco said, matter-of-factly. "Can't fly."

"They're awfully touchy about it too, so if you do meet one, be very, very polite." Calida plopped down on the sofa beside Terius, her dark eyes snapping. "They are absolutely gorgeous though." She grinned. "You'll never see anything prettier than a pure girl from the side of Merrow." She whistled softly. "I'm perfectly straight, mind you, but I would turn in an instant if those beautiful creatures ever thought I was worthy of their attention."
"And you'd turn back when you caught a good glimpse of a pure fellow from the same side of Merrow." Terius retorted, dryly. "Really, you haven't changed at all."

She elbowed him with a sniff. "It's the thought that counts." She winked at Harry. "They're gorgeous, just know that. If you're hunting this season, stick around for the whole thing, the water types will come up and rumor has it that even the storms and the darklings will make their unofficial showings as well."

"Storms?" Blaise brightened at the thought of meeting those with his own type of element. "Really?"

"Mm." Calida settled into the sofa, watching as Severus continued his diagnostics and summoned a few potions to his side. "It's also said that Lord Cunningham will make an appearance as well." She wiggled her eyebrows. "They say he has a bodyguard as his acting Gheyo, a hired fighter."

"Hired?" Terius frowned. "Not part of his circle?"

"Oh goodness no." Calida shook her head. "This one, he's a real darkling they say. Tall, handsome—always in black, always in the shadows, and has never lost a single fight, save for one. Currently holds a blood title in the arena. That's impressive, I'd say."

"The arena?" Draco moved to sit by Terius, happy when the older man pulled him into his lap. "You haven't stopped talking about the fights since yesterday."

"Because they're fun."

"Is that a dreamless sleep?" Harry interrupted, his sharp eyes fixed on Severus' every move. He didn't want to hear about fights and arenas just yet, there was too much going on—too quickly. He chose, instead, to focus on the little specks of normality that he could.

The Potions Master gave a short nod.

"Why are you putting her back to-"

"The potions have been working to repair internal damage." Severus said, quietly. He pried open the girl's mouth, accepting Charlie's help as the redhead propped her up and held her upper half steady. "She took something or the other, a potion—I'm not sure what—and it was meant to end her life." He sighed, wearily. "I would ask of you, Mr. Potter, to inquire of her when she wakes what was so horrible that she sought to end her life in such a sordid way."

"What kind of potion?" Harry had to know, even as a dark feeling of dread curled in his stomach.

"One that renders the subject unconscious as it eats away at their internal organs, destroying them from the inside out." Severus closed Hermione's mouth and with his wand pointed to her throat, he murmured the words that magicked her body to swallow the potion on her own. "When that is through, the result is something that mutates, almost like acid and it eats through the bones and melts the flesh. A truly despicable creation." There was a hint of disgust as he coaxed another potion down her throat and spelled it forward.

Harry didn't answer to that. He didn't miss the reaction the Potions Master had to something of that horrible a nature, but he wondered what had driven his friend to do it. Hermione always had reasons for doing everything and surely, there was a good one for this—unless, someone had simply taken advantage of her and that had been the result. He stifled a shudder. Hermione was a brilliant witch, there was no way she would've gone down without a fight and he didn't like what the alternative told him.
Forget Snape's question, he had a thousand of his own.

"Did you find out anything?" When Severus had finally finished his ministrations, he turned to Terius who had been absently summoning books from various libraries in the flat and had accumulated quite a pile beside him. Draco had been eased to sit beside him on the sofa, napping comfortably, with Calida browsing through the books, via looking over Terius' shoulder.

"That depends." Terius closed the book with a sigh. "Lady Ilsa said it was a hellhound's seal, yes?" Heads nodded. "Well, as far as I can tell, the seal with the rose belongs to the line of hounds in the highest regard—this is good, for Hermione—the rest of us, probably not as much."

"What do you mean?" Harry turned to face him, having settled beside Hermione and taken one of her hands in his.

"Well, the house it is calling her to, tends to be extremely protective and aggressive. Before we do anything, we need her awake."

Severus frowned. "And I don't suppose you could have figured that out a few minutes before?"

The blue-grey eyes narrowed. "Perhaps I could have. However, if you are referring to that which is already settled, then if we did not have guests right now-"

"Yes. I'm sure." Severus cut him off, rising fluidly to his feet, apparently still annoyed with whatever had happened between them. "What else did you discover? Or was that all?" There was the faintest hint of a challenge in his voice.

Theo looked from the scowling alpha to the mildly annoyed Terius who handed over the book to Calida and shifted Draco more comfortably in his lap.

"When she wakens, we must ask her to grant immunity for our actions, regardless of whether she knows what it is or not. Once we have that, we will live, otherwise, I daresay we should be worried. To bear a hellhounds mark of that particular image, it means she is his consort." Terius explained.

Severus paled. Blaise and Theo swallowed hard and Charlie looked to Harry in confusion, who stared down at Hermione with a torn expression.

Calida perked up almost at once. "Really? No kidding?" She gave a happy little wriggle. "Oh I am so jealous." She gave another wriggle. "The hounds are so gorgeous." She hummed, completely oblivious to the others staring. "Dark, pale, thin and with those red, red eyes." She sighed, happily. "I'm told they have wicked hands…and feet. What I wouldn't do to meet one in person," she blinked, sitting up straight. "Er, not in my present condition of course, but, you know. Hound lore is so fascinating."

"No," Terius frowned. "Actually, I don't. Care to share?"

Calida shrugged. "Well, it's more like lore than anything else, but, it's this kind of seal?" She held up the book, turned to the page that Terius had been studying. It bore the exact same image as Hermione had branded onto her stomach. Terius gave a careful nod. "Well, the story goes something to the effect of Death and the first hound meeting up out of nowhere when Death sought a guard for its Labyrinth of life. The hound became a good friend that listened to all of Death's worries and thoughts without complaint. However, Death had only come to screen potential guards for the Labyrinth, so it had to leave. The hound begged to stay with Death, who refused because it could not gift something of importance as binding gift to a mere hound, so the hound said "bind me
with a length of rope 'round my neck, I need no other collar nor bribe, so as long as I may walk by your side.' So Death did and the hound guarded the labyrinth. After a month passed and there were no problems, Death decided the hound deserved a reward and so named it a pet." Calida paused. "To thank Death for its kindness, the hound sought the most beautiful flower in the realm and brought it to the heart of the labyrinth as a gift, where Death would appear to visit every now and again. Death was pleased with the flower and allowed the hound to come on walks to the underground and made it an official companion." She finished with a shrug. "It's common folklore that they say that if you find yourself in Death's labyrinth and you search for the center, if you touch the flower before you are caught, then your Death will be painless. If you have a strong enough will to live, then by the hound's grace, you'll return to life."

"What kind of flower was it? Blaise wanted to know.

Calida shrugged. "It doesn't say. Depends on which hound tells the story, every flour is the crest for a noble house. The rope braid around the Labyrinth mark is a symbol that it is a genuine hound and not a Reaper, the flower will tell you what house. As Terius said, the flower being a rose, means that your little friend is a cosort from the noble house of Arythmoor. The Red Rose of Arythmoor, to be politically correct."

"Is that what they teach you in school these days?" Terius countered, dryly.

Calida stuck her tongue out in response. "Mmm! I'm a Carrier. I talk to other Carriers. We like to talk and therefore we talk about everything."

"Gossip?"

"Talk!"

"Even hellhounds?"

"They help us guard the city and they live here, for goodness sakes!" She threw back. "Really! They've never caused any issues for us and as far as I know, I'd rather have hellhounds on my side any day than those horrible bird things, Torvaks." She shuddered. "Speaking of which, they say one of the head clans of the Torvak is waking again. Sounds like a bad omen."

That, Harry silently agreed with.

"Take them directly to the City Hall and have them registered!" Terius admonished. "Remember that your wings are more sensitive and be careful in the crowds. Stick to the walkways and-" This was directed to Charlie. "And Harry, remember to-"

"I know," Theo said, patiently. "We know." He corrected. "And I thank you for your help and advice to now, but I do know how to go about-"

"He's fretting." Calida said, cheerfully. She popped 'round Terius' side with her usual grin. "Just let him whine it out, in fact, don't, I'll listen for you and you can just go along. Have fun! Ooh—and make sure you take a good look at your healer. I want to know if they're as cute as mine!" She ducked the half-hearted slap that Terius aimed for her head.

Theo shook his head as he started down the hallway and to the transportation room. Charlie kept close behind Harry, who hovered at Theo's right as the trio made their way down to the designated room.

"I thought Draco only had Severus and Terius." Harry ventured, after a moment. He cast a curious
look at the dozen doors ahead of them as they neared the end of the hall. "Is this…?"

"It’s a shared complex." Theo explained. "Terius comes from a large family, five sisters, seven brothers. They all have their own floor, this entire building belongs to them." He came to a halt in front of the door marked "TR" for transportation room. They entered. It was a pure white room, with no distracting colors, items or images, just pure white everywhere, the door itself, seeming to fade away as it closed behind them.

Theo drew in a careful breath and took quick, visual stock of the lack of detail. That was important. This would be the first time he'd be transporting any of his mates on his own and not just one, but two. He silently pushed away the tiny nigglng of doubt in the back of his head. There was an easy solution to this. He took it. "Trust me?" He extended his hands, one to each mate. There was a hint of steel and his voice was dead serious.

A moment of silence hung in the air.

There was suddenly clarity in the pairs of green and blue eyes as Harry took one hand and Charlie took the other.

They 'ported out to the call of "Temptrificus Portgas, Nevarah, City Hall!"
Off To See The Healers

NEVARAH : INSIDE THE CITY : TUESDAY AFTERNOON

"That took longer than I expected." Theo frowned, checking his pocketwatch, before tucking it back in his robes. He cast the customary glance around himself, one to see where Harry was and the next to see where Charlie hovered. The fire dragel was no more comfortable than Theo had felt at first, shying away faintly from others as they made their way through the crowded walkways of Nevarah. Theo reasoned it had to do more with his sensitive wings out than any real fear, as Charlie seemed to take an inordinate amount of caution in keeping his wings as carefully folded as he could and out of the way.

They had yet to fade into the tattooed marks that would afford him some semblance of privacy and modesty. Theo had to admit that Charlie was definitely quite good-looking and he had growled a few times from a few wide-eyed stares. Charlie's neck was bared for all to see—Theo had thought of that when he'd transfigured the shirt his beta was wearing—but the visible site of his mating marks hadn't deterred some folk.

Harry seemed to have picked up on Charlie's discomfort as he bridged the gap between the redhead and Theo, often with occasional brushes against their hand and a smile or two in their direction, enough to keep them properly distracted. Theo noted, pleased, that Charlie kept a watchful eye on Harry, able to scowl away a few possible interruptions on his own.

Nevarah was bustling and alive, with people, dragels and creatures of all kinds, colors and age bustling back and forth. It was comforting, in a way, Theo mused. He had spent a handful of years here, enough for the wariness to fade within the first few hours out and about. There were plenty of regulars and plenty of visitors, the differences obvious in the various scents wafting through the air and the different dialects floating by his ears. He had seen a few familiar faces, but as said faces hadn't seen him, Theo had opted to keep his anonymity in the crowd and deliberately led his mates elsewhere.

They bypassed a bustling outdoor marketplace, that immediately attracted both Harry and Charlie, Theo was forced to coax them away with promises that they might return the next day or sometime during the week. He made a mental note to himself then, to keep track of the time. Four days in Nevarah was equal to a single day in the outside realm, that would afford them some time. It was one way he'd managed to spend more time training his Dragel side before venturing back to the wizarding world and enrolling in Hogwarts. Time well spent, he mused to himself, checking again to be sure that his mates were keeping up.

Harry seemed amazed by the buildings and the bustlings, his steps sometimes slow and shuffling as his neck craned back and he peered up into the sky, squinting through his classes and every so often, he stepped a little closer to Theo and Charlie, as some of the busier folk brushed past.

He'd kept his glasses on for appearances—back in the Wizarding World and Theo was faintly irritated, wondering when he'd take them off and get rid of them. He obviously didn't need them and it didn't take a genius to figure out that they were an annoyance. With a sigh, Theo reached over and plucked them off, banishing them with a discreet wave of his wand up his sleeve. At the rate things were going, Harry could accidentally poke himself in the eye—no thanks to a wandering elbow or rushing passerby.

"Wha-hey!" Harry protested, temporarily disoriented, but steadied by a timely hand from Charlie and the softest brush of his mate's wing. "Theo!" He threw a dirty look towards said mate, but it
disappeared almost as quickly as it had come when something glittering in the distance caught his attention.

Theo perked a brow in answer and tapped Harry's pert nose with one slender finger. "Give it a moment and they'll adjust." He said, simply. "What are you looking at?"

"But-" Harry bumped the finger lightly in response, his bright green eyes flickering away at something else. "That thing over there," he mumbled, his mind already off puzzling on the new distraction.

"You can see?" Charlie stared down at him in surprise. He grinned, an expression that seemed to take over his whole face, before he suddenly wrinkled his nose at a new scent passing by.

It was a look Theo had quickly learned to pick up from both of them. "What is it this time?" He inquired, patiently. "Scent or sight?"

"Scent…" Charlie murmured, he wrinkled his nose with a slight grimace.

"It's kind of sweet and…syrupy?" Harry wrinkled his nose in similar fashion, immediately picking up Charlie's puzzle. "Theo?"

"Where?" Theo leaned to the side, following his beta's line of sight and taking a good whiff. He was silent for a second and then shrugged. "That would be the Vampires." He said, calmly. The green-eyed beauty gave a sudden start as if he'd been electrified.

"Vampire?" Harry said, very quietly. "There's Vampires here?"

"And Weres, Shifters, Merfolk, Hellhounds and more." Theo perked a brow. "This is Nevarah, this is very little discrimination here. We do not hold anything against other kind, as long as they are abiding by our rules here, they are welcome to reside within city walls, courtesy of their circle."

"Werewolves?" Harry asked, quietly. He craned his neck, breathing quickening to short pants as if searching for something.

"Harry?"

"Werewolves." The smaller green-eyed teen had grown rather still. "That's what that other scent is, right? The darker one? The one that smells like you."

"Me?" Theo blinked.

"Earth." Harry corrected.

"Oh." Theo took another deep breath. "It is, actually." Theo's brows knitted together. "How did you know?"

"They smell…familiar."

"Familiar how?" Charlie wrinkled his nose again, working to separate the scents as they paused on the edge of the lighted sidewalk.

"Moony." Harry whispered, faintly, his eyes faraway in remembrance. I miss you…

"I hope we didn't run out of time." Theo checked his pocketwatch again, only to have it taken from his worrying hands by Charlie and tucked into the front pocket of Harry's wizarding robes. He
sighed, but didn't protest. His hands did tend to show up his nerves when he was more frazzled than he cared to be and while he was trying his best, it was hard not to worry about Harry. He was looking forward to this Healer's appointment almost as much as his partially wound-up mates.

They all wanted answers and hoped to find at least several.

"Is it that bad?" Harry looked at him, worriedly. "I mean, we could always come back tomorrow, right?"

Theo half-smiled. "We can." He admitted, letting Harry slip a reassuring hand into his as they continued at a rather brisk pace, all sight-seeing brought to an abrupt halt. "But I would really rather not."

"I can manage another night." Charlie said, hesitantly. His eyes said otherwise, but he was making an effort anyway. His wings fluttered faintly, vibrating as if they'd like to stretch out, but didn't dare.

Harry flashed him a grin. "I'm sure we'll make it on time…"

"I didn't think registering you two would take so long." Theo muttered, frowning. "Then again, it is Hunting Season."

"Is it really such a big deal?" Harry asked.

The young alpha thought for a moment, before he shrugged. "It depends. I have you two, it no longer seems quite as pressing as it once was."

"Pressing how?"

"Can't you feel it?" Theo countered. "All the magic, the power, the allure of it? Rather difficult to resist when it is calling out to you, teasing, taunting and mocking almost. It is a very important time for many of us."

At that, the other two fell silent.

"Wouldn't it have been easier to 'port in?" Charlie inquired, as they strolled up the reception desk in the large health clinic. Theo hadn't wanted to visit the hospitals, explaining that while they were perfectly acceptable, the smaller health clinics specialized in specific maladies or creatures, in their case, rituals and wizard-raised individuals

"Couldn't." Theo said, simply, drawing out the documents he'd been to sign along with his identification card. He held out his hand to Harry and Charlie, waiting for them to hand over theirs as well. "Transportation portals are tricky. They are not as simple as apparition, it requires a little something more and a definite affinity with a specific power. I have never been here and thus, like apparition, I need a point or specific place to hold in my mind, before I throw out a name and place. If I had the address of their transportation room, that is another story."

"Like a Floo?" Harry thought, digging the new identification card out of his robes and handing it over, as Charlie did the same.

"Something like that." Theo shrugged. "That is why there is always an advantage to knowing a person's full name, you can 'port directly to their side—within reason—and you must always know what you are getting yourself into." He sorted the papers and cards, then looked up as they approached.
A blonde woman with pink lipstick stared across the counter at them and then over their heads. "We're closed for today." She said, at last, picking up a metal bottle from beneath the counter and taking a rather unladylike swig. "Try again tomorrow." She pushed the papers back over the counter and turned away.

Theo looked from her and then behind them to the revolving doors where they had just entered. He was in time to see the lightened sign over the door flicker from "open" to "closed." He frowned, faintly. "It would seem as if we made it in time." He pushed the papers back. "This is important."

The woman stared at him for a moment, then sighed. "It's always important." She huffed. "And like I said, we're closed. Nothing we can do about it. See you tomorrow."

Theo's golden eyes flickered faintly and he stood taller. "Surely there is something you can do."

"Surely there isn't." The woman countered, her pale blue eyes narrowed faintly. "Now look here, Mr…" She glanced down at the papers for his name.

"Gorgens." Theo said calmly, quietly, the faintest glint in his golden eyes. "Mr. Theodore Gorgens."


"Oretta prefers that I leave her name out of things," Theo returned, smoothly. "Surely there is a way to fit us in today? It is most urgent." He gestured towards Charlie who stood behind him and Harry, with his wings partially flared."

"Gorgens?" She repeated.

"Lady Ilsa Gorgens, if you would be so kind?" Theo's strained smile said more than he might have.

The woman shuffled some papers behind the counter before snatching up the proffered stack and turning away to enter the information in the magically updating ledgers. "We really are closed." She growled, flipping through the pages, signing and stamping them furiously, with more force than needed. "In case you have forgotten, we are in the middle of the hunt and tonight is the First Walking."

"Then perhaps if your fingers were moving as fast as your mouth," Theo suggested, helpfully.

The answer was a sudden, wordless snarl before a cool, composed voice halted the interaction. "Ah, more patients?" The voice came from a white-haired woman in a standard dress uniform of white and burgundy, with a golden insignia emblazoned on the upper left of her sleeves. "I had thought I'd sent for the last escort a few minutes ago."

"Just a few stragglers trying to bribe their way in." The blonde woman bit off, her pink lips still curled in a half-snarl. "Shall I throw them out?"

"Now, Mimei, that is rather rude of you. We welcome all of our patients, no matter what the ailment or the time." The older woman's smile was bright and cheerful, though her eyes held a hint of warning. She had just come through the glass doors to the right of the reception desk, with words 'restricted' painted across the front and a bright blinking light from the card reader at the side of the doors. "Must I report your behavior to your circle's Captain Garrow?" It was said with a long-suffering sigh. "I thought you were beginning to fit in quite well, I suppose I was mistaken."

The blonde Mimei blanched, her entire body becoming rigid, her eyes flashing with suppressed fire. "It is quite fine, Matron Olivia." She lifted her chin. 
"Very well then. I am sure that Healer Quinnten can fit them in his busy schedule, do add it to their card." Matron Olivia smiled pleasantly. "I shall send Dahlia to come and escort them in, do wait a moment." With a slight dip of her head, the elderly woman turned and disappeared down the hall she had previously come.

Mimei's angry face grew somewhat pale as she touched her wand to the stack of papers and printed out small, green appointment cards. "You cruel and devious woman." She said, coldly. "As least I would've told them that there was no one to see them rather than foisting them upon some foolish, prodigy without a half-pence's weight of a brain or talent!" With a huff, she threw three green cards on the counter and stalked out from behind the desk and towards the front doors. "A guard will come for you." She threw over her shoulder. "Do as they say and do keep an eye out."

Charlie bristled faintly as she passed behind them, but he stilled at Harry's hand in his and a warning glance from Theo. The redhead didn't miss the way the Slytherin's golden gaze followed her to the front doors and then beyond as she turned the locks and all but stormed out of the clinic.

"Excuse me, we're closed." A cheerful voice cut through to the pensive trio hovering in front of the glass doors as they slid open. 

Harry turned to see who was speaking this time and he was pleasantly surprised to find himself staring back into warm brown, cat-eyes and a young woman no taller than himself. She was dressed somewhat oddly, in a long, silken robe, loosely tied about the waist, showing off lovely tanned skin beneath. Her hair, a thick braid of black was flung carelessly over one shoulder and one hand hovered to the right of her waist as if waiting for something. The main reason that drew Harry's attention was the scaled, pointed ridge along her forehead and neck, just like Ilsa's had been and the very obvious scar stretching from the tip of her left eyebrow, down the curve of her cheek and disappearing along her shoulder, hidden by the robe.

Fighter. Harry's brain supplied. Gheyo. His Dragel added. Very experienced too to have survived such a wound and accept a scar...

The eyes seemed to light with humor as she matched Harry's stare and her skin seemed to ripple. "Good afternoon to you all. I don't mean to be rude, but we really are closed…?" Her voice trailed off as Theo held up the three appointment cards. The girl's brow furrowed into a knot of confusion and worry, before she took the cards and swiped them one at a time through the reader. "I am sorry, I did not think that Quinn was honestly seeing anyone else today, he should have canceled, he's dead on his feet right now." She sighed. "Ach, where are my manners? Do call me Dahlia, I answer to it faster than anything else. Please follow and stay close behind. It is the end of the day and I fear most of us are on our last threads of sanity."

Dhalia led them through the doors and down shiny white walls. Everything screamed of being clean, sterile and precise, a cold impersonal touch that Harry wasn't quite sure he liked. But he had spent enough time under Madam Pomfrey's care to know a few things about healing and hospital wards. If the impressive white everywhere was anything to go by, then perhaps, the healers here would know what they were doing. If anything, at least they took their healing seriously.

The earlier outburst from the receptionist, Mimei, made him scowl as he wondered just what kind of healer he'd been assigned to see and what exactly had Theo so worried. While he hadn't minded going out with his mates and being in the thick of Dragel society—which reminded him more of an extremely busy muggle London—Charlie had been wary and Theo'd been on edge. Harry had silently counted himself as the rational one in spite of all his rather obvious shortcomings. He sighed.
Dahlia had led them into a large waiting lounge, with colored corded ropes partitioning out various walkways that led to one of eight doors on the far end of the wall. There were couches and tables and chairs set along the two side walls and several young men and women in various armored wear, hovering near their respective 'lines' as the last few patients were sent through.

Harry stared.

The patients were obvious in terms that he could scent a vampire or two and at least one Were creature and they were huddled together in their respective circles looking quite exhausted and miserable.

The fighters were easy enough to single out as they all wore the same dark burgundy robe as Dahlia had, bearing the gold crested insignia on the left shoulder. They all seemed on edged and Harry could easily understand the earlier remark of the final threads of sanity. He could feel himself joining their ranks as prickles of unease danced up and down his shoulders.

He wondered why it was arranged that way and it was enough to make his head spin as he tried to figure it out and failed, before turning to Theo, who was now rubbing his forehead a little harder than necessary, the faintest hint of a grimace on his face.

"Theo?"

"Just a headache." Theo half-smiled, his look softening, when Harry tipped his head towards the sword-equipped soldiers scattered throughout the room in silent question. He rubbed his neck and wrists a moment later, the agitated look remaining, even as he answered the silent question. "They are fighters, Gheyos—sometimes mates can be a little too protective when they are in need of a healer, so there are unrelated fighters who help to keep the more…boisterous ones at bay. A healer has little to no fighting prowess or experience, their spells and gifts are solely to heal, the Royal Council assigns a specific fighter to each healer or healer team, so ensure that there are no unnecessary fights or bloodshed."

"Isn't that a little paranoid?" Charlie eyed one of the young men, a Dragel larger than himself, with rich black, glittering scales and flecks of red along the spines. His sword was unsheathed and he was currently scraping his clawed hands along the ebony-hued surface, a strange glint gleaming in his eyes.

"Oi, Wikhn, quit scaring people." Dahlia scowled. "If you want to show off your new sword, do it in the rings or cages. I don't need to have things to worry about right now."

The black Dragel in question, Wikhn, merely perked a brow then rose and calmly tucked the sword back into its ornate sheath. "Terribly sorry, Lady Dahlia." His voice was somewhat mocking. "I did not mean to make you uncomfortable."

"Yeah you did, you big brute." The girl retorted, but her friendly demeanor remained as she strolled up to the corded off passage, third from the left. "I'll check to see if Quinn's last one is out, if they are, then just follow through when I yell, m'kay?" Dahlia trotted off and the trio remained where she left them.

Several minutes later, shouts and scuffles announced a disturbance behind one of the doors. Harry was surprised to see Wikhn leap to his feet, his eyes losing the odd light and his expression turning grim as he strode towards one of the doors behind the roped off sections.

Silence reigned.
A moment later, the door he'd entered burst open and he backed out, dragging two taller figures by the collars. He pulled them away from the door and laid them, carefully on the ground, before returning to the room and exiting again, this time with two more figures. He laid them out on the ground beside them and then gave a nod to the door.

A pretty little blonde gave a teary smile in return and turned back to face a white-and-burgundy clad healer, once more offering her a vial of potion. Wikhn sighed, settling down on the floor, his arm propped up on his knee and his chin resting in his hand. "You'd think they'd learn." He grumbled, turning away from the sight.

Harry felt his stomach pale and clench at the sight of the four figures lifeless and spread out for all to see.

"They're alive, Harry. Shh." Theo soothed, his own issues forgotten as he wrapped an arm around Harry and drew him close. Charlie shuffled over to share the impromptu half-embrace.

"W-what'd they do?"

"Something they shouldn't, I'd expect." Theo murmured. "Relax."

Harry felt himself shiver in response, a weary sigh tugging from his lips. Why couldn't the day be over already?

When Dahlia yelled a few minutes later, Harry had never been so relieved to have his feet working without his conscious consent. He hurried towards what had to be the examination room, glad to leave the tension-filled atmosphere of the waiting lounge behind.

"Anything happen?" Dahlia ushered him into the room and towards the examination table, a foam-green padded table with a stretch of clean paper drawn over the surface to ensure sterility. Her soft brow eyes narrowed faintly, before she waved in Theo and Charlie, before sticking her head out the door. She muttered and grumbled a few things beneath her breath before she straightened. "Quinn will be in just now. I'll be back in a minute, don't bother about Wikhn, it really isn't so bad in here, but honestly that idiot is just begging for his head on a platter! I've told him about knocking heads around." She disappeared through the doorway and then returned a quick moment later—to lock the door behind her—with a wink. "Holler if you need me." This was directed to Harry. "No matter what it is. Name's Dahlia, remember it, love." The door clicked shut behind her.

Harry blinked.

Charlie shrugged.

Theo almost smiled. "They are very serious." He explained, at last. "If you wish to have your examinations in private or to undergo a procedure I do not fully agree with—a partial disagreement—then you may ask to have me formally and physically removed from the examination room. If I resist or protest, your wishes will be enforced. The same is true for me, but the protection is mostly for those beneath an alpha's rank."

"So the girl…?" Harry trailed off, remembering the teary smile. She'd smiled at Wikhn, even as her four mates had been stretched out on the ground and guarded by a scowling fellow in black, she'd been smiling and grateful. He shuddered this time. He really didn't understand this place.

Harry took note of the examination room, rather large compared to what he knew of Madam Pomfrey and St. Mungo's, but he guessed the excessive size was due to being Dragel friendly. There was room for him to comfortably stretch his wings and probably to do backflips as well if he
wanted to.

A sudden, warm fuzzy feeling rippled over him. He blinked in surprise, trying and failing to place what exactly it was. Like a wave of warmth, it swirled around him, caressing, touching and soothing, before settling down, stretching over the entire room and pushing out gentle waves of relaxation and calmness.

"Did you-?” Harry heard himself say.

Theo's tense shoulders relaxed a fraction of a section and he gave the faintest tilt of his head in answer. Charlie's eyebrows arched clear into his hairline as he looked around him, perhaps expecting to see the actual thing that had suddenly filtered into the room and brightened them all up.

Harry couldn't deny that it felt quite wonderful and very welcomed. It was almost like eating chocolate from Remus, it brightened and strengthened him, reminding that there was still good, life, love and happiness somewhere in the world. It soothed his raw, stressed nerves and Harry silently basked in it as long as he dared.

Charlie twitched beside him and Harry's green eyes flickered to him. They hadn't had much time together at all, as a trio. There were tiny little nuances and quirks he'd discovered today as they'd gone to get themselves registered at the Nevarah City Hall and subtle little exchanges between the redhead and brunet, when he didn't really expect it. Theo had automatically included Charlie in his short 'bouts of 'smothering' as Harry decided to call it.

He was glad, Harry realized, to see that they were at least getting along, as far as not fighting—verbally or physically—and Theo had been considerate in his own way, making sure they were both comfortable and rested throughout the busy day—especially for Charlie's extended wings. Now as they waited, Theo's hands reached towards one rich navy-hued wing and gently ran his fingers over the appendage in soft, soothing strokes.

Charlie visibly trembled, his eyelids fluttering shut, enjoying the attentions.

Harry smiled, softly.

The warm, comforting feeling grew stronger and thicker suddenly.

A door on the opposite room banged open and a young fellow bustled in, wearing an outfit of tunic and breeches, bearing the same insignia as Matron Olivia had. His arms were laden with potion vials, paper-wrapped bundles and a silver lunch tin swinging from one pinky finger. He froze as he caught sight of the trio and then blinked, comically, before backing towards the very door he'd just closed and raised a finger, pressing it to his lips to pantomime silence.

For a long moment, they all stared at each other.

The curly-headed blond eyed them for a good moment, then started forward, his head tilted back, listening carefully until a muffled voice came from the other side of the door. The blond immediately threw his weight back to keep the door shut, a mischievous smile playing about his lips. The voice whined and shouted, then stilled after a moment.

Cautiously, he started forward again and then sent his armful down on one of the broad countertops lining the walls. He fished inside his tunic pocket and drew out a green card then tapped it lightly and cocked his head.
"Ah, we're here to see Healer Quinnten." Theo held up his card as Charlie and Harry did the same.

The blond relaxed almost at once, his teal-colored eyes still alight with merriment as he picked up a paper wrapped bundle and chucked it towards the door.

His timing was impeccable, as the door opened and the bundle hit a young man square in the face.

"Quinn!" The fuming young man spat strands of dark-green dyed hair out of his mouth, his fiery brown eyes flashing. "What in Arielle's name was that for?"

Quinn turned him with a rather mild expression on his face and shrugged.

"W-what?" The green-haired teen sputtered helplessly for a moment and then threw up his hands. "Because you felt like it? Because you bloody felt like-oh why do I bother?" He looked to the ceiling as he said this, then bent down and picked up the paper wrapped bundle. "And would you please quit pawning your dinner off on me? Mum can tell when I'm not eating hers." He sniffed the bundle and brightened. "Ooh, that's my favorite. Thanks. Wait, what do you mean Emily put you up to it? I apologized to her—twice! It was an accident, I wasn't flirting, I was-" He blushed a bright, bold red. "Yes I meant it! I wouldn't have repeated it if I didn't mean it-!" His potential tirade was called off when Quinn's tapping fingers along the counter drew his attention, as well as the head jerk towards the near silent trio.

His eyes grew large and wide, before he offered a quick little bow from the waist, his eyes focused on them. "Good afternoon, I am Medic Kyle, Healer Quinn's assistant. That is Healer Quinn, he is not as touched in the head as he may appear. My apologizes on both of our sides for that rather… unprofessional display." He chucked what appeared to be a wrapped sandwich, towards Quinn and strode forward, hand extended. "May I see your appointment cards?"

Quinn caught the sandwich and set it down on the counter as he went about organizing the potions he'd brought over. Kyle took the cards and flipped through them with a half-frown. "Did Matron Olivia sign these to you personally?" He inquired, brown eyes still flashing, this time a tad darker than before.

"Is something wrong?" Harry spoke up, reading the tension in the room the only way that he could. He didn't like it and he really didn't want to deal with any kind of weirdness now.

Kyle's gaze flickered to him and his brow furrowed even more. "No, not really. Just that we didn't have any more patients scheduled today, because Quinn is magically exhausted. I do hope you're not all here for a complete scan." He nibbled on his lower lip. "I am qualified to see to it, but I am not quite as thorough as Quinn and it would certainly be worth a return trip to have his expertise. He will recover overnight, nothing a bit of sleep can't fix. There's been a recent surge for vaccines and intra-creature ah, well, I am sure you do not need to hear of that, but there are wizards living among us and they are not quite as immune as the rest of us." He sighed. "On second thought, is this your first visit to a Dragel Healer? You look as if I'm going to eat you alive."

There was no answer. Theo sighed. "I have been before, but it was years ago. These two have not, we have recently come from City Hall and would have arrived sooner, but it is quite busy out there."

"Mm, I know." Kyle gave a rueful smile. "That's quite alright, I'll do what I can for today, if you don't mind that is." He tapped the cards lightly. "Quinn?"

There was no answer from the blond who had yet to stop with his organizing the potions along the wall rack.
"Hmm. Okay." Kyle motioned towards the examination bed. "Who wants to be first?"

Harry elbowed Charlie, even as the redhead spoke, saying "Harry."

Kyle gave a half-smile and a wise shake of his head. "That never works you know." He said cheerfully. "How about you with the wings then, Sir?" He drew near, fiddling with a knob on the control panel near the examination bed. The lights in the room brightened and dimmed according to his tinkering. "Are you magic-sensitive? Any phobias, sensitivities, allergies or declarations I should know?"

"Declarations?" The redhead moved forward and hefted himself up onto the exam bed. His wings twitched and quivered, now that they were no longer subject to Theo's soothing touches. "My name is Charlie."

"Your rank?" Kyle wandlessly summoned a pad of parchment and a quill, his fingers hovering. "Charlie," he added, quickly.

"Beta." Theo answered, quietly.

Kyle's gaze immediately snapped to him. "And you must be the…?"

"Alpha." Harry interjected, when it didn't seem like Theo was about to answer. "That makes me the Sub." He finished, wearily.

"Wonderful." Kyle flashed a brief smile, his attention returning to Charlie. "Declarations are if your Alpha has you under restriction for any reason or if there are any particular movements, gestures, phrases or nuances we, as your medical providers, should be aware of." He raised an eyebrow expectantly. "Are there?"

Theo's golden gaze narrowed. "I would prefer if you did not keep a running conversation of pointless-"

Quinn turned around from his station and immediately went to Kyle's side, slapping a hand over the green-haired Dragel's mouth. His own teal eyes flashed meaningfully for a moment and then he turned Kyle around and gave him a push towards a room corner bearing a single, swivel stool.

There was a heavy sigh as the assistant went. "Quinn, you don't have to do this. It's been a long day. I know you're tired. I can actually conduct a basic-" Kyle stopped speaking. A moment later, he muttered something to which Quinn's eyes narrowed and the Healer flicked his fingers over his shoulder.

Harry could've sworn he'd thrown a stinging hex at the yelp and half-run that the assistant gave as he shuffled to a corner of the room and took a seat on the lone stool there, his back facing the room and its occupants. It almost made him laugh—almost.

Quinn's gaze flickered from Theo to Charlie and then he held out his hands showing they were empty and then twisted to wash his hands in the handsink just a few feet away. He then pulled on a pair of latex gloves and waited, finally throwing a glance over his shoulder to what appeared to be a slightly sulking Kyle.

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The green-head sighed. "This is Healer Quinn. Please excuse my idiotic assist—QUINN!"

The blond didn't flinch or blink before Kyle finally spun the stool around, a glower fixed on his face and a slender wand in his hand. "Again," he began, through slightly gritted teeth. "Do excuse our unprofessionalism. Quinn is…mute. He does not speak." The brown eyes watched carefully as
he spoke. "We share a mental connection, so I am his voice at all times. I will be sitting over here," he gestured to himself. "And I will be speaking exactly what Quinn says, within reason." There was a warning note in his voice, but this was directed to the blond who finally gave an apologetic look, to which the green-head grudgingly nodded. "If you have any questions, now would be a great time to speak your mind." With that, Kyle swiveled around on the stool and waited.

There was a moment of silence and then Kyle's voice sounded, but instead of coming from the corner, it seemed to be coming from right over Quinn's shoulder.

Harry looked from Healer to Assistant, but couldn't see the wand movement nor hear the spell that had been cast for it. He frowned inwardly, taking another glance at Theo who was now looking rather pale.

"Shirt off, please. Are you allergic to latex?"

Charlie shook his head, beginning to undo the buttons on his shirt. "Not that I know of."

"Good. Blink twice, please."

Charlie managed that, surprised to find his eyes drawn to the suddenly fiery gaze of the Healer, whose teal orbs seemed fathomless for several brief seconds.

"Good. Mouth open?"

The strange stare was broken as the next command was given and Charlie obediently held his mouth open as Quinn's gloved fingers darted quickly inside. He coaxed Charlie's fangs to the surface and testing them, carefully before giving an approving nod and switching his attention to the extended wings.

"Very good. Now, your wings were forced out and your spines have been stretched twice, if once, correct?" Without waiting for an answer, Quinn moved around him, brisk and efficient as he circled the taller Dragel once, before drawing something from the folds of his innertunic, a medium-sized black cross pendant on a silver chain. He pointed it at Charlie and a moment later, a thin, golden light shot from the top, a visible scan.

The quill and pad that Kyle had abandoned on the counter, hovered to life and began frantically scribbling away as Quinn waved the pendant around, taking several different diagnostics and readings. Charlie laughed out loud at one that apparently tickled and shivered at another, that left him sneezing twice.

Quinn silently handed him a tissue, the teal eyes narrowing faintly as he felt along each webbed space, probing, squeezing and stroking with careful, impersonal fingers. His expression remained neutral, even when he procured a spray bottle from the counter and poured something inside of it, mixing it with water and turning to Kyle, who threw a warming charm over his shoulder, to the bottle.

Satisfied, Quinn began to spray the wings and gently tug on each spine, stretching and pulling it into a more natural position until the broad wings were well beyond the length of the examination table.

"This is a muscle relaxant spray," Kyle began. "I take it there was something that disturbed you on a subconscious level to leave such a reaction?"

Charlie rolled his shoulders backwards, casting a glance to Theo who was leaning against the wall near the doorjamb, his golden eyes watchful. "An unexpected situation." He said, smoothly.
"I see."

Quinn continued until the bottle was empty. As the blond searched for something in one of the cabinets, Kyle turned the stool around to cast a drying charm and another warming charm, waiting until his partner straightened up and returned to Charlie's side a bottle of thick oil in hand. Quinn poured a generous handful in one palm, giving the bottle to Charlie to hold as he circled 'round behind the redhead and began to let it dribble down his back. He worked the muscles carefully and then coaxed the wings to fold back.

Moving around to the front, Quinn summoned a silver knife from the counter and beckoned to Theo. The golden-eyed Dragel inched forward, wearily, but bared his wrist and held it out. Quinn, touched the flat of the knife to the pale skin and a cleansing tingle ran through Theo, before the Healer turned the flat of the blade to the side and pressed down, drawing a thin line of crimson.

Harry bristled.

"Nothing to worry about." Kyle's quick voice came from his corner, poised to turn at a moment's notice. "Quinn?"

No answer, of course, but Kyle relaxed as the Healer continued on as if nothing was wrong.

Quinn calmly took the bloodied blade and began to paint several runes along Charlie's exposed chest. The runes glowed a bright, fierce green before they faded into the skin and when he'd completed the last one, the wings melted back into Charlie's tanned skin.

The Dragon tamer gave a deep sigh of relief a yawn escaping as he still held the large bottle of warmed oil. He was feeling better than he had since the night with Harry. His body seemed to hum with contentment as he felt his magic no longer stressed and stretched out around him, but comfortably close and wrapped around his body.

Theo tended to his cut wrist with a few swipes of his tongue, as his body healed from the intrusion within seconds.

Harry looked between them worriedly and Charlie smiled, warmly, for them both. "That was heavenly," he announced, rolling his shoulders forward and back with pleasure. He hadn't realized how much that simple act that been weighted by his wings. "Thank you. I didn't realize that-"

"A common enough mistake that most new Dragels make."

Quinn sniffed.

"In the future, do not allow your wings to remain out and exposed when they are so weak. They require use to strengthen them and practice to be able to actually use them. Keep the massage oil. Ask your mates to help you with your wings until you can invoke and entreat them to retract." Kyle said. "It is a nourishing oil with healing herbs and will lessen any particular discomfort from having them in or out. I would suggest using it warmed and to be sure that to cover every inch of your wings, so the scales are encouraged to grow and become flexible as they should. The information from your full scan will be made available tomorrow as our records office is closed for today. Seeing as you do not have any further pressing ailments, I will be issuing you an appointment card for tomorrow. You currently have dark residue within you and I can see evidence of a recent ritual, which worries me. I request that you spend the evening as relaxed as possible and no strenuous activities." Kyle paused. "Your age suggests experience, but your wings speak that you are barely within your inheritance, may I inquire as to why?"
"You may." Charlie picked up his shirt and began to thread his arms through them, with a pleased smile when he realized that the shirt no longer bore the necessary holes for his wings, but had closed up to a normal style. "But as I don't quite have an answer, I can't really say. I just came into this…a day ago, I believe. It was a bit of a shock."

"A day?" There was surprise and a hint of shock in Kyle's voice. "How did this come about?"

"Not sure about that either," Charlie said, lightly. "But I'm sure there's a few answers that I can ask for now that I can think clearly again."

"…I see. Very well. Please step down. Next?"

Quinn waved Charlie down from the bed and beckoned to Theo as he stripped of his gloves and disposed of them, donning a clean pair. Kyle waved his wand over his shoulder again and the paper on the bed was ripped away and replaced by a new sheet.

Theo shook his head, a sudden flash of stubbornness in his eyes. "Harry's next."

Quinn perked a brow, his lips pursing into a frown. He repeated the gesture again.

"I have just a headache and I would rather that you saw to Harry first."

Kyle huffed in his corner. "Quinn, you can't argue with the-Ow. Hey! Do not take your frustrations out on—Quinn?" Kyle swiveled around, his eyes narrowing as Quinn summoned a vial from the shelves where he'd been organizing it earlier. He broke the seal and then raised one gloved finger to his mouth, where he tugged the glove off with his teeth and pricked it with one fang. Two single drops of blood were added before the Healer handed the vial to Theo and waited, arms crossed over his chest.

Theo met his gaze squarely as he accepted the vial and swallowed the potion with a grimace.

"Harry?" Kyle repeated the name, having turned back to face his corner, his wand tapping idly on his knee as Quinn moved around, quiet and efficient in his own way.

A more alert Theo was settled on a chair beside the door, his eyes still watchful and piercing as they tracked the Healer's every move. Charlie sat next to Theo, his own blue eyes settled on Harry, mindful of the younger man's movements and the faint, cautious twitches of a muscle every now and again.

Both had been warned to keep their silence and their inclinations to a minimum and not to interfere whatsoever.

"Shirt off please." Came the standard request. "Are you magic-sensitive? Any phobias, sensitivities, allergies or declarations I should know?"

"Not that I know of." Harry answered. He fought the urge to flinch as Quinn's gloved fingers skittered lightly over his mating marks, both old and new. He didn't want anyone but his mates to touch them, to see them, even.

"I am only checking to be sure they have healed properly. I would not cause discomfort to you and your mates by directly touching or activating your marks."

Another ripple of soothing magical energy swirled through the room and Quinn offered the faintest of smiles as he caught Harry's chin and tapped his cheek lightly, a prompt for Harry to open his
mouth. His eyes gleamed as he studied the picture presented, then summoned a packet from the shelf and withdrew to tear it open and squeeze the contents out onto his gloved fingers.

"Open." Kyle intoned, a moment later.

Harry eyed the mystery gel, reluctantly opening his mouth. A cool, satisfying burst of mint and copper exploded in his mouth and he gave an unexpected trill of appreciation.

Kyle chuckled softly. "Your fangs are as sensitive as the rest of your teeth, do you brush regularly? I will give you a specific tooth gel to be rubbed into your gums twice a day. It will help to curb the sensitivity and repair some of the damage. Do not forget to use it, I will know if you have been skipping it. This is important, your dental health can directly correspond to specific physical attributes as well as mental blocks in your magic."

The gloved hands withdrew and Quinn stripped off the gloves, throwing them away and donning a new pair. He then tipped up Harry's head to look directly into those emerald eyes.


Harry found himself staring into the entrancing teal gaze a moment later, eyes a such a bright, blue-green, it almost hurt to look at them and yet he could not look away. For a moment, a tendril of fear sparked through him as he mentally scrambled to check and test what poor Occulumency shields he had, tensing for the mental probe that never came. If anything, the feelings of warmth, comfort and strength swirled a little thicker around him for several moments, before the air thinned again and Quinn broke the gaze himself, a sudden, shadowed flicker visible in those rich, bright teal eyes.

Harry swallowed hard.
"Your circle is fairly new?"

Quinn turned to the counter and drew out three different containers and a sheet of wax paper from a shelf below. He spread the paper on the countertop and then reached into the containers with a tiny scoop.

"Judging from your marks, the second one especially, you haven't even been together for a month, correct?"

Harry glared at him, but didn't answer. As far as he could tell, the Healer hadn't tried to pry into his mind, though what he was doing at the counter, didn't exactly leave Harry feeling any more relaxed. He watched as Quinn scooped out different colored powders from the containers, dumped it on the paper and began to stir them together.

"You do not have to answer any of the questions I am asking you, however, it would make this process faster and it would make my job easier."

"What are you doing?"

"Testing a theory. Wrist please," and here, Quinn returned to his side, the silver knife in hand again.

Harry hesitated. "What's it for?"

"Theory." Kyle repeated, obediently and apparently at Quinn's own repetition. "I am testing the strength of your blood."

"Why?"

"Why not?" The question was countered. "Shall I charm the knife painless?" At this, Quinn held up the knife and Kyle waved his wand over his shoulder.

A moment later, Harry extended his wrist and found himself staring in morbid fascination as the knife did, indeed, slice painlessly through his wrist, a line of blood welling up in its path. Quinn coated the blade in blood and then wiped his thumb firmly over the cut. A thin line of pink showed up, newly healed skin.

Harry felt his eyes widen in surprise as he stared at his newly healed wrist. He'd never even seen Theo do that and he knew his dominant had quite a bit of power at his disposal.

"Healer's trick." Came Kyle's explanation when Quinn saw the look on Harry's face. "Saves on bandages."

Taking the blood-covered knife, Quinn returned the counter where he coated it in the mixed powders and then placed it in a water-filled container. The liquid colored, mingling the ingredients together with the blood and resulting in a murky liquid and a clean knife. Quinn rinsed the knife in the sink and then clicked his tongue against his teeth to gain Kyle's attention.

Here, the assistant turned around on the stool and came over to help. Kyle filled the liquid in vials.
and sealed them, with a wave of his wand, replacing the containers in their original places, while Quinn went about labeling the samples.

"New circle?"

"...yes." Harry finally answered. "Does it matter?"

"No. But it helps me to narrow down the result a little quicker. Are you adjusting well?"

"Define 'well'," Harry retorted.

"Have they spent a realignment cycle with you? Have you had either one of them long enough to process an entire cycle?"

"N-no."

"Elaborate."

"What?"

"You stammered. There was a reason, you think so, but you're not sure. Elaborate."

Emerald eyes narrowed. Harry looked from Quinn to Kyle and then back to the teal-eyed Healer. Quinn elbowed Kyle and with a muffled sound of protest, the assistant retreated to his stool in the corner, facing the wall once more, his wand twirled in idle fingers.

"How long is your cycle?"

"A month."

"Ah, every three weeks?"

"Something like that."

"Who figured it for you?"

"What?"

"A submissive never calculates their cycle lengths, a trusted friend or their mentor usual does it for them. Who figured it for you?"

"...Terius."

"Terius who?" Kyle didn't miss a beat and Quinn continued with his light frown.

"Councilman Terius Snape." Harry filled in, deciding to go ahead and throw in the man's political title, it certainly couldn't hurt.

"Councilman Terius?" There was a hint of surprise in Kyle's voice. "Admirable...shut up, Quinn, it is. That and the little Alpha."

Harry bared his fangs at that, a mild hiss. Theo was not little!

Theo's golden eyes glittered with amusement, but he didn't do anything to counter that, seemingly pleased with Harry's reaction instead.
Quinn threw a glare over his shoulder in Kyle's direction—for good measure, it seemed.

"When is your next cycle expected?"

Harry blinked. He tried to count and then looked to Theo for help. His Alpha was quiet for a moment and then he held up two fingers, one crooked. "A week and a half?" Harry translated. Theo nodded.

"A week and a half? Interesting. Were your cycles restful?"

Harry snorted at that.

Quinn perked a brow, expectant.

"Care to share, please? The entire story, if you would."

"I didn't know when the first one came." He admitted. "It was after my birthday I slept and I didn't know and then a few weeks before school, the first week in school and then the last one…I found Theo."

"So roughly about four cycles. Hmm." There was a sound of consideration from Kyle's corner as Quinn tapped his own chin in thought. "You should have had some sort of elemental inclination by now, if you were so inclined. Is there anything you'd care to share? Any specific issues you wish to address?"

Harry nearly scoffed. No magic, for one. No sanity seemed to be a quick second. Theo gave him a look from his corner on the sofa. Harry struggled against the urge to squirm. There was a weight in that gaze that urged him to speak up and speak freely, even if he didn't particularly want to. "I don't have any magic." He said, at last.

"None whatsoever?" Kyle asked, calmly. "Since when?"

Harry shook his head. "Gone. Since this happened." He gestured to himself. "I see. Have there been any accidental bursts? Do you have a wand and is it still attuned to you? Have you been able to access your mate's abilities?"

"No bursts. I still have my wand." Harry fiddled with his shirt sleeve until the sleeve holster released it and he gripped the wand tightly in his hand, feeling the comfortable weight settle there. "I've used Theo's," he thought for a moment. "And Charlie's too, but I don't remember using his."

"Fire and Earth. Hmm. Alright. Is that your wand? Please hold it up. I would like to look at it and I do not wish to touch it."

Harry held up the wand, cautiously.

Quinn leaned in and sniffed experimentally at the stick of wood and then craned his neck to look from side to side and then his lips gave a faint quirk, before he straightened and stood back.

"You said you were unaware of which power?"

"Charlie's fire. I used Theo's before."

"By used, how so?"

Harry straightened, visibly. "I…invoked his password."
Teal-eyes grew wide and snapped around to look at him for a good long moment, they flickered briefly to Theo and then settled on the parchment where the quill was busily writing away.

"I see. I wish to summon your medical records, do they exist in the wizard or muggle world?"

"Wizard." Harry answered. The Dursleys surely had never thought him to be worthy of anything as luxurious as a trip to a muggle hospital, so there were definitely no records to be found there. He was sure that Madam Pomfrey had something on him though—he certainly spent enough time beneath her tender care.

"Good."

Quinn snapped his fingers to gain Harry's attention and then extended his hand.

"Please relax and trust me. I am merely tracing your files via your magical signature."

A rather reluctant Harry placed his hand in the one extended. He felt a gentle magical tingle and the faintest of pulls before it faded away, then nothing. Quinn frowned as he released Harry's hand and turned away.

"Excuse me a second."

There were several moments of silence.

"Quinn?" Kyle spoke up from the corner. "What's the matter?"

Quinn gave a faint shake of his head in answer and then reached yet again for the floating parchment currently documenting their appointment. He scanned it with expert eyes and finally waved his hand as to urge Kyle on.

"Have you been sleeping well? Nightmares, dreams, visions?" Kyle recited obediently.

Harry blanched. He didn't know where to look and how to answer that. So he didn't. He had a sneaking feeling it didn't matter if he did or didn't. There was something about Quinn that hinted of secrets known and well-kept.

Wizard Harry wasn't sure whether he ought to trust him. Dragel Harry excitedly pointed out Quinn's significant magic and whispered that he didn't appear to be claimed into a mated circle. Plain ol' Harry wanted to clobber both sides of him.

"Have you been taking anything for your sleeplessness?" Kyle continued on, not even seeming to notice his reluctance to answer.

Theo and Charlie both frowned, apparently remembering separate incidents with Harry and his nightmares. Neither could recall the green-eyed brunet ever mentioning anything of said nightmares nor had they ever seen him take anything for it. Theo's golden gaze narrowed as he silently waited for Harry to answer the question. If his adorable little sub did not, then he would definitely be speaking up—regardless of Quinn's initial warning.

"Have you taken any Wizarding potions such as Dreamless Sleep? Please answer." Kyle prompted.

Harry sighed and after a moment, he did answer. "Yes."

"How did it work?"

"Badly."
"Define badly."

"It didn't work at all." Harry ground out.

"...Have you taken any other measures to counter your sleeplessness?"

"No. It's fine." The words were quiet and defensive, Harry's emerald eyes shimmering as he silently dared anyone to correct him on that. He'd always managed and managed just fine, thank you very much. A slight prickle of unease washed over him and he refused to look in the corner of the room where his mates were sitting. He had a sudden sinking feeling that this whole healer's checkup might be bringing out a few more secrets than he cared to reveal just yet.

Far more secrets than he cared to show.

Now he could almost understand the reason for Gheyos(fighters) to lurk in the doorways and patrol the halls. He could definitely see Theo shaking walls and floors as he discovered Harry's past. Charlie was sure to burn a few things to nothing, knowing of the famed Weasley temper. Harry swallowed hard. He didn't want to have his mates thrown out of the room, in all honesty, he felt far more comfortable with them there, in spite of everything.

"Sleeplessness is not just fine." There was a hint of reprimand in Kyle's tone and most definitely in the look that Quinn shot his way. "You have recently come into your inheritance and judging from that, your mates are relatively new. Your realignment cycle will alter with each new mate, it may increase or decrease your spare time and sleep in between of each cycle is extremely important, especially for a male submissive. You do not have the luxury of a monthly cycle as a female to keep your hormones, emotions and magic in balance, as such, sleep and an excellent diet will go a long way in ensuring balanced health."

There was a pause.

"When did these bouts of sleeplessness begin?"

Harry shrugged. *As long as I can remember...I've never been able to enjoy a peaceful night's sleep...not until Theo and even so, only when I am directly in his arms and otherwise...exhausted...* A pale blush decorated his cheeks.

Quinn pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I shall assume since your inheritance and it would behoove you to at least pretend to care about answering these questions? You may refuse if you feel so inclined, but I should warn you that I can only help you to the extent that you allow me. Now, for your sleeplessness, you have two mates, both fairly young and as such, there is one obvious way to wear yourselves out and sleep should come easier because of it."

Here, Harry blushed a delightful shade of red as his mind caught up to the insinuation. Theo's cheeks may have pinked and Charlie was studiously eyeing the ceiling.

"If neither of you feels particularly inclined, then I would suggest a few minutes of blood sharing or you can request of your alpha to ease you into sleep. Meditation exercises and sleeping directly under moonlight according to your astrological sign in coordination with the lunar cycle, can also ease your sleep worries. Now then, I have several questions some of which I expect to be answered through this scan, please remain calm and do not fight it. Remove your shirt so I can begin."

As Kyle finished the instructions, Quinn was fiddling with the newly sealed vials once more and finally, he selected on, broke the seal and downed in a single gulp. He shuddered, moving to stand.
over the sink as his body trembled and spasmed, before stilling.

"Quinn?" Kyle shifted uneasily in his corner. "What'd you just do?"

No answer.

"Quinn!" Kyle was off the stool and across the room, standing beside his friend even as the Healer shied away from the helpful hands. "You know you're not in a condition to do that!" He hissed, smacking his friend over the head, perhaps a tad harder than necessary. "You shouldn't even have been doing the—you're my friend, Quinn and I'm your assistant afterwards! What kind of friend lets his—I don't care! There's tomorrow. There's always tomorrow—oh for heaven's sake, spit it out!" He clapped a firm hand on Quinn's back as the wavy-haired blond promptly threw up in the sink. Kyle muttered a few more things before throwing an apologetic glance over his shoulder. "Please excuse this," he waved towards them both. "Quinn is a…special healer. He has many abilities that have not been seen in centuries, this is one of them. Unfortunately, he has a habit of working of himself to exhaustion and as such, leaves himself in a position like this." He thumped Quinn on the head again.

The Healer scowled at him, darkly, and dodged the incoming smack. He took a disposable cup from a nearby stack and filled it with water, rinsing out his mouth and washing his face. His gloves were replaced once more and then Quinn straightened, sending Kyle back to his stool with a single pointed eyebrow.

"Sheesh. I'm going, I'm going." Kyle grumbled. "See if I worry about you again, idiot." He flumped on the stool, but did not spin around to face the wall until Quinn finally glowered at him again.

The stool swiveled to face the wall and Quinn's attention returned to a newly apprehensive Harry.

Quinn held up the cross pendant again and the familiar golden glow shone at the tip as it began to perform the scan, starting at the tip of Harry's head. Quinn's expression darkened as the scan continued down to Harry's toes. When it finished, the Healer touched the tip of the pendant to his own throat, opened his mouth and spoke.

Harry found the image slightly familiar, reminded of a sonorous charm as a light, clear voice suddenly filled the room, quite a difference from Kyle's rich depths.

"Dahlia!" It was spoken with force and authority, teal eyes blazing as Quinn's free hand dropped to his side.

The door to the exam room burst open and Dahlia entered, her dark eyes snapping as she quickly took in the scene and then looked to Quinn.

"Please escort these gentlemen to the waiting lounge." His voice was pure steel, as the pale skin rippled and smoothed, a smattering of fine pale green scales beginning to show on his face and hands. "Kyle, out, now."

"What?" Harry froze, panic showing clearly on his face. "They didn't do anything! I want them here!"

"Dahlia." Quinn repeated, his gaze pure steel.

"No!" Harry made to slide off the exam table only to find that he was stuck to the papered surface and unable to do so. "You can't!" He struggled for a moment, finding his movements growing sluggish and uncoordinated until his limbs were simply too heavy to move. He opened his mouth,
but no sound came out.

Charlie was on his feet, his wings bursting out, the back of his shirt shredded to nothing even as Theo rose protectively in front of them both, a steadying hand on Charlie's forearm and a warning glance to Harry. "Is something the matter?" He inquired, stiffly, formally.

Dahlia looked from the scowling Quinn to the two bristling Dragels. "There probably is." She said, quietly, cautiously. "I would say it is something of grave importance." She turned and extended a hand to Quinn, who pushed it aside carelessly, his teal gaze still locked on Theo and Charlie. Dahlia frowned, her features smoothing over as she drew herself up, one hand hovering over the corded belt of her robe. "May I ask you two to please step outside to allow some privacy between a Healer and his patient?"

Kyle slid off the stool, coming over to join them, worry showing plainly in his face. "Quinn? What's going on? I didn't sense anything amiss with his scan, what's wrong with-"

"Out." Dahlia pointed to the door, her gaze narrowing as it flickered to Kyle and then back to the other two.

The green-haired assistant shut his mouth and quickly ducked out through the door.

"Sirs?" She gestured towards the door. "I do not know what exactly it is that has triggered this… situation, but I would ask you to please trust me that everything will be fine. Quinn is an excellent Healer and if he has discovered something, it is not his intent to exclude you from the proceedings but to allow some privacy for your submissive." She tipped her head to the side. "Kindly step outside and do not make this any more difficult than necessary. It has been a long day and my temper is rather frayed."

"Necessary?" Charlie bristled. "What kind of twisted-!"

Theo's gaze burned bright and a subtle ripple of magic washed through the room.

Dahlia sighed and her hand dropped to her waist, tugging the belt free and loosening the gown to show armor-plating beneath and two, thick, heavy swords slung to her left hip. She was dressed in a cropped bustier and a short, plated skirt, to allow free-movement. The scar from her face was shown to continue down the left side of her body, ending somewhere mid-thigh. "Might I ask you to leave?" There was a new edge to her voice. "Now?"

Theo reached back, his hand staying on Charlie's, calming him. He turned those golden eyes to lock onto Harry's panicking face. "Calm down, Harry." It was spoken gently, soothingly. "We will be right outside nothing is going to happen." If at all, those words only served to make the panic more present in Harry's body as the expression reached his eyes that immediately shuttered and dimmed as the smaller figure began to withdraw.

"Thank you." Dahlia murmured, ushering them both out and exiting herself, with a weary glance cast over her shoulder at Quinn.

"Ororo Carmena." The spell was spoken with a soft finality.

Harry watched with angry eyes as Quinn's grip on the pendant loosened and a thick band of black settled around the blond's throat in delicately twisted lines, a decorative choker. He fought against the invisible bonds once more, refusing to believe that there was nothing he could do because he didn't have any magic. Just you wait! He thought, fiercely. I am not some bloody doll that has to be-!
"You will answer carefully and truthfully." Quinn began, his teal eyes drilling straight into the angry figure sitting in front of him. "And you will think before you answer, lest your anger accidentally triggers my own temper. Dahlia's temper is not the only one that is frayed. It has been a very long day." There was the faintest hint of warning as he spoke. "Do you trust me to heal you?"

Harry blinked.

"Think about it for a moment if you must, but I would like to know the answer to this as well. What have you done to deserve this?"

There was a moment of silence and then Quinn clicked his tongue against his teeth, removing the silencing spell he'd thrown up around Harry as he gestured towards the smaller Dragel.

Harry glared at him, angrily for another long, silent moment. That question didn't make any sense at all and he most certainly wasn't inclined to answer. He silently dared the older Dragel to make him talk. He'd been through far worse than anyone could have ever-

"I have never seen an individual as young as you bound with so many seals, two of which correspond to two of the oldest, most respected families among our High Nobles." Quinn continued to study him. "In addition, you bear seals to bind your wizarding powers, one to bind your Dragel Inheritance, another for your physical protection, one to suppress your soul, another to hid your signature and above all, it worries me to think why a someone of your age—a submissive at that—would bear a Blood Seal and Death Seals!" There was the faintest tremor as he voiced those last words and the temperature in the room dropped several degrees. "Only fighters and perhaps a few Carriers ever bear a Death Seal." He said, quietly. "It is a dark and heavy burden to have laid upon your shoulders. By all admission, simply holding these seals should not leave you functioning in such good respect. So I repeat, what exactly have you done that someone would do this to you? My opinion may not matter, but I do not believe there is anything in this realm you could have done to warrant such punishment. Our clinic specializes in Dragels coming into their inheritance from the muggle or the wizarding world. I cannot place you in either one, so it must be both, regardless, whoever has done this in whichever world, I will only say that you've suffered more than enough and whoever has dared cast these, should hope for death, because if I should find them, I daresay I will kill them."

The chill in the room could not compare to the sudden cold shock rippling through Harry. He was unable to keep the surprise from showing through his face and he stared, still silent, for there was nothing he could quite place to that.

"Thirteen total." Quinn continued, at last, seeming to sense that his patient was far too shocked to continue on. "An unlucky number isn't really a bad omen. Double digits as it is, really isn't a problem, considering there are those who are decades or centuries old and can house up to a hundred and beyond of Seals, but certainly none quite as varied as yours. Answer me this, how were you raised? And please answer. I do not have all day to keep this up and if you truly require help, then I am in a position to be more helpful than any other healer or individual you may stumble across at present. I would swear that on my honor if need be."

Harry glared at him at that, but considered the words and the possible answer before finally giving a tug to his still unmoving arms and legs. "Take this off first!"

Quinn turned his head to the side. "Those are not the words I am listening for." He said, calmly. "Were you raised by your parents or were you gifted a mentor upon coming of age? If your parents placed the ancient seals on you, then I will not touch them as it is in their place to remove it or your mentors. My removing them can cause a bit of a hiccup for some of the other seals as well as your
magic. This is an extremely delicate situation. However I do not see a mentor's mark of claim upon you, which worries me as you bear three seals with a mentor's signature." He frowned. "You really do worry me," this was said with a touch of frustration and a mild expression of pain painted across his pale face. "How is it that no one noticed anything?"

"No one ever notices! It doesn't matter to them. And I don't have a mentor!" Harry growled. "Is that all you people think about? It's always whether I have one, whether I knew one. I don't! I didn't! I don't f-"

"How odd." Quinn interrupted as he inspected his fingernails with a seemingly blasé air. "And I am not attempting to insult you for a lack of one. I merely meant to say that you do have one because there is a mentor's seal upon your signature, hiding it from others, one to guarantee your physical protection—suggesting a less than stellar home environment—and there is a third, suggesting it might have reckoning with your unnecessary Death Seal, which worries me, because then you have another seal on you, this one tied to something of a prophetic seal? It has to do with reviving you in the event you should die before it is fulfilled. I'm afraid Dragel Law is rather complicated, but there are some points that are very clear—we outlawed the prophetic seal eons ago. It was far too cruel to keep."

"Then take them off!" Harry hissed, his hands beginning to morph into claws, his shoulders burning and aching, warning him of wings about to burst forth. He silently reached out inside of him, feeling for the thread of energy that linked him to Theo and the one that led to Charlie. This stupid, idiotic Healer would never know what hit them if he-!

"Do you trust me to heal you?" The question was repeated again, in all seriousness, the Teal eyes glittering with fire.

For a moment, Harry felt his anger freeze. There was more to this question than the Healer was saying, but at that moment, he didn't care. He'd had it with secrets and lies and coded messages. "Can you even help?" He shot back.

"Shall I take that as yes?"

"Take it however you like!" Harry hissed. "Take the bloody seals off or let me-"

"I cannot remove them some of them without this missing mentor's permission." Quinn said, matter-of-factly. "Though I would dearly love to have an audience with this non-existent mentor whenever they are found, be it dead or alive. I will split the necromancy fee with you, if they are dead." He smiled, humorlessly. "I have quite a few things to say to them." He studied Harry with a critical eye, his arms folded over his chest, fingers drumming in thought. "I cannot do much today, I am truly exhausted, but I will do my best and that is all that really matters, isn't it? With what I know for now, I can pull at the Blood Seal and perhaps a few of the others. Your Dragel Inheritance seal is fraying at the edges, I would think that in accessing your mate's powers, you subconsciously accessed your own gift as well, in order to best use them. I am loathe to unseal that just yet, removing too much too quickly would be dangerous and harmful in the long run. Which leaves me little choice if I am to do anything today and I would much rather prefer to do this with some sort of preparation…" Quinn trailed off at this, his eyes taking on a faraway look. "You've done so well so far, I wish someone had noticed you sooner…" He huffed at Harry's perplexed expression. "Do you understand what I am saying?"

"…explain." Harry demanded, scowling.

"I won't list them all now, because I'm sure you won't remember half of them. For now, there are a handful I will attempt to remove. You have a Blood Seal, this binds your blood. That is also a not
quite legal seal by Dragel Law, but it is sometimes used in rare cases. You, a newly turned Submissive, most definitely should not have one. It binds the true power and life in your blood. It can weaken your circle if they choose to feed from you or if you all indulge in blood sharing on a regular basis. It can also lead to depressive tendencies. A lack of life in your blood, leads to a lack of life overall. This may become more pronounced after your inheritance, because the change triggers certain things within your body." Quinn eyed him, carefully. "The only way this can happen, is if you willingly allowed a dark artifact of blood origin to repeatedly violate your physical body." Quinn's brow furrowed. "Though how you can come into contact with one and no one notice, is beyond me. They reek of dark magic and that alone is unsettling to most."

Harry trembled. Anger spiked and wrought its fiery way through him, as the memories danced through his mind as blood rushed to his ears. He remembered one scar he had looked for, after his change. One line that had been burned into his brain, courtesy of one sickening excuse of a witch. For Quinn's question, there was only one thing, one specific little thing that fit such a description. "A dark artifact…?" He licked his lips. He had to be sure, even as the sick feeling in his stomach warned him that he already knew the answer. "Of blood origin?"

"Anything of Vampire or Shadow origin," Quinn said quietly. "Or something of Dark Wizardry. It needn't have been anything complicated, a hairbrush, a family ring, an enchanted parchment…a quill."

Harry blanched.

The Teal eyes watching him darkened visibly.

"A blood quill?" Quinn ground out. "You willingly used a blood quill?"

If Harry had thought the young Healer had a temper, he truly had yet to see a fraction of it, as this version of Quill seemed decidedly taller and most definitely darker as his bright eyes flashed with an eerie glow. They seemed to say far more than his mouth would have at that point, but with a visible effort, he held onto his own temper and calmly continued to speak.

"Did you not know?"

"There was nothing I could do." The words sounded hollow and empty to his own ears, even as Harry spoke. He cringed, waiting for the backlash, even as his temper simmered beneath the surface. He struggled to keep it back, growing weary at the thought that he might explode in a passion and cause the kind of trouble he wouldn't be able to reverse.

"Surely there was an adult you could speak to, a guardian, a teacher."

"No one." Harry smiled, bitterly. "Not then."

"Couldn't you have taken things into your own hands? I am sure there are plenty of wizarding spells that would have done the trick."

"Sure." Harry said, lightly. "I could've used any of them, if I'd known of them. If it wouldn't have landed me in Azkaban. If it had even been an option!"

"There had to have been something." Quinn pressed. "For you to have so many seals and still be walking, talking and functioning as you are, is a large testament to the sheer amount of power within you. Some of these are new, some are quite old. I would wager that within the year this… situation occurred, you should have been able to take things into your own hands. You were more than capable."
"Like what?" Harry demanded. "What would you have done?"

"It will be painful." Quinn said at last. He turned away, slightly. "Because you willingly accepted it, will make the ritual to remove the seal more painful than necessary." He turned away, his back to Harry as he skimmed over the parchment. "Am I correct in assuming the phrase 'I will not tell lies' is the point where the blood was drawn?"

Said hand clenched into a tight fist.

"According to this, you attempted to treat it with Murtlap Essence, but the scars remained until your inheritance, yes?"

Harry bristled, visibly.

"I shall take that as a yes." Quinn turned, a calculating look on his face. "Tell me, have you learned the intended lesson?"

"What?"

"Do you still tell lies?"

With a growl, Harry's pearlsscent wings burst from his shoulders in a shred of fabric, a burst of blood and a twinge of pain. His vision went red for a moment as he struggled and fought against the invisible bonds holding him back from ripping the Healer to shreds. Rational thought was quite far from him at this precise moment. He could only vaguely understand that his mates were not nearby and that this new dragel might be trying to help him, but had somehow managed to insult and compliment him at the same time. He could also understand something his mind had refused to dwell on before. Betrayal. The Healer's words had struck a raw nerve. He'd been through so much for so many and yet, he was repayed how? He screeched and twisted, violently.

A low rumbling growl caught his ear and Harry looked up, freezing.

Quinn had morphed as well to show a trim, lithe body clad in yellow-green and pale-green scales, with hints of bright teal mingled throughout. His wings were several different colors, shimmering and fluttering, comfortably extended in the large room. Scales had taken over his entire body and Harry realized that the Healer was no longer wearing his overtunic, but that it was placed neatly on the nearby countertop. Harry glanced at the expanse of torso and chest, but didn't focus longer than it took to see that it was covered in scrolling green tattoos resembling flowers and leaves amongst their scripted scrolls, a moving tattoo that seemed to be dancing around him as Quinn simply stood back, waiting.

Harry felt his Dragel screaming to be released. He smirked. He wasn't about to deny it.

A faint glint showed in Quinn's teal eyes, a pleased glimmer, almost, as if he'd finally seen what he'd been looking for all along.

Harry didn't care. He only wanted to sink his fangs, claws—anything—into that calm, collected face. He tore at the bonds, feeling a strange, tickling feeling rippling over him, almost as if his magic was slowly returning.

Quinn rolled his neck to the side, stretching, casually.

Emerald eyes seemed to darken to rich forest green as Harry's narrowed gaze locked onto that vulnerable throat.
And then, the bonds holding him down, were off.

Harry launched himself forward in a barely controlled fury. He swiped, clawed and hissed, trying to hook his deadly claws in any available part of Quinn. The anger was more like a friend than some uncertain, incontrollable outburst. Harry tried to ignore the soft, painful ache beginning to burn in his chest as he prowled, backing Quinn around the exam table—again.

In a brilliantly calculated move, he leapt over the bed, wings flaring out behind him as he threw himself forward and pounced, knocking Quinn to the ground. The Healer did not fight back. Harry snarled viciously in the impassive face, one clawed hand rearing back as Quinn opened his mouth and a series of foreign words spilled out.

Pain streaked through him in blinding streaks as the words echoed eerily in his head. He reared back, thrashing even as slender arms came up to lock around him. He howled and screamed as the fire burned through his veins. Images streaking through his mind, flashing before his eyes. Images of his father, his mother, of faces he didn't know and couldn't place, of whispers and spells cast before he was even born.

And then of course, that lovely blissful blackness came for him at last.
Tell Me My Secrets, Part II

Chapter Notes

RECAP: In Nevarah, Theo takes Charlie and Harry with him to a specialty Health Clinic. They are barely admitted, even after Theo uses his connections and then escorted by a Gheyo(fighter) named Dahlia, to see Healer Quinn, who turns out to be a mute blond with Teal Eyes and a short-tempered, green-haired assistant named Kyle, who speaks for Quinn through a shared mental connection. Healer Quinn has just seen to Charlie's wings and Theo's Headache and after performing an in-depth scan on Harry, orders the others to leave the room so he can tend to the new discoveries.

NOTE: This chapter focuses on Harry and Quinn, in a professional setting. This features scene jumping, quick snippets of different moments between Quinn and Harry, instead of following the entire, exhausting exam. ;)

NEVARAH : INSIDE HEALTH CLINIC : TUESDAY EVENING

Harry woke to a cool, damp cloth sponging on and around his face, as something cool, sweet and delicious was trickled into his mouth through an equally cool tube, braced at the corner of his lips. He could die happy with that taste lingering on his tongue, it was purity in liquid form as it slid comforting down his throat, leaving a nice, chilled feeling in his warmed body. He licked at it as feeling returned to his limbs and the heaviness in his eyelids began to lift. His head was pillowed on something soft and warm, while the rest of him seemed to be on a rather hard surface. He shifted and squirmed when nimble fingers threaded through his hair. He tried to open his eyes only to feel the hand wrapped around his shoulders, loosening to rest over his face, keeping the eyelids lowered.

"Not yet, you are not quite awake just yet. Give it a moment."

Harry contemplated that for a moment and then made a sound in his throat.

It was answered almost at once. "Shh." The sound was soothing and gentle. "You are fine. Everything is fine. You lost consciousness when I deactivated the Blood Seal and removed it. There will be a few side effects, some stiffness in your joints, a few aches and pains, but nothing serious to worry over. That is one major thing over and done with, you did very well and I am quite proud of you." The fingers stroked a little deeper at that line and Harry nearly purred under the delightful ministrations. "This went much better than I expected." Quinn murmured. "Now then, the lights are dimmed here, so you may open your eyes slowly—and don't bite that!" Something flicked his nose lightly in reprimand.

Emerald eyes flew wide open and Harry fought to sit up as the first wave of panic registered and then faded, the earlier calmness returning to him.

"...and don't mind me. Do sit up if you so desperately want to." Quinn's sarcastic drawl didn't quite touch his eyes that shimmered with warmth in their teal depths. "Hello again, Harry. Welcome to the land of the wakened." He helped Harry sit up and gently tugged the tube from his patient's mouth. "How are you feeling?"
Harry protested with a groan and half-whine as he let himself be moved and maneuvered into a different position. Quinn's hands were slender, betraying a hidden strength beneath them. He did give a yelp when something thick and cold was rubbed into his back. "Hey!" He flailed with uncoordinated limbs, relaxing when the ointment warmed within seconds and began to seep into his skin. He could feel spikes of leftover pain and from the numerous aches beginning to bloom. "Cold." He explained the outburst, a moment later, feeling the warmth of a blush spreading over him as he realized he was currently still shirtless.

"Sorry." Quinn's thin lips quirked into a smile. "This helps with the pain somewhat though, a touch of cold is worth it." He held two items in one hand, one being glass tube that Harry could now see had been a rather large dropper. The second item happened to be the container of ointment and it was set down well within arm's reach. "Blood." The Healer answered, in reply to the silent question in the emerald eyes. "Pure Dragel blood, the properties within help you to heal faster in the wake of a seal removal." He tossed the dropper upwards, hearing it clatter in the sink. "I only gave you a few mouthfuls, your recovery time is rather decent. I am glad. That is less worries overall."

Harry blinked groggily at him, finally putting two and two together. They were sitting on the floor, with Quinn sitting, braced against the floor cabinets, looking somewhat tired, while from their current position, Harry could figure that he'd been lying on the ground with his head in said Healer's lap and now was all but practically sitting in said lap.

There was a quiet squeak of mortification and Harry blushed fiercely.

Quinn matched his blush with a warm smile. "You were perfectly well-behaved." He teased. "As was I. Be assured that your innocence is exactly what it was as is my own."

Of course, that only served to deepen Harry's blush, even more so when he could scent that the young Healer was indeed telling the truth. He looked away, frantically searching for a better topic of conversation. Anything that didn't have anything to do with…that. "What happened to me? What did you do?"

"Stupid answer or smart one?" Quinn shifted with a wince, drawing Harry back to him when the brunet made a move as if to escape the almost-embrace. He shifted them around until Harry was practically straddling him. "I need to reach your front and back." He explained, simply. "This will help the aches and pains to fade faster, if they linger, we should be worried."

At that, Harry relaxed and let himself be manipulated. It was easy to follow and understand Quinn and from the gentle, but expert efficiency of those hands, Harry knew there was nothing to fear from them. Even the sudden display of power that had, quite literally, knocked him off his feet, didn't leave any lingering resentment, in fact, he felt several stones lighter. "Easy answer?" Harry suggested as Quinn shifted him around, positioning him just right. The Dragel world was terribly complicated, he had a feeling the simple answer would be just overcomplicated enough that he might consider puzzling it out. "The really easy answer?" He added, hopefully.

"Of course." Quinn now held him close, pressing him forward so that Harry now rested against him, chest to chest. It allowed him to gauge the brunet's steady heartbeat, pulse rate, magical core and a few other vitals as he continued with his earlier ministrations of rubbing in the medicated salve, starting off with a generous handful. "I am not going to explain everything at once," he cautioned. "You're in no condition to follow it, really and I do hate to repeat myself, which is why I have Kyle. He does the repeating. Now, what I did was to remove the Blood Seal. Do you remember what we discussed before you lost consciousness?"

Harry was silent for a moment, his head pillowed on Quinn's sturdy shoulder. He was glad the
Healer could not see his face or his fisted hands that rested at said Healer's waist. He did remember, now that it had been mentioned and there was a sudden rush of emotion that he didn't really want to deal with. He gave a slow nod.

"Harry?" Quinn prompted. "Verbal answer, please. Do you remember? It is not uncommon to forget a few things after having a seal removed, I would just like to know where we stand right now."

"I remember."

"Good. I also frayed the edges of the seals your parents placed on you. Your records list them as deceased, so I am left wondering if you were aware of their existence? The seals, I mean. Generally, parental seals fade within a year or so of a parent's passing, unless they become Caspered, and then, as such, their soul hangs in the balance and if the seal was made with good intent and honest heart, then soul magic will keep the seals alive and functioning. Yours are still functioning."

Harry whuffled softly into Quinn's neck, his mind sinking into thought. He was sorting through some things and ignoring others. It was quite a lot of things to take in all at once, so he focused on one important term that seemed to stand out amongst the others. "What exactly is a seal?" He asked, at last. "If you don't mind my asking, I don't really…know."

Quinn was silent for a moment and then he scooped out another handful of ointment and sighed, softly as he warmed it in his fingers. "I am not sure of an analogy that would make sense, but perhaps you will understand anyway. A seal is like a valve, sort of. Well, more like, everything inside of you has an outlet, which is controlled by a valve. You can either cement the valve shut, hack it off and cover it up as if it never existed, or you can grease it well, polish it and replace it as necessary." He chuckled. "And that is probably the most horrible example I believe I have ever fabricated in the-"

"No, I can actually understand it." Harry interrupted. "Thanks. You're saying that I had all my magic, but the seal—froze it?"

A burst of warmth traveled from Healer to patient. "Quick study." Quinn complimented. "Precisely. I do not want to prejudice you into thinking that all seals are evil, they most certainly are not and they can be a tremendous help to powerful individuals, as it allows them to effectively use and handle their powers, without becoming overwhelmed. However, they can be harmful as well and in some cases, very tricky to cast, bear and manipulate."

"I guess that makes sense," Harry frowned. "But I'm not powerful or anything—and I don't remember anyone, how did all these—on me?" He started to straighten up.

Quinn's hands gently pressed him back down, working through the tenseness of his shoulders and neck. "I am not sure." He answered, honestly. "I can, however, investigate and I do intend to. The parental seals will probably be the easiest ones to remove next, as I do not foresee any complications with removing any of your seals, merely the inconvenience on my part that it will take a significant amount of energy." 

"Oh." Harry's disappointed voice made the Healer roll his eyes.

"That does not mean I will not help you." He lightly pinched the back of Harry's neck. "It means I will have to see a catalyst in the form of another healer or enlist Kyle's help. I will have these seals off of you or so help me." He said, dryly. "Now, tell me about your parents? They were wizard and witch, obviously, but beyond that, what can you tell me?"
"My…parents?" Harry shivered as those talented fingers continued with their magic, turning him into a compliant bundle of arms, legs and drowsiness. "It's c-complicated—ah. That feels nice." His eyelids drooped and a faint smile registered.

Quinn hid a smile over Harry's head. He shifted to cuddle the smaller figure better when Harry shivered. "Cold?"

"Mmmhm." Harry mumbled, his head lolling forward to rest on one tattooed and scarred shoulder. Theo had magic hands. Quinn had magic hands. They must have attended the same school, he figured, contentedly.

"I'll take that as no." Quinn stifled a chuckle. "Seals," he continued. "I cannot say why your parents would have placed seals upon you, but I can wager an educated guess and it will probably be the closest thing to the truth. Whether your parents did it consciously or not is the main point. If you do not recall anything at all, then that is fine as well. It is rare that a child would remember a parental seal, but sometimes it does happen. I am still worried. I will work on the parental seals tomorrow. I do not have the energy to spare for it at the moment, but it is nothing a good night's rest cannot cure." He paused. "How are you feeling now? Your magic has been repressed for some time, I would wager you will feel quite a bit of discomfort as it returns, but I'm sure you won't mind, as having it back will cancel out all other feelings."

The pleasant tingles and faint pinpricks of pain danced over Harry leaving him in a pleasurable haze that he didn't care to deconstruct. "Feel fine." He said, in wonderment, surprised to find that he really did feel much better than he had in weeks.

"Good. I must advise you however, not to use your wizarding magic—no matter how tempting—until I can determine that it has all returned and your magical core is fully restored. Your magic levels will be rising, doubling and expanding quite rapidly and deeply in the next few days, simply because of the removal of these Seals and you have yet to come into your Dragel Inheritance, fully. It is extremely important that you be very careful with all your magic, especially your wizarding magic, because it has been suppressed for so long. Understand?"

"…yes."

"Good. Now, how do you really feel?"

"I feel—lighter." Harry admitted.

"Blood Seals will do that to you. I expect your temperament will even out in a few days, even more so when the other seals are off."

Harry's eyes popped open and a wave of shame washed over him as he briefly remembered attacking the Healer just moments ago. The kind Healer that now held him quite comfortably in his lap and was currently giving him the best back and shoulder massage he'd ever had in his young life. Harry buried his head further in the available neck, wishing it could hide the burn on his face. "…sorry about attacking you and all that."

"Perfectly fine." Quinn hummed, scooping out another handful of ointment and slathering it easily over the thin body. Harry was still absorbing it, proof that the small figure was still in some degree of discomfort, so the Healer continued on. He'd move to the limbs next. "You were provoked. Deliberately provoked, I might add. Strong emotions can bring forth magical reserves, I had already tapped into mine, so I was aiming to use yours to help break the seal. I did not mean to distress you, my apologies if I had."
Harry blinked and leaned back to stare at him.

For a long moment, they simply stared and then, shared a single, simple smile.

"So Blood Seal…" Harry mused. "Just because I," he swallowed back the bile in the back of his throat. Just thinking of that pink-clad witch was enough to make him sick to his stomach. He hadn't given in. He hadn't! But it had been pure torture of an unearthly kind, even with Hermione's helpfulness with the Murtlap. "Because I-"

"If you picked it up and didn't know what it was, you accepted it willingly." Quinn explained. "It didn't matter if you refused it once you found out what it did or how it worked, the fact that you picked it up on your own or accepted it from the person who gave it to you constitutes as willing."

Harry bristled, faintly, unable to keep from the reaction that revelation had given him. The wounds were still fresh in his mind, no matter how much or how little time had scampered between it. He abruptly jerked away and out of the warm safety offered to him.

The Healer made no move to restrain him. "Bad memory?" Quinn inquired, simply.

"Something like that." Harry sucked in a breath and blew it out, harshly. "I-it's hard to explain."

"Sometimes there are things that can't be explained." Quinn murmured. "And you do not owe me any explanations. Any twisted individual that would prey upon an innocent is a truly sick monster."

"She was a toad." Harry gave a short bark of laughter. "A toad."

"Warts and slime and all that rot?" Quinn supplied.

It was the way he said it, Harry mused. Because then, suddenly, he couldn't stop laughing and the weights wound around his neck lightened, considerably.

They talked some more, general small talk, as Quinn rubbed the herbed ointment into his arms and legs, until he was satisfied that no more would be absorbed by the soft skin. Once done, Quinn switched ointments and beckoned to the small brunet once more to his lap, not moving from his position on the floor.

Harry wondered, briefly, exactly how tired said Healer was, but Quinn never gave him the chance to ask nor turn the conversation elsewhere as he started over on the careful process, answering Harry's questions in honest tones.

Harry was soon surprised to find that his arms, at some point or another, had somehow managed to make their way around Quinn's neck. As the Healer didn't seem to even notice, Harry left them where they were. He was pleasantly surprised a moment later when Quinn, himself, pulled him down once more, flush against his warmed, tattooed chest and continued with the gentle massage.

"What is your full name?"

"Huh?"

"Turn around, I need to reach your front." And here, Quinn untangled Harry's arms from 'round his neck and turned the smaller figure so they sat chest to back. "I am going to stretch your arms in a moment, so don't fight it, alright?" Harry nodded, unable to find himself further embarrassed at the quiet, efficiency presented by the Healer. "Your full name," he requested, again. "I am curious."
"Ow."

"That is fighting me." Quinn said, dryly. "Just relax. I will not be doing anything you do not wish for me to do, but you will feel much better when I am through here."

Harry reluctantly let his arms go limp. "Why does my name matter?"

"Why wouldn't it?" Quinn countered. "There's quite a bit to be had in a name. I was asking your full name, because the parental seals you bore came from the Noble houses of Perevell and Evanston. The Perevells are known for bright, smart and rather mischievous individuals and their children are always sealed. Sometimes they never remove the seals, even through death. I have heard of a few who were caspered and still bore the seals without any ill effects, sanity intact. I would wager your father placed the seal on you for the sake of his sanity and your own. Too much power at a young age can force you to grow up or grow wild." Quinn scooped out another gob of the ointment and slathered it generously over one arm, working the tendons and the muscles according to his expertise, his fingers skimmed over the mating marks and settled on the elbow joint where Harry had yelped a moment before.

"My father died when I was a baby." Harry blinked, trying to process this. There was something familiar about that name…

"The Perevells have been known to cast seals at Birth. Not only does it cut down on wild, irresponsible stunts in your youth, but it prevents possible dangers from bursts of accidental magic during infancy. It is not a bad seal, but I see no reason for it to remain, as you seem well and worthy enough to hold what it restrains."

"So he did it for my own good?"

"I should think so." Quinn patted his arm. "Next arm. Parents generally do what they think is best for their children."

"So they were probably Dragels too?"

"They would have had to be." Quinn explained. "If they weren't, there's no way you would have been one."

"But I've never heard about it. No one's ever—never!" He protested.

"Knowing what you do of us, can you find that so difficult to believe?"

At that, Harry shook his head. He really couldn't. "I just, I mean, why then? Everything I know, everything so far," he amended. "It's as if Dragels are invincible."

Quinn chuckled softly. "They are not. We are not." He said, simply. "It would take a great deal to kill one, much less two—but that is only if the Dragel is trained and with access to their Dragel side. If not, then they are no better than any other witch or wizard, albeit with a touch more power than the average magical individual. Of course, if an individual is suppressed or bound, then they are already at a disadvantage."

"What's the difference? Bound or suppressed, isn't it the same thing?"

"A suppression can be temporary and placed by more than one individual." Quinn explained. "Bound is permanent and done by one caster with extreme control over a single type of magic or element. If your parents were unaware, it is likely that they were bound and…clueless as to their true heritage. The Dragel gene is a dominant gene, however and it would have been passed to you,
but remained hidden, even through your magical majority, as long as the seals were untouched. Your parents lived in the wizarding and muggle world, correct?"

Harry nodded.

"Then it is possible they were suppressed or bound since their birth and knew nothing of it. The same would've been true for you." He frowned. "Which is another thing that worries me, your inheritance wouldn't have been anything other than a strong magical boost, but this—your actual coming into creature—it was forced. I know this might not be particularly pleasant to recall, but this is a serious offence. Do you remember anything odd or strange happening before your inheritance? Typically, a revelation spell will cause some degree of pain and lightheadedness, I have yet to trace the origin of the one I found on you—that will take some time, but if you had anything to offer."

Here, Harry straightened, a grim line replacing his earlier frown.

"Remember something?"

"It's a fuzzy memory," he said, at last. "Sometimes, I remember it."

"Really?" Quinn prompted.

"Yes." The brunet squeezed his eyes shut, sitting back, hands clenching to fists that came to rest in his lap. "It was right before the end of term, the Farewell feast." He swallowed hard. "It's like I…imagined it."

There was an encouraging brush on his arm and then Quinn took his hands and held them steady, uncurling each finger and splaying them out for inspection.

"I see…someone. I can't see them, exactly, but it's almost as if I know who it is." Emerald eyes popped open, showing a wealth of anguish and agony. "It's as if I don't want to believe it, so I can't see the face. But he casts a spell. A big one. Everything hurts and then it stops and then, nothing." Harry shook his head slowly from side to side. "It's like a dream. Like I imagined it." He said, quietly. "Because I asked—even Hermione, she said nothing happened and I know her, she wouldn't…it's real, isn't it?" He stared straight into those steady Teal eyes. "It's real isn't it? Someone cast a spell that did this?"

"I'm afraid so."

"B-but, there were other people there." Harry's own worries gave way to new fears. "The whole Great Hall, everyone!" He stared at Quinn in horror. "There were more people! They're all going to-"

"Shh. Hush. Calm yourself." Quinn caught him in a hug and held him tight, even as Harry squirmed and wriggled to be set free. When the smaller figure relaxed, Quinn's embrace loosened, faintly. "They are not all going to turn into Dragels, Harry." He admonished. "There are other creatures and possibilities."

"B-but, they don't know. There's no one to help them and-"

"They have their families, friends and I'm sure the teachers at this Hogwarts school are intelligent and helpful individuals."

"But-"
A finger was pressed to his lips and Harry was gently held at arm's length as the finger then moved. "No buts. They can wait, for now." Serious teal eyes locked onto Emerald orbs. "Right now, you are important. You are, no one else. Now, can you answer what I asked earlier?"

"Harold James Potter." Harry said, quietly. "After my father," he added, in reference to the middle name.

Quinn smiled. "Thank you, Harry." He gently urged the boy to stand. "Quinten Auwren Kalzik." He added, softly. "I was named after my Sire's favorite uncle."

Harry smiled—brilliantly.

"Quinn?"

There was a grunt in answer.

"What about my Mum? Her side of the family? What seal did she put on me? Is it good?"

"It is quite harmless, if that is what you mean. Nothing detrimental about it. Your mother's seal, known commonly among the high circles, is the Evanson seal. It is actually two-fold. One was done at birth, as your father's, this was to dim your sense of intuition to some degree of empathy. Mostly because the Evanson's have a long and varied history of extremely powerful and important empaths, telepaths and telekinetic individuals. Coming into an empath's inheritance too young in life, can cause emotional instability and such. You feel too much and in turn you can stop feeling altogether. That is never a good thing."

Harry found himself nodding in agreement. That did make sense. As much as feelings and all of that emotional rot made his stomach churn, his head heart and his heart ache, he had to admit that the thought of being an emotionless, mindless drone was far worse. It would be more of a shell of a person, rather than an unique individual.

"I take it you have found yourself to be more sensitive to other things than expected, compared to other friends and peers?"

Harry nodded, holding up his other arm as Quinn had finished with one side. The Healer was now carefully wrapping his arms with something akin to a muggle ace bandage. It was flexible and soft with a dull green color on one side and a cream-colored hue on the other. "Sometimes." He admitted. "Is that important?" He flexed his wrist, obediently holding it up as Quinn expertly threaded the bandaging through and around his fingers. "And why are you doing this again?"

"Because it needs to be done and because you want your magic to channel equally through your physical body, yes? I do not believe an oversized arm or head would suit you well."

"You're not wrapping my head."

"Of course not. It does not need wrapping."

"Oh."

"Oh, indeed. I am wrapping your arms, because you were muggle-raised and wizard taught, all your magic has been channeled into a wand, with the exception of accidental outbursts. As such, to keep the magic from settling solely in your arms, I am wrapping them with these. It helps to coax the magic to circulate in your body. You can take them off before you sleep or before your morning shower, tomorrow. The longer you keep them on, the more sensitive your arms will be,
but I can take care of that when you return tomorrow." He patted Harry's wrapped arm, gently. "Now, before, as I was saying, the gifts in the Evanson line are on account of Ancient Magic. The Evanson house has long held ties and associations to it through the ages. According to folklore, it is because Lord Evanson was a consort to Magic, herself and she chose to favor him with a link through his children as thanks for his loyalty."

"And Perevell?" Harry felt his mind spinning and whirling, the name and the history. The invisibility cloak! He nearly gasped.

"Well, I said Consort of Ancient Magic. Lord Evanson was not the only one. Magic is a demanding mistress. Lord Perevell was probably another, though it is never recorded in the official historical accounts. But he is best known for outwitting Death—on shared terms."

"The invisibility cloak." Harry managed, he lay, limply, relieved that Quinn was holding him up.

"Indeed. Also known as one of the Deathly Hallows." Quinn flashed a grin. "I'm going to stretch your arms again, to test the strength of the wraps and your range of motion. Remember, stay as relaxed as you can and let me move the arm."

Harry nodded again as his left arm was lifted and bent in a position that gently tugged on his weary muscles. Another phrase Quinn had calmly shared suddenly registered. "Quinn?"

"Hmm?"

"You said Noble houses as if they're alive."

Quinn blinked. "Well, they certainly aren't dead." He remarked. "And if I were to even insinuate such things, my entire family might be in disgrace or quite close to Death's door, herself."

"So my parents?" Harry didn't dare finish that sentence. The thought that he might have family—extended family, to be sure—alive, after sixteen lonely years was nearly too much to comprehend.

"According to your records, they died in the wizarding world and as I have no records of them here, I am afraid they are dead, unless they were able to make a pact of sorts, then they may be somewhere as casped spirits."

"Caspered whatsits?" Harry twisted to look at him. He'd heard the Healer use the term quite a few times already.

Quinn immediately dropped Harry's arm and turned Harry's head back to the front with a quick hand. "Do not do that. Your neck is not meant to be at that angle when I am moving your shoulder!"

"Sorry." Harry nibbled on his lip for a moment. "But the-!"

"Caspers. Not Caspered whatsits." The Healer sighed. "And I did mention this earlier, did I not?" He said, softly. "A Casper is, as I said before, an individual who retains their soul for the purpose of hovering between the afterlife and the living realm, they do so of their own free will and often, because there is unfinished business. They last as long as their soul does. If they find another soul before time runs out, then they go on living in their own sort of way. It is a possibility that your parents may have been caspers, if they knew of their Dragel origins, but the chances are so slim, I would surmise that it is quite impossible."

"And almost done." Quinn chuckled. "Breathe in. I do hope you are not ticklish."
Harry sucked in his stomach, surprised when Quinn thwapped it lightly with two gloved fingers.

"According your to basic health scan, you've been starved…and beaten." He said, bluntly.

Emerald eyes met Teal ones. Harry didn't look away.

Quinn's expert fingers skimmed over skinny ribs and the thin bits of flesh finally beginning to fill out, thanks to Theo's meticulous attention to Harry's eating habits. "The report tells me this all happened before your inheritance, so I am assuming your Alpha had nothing to do with this."

"Never!" Harry flinched as Quinn's fingers massaged over familiar scars on his arm. "Theo's been…good. So's Charlie. They had nothing to do with…this."

"I am glad to hear that." Quinn said, calmly. He took the ointment back, closed it and set it aside.

"Do they know?"

Harry swallowed. "No."

"Why not?"

Harry's hands curled into fists as he searched, desperately for words that would make himself known. "I can't." He said, at last. "I don't know. I don't think I can. I'm not…ready." He hesitated. "I-I can't!"

"I am not forcing you to." Quinn said, quietly. He took Harry's hands in his and gently uncurled them. "Sometimes things happen that can't be controlled. Sometimes the things that happen, really shouldn't." He sighed and turned to face Harry fully. "I do want you to know that it is not a sign of weakness. No matter which way you paint it, sometimes bad things happen to good people. The true strength of those people come to light if they can weather it out rather than drown beneath it."

It was then that Harry finally took a good look at the Dragel standing before him. He wondered how he'd missed it before, in his rage-induced haze. The moving plant-like tattoos had finally stilled and it seemed as if Quinn had a curtain of lovely, curling ivy growing over his left shoulder and torso. Now that the tattoos weren't distracting him, Harry could see dozens of white and cream colored scars littering Quinn's pale-green scaled form. The Healer's throat was a mangled column of scar tissue, with several clawed marks reaching out and down his chest. There were various marks all down and along his torso, though his elegant face remained untouched. In spite of it, the markings didn't detract from the tailored beauty surrounding the Healer.

Quinn was a fighter, from the looks of it. Able to stand up and stall tall, no matter what had happened to him. Harry swallowed, seeing and hearing the truth the Healer had so obviously imparted to him.

"I will not let this go." Quinn murmured, softly. "You will have to speak of it."

"I know." Harry swallowed, searching for another change in subject. "What happened to your voice?" The words came out before he could stop them and he ducked his head, hoping he hadn't offended the young Healer.

"A foolish fight in my youth." Quinn half-smiled.

"You're speaking with a spell."

"One that my dear mother will have my head for." Quinn sighed. "Every minute that I use it, is a minute to the side that I may never speak naturally again."
"Then take it off!" Harry burst out, worriedly. "That's too dangerous."

"I am well aware of the consequences, Harry and I would gladly trade the ability to speak again for the ability to heal all the patients that come into my care. It is my own choice and I have chosen, knowing fully well what price I pay." Quinn half-smiled. "Now, if I did not use this particular spell, then Kyle would be privy to our conversation. A well-meaning as he is, I did not think that he would be particularly helpful at the moment. Did you?"

The brunet shook his head, conflicting emotions dancing across his face. He wasn't sure who he wanted to know what, but for now, he trusted Quinn, if only because the Healer had yet to give him a reason to distrust him. Kyle, well, Harry wasn't quite sure about him yet. He opted to change the current subject, as the seriousness in Quinn's voice a moment ago, had him squirming where he sat. "How do you talk to Kyle, then?" He countered. "What kind of mental connection?"

"The kind that is rather difficult to explain." Quinn tapped his head and moved around Harry, to where he began to manipulate the silver and pearl wings that had finally come out in the last few minutes as they spoke. "There we are, I was wondering if your wings would dare to come out again in my presence. They are fine wings, by the way." Quinn checked the clock on the far wall. "And I do not believe I have the time to stretch them as did your Beta's, perhaps you could encourage both of your mates to pay a little bit of attention to them? They could use some stretching and I am sure your Alpha can show you both a few exercises for them. Are you taking flying lessons yet?"

"What?"

Quinn stifled a chuckle. "I shall let your Alpha explain that one. Just stay still a moment longer. Use the same oil I gave your Charlie, alright?"

"Alright." Harry shifted and stilled a moment later. He felt Quinn's familiar hands dancing up and down the sensitive length of his wings. It sent dozens of delightful shivers all over him. "They feel fine." He babbled. "You don't have to-"

A hand snaked around from behind and covered Harry's mouth. Quinn leaned forward to whisper in one pale ear. "I do too." He said, softly.

"You're all done for today." Quinn announced, watching as Harry stood on cautious legs and wobbled, once, before catching Quinn's proffered hand and shoulder. He'd finally eased himself down from the examination table where he'd been sitting as Quinn had worked on his wings. "Easy now. Small steps and small breaths." Quinn advised. "We were sitting for a reason." He helped Harry walk around the exam room, a careful arm threaded around the thin shoulders.

"Thank you." Harry finally managed. "For everything I mean, I really-"

"It's fine." Quinn cut him off with a warm smile. "It is just fine. I expect to see you tomorrow though. Tomorrow afternoon. We are nowhere near through."

Harry fought to keep the blush from showing on his face. He felt his cheeks warm anyway and he was glad, for once, to be shorter than average. At least Quinn might not see it. "Right." He took several careful breaths. The pains and aches were faded to a dull drumming in the back of his head and while he did feel as if he'd been stretched too far, it was definitely an improvement than when he'd been awakened before.

"How are you feeling now?"

"A little better. It's finally kind of fading."
"Good. It's about time."

"Thank you-"

"Make sure to rest well tonight and probably most of tomorrow as well. I know it is Hunting Season and the First Walk and feasts and all that, but you are not going to miss much and it is best for you and your magic, if you simply take it easy at least, for this week. You can make up for lost time next week if the Hunt is that important." And here, Quinn winked.

Harry, of course, half-blushed.

"…Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"You will tell them at some point or another." Quinn watched as thin shoulders stiffened and raised, ever so slightly, defensively. He expected it, a few hours were exactly that, a few hours. There was plenty he could do in that time, but scars were scars and they would always remain, even as they faded. "As I said before, as your current Healer, I am obligated first to you and second to them. But for the sake of your own well-being, I am requesting that you include them. It does not have to be on everything and believe me, I will never say a word to them, without your permission. But they do deserve to know."

"I don't want to-"

"Then you do not have to." Quinn interrupted. "But if you are hiding this from them, because you expect them to reject you, then you are only doing them and yourself a grave disservice. In the wizard and muggle world, there is nothing that can honestly compare to a mated Dragel Circle." Teal eyes drilled deep into Harry. "Nothing." The Healer emphasized. "They do not love and care for you because they have to, but because they want to. It will, in time, become as second nature to them as breathing, because you are a part of them. When you hurt, they hurt. When you ache, they suffer. It is the kind of bond that cannot truly be grasped by the mind. But I urge you to speak to them, regardless of whatever is between you, whatever may be, between you. Speak to them. Speak to your alpha. Ask them to listen and tell them. They will never think anything less of you."

The messy head of hair lowered as Harry looked away. "Maybe." He allowed, at last.

"Excellent," Quinn backtracked to the counter where he drew out the tooth gel in a container and tossed it to Harry. "Remember, twice a day! I want to see the result of at least three applications before you arrive tomorrow."

"Three?" Harry swallowed.

"Don't give me that face. You liked the taste of it earlier and it's good for you. Once more tonight and twice tomorrow." He instructed. "Now, I need you to do me a favor."

Harry pocketed the ointment and caught the shirt tossed to him. He shrugged into it and did up the buttons, reaching for his robes that hung on the pegs near the door. "What kind of favor?"

"A very easy one." Quinn said, lightly. The Healer had moved around from the counter and now braced against the wall, a look of exhaustion slowly creeping over him. "When you walk out of here, there's going to be a bit of chaos." He explained.

"Oh." Harry brightened as understanding registered. "I'll tell them that you were only helping."

"Lovely." Quinn winced. "That is quite alright. I want you to look for a hulking Jamaican giant. He's probably got a scowl on his face and may or may not be lecturing Kyle out of his mind."

And here, now that Harry looked closely, he could see the light in Quinn's eyes beginning to dim and the black choker 'round his neck beginning to fade, showing the spell wearing off. "Quinn?"

"I'm fine, Harry." The smile was soft. "Remember, a tall hulking fellow. His name is Bharin and he's a brute." Quinn smiled fondly. "And no matter what anyone says out there, I need you to tell him that I need him, alright?"

"Why? What's-"

"I'm taking the silencing wards down, the protection ones next and then door should be opening, right about now-"

The flicker of black 'round Quinn's neck flickered out and he leaned, heavily against the wall as his smile turned into a grimace.

The door opened.

Chaos was outside.

Angry magic, crackling energy and loud shouting voices.

Harry suddenly couldn't find his voice.
NOTE: This chapter focuses on Harry, Theo and Charlie in differing POV's. DAHLIA, WIKHN and MEIMEI, all belong to the same Gheyo Circle(Military circle). Dahlia is the ACE in that group and as such, she can order the other two beneath her without repercussion. Dahlia can interact with Bharin on a fighter-level as they understand each other on that level and she is used to seeing him take care of Quinn.

RECAP: In Nevarah, Theo takes Charlie and Harry with him a specialty Health Clinic. Healer Quinn is a mute blond with Teal Eyes and a short-tempered, green-haired assistant named Kyle, who speaks for Quinn through a shared mental connection. After performing an in-depth scan on Harry, orders the others to leave the room so he can tend to the new discoveries and promptly removes Harry's Blood Seal and personally tends to him in the aftermath.

NEVARAH : INSIDE HEALTH CLINIC : TUESDAY EVENING

They were taking a rather long time, Theo mused. He hadn't really wanted to leave, but he hadn't wanted to start a fight that would put him at a disadvantage either. From the bondmarks shared between his small circle, he could feel that Harry was technically, quite fine—panicking, but fine —while Charlie was a bundled mass of confusion.

He set about sending a few waves of calmness through the bond, until he felt it abruptly dull on Harry's side. It had taken a significant draw of willpower to remain calmly seated, his expression unchanged, as he realized that the Healer had thrown up several wards, including one to block the connection between a sub and alpha. A medical necessity, he was sure, but entirely unneeded as far as he could reason.

His Slytherin mind set to work, puzzling, figuring and sifting through the recent cache of memories to see if there was anything off about Harry. Well, anything a tad more off than usual, Theo amended. His thoughts were interrupted by his worried beta.

"Theo?" Charlie rolled his head to the side, uneasily. There were too many feelings and a faint buzz of magical energy still tingled in the air.

"Yes?" Theo turned to look at him and immediately beckoned the redhead a seat closer. "Come closer. They will not be out straightaway."

Charlie had seated himself two spaces away on the padded bench in the waiting lounge and he immediately scooted closer at Theo's prompt. He was slightly surprised to find that his nerves calmed even more, the closer he slid to the younger man. "I don't-" he started and then stopped. Theo had calmly reached over and laced their hands together, before staring straight ahead again, his golden eyes riveted to the examination room door. Charlie stared down at their hands for a long moment and then finally half-shrugged and let it be.

Everything was so confusing since he'd woken. He'd been at The Burrow, then he'd died—at least, he was pretty sure he had died, because dying could only hurt so much—and then he'd come back
to life and then, well, there were a lot more 'thens' to add to it and he was beginning to feel like a puppet on a string.

"You're thinking too much about it." Theo murmured. He gave the large, tanned hand, a gentle squeeze and began to rub his thumb back and forth in soothing motions. "Puzzle through it one at a time. Take your time."

"I don't—it doesn't—this is real." Charlie said, at last. "I mean, this, it all happened so fast." He shrugged, helplessly. "How am I supposed to?" and here, he gestured in the air.

"It did, didn't it?" Theo half-smiled, finally breaking his stare with the closed turn and turning to redirect his attention to the present mate beside him. "Talk to me." He invited, sincerely. "Ask me anything you want to know."

And so Charlie did.

At one point, raised voices caught his ear and Charlie looked up to see the young man from earlier, Wikhn, arguing loudly with Matron Olivia. He couldn't quite make out everything they were saying, but the gestures said plenty. He didn't have to be a genius to know that something was wrong.

"Fine time to be arguing about it." Theo muttered.

"Arguing about what?" Charlie wanted to know.

"You can't understand them." Theo murmured. It was a plain and simple statement.

Charlie looked at him and then shrugged again. "Should I?" He resisted the urge to brush off the worry that registered. Things didn't bother him—much. But talking with Theo and learning of the complicated Dragel culture, he had more than a decent share of worry on both his own behalf and poor Harry's. Knowing Harry as he did, the dragon tamer could not help but feel a little for the teen—they were both in the same boat.

"Depends." Theo allowed. "Does any of it make sense?"

The redhead listened carefully for a second, his brows furrowing together as he watched Dahlia push away from the wall where she'd kept her position beside the examination room door. "No." He admitted. "It feels like I should, but I can't make it out. Can Harry?"

"Harry should." Theo held out his other hand, fingers splayed. "But I haven't checked him for that yet. Sometimes you are born with the ability, other times it must be called forward. I am sorry. I should have seen to this sooner. There has been quite a bit to keep straight at the moment." He sighed. "Here, take it."

"What?"

"The language." Theo wiggled his fingers. "Just touch your hand to mind, fingers like so-" he demonstrated.

When the examination room door popped open, Theo's grip on Charlie's hand tightened to nearly bone-breaking standards.

"Theo?" Charlie looked from his young alpha to the door where Harry suddenly stumbled forward
and out into the middle of a rather large argument. "Harry-" Charlie didn't have to say anything more as Theo abruptly released his hand and shot to his feet, his golden eyes fairly smoldering.

Silently, Charlie shifted to stand behind the shorter figure. He was hit by a sudden wave of dizziness that made him wince and reach for the sturdy shoulder before him. Theo made a sound in the back of his throat and a scarce second later, a faint burst of warmth traveled from Theo to Charlie. Charlie was relieved as his head cleared. He could adjust to this Dragel thing if it helped with little moments like that.

He waited for Theo's cue only to catch Harry's eye and see the short brunet shake his head very faintly. Before he could puzzle through that, Charlie caught sight of a newcomer joining in the shouting match.

Harry was pushed through the doorway and into the fray via an invisible hand. Before he could cast a backwards glance into the room, the examination door slammed shut in his face. Harry stumbled to the side, to find himself in the middle of a complicated shouting match between Dahlia, Kyle, Matron Olivia and Wikhn. There were red faces and angry hand gestures to complete the picture.

The shouts made Harry wince and subconsciously shrink away from the noise as a flicker of silver caught his eye. He turned in time to see a figure standing off to the side, watching with sharp, calculating eyes.

Harry blinked. The shock was tempered with the initial impression of the tall, dark figure, standing to the side with his heavily muscled figure on display. With a height reminiscent of Hagrid, Harry stared as the similarities ended there. Clad in silver, this fellow's rich black hair was done up in thick dreadlocks that hung to his waist. In similar fashion to Wikhn, the newcomer also wore thin leggings and a large, sleeveless, overtunic showing off a crested mating mark and on one thick bicep. He wasn't particularly shouting with the rest, but he wasn't stopping them either.

Gheyo. Harry's mind supplied. Brute. It added, belatedly. Bharin. The man was massive and his face seemed set in a Snape-worthy scowl. Quinn's description had been quite accurate. Harry picked up on the thread of conversation that seemed to have something to do with the Matron in regards to something said Matron had announced about overtime and unnecessary things.

Dark eyes drilled into Harry and he met the gaze squarely for a moment, before a glimmer within them made him look away in search of two specific individuals.

A quick glance around the waiting lounge located his two mates and Harry was happy to see that Theo and Charlie stood off to the corner, Theo slightly in front of Charlie, his golden eyes flickering at once to Harry. Two bursts of warmth blossomed in his chest and a steady thrum of calming feelings and magic filtered through the bond, flowing through him from the mating marks.

He'd missed that. Quinn must've thrown up more than just silencing and protective wards, but Harry couldn't find it in him to care. He was just happy to see Theo and Charlie and even happier to see that they seemed in control of their tempers and Dragel instincts. Thankfully, Theo didn't seem inclined to smother him in public, though the promise in his golden gaze assured him it would happen eventually. Harry was fairly certain Charlie would join him in the general smothering.

Before his alpha could move forward, Harry quickly shook his head, Quinn's request echoing in his head. Here, Harry froze, momentarily, when the slight action meant for his Alpha caught the eyes of all three fighters. They turned as one and Kyle's head snapped around to see what the fuss was about and he surged forward, the argument forgotten at once.
"Harry!" He caught Harry by the shoulders and immediately released him at a low growl from Theo, who drew near, and a slap to the head from Dahlia. "Sorry." He scowled at Dahlia. "Quit that. Harry, Quinn? How is he? I felt a burst of energy and then nothing and I couldn't break the wards on the room and he's not supposed to be doing these-" Kyle paled rapidly as he whirled on his heels and rushed to the door with Dahlia hurrying after him.

Harry was jostled out of the way, but relieved to be out from the immediate center of attention. He observed, worriedly as the frantic assistant tried to garner Quinn's attention.

"Quinn!" The green-haired Medic pounded on the closed door. "Quinn, it's Kyle, please let me in!" The door was locked with magic apparently, as Kyle gestured with his wand at the door several times, to no avail. "Quinn!"

Harry swallowed when his vision was blocked by the dark, muscled near-giant. He was well aware of his two mates hovering just a few feet away, tense and coiled as if waiting for his signal to strike. They had approached him anyway, but stood just outside of reach to allow him whatever privacy he had wanted by originally refusing them.

The fellow in silver glided forward, his dark eyes unfathomable. He paused in front of Harry and their gazes locked.

Harry straightened up, standing tall. "Bharin?" He pronounced the name as best as he could, per Quinn's repetition.

"Speak quickly." The rich voice ground out, as dark eyes penetrated Harry's short form.

"Quinn said he needs you." Harry said, simply.

The dark eyes narrowed faintly and without protest, he turned and moved to the examination room door. He caught Kyle by the collar and bodily lifted the young man out of the way. The door was ripped open and Bharin stood there for a split second before he streaked into the room and dropped to his knees beside a pale, white figure sprawled lifelessly on the ground.

Harry caught a glimpse of pure white and Quinn's sleeping face as he heard Bharin's mutterings and the sound of ripping fabric. "You foolish...foolish...child...of all the...stupid...stunts to pull and..." The door abruptly slammed shut on the scene, denying them all further view.

Kyle yelped and danced back a few feet, rubbing his nose where apparently the door had closed too quickly. He glowered at it for a moment and then turned around, an apologetic look on his face.

Harry perked a brow, wearily. Thankfully, most of the aches and pains were fading away and he could move painlessly for now—mostly, anyway. He hoped Theo could 'port them all home. He could feel his wizarding magic returning as if it were an orange squeezed through a juicer. Painful and in very, very slow, small trickles. It made him feel annoyed and irritated.

A yawn snuck past his lips and Harry mentally reminded himself to stand straight and stay awake. Kyle was saying something now and with some effort, Harry made himself focus and listen.

"W-was he alright when you left? Standing and all that? Not on the floor?" The Medic offered a sheepish smile. "Sorry, I tend to get a little...irrational where Quinn is concerned. He's a magnet for trouble, it seems." Here, Kyle scrubbed a hand through his shaggy, forest-green tinted hair.

"So it would seem." Matron Olivia snarled. "We closed hours ago!"

Hours? Harry nearly said aloud. He hadn't realized so much time had passed by. His stomach
rumbled, reminding him that he owed it dinner. He sighed, seeking out Theo's golden-eyed gaze once more. He flinched, briefly, when two hands rested on his shoulder, but he relaxed almost at once, placing them as his mates and identifying their scents. Now that he could concentrate, the hands were familiar. Theo's hands.

"Harry."

Charlie's familiar rumble sounded above his head and Harry released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He was glad to sense that the redhead didn't seem too agitated and the same for Theo. That was good. He hadn't been looking forward to trying to brave a famous Weasley temper and a Slytherin one at the same time. It would seem that he was lucky today.

A soft oomph, gushed out when Charlie pulled him away from Theo's comforting hands and into a tight hug. Harry didn't fight that. The touch was warm and welcome. He made a soft noise in agreement.

For Charlie, he simply couldn't help himself as he caught the look on Harry's young face. There was simply something so lost about him in that moment that the redhead couldn't help it as he squeezed him tight. He allowed Harry to be pulled away from him by Theo.

Theo circled around to wrap his arms around the small brunet for his own turn of comfort, having seen that Harry didn't mind that particular public display of affection. "Are you alright?" He whispered.

Harry nodded, tiredly, feeling the strength beginning to wane from him as his head tipped forward to rest on Theo's inviting shoulder. "M'tired." He admitted, nestling his head comfortably on Theo's shoulder, breathing in the calming scent that was all Theo. It soothed and relaxed him almost like Quinn's magic hands.

Theo clutched him tight, scenting him as discretely as possible—and perhaps a little more thoroughly than necessary when he realized that Harry smelled of a certain teal-eyed Healer. He tightened his grip when Harry gave a testing wiggle to see whether he could move.

"Too tired?" Charlie prompted, running his long fingers through the messy crop of hair, taking comfort in the fact that he could now see, touch and smell Harry. The sudden separation hadn't sat well with him at all, but having Theo nearby had helped in more ways than one. He leaned down, rubbing his face along Harry's head and neck, adding his own scent to Theo's. He wasn't quite able to fight the urge as well as his Alpha, who'd managed to restrain himself from the urge in public, even though his golden eyes gleamed in promise. But Charlie had begun to resign himself to the fact that there would be quite a bit of changes he needed to accept. This was most likely one of them. Theo had listened to him at length and promised to explain and help whenever and wherever he could. "Did something happen?"

Here, Theo helped with a firm hand on both of them, channeling whatever powers he had around him to push feelings of deliberate calm to both mates.

Charlie was glad for it.

Harry barely registered it.

"Yeah." Harry yawned as Theo gently nudged him back to Charlie, who wrapped his thick arms around him once more. "He took off a seal." Harry yawned again, this time into Charlie's available chest. "I'll explain...later?" He felt his eyelids droop of their own accord. "I'm really tired right now."
"You could sleep." Theo's hand slipped around Harry's neck, beneath his shirt and robe collars, rubbing gently and squeezing. "Charlie?"

It happened without further prompting.

Harry didn't protest when the sturdy redhead easily scooped him up, holding him close. He felt all of his energy drain away as if it had never been his in the first place. He quickly destroyed the thought of an impending realignment, he had time before that. It was most likely the Blood Seal removal and the return of his wizarding magic. Quinn had said something about it and now Harry could fully understand it.

The exhaustion was truly beginning to settle in. "Thanks, Char." He mumbled, grateful instead of embarrassed. Charlie's arms were strong and safe. The perfect haven for a quick nap. Harry drifted away without another care.

"He's exhausted." Theo frowned, eyeing the already sleeping face of his submissive. "I have never seen him sleep this…easily. Even during the partial realignment I was present for."

Charlie leaned back, twisting to see the peaceful face. He frowned. "Is there anything else that needs to be done? He needs to be home."

"Nothing else. We are through. I will settle the accounts later. Home, for now." Theo murmured, his golden-eyed gaze flickering quickly over the remaining occupants in the waiting lounge. The door was still shut, though now Kyle had taken up pacing a few lengths before it, since Bharin had made his appearance. Dahlia stood off to the side, her sharp eyes fixed solidly on the closed door.

A well-loved Healer, Theo mused. That was good to know.

They had waited until the entire clinic had shut down and still, the door to Quinn's examination room had remained magically locked and eerily silent during Harry's turn. There hadn't even been the faintest of magical pulses to hint as to what was happening behind that closed door. Theo had kept watch, in between of his shared discussions with Charlie. There were still some things he'd have to address, but they could wait. They would wait. He had to remain as calm and rational as possible.

Mostly calm and rational, anyway.

As a pair, they had managed to keep relatively calm and quiet.

Theo wasn't entirely sure about the rational part of it.

Once she had escorted them out of the examination room, Dahlia had taken up her defensive stance by the closed door, having removed her gown and left it in a pile on the floor. It was a silent message to all present that she acted in her full capacity and would react should something happen. Her armor had gleamed and glistened as her scars stood out plainly on her tanned body. She, had, after the first hour, relaxed considerably and taken to trimming her claws with a rather sharp knife.

Theo had taken that moment to check Charlie's claws with a mental note to do the same for Harry as well. As time had continued on, Charlie had grown silent and Theo had opted to keep the light atmosphere. He'd engaged the reluctant Dahlia in conversation, thanks to Medic Kyle, and they had managed fine until Wikhn had run up, panting and saying something about Matron Olivia.

From then on, everything had become rather confusing as the strict woman had made her appearance and immediately started in on both Kyle and Dahlia, with a dark, disgruntled fellow in
silver, trailing behind her. Theo had singled him out at once, careful to withdraw to the corners as the argument had started up. He was well aware of the fellow's notice of him and Charlie and it hadn't rested well within him at all.

In his opinion, there were too many fighters and that alone was more than enough warning for his Dragel side. It had screamed at him to retrieve his mates and 'port them as far away as possible.

Then Harry had appeared.

The dark fellow had immediately turned towards him and before Theo could react, Harry had said something and chaos had quickly followed. There was more yelling, more shouting and then of course, the dark fellow kicked in the examination room door to show the Healer lying, pale and unconscious on the floor.

At that display, Theo had found himself strangely calmed as his rational self pieced together the fact that the dark fellow, Bharin, as he'd heard Harry call him, belonged to Quinn's family circle. That was good. Whatever was wrong with Quinn would then be sorted.

With that minor burden lifted from his hidden conscience, Theo had turned his attention to his stressed and exhausted mates. He calmed them both and coaxed Harry to relax enough so Charlie could carry him. The redhead was masking his unease, but it was still tangible. Theo knew none of them would really relax, not until they were once more in a familiar environment.

Here, Theo was torn from his musings three distinctly different things happened.

Wikhn drew his sword on Matron Olivia.

Dahlia yelped at him to stand down.

Medic Kyle gave a horrified cry of "Quinn!"

It silenced them all.

"Bharin!" Kyle exclaimed, starting forward, his hands shaking, almost, as his hands fell back to his sides and horror showed plainly on his face. "Is he-?"

"He will be fine," Bharin said, curtly. In his arms he cradled a shirtless and barefoot Quinn in his Dragel form, his lower half clad in a pair of trousers ripped at the thighs into a crude pair of shorts.

Theo's initial reaction was a hiss that he tamped down, when Harry stirred faintly in Charlie's arms and turned to see. He heard his submissive's sleepy whimper and he saw Charlie's grip on Harry, tighten just a bit.

Quinn's Halfling Dragel form was lovely, Theo supposed, except, in its present state.

The Healer's scales were now a pure snow white and nearly transparent, instead of the pale-yellow-blue-green he'd seen earlier. It was as if there was nothing left within the seemingly bloodless body. There was no indication of life, not even a thread of magical energy curling around the body. Intricate tattoos decorated his entire upper half, the ink a stark black contrast to the pale, lifeless skin.

"W-what did he do?" Kyle started forward again, his expression pleading as he looked to the older Gheyo. "Bharin, please. What happened? I didn't feel anything-!"
"Blood Seal residue." Bharin said, stiffly. "I thought you swore to serve as his catalyst?"

"I didn't know!" Kyle protested, paling rapidly. "I swear, Bharin. I had no idea—he...he sent us all out." He turned and gestured, awkwardly, towards Theo and company. "I didn't think that he would—he was exhausted! I offered to take the basic exams for them. He wouldn't let me. He was all worked up and—he knew better!"

"And since when has that ever stopped him before?" The man retorted, darkly. His glower shifted from Kyle, however and settled meaningfully on the red-faced Matron Olivia. "I have warned you once before woman," he growled. "Quinn may not be my son by blood, but he is very much my own. You take advantage of his selflessness and his rare gifts. I saw his patient list this morning. He always shows it to me on his way out. He should have been home hours ago! Especially after the week you have put him through!" Here, Bharin's dark eyes blazed with fury. "This is your final warning. I will not stand idle while you-"

"He has sworn a Healer's Oath to us!" The woman blustered, lifting her chin defiantly in the face of trouble. "You have no right to barge in here like this and start acting as if you're the-"

"I do." Bharin glowered at her, a faint stirring of magic rippling through the room. "Quinn is one of many, but his disability is singular. He may have sworn oaths by the Healer's creed, but he answers to me. He is my responsibility and I take it very seriously. You are pushing your luck!"

"Why, I never-!" Matron Olivia began, in pure outrage. "He's more trouble than he's worth with all of his-"

"Silence!" Bharin's voice was dark and deadly. "He is no more trouble than any of your other healers and yet you treat him as if he were a leper! If I were to ask him—to ask—that he seek employment elsewhere, know that he would. Merely because I asked. I might take care to remind you that he chose this clinic of his own accord. I am sure he could find a suitable residence elsewhere without any of your help!"

"You would limit him?" Matron Olivia snarled. "His talents are not that rare! He could make himself more useful and repay the-" She was silenced when Wikhn drew his sword and held it level at arm's length, just beneath her chin. His eyes glowed the faintest eerie shade of red-pink. The woman paled, even as she shook with anger. "Get that out of my face, you wretched boy-!"

"Kindly do not insult my circle mate." Dahlia snapped, her own temper finally frayed enough to show around the edges. It appeared in the way her dark eyes gleamed and her claws twitched towards the worn hilts of her twin swords. "He won't take lightly to it and I may be just so predisposed that I will be unable to restrain myself from leaping to his defense in an attempt to reclaim his honor." Her dark glare held the same burning intensity as the older Gheyo. "Do not tempt him or me, dear lady." The title was said with obvious mockery. "You can report all you like to my circle head. I do not care." She gave a jerk of her head to the side. "Leave. Now. I shall see to locking the doors and setting the wards if you manage to bumble your way safely to the 'porting room."

"Now listen here, girl, just because you're on her majesty's military-"

"Wikhn." Dahlia murmured. Her head swiveled away, as if bored.

The pale, almost-red-eyed boy flipped his wrist—and sword—over, a movement showing his preparation to strike. It was fluid and flawless. He'd done it before.

The Matron heaved herself up, lifting her chin to be higher than his blade, unintentionally
presenting him with a clearer access point to her neck. "Goodnight." She said, icily. "Beware your actions will cost you both."

"Indeed." Dahlia retorted. "But it is not so great a price that I cannot afford to pay it. For both of us." She added, beneath her breath. She turned away as the older woman fled. "Bharin?"

"I shall carry him home. Kyle, you will 'port in ahead. Have them clear the runic grounds and carve out a hollow for the lad." Here, Bharin tested the weight of Quinn in his arms. "He will have to sleep in stasis for his required hours and then some. A charmed bath is probably best as well, so have them prepare incense and oils."

"Bharin, please-" Kyle began. "Surely-" he broke off, abruptly.

Bharin nudge him, gently, with one crooked elbow. "Quinn will be fine, child. There was naught you could do."

"But-!"

"I sensed his lapse and I came. That was the only outcome this situation could've had." He frowned, faintly. "Then again, if you could have held your temper rather than provoking the dear lady, I daresay I would not have to mention the possibility of a lecture to a certain someone?"

Here, Kyle winced. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather Mum's lecture over Quinn's." He shuddered, briefly. "He'll ream me out for everything south of the-"

Quinn's pale body twitched, feebly.

Bharin's grip on the limp figure, tightened.

"It is far too late for all of us right now. Just get him home." Dahlia cast a look over at Wikhn, who now sheathed his sword and began tugging on the fingerless gloves he'd removed at some point. "Wik, you alright with me?"

The pale boy gave a single, jerky nod.

"Good boy." She patted his shoulder. "Good form too. Stand down." The words were delivered in a clipped, precise tone.

The red-tinge faded from Wikhn's eyes, showing a more reliable pink hue as he bowed his head in acceptance of the given order and masked compliment as he trotted off after her.

"Kyle?" Bharin prompted, when the green-haired Medic seemed frozen in thought.

"Wha-huh? Oh!" Kyle blushed and ducked his head. "Right. Ah. Follow Dahlia, she'll let the doors open. I'll uh-" He blinked, comically. "Quinn, what? You're—stop that!"

Bharin froze in mid-movement, his brow perked in a silent question.

"Yes, yes, I'll check that." Kyle's worry faded into a deep scowl. "And no I won't!" He glared at the limp figure. "He's fine. They're all fine. You're the one that's not fine. Now stop stressing before I end up in trouble for something that you're—then again, I wouldn't put it past you." He snorted. "No, I will not—Bharin!" The exclamation ended with a grimace.

And here, Bharin's eyebrows danced in further upwards, apparently being admitted to the mental conversation taking place between the young man in his arms and the Medic standing a few feet
away. "I see." There was the faintest hint of amusement in his tone. "Quinten Auwren, you are in no condition to be arguing." With that, he walked off after Dahlia, bearing his precious armful.

"Theo, Charlie and Harry right?" Kyle turned to them, wearily. "Quinn's fine. Sorry for the chaos and the confusion." He gave a faint jerk of his head. "The idiot's going to be fine. If he isn't, I'll revive him and kill him myself." Kyle huffed. "He also just had the nerve and hindsight to remind me that he didn't remember authorizing your appointment cards for a time slot tomorrow. May I remedy that?"

Theo produced his own card, digging out Charlie's from the redhead's back pocket and then Harry's from the brunet's trouser pocket. He handed them over and watched as Kyle produced his wand and waved it seriously, over each green card in turn.

"There you go." Kyle breathed a sigh of relief. "All done. This way. I'll see you out, unless you're 'porting in to somewhere?"

"Porting." Theo murmured, quietly.

"Good. Less headache all around." Kyle blinked and promptly blushed. "Erm, and I didn't mean it like that." He started off at a trot. "The 'porting room is over here, unless you don't particularly fancy using one?"

Harry woke when they 'ported directly into Terius' living room instead of the complex's transportation room.

It was with a jolt that he found himself awake—wide awake—and too comfortable to move. The too-comfortable to move was explained when Harry finally processed that he was being carried quite easily through familiar walls and to an unfamiliar room. He was vaguely aware that Charlie was the one carrying him and that Theo was somewhere nearby.

Theo came into his line of sight a few seconds later when Charlie eased him down onto the bed. "Harry?" There was a flicker of worry in his voice. "What happened?" There was a long moment. "Are you still asleep?"

Harry blinked, owlishly up at him for a moment. His stomach rumbled and here, Theo managed a small smile.

"Ah. Hungry then?"

The emerald eyes blinked once. Harry himself, wasn't particularly inclined to speak just yet. His mouth was mildly dry and the rest of him was still rather sleepy.


The redhead was quiet for a moment. "Dinner would be appreciated." He admitted.

"I believe either Draco or Calida would have left something for us in the kitchen." Theo said, thoughtfully.

"I'll be right back." Charlie straightened and left. His footsteps were soft and nearly non-existent on the carpeted floor as the door clicked shut behind him.

Theo sighed, looking down at Harry with a faint fondness. "How are you feeling?"
Harry merely groaned.

Theo chuckled as he rolled up his shirt-cuffs and bared his wrist. He brought it to his mouth, his fangs showing briefly, before he bit down sharply. A moment later, he pressed the bloodied wrist to Harry's parting lips.

The scent of blood stirred the brunet's fangs and within a minute, Harry sank his newly emerged fangs into the delicious offering. Shifting to sit closer to him on the bed, Theo ran his free hand lightly over Harry's clothed body. He cast a handful of diagnostic spells, glad to see the results were mostly normal and that Harry's wizarding magic now figured into the equation.

"I see the magic is back." He murmured.

The emerald eyes merely sparkled in understanding.

Theo bent to press a soft kiss to the unwrinkled brow. He busied himself playing with Harry's wayward hair, occasionally stroking one pale cheek and pressing his thigh closer to Harry's shoulder. Harry drank greedily until Charlie returned with three full dinner plates floating in front of him.

Blue eyes flared bright with a mixture of envy and desire as Charlie directed the plates to settle themselves on the bed.

With quiet rumble, Theo prompted Harry to release his wrist and waited while his little mate reluctantly did so, cleaning the healing wound. "Did you find everything?" Theo asked, eying the plates. They were generously filled in their portions and neatly charmed to remain preserved and warm.

Charlie nodded, stiffly.

Theo gave another smile and beckoned the redhead over. He gestured to the ground, prompting the taller man to kneel and then he leaned forward, baring his neck in a wordless invitation. He'd seen the glimmer in his Beta's eyes and would never deny his mates what they needed whenever it was within his power to grant it.

Blue eyes widened in shock and surprise, before a look of longing and uncertainty replaced it.

This would be Charlie's first feeding.

Theo had mentioned it to him, noting the redhead's reluctance with something that seemed so vampiric. He'd tucked that tidbit away for later, knowing that instinct would take control whether Charlie's wizard side cared for it or not. With his smile in place, Theo lengthened one hand into claws and drew them down, lightly over his neck. He did not flinch at the customary stripe of pain, knowing that the incentive was all that was needed before Charlie's instincts could take over.

Sure enough, the blue eyes burned bright and Charlie lurched forward. His hands came up to grab Theo's arms, holding him in place as he licked at the line of crimson. Inexperienced fangs sank into the supple skin as Charlie hummed in approval and contentment. Theo rumbled back in assurance, freeing one hand to tug off the silken ribbon holding Charlie's fiery hair in a neat ponytail. He slid one hand through the reddened tresses and stroked gently, alternating with light scratches and firmer pats.

A happy purr came from Harry contentedly watching them both with a faint fire in his emerald eyes.
Another purr came from Charlie, whose grip on Theo's left arm loosened to nothing as he drank hungrily.

"Theo?" Harry's worried voice was the first one to break the strange silence that had lingered after Charlie's feeding had ended. "Aren't you…?" He swallowed, gesturing to himself.

Golden eyes gleamed in amusement. "I'm quite fine, Harry. One of the Alpha perks, I suppose." He smiled thinly, settling into the cleared space on the bed. "Sleep and food will be fine for me. It was you two I was worried about." He frowned. "How are you feeling? Both of you!"

They were sitting together, all three of them, in a skewed triangle of sorts, each with a plate balanced on one knee or held carefully in the crook of one arm. The late dinner had been kept ready for them with stasis and warming charms. Generous portions filled each large plate and Charlie happily dug in, while Harry cautiously poked at his own. Theo simply set about eating in his usual methodical way.

"M'fine." Harry swallowed before he spoke.

Charlie gave a quick nod, chewing carefully before he spoke. "Much better now." He flashed a brief grin. "Thanks for the, ah-"

"If you feel the urge again, then ask." Theo nodded in understanding. "It takes a touch of practice. Your fangs are inexperienced and new. I will ask of you not to bite Harry just yet." He frowned. "If I am correct, Harry will shortly have quite a number of potions inside of him, as such, my blood will be the best for you." The golden eyes settled meaningfully on Harry. "The same to you, Harry. Please leave Charlie alone, until he bears a clean bill of health. The Healer mentioned something about residue from the Blood Purification ritual. I do not know how it will react to you."

Harry set his plate down on the bed, pushing it away from him, his brow knotted in a deep furrow.

"Harry?" Charlie looked to him in concern. "What's the matter?"

"I-I," Harry's hands clenched at his sides and he slid off the bed, standing in front of them. He took a deep breath. "I need to…to talk to you." He licked his lips. "Both of you." He added, quickly, when it looked like Charlie was about to set his plate down.

"You can talk." Charlie said, confusedly. He looked from Harry's serious face to Theo's own expressionless one. "Can't he?"

"Of course." Theo murmured. "We are listening."

Harry shook his head quickly, sneaking another quick breath. "N-no. Not quite like that." He looked away. "I need to talk. To tell you about…things." He swallowed hard. "Do you know what a seal is?" He ventured, at last, deciding to take the easy way around this.

Theo gave a short nod. "Ilsa sealed me several times before I came of age." He admitted. "My magic was wild and unpredictable because I was too young at the time it manifested. She sealed me with different seals of varied strengths. They wore off on their own and vanished for good when I turned sixteen."

Charlie paled rather spectacularly, his head bowed, dinner forgotten.

"Charlie?" Theo prompted. He leaned forward to nudge the redhead's knee with the handle of his fork. "Here." He extended his hand, fingers splayed.
Woodenly, Charlie accepted the transfer of knowledge. It did not erase the sudden look of betrayal on his face. Theo poked him in the knee again, this time, with a warning glance. He could read what was flickering through his beta's mind. Molly Weasley had sealed her children—but not with the intent that Ilsa had. She'd meant for the seals to be permanent. The silent warning was received however, as Charlie gave the faintest of nods, before lifting his pained gaze back to Harry's worried face.

"I have…" Harry heaved a sigh, choosing to ignore the little byplay between the duo. "I have thirteen of them."

The following reaction was infinitely amusing.

Charlie stared at him, mouth open.

Theo choked and upended his dinner plate on the pristine guest bed.
Charlie reached over and helpfully slapped Theo on the back as the pureblood coughed and choked. His incredulity was transformed to concern when the smaller man coughed and sputtered for a few minutes longer than expected.

"Thirteen?" Theo managed to exclaim. "Thirteen seals?" There was a most undignified squeak at the end of his hiccupped exclamation.

Charlie conjured a glass of water and handed it over, wordlessly.

Theo reluctantly took it, looking as if he'd rather drown himself in the glass rather than drink it. "Thirteen." He whispered, darkly. "I'm fine. Stop introducing my spine to my lungs." He hacked out another cough and suddenly leapt from the bed to dart to the en suite.

Charlie and Harry exchanged a look.

Harry managed a weak smile.

Charlie waved his wand, cleaning up the mess and set Harry's plate on the nightstand. "You want any more of this?" He gestured to the barely touched plate.

"Eat the vegetables at least." Theo instructed. He emerged from the en suite, his face somewhat red, but freshly washed as if he'd scalded it, scrubbed it and then towed it dry.

Harry made a face. Vegetables were definitely the last thing on his mind at present.

"It has fiber, vitamins and some degree of protein." Theo countered, accurately reading the expression on Harry's face. "If you don't want that, then at least-

"I'm full." Harry interrupted, turning away. "I-

"Harry."

"Please." The emerald eyes winked shut. "I can't—not now, Theo. Please."

"He ate well this morning." Charlie said, helpfully. "And for lunch." He hesitated. "And not that I'm keeping track or anything, but I'm fairly certain he had a little ah, more than me." Here, the redhead blushed a rich shade of red to match his trademark hair.

Theo heaved a sigh, noting Charlie's reluctance to use the word 'blood'. He would have to remedy
that some time or another. "Once." He allowed, wearily. "And only because of the present circumstance." He took up residence on the bed once more, his golden eyes set in an unreadable gaze. "I did not mean to interrupt, Harry. Please, continue."

Harry nodded. "One of the seals removed was a Blood Seal." He fiddled with the hem of his shirt, his wizarding robes having been spelled away once they had entered the bedroom.

Theo stiffened.

Charlie looked from Harry to Theo again and then held out his hand again.

Theo lightly brushed his fingertips over the proffered hand. "What caused it?" He asked. "When? The Slytherins never had any blood objects present in their-"

"A dark artifact?" Charlie burst out. His blue eyes blazed. "What kind of a-"

"It was an accident." Harry said, quickly. "Really. It was. I didn't know. No one did. I didn't..." he swallowed hard. "I didn't tell anyone. There wasn't anything to tell."

"There wasn't what to tell?" Charlie's brows furrowed together. "Harry?"

"What was it?" Theo prompted again. "How come no one noticed?"

"Because they never do." Harry huffed. "No one ever does." He looked away for a moment, fighting to grasp his emotions and push them aside so he could concentrate. "It was a Blood Quill...it was used during a...detention."

"A Blood Quill?" Charlie exclaimed. "Those—but that—they're outlawed by the Ministry of Magic!"

"Just because it is outlawed does not mean it is no longer in use." Theo said, grimly. "When, Harry?"

"And you didn't tell anyone?"

Harry sighed. "It was a...long year." He said, softly.

"Were there others?" Charlie had to know.

Harry nodded—once.

This time, it was the muscled redhead that leapt from the bed and stumbled to the bathroom to empty his stomach of his recently acquired dinner.

"The bandages on your arms...?" Theo's voice trailed off. "Is there anything...?"

"Oh. No." Harry flexed his hands, experimentally. "It's to channel my wizarding magic. It's returning and it could be tricky."

"I'm glad. Your arms?"

"They were wrapped to channel the energy."

"Ah. Anything that needs to be done?"
"Don't think so."

Theo ruffled his hair, affectionately.

Harry half-heartedly dodged the hand. It felt nice on his head.

When Charlie returned, Theo eyed his Beta with some degree of concern and then his brave Harry. The lips were occasionally nibbled, sucked and worried between his teeth as Harry seemed to work up the nerve to share his story in the least distressing way possible.

Theo wasn't sure how much he'd be able to take.

"I need to touch you." He managed, at last. Unable to keep the words inside, even as his hands twitched imperceptibly towards the shorter brunette. The instinctual need rose up to nearly unbearable proportions. He'd have to be careful. So very careful. In the back of his head, the faint ache, formerly dulled by the potion, flared and throbbed. Theo inwardly grimaced and mentally shoved it aside. He'd deal with that later.

Harry eyed him wearily.

Charlie shot a glance between both of them, before shifting on the bed—having banished the dinner away—to form a little empty space between him and Theo. He wasn't quite able to mask the need as well as the other Dragel. His hands fidgeted anxiously as his blue eyes tracked Harry's every movement. "Sit?" He offered.

Slender shoulders arched upwards. "I want to talk." Harry licked his lips and closed his eyes. A pale pink blush dusted his cheeks. "I want to talk." He repeated in softer tones. "No…sex."

Theo's wings snapped out from his back in a loud, leathery snap. He didn't even flinch at the loss of control as his features schooled themselves into a neutral mask. "I would never try to distract you from speaking your mind and heart when you sincerely desire my undivided attention." He said, seriously. His golden eyes blazed bright as his Inner-Dragel processed the fact that someone had hurt his Submissive—long before there was anything he could do about it.

Weary emerald eyes locked onto his and Harry gave the faintest of nods as his glaze flickered to Charlie.

The Dragon Tamer offered a wan smile. "I would never do that either, Harry. I just—I can't help it." And here, Charlie's hands twitched as his lovely red hair suddenly burst into flame.

Harry flinched.

Theo was off the bed and across the room, holding Harry securely in his arms, wings wrapped tightly around them. He turned, just enough to bare his fangs at Charlie.

The redhead glowered in response, but worked to gather himself together, though his hair continued to burn in its fiery form.

"M'fine, Theo." Harry squirmed and wriggled. He'd been too shocked and surprised seconds before, he hadn't known that Theo could move that fast. Then again, he should've known, Ilsa seemed to have that particular trait mastered. A low growl was his answer and Harry instinctively stilled.

"Wards." Theo muttered, a second later. He released Harry from his arms and wings, before giving
him a gentle nudge towards the bed. "Sit. Stay." He muttered and weighted his words with all the sway he held as the Alpha. "Please." He added, catching the faintest flicker in Harry's conflicted expression. Golden eyes flashed as Theo cast a cursory glance around the room and his lips began to move as he made a shallow cut on his chest and using one blooded claw, painted a few symbols along the wall.

"Theo?" Charlie's voice was vaguely apprehensive.

"Silence and privacy." Theo muttered, continuing his work. A few minutes later, he returned to the bed where Harry sat stiffly beside Charlie, his hands in his lap, twisted together. "I do not wish for anyone to overhear anything that you do not wish to share with them." He said, by way of explanation. The golden-eyed brunette, settled down, his wings shifting and moving to arch forward and form an incomplete cocoon around his two mates.

Charlie relaxed almost at once.

Harry copied the redhead's weak smile from earlier. "Thanks." He looked away. The pink darkened a tad more. "Didn't think of that."

"Slytherin second-nature." Charlie murmured, but the teasing sounded off, even to his own ears.

Theo simply smiled.

"Please…" Harry took a deep, steadying breath and held his head high. "Please don't interrupt." He said, quietly. "I don't really fancy repeating myself."

"It started in DADA class when I mentioned that Voldemort was back." Harry stared off at the far wall in the room. His eyes glazed over and his voice seemed to drop a few decibels. "I guess I didn't... think, at first. I just wanted people to know, for them to be aware, I mean." Here, he smiled, ruefully. "People only hear what they want to hear, see what they want to see, believe what they want to believe. No one wanted him back, so to them, he wasn't back." There was a little scoff. "Because they couldn't see Voldemort with their own eyes, they didn't believe."

Silence danced through the room.

"I really don't remember what I said." Harry admitted. His hands continued to twist themselves together in his lap. "I only know that, all of a sudden, I had detention and Hermione was asking me why I'd stood up to a teacher." He rubbed the back of his left hand, absently. "Ron worried, maybe. He didn't like her either. None of us did. But there wasn't anything we could do about it. She kicked out Dumbledore." Harry swallowed. "Because of her, Dumbledore left." The hands stopped twisting and clenched into fists. "Not that it was a problem. He didn't talk to me much, that year."

More silence filtered through. Theo's wings fluttered, faintly. Charlie's hair continued to silently flame.

"The first detention—it was strange. I was to write lines—that was nothing new—but when I took out my quill, she stopped me. She said she had one of her own. It was especially for... people like me." He swallowed. "I didn't think anything of it. I took it from her." He shuddered. "I took it right from her hand."

Theo gave a low, soothing rumble. Charlie answered it with a faint, half-whine.
Harry almost smiled. "At first, the ink was red." He continued, calmly. "I thought it was different, kind of nice when everything's in black. I didn't realize until I'd written the first few lines that the burning pain on the back of my left hand was—the quill."

Here, Charlie snatched up Harry's left hand to squint and scowl at it.

Harry tried to tug it free, his lips parting in a silent whine.

Theo gave him a warning growl and then shook his head, understanding Charlie's reaction and prompting his Beta to release the hand. "Any scars Harry would've had, should have healed with his inheritance."

"Not this one." Harry gave a bitter laugh as he touched his forehead, to show the lightning bolt etched into the flesh there. "Not the one that should've disappeared."

Theo's hand flashed out and caught Harry's chin. He gently turned Harry to face him, then leaned forward and pressed a kiss directly over the offending scare. "It will not haunt you forever." He murmured.

"You can't promise me that." Harry turned away. He pulled his hand back from Charlie and tucked it beneath his thigh. "There were many detentions." He admitted. "And she used the quill on some of the younger year students. Everything was for the ministry, by the ministry and because of the ministry." He snorted. "Then Hermione had an idea." He smiled, fondly. "She's a real smart witch, you know. Brilliant." He grinned. "Scary, but brilliant." He echoed Ron's once famous words that seemed to sum up Hermione Granger. "She decided we should start up a club of sorts and somehow I ended up teaching everyone." He gave a quiet, shuddering sigh. "It was to be something to help, since Umbridge insisted on a book that had nothing to do with defense. We used the Room of Requirement. We called ourselves Dumbledore's Army." Harry's hands twitched, faintly. "I had fun." His voice was light, almost.

"We learned the Patronus Spell and-"

"The Patronus Spell?" Charlie's eyebrows danced upwards. "That's—Harry, that's—wow." He settled, at last. That was an impressive bit of spellwork for fifth years. The redhead snuck a glance at Theo, whose neutral mask had eased, faintly.

"Who taught you?" Theo asked, softly.

"Remus." Harry's hands clenched tight. "Remus Lupin."

"The werewolf?" Theo blinked.

Harry glowered at him. His emerald eyes burned eerily. "Remus is a friend." He said, coldly. "A very good friend. Don't speak of him like he's something that-"

"How do you know?" Charlie's blue eyes directed the question to Theo. He knew through The Order some of the secrets among their members. Remus Lupin's werewolf status was old news. It didn't bother him, he worked with Dragons after all and there was little to worry for after that. He frowned, mentally wondering where their little Nyitura had wandered off to. It was odd that it hadn't come to greet them. Then again, the last he'd seen of it, the little thing had been curled up on Hermione's chest.

The Slytherin's lips twitched, faintly. "We are Slytherins." He said, softly. "When Severus insisted on the lesson for werewolves, it was more of a cue for all of us to know exactly why we were to
keep our distance."

Harry scowled. "He didn't have to ruin Remus-!"

"He was only trying to do what he thought was best." Theo interrupted. "There were things that happened that year that-"

"Remus didn't hurt anyone!" Harry snapped. "He was trying to-"

"I am not saying that he did." Theo soothed. "I am only saying that-

"We said we'd listen." Charlie reminded. His voice effectively cut through the near argument, settling it with a single look. "Theo." He said, mildly. "Harry."

Charlie's blue eyes flared faintly and he hissed, softly—a warning to both mates.

Theo bowed his head and looked away. His wings fluttered in agitation.

Harry's shoulders twitched in answer, but he remained seated between the two of them.

"What's a Death Seal?" Charlie asked. His blue eyes betrayed the worry for his calm voice.

"I'm not sure." Harry admitted. "Quinn just said that I had one and it wasn't good. Said it was bad because I was young and a Submissive."

Theo now turned a lovely shade of pale, the former pink flush having faded away. "It's like a ticket stub." He said, warily. "Gheyos—fighters—they use them. It allows the caster to place a mark on the intended, so that should they die before their score is settled. They will be forced into a state of stasis until the other party is revived. Once they are revived, the two are 'ported in somewhere together and may settle their differences to an agreeable end."

"Agreeable end?" Harry spluttered. "How can that—is that even—how?" He faltered. This time he stared down at his stomach in confusion.

"Some people can hold grudges for centuries." Theo sighed. "That can affect their souls, their magic, everything about them over such a long period of time. A death seal allows you to settle a grudge to the satisfaction of both parties. It also means that if you were about to die, you will not, until you've settled all your debts."


"It depends on whether you are the caster or the intended." Theo countered. "Mainly only the Gheyos use it. They might postpone a fight indefinitely, if they are experienced enough to predict the outcome and only settle it when upon their deathbed. As such, they are free to live their life without the consequences of a brutal battle resulting in crippling injury or significant magical loss. A carrier might bear one, if they happened to lose a child, allowing the circle that contracted them, permission to exact whatever punishment they deem fit before death."

"And people are happy with that?" Harry demanded.

"Absolution." Theo answered. "For the soul to rest in peace. If you come from a family with a history of being Caspered upon death, there is a chance you will not rest in peace. A Death seal allows a peaceful death, if your debts are all settled."

"Caspered?" Charlie held out his hand—again. The explanation he'd been afforded while traveling
to Nevarah, hadn't made much sense at all.

Theo and Harry both reached forward. Harry shrank back. Theo withdrew his hand and gave an encouraging gesture. "Go ahead. I'm sorry. I didn't realize you knew it."

"Quinn…explained." Harry hesitated.

"Splay your fingers like so" Theo demonstrated. "Then think very hard on what it is you want to share. When you have in your mind's eye, think of how you'd like to share it with Charlie. Do you want to touch him? Hold him? Or quickly bring him up to speed?"

Charlie managed a light blush at that.

Harry's was slightly milder. "Just bring him up to speed."

"Then make that your focus as you concentrate on what you want to share, then touch your fingers to his." Theo watched, carefully. "The first time might be a bit jumbled. It takes practice to share with ease."

Harry followed the instructions and both he and Charlie jumped when a faint, static spark leapt between them.

"Nicely done." Theo murmured. "Charlie?"

"It's fine, it's just-" Charlie squeezed his eyes shut and then nodded. "I'm with Harry, that's… uncommonly cruel, isn't it?"

Theo sighed. "Some believe Death Seals are too cruel a practice. Others know better than to interfere. The Gheyos—who mainly employ it—and use it, would be the first to revolt if any action were ever taken to ban it." He frowned.

"But why would I have one? I don't have any—debts." Harry paused and paled rather rapidly in the next few seconds. "I don't, do I?"

"I don't know, Harry. You're the only one who could say."

"Alpha's rights?" Harry repeated. The paleness had yet to leave. He'd finally finished his tale of the pink toad-faced witch, complete with Hermione's brilliant plan and it was only afterward, that the Slytherin had mentioned a rather disturbing term. "Theo—Theodore, don't!" Harry scrambled frantically for the best words to use to articulate this new horror.

The young Alpha merely perked a brow in silent question.

"You can do that?" Charlie looked from Theo's grim face to Harry's suddenly frantic expression. "He can?"

"No! He can't! I don't want him to." Harry shot to his feet, holding himself tall. There was a sudden wariness lurking in his emerald eyes. "Please, Theo." Harry heaved a breath. "Don't." He said, softly. "It's not worth it. She's not worth it. You're better than that."

"Harry-" Charlie began, in protest.

Theo raised a hand. "Are you absolutely certain, Submissive?" He asked, formally.

"Yes, Alpha." Harry said, steadily.
The golden eyes flickered and Theo gave a short nod.

"You're nothing to me if you're in Azkaban and killing doesn't solve anything!" Harry exclaimed, passionately. "Please, Theo. Killing won't make me feel any better nor will take away this—this nothing." He rubbed the back of his now scarless hand. "Killing never solves anything. It just causes bitterness and problems for the people left behind." He frowned. "Do you have to claim those—rights?"

"I can refuse them, if you require it of me." Theo sidestepped the question. "Harry, you do realize that—"

"Yes." The word was bit off and Harry sighed. "I do. I realize that bad things happen to good people, but it doesn't mean that I have to agree with certain things. Revenge—this whole thing—"

"An Alpha's rights do not necessarily mean revenge in—"

"But that's what it is, isn't it?" Harry said, bluntly. "It lets you stand up on my behalf and carry out whatever kind of retribution you think is fitting."

Conflict warred on Charlie's expressive face. "I don't know, Harry." He allowed. "If—it's like, if something were to happen in the wizarding world, it falls to the head of house to seek the appropriate repayment for whatever the offense is."

"Even if the price is death?"

"In the old days, yes." Charlie sighed. "It actually used to be settled with duels. A duel to the death. It is a matter of honor."

Harry blinked.

"I was only asking." Theo said, quietly. "I will abide by your wishes, if that is what you wish."

"Honor?"

"You are everything to us." Theo gestured between himself and Charlie. "As such, anything, any perceived insult or injury to you—is the same to us—I, more so than Charlie, am obligated to respond to it in some fashion or another. However, it is acceptable to defer my rights if you request it, or if you have need of me beside you."

Harry swallowed. "I have need of you beside me." He said, thickly. "You and Charlie."

"Then I shall remain." Theo smiled, thinly.

So they talked.

For hours.

Theo ended up with Harry sitting practically in his lap at one point, his arms tightly wrapped around the younger brunette. Harry had given up trying to fight the impromptu embrace, settling down instead, with his back to Theo's chest, head resting on one strong shoulder. He stared at the ceiling as he talked and tried not to censor the words.

Charlie's wings eventually came forward and the two older Dragels alternated in calming each other and resisting the urge to further smother the perpetually calm Harry. At one point, Charlie snatched Harry from Theo, only to receive a smack for his efforts from a ticked off Harry.
"I am not a toy!" He snapped, at both of them, expertly wriggling free of their grasp. He'd improved in his escapes. "You're worrying, fine. I understand. But stop grabbing and squishing me to death!"

Charlie growled.

Theo rolled his eyes and sighed. It was enough of a difficulty to keep his Dragel instincts from moving up to smother said Submissive. He had a feeling that he was the last notch in the belt keeping Charlie from completely running on pure instinct. "Believe me, Harry. I am trying my absolute best."

"Try harder." Harry took a shaky breath. He'd succeeded when he now stood up on his own. "Because it isn't any easier for me to do this when you're acting like-"

Charlie put a finger to those dry, pink lips. "I know." He said, simply.

Harry's watery smile was rather heart-breaking.

The various threads of conversation were not always so easily resolved.

At one point, Harry feared that the Dragel wings, claws and fangs would all burst out in a shower of blood and tempers. He hadn't yet dared to breathe a sigh of relief that it hadn't happened so far.

"How many times have you almost died?" The words were clipped, cool and precise as Theo's golden eyes blazed merrily. He was doing an admirable job of controlling his temper, but the shadows that lurked beneath the surface, promised that he held back—only for Harry's sake.

Harry resisted the urge to squirm beneath that penetrating gaze. He knew from that tone, what exactly Theo wanted from him. He wasn't sure that he could give it. It had never occurred to him that someone might actually care about how many times he'd risked his life and limb for the sake of another. He hoped Theo wouldn't ask the impossible of it—he knew he'd never be able to give up that 'hero complex' bit.

"More times than he should." Charlie answered for him, correctly interpreting the look on Harry's face. "I don't think it's something he can measure like that."

"Then perhaps we should start with the simple parts?" Theo suggested. "The really obvious instances where you were in grave physical danger?"

Harry snorted. "That would be every waking moment." He huffed and yawned. It was rather late to be up and chattering, especially after the day's events. Not to mention, he was fairly certain that Quinn would put him through his paces the next day. "Why would it matter?"

Charlie reached for Harry and drew him close in bone-crushing hug. "It matters because we care." He murmured. "We care about you." He rubbed one large hand up and down Harry's weary shoulders. "Has it been that many?"

"Many." Harry wearily eased his head down to rest on Charlie's available shoulder. "Quirrell." He listed. "Basilisk. Lockhart. Tourney. Toad..." There was a great big yawn and then a soft, snuffling sound.

"Asleep?" Theo prompted.
Charlie listened for another moment and then nodded. "Did you…?"

"Did you?" Theo retorted.

A bittersweet smile was shared.

"In my fifth and sixth years, I didn't have anything to worry about." Charlie half-laughed. "Sure there were things to worry about, but I didn't have to worry about it all on my own." He sighed. "I had—Mum." A pained expression settled on his rugged features.

"You need to see her again." Theo stated.

Charlie gave a jerky nod.

"Then you will."

"Preferably after Harry's seals are off." Theo said, quietly. "Is that soon enough?"

"I suppose." Charlie shifted to better hold the sleeping armful. "I don't know what I want to say to her yet."

"Think on it." Theo murmured. "And sleep on it." He slid off the bed and moved up to turn down the covers. "Set him in the middle here." Theo cast a tempus and quickly did the math in his head. "A few hours of sleep and hopefully a sugar-charged breakfast." He muttered to himself. "I see that Medic Kyle took the liberty of setting our appointments at lunchtime tomorrow."

Charlie set Harry down in the middle of the bed and with a wave of his wand, transfigured the sleeping teen's clothes into pajamas. Theo returned the favor with a single wave of his hand.

"Thanks." Charlie mumbled, crawling between the sheets and cuddling up to Harry's sleeping form.

"Good night." Theo murmured in reply.

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**WEASLEY MANOR : UNPLOTTABLE : MONDAY MORNING (Earth Time)**

They stood in front of the ornate, ancestral home of the Weasley Torvak Clan. Arthur ran a hand through his thinning red hair and paused to thrown a warning glare over his shoulder at his fidgeting children.

Specifically, the fidgeting twins.

George had taken the news surprisingly well, but Fred had been rather vocal in his disagreement of it. The ending of everything had come when their former discussion session had turned into a shouting match on account of the left-behind Ginny. Bill was on his way, as per his father's urgent instructions and he'd messaged back with word that Fleur would most likely accompany him.

Now Arthur stood in front of the tall, burnished doors he never thought he'd seek again. The knocker was heavy and old as he took it in his hand and rang four and a half times, the coded answer to admit him to the warded grounds.

Percy shifted uneasily in the background and accidentally stepped on Ron's foot to interrupt his younger sibling's whining about their long and confusing journey. They had been traveling via floo and portkey steadily for the past night, with the exception of a few hours for dinner and the
troublesome conversation. Ron had been absolutely fascinated at the thought of being a creature, seeming to think it was a brilliant turn of luck.

Arthur had worried briefly over this, when he'd heard Ron's exclamation as to now he had something 'over Harry'. He'd filed those words away for later as he'd always known there was a jealous streak in that particular son. He'd hoped a friendship with the selfless Harry Potter would've rubbed off on Ron, but some things would never occur as long as the fates had their hands in things. Ginny had become infatuated with Harry since his heroic rescue of her from the horrible Chamber of Secrets.

In light of the Boy-Who-Lived being a Dragel, Arthur was suddenly glad he'd never given in to Molly's subtle hints of pushing Harry and Ginny together. A Dragel and Torvak bonding was rare and most likely wouldn't last. He didn't know of any that had. The ones he did know had ended with the Dragel fighting to the death or the Torvak dead.

He shuddered to think of it, worrying over his precious baby girl as he turned back to the door to lift the knocker again.

It opened.

For a moment, there was a hush as children quieted.

A taller, distinguished version of Arthur hovered in the doorway, his face set in a neutral expression, his posture regal and intimidating. He was dressed in rich, elegant robes that added to the respectful air around him. The main difference was the pale blue eyes and the salt-and-pepper look to the rich red hair. As if on cue, a lovely lady appeared at his elbow, her hair a mass of crinkled, honeyed ringlets as she peered curiously around him to see who had come.

"Septimus, who is it-oh." There was a long pause and then sad, hazel eyes fixed solely on Arthur before flickering up her husband.

He patted her hand, reassuringly and gave a nod of his head, directing her back into the inner shadows of the manor. The same sad look in his wife's eyes flickered briefly through his own pale-blue ones. "Arthur." He said, simply.

"Father." Arthur responded.

"Bloody hell!" Ron sputtered.
**NOTE:** This chapter features Arthur and the Weasley kids, Aiden, Dumbledore and Voldemort. There's a hint of Harry/Charlie/Theo in the very end. This is a SUBPLOT Chapter.

****WARNING: This chapter features some darker themes, especially during a few scenes between Arthur and Septimus. Very old-fashioned and slightly D/s themed if you kinda squint.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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He patted her hand, reassuringly and gave a nod of his head, directing her back into the inner shadows of the manor. The same sad look in his wife's eyes flickered briefly through his own pale-blue ones. "Arthur." He said, simply.

"Father." Arthur responded.

"Bloody hell!" Ron sputtered.

"I warned you to never darken this doorway again with your presence. Do you wish for death so early?" Septimus folded his hands into the sleeves of his wizarding robes. His pale blue eyes held the same icy hardness often seen in the gaze of the once feared Malfoy patriarch. There would certainly be no question of pure blood now.

Arthur drew himself up tall, looking his father square in the eye, soft brown orbs meeting icy blue ones. "I come on behalf of my children, Father." He said, clearly. "It is only for their sake that I would dare—trouble—you." The words seemed to be spoken with some degree of difficulty.

"Children?" Septimus' piercing gaze swept over the brood behind his son. "What of them? They have no place-

"Molly placed suppression seals on them from birth." The words came out in a rapid tumble of syllables. Arthur looked away, fearing to see the expression on his father's face. His children
shifted restlessly behind him.

Nothing happened.

A chilly gust of wind blew through them. Arthur chanced a look back.

Septimus blinked. "I could have sworn you had come here with a most extraordinary-"

"Please." Now, he fixed his gaze on the tall imposing figure once more. This time, Arthur's gaze never wavered. "They were innocent, they had nothing to do with it."

"Were they?"

"For the sake of the children." Arthur swallowed hard. "Deny me, but not them."

"Some wayward nemesis or an old friend turned foe?"

The expression of pain that filtered across Arthur's face was raw and vulnerable.

"Arthur?"

"Molly." He whispered, lowly.

"And how would Molly," the name was said with disgust. "Be able to do a thing like that?"

"Dragel."

That was all it took. The door was suddenly forcefully flung open, banging into the wall as the taller man stepped to the side, holding it open. His piercing pale eyes scanned the foggy, swirling surroundings that shrouded the entire front stoop from view.

"Did you follow the usual routes to reach here?"

"I am not as foolish as you would believe." Arthur snapped back.

His father snorted. "Well, you have shown me little proof otherwise." He shot back. "Are those all of them?"

"The oldest will be portkeying into Hogsmeade after he is off of work. He is bringing his fiancée. Veela."

"Full-blooded?"

"Quarter."

"Have you instructed him?"

"Again, I will say that I am not so foolish as you would believe. Nor did I assume that you would be extend your hospitality to us all."

"You were never very good at verbal spars, were you?" Septimus retorted. "I shall send someone. Write the location on the parchment in the hallway." He leaned out, cautiously once more, his eyes scanning the fog. "And get in here quickly, the whole lot of you!"

"Take the children into the coat room." Septimus directed the house elf that popped into existence beside his elbow. "Please see to their coats, boots and things. Please provide dressing robes, as I
feel a bit of a chill coming on." The house elf bowed deeply and trotted to the front, directing the Weasley children with a high, squeaky voice.

Arthur started after them, only to be halted by a strong hand that clamped down on his shoulder. He remained behind, sending a reassuring smile to Percy and the others when they looked back for him.

He had expected this after all.

"Dad?" Fred's voice held enough worry for all of them.

"It's alright children. Just go on in. I'll be there in a minute."

"A minute?" Percy demanded. His worried gaze flickered between his father and apparent grandfather. They narrowed meaningfully in silent promise.

Arthur was proud of him. "A few minutes, then." He corrected.

Percy gave a noncommittal nod and urged a gaping Ron further ahead, to follow the others.

"Arthur." Septimus murmured—again. The hand on his son's shoulder tightened to painful proportions.

"Father." Arthur answered, neutrally.

"Sparing the children?" Septimus mocked. "Their delicate sensibilities and impressionable young minds?"

"If you are going to kill me after all, you needn't make a speech of it."

"Ah, but that would be too easy, wouldn't it?" The powerful hand move from the newly bruised shoulder to wrap purposefully around Arthur's throat. "I should kill you here and now." He hissed.

Arthur merely closed his eyes, holding his head tall.

"No last words? No final pleas?" The hand squeezed gently on that vulnerable throat.

His son gave the faintest shake of his head. The hand gripped tighter and forced him down to his knees, before fisting in his hair and yanking it back to show the shadowed face of Septimus hovering above.

"Open your eyes and look at me!"

Soft hazel eyes popped open and stared upwards, gazing into the unfathomable expression on the haughty face that hovered above him. The face that had once held admiration, pride, respect and yes, even love. Arthur drew in a shaky breath. He was roughly shoved to the ground. His father's feet paced the small section of floor before him for a long, torturous moment.

"I should kill you." Septimus repeated. "But somehow, it feels as if it would be a waste." He sat down on the floor, his polished, dragonhide boots inches away from Arthur's face and the cold floor. "So tell me something, hat do you have to offer to make it worth my while for admitting you within these wards and across this threshold—again? And do not be hasty nor foolish enough to say you would renew your oath." The hand fist ed angrily in the thinning red hair of the head at his feet. "I will tolerate no lies—least of all—from you."

The silence stretched between them.
Septimus did not speak. His hand did not gentle.

Arthur did not speak. His body remained still, compliant.

"Nothing." Arthur said, hoarsely. No matter which way he turned it, there was nothing he could offer, nothing he had to offer. That which he could give was that which he had never taken—his loyalty and that itself, was now tarnished. His stomach churned, his nerves rattled, but he worked to steady his breathing. No sign of weakness could be shown now. He owed it to his children—his precious, precious children.

"Nothing?" Septimus repeated.

"Nothing." Arthur didn't dare breathe.

The hand in his hair slid free, massaging gently along the crown. "Had you lied to me," his father's voice was velvety soft. "I would have crushed your skull, son of mine." He stroked Arthur's head. "Breathe child." He ran that traitorous hand over the trembling body before him. "Talk to me, why come? After all these years? You turned your back on all of us. On everything that we are. On your brothers, your mother...myself. Do your children mean this much to you?"

Arthur did. He forced himself not to take the relief that seemed so close now. "Need you even ask?" He snapped back.

"Aye."

"...you said I would understand." Arthur sucked in a breath. "You said I would understand what it meant to stand in your shoes when my first child would enter realms of life."

"Ah. So now you acknowledge there may have been truth in an old man's babblings?"

"I have nothing but respect for you!" Arthur half-rose, his head jerking around, searching for those mocking, pale-blue eyes.

"Calm yourself." Septimus pressed him back to the floor, the strength in his hand surprising, as it caught his son offguard and thunked his head against the cold, tiled floor. "Respect is nothing, if I do not have your loyalty."

"You have always had my loyalty." Arthur growled. His hazel eyes flashed with a hint of fire.

Septimus smirked. "Have I?"


"And yet you left."

"I could not stay."

"One woman was worth everything?"

Septimus rose from the cool floor, dusting off his expensive robes as he did so. He stood tall and imposing as before. His severe gaze remained cast downwards on his son's prone figure on the floor—at his feet. There was an expression of complete disgust on his features before they schooled themselves away into that unfathomable mask once more.

"Father—I, please-!" Desperation shone clearly in those pale brown eyes.
"I change the rules for no one, Arthur." The voice was cold, stiff—as fitting for the Head of the Weasley Torvak clan. "You may be my son, but that does not excuse you, nor does it render you exempt from the prices that must be paid. You left of your own accord. I made allowance for your life when you left, because you were my son by blood!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Father. I did not mean to-

"My word was nothing to you. Everything that you are was nothing. That cannot be excused."

Shamed, Arthur's head nodded, faintly, slowly. His hands clenched and unclenched.


They danced across his son's face in leaps and bounds, settling before changing just as quickly as the other. But Septimus remained unmoved. There was no weakness to be shown.

"I can't."

"Then there is nothing more to be said." Septimus turned away. He started towards the door when a hand shot out and caught his ankle.

"Wait."

"Do not embarrass yourself any further than you already have. This disgraceful display of-

Arthur heaved himself up from the floor, careful to keep his head no higher than his father's waist. He shifted to kneel, sitting back on his heels as he placed his hands on his thighs and then forward to rest on the floor, before he bent forward. The coolness of the tiles on his forehead was enough of a stimulant to propel him forward.

Silence reigned.

"Please." The tone of voice shifted, a little less pleading, a little more demanding—a tad more authoritative.

"Please?" Septimus mocked.

"Memores acti prudentes futuri." Arthur murmured. He did not move.

The sound of feet shuffling filled the air.

"Lift your head." His father intoned. "Do you understand that which you invoke?"

"I have strayed. I have returned. I have—learned—my lesson. I humbly beg of you to grant me the chance to atone for my misdeeds," Arthur lifted his head, meeting his father's gaze square as he spoke. Daring him to contradict the truth in his words. He had known it would not be easy to do this. He had chosen this path. And now, he was trying to fix that which had been broken. He silently implored his father to give him the chance—and phrase—he needed.

"That was more than a misdeed, child." Septimus said, quietly. "A mere misstep or misspeak does not warrant the status of Blood Traitor."

"I was young and foolish. I seek forgiveness."

"Youth is forever wasted on the young."
"In the custom of our ancestors-" Arthur began.

"-let that which has been approved, be thus carried out."

SKIPPABLE SCENE FOLKS...

Silence settled down.

It hung thickly and darkly over the duo of father and son.

Septimus folded his arms, waiting.

After several long, agonizing moments, he took a breath, preparing to turn away.

Arthur moved.

Pale blue eyes locked onto soft hazel ones as Arthur bent his head.

Septimus watched as his middle son, kneeling, lowered himself further to kiss the tips of both polished boots. "Ab antique." He murmured. "From the Ancients and that which grant me the rank and position due, with their permission and acknowledgement, I receive your apology." He extended his left hand, the family signet ring gleaming in the flickering light of the dimly lit entryway.

Arthur straightened and knelt, reaching for the proffered hand with both of his own. He kissed the ring and then touched it to his forehead, murmuring his apology in the latin that their kind was so fond of.

It seemed like an hour, though reality made it naught more than a tense few seconds.

The signet ring hummed and flared to life, a jolt of warmth spiking through it, showing acceptance of the ritualistic apology and admittance to the family he'd once foolishly abandoned. The delightful warmth burned pleasantly through him, gently easing the pain of humiliation and coaxing his dignity back to the surface.

And then, he made to release the hand. His touch lingered, hesitating, he snuck an upwards glance at his father's impassive face and gently held it to his cheek. A gesture too plain to be anything other than what it was.

That strong hand fell to his shoulder once more and Arthur found himself in a hug that brutally squeezed the air from his lungs as his head was awkwardly nestled in the crook of his father's neck.

"Do not ever force me to do that again!" Septimus whispered harshly. He hugged his son tight, his own pale eyes glittering with tears that he would not shed. "Never." He squeezed a little harder than necessary and then slackened the punishing embrace. "Oh Arthur." His son made a quiet sound of agreement. "Whatever am I to do with you?"

END SKIPPABLE SCENE

"Am I forgiven?" Arthur had to ask. Under any other circumstances, any other person, he wouldn't have asked. Wouldn't have had to. But here, he did.

Those strong, powerful hands cradled his face, tenderly and the faintest of kisses was pressed to his forehead. "Forgiven." Septimus murmured. "I daresay your brothers will hate me."

"Mother?"
"For a few nights."

"...thank you."

"There is nothing to thank. Come along." They shuffled forward together, shoulder to shoulder. "...you said you had another son?"

"Yes. Bill. My oldest. I wrote what you wanted."

"Good. I'll send someone."

Septimus sent someone to retrieve Bill and Fleur, once Arthur had provided the necessary information. He'd then called for his wife, Cedrella, who had instantly appeared out of the shadows, her entire appearance as severe and imposing as her husband's. She looked to him for guidance and he gave a faint shake of his head.

"Septimus-"

"Not yet, love. I will hear him out and then we shall decide, agreed?"

"Swear it." She eyed him, warily.

"You do not trust my word?"

"Not when it comes to Arthur." She sighed.

"The same could be said of you." He countered, gently. "We shall have them to tea and we shall listen to what they have to say. If nothing else, then you cannot say that I never allowed you to see your missing grandchildren."

Here, Cedrella turned hopeful eyes to the uncomfortable children, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Indeed." She moved forward to close the gap between herself and her husband, pausing to kiss his jaw before moving around him and out of the room. "I shall have the elves send something up to the North sitting room. Do you require the others?"

"You might as well. I see no reason to keep this from them."

"Wise choice, husband of mine." She purred, melting away into the shadows once more, her slate-colored robes blending with the dreary interior as her footsteps faded off.

They gathered in the North sitting room, which turned out to be a room just as gloomy as any of the rooms in 12 Grimmauld place. It was dark and shadowed in every corner and there were musty portraits peering out from behind grimy curtains.

Arthur and his children sat together on a magically transfigured settee, large enough to hold all of them. The children crowded close around their father, the oldest one present looking after the youngest, while the twins mirrored each other with blank, expressionless faces.

Silence reigned.

"Father?" An imperious voice cut through the somber mood.

"In here, Bilius." Septimus looked up from where he had regally seated himself on a newly cleaned armchair. The upholstery was dull and faded, but it was dust-free. "You will have to enter with more than just your head." He commented, dryly, when his youngest son ventured to crane his neck around the darkened doorway.
"Did Mum have to pick this room?" Bilius entered, his appearance hooded and drawn as he moved in short, jerky movements. "It always feels alive."

"I believe it is her way of handling our comments in regards to upsetting the luncheon she planned last weekend." Septimus waved him towards a settee in the corner. "Sit down. It does not bite."

Bilius did, his hawk-eyed gaze flickering around the dreary depths of the room before amber eyes flared bright and in a burst of black feathers, he gave an inhuman screech.

Septimus was on his feet in an instant, a very visible barrier between his two sons. "Calm yourself, Bilius!" He trilled, his voice taking on a slight warble. "I did not order you to react. I asked you in on good faith."

"Traitor!" Bilius hissed. His wizarding robes had shredded themselves to useless rags and he now stood clad in trousers that bulged at the seams, while his entire upper torso had become thickly feathered with shimmering black tuffs. A feathered ruff flared with agitation around his neck as his face seemed to be fighting the transformation that would covert his features to that of an entirely avian nature. "You betrayed us! You fool! How dare you set foot in this ho-"

"Bilius!" Septimus roared. His pale blue eyes burned a dull amber hue as small feathers began to sprout along his cheekbones and down the side of his neck, disappearing into his shirt collar. "Calm yourself!" The words were weighted with magic as he spoke.

With visible effort, Bilius seemed to retreat into himself. His body trembled and shuddered as feathers melted back into pale, partially freckled skin. His head rolling back with the transformation, his eyes turning white, before one last shudder completed it. He stood, scowling, his amber eyes not quite fading away. "You threw him out!" He accused. "You called him a traitor-!"

Septimus strode forward two strides to grab his son's thick bushy hair and force him to kneel. Within a moment, Bilius crouched on his knees, before his father, babbling in a set of cheeps, trills and gurgles. After a long moment, the hand in the hair gentled and stroked the bushy locks twice before shifting to rest on an available shoulder.

Bilius' pleas settled to more coherent terms of English and the faintest glimmer of light showed tears on the broad face. He sat back on his heels, remaining on the floor, his head resting against his father's thigh, thankful for the hand of forgiveness that rested on his shoulder.

"Felix, as I am sure your eyes are always everywhere," Septimus began. "Spare me the headache and your mother the nerves and do not repeat your brother's disgraceful display when you enter."

Arthur's head snapped up at once and he stared, transfixed at the doorway where Felix stood, lounging, as if waiting for that very invitation before he entered the sitting room.

"Father." Felix acknowledged. He pushed away from the doorframe and entered the gloomy room. His gaze swept quickly over Arthur and company before settling on Bilius' compliant form at his father's feet. "Arthur. Bilius." His dark-eyed gaze flickered to the Weasley offspring and his lips quirked faintly. "And various nephews that I have never seen before." His head gave a slightly mocking tip towards them. "Mother says I am to make sure that the portraits are not listening." The brown-black eyes burned a light shade of amber, before all the curtains hanging 'round each portrait suddenly snapped shut, muffling and silencing any protest the portraits might have had. "I do hope you do not intend to blame Bilius for this slip-up, it is hardly his fault. You made all of us swear to never let Arthur set foot in this home age." The amber eyes darkened and faded back to their lovely brown-black gaze. "You made us swear on pain of death."
"Felix." Septimus greeted, somewhat grumpily. "I am head of this house, am I not?"

"As if you would be anything else." Cedrella snapped. She entered with three house elves trailing behind her, bearing silver platters, lovely china plates and embroidered napkins. "Serve the guests." She said, with a wave towards Arthur. "And for goodness sakes', both of you sit down somewhere!" This was directed to Septimus and Bilius as she accepted Felix's arm as he led her to an armchair across from his father. Her soft brown eyes locked onto Arthur's own hazel ones. "It is safe for you." She inclined her head towards the tea. "The children should only eat the biscuits."

"I knew that witch was trouble!" Bilius spat, his blue eyes fairly glowed with triumph. "I knew it! None of you would listen to me!"

"I listened." Felix retorted. "And drink your tea before I dose you with one vial too many of calming potion!"

His younger brother glared at him, but did drink his tea as requested, when encouraged by a glare from his mother.

"A Dragel." Septimus repeated. His own discomfort was mirrored by Arthur's pained expression. "I take it you didn't know at all?"

"Found out this weekend, actually." Arthur said, tightly.

"Really? Pray tell, what brought it about?"

"There was an—an attack at The Burrow."

"Burrow?" Cedrella's delicate eyebrows arched upwards in confusion. "You live in a burrow?"

There seemed to be something akin to horror in her voice.

Arthur managed a small smile. "No, others call it that and the name sort of stuck. It is a rather—cheerful place."

"Cheerful." Bilius snorted. "A hive full of-"

Felix surged off the armchair where he'd been nursing a cup of lukewarm tea and set it down a split-second before he tackled his younger brother straight off the settee across the room.

With strangely coordinated timing, both Septimus and Cedrella took a sip of tea, followed by a bite of biscuit. They appeared blissfully oblivious to the scuffles of their fighting sons just a few meters away.

"And?" His mother prompted. "What kind of an attack? Was it bad?"


"Those still?" Septimus frowned, holding out his teacup as a house elf replenished the hot brew. "I thought they had disappeared after a time."

"They have returned in recent years." Arthur explained. He had to remember that the Torvaks were nearly as notoriously private as the Dragels. They didn't necessarily hide from conflict, but they generally didn't engage in it, if there was nothing to be gained from it. "It was more so, because of a specific person."

Septimus' smile was strained.
"And which person was that?" His mother encouraged. She took another sip of tea and swallowed delicately. "Felix, dear, don't tear up the rug. I am rather fond of it."

By the time the brothers had finished their scuffle, Arthur had told his story and the children had been introduced. At that point, Septimus had insisted they retire to a more welcoming room and the house elves were sent off for the evening.

The other room turned out to be a brighter, warmer parlor with softly colored tapestries, comfortable chairs and a flickering fire on the hearth.

"William, Percy, Fred, George, Ronald." Septimus recited as he sounded off the names of his newly introduced grandchildren. "And you said there were two more?"

"Ginny is with her mother. She refused to leave." Arthur looked away. "Charles…went with Harry."

"Went with Harry as in…?" The question was prompted, the pale blue eyes narrowing. "Arthur. I am not asking for your honesty. I am requiring it."

"Harry Potter is a Dragel and he is mated to a young Earth Alpha. Charles was…taken by them."

"Taken or turned?" Bilius demanded. "There is a difference."

"I'm not sure." Arthur admitted. "No one saw what happened."

"Did you hear it?" Felix tried. "Was there anything that sounded off?"

"Many things." Arthur sighed, wearily. He rubbed his aching face and then for a moment, buried his head in his hands. This was taking so much more from him than he'd been prepared to give to so easily. He started when a gentle hand rested on his shoulder. He looked up to see his mother's compassionate face just inches away from his own.

"Oh Artie." She sighed, bending to kiss his wrinkled brow. "Your golden heart brings you the deepest of sorrows at times." She pulled him up from the settee, out from amongst his children and smothered him in the kind of hug that only a mother could give. "But it makes you glow like no one else." She soothed, rubbing one hand up and down his back, holding him close. She shot a glare at her husband.

Septimus smiled serenely and merely moved forward to join the embrace.

The weary wizard melted into the embrace, soaking up the affection and reassurance that meant so much from the ones that offered it.

Shuffling in the background alerted him that others were up and moving closer. Arthur was dimly aware of other hands and arms weaving their way around him, before his family—both his children—and his parents and siblings, wrapped themselves protectively around him. He sagged helplessly into the proffered strength and cried as ache in his heart refused to be soothed away.

Aiden scowled and grumbled in alternate bits as he made his way back to the fireplace where he'd left his new Consort. He clutched a handful of silvery herbs in one hand and a large, ornate staff in the other. His ears twitched, faintly, his hound nature begging to be released as he moved in the awkward, two-legged form.

There were some days he cursed his existence.
Some days.

Today was not one of them.

He wrinkled his nose as the damp smell of the earth clung heavily to the air. Normally, it wouldn't bother him, after all, he'd only need to stop breathing to avoid such unpleasantries, but he'd been tracking. And now it seemed that whatever had been stalking him, had left as quickly as it had come.

He didn't like that very much.

Death would not be happy, he mused.

But he continued on anyway, retracing his steps back the way he had come.

He hoped his new charge was recovering better. The herbs would help to soothe her throat and he was relieved to know that he'd managed to reach her in time. The potion she'd taken—whatever the vile concoction was—it had slowly begun to destroy her vocal cords and would have managed to collapse her internal organs in a quick matter. He hadn't known what else to do, other than to infuse her very veins with his own darkened magic. Forcefully.

It had to have been painful, he knew that much, the kind of magic he wielded wasn't the happy, fluffy, bunnies and roses sort. It was the more the screams of despair and the terrors of the night. But it was powerful. Oh so powerful. It had saved her—as he knew it would.

Her sudden pleas and frantic panic had pulled sharply at his non-existent heart.

His very non-existent heart. Hellhounds didn't have hearts. Not that he knew of, anyway, and if anyone would know, then it ought to have been him.

He huffed again and tromped a little harder through the underbrush, even as his shadowy feet made no actual sound upon the carpeted floor of the Forbidden Forest. He had traveled to clean up his Mistress' mess once more.

Not that he minded.

He could never mind.

He sighed and cast a look overhead. He could feel the oppressive air and mixing magics beginning to descend. That definitely wasn't good. He'd have to move Hermione—the moment he laid eyes on her. As a muggle-born witch, she certainly wouldn't be prepared for something as old and powerful as the Ancient Magics.


He growled low in his throat.

Torvak.

They were the only kind of creature that were bold enough to be streaking around overhead during such trying times as this. Perhaps it had been Fabrine tracking him again, but they knew better than to do so. Something was off about this. He'd have to tend to it another time. Especially now that a Torvak had suddenly shown up.
Aiden paused, waiting. After a long moment, he silently reached out with his talents and could not sense the lingering presence. It suggested that perhaps the Torvak had been running from the swiftly approaching doom. That made some sense. He cocked his head, listening, feeling with otherworldly senses that curled sensuously around him.

In the distance a nearly haunting melody wafted through the air.

He sighed. He could already hear the luring call of souls begging to be harvested. Soft and teasing, tantalizing as always.

Throwing his head back, Aiden rolled it to the sides and then upright. He could not go hunting on his own. Not without a Reaper and he knew of none that would be willing to spare him a luxury during what promised to be a rather large gathering.

He sighed again, the glower returning as he realized that the possibility of joining a gathering or a reaping was nil, with the whole having a little-suicidal-witch-turned-consort on hand.

Then again, she will most likely remain in a healing coma for days. That despicable potion was something else. How can mortal creatures stand to fill themselves with such wretched things to seek Death? Why cannot they simply summon her like a rational being? I hate cleaning up their sordid messes…

And so he scowled, silently complained and glared all the way back to the campsite where he'd left the recovering witch, covered in his travel cloak of thirty-nine shadows and kept close to a fire where he'd thrown in a handful of incense and a good chunk of herbs to produce a healing effect from the heat and smoke.

When he reached the campsite, Aiden simply stared.

He had to.

There was very little else he was inclined to do when that particular sight caught his eyes.

The camp was broken, dismantled and a certain half-dead witch was missing.

So he stared.

He hadn't cast any wards nor circles 'round the camp. He shouldn't have had to. There was nothing dangerous to him in this forest and certainly nothing stupid enough to take what was his—and he had branded her. She belonged to him after all and he always took very good care of what was his.

An itchy, irritated feeling blossomed in his left shoulder and spread to his right, creeping up his neck and settling into a dark scowl on his face. He was vaguely aware of the shadows swarming around him and rushing toward him with the subconscious summoning. They were reacting to his mood and his current mood was very vicious and very dark.

The ground trembled, faintly.

He stilled it by looking away from the destroyed camp.

Lips curled back in a sneer, showing gleaming, wicked fangs as his eyes burned a scorching red. "Whist." He hissed, the summoning spell to call his eyes and ears. "Come to me."

The spirits rose up at once, they'd been mired in the forest for ages, but they answered his call because he demanded it of them. They moaned and groaned as the dead of their kind were wont to
do, but they still when his gaze burned over them. "The girl." He spoke stiffly, coldly. "The mortal witch. Who took her?"

An unearthly howl split the air, shaking the ground and making the sky rumble.

It was long, mournful and breathtakingly eerie in its apparent displeasure.

Albus Dumbledore gripped his wand tighter as the sound seemed to dance around him.

"Albus?" Minerva paused, her own wand tight in hand. "Whatever is that creature?"

The elderly wizard had paled beautifully, but his blue eyes hardened over to pure ice. "Nothing to fret over, Minerva." He murmured, continuing onwards, up to Hogwarts. They would need to remove that ugly mark from overhead and see about strengthening the wards and whatnot. It wouldn't do for the children to miss an entire week of classes.

"It's ghastly." The mature witch sniffed, drawing her simple, green robes tighter around her, whether from habit or necessity, it was hard to tell. "Absolutely dreadful."

The howl repeated itself again.

Albus waved his wand and cast a muffilato over them both. He couldn't stand to have Minerva distracted right now. Not by that infernal howling. They needed to prove a point and they would, by removing Voldemort's mark over Hogwarts. The Dark Lord could unleash whatever dastardly plans he had, but so help him, Hogwarts was a school for children—and Albus certainly had no intention of giving up his school for the sake of a few scares.

Ancient magic! He nearly scoffed. Hogwarts was a perfect runic casting ground—and he surely didn't intend to lose it to Voldemort—who had certainly learned that much of the very school he'd attended, but Ancient Magic? That was ridiculous! It was as much a myth as the strange creatures a certain Mister Lovegood continually encouraged his promising daughter to search for.

Pity too. The girl was a bright witch.

A movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention.

His deputy headmistress was looking around, with her usual sharp-eyed gaze, but there was a strange, nearly fearful gleam in her eyes. A shadow seemed to flutter overhead, but Albus immediately dismissed it. He could sense his own kind and it was merely a stray Torvak. As to what it was doing at this particular time over this place, he didn't care. The recent events were sure to stir up every kind of creature and he knew it wouldn't be long before things started happening.

He would have to throw things together much faster than he had originally intended.

And a certain Harry Potter back at Hogwarts was a very necessary thing.

Minerva stumbled and she instinctively grabbed his arm for support. He did not wince when her bony fingers dug firmly into his arm, holding a tad tighter than necessary, perhaps. But he could fairly hear her heartbeat pulsing through her veins and—just as abruptly, she released his arm and stalked forward as if nothing had happened.

Albus pretended not to notice. It would've been best to do this with Severus—the man had always had incredible magic—but his resident Potions Master was nowhere to be found when he'd flooed back to his office and there was no one in the dungeons now. Something was wrong.
And he couldn't put his fingers on it.

It fairly rankled.

His blue eyes darted towards the clinging fog that seemed to be swooping down towards them.

It would be best to hurry up.

This was not a ritual to try during the night.

It was a rather disgruntled Dark Lord that swept into the bowels of his mountained residence, the one darkened hollow where he could both intimidate and hide from his worthless followers. Even crucioing hadn't relaxed him the way it usually did and he'd had to simply remove himself from his usual headquarters and escape elsewhere.

Yes, escape.

He raged and stormed in the caverns of that cursed manor, before he finally calmed enough to do what he generally did, once his temper simmered down.

Think and scheme of better way to bring about his original goal.

So he thought and thought, while reviewing the most recent events.

He couldn't fathom how it had turned out quite so horribly.

That worthless prophecy of Trelawney's had only caused him more headache than anything he had yet to encounter. Every attempt he'd made so far, to get rid of that miserable Harry Potter and to at least gain a steadfast foot in the wizarding world, had been met with equal resistance—almost. Lord Voldemort had some available options, but Tom Marvolo Riddle had acquaintances that were certainly questionable.

With a huff, the Dark Wizard-turned-Dark Lord cast the usual glamours to bring up the physical appearance that had once let him charm his way through any necessary negotiations. He stared at the grimy windows and shattered mirrors in the room he'd chosen to brood. His splinched reflection was irritating to squint at, so he waved his wands to have everything repair itself.

The cursed manor shuddered.

He smirked, wickedly at the lovely reflection that was now presented to him.

That was workable.

There were a few souls to scare—souls he hadn't seen in decades.

One stray thought niggled in the back of his mind and he wondered briefly about it. Then paused and quickly made a list. After all, it wouldn't do to forget the fundamental blocks for his dastardly schemes.

One, the Deathly hallows, they would prove useful, though most likely difficult to obtain, two, his horocruxes—it was dangerous to leave them lying about—three, the whereabouts of the former, pathetic dark wizard, Gillert Grindelwald, four, the burial ground of that famed Ariana Dumbledore, five, a meeting with that interesting creature fellow—the one with the black wings, that certainly hadn't been a veela—and six, he would have need of a necromancer.

Ah, yes. A most satisfyingly short list, with plenty of useful items and no particular order.
Voldemort sifted through his known followers, both those trusted and those not.

Here, he scowled, remembering a certain incident with a certain, stubborn, two-faced Potions Master. Did Snape really think he could fool him? Sure, he had agreed to allow the Potions Master to play the spy for him—but playing both sides of the game made him vulnerable to each side in turn and recently—in the past year alone—there had been a very obvious change in the wizard. Severus Snape was a powerful wizard in his own right, for all of his heritage declaring him a half-blood, but that had not been an issue from the first time he had seen the man duel.

Voldemort had decided then and there, that he'd wanted that dark-eyed menace for his own minion. Severus had always been faithful and loyal in every way possible, there were a few regrettable instances between them—such as the death of that pathetic Lily-witch—it had sent his only Potions Master running to that despicable Dumbledore and that had been that.

It had taken some finagling through Lucius to discover Severus' betrayal and Voldemort had allowed him a longer leash, just to see how far his pet would take it—if the most recent meeting was any indication, then apparently, Severus was willing to take it quite far. It had been the beginning of a very bad mood that had yet to lift.

Especially since he'd received news while in the midst of his plans about the attack meant for Harry Potter.

Harry Potter.

That wretched child.

It should have been an interesting afternoon of diversion—he'd meant it as a test to see how well his lovely Death Eaters were faring with all that new training he'd been allowing beneath the Carrows and a certain mad witch. He hadn't meant for it to be a bloody massacre!

Something shattered and consequently exploded somewhere in the distance, but Voldemort made no move to check his temper. It wasn't as if it could affect anything at present, anyway.

The report had come in of death, arrests and a sudden, fierce display of power.

Fierce.

Power.

Display.

The words had echoed hollowly as Voldemort had processed that bit of information and reacted appropriately. Of course, it was shortly afterwards that he had taken himself away to the Cursed Manor. It would have helped to curse his remaining followers senseless, as it was, he'd need every single one of them in the near future.

His mind flickered back to the list.

He could add Inferi to it as well as requesting a penseived memory of what had taken place at the Burrow, along with a list of the captured followers, he would need to see if they were worth redeeming or not. He had allowed the ever useful Lucius Malfoy to sit in Azkaban for a little while, just enough to teach the proud man a lesson—and then some dark creature had torn the place apart from the inside out.

There hadn't been anything he could discover from the ruins left behind. It had taken the workers
weeks to repair the damage and there was still a growing list for the death toll—even as the building was completed. There had been some rather impressive spells left behind to ensure that rebuilding the miserable prison had required blood. Blood that was not freely given.

Voldemort studied his list for a moment, tapping it thoughtfully with his wand. Necromancer was probably the easiest thing to handle—he could do it on his own and through old connections and that would set some other things in hand.

It took a moment for him to call forth the memories—they were old and foggy—to remember the name and the face of the charming young lady that he had once befriended. The young woman called Niko with a bright, gleaming smile, eyes the color of rainbow, hair as thick and black as ebony. She was neither muggle nor witch, but what she was, he hadn't even dared to ask nor question.

They had laughed and perhaps, even, almost loved. A strange, twisted love, for Niko was barely a wisp of a girl. She boasted the age of sixteen, but there had always been a shadow haunting her eyes, betraying a truth as if she were decades—no—centuries, older, than a mere sixteen years. She had fascinated him. Teased him. Taunted him.

And then, she'd disappeared.

But she had left one single gift behind.

He summoned her gift and waited.

It took some time.

He took a drink in the meantime.

It almost reminded him that he wasn't a shell, a husk of the wizard he'd once been. But those days were past and he'd had enough of brooding for today. Perhaps he could ask more than a few favors of her. If Niko was anything like she'd once been, then he would have an invaluable ally. If not, well, then, the few times they had dueled—he had bested her.

He would never lose.

In the aged jewelry box, a single, white pearl lay nestled on the old velvet.

Picking it up, he placed it in his mouth, chewed a few hard crunches, then spat on the ground.

A drop of blood, a lock of hair, a touch of blue fire and a scrap of a dementor's robe completed the necessary ingredients.

Without warning, a pillar of bright green flame streaked upwards, to a height of about six feet. It burned steadily, showing nothing at first, before a young face came into view.

Voldemort frowned.

That was not Niko.

In fact, it seemed to be a young man—definitely not a young woman!

For a moment, the two stared.

Then Voldemort sneered and the young man looked away.
"Tavit." He said, irritably. "Tavit McGwain." There was a pause, then a mumbled addition. "Necromancer. How may I be of service?"

"I require your services." Voldemort said, stiffly. He surveyed the youth with a calculated gaze.

"Obviously," Tavit retorted. "Is it immediate?"

"And if it is?"

"Then I shall step through. Do excuse me." The green fire shimmered and a moment later, young Tavit stood, fully formed and breathing on the floor of the west parlor in the Cursed Manor. He brushed off the sleeves of his ornate black and violet robes, with rich golden embroidery along the sleeves, collar and hems. He bore the same ancient, black staff, with glowing blue runes—the one that Niko had always kept nearby. His nose crinkled as if something in the air annoyed him, but nothing was said, as he turned an expectant face to Voldemort's glamoured figure.

"Are you always this presumptuous?"

"Do you require my services or not?" Tavit drawled in response.

Voldemort inclined his head. "Your price?"

"Shall be discussed after I know what it is you desire."

"Inferi." Voldemort said, bluntly.

Tavit rolled his eyes.

"and a body, as close to life as possible."

Startling blue-purple eyes snapped to his face, searching, scouring, as if to verify the words. "Male or female."

"Female."

"Human, creature or immortal?"

"...witch."

"Human then." Tavit snorted. "That will cost the usual."

"The Inferi?"

"When do you have need of them?"

"Ah, that would be a problem for you, wouldn't it?" Voldemort smirked. "How long can you hold the animations?"

"As long as you live." Tavit snapped back. "I do not bear my own enchantments."

"How...unique."

"Indeed." The young necromancer's cold smile spoke volumes. He inspected neatly trimmed and buffed fingernails. "Speaking of which, how did you come across that summoning pearl?"

"An old friend." Voldemort smiled, dangerously. "A very old friend. It seems, Mr. McGwain, that
we shall have a great deal of business to arrange."

Aiden howled to the sky until he felt his fellow brothers in shadows answer him.

He didn't care if he was working up a storm. He didn't care of the consequences of using so much death magic in a forest that held Unicorns. The blasted beasts could stay away for their own sakes. The snorting and pawing of thestrals nearby reminded him that not all creatures were nuisances, but he resolved to keep his own opinions, they served him quite fine.

Having called the dark creatures to him though, he directed them to where he'd left the mess. Death had ordered him to clean up, but she hadn't said that he needed to grovel and do it himself.

At that, he'd decided to make use of the ranks afforded him.

For now, his mind was stuck on the image of one distraught little witch.

He'd been able to pick up that there had been on set of creatures to tear up his campsite and another set to cart of the lovely Miss Hermione Granger. A few careful sniffs had alerted him to Fabrine—wings or flighted kind—he could not be entirely certain what they were, but then he'd scented Dragels.

Faintly, but the scent had been there nonetheless. Two of them, to be exact, one older and one much younger. One mated. One not. The mated one had taken his Hermione. His consort.

It made his blood boil.

He'd traced the scent all the way to the horrible castle—the one warded with Ancient Magic—he'd begged for entrance and it had barely granted him that much. Once inside, he'd prowled the halls until he had found the rooms. He'd been in time to discover the rooms—and portal residue. It was good news—she seemed to be in good hands, as the portal was headed for Nevarah, a realm that welcomed his kind—that was good. He could retrieve her from there later.

Hopefully.

He'd have to contact Niko again. It had been some time since he'd seen the girl. It never hurt to have one nearby after his own shadowed heart. She would be helpful to have nearby. Hermione was sure to have questions and require looking after—both things he did not have the patience nor the time for.

Niko would be useful there.

He hoped his howls had wakened her.

And with that thought, his feet went out from under him.

The castle promptly ejected him before he could further ruminate on a specific course of action and he had nearly cursed the wretched build before he'd heard the calls again.

It was a welcome call this time.

Reapers had been released.

Something had happened.

Something worthwhile.
Aiden smiled, darkly. His eyes flared a lusty red.

There would be good eating tonight.

Miles away in a musty bedroom, a young girl sat bolt upright in the center of the bed, rubbing her sleepy eyes with one closed fist and tugging on her excessively long, black hair with the other. Her pink lips curved into a pout as she squinted and listened, her hands falling back into her lap as she shivered in the drafty room.

She heard a whisper—someone calling her name—again.


The chant continued.

Her left ear ached and burned.

She stifled a whimper.

Then the chant quieted.

A loud mournful howl rang through the air and rattled the glass squares in their little window panes. Niko's eyes lit up in undisguised joy. The ache in her ear faded considerably as she scrambled off the bed, grabbing her long hair in a hasty handful before shoving her feet into ratty bedroom slippers.

The shadows in the little bedroom in the shack, were terrifying and dark in their own right. But to Niko, they were more like friends—just like that heart-wrenching howl that carried itself to her ears on the winds of the black moon. She pattered over to the window and carefully pried it open, leaning out as far as she dared, before cupping her hands 'round her mouth and giving back a loud, long, full-throated howl.

There was no answer, but she felt a sudden inkling of giddiness.

That was good.

She trotted over to the broken nightstand beside the rusty bed and picked up the crude dagger there. With a careful slice of one hand, she hacked through her thick hair until it lay in a lovely silken carpet beneath her cold, bare feet. She threw the dagger to the door, watching where it lodged, quivering, in the worm-eaten wood.

Settling down on the bed of hair, she clasped her hands together and whispered the incantation. Her hair burst into flame and the with a sudden, loud pop, she disappeared from that forsaken room.

And reappeared on the front steps of a certain building housing a family under the name of Snape.

Theo shifted restlessly beneath the covers, he could not lay still and think.

His mind refused to cooperate.

It seemed as if it had been hours since he'd murmured the perfunctory goodnight to his Beta and Harry had curled up comfortably in his arms, making soft, muffled noises of protest with every restless shift the Slytherin made.

He sighed and stared up at the dark ceiling.
The best thing to do was to simply go and ask the man himself. Ask him to his face and judge the reaction.

With a weary groan, Theo turned and shifted to bury his face in Harry's neck. He mouthed the mating marks, gently, insistently, until Harry squirmed and pulled away from him. A soft, rumbling sound—not quite a growl or a purr—had Charlie shifting in his sleep and moving, instinctively to open his arms to Harry.

A second later, Harry was comfortably nestled in Charlie's strong arms and both of them merrily snuffling away in their sleep.

Theo watched them for a second longer, then slid out, surreptitiously from beneath the covers. He was almost out the door when he heard Charlie's voice. It was thick and heavy with sleep, slurring with the words.

"S'thing wrong?"

"Can't sleep. I'm fine. Don't leave him." And Theo escaped before Charlie could ask another question. He stole quietly through the silent, shadowed halls within the Snape's quarters. His nose led him straight to the room he sought. He could scent Severus behind the door and that was really all he needed.

With a light hand, he tapped on the door and waited.

He knew Severus would hear. The man never missed anything.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Ah, this chapter was a bit tricky (and LONG...argh). Any mini subplots introduced in here will be cleared up in the next few chapters (I estimate about two-ish). This was NOT meant to be a Harry chapter, so please do not whine about it.

*exhausted* Harry is currently "sleeping" while all of this is happening and time is working itself together. The Arthur/Septimus scenes were necessary-Septimus is full-blooded Torvak, remember-Cedrella is not, so Arthur doesn't quite have all the primal instinctive points that his father does, but he can understand there are some things that need to be done, such as the formal apology. The phrases in Latin just mean "Ancient one" and "I've learned my lesson" as a loose translation.

If you have questions, ask away. I'll answer what I can.
NEVARAH : TERIUS SNAPE'S HOME : TUESDAY EVENING (Nevarah Time)

It took a minute longer than he expected, but from the soft murmurings that were abruptly silenced, Theo surmised that Severus was arguing with Terius. It seemed that was what they did most of these days. He wondered, inwardly, why Draco hadn't had any further inclinations before carrying their first child.

Most mateships waited until they were complete before children entered the equation. It bothered him, faintly.

The bedroom door clicked open and a scowling, weary Severus Snape glowered down at him. "Mr. Nott." He drawled—how he could drawl when still half-sleep was an amazing feat in its own—but his glare was perfectly effortless. "To what do I owe the pleasure at this abominable hour?"

"Did you know?" Theo forced himself to speak calmly and rationally. Emotions would only ruin this and he didn't really have the energy to spare for being emotional tonight. Or today. He was pretty sure it was practically morning already. He'd lost track of time.

"You shall have to be more specific. I assure you I know a great deal more than your-"

"Delores Umbridge used a blood quill in her detentions. I realized that I cannot ever recall any Slytherin ever having a private detention with her that year. Malfoy went wild to be on her good side, traipsing about with that ridiculous excuse of a club and then there was that—confrontation with—but none of us. There were horror stories aplenty, but none within the dungeons. We served all of our detentions with you that year. No one else. Not even Filch. You all but swallowed us whole if we dared to bring trouble in any way that did not fit the Slytherin house. So I am asking you, because I need to know. Did you know?"

Severus stared down at him, impassively. "I would ask what prompted this, but my curiosity is neither so-"


"What is it you wish to ask of me, Mr. Nott?"

"I want to know if you knew what that wretched woman was up to!"

"And if I did?"

"Did you tell no one else?"

Those aristocratic eyebrows arched upwards, elegantly. "I beg your pardon?" He said, imperiously.

That was answer enough. Theo felt a sudden, stabbing pain registering somewhere in his stomach. It reeked, faintly, of betrayal. For this man standing before him, more wizard than man, had been there for him countless times in the past few years. A man with so many secrets and so many layers, that it was nearly impossible to know anything of him—and yet, it hurt. "You knew and you told no one?"
"There was nothing to tell."

"That is not nothing!"

"It did not affect you. My duty was complete." Severus bit off. "To whom should I have shared such…things, with? Pray tell, Mr. Nott."

Theo opened and shut his mouth. There were many things he knew and many things he didn't. There was an equal amount of things that he knew he would never understand, either. This, perhaps, was one of them. He hadn't thought it would actually hurt.

Severus' glower deepened by several degrees. "If you have wakened me for a half-baked argument out of some misguided-

"It is far too early for insults, Severus." Terius chided, gliding up behind the Potions master, also clad in a black, silken dressing gown. He slid his arms around the Alpha from behind, hugging him and resting his chin on Severus' shoulder. His expression was tired, but indulgent and his face was lightly flushed as if he had been doing anything but sleeping. He flashed a small smile to Theo—soft, welcoming, tempered. "Theo."

"I am not a huggable-" Severus began, bristling at the touch in the presence of an audience, even as Terius' ministrations eased a single wrinkle from his brow.

Terius calmly pressed a kiss to the exposed patch of skin on the Potions Master's neck as if in forgiveness. He nuzzled it gently, a second later, asking a silent apology. "I take it Harry's trip to the healers was enlightening?" He inquired—this was directed to Theo, as if having a conversation while feeling up Severus was a perfectly normal thing.

Theo blinked. "How did-?" He shook his head. There was no connection between his conversation and Harry. Well, not an obvious one anyway, and he really did not want to see what he might have interrupted.

"We waited up for you, but Draco tired and Calida did not wish to sleep alone." Terius shrugged, his arms tightening around Severus. "Is there something that you needed from—Severus?" He stopped and looked to the black armful of wizard he held.

Severus had become rather pale and his entire body had frozen, as if in shock, no longer fighting the impromptu embrace.

Theo's golden gaze narrowed. "You could have said something." He hissed. "You could have told the other heads of house."

"Potter?" Severus licked his lips. The black eyes were dark, piercing and sharp, demanding answers in that typical way.

"He prefers Harry." Terius said, exasperatedly. "Would it really pain you to address the boy with-" He looked to Theo in puzzlement as the young man made a strangled sound in his throat. "What?"

"They removed a Blood Seal today." Theo said, neutrally. "A Blood Seal. Imagine that. I couldn't think for a moment, where one might acquire something like that, especially while attending the esteemed Hogwarts Academy of witchcraft and wizardry."

The paleness grew to a startling whiteness. "A Blood Seal?" Severus repeated, hoarsely.

"Severus?" Terius released him at once and turned his Alpha to face him, searching his face rapidly
for any interpretable signs. He frowned, turning to Theo. "Kitchen. Now." He ordered, casting a weary glance over his shoulder and into the room where Draco and Calida slumbered peacefully, cuddling the same pillow between them.

WEASLEY MANOR : UNPLOTTABLE : TUESDAY MORNING (Earth Time)

Fred woke the next morning to find himself sleeping in the middle of a bed shared amongst as his fellow siblings. It took a moment for the strangeness to register. He blinked, staring upwards to an unfamiliar vaulted ceiling and then frowned when he could not place his new surroundings. It took him a scant few seconds to realize that there were things and other stuff that didn't quite make sense.

The redhead rolled over from his stomach to settle on his back instead. His busy mind flickered back and forth, before finally finding the information his waking self desired.

And then he remembered.

His father's serious confession.

His mother's crying face.

The ridiculous rituals and rules they'd had to follow to find an unplottable manor.

Admission into Weasley Manor.

Acceptance by the Head of house for their clan—Septimus Weasley.

Septimus Weasley, also known as his grandfather.

Bilius and Felix Weasley—two uncles he'd never known he'd had.

A strangely satisfying expression on his father's face—one that he'd never seen before.

Fred stared, unblinking, up at the dreary vaulted ceiling and wondered at the time. Instinct told him to draw as little attention to himself as he gathered his bearings together, so he didn't move beyond a few precious inches. Something grabbed a hold of him and held on for dear life. Fred snorted.

He identified the warmth clinging to him as George—his twin was always something of a cuddler—and Merlin, he'd never been able to coax him out of the habit. The lump behind him turned out to be a scowling Percy, who—yes—did indeed scowl in his sleep, and Ron was sprawled across the remainder of the large bed, one arm and leg hanging out the edge.

It took another snort to keep him from rolling his eyes, knowing Ron's recent fussiness of late, Fred could guess that he'd griped and moaned about being stuck in the middle so that Percy would give up his usual spot simply for some peace and quiet. He could vaguely remember his father and his uncles—Merlin, he had more uncles now—carrying them to bed and wishing them a goodnight's rest.

He'd wanted to know how they could possibly have a goodnight's rest, but he hadn't been about to ask when he'd felt his father kiss his forehead and murmur several words in Latin.

As far as Fred could recall, he'd never known his father to do that. Mum was always the one with the hugs, the kisses and the occasional smack to his bum—either with her own hand or by decree of her famed wooden spoon. Her soft brown eyes lingered in his mind's eye and he felt a distinct, peculiar ache for her. It made him hot, bothered and frustrated on a level that he could not quite
understand.

George nuzzled his twin's stomach, cuddling even closer with a sleepy sigh.

Fred rolled his eyes and shifted the covers to reach down and thump said twin on the head. He would permit the cuddling while sleeping—because he had no other choice—and because he knew it kept certain nightmares at bay. Nightmares that George would never speak about, but images that would haunt him throughout the day. For the night, he'd tolerate it, but most certainly never while he was awake.

He'd decided that it didn't matter after their tenth birthday. They were twins. He was old enough that it no longer bothered him. He'd always look out for George. He couldn't possibly do otherwise, not when his twin readily did the same for him, without so much as a second-thought.

He waited for the thump to register, hand still fisted in case a second dose was necessary.

It was not.

There was the typical freezing—as the relaxed sleeping body tensed and came to wakefulness—then George would inevitably freeze and after a long, silent moment, disengage himself from his living pillow.

"Gred." George mumbled, sleepily. "Was a nice dream. Y'ruined it." His twin yawned and stretched with slow, calculated movements.

Fred snorted, but took note of the morning address. Just because he was in a cynical mood that morning, didn't mean that George would copy that. If they didn't settle on a suitable attitude compromise between the pair of them, it would be painstakingly easy to tell them apart. "Morning to you too, Forge." He grunted—and silently counted in his head. He could count himself as the more outgoing one in their twinship, but George was just as singular and unique in his own way. Fred had been waiting since yesterday for the meltdown that hadn't shown itself yet. It was bound to happen soon. He was just barely holding back his own.

And one, and two and, three and-!

George sat bolt upright in bed with a yelp that woke Percy, who sent Ron tumbling off the bed and to the ground.

His mind certainly connected the dots much quicker than he had, Fred thought gloomily as he reacted out of instinct. "Forge?" He grabbed his twin 'round the waist before his distraught brother could also topple off the edge of the bed and to the cold floor. "Thought you said it was a good dream." He huffed.

"It wasn't a nightmare." George fought for a second and then relaxed. He twitched and pulled free of Fred's loose embrace. "It's…it's real, isn't it?"

"You woke me for that miraculous revelation?" Percy muttered, groggily. "Merlin, why me?"

"I ask myself that every morning." Fred shot back.

"Owww…" Ron whined from the floor. "It's cold down here."

"...and he's still sleeping." George yawned, chuckled and yawned again. The faintest hint of light touched his eyes and he patted Fred's head as he slid out from beneath the tangle of sheets and duvet. He stood and stretched, rolling his shoulders and neck for a moment. "Nice room." The
hawk-like eyes took in every quick detail. "First dibs on the bath."

Fred didn't even bother to stop him.

If George wanted to have his little meltdown on his own—that was fine with him.

That uncomfortable twinge in his chest, deepened to a very realistic pang.

A painfully eerie screech replayed itself in his mind—a screech where his mother had screamed and Harry—Harry had split the earth open in two.

Fred winced.

Breakfast among the Weasleys wasn't too different from what they were used to, Percy noted. At least, coming from The Burrow, there was the usual bustle of too many people in too-small a space. The scent of food wafting through the air, every kind of dish imaginable and voices shouting back and forth to each other.

Various redheads and brunettes stumbled into the small line of Weasleys making their way towards the dining room table as the note left on their nightstand had instructed.

Percy managed to keep his errant siblings mostly in line and as respectful as could be hoped for them. His father was nowhere to be found, but the everpresent and constantly moving Cedrella Weasley—his grandmother—the oldest Weasley child mentally reminded himself, was present and she caught sight of them as they hurried by.

There were house elves busily working away and breakfast appeared on the long, rectangular table, heirloom dishes gleaming in the sunlight dining room. The dining room opened into the kitchen where busy hands and feet worked steadily. Cedrella herself bustled in and around the house elves, in a strangely sort of coordinated dance that didn't seem the least bit unnatural.

"Morning boys!" She called out, cheerfully. "Did you sleep well? Are you hungry? Your father's a tad busy, he'll be here in a second. Sit down where you've a mind to." And without a second glance, she dived back into the bustling kitchen once more.

Percy looked from her to the positively enormous dining table and swallowed. He reminded himself to buck up and take it in stride, after all, a bit of finery wasn't something to throw the wheels. "Ron, stop that!" He growled at the gawking younger boy. He knew his kid brother could wrestle his child-like mind into the cunning, strategic mind that they all seemed to possess—if he had a mind to. Currently, it didn't seem like he had a mind to. Currenty, it didn't seem like he had a mind to.

A look to the twins didn't particularly leave him feeling any more hopeful for a decently turned out family in the absence of his parents, as the twins were very much their own entity and without Bill, Charlie and Ginny around, this stood out more than usual. It worried him, slightly to note the mismatched scowls on their faces. Fred—or was it George—they were far too good at trading places that he'd eventually given up trying to tell them apart. He was sure there was a secret to it, but he'd never ask them and his older siblings had never volunteered the knowledge. One of them, he decided, irritably, was upset about something and the other wasn't quite all there yet.

Wonderful.

Percy sighed. He would be missing a day of work today, but he'd put in for a desperately needed week off—at his father's insistence and had yet to slow down and process half of the news that had been shoved on them all. He scowled, classically.
Fred-or-George elbowed him. "Eating lemons so early?" The teasing was more mocking than anything.

"Stand straight and at least try to respectable!" Percy shot back. He passed the elbowing down to the still-gawking Ron. "Did Bill come last night?"

George-or-Fred snorted. "If he did, then he'd be here, dontcha think?"

"Seppy." Cedrella leaned out from her position near a full kitchen counter to turn and plant a full kiss on her husband's lips. Her hands were still buried in a bowl of dough, up her elbows, half-covered in flour, even as one of the elves around her tried to spell it from her robes. "Morning, louse." She greeted.

"Ceddy." He returned, delivering a smack to the bum for that cheeky comment. "Morning to you too."

She winked at him. "Do tell your grandchildren to sit down. They're all looking at me as if I'm about to devour them whole and I swear I wouldn't." Her smile grew wider. "I could not convince them to have a seat, but the others are coming in, Teritus and Primus are missing. I assume you sent one of them for the missing lad?"

"I'd be worried too, if I saw all of that." Septimus retorted, he'd snuck a glance at the fully dressed table and gave a slight shake of his head. "There's no need for such formalities." He squinted. "I sent Tertius, he has the best manners out of us all."

"Manners my foot!" His wife snorted, a rather unladylike sound. "If that man sets foot in my house again with that ridiculous-!"

"I shall warn him."

"Septimus!"

He kissed her cheek. "I swear I shall warn him or ban him."

She huffed. "Fine. But there's nothing wrong with the table-"

"Do you want them to eat or die from indigestion?"

"They wouldn't die from-"

"They would." He interrupted, calmly. "And you'll scare them silly before we've even started." He sighed. "Merlin knows it's going to be a bad day." A grim line stole over his face. "Have the elves change the table settings, hmm?" He turned to go.

"But Artie's here and he deserves a-!"

He silenced her with another kiss, this one a tad longer and deeper than before. He finished with a peck to her nose. "Artie is out in the training ground, having his head handed to him on a silver platter." He corrected. "And you know as well as I do, that our son never cared for finery and all its frippery."

Her smile was brilliant as she spun back around to blend into the kitchen frenzy.

Septimus smiled to himself, turning back to face the line-up of Weasley children along the dining room wall. They were clearly uncomfortable and rather ill-at-ease, though they each showed it in a
The eldest, Percy, was so perfectly straight and postured, if he didn't look clearly and deeply into the lad's eyes, he wouldn't have known just how much fear hung in the air.

The twins were near mirrors of each other, except for one, George—or was it Fred—seemed to have a deeper scowl than the other. They stood mostly straight at attention and neither would meet his gaze. That was quite curious. Septimus filed it away for later thought.

Ron shifted uncertainly and swallowed hard as he became the object of attention.

There was something about the youngest male that did not set well with him, but Septimus did not think too deeply on it. He wished to reserve judgment until he knew his grandchildren a little better and there were still three missing, from Arthur's admission. The eldest, William—if he recalled correctly—was due to arrive, along with his Veela fiancé, that was a nice addition to their family he mused.

Much better than Dragel trappings. He scowled. Listening to Arthur's sad tale the night before, he found himself wishing he had done more than simply protest when his favorite son had started seeing the witch. She'd managed to let the second-eldest son escape—and from the pensieved memory that Arthur had reluctantly consented to, Septimus knew that the missing Charlie was most certainly Dragel-kind. There would be no hope of returning him to Dragel-roots. He sighed. It had been heart-breaking though, to set eyes on Ginevra, or Ginny, as they called her, the first daughter amongst the Weasleys in years. There were almost always sons, at least, in the pureblooded lines.

Here, the Head of House scowled, darkly. This was a sordid mess Arthur had brought him. It would take time to undo all that was done.

"Septimus?" One dark-haired redhead appeared at the kitchen doorway. "Did you see what was happening in the courtyard?"

"Which part of it?" Septimus perked a brow. "The one where two of my sons are trying to behead the third or the one where my lovely daughter-in-laws are intent on digging a pit to the neverrealms?"

"They are?" The fellow perked up quite visibly. "I don't suppose my daughter would happen to be with them, would she?"

Septimus thought for a moment, recalling the visual on demand. "Hmm, I don't believe so." He blinked. "Who's winning?" Arthur had seemed woefully out of practice as he'd dressed this morning in the more formal wizarding attire that the Torvak favored. Septimus had paused to straighten his cravat return the cufflinks that bore the Weasley family crest—the ones that had always been specially crafted for Arthur alone.

Here, the man cracked a smile. "Artie, of course. It's good to see the boy back, he's honest, isn't he?"

Here, the Weasley Patriarch looked up sharply, his pale blue eyes blazing. "Mark your words carefully, Primus." He said, stiffly. "You may be my oldest brother, but you are no more exempt than Arthur is, merely for the matter of blood."

Primus stepped aside as the newly infuriated Septimus swept past in a swirl of his wizarding robes. Cedrella sighed. "Did you have to do that one, love?" She leaned out from the kitchen section again
to accept a kiss to her cheek and give one in return. "How is-"

"She's fine. Sulking, but fine." Primus gave a thin smile. "My darling wife will eventually manage to come to some ridiculous conclusion to allow her to save face and then, we shall see her again. Which is why I am here in the first place." He cast a glance towards the dining room table. "News carries quickly and I had to see."

Cedrella wrinkled her nose and handed off her mixing bowl to an available elf, standing with her arms held out to be properly spelled clean. "Which means if you're here, then it was that idiot Tertius sent off to retrieve William."

"Ah, so he will come?"

"I dislike speaking in riddles, Primus." She said, stiffly. "Either speak plainly, that which you mean to say or do not speak at all." She checked her hands, as if looking for any stray specks of flour or sugar. "Shall I introduce you to the grandchildren or do you know them all, already, seeing as William has made such an impression?"

"He works as a curse-breaker for Gringotts." Primus said, smoothly. "That is admirable work."

"Admirable how?" Cedrella shot back. "You'd best not have been tampering where you haven't a mind to."

"And if I was, I would have done it in a way as not to be caught out—least of all by you." He offered his arm to his sister-in-law. "I assume the council is postponed for now?"

"Probably." She mused, taking his arm. "Septimus was tossing and turning all night over this. He says if something of this magnitude could happen, then it means Dragels are waking and we—we will have to fight again, Primus." She shuddered, a pale, gaunt look settling over her pretty features. "I loathe the days of war."

"Perhaps it is only a passing moment." He soothed, his hand resting over hers. "Let us hope for the children's sake."

"Yes, for the children indeed."

In the outside courtyard—divided in two—the loud clashing and banging of wooden training staffs filled the air. On one side of the pit, two young women in tunics and leggings tucked into boots, sparred with each other in practiced ease. On the opposite end of the pit, three redheaded brothers engaged in far more vicious staffplay.

"I'm surprised you had time to practice!" Bilius called out. He ducked and circled, taking the opening that Felix left for him. "I'd think you'd have been too busy between all those children and the wife."

"I'm surprised you haven't improved at all." Arthur shot back. "It was no hardship to practice."

"Less talking and more fighting." Felix admonished. "Arthur, keep your chin tucked—you still have it as if—oof!" He grunted as the tip of Arthur's staff connected solidly with his stomach. "On second thought, I'll keep my suggestions to myself."

"See that you do." Arthur retorted. "I haven't practiced in years and yet, two on one?"

"It's fair." Bilius snapped. "It's more than fair."
"If it's a fight you're spoiling for, I'm happy to oblige!" Arthur's soft hazel eyes narrowed meaningfully. "My mind may be slow, but my body remembers."

"Indeed it does." Felix blocked the next blow and spun back, allowing Bilius to step in. "Done warming up then?"

"Indeed." Bilius laughed.

The fight began.

Two against one was certainly quite one-sided—on Arthur's side—there were brief moments of hesitation, a few lucky strikes and moments where it seemed like he would not be able to retaliate. But for the few blows landed, he delivered equal and double the measure, his strikes swift, sure and deadly. Felix was the first to bow out when Arthur disarmed and pinned him, Bilius was the last to remain.

Circling each other, the two brothers started forward, Bilius with a downward strike, Arthur with a side-swipe. With a flick of the wrist and a little extra twist, Bilius' staff flew to the dusty ground several yards away. Arthur dodged the few physical blows and within a matter of seconds, floored his youngest brother and pinned him down, the staff pressing heavily into his neck.


Amber eyes glittered with hostility. "Never!"

Arthur pressed a little harder, his face impassive, knowing fully well what the staff was doing to his youngest brother. It wasn't his real staff—that he would not receive until the Council deemed him worthy of it. This was just an ordinary practice staff, slightly roughened from use, uneven in its carving and hardly weighted at all.

It was pure humiliation.

"Give. In." Arthur repeated, keeping the pressure constant. "If not for my sake, then we shall do this again, but I ask of you not to hold my misdeeds against my children."

"Blood traitor!" Bilius gasped. "You left for that rotten-"

"Enough, Bilius-!" Cedrella's voice came from the left. "And let him up, Arthur. Now!"

The authority in her voice demanded that they both obey, but it wasn't until Septimus bent down to pick up Bilius' fallen staff, that both sons broke away to track his movements. Septimus hefted the staff in his hand and then calmly threw it to his wife.

In the moment where it had left his hand to hers, Arthur sprang up and backwards from his crouched position over his brother. He was caught around the shoulders and waist by Felix, who gently pried the practice staff from his younger brother's hands, despite Arthur's sound of protest. Felix tossed the staff to his mother, who then dropped Bilius' own by the youngest Weasley's side.

Cedrella skipped back a few steps, hefting the practice staff in her hand and inclining her head to the fallen son. "On your feet, Bilius and be quick about it." She tucked a stray curl behind one ear. "I left something baking in the kitchen."

The duel between Mother and Son was over in a matter of minutes. It was easy to see that Arthur had learned his staffwork from his mother, who was just as quick and light on her feet as he had been. The strength behind the blows was visible only in the slight tremor of Bilius' arms as he
countered, blocked and stuck in a patterned set of moves.

He was cornered, disarmed and floored in short order.

Cedrella merely stood over him this time, an expression of disappointment on her pretty face. "When the staff teaches us a lesson," She murmured, the tip touched lightly to Bilius' exposed throat. "We learn it and move on. We do not fight it."

Bilius swallowed and nodded.

"Verbal answer, please." Septimus called from his watchful post near the edge of the courtyard.

"We do not fight it." He repeated.

"Good lad." She offered him a hand and perked a brow until he took it. She soothed the defeat with a kiss to the cheek and a ruffle of his hair. "Don't hold grudges you don't want to." She searched the simmering amber eyes. "Arthur was always your favorite brother, wasn't he? Give him a chance." She sent him off to wash-up with a quick smack.

He yelped and danced away, shooting an injured look over one shoulder.

Felix snickered softly and finally released Arthur from the vise-like grip he'd started the moment Arthur had made a move to interfere. "There, that wasn't o bad, was it?" He brightened, looking up. "Uncle Tertius!"

A black-feathered form drew closer overhead, bearing two armfuls.

Within a matter of a minute, the feathered form became the man in question as he touched down in mid-air, setting his precious bundles unsteadily on their feet. His lighter, bronze-tinged hair was a change from the typical Weasley red, but the same warm-brown eyes shone in the familiar face as Bill and Fleur were deposited on the courtyard. "Felix. Septimus, Cedrella." He acknowledged. "I found them, the trip was a tad tricky." He frowned. "There's hellhounds prowling about out there." He gave a jerk of his head to the sky as his black-wings shuddered and slowly shrank away, folding back into him. The folds of his robes settled back where they ought to.

"Dad!" Bill surged forward, after quickly checking over Fleur who looked rather green from the method of transportation. "What's going on? What happened? Where's Mum and the others?"

Arthur gladly folded his eldest son into a warm hug. "It's a long story." He managed at last, reluctantly including Fleur in the hug when Bill tugged her along as well. "A long story. I'm glad you're safe." Suddenly, Arthur wanted to be back inside the manor and as closely surrounded by all his children as possible.

By the time Bill was brought up to speed and everyone was introduced all around, it was quite close to lunchtime and a few tempers were spiking over their natural marks. Several representatives from the Noble families had come on behalf of their Heads of House or the Council, the news of Arthur's return having spread rapidly during the night.

Septimus wearily calmed them down, with pointed looks to his own brothers, a few glowers to those in higher rankings and a deliberate hand on his wife's shoulder, sensing she was about to hex a few of them senseless. "I understand there is a great deal of...business to be taken care of, before this is acceptable, however, in the light that these are children here-" he gave an apologetic nod to Bill at that. "-bearing Dragel seals, surely you understand that time is of the essence?"

They grumbled amongst themselves, but no one could argue that. For the Torvaks, Children were
rare and precious things. The Weasley clan was by far the most prosperous in terms of their many children, every other generation. Other clans were not quite as lucky. To have five potential Torvaks present was cause for cooperation.

"Have you viewed the seals?" This came from Heron, a young man of slender build, bearing the crest from the Orwitch family. "Can they be removed?"

"They are suppression and restraining seals." Arthur spoke up then. He'd gathered his children around them and now, sat with a rather worried Ron, in his lap. "They are three-fold and were cast at birth."

"Three-fold?" Tertiuss' wife, Amanda spoke up, with narrowed eyes. "That is ridiculous! Unheard of. No individual can cast three separate seals on a singular being without severe consequences—and to insinuate that this—wife—" the title was spat out. "—could manage seven of them," Amanda drew herself up. "Was she mad?"

"Spell at conception, ritual at birth and a potion afterwards." Arthur continued, as if he'd never been interrupted.

Cedrella pressed a hand to her mouth as if to stay the cry that threatened to escape. "I suppose she had to cover every trace, yes?"

Amanda scoffed, but the weary look in her eye seemed to take on a slightly mad glint of its own. "Even if she did manage to cast it, surely it is not so hard to remove them?"

"Torvak seals, yes." Heron spoke, haltingly. "But Lady Amanda, these are Dragel-seals, I would wager they are sealed in blood, correct?"

Amanda paled considerably, as did several of the other members present in the room. "Dark magic!" She whispered, staring at the children in horror. "She used dark magic on children!" She turned to her husband. "Does the witch live?"

"Amanda!" Tertiuss grabbed her arms, giving a slight shake. "Get a hold of yourself, woman!" His voice was calm and controlled. "That is not our quest to worry of. No sentence has been given—" he looked to Septimus for confirmation. "And so we will do nothing. Right now, we must concentrate on these children." He frowned. "There may be hope for the daughter as well, if she is a year younger as you say." He frowned. "Did she tell you anything else, Arthur?"

"She said she did the rituals on her own and bore the marks that were necessary." He heaved a sigh. "She also said…" he trailed off, this last admission weighing more heavily on him than anything else.

"Yes?" Septimus encouraged. He squeezed his wife's shoulder when her hand came to rest on his.

"She said that—Albus Dumbledore helped her cast them."

More cries of outrage rose up around the room and Arthur sat tall and proud, even as his children shifted to lean closer to him.

"Well, there's nothing I can do about it." Heron said at last. He stepped back from Bill, wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead. "Blood magic is blood magic." And here, he quickly traced a sign in the air and bowed his head, quickly.

"Forbidden arts." Amanda murmured. She repeated the same sign and touched it to her forehead. "Can it not be broken?"
"The light will always prevail." Cedrella intoned. She rose with dignity from the seat she'd taken before her husband. "I take it we shall need to reach into the shadows, then?"

"How far?" Tertius exchanged a glance with Primus.

Primus rose with a sigh. "Shall I call for Regulus?"

Murmurs of dissent filtered through the room—yet again.

"Regulus Black?" Heron's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure? He is not—natural."

"Perhaps, but it does not mean we cannot take advantage of that which is offered to us. Septimus?" Primus looked to his youngest brother. "Shall I?"

The Head of House sighed, softly. "Yes." He looked away. "Call him alone, first."

Regulus Black turned out to be something of a failed experiment. His features were decidedly of the Black family, but softened, and gentled as if he'd taken a great deal of practice to wear off his own sharpened corners. The nature of his failure was explained in the very way he was introduced to the Weasley children.

Ron's trademark exclamation was muffled by his father's hand and Percy's pinch to one vulnerable thigh. The Twins gave a start, but made no other reaction as Fleur gasped, loudly and let herself be pulled onto Bill's lap.

Regulus Black was very visibly a wizard-Torvak hybrid—or mistake—depending on which you chose to accept. He wore no typical wizarding robes or clothes, save for a simple pair of trousers and a plain, belt with an unobtrusive buckle. There were silvery, magicked cuffs about his wrists, with glowing runes in blue and green. No shoes, his feet—or rather, his claws—were gnarled and scaled. His entire upper torso was covered in thick black feathers, neatly groomed and pressed flat. His wings turned out to be partial forms, instead of separating from his arms, they remained attached, moving with his every movement.

His face—the human features—were surrounded by a neat halo of smaller, finer, softer black feathers and his did not hold the trademark hint of amber, rather, they were a simple soft grey. A single gold chain hung 'round his neck, a tarnished, twisted locket. His hair was long, smooth and untangled, gathered into a makeshift ponytail at the back of his head, tucked behind his ears to show simple, gold hoops through each earlobe.

An air of sorrow seemed to hang around him as he entered the room, eyes lowered, Heron and Tertius standing behind him, like guards. "Lord Weasley," Regulus murmured, he bowed formally and as best as his half-form would allow. "I am honored that you would see me out for. How may I be of assistance?"

Arthur himself had a moment's worry where it took him a deep breath and the action of Percy mistakenly pinching him—instead of Ron—to keep from saying anything aloud. The last he had ever heard of a Regulus Black, was that the lad sorted into Slytherin and initiated as a Death Eater was quite dead, at least, if the Black family tapestry was anything to go by.

Septimus' pale blue-eyed gaze darted quickly between Arthur and the newcomer. He could easily piece together the gaps there. "I am asking you here on behalf of your wife."

Regulus lifted his chin, eyes still averted as a sign of respect, but head held high. "Yes?"

"These children have been sealed."
Regulus' head snapped up, his grey eyes darkening. It immediately sought out the Weasley children and focused on each child in turn. "What kind of seals?" His gaze flickered back to Septimus.

"Dragel seals."

Regulus swallowed. He looked away.

Silence strung up the tension in the room.

"Jun has quite the temper these days." He said, at last. "I do not know if she will come."

One of the noblemen snorted. "Then tell her it is an important matter of life and-"

"She has not forgiven any of you." Regulus interrupted. "And should she agree, she will not accept an audience."

"I don't understand." Arthur broke in. "Father-"

"Regulus achieved his status as one of us—through a botched potion." Septimus explained, quietly. "There is no Torvak blood in the Black line, the potion he took near death, brought him back as—well, that."

"And?"

"And, the Black line holds ties to Dragel blood, remember?"

Oh. Oh. Arthur blinked, understanding dawning. "So he can-?"

"I cannot." Regulus murmured. "But my wife can."

Wife? Arthur scrambled to recall potential proposals between houses. He'd seen the list several times during his training, it had been part of the family history. Yet, he couldn't think of any respectable witch that would've married the Death Eater. Here, Arthur snuck a glance towards the man's arms, only to see the completely feathered appendages, with the fingers not quite made into talons, but still more feather than skin.


At that, Arthur thought he might quite possibly have reached his limit of surprising revelations for the day.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Arthur can fight! whoohoo. Go Arthur! lolz. I hope that fight scene was a good one. I like the idea of Arthur with a staff. :) (and I thought it'd be a good twist if his Mother was the one who taught him. heehee). Regulus is alive 'cause I like him. :P Ah, the subplot chapter evens out next chappy, the Weasley kids seals are coming off, cute!harry and cute!Draco to follow, then Niko, then Aiden, then at last, back to Quinn. Whew. Got it? Good! Thanks for reading!
RECAP: Arthur, Percy, Ron, Fred, George, Bill and Fleur are in the unplottable Weasley manor, under Arthur's father, Septimus' protection, who has offered to help them with removing the seals on the Weasley children. Septimus calls in Regulus Black—a botched Torvak hybrid. Theo cannot sleep after Harry's revelations and seeks out Severus to ask him a necessary question. ...

NOTE: The final TORVAK subplot chapter, we start to transition half and half between Harry and the rest of the Weasleys after this one. :) Since the Battle of the Astronomy tower hasn't happened yet with Bill, (the year is 1996), I have taken some artistic liberties.

WEASLEY MANOR : UNPLOTTABLE : TUESDAY NOON (Earth Time)

Sometimes Arthur had a sneaking suspicion that his Torvak nature swam closer to the surface than he wanted it to. It had taken years in the wizarding world to dull the senses to a point where he did not have to agonize over every miniscule act and situation. Things like his father springing surprises on him. Surprises like having a hybrid misfit brought to a private gathering amongst the elite and noble. Surprises like proposing to let his children near a pureblooded Dragel.

Dragel.

His mind whirred to a stop at that precise mention.

"A pureblooded Dragel?" Arthur managed to sound out. He eased Ron off his lap, though he was unable to quite release his grip on his youngest son's arm. He was slightly surprised when George leaned against him and causally linked their arms together. It was George, as the quieter twin had always been the one with a slightly more emphatic nature. Fred tended to be the louder and more ostensibly blunt about his opinions.

Opinions that were usually tempered by George.

Arthur swallowed. The physical contact helped him to remember to keep his rationality around him. At least for the sake of the children. He cast another glance at his father's impassive face. Those words did not make sense at all. From everything he knew of Dragels, there was no way the woman could remain sane—Dragels craved the affection and stability that came with more than one mate. A fierce blush dusted his cheeks as he recalled himself and Molly.

He swallowed. Their very history turned that idea upside down as Molly obviously had not been insane—at least not in a traditional sense—she had bound his children, sealed them and hidden her entire self. Arthur frowned. Perhaps sealing herself had sealed some of her natural instincts as well. He gave a decisive half-nod to that. It made more sense.

Far more sense than Regulus and some nameless supposed-pureblood.

"Which family does she come from?"
Septimus frowned, giving a slight shake of his head to acknowledge the question, but also hinting that it was not a matter to be covered in a room with so many available ears.

Arthur frowned.

"Could you at least persuade Jun to allow us an audience?" Septimus hesitated. "Is there anything we could offer?"

"Any offerings would be an insult." Regulus said, firmly. "And I do not presume to possess the ability to persuade her to do anything. However, in light of your—situation—you are welcome to ask her yourselves. If I call, she will come."

"Then call!" Another noblewoman spoke up from the background. "Call the little lady dragon and have done with it all! She might as well make herself useful for once in all these-"

"She will never consent to breathe the air within the same room as you!" The hybrid shot back. "For which I would respectfully request that only those in need of her assistance be present." He scowled. "And I would not call her in the same room as you, Madam. I fear she might swallow you whole."

"Why you impertinent-!"

"Enough!" Septimus broke in. He sent two decidedly different glares to each speaker in turn. "That is quite enough. You will comport ourselves with the dignity that runs through our veins or you shall remove yourself from this situation. I will not tolerate these—embarrassing outburst again." He sighed. "Now then, Mister Black, you said she may be inclined to offer assistance?"

"Assistance?" Heron made a strangled sound in his throat. "Admit it! You're begging a filthy, dirty creature of-"

"She would say the same of you!" Regulus hissed. His shoulders twitched and jerked as if barely restrained. "And I daresay she'd be justified." His soft grey eyes narrowed. "We are so unworthy of your mention, so far beneath the notice of your social systems, yet when you stumble across a problem you cannot solve on your own wits, you call for us misfits—and yet, you still have the gall to insult us."

"Speak for yourself!" Heron threw back. "Your word has been tested—it is mostly acceptable. But the rest of your-"

"I no more speak for myself then I would deign to speak for them."

And so they argued.

By the time the arguments had subsided and most ruffled tempers were somewhat soothed, Regulus began to shift uneasily from side to side as if expecting some sort of physical retaliation. Several Lords and Ladies had already been ejected from the room, some of their own opinion others at Lord Weasley's heated insistence. For Regulus, he had grown tired of standing in the center of the room and being the center of attention.

From what he could see, things were far too complicated to deal with.

"Can you at least promise not to antagonize her?" Regulus asked, at last. "I will call for her, but please understand that things are not—perfect right now. Show the same courtesy you would
"Of course." Cedrella shifted to stand. Her hazel-tinted eyes flickered. "We would definitely extend the same courtesy that is given to us."

"You will come to no harm." Septimus added.

"The last few times I have heard that phrase, I feared for my life." Regulus returned, evenly. "I understand that you wish to use me as a peacemaker between yourselves and my wife, however, I do protest on her behalf."

"She cannot speak for herself?" Lady Amanda snapped. "She is a woman who is capable of-"

"She would no more speak to you than you would willingly converse with her kind." The air of finality in his voice hinted at closing the subject. "Am I correct in assuming you have nothing more to say or offer?"

"Will you help us?"

"Are we your last resort?"

There was no answer.

Regulus half-smiled. "Then I suppose I shall mention your distinct lack of hexing me upon sight."

Soft grey eyes flickered about the room and settled on the doorway. Regulus sighed. His voice rose a few decibels higher and he spoke with a softer, lighter tone. "Jun? Show yourself please. I wish to speak to you."

A sudden silence crept over the room before Heron burst out in an angry exclamation. "You brought that madwoman with you?"

"What part of alone was so difficult to understand?" Lady Amanda was barely held in her seat by Tertius' restraining hand. She sent a glare to her husband, but reluctantly shut her mouth when his look didn't waver.

"The part where she is loath to allow me out of her sight with, and I quote 'those miscreant feather-brained idiots who treat you like dirt and would hex you to death on account of simply existing'." He smiled, thinly. "That part."

A few faces turned red at that admission.

"A moment ago, she could not come fast enough." He frowned. "And kindly refrain from addressing my wife as a 'madwoman' she is no more mad than you lot!" With that, Regulus ignored them. He waited for something that only he could hear approaching. A moment later, little feet came pattering through and a scaled blur of black, red and green streaked through the room. By the time it settled, it had the attention of everyone within the room.

A small, miniaturized dragon, with its tiny body wrapped around Regulus' neck, beady emerald eyes peeking out from around the spillover of hair from Regulus' black ponytail. The eyes blinked a few times, taking stock of the room.

Regulus smiled fondly at the little creature and reached up to chuck it under the chin with one feather-webbed hand. A happy purring sound filled the room, supplemented by a few contented
gurgles. When the hand was removed, a sound akin to a whine replaced the happy noises as the little dragon screeched its displeasure. The hybrid merely bopped it lightly on the nose, avoiding the sharp-teeth that snapped at his fingers. "Greedy." He scolded, mildly. "Behave. You just healed my hands this morning, do you want to do it again?"

Emerald eyes blinked innocently at him. The flared head gave a little shake.

He scowled at it, playfully. "I did not think so." He sniffed.

The little creature stretched forward, revealing more of itself, slender, burgundy webbed rings with dark, forest-green spines and a completely glittering scaled body of black. It reached out with two, small forepaws to touch Regulus' cheek and gave a rough swipe of the forked tongue to his exposed ear. The hybrid-wizard jerked, awkwardly and tempered the look he sent at the little thing. It almost appeared to be smirking.

Fragile silence reigned for a moment, no one daring to speak.

Hybird wizard and miniature dragon stared at each other for a moment. Regulus sighed. "They are not going to hex me." He said, patiently. "They did not hex me when I walked through the door. Surely that is a good sign?" The little dragon made an inquisitive noise. "No, they are not going to hex you either." He frowned. "If they do, then I will attack them myself, there is no need to for you to retaliate." A contemplative noise hummed out. "I am not sure, love. I did not ask."

"Ask what?" Septimus watched this exchange with some degree of reluctance and apprehension, stayed by his wife's hand on his shoulder.

"Jun would like to know if you have informed the children of their choices."

"Choices?"

"Of course." Regulus furrowed his brow. "You did, did you not?" He looked to Lord Weasley. "You did tell the children there was an equal chance of them becoming Dragels as well as Torvaks, yes?"

Chaos shortly ensued—again.

By the time everyone had calmed down again, the little dragon was no longer appearing as smug as it had before. Instead, it looked rather bored and indifferent to the shouting matches beginning around them. After a time, it curled tighter 'round Regulus' neck and seemingly went to sleep.

"Enough!" Septimus' voice boomed through the squabbling nobles.

An embarrassed silence filled the room.

The Head of the Weasley clan scowled fiercely at each individual. "If you cannot properly comport yourself, then leave!" He frowned. "Arthur, they are your children. I trust you spoke to them at length?" The frown deepened. "I was unaware that there were—choices."

Arthur gave a quick nod. He had. Though he had not had enough time to explain all the finer points, he thought he'd managed a decent enough job. At the very least, the children would know what to expect from an impending creature inheritance and they would understand something of the proud Torvak culture. He did not bother to answer the unspoken question in his father's statement. He hadn't known either. He'd assumed his wife had suppressed everything Dragel in the children and the Torvak had simply lain dormant.
There was a snorting, scoffing sound and it drew attention to the still standing Regulus in the center of the room. The formerly sleeping dragon had uncurled itself and fallen, hanging only by the forepaws to Regulus' right shoulder. The body twisted, wrinkled and lengthened until it swelled in size and arched, curved hind feet rested tentatively on the ground. The morph continued the wings flaring out and growing to rather impressive proportions, shielding the changing body from view as it began to take on decidedly feminine traits.

Black scales, burgundy wings and rich-forest green spines. The wings slowly folded themselves away and a tall, woman stood in its place, the transformation complete. She was clad in a low-slung skirt with generous slits up the sides to show her pale skin half-melded into the black scales still lining her body and a simple, band of green cloth wound round her chest, serving as a bustier.

What actually caught Arthur's eye, wasn't the massive exposure of skin, the wings folding back or the black scales. It was the fierce expression, rich, crimson hair and startlingly familiar green eyes, set in a face he had never seen before.

Avada Kedavra green eyes.

Lily.

The name whispered through his mind. Arthur swallowed and made a move to pinch himself before he remembered the audience around him. There were some folks watching his every move. He managed to mask his surprise, just barely, even though he knew the faint twitch of his eyebrows had not been lost on his father. It was difficult to remain impassive with such a shock.

Jun was the near replica of the late Lily Potter.

It took a more careful look to find the differences, but Arthur could pick them out after a few moments. Jun's face was longer, broader and older than he could ever recall seeing of Lily Potter. She was at least a head taller than Regulus who was definitely no short sprout. Her shoulders were wide and broad, a less ladylike appearance than Lily kept about her. Jun's eyes were a brighter green than Harry's—and Merlin knew those eyes were his Lily's trademark—to finish, Jun's hair was the closest hue of near crimson he'd ever seen. Lily's had been lighter, softer and more natural—even a few shades below Molly's own curly crop. Arthur swallowed hard and looked away to gather himself together.

He could not afford to think of Molly now.

Not now.

Not when he had to be strong and present for his children.

The rituals would be bad enough, but now—he suppressed a shudder. He wished his father had warned him that there was a Drigel amongst them. Then again, he could understand that while his initial return had been approved and accepted, he would still have to earn back every iota of respect, loyalty and honor.

"Arthur, this is Jun." Septimus inclined his head. "She may be able to help."

"I can do my own introductions, thank you kindly, Lord Weasley." Jun's voice was low pitched and achingly familiar.

Arthur swallowed hard. She sounded almost like Lily.
A look of complete disdain overtook her features as she swept the room with a single, burning emerald-eyed gaze. "And I need none." Her piercing eyes settled on Fleur and then behind her to Bill. They narrowed, meaningfully, before they moved on to Arthur. "I take it you are that miserable wretch of a father?"

Regulus moved forward, resting a hand on his wife's shoulder.

She snorted.

The potential cries were muffled with a look from Septimus. He frowned in the lady's general direction, but did not speak.

Regulus leaned close. "Could you help them nicely, love?"

"Not bloody likely!" She leaned away from the calming hand he rested on her shoulder.

He gently brushed his lips along one still-scaled cheek. Black scales melted into creamy, freckle-less skin.

A long-suffering sigh left her lips. Then she looked directly at Arthur once more. "Why do you want them off?"

He stared at her.

The emerald eyes did not waver. "Your wife—submissive or a carrier—she bore them for you? I cannot see the entirety of her seal, as she had one of your kind assist. But there is no reason to remove them. I dearly hope these are not all your children."

Arthur bristled at the condescending tone. She knew nothing of him! Nothing of his family nor of their circumstances. But before he could retort, his mother spoke in his defense.

"We did not ask you here for a second opinion, madam." Cedrella moved to stand in front of her husband. Soft hazel eyes were now snapping with barely restrained emotion. "And I could not possibly expect you to understand that which-"

"They are not meant to harm." Jun continued, as if she'd never been interrupted. "They will wear off on their own, most likely and to take the children away from their mother, you may as well simply kill her. For she will be an empty, heartless, soulless shell, especially if you were all she had."

The words stabbed deep inside of him and Arthur held her gaze. He could not let her know how those words had affected them. He had to be strong. He had to keep the end goal in sight. "I still wish for them to be removed." He said, evenly. "Whether they are harmless or not, is of no concern. I never have nor will I ever, support the suppression of a child when it comes to their magic, their future and-"

"I will need casting grounds." Jun turned her back to them, her emerald eyes searching Regulus' worried face. "I shall be fine, Reg." She leaned close enough to touch her forehead to his proffered, feathered shoulder. "I would swear not to hex any of them, but that would be asking too much."

Her husband nearly laughed. His lips twitched faintly. "That would, wouldn't it?" He sighed. "What size?"

"You know my runic circles." She yawned into his shoulder and her own twitched, faintly as if her wings wished to present themselves once more. "Something about that size."
"Can we clear this room?" Regulus turned to Septimus, a winged arm curling possessively around his wife. "Is there room to stand in the halls?"

"Don't want an audience." Jun mumbled.

Regulus stroked her fiery hair in response. "If there is, then we can use this room and start as soon as you are ready."

"Now?" Heron stared at him, incredulously. "No preparations?"

Jun snorted and her head lifted. "What kind of preparations could I possibly need?" She scoffed.

Lady Amanda immediately drew a sign in the air and touched it to her forehead as she'd done earlier. "You will not be doing any of your forbidden arts in this ancestral manor!" She glowered. "These are pure rooms, untainted with—!"

Regulus immediately clapped a hand over Jun's mouth, his grey eyes hardening at once. He silently dared her to speak and for a moment, the awkward silence resumed. After a long moment, he jerked his hand away, holding a bloodied palm. Jun licked her lips, defiantly, the delicate curve of fangs showing with each sensual swipe. He turned away from her, the heavy look still in his eyes. "You asked us here of your own accord. We can help you here and now, but I cannot do any more. Jun will continue from here and if you wish for her to continue, then I would suggest paying attention to her requests, unless these children really are not your foremost priority." He frowned. "And I shall thank you to keep your archaic beliefs to yourself, Lady Amanda. Magic is only as light or dark as you make it to be and there is nothing more sacred to swear on than the very life fluid in our veins—blood!" Here, he held up his still bleeding hand. His wing trembled, faintly.

Jun shuffled to stand beside him and took his hand, lifting it to her mouth. She laved it quickly, tending to the wound with expertise and it healed before their very eyes. Emerald eyes darkened with a flicker of red. "You hypocrite. You wouldn't let me stay near Regulus—even though you call him a misfit—unless you could bind me as well. I allowed it, because I care for him! He is worth it." The words were hissed. "But you are a silly, foolish woman to think that bindings can tear apart that which fate has thrown together."

"Enough." Septimus pinched the bridge of his nose. "Speculation and old arguments will not benefit either of us." He sighed. "I take it you are ready, Lady Black?" The emphasis on her title brought a sour look to her face. He nodded. "I thought so. Everyone, out!"

The room cleared in short order.

Jun arranged her casting grounds.

She cleared the room of everything and then cast a few cleaning spells at the cleared space. She spoke to Regulus who produced a pouch of powdered golden dust from one trouser pocket. With that in hand, she sprinkled it in a large, double-banded circle. A well of ink was produced as well, from Regulus' trouser pockets and she painted several runes along the inner and outer rim of each circle present.

Arthur and the children remained, Septimus and his family as well.

"Bill, you're first." Arthur urged his eldest forward when Jun had gestured toward Ron.

The Dragel beauty perked a brow. "Really? How kind of you to overlook my preference."
Regulus clicked his tongue lightly against his teeth.

Jun sniffed. "When you enter the circle here," she pointed to the clear space between two runes. "You will activate a soundproof barrier. I need absolute silence to concentrate." Her emerald eyes gleamed. "If you break my concentration—you break the child." The weight in her voice brooked no room for argument nor complaint. "Regulus, you will be my gauge—as usual—if something is wrong, you need not hesitate."

"Always." He murmured.

Her lips pursed for a moment then she heaved a sigh. "By gauge, I mean that if Regulus senses anything amiss, so will I. So please be kind to him, because if that disturbs me, then I daresay there will be plenty of pieces leftover for everyone."

Cedrella bristled—barely restrained by Septimus' arms wrapping around her shoulders from behind.

"I believe you have made your point clear," Septimus began. "We understand. Now, if you could—"

Jun stepped through her own circle and moved to stand in the blank, circular center. She closed her eyes.

"If you bound her," Arthur nodded towards the standing figure. "Then how is she supposed to help? Molly couldn't even release her half of the bindings, because she was bound."

Regulus merely smiled. "Some things are best left unexplained, wouldn't you agree?"

No. Arthur protested, silently. *I most certainly do not!* His gave riveted on Bill who had reluctantly left Fleur's arms, entering the circle as he'd been instructed. The moment he stepped through a wall of neon yellow fire shot up to the ceiling, forming a defensive, soundproof barrier. Arthur sucked in a quick breath. He felt his chest squeeze tight.

Molly's smiling face flickered in the back of his mind.

Bill perked a brow as neon yellow fire burst into existence and flared high enough to touch the tall, vaulted ceiling in the meeting room. That was impressive. He gave a faint nod of his head, feeling those piercing emerald eyes settling on him—and looked away.

Jun gave a snort. "Why are you wearing a glamour?"

"Pardon?"

"Oh don't give me that, darling," Jun chuckled. "I do not care who you are hiding it from, it is none of my business, but it is nothing to be ashamed of."

Bill lifted his head to meet her gaze squarely. "You are right," he agreed. "It is none of your business. What is it I need to do for this to work?" His gaze flickered to the right, where he'd left Fleur.

"There is no rush." Jun yawned. "None at all."

"Runic circles require a constant drain of magical energy." Bill countered. "It wouldn't be fair to you, with my-"

"There is no rush." Jun repeated, unconcernedly. "I am quite fine and I hope the same will be true
for you. It does not matter how and when they bind me, for whatever reason. You cannot judge that which you have not experienced, yes?"

The oldest Weasley son blinked.

"Good lad." She half-smiled. "They do not know me. They do not know what I have been through, therefore, it does not work, hm? The power of the mind is a beautiful thing. Now, about that glamour you're wearing, there's a little bit of a problem, see? You will have to take it off of your own accord, or it might get in the way. Now, do listen carefully, because I hate to repeat myself. It puts me to sleep." She pointed to the floor. "Lie down, spread your arms and legs, feet there." She pointed towards the open doorway where the boy's father and siblings watched. "And whatever you do, try not to fight me and I shall try to refrain from pointless phrases such as 'it will be alright' and 'the pain will pass' alright?"

The glamour came off to reveal three gouged clawmarks in an otherwise perfect face.

Jun sighed, softly. She crouched down beside Bill's prone figure and lightly traced her fingers over the cursed scares. "I take it your father would be furious to know?" She fingered each jagged stripe.

Bill nearly smiled. "Something like that." He drew in a breath. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, that's actually quite easy, see, our kind are more than capable of answering for themselves and once you are over the age of ten, you may make certain choices on your own." Jun tapped the redhead's nose. "You are over ten, so I shall treat you like the adult you are, but I will give you the consideration of our kind." She settled comfortably beside him. The age seemed to lift from her face as she stared down at him.

"Did you know your mother was Dragel?"

"Well, the choice is yours really. Dragel or Torvak." Jun frowned. "With one exception." The sorrowful expression on her face was tempered with the faint light in her emerald eyes. "I'm afraid you're too old."

Bill gave a start. "What?"

"Your mother is very skilled in a rare branch of magic." Jun patted his chest. "Calm yourself. She used family magic to bind you, with pure intention and all of her hopes and wishes for your future. You are twenty-six years old. One year too late. Your seals will burn out on their own by the end of this year. They worked just as they were supposed to."

"So why am I…?"

"Easy answered, pet." She winked. "The reason I said the seals were not destructive, really, is because in your case, they were not. She cast these perfectly. They were meant to devour your creature sides and leave you as an exceptional wizard."

Bill's jaw dropped. Snatches of memory, past experiences and his sudden success at Gringotts flickered through his mind. "Exceptional?" He repeated.

"Your Dragel ate your Torvak." She poked his cheek. "The only inclinations I can call out from you right now, would be to stabilize the werewolf in you." She frowned. "Speaking of which, how stupid could you be to let it so close?"
"I was defending a friend."

"Injured?"

"Of course."

"Smart answer." Jun countered. "I take it you were the one with the injury. It lives?"

"My friend is fine."

Jun smothered a laugh. "Meaning that the wolf is dead. You are a remarkable young man, William."

"Bill."

"Very well then, Bill." She rose in a single fluid movement. "Has there been anything you do not wish to deal with?"

"What?"

"There are traces of Torvak within you, I could call it to the front, however…"

"However?"

"However, in light of your—wolfish tendencies—the Torvak in you would not accept that. Your blood would fight and it would—hurt."

"What do you suggest?"

"Ideally? Moon-bathing." Jun said, matter-of-factly. "There are cursed wolves and then there are those who are loyal to the moon." She stood over him and cracked her knuckles. She stood, one foot on each side of him, her skirt pooling lightly on his stomach. "Pick a lunar cycle and do something with that lovely veela of yours. The curse will never deepen beyond that which it has." She licked her lips. "And craving a rare steak every now and again is not a problem."

A series of shapes, lines and dots began to emerge from her skin, neat rows and sections. They surfaced, like magical tattoos and then they began to glow.

Suddenly, Bill understood. He'd worked with one a long time ago—in the early years when he'd started with Gringotts. "Rune master."

Cherry red lips curved into a smirk. "I prefer Rune Mistress, but it is nothing to quibble over."

"They don't know, do they?" The words came out before he could check them.

"Regulus knows." Jun's emerald eyes flared green. "And he is the only one who needs to. Would you like me to remove the seals anyway? They will fade on their own, you will notice a gradual increase in your magic until they fade completely."

"How long?"

"By the end of this year, possibly the next. It is not harmful to you, as you have outgrown it."

"Then leave it."

"As you wish." Jun pricked her thumb on one fang and traced the rune for wolf in the palm of her
other hand. She held it downward, facing him, so he could see it. It flared and glowed to life, the red burning black and the black burning into a rich, bright green. "I will call out the wolf in you and not the curse." She whispered. "Do you understand?"

Bill met her gaze. He nodded.

"Do you trust me?"

"...yes."

"Grantea ineekea solum-" within the confines of the neon fire, the circular rings began to glow an eerie green. "Shakshi. Wolf."

The green circles hummed to life and magic poured into the confined space, thick, rich and stifling. It swarmed frantically around the two present and then fashioned itself into a wispy, wolfish-image. Bill found himself frozen as magical bindings activated, holding him immobile on the floor. He worked to push away the thought of fear, the thought of rejection and to find the resolve that had led him to cast the glamour over himself in the first place.

It sprang up strongly and he clung to it.

The ethereal wisp of the green wolf hovered over him. A sudden, delightful tingle of acceptance blossomed inside him. It yanked one memory to the forefront.

"You are different, Bill." Molly kissed his forehead, smoothing back his long hair. She tugged a few strands for good measure, then straightened the collar of his wizarding robes. "You really should cut it."

"Maybe." He stayed her hand, holding it for a moment.

"Definitely." Her smile trembled.

"Bye Mum." He kissed her cheek.

She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "Take care of yourself. Call me."

"Yes Mum."

The hug she gave him tingled and burned for hours afterwards. It warmed him as the portkey whisked him away to the mysteries of a new land, a new life and a new home.

The memory faded. Bill blinked, working to return himself to the present. That memory of her was a special one. He'd been looking forward to seeing her. He'd been worried when his father had sent word. He hadn't been thinking of something like this at all.

"Open." Jun murmured.

Bill felt his mouth open of its own accord. Focus. He reminded himself, preparing for the inevitable.

Fear melted away to fascination. He stared at the magnificent face before him, the partially formed body of the wolf hovering in midair. The dark eyes pierced through to his very soul.

The cursed scars on his cheek ached.

The wolf lunged.
When Bill gained consciousness once more, he found himself clutching the arms cradling him close. Everything had changed. Sight, sound and smell was now sharper, deeper than he recalled.

Jun chuckled overhead. "There is no need to be so—generous in your affection." She drawled. "Your veela might wish to draw and quarter me if you keep this up."

A substantial blush decorated Bill's face and he pulled away. His blue eyes shone with a sharper, clearer light. He stood up and offered a hand to the crouched Jun. She accepted it with a nod of her head.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He turned to step through the fire and hesitated. Should he cast the glamour again? All former worries and thoughts in regards to the ugly scars had been smoothed away and replaced by a new respect for the shared spirit of the wolf that now resided within him. He felt stronger and lighter than he had in years. Curse-breaking was not a light profession by any means. The constant need to drive himself further and harder had quite nearly sucked the joy from his talents. Then there had been that horrible night where he'd leapt in front of a werewolf—for the sake of a friend.

It was a new feeling that settled over him, one of proud contentment. A realization that he was closer to being at peace with himself than he had ever been in the past few years. Relief prickled through him in enlightening stabs. He was suddenly grateful to this mystery dragon-woman with the powerful magic and loud mouth. He almost wished the seals hadn't quite worked so that he could've told her to call out his Dragel side.

To know what it would've been like to be a powerful creature like her, to understand that hidden strength and quiet confidence that his mother had always cloaked around her. But somehow, it didn't feel like a horrible injustice, it felt like a spiral of warmth that nestled in his gut. He reached one hand towards the fire—he would not cast the glamour. There was nothing to hide.

"It will not burn you."

"Ah." He touched the flames. They were cool and ticklish. He smiled.

"...Bill?"

"Yes?"

"You are not a dark creature."

He half-smiled. "I know."

When Bill stepped through the curtain of flame, Fleur launched herself at the redhead wizard, spouting a flurry of French before she enthusiastically snogged him backwards a few steps. His eyebrows danced up while his arms automatically curved around her. He returned the welcome as warmly as his present company would allow.

"Oh Bill!" Fleur hugged him tight and rubbed her face against his chest. "I was so worried!"

"Sh. It's fine." He soothed, rubbing her back and then shoulders. He rested his chin on her head and smiled.
"Bill?" Arthur's voice was slightly strangled. "Your face-

Bill smiled. "Accident at work this year." His lips gave a faint quirk. "It is nothing to worry about."

A sharp intake of air came from Septimus standing off to the farthest corner of the room. Cedrella gripped her husband's arm, a horrified look plastered on her face. They exchanged a glance.

Arthur found his voice first. "The inheritance…?"

"She said it was too late." Bill tilted his head to the side. The softest of smiles played about his face.

The shock on Arthur's face melted away to a look of betrayal as sharp eyes caught sight of the scarred cheek. "You wore a glamour?"

Harry stirred faintly in Charlie's arms. He snuggled close, burying his nose in Charlie's warm neck and breathing in the faintly smoky scent that had nothing to do with smoke and everything to do with Charlie. It comforted and soothed his raw nerves and troubled thoughts. His sleepy mind stirred, moving towards wakefulness as he processed the fact that he had fallen asleep in Theo's arms and woken in Charlie's.

Not that it was a problem…

Harry frowned. Emerald eyes popped open. He twisted carefully and tiredly scanned the tangles of sheet and duvet. Theo had been there before. He'd been sure of it. He'd specifically chosen Theo's arms to fall asleep in.

"Harry?" Charlie slurred. "Whas' wrong?"

"Theo?" Harry gave an experimental wriggle. "Where's Theo?"

Charlie yawned, slackening and releasing his grip. "Don't know. Said he could sleep. Figured he'd be back."

That answer did not sit very well with Harry. He could recall the conversation just hours ago and the pure agony he'd seen reflected in his Alpha's eyes every time Harry made light of something that wasn't quite—normal. But Harry had tried his best to ignore it. He'd had to grow up early and quickly. It was no one's fault. It was pointless to point fingers. He simply had to make the best of everything.

"Charlie?" Harry sat up, turning to see that Charlie had already half-dozed off. He smiled and leaned over to pat the redhead. Charlie was probably more mixed up than he was. But he was doing splendidly, Harry mused. He stretched and yawned, gathering his thoughts together. There were two very distinct bubbles of energy in his chest, one happy, sleepy-ish and humming. Harry wrote that one off as the snoozing Charlie and focused his attention on the other one.

This one was muted, cautious and very, very distraught.

Harry blinked. The moment that flood of emotion registered, sleep became the furthest thing on his mind. Theo. Something was wrong. Harry rolled over, swinging his feet off the bed to rest on the floor. He stood for all of a handful of seconds, before an painful squeak left his lips and he crumpled to the floor.
"Harry!" Charlie fairly exploded off the bed, half-vaulting, half-scrambling over the bed to land on the floor beside Harry's trembling body. "Harry?"

"Owww." Harry winced. He managed a tight smile.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

"Hurts." Harry hissed, leaning his head back to rest on Charlie's available shoulder as his beta cradled him from behind. Charlie's hands hovered, frantic, uncertain, worry clear in his blue eyes. Harry bit his lip, hard. He couldn't remember if Quinn had mentioned anything about any kind of aftershock, but everything hurt! I've had worse. I've had worse. I've had worse. He chanted in his head, over and over, until he could settle in the mental numbness the repetition offered. His fangs ached and he had the sudden urge to bite something—or someone. He grimaced. Theo had said not to bite Charlie.

"Okay." Charlie took a breath. "Potion." He decided. "A pain reliever, maybe? Did that Quinn fellow say anything about aftereffects?"

"Can't remember."

"Alright. Don't worry. It'll be fine. You'll be fine." Charlie frowned. "I'll get Severus and-"

"No." Harry grabbed his arm. "Don't leave."

"Harry-"


Charlie hesitated for all of a split-second, before he swooped up Harry in his arms and strode toward the bedroom door.
RECAP: Arthur, Percy, Ron, Fred, George, Bill and Fleur are in the unplottable Weasley manor, under Arthur's father, Septimus' protection, who has offered to help them with removing the seals on the Weasley children. Septimus calls in Regulus Black-a botched Torvak hybrid and his Dragel wife, Jun. JUN handles Bill's inheritance first and grants him a wolf's true abilities as he is too old to inherit any of his parents creature sides. When Theo seeks out Severus to ask him about Umbridge, Harry wakes up to discover his dominant is missing...

SNAPES' QUARTERS : NEVARAH : WEDNESDAY MORNING (Nevarah Time)

Theo was halfway out of the kitchen when Charlie came down the hallway with an armful of Harry. Terius hissed something from in the kitchen to which Severus replied with a muttered mumble.

"Harry!" Theo backed into the kitchen, allowing Charlie in before he extended his arms to take Harry, himself. "What's wrong, what's-?" He immediately bent his head to nuzzle the bared marks on Harry's shoulder.

A tiny sigh of relief left the brunet's lips as he breathed easier for a moment, his eyes still squeezed shut. "Theo?"

"Shh. What happened?" Theo looked to Charlie. He cuddled Harry close, relieved when the calming he'd sent through the bond, rendered Harry perfectly limp. He then shifted his smaller mate into a more comfortable position. "I felt a surge and—ow." Theo winced. He hadn't been expecting the bite. He tipped his neck sideways, just enough to allow better access. "A little more warning next time, my little treasure." He began to rub Harry's back, stopping in mid-rub with a frown.

Harry was practically shivering.

"Harry?" The young Alpha looked from Harry's nightclothes to his own self, clad in a thick, rich dressing gown.

"He woke up and said he wanted you." Charlie sighed. He handed over the missing dressing robe he'd snatched on the way out. With a flick of his wand, it went from his hand to properly secured around Harry. "The bandages were hot a moment ago too, you don't suppose there's something that he forgot to mention, do you? He was tired, but I don't think that he would've forgotten-"

"Bandages?" Terius stood at the opposite end of the table, his hands on Severus' shoulders being the only obvious reason the Potions Master was still in the room. "For what?"

"His magic is returning." Theo explained. "I don't think he forgot to mention anything, at least, not that I can remember." A touch of relief tingled through him when he heard Harry make a soft cooing sound. It brought a smile to his tired face. "That's nice, Harry." He murmured. A second later, Theo stifled a yawn. It had been a long day and it had been draining in more ways than one,
simply because his rank and position afforded him a few more perks than his mates, did not mean he had to abuse them.

Charlie perked a brow.

"He says he feels the magic coming back. It's like an old friend."

Charlie grinned. He could certainly understand that and he could not wait for their bond to reach the level where it was with Theo. He wished he could understand the sounds and hums that Harry seemed to subconsciously indulge in. "The pain?" He questioned. "I didn't see what happened. I fell asleep and then I heard him—\textit{squeak.}\" The word was said with a grimace. It had been a sound very unlike that which the redhead had ever heard come out of Harry and that had partially fueled him beyond instinct to rush to Harry's side.

"Pain?" Theo's golden eyes snapped upward. His frown returned. "I can't feel any backlash of pain anywhere beyond that bloody headache that wouldn't go away until the—" he frowned, understanding dawning. "Harry, are you blocking me?"

A hummed murmur was the answer.

"Harry, love…treasure. Please think about it, are you blocking me? Are you still in pain? I can't feel you."

Harry shifted uneasily in Theo's lap and after a moment, gave a muted hum in answer. He did not disengage from the neck and his currently very satisfying blood source.

"Can you feel him, Charlie?" Theo turned inquisitive golden eyes towards his Beta. That would be even odder.

Charlie shrugged. "I'm not sure. Everything's really jumbled at the moment."

"Concentrate?" Theo suggested. He worked to phrase it as a suggestion and not a command. He was really far more tired than he'd realized.

After a moment, his Beta shook his head. "I can't.\" He said. Regret colored his tone and his brow creased with worry. "I just feel—confusion."

"Ah.\" Theo acknowledged. That was probably as accurate as it could be. He certainly felt confused and if Harry was actively paying attention, then it was doubtless that he felt the same as well. "Never mind then. I suppose we'll have to ask Quinn again.\" He shifted Harry in his lap. His sub was still too thin and small for his own liking.

Harry lifted his head, disengaging his fangs long enough to thunk his head against Theo's cheek. Then he licked the puncture wounds carefully, before selecting another spot and biting down again—harder than before.

Theo winced. "You are a biter.\" He mumbled. One hand traveled upwards to nest in Harry's dark hair. "Drink slowly.\" He reprimanded. "And bite \textit{after} you lick."

Harry hummed again, his body growing decidedly slack.

Charlie frowned. "Isn't there any way to tell if he's—"

"If he is in pain, I would wager he isn't anymore.\" Theo interrupted.
"He might not know it." Terius suggested. "When we were in the infirmary that time with Madam Pomfrey, he still had a magical signature—very dimmed, but there—and he was blocking. Subconsciously, I believe, because nothing prompted him otherwise." He released one grip on Severus' shoulder and patted the dark wizard's head. "I'll find some sugar in the kitchen."

"Sugar?" Charlie grimaced. "Perhaps some tea?" He rose from the chair.

"The sugar helps like blood." Theo explained, quietly. "Like the pudding, remember?"

Charlie blushed. He remembered far more than just pudding...

Theo gave him a half-smile. "I would take a spot of tea with my sugar."

The redhead disappeared into the kitchen, his ears as red as his hair.

Severus glowered at the pair of brunets across the table.

Theo met his gaze, steadily.

The Potions Master really did not want to deal with this now. It was headache enough that Theo had somehow figured out that he was not always the fearsome dark angel that his Slytherins thought him to be. It did not sit well with him, however, to see the disappointment in those golden eyes. Especially not at this precise moment.

The sound of pattering feet came through the hallway and a very sleepy, disheveled Draco shuffled into the lit kitchen. "Sev'rus." He mumbled, scrubbing his face with one sleeve of his silken dressing gown. His pouty lips were drawn into more of a pucker than usual, the grey eyes glittering with half-way there tears. "You weren't there" and without further preamble, Draco crawled into his alpha's lap and pillowed his head on one available shoulder.

Theo barely managed to hide his smirk. He'd seen very little interaction between the Potions Master and his Sub, most of what he had seen between them was through Terius. The DADA Professor was far more generous in showing his affection and his worry—in equal amounts—regardless of audience, though barely tempered at times.

The Potions Master had been an entirely different story altogether. Theo knew him as Severus—the stern Head of House for Slytherin—and also the man who had brought him hot chocolate spiked with a calming draught when he'd been too wound up and distraught to handle the thought of returning to an abusive home over the holiday breaks. The same man who had put his name down on the Christmas sign-up sheet and allowed Theo to spend his holiday reading and playing with the other 'leftover' Slytherins under his watchful eye—and made a few helpful corrections on his holiday homework.

It was a memory of the wizard he admired that would never fade. Tarnish, perhaps, but never fade. Theo clung to it now, searching for some sort of justification. He remembered the shock when he had discovered his inheritance and then when he'd arrived at Hogwarts and scented the Potions Master as being Dragel-kind. Until Terius had arrived, Severus had never acknowledged it.

Never.

And yet, Theo could see that it had cost him.

In Terius' care and with Draco's presence, the solemn man was less likely to snap and growl, while
the thin, angular lines in his face evened out. The lines would certainly never fade, but perhaps they would not carry the same harshness that strangers associated with them.

A man of many shades, yet with the same solidity as his solemn black robes.

Theo frowned. There was so much in there that he could sense he would never understand. Perhaps it was best that way.

Severus looked rather put out at the fact that he had an audience, but his thin arms came up anyway to protectively cradle Draco and hold him close. It was a typical position of comfort for an Alpha and Sub and the ease in which Draco situated himself, spoke volumes to the fact that he had done this many times before. Enough times to know that it was alright. Dark eyes glittered in warning, as if silently daring Theo student to comment on their silent communications.

Draco yawned into the hollow beneath Severus' chin. He fisted his pale hands in his Alpha's dressing gown and snuggled close, comfortable and relaxed enough to begin drifting towards dreamland again. A rather nasty nightmare had woken him and he'd woken to find that the bed was empty, save for a peacefully slumbering Calida, wrapped around a thick, fat pillow. The small blond nuzzled his head a little harder against the firm chest bracing him.

Severus rumbled softly in answer.

Draco repeated the movements, a faint whine of distress becoming audible.

Harry stirred, twitching in Theo's arms. His fangs no longer ached, but he had only just begun to enjoy the taste of blood slipping down his throat when he'd become aware of Draco's presence. A fellow Submissive's sound of distress was equally distressing to him and he did not like it. His fangs began to recede and that made him mildly irritated. He squirmed on the comfortable lap, testing the arms that held him, a silent, instinctive protest that he could not vocalize.

Theo did not speak. He merely tightened his grip on Harry. The hand curved up along Harry's upper back, now snaked to rest on the back of Harry's neck, squeezing gently in reassurance. Harry sniffled in answer, resuming his drinking. Theo made a mental note to swallow some sugar and perhaps another Blood Replenisher sometime before breakfast. His golden eyed gaze flickered up to Severus.

For all that Theo had known of the former Malfoy heir, he had not ever expected this.

Draco had quieted—apparently sensing Harry's reaction—but he hadn't stopped his fidgeting.

"You are fine, Dragon." Severus's silken whisper carried everything it needed to. "You are safe here."

Draco's face flamed a delicious shade of red and pink, both at the acknowledgement and the use of his private nickname. "Couldna 'eep." The words were muffled and mumbled together. He gave a half-hearted tug on Severus' robes. "All bad." He squirmed, uneasily. "Bad, bad, bad." The words seemed almost more like a chant than an admission and quite child-like compared to the usually articulate mutterings that Draco favored.

Severus' attention immediately riveted on his distressed Sub, this time a touch more forcefully.

"Draco!"

"No like." The lapse in grammar was punctuated by shimmering, glistening grey eyes. "No like it!"
Severus ignored the worried look the golden eyes cast his way. There was something more than just a mere nightmare at work here. And He really didn't like any of the answers his brilliant mind currently supplied. "Look at me."

The blond head shook, shoulders tensing.

Severus frowned. But he did not force the issue. Instead, he chose a different approach. Elegant fingers smoothed up and down Draco's spine, rubbing along his shoulders and skimming over his sides. The stiff body relaxed gradually, content within the arms holding him close and Severus' gentle ministrations. For a moment, the blond seemed too fragile and too small, sitting in the lap of the man clad in black. Then a soft, barely audible purr began to fill the room. Draco bent his head to rest against the black robes and available shoulder.

The silver-grey eyes began to close, sleep calling until Severus caught Draco's chin and twisted him to just the right position for a slow, deep kiss. Draco's entire body grew rigid, eyes opened wide in shock and surprise, all thoughts of sleep chased far away. He stared up at Severus in something akin to awe.

Severus' dark-eyed gaze locked onto the trusting gaze and silently he requested permission. It was granted by a single, deliberate blink. Severus didn't hesitate to dive into the young mind, held open, tentatively—for him. He sifted quickly through the recent memories, searching for the ones that distressed Draco. He flinched—physically and mentally—withdraw ing several moments later.

Draco trembled, faintly in his arms. Severus tightened his grip, cradling the smaller body as close to him as possible. The images he'd seen were distressing and disturbing. Draco dreamt of his parents.

Lord and Lady Malfoy in moments where it was virtually impossible for Draco to have witnessed any of it. Yet a startling clarity hovered around the images, something that hinted that they were more than dreams. Someone was sending Draco dreams. Severus didn't like that. He definitely did not like that at all. He retreated from the young mind with the need to verify that Draco was physically fine and indeed sitting on his lap.

The tense silence hung in the air, broken only by the occasional sound of something clanging in the nearby kitchen.

Dark eyes locked onto Theo's golden orbs.

Theo inclined his head.

Severus scowled.

Neither spoke another word.

"Draco's up?" Terius appeared around the corner with Charlie bringing up the rear with the tea service. "Oh dear. I don't suppose Calida will sleep for much longer then, will she?" He waved Charlie towards Theo. "Give him the cup with the green around the top." He approached Severus, a cup of sweetened, black coffee in hand. "Is he well? Does he have a fever? What is wrong? I was sure that the nightmares had stopped and they only started when you weren't on hand those few days in between of-"

Severus freed one hand to push the proffered cup upwards to Terius' own face. "Drink." He snapped, a twinge of annoyance in his voice.
Terius opened his mouth and then shut it, staring down blankly for a long moment.

Severus sighed. "It is late. You are tired." He articulated, slowly and deliberately. "More so than I am. Drink first."

The faintest hint of pink may have danced across Terius' sleepy features. He gratefully gulped down the hot cup, quickly and expertly. A second later, he refilled it, following the same preparations he had in the first place. This time, when he offered it to Severus, his Alpha took it with a barely audible sound of approval.

Charlie did nearly the same thing, having already taken a cup for himself, he now held up the second for Theo to take a sip as the brunet's arms were currently Harry-filled. Harry was still happily drinking away. "Is he...?" Charlie prompted.

"It's fine." Theo gulped down the hot, sweet tea. Uncaring whether it scalded his tongue or throat, feeling some of his weary self perking up at the sugary taste. "Another one, fixed just like that, if you don't mind?"

"Mm." Charlie set about filling and mixing once more.

"I believe he is fine. He certainly is no longer in pain, though I cannot think what it was to trigger something like that. I still can't feel anything." Theo frowned. "I don't understand, I should be able to—I can feel you." He nodded towards Charlie. "But Harry's rather…muted, as if there's something between us. I don't like it."

"Quinn?" Charlie suggested. He stirred the hot liquid, tapping the silver spoon lightly against the cup's lip. "A pain reliever potion?"

"We'll ask tomorrow." Theo said, decisively. "If he's fine, then no potions right now. If Quinn is taking off more seals tomorrow, I don't doubt that he'll have to take quite a few potions and I don't want to overload him with any unnecessary ones. Terius, I don't suppose you know? Severus?"

Both older men shook their head. Terius hesitated, "if his magic is returning, it could simply be that the lack of magic during all the transformations for his Dragel inheritance is causing some rather unwanted side effects."

Theo found himself shaking his head to that. "It doesn't make sense." He admitted. "The magic returning yes, but I doubt—" he grimaced. "Harry, that's enough."

There was a whimper in answer.

Golden eyes gave a rather spectacular roll. "That was not a request, Harry." A touch of firmness entered his tone. "You have taken quite enough for now." He sighed, one hand reaching up to rub his forehead. He should've known allowing a comfort feed would not end quite as smoothly as he'd hoped after the day of emotional-ups-and-downs they'd all experienced.

Harry's arms traveled upwards to lock around Theo's neck, with a decisive purr. He would not give this up—not now!

Theo's long fingers slid easily into the tangle of black-brown hair. He rubbed Harry's head, firmly in warning. "Harry." He was finally feeling the drain of allowing two—no three—feedings with no rest and nothing in between of it. He would definitely need that Blood Replenisher sometime soon. He did not feel up to pushing his Alpha limits. Not now, anyway, he couldn't afford such a luxury.

There was a slight shake of his head, in which Harry actually growled in disagreement.
Theo winced at the shake, Harry's sharp fangs unintentionally carving a little bit more of a chunk out of him than he'd consented to. With a muted sigh, Theo tightened his grip on Harry's hair and began to pull, keeping the pressure even and deliberate.

Charlie's blue eyes shimmered with sympathy. He reached for Harry, hoping to ease the transition. A protesting whine came from the smaller brunet as Harry was forced to disengage his fangs and summarily lifted and set on his feet. The punishing hand in his hair vanished almost at once as Theo held a hand to his bloodied neck. Charlie watched with interest as the young Alpha merely traced several runic signs with the dribbling blood on the patch of unmarked skin beside the wound. A moment later, a pulse of soft, gold magic flared around the injury and it faded away into smooth, unblemished skin. He could not keep the admiration from the sound that bubbled out of his throat.

Theo half-smiled at him. "I'll teach you it some time." He promised. "It is handy to have. Is he coming around?"

Emerald eyes held a tinge of red, his gaze hazy as Harry allowed Charlie to steady and balance him. He licked bloody lips and teased his fangs with his tongue until they melded back into his gums. Awareness registered several long, silent minutes later and then Harry fought against Charlie's embrace to reach Theo. He didn't verbalize his protests.

"Harry? Charlie, let him-" Theo was on his feet, accepting the frantic Harry back into his arms. "What's the matter? Harry? Talk to me." For a moment, he worried that the brunet would remain silent. But then he spoke, in a voice barely above a whisper and so, so very small that Theo could barely keep himself together.

"You were worried." Harry's arms tightened painfully around him. He fairly trembled.

"Harry?" There was a touch more worry in this repetition. "I am here. I am fine," Theo kissed the top of that messy head. "Shh, treasure. Everything is fine. I'm here. Charlie's here." He inclined his head, waiting as his Beta glided forward and they sandwiched Harry in a mutual embrace.

"He's angry." Harry whispered. "He let them come to The Burrow." His breath hitched. "He wanted —he's angry. So angry."

Severus was out of his chair, handing Draco over to Terius, with a warning glance to his bewildered Pareya. "Pot—Harry—" the name was said with some reluctance. "You dreamt—your dreams, the—" he swallowed. "He is unhappy?" Severus' sharp gaze analyzed Harry's weary nod. "What attack on The Burrow?"

Theo winced. Ah. They had more catching up to do than he'd realized. "That is a bit of a long story." He spoke, running his hands soothingly up and down Harry's sides. He had felt a few drops of wetness on his neck and shoulder, realizing, belatedly that tears of exhaustion and frustration would doubtless come raining down now, if he did not proceed with caution.

"We have the time," Terius spoke. He adjusted his armful of sleeping Draco and moved to stand closer to Severus. "Shall I bring some Pepper-up?"

"That would be best, yes." Severus turned, accepting Draco back. "It would be in my cloak, you know the one."

"Mm." Terius murmured, noncommittally. "Calida?"

"If she is awake."
"And if she is not?"

"Let the woman rest."

Theo exchanged a look with Charlie. They both sighed in unison.

"Perhaps we should move to the sitting room." Severus suggested, in a tone that really was not much of a suggestion at all. "There is another one down the hall, that way we need not disrupt Miss Granger's healing rest."

"Did she wake at all today?" Charlie inquired. "I mean, afterwards."

Severus gave a short shake of his head. "She is resting with the sleep of the Dead, Mister Weasley. She is best left alone until the magic has worked its course. To wake her now in the present state—or to allow her to wake in the present state—would be cruel punishment."


"The scar?" Theo leaned over to see. The jagged strip of lightening-shaped scar was red and inflamed, though thankfully, not weeping nor bleeding. "Harry? Are you in any pain?"

Harry was silent for a moment. He wriggled faintly, wanting Charlie to hold him tighter, so he would not have to worry of falling. He was silently grateful when the redhead complied automatically. It took him a moment to think of an answer and he was glad for Theo's everpresent patience. He had promised to never lie—at least, not to Theo anyway—and there really was no reason to hide this. Not like he usually had to. Snape knew of his nightmares. He would understand. Theo didn't. Snape would make him. It was a somewhat satisfying equation. Harry sighed. "Not here." He made a gesture with one hand and pressed it to his chest. "Here."

Theo captured that hand and brought it to his lips. "We'll see what we can do." He murmured. "Thank you." His golden eyes shimmered, understanding and approval shining bright in them. He understood and acknowledged Harry's silent figuring.

"M'tired."

"That's fine." Charlie hummed. "It's fine."

WEASLEY MANOR : UNPLOTTABLE : TUESDAY AFTERNOON (Earth Time)

Percy waited for his father's nod of approval before approaching the neon yellow flames. He was not afraid. He was not! Sure, Bill had gone in a perfectly sane wizard and emerged believing that the scourge of a werewolf's curse was no hardship, but that was Bill. The Curse-breaker had always been a bit off in Percy's opinion, especially when he'd taken a Veela as his fiancée.

A Veela for Merlin's sake!

The third-eldest Weasley child gave his head a quick shake before he squared his shoulders and started forward. He barely caught his grandfather's nod of approval and an encouraging—though shaky—smile from his grandmother. That was good. He was somewhat glad he would not be around to hear his father's lecture to Bill. Not that it was likely to happen in their present company, especially seeing that Fleur seemed quite insistent on showing her gratitude for Bill's new self through some rather er-demonstrative methods.
Percy shook his head again, a tad more forcefully this time, as he approached the flames and searched for the blanked areas where Bill had gone in. He could see through the haze—somewhat—and it seemed like the pathway between the runes was oddly narrow. The flames hissed as he stretched one hand towards it and he forced himself to continue walking, even as he felt the heat envelope him before suddenly, he stood inside the protective ring.

He continued forward towards the center of the circle, uncertain.

Jun stood at the far end of it, her back to him. She stretched her arms up to the ceiling and then rolled them back. She didn't even turn to acknowledge him.

He frowned, but waited, politely a moment more.

She was probably preparing herself for the necessary ritual in some way or another. He hadn't quite been able to see what she'd done with Bill. Actually, no one had, the flames had turned so bright that no one had really been able to look and see what she'd done. Not that he'd really wanted to see. Percy scowled. He couldn't blame his grandfather for being suspicious of her or Dragels in general.

A sulky sort of sullen feeling settled over him and Percy scowled as he waited to be noticed. Surely she hadn't made Bill wait this long…

The minutes ticked on and finally Jun snorted, her back still to him. "We are going to trade places, because I am not going to turn to look at you and you will not be standing so close to that wall, lest you truly wish to catch on fire."

Percy blinked. He bit his tongue to keep the automatic answer from leaping out of his lips. "Why?"

"Because I said so." Jun drawled. "Now be a dear and move, being on fire is really quite unpleasant and I am not fond of water spells. I have no affinity with them."

That was nowhere near a good enough answer for Percy, but before he could question that, he realized that Jun was taking slow, measured steps backwards. He inched forward, passing her with a haughty look.

When he stood where she'd been just moments before, he turned to face her fully. There was something off about her appearance that bugged him in a way that he couldn't quite place. He resisted the urge to shake his head to clear it. It was a habit he was dearly trying to rid himself of. Perhaps it was her green eyes, they were too bright, too clear and reminded him of someone he couldn't quite recall.

Great.

A brain itch.

As if he needed more puzzles to slave over.

Percy huffed.

Jun sighed. Loudly. She did not look at him, but rather, focused on her fingernails, preening them with great interest.

The third-elder Weasley could no longer hold his silence. "What is it you need me to do?"

"Oh lovely. It speaks." Jun snorted. "I don't need you to do anything, but it would help if you
would calm down."

Percy blinked. "What?"

"You are anything but calm, you do not believe I am capable of helping you. For some reason, it appears you blame me for your brother's present state—never mind that it was his choice—and you are standing before me, determined to make me out to be a monster. You are not calm." The lady stressed the last word, her emerald eyes snapping with fire. She lifted her gaze to meet his at last. "And until you are, I cannot do what I need to."

"I am calm!" Percy snapped. "I simply do not have all day to wait on-"

"If I say it will take all day, then it will." Jun interrupted, evenly. "And you will not speak to me like that. I am affording you some degree of respect and I expect the same."

It took all of his willpower to keep from growling out the words on the tip of his tongue. Percy clenched and unclenched his hands several times. He breathed in and out and in and out and in and out until he was sure he could speak in the usual tone he chose to employ when speaking with adults. He really had no desire to speak nor interact with this woman, but that did not mean he would embarrass himself with a display of immaturity.

He did not know how much time passed until finally, he ventured to speak again, careful to keep one hand curled into a fist, but partially hidden in his robes. The half-clenched hand would let his fingernails dig into the palms of his hand, producing a spike of pain to keep him grounded enough to continue the expected charade.

"I am calm." He said, clearly.

Jun had returned to inspecting her fingernails and now, she looked up at him. The expression on her face was rather blank and empty, showing nothing and hinting at nothing. Thin lips pursed into a frown. "By your own admission." She murmured at last. "Your magic says otherwise."

That, Percy could not protest, but he had never been able to control his magic when it reacted to his emotions. It was always a losing battle and he had learned early on that it was easier to simply keep his temper if he agreed with everything everyone wanted. It saved him the headache of fighting himself. Of fighting a losing battle against a darker side that always seemed to win.

He made himself smile as charmingly as he could stomach. "I am sorry. I do not know how else to-"

"Kneel." Jun's voice rang out, sharply. "We have plenty of time, so I shall speak and you shall listen."

Percy hesitated for the barest of seconds, before he knelt as directed. He watched her approach and forced his body to remain calm and still. She circled him once, twice and then a third time.

Then she backed away from him, holding his gaze with her still bright eyes.

He stared in a mixture of horror and fascination as lines, dots and circles began to form symbols along the bare stretches of skin visible through her unusual attire. Within seconds, her body was covered with the symbols he could now recognize as runes and they glowed an eerie shade of green.

He sucked in a breath and tamped down at the fear that threatened to raise its ugly head.
Her hand fisted in his hair, harsh and unyielding, while her magic wrapped around him, warm and soft in contrast. She pulled, until his head was tilted back at an unnatural angle and took no notice of his discomfort. She stood behind him, her soft stomach brushing against his head as her free hand stroked one cheek in contemplation.

"Did you know your mother was a Dragel?" She began.

He tried to shake his head, but couldn't. He didn't want to answer. This was strange, odd and confusing.

He really didn't want to answer.

Her hand on his cheek, morphed into claws, black-curled, wicked-looking claws that scraped lightly along the length of his face and his neck. "Did you know?" She whispered. "Did you?"

"...no."

Relief coursed through him as Percy thankfully sat back on his heels, working to gain his breath back under control. His neck ached, his head throbbed and adrenaline sang sweetly as it rushed through his veins. He gasped softly, rocking forward to brace on his hands. His legs felt like pudding beneath him, soft and pliable with no strength left within.

"Breathe through your nose, child." Jun's hand fell carelessly against his head, fingers now, no longer claws. "You will not die from holding still for a few moments."

Percy did not deign to dignify that with an answer. He tried not to acknowledge that her hand carding through his hair was so very welcome and so very familiar. It paused a few times to briefly rub at the ache in his neck, before firmly stroking and soothing away the horrible headache that pounded in his head. His mind was beautifully twisted and tangled.

He didn't know what to think.
He didn't know why it mattered.
He didn't know if it should have.

This must be what delirium feels like. Percy thought, sluggishly. He was only aware that it felt like his body was shutting down on him. He ended up sprawled out on the ground, on his back, with his head in Jun's lap.

She had a sad smile on her face as she stared down at him and her fingers—those lovely wonderful hands—continued to comb through his hair in sure, deliberate strokes.

He opened his mouth to speak—several times, actually—but could not articulate a single word. Finally, he stared up at her, putting every ounce of energy into a wordless plea.

Her emerald eyes met his own soft brown ones.

She sighed, softly. "You cannot be one of my kind." She said, at last. "I would pity those that would make your existence necessary." Her hands paused. He shifted in her lap, subconsciously pushing upwards to urge her hands to resume their work once more. "To make you a Torvak means you would not be my headache." She gave a particularly nice scratch to that spot in the back of his
Percy let his eyes close in bliss. He shouldn't be enjoying this. He shouldn't be allowing it.

*It* should not be feeling so *good*, but he couldn't help the sounds building up in his throat or the way his breath quickened as her hands began to work again. Gently stroking, working through the curls and tangles, smoothing it all down.

"I really do not need another headache." She murmured. "And it would suit you better." She hummed. "Yes, it would suit you so much better. You're very much like your father."

Percy froze. The memory was buried deep, but it flew to the forefront in a heartbeat, so that he could relive it in his mind's eye.

"Ah, Percy. You're just like your father." His mother laughed. The lines around her eyes crinkled in that way that showed just how happy and pleased she was at the same time.

He held himself, stiffly as she swished her wand to clear the kitchen and drew near to him, a bundle of home-baked goods neatly wrapped for lunch. "Lunch?" He asked, as he always did.

"With dessert this time." She winked. "Something to sweeten you up a touch? Make all the pretty witches take notice?"

He blushed to the roots of his hairs and hastily stuffed the bundle in the dragonhide briefcase his ministry sponsor had gifted him. "I don't have time for that sort of thing, Mum. I have work to do!"

"Of course, of course." She soothed. She kissed his forehead, tugging him down by his tie to meet her height. "So much like your father…"

With a gasp, Percy sat up. He pulled away from the gentle hands, his mind whirling, his face flaming. He remembered that day. He had been late to work, but the dessert had helped to improve his mood. And while he'd been eating, he'd happened to see Penelope Clearwater who visited the ministry with her father to have certain papers signed. She'd looked over at him and he'd just taken a mouthful of treacle tart.

His reaction had prompted her gorgeous smile and somehow, he'd worked up the nerve to ask her out.

For some strange reason, she'd said yes.

Jun shifted to her feet and stood tall. "Definitely a Torvak." She murmured. "Sorry love, but this will hurt."

*Hurt?* Percy didn't have the time nor the strength of mind to process that. He stared up at her dumbly, from where he sat on the floor.

"I'm afraid I cannot give you the choice that you ought to have had upon your birth, but then again, childhood shows the man as morning shows the day." Jun pricked her thumb on one fang and traced the rune for Torvak in the palm of her other hand. She held it downward, facing him, so Percy could see it. It flared and glowed to life, the red burning black and the black burning into a rich, bright green. "You are not familiar with runes, are you?"

He blinked in answer, dazed.
She nodded, once. "I will call out the Dragel in you," the sorrow was heavy in her voice "and destroy it. The Torvak is all that will remain. You will never know the other side—your Mother's side. Do you understand?"

Percy struggled to hold her gaze. There was so much sadness in there and he could not understand it. Mum...

Why couldn't he have a choice? Did Bill have a choice? This wasn't fair!"

"I do not expect you to understand." Jun continued. "But you will answer me on this. "Do you trust me?"

NO! His mind screamed. "...yes" his mouth answered.

Her sad smile wavered. "Grantea inneeka solum-" within the confines of the neon fire, the circular rings began to glow an eerie green. "Shakshi. Torqash!"

Percy screamed.

The fire burned and raged wildly around him.

Percy dropped to the ground, his body growing slack. He writhed, spasmed and screamed, but there was no relief, no respite from the burning, searing pain that rippled through him.

He was on fire.

He was dying.

And it bloody hurt!

Hurt couldn't even begin to cover the depth of feeling slamming through him.

He whimpered.

Stop. Please stop! Make it stop...I'll do anything...

The fire raged on.

Jun stood over the shivering young man, the weight in her eyes reflecting the weight in her soul as she reached towards Percy with the runed hand. His body turned to face her, head falling back as she willed it to. She had spent all that time with him, after all, to attune her runes to his magic, his body, his spirit.

The Dragel within her stirred and roared.

She ignored it.

Clear mind, clear magic, clear results.

That was what she'd always been taught.

Her runed hand hovered over his mouth, open in a soundless scream.

"Shakshi." She murmured. "Elomath Dragel."
A horrible hissing, gurgling sound came from the prone body before blood bubbled up from his throat and spilled out until the ground. Jun did not acknowledge it as she held her hand just above his gasping lips and continued to murmur the words.

The blood spilled over, seeping into the ground, filling the carvings she'd cast when Percy hadn't been watching. They filled with the rich, red blood and suddenly, turned black, hissing as it melted away and returned the floor to its original state.

*Blood traitors.* Jun thought, idly. That could not bode well for any of the children. Bill was lucky. Very lucky.

Percy hiccupped and coughed out one final mouthful.

She straightened from her crouch over him and wandlessly cast a flicker of magic to clean him up and freshen his mouth. She would probably have to remove the memory of the changing. From the blank look in his eyes and the limp line of his body, it was not something that he was interested in recovering from. She touched a hand to her finger and then pressed it to his forehead.

*A mother's love...* His bearer had certainly been a strong and resilient woman. Jun smiled to herself and silently willed her magic to coax the young man to sleep.

Percy woke to an annoying buzz in the back of his head.

He scowled upwards at the shadowed face that hung over him and then glowered when he recognized it as Jun. He ignored the hand she offered him, sitting up himself and taking a quick look around.

He must have fallen asleep waiting on that woman. His scowl deepened. "What did you do to me?"

"Nothing." Jun held out her hands and took a cautious step backwards. "I was speaking to you and you did not answer, so I was worried that-"

"Worried for what?" Percy sneered. "You turned my brother into a werewolf and you were going to do the same to me, weren't you?"

Eyebrows arched upwards, almost mockingly. "Is that what you'd like?" She laughed. "Shall I turn you into a werewolf? It would be oh so much fun."

Percy glowered at her, shifting awkwardly to his feet. Everything ached. He bit his lip to keep from accidently saying something he hadn't rehearsed yet. It took a moment and then he sniffed. "What is it I have to do and how long is this going to take?"

"Dragel or Torvak?" Jun shot back.

"Torvak!" Percy snapped. "How could I possibly want to be a-"


He stumbled backwards, staring at her in confusion. "What? What did you just do? Why—I don't feel any different!"

"Most idiots don't." Jun wrinkled her nose. "The flames should release you. Go. Now!"

Percy took one look at her face and obeyed. He didn't want to spend another second around her if
"Percy!" Arthur surged forward as his third-eldest son stumbled out from the flaring ring of bright yellow fire. He steadied his son with a hand on his shoulder, worried eyes glancing over to see the shadowed figure in the midst of the circle. Percy had taken much longer than Bill, but just as before, he couldn't see nor sense a single thing that had taken place behind the wall of flame.

Regulus had struck up a conversation with Bill and Fleur and Arthur had let them be. There wasn't anything he could do or say and he didn't know what he should do or what he ought to say.

Septimus had frowned in disapproval, but he had not voiced it aloud. Cedrella had stayed close to her husband, occasionally rubbing her arms and casting weary looks at Fleur.

"Father." Percy held himself stiffly, allowing the embrace for necessities sake.

"What happened? Did she-?"

"She's a pathetic excuse of a witch!" Percy snapped. "And all she did was make me wait and then snap her fingers in front of my face."

Arthur blinked. "That's all?" He looked from Percy to the yellow flames and then back again. "That is all?" He repeated, incredulously. He dismissed Percy's initial words, after all, Jun was no witch. She was just a Dragel. A rare Dragel, perhaps, seeing that he couldn't recall runes ever being one of their specialties, but she was a Dragel nonetheless. He didn't bother to correct Percy though. There was no point to it.

Percy merely gave him a long-suffering sigh. He then moved to stand over behind the twins, with a sideways glare to Ron, a silent order for his youngest brother to shape up and at least pretend to act decent.

Arthur watched him move away and after a moment, he pinched his arm. The spike of pain reminded him that he was not dreaming and that yes, some times things happened that really didn't make any kind of sense at all.
The Weasley twins exchanged a glance between each other and then gave simultaneous sighs of boredom. This was taking longer than either of them had anticipated and from the current fuss over Percy's new form, Fred found himself gagging. George rolled his eyes in answer, but elbowed his twin for the expression on his face.

"Think she'll let us go together?" George eyed the yellow flames with no small amount of distaste.

"Can't see why not." Fred shrugged. "Looks like she has enough to spare." He wiggled his fingers with a nod towards the magical barrier. From the whispers he'd heard from his grandparents and a few of the nobles still lingering out in the hallway, Jun's magic was special and rare. They didn't know exactly what it was, but it simply was.

The expression on Arthur's face when Percy had stepped out was near blinding.

Fred could see in a heartbeat that his older brother now had a legitimate excuse for his haughty behavior. It rather made him sick to his stomach. He scowled.

"Quit it." George elbowed him again. "What's with you today?"

"Me?" Fred held his hands up in mock surrender. "What would make you think that I am the one with-"

"I don't like her." George swallowed hard. "I really hope we can do this together."

This time, his twin eyed him seriously. "Gred?" Fred's voice was very light and very soft.

"M'fine." George leaned away from the serious look. "I just don't want to have to do this—alone."

Fred returned the shaky smile, but his heart wasn't in it.

"Fred, you're up next," Arthur looked to his twin sons. He had a general idea of which son was which, but at his wife's general treatment of both of them as a single entity, there were some things he'd allowed them to indulge in. He now wished he knew what secret it was she'd never shared in telling the two apart.

One broke away from the other and started forward.

Arthur hoped it was Fred.

Jun watched the father shuffle to greet his new Torvak son. She studied the expressions of all the others present. There were differing reactions to all and most of them were pleased with Percy's turnout. She studied there remaining Weasley children, she could already see how this would turn out for all of them.

It coaxed her headache into full bloom.

With a grimace, she turned away and rubbed her arms to put some warmth back into them. It seemed the twins were next, but she could feel a disturbance in their matched auras.
That was not good.

That was actually rather dreadful.

The runes on the ground hummed to life with the shift in her emotions and she paused to glower down at them. "Quiet you." She began to walk on the marks, smearing them out with her bare feet. She would have to write new ones for each child. The light and magic within each symbol faded away as she willed her magic to return to her.

Someone approached the barrier and Jun raised her head, turning to look over her shoulder. She frowned, reaching out with a flicker of her magic. The response made her recoil and edge further away from the fellow who stood at the yellow barrier of flame. It burned higher, brighter and hotter in understanding of her reaction.

It took several minutes before she could wrestle her emotions and reactions under suitable control. When it did, her fickle temper surfaced as well. Jun scowled and stomped to the front where she was nearly nose to nose with the redhead. "Not you, the other one." She snapped and turned away.

Fred leaned back as the flames suddenly came to life, burning hot enough to scorch and bright enough to blind. He stumbled back a few steps, holding up his hands against the change. That had been unexpected. He frowned when they finally faded somewhat and he edged closer again, attempting to look through the pale flames to see the runed pathway his siblings had taken before.

He was surprised to see the shadowy figure within, now drawing near.

Fred found himself taking another step backward. He stared at the fading figure in a mixture of disbelief, frustration and indignation. But before he could protest, he heard his father speaking from behind.

"What's wrong?"

"She said she wanted George." Fred turned to look at his twin. George was significantly paler now than he had been a few minutes ago. "George?"

"No!" Arthur protested. "Don't give in to her." He turned his frown towards the wall of yellow flame and drew close to it. He waited until the woman circled around in her movements and spoke. "Fred is next."

There was a scoff from the other side of the flame. "You are not in a position to make demands. I want the other one. Now! Or I shall sit here all day and wait for night to come."

"Jun!" Regulus started forward only to be caught by Septimus' warning hand. He cast a look of worry to his wife, safely ensconced behind the fiery barricade. It did not escape him that her words were not an idle threat. If she did not wish to leave, then he knew there was no way that the featherbrains could make her. He almost smiled. It was that kind of stubbornness that had endeared the prickly woman to him in the first place.

The flames flickered and then roared back to life, twice as strong.

Arthur suppressed a flinch as he stood back. "George!" He said, stiffly. "Fred?" Perhaps it had been
the wrong twin after all, but he certainly could not tell.

Fred stepped back.

George wearily approached. A moment later, the flames parted, allowing him entrance unlike the others. George's last visual was Fred's stricken expression as the wall of flame flared to life between them and a sudden, sharp emptiness stabbed through him.

"That required more drama than necessary." Jun frowned. She studied this newest redhead with a hint of worry. The decision to freeze the twinbond between them had not been an easy one. But when she'd caught a good whiff of the conflictsion within each twin, she made up her mind.

They were individuals after all. With their own particular likes and dislikes, no matter how similar they were in physical appearance or magical ability.

She now made a series of calculations in her head as she approached the newest Weasley admission and held her hands out in supplication, showing that she meant no harm.

"Your face is saying so much, I daresay you would not have to say a thing." Jun commented, lightly. She rolled her shoulders back, holding the left one a tad higher than the right. "Do excuse me a moment." Her black wings burst forth from her shoulder blades and stretched—though not to full span—and shuddered. The black scales glistened in the light of the flickering flames as she drew near and the wings shifted to cocoon around them, hiding the interaction from prying eyes, even as the flames burned bright.

George felt something akin to mild panic settle over him as Jun drew near and her large, leathery wings unfurled with an audible snap. He had no delusions that she wasn't aware of her actions or her power. Everything about the woman reeked of power, authority and a painful darkness. He did not answer her statement, there really was nothing to say to that and if he didn't have to speak, then he wasn't about to complain either.

He didn't know what to say. Didn't quite trust his mouth to speak either. That was what Fred was for. Fred always knew what to say, how to say it and when to say it.

George suppressed a shudder as the wings arched forward and curved around him, coaxing him to inch forward, lest he be caressed by their warmed touches. He stumbled straight into her arms that curved around his back and neck, holding tight.

He trembled.

She made no comment.

They stood like that for a long time.

When George finally gathered himself together to pull away, the embrace tightened. He froze for a moment, checking his current status and the present situation.

It was dark, warm and comfortable in the makeshift privacy bubble.

Jun's arms were soft and strong, a lovely contradiction, but George didn't quite care. She held him with one arm curved around his neck, holding his head over her heart, so he could hear the steady, thrumming beat. She was tall enough that his height was nothing to her, not in this moment,
anyhow.

It was a bit of a stretch. He could always remember the moment he became taller than his mother. It had made moments like this naught but a memory in his jumbled mind.

"A-aren't you supposed to change me or something?" He heard himself say.

She chuckled—softly. "In a hurry, are we?"

"Just a little."

The arm around his waist shifted so that the hand began to rub up and down his spine in soothing, slow motions. "There is no rush. Decisions like these take time."


The arms slowly fell away and Jun stepped back, tipping up his chin with one hand. Her emerald eyes pierced through his soft brown ones. "You are fighting yourself." She murmured and then the wings rose and shifted to hang in the air behind her. She turned with ease and started forward to the center of the fire-sectioned space. "That is what was wrong."

"What?"

"For once in your life, choose for yourself." Jun studied him for a moment. "Choose the right thing. It is neither a crime nor a shame to do something for yourself. We are all individual beings, no matter how many things may bring us together, bind us together or tear us apart, we will always remain that which we are."

George didn't answer, but he followed her to the center of the chalk scripted circle on the floor. He didn't know how to answer that.

"Come around front, please." She requested. "I do need to see you in order for this to work." She seated herself, gracefully. Long lean legs folding effortlessly beneath her, hands rested on her thighs, head held high, wings stretched out beautifully behind her.

George did circle around and the next thing he knew, he found himself kneeling before her, his hands in hers as she seemed eager to take them. He swallowed hard. "What are you going to turn me into?"

"You are well over the age of ten." Jun said, mildly. "That is the age of consent among my kind. You may bond at ten, leave home at ten and bear your own responsibilities at ten." She sighed. "Ideally, sixteen would be the best coming of age, but when you have reached your first decade—she released one hand to trace a line from the center of his forehead, down his nose and over his lips, to end at the point of his chin. "Then you are old enough to speak for yourself."

He looked down.

She took his hand in hers once more. "The choice is yours," she said, softly. "Though I daresay you already know the answer."

"Things are never simple." George said, bitterly. "They are never as easy as they seem."

"Ah, but sometimes the right thing is the simplest and by doing the right thing, you choose the easiest path. Imagine the obstacles you would face, if you tried to live a lie and constantly rewrought yourself to be that which you thought you ought to be? Painful, I'd imagine. Boring as
well. Exhausting for sure. It would milk your soul dry."

The laugh was torn from his lips. "Half a soul." George muttered.

"Ah, yes, your twin." Jun sighed. "I asked for you on purpose you know." She wrinkled her nose. "What is your name, anyway?"

"George."


George glared at her.

She met his glare easily. "I asked for you, George. Not your older brother, not your 'other half' as you put it. I asked for you, so that you could have a chance. For once in your life, for goodness knows how it could turn out, you deserve to know that you have a choice. That there are options. You will not always be a carbon copy of each other, surely you know that."

"Of course I do!"

"Then why are you treating this opportunity as if I am raking you through the coals of the underworld?"

"Most people would say 'hell'." George quipped.

"Most people would answer the question." Jun's grip on his hands tightened—painfully. "Dragel or Torvak?"

"What?" He tugged on his hands.

She did not release them. "Did you know your mother was a Dragel?"

George closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. For some reason, that question hurt.

When the story finished, George didn't quite care that his head was in her lap and her hands were smoothing through his hair. He didn't care that he was sprawled on the cold, hard floor and he really didn't care that he might be crying. "I miss her." He said, hoarsely.

Jun wiped away a tear from his eye without comment. "Every child misses their mother." She murmured.

"No, I miss her." George stabbed a hand at his chest. "Here. It hurts. Since we left and especially since we came here and it makes me so—angry."

"But she lied to your father, practically betrayed him." Jun hummed. "That was very bad, was it not?"

"She did what she thought was best!" George made to rise, but her iron hands held him down.

"Shush, child. Do not work yourself up so. Do not think of what she could be, but rather what she is. A mother to cast this kind of magic has the kind of strength to move mountains and shift history." She patted his cheek. "Do you understand what I am asking of you?"

"I understand it, but I don't want it!" George exclaimed, passionately. "Why can't I stay like this? Why do I have to change just because everyone else wants me to?"
She curled her fingers in his hair and tugged, lightly. "You are working yourself up into a fit." She popped him on the cheek with two fingers. "Do not do that. I have no patience for hysterical beings of any kind, regardless of age, size or gender."

George did not deign to answer that.

"I am sorry that choice is no longer yours." She sighed. "Ideally, you should have had the choice, but if you were raised as you ought to be, there would've been nothing to worry of. Nature would have run its course." She smiled. "Surely the alternatives are not as horrible as you would believe? Besides, the choice is rather easy, is it not?"

"No, it isn't." George returned, dully. "It's hard and it's pointless."

"And you are sulking and moping." Jun retorted. "Allow me to spell it out for you then, shall I? That hurt in your heart is not your mother. It is her wish for you to have a happy, fulfilled life for every day that you live and breathe. The one beyond that, the one that aches and burns, that is your soul. It is crying for something that you are denying it." She began to feather her hands through his hair once more. "It is crying for your soulmate."

George blinked.

She smiled down at him, a sad, soft smile that didn't quite touch her vivid emerald eyes. "No one mentioned that you were exposed to a Dragel's Soulcry. That brother, Bill, he didn't have a hint of it, Percy didn't know what it was, so tell me something George, why are you reacting to it and how is it that you are able to resist?"

She still had that sad smile on her face as she stared down at him and those lovely wonderful hands continued to feather through his hair and wipe away the occasional traitor tear that snuck down his cheeks. Her words echoed hollowly in his head and he could not piece it together.

"I don't understand."

"You do not have to." Her hands stilled and one came to rest on his forehead. "You do not always have to understand everything, especially in matters of the heart and soul."

"What does it mean?"

"It means a Dragel Submissive saw you as a worthy mate." Jun said, matter-of-factly. "It also means that you are more attuned to your Dragel side than your inner Torvak."

"Why can't I be both?"

"Because you do not have the personality nor the magical reserves for it and because it would kill you." She thwapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Your blood is activated, meaning you have to choose. Which also worries me, because your mother's seal should have protected you from any kind of activation. Have you noticed anything odd, lately?"

George shuddered.

"I suppose that would be too broad. Very well then, the Dragel Submissive that called to you, do you know them?"

A soft pink blush registered as George's mind caught up to Jun's question. He winced.
"George?"

"…Harry." He muttered. "Oh, Merlin, it's Harry, isn't it?"

"Counting the fact that I do not know this Harry of which you speak, I would suppose that we assume you are correct in your figuring." Jun perked a brow. "What makes you say that?"

"It was announced." George tried to shrug. "At the table, the breakfast table—no wait, I think it was lunch." He scowled. "It had everyone shouting. Poor Ginny."

"Ginny?"

"My sister." George frowned. "My only sister. She's had a crush on Harry for years. Mum never discouraged it, but—" George's soft brown eyes radiated a new measure of pain. "But she asked him if he was happy."

Jun tilted her head to the side.

"She asked if he was happy," George continued. "And then she left it like that. As if, that was enough to know."

"But it wasn't enough for you, was it?" Jun prompted. "Speak up now, while I am listening."

"He was mated to some Slytherin snake." George bit his lip. "I mean, I know a bloke's entitled to happiness and all that, but a Slytherin? A pureblood one at that, not that there are any that really aren't." He shifted uncomfortably on the floor. "A Nott, Theodore Nott. Harry was furious when Dumbledore told. He said he was happily mated and bonded." George scoffed. "Said he was! And when the bloke actually turned up, he didn't protest when Nott dragged him off in private." He huffed. "Then when they came down they had a lovely argument, but Harry took his side anyway."

"They were close then." Jun commented.

"What?"

"You were jealous?"

"No!"

"Liar."

"I was not!"

"Which is why you are so mixed up in here." She tapped his head. "You can join them, you know."

"…no."

"Yes."

"I can't."

"Dragels are different creatures," Jun hummed. Her emerald eyes flared. "Let me show you."

When George was conscious once more, he found his earlier blush rather pointedly painted on his face. Jun's explanation via mental channels had been welcome, informative and very, very embarrassing to a hormonal young wizard. He swallowed hard, avoiding her mirthful gaze. "So, I
"More than a chance." Jun corrected. "A Soul cry affects all potential soulmates. You can refuse him, if you like, in fact, choosing your Torvak side may actually handle the refusal for you, but you probably will never forget this."

"...and if I want to be—like you?"

"Then when I leave here, I suppose I shall have to take you with me. Regulus shouldn't mind."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid your family isn't very welcoming to our kind, love." She tapped his nose. "Now then, I think that is enough dithering about for the both of us. I already know what I want you to be and what would suit you best, but the choice remains yours. You are of age, after all." She yawned. "Torvak or Dragel?"

George slowly sat up, curling his legs up to his chest. He was silent for a long moment and then he cast a glance upwards at Jun, staring into bright emerald eyes that reminded him so much of Harry. "...Dragel."

She stood, behind him, bending down to kiss his forehead, her wings flaring out behind her. "Good choice, love."

"Will it hurt?" George lay down on the hard floor, surprised to feel some warmth creeping into it. He let her move his body about as she pleased. His arms and legs were quickly spread, his head positioned just so. He discovered, rather quickly, that once she had moved each limb in question, he could no longer move it on his own.

"Everything hurts." She countered.

"That bad?"

"Probably worse."

"Wonderful."

She smirked. "Pain is not always a horrible thing. It reminds us that we're alive, that there is life and in life there is hope. It is a singularly unique reminder."

George snorted. "Will you count?"

"Will it help?"

"Probably not."

"Wonderful. I'll count."

George almost laughed.

She stood over him, at his feet, her back to the blurred audience. "Hold your breath, I am told that helps." Her wings stretched and fluttered, moving around them to form an imperfect cocoon, so that his focus was solely on her. He welcomed the wisps of warmth that came with it and wished he could touch those beautiful wings.
He wondered, briefly, how his own would look. Would they be the same gorgeous shade of black?

She waited while he sucked in a deep breath.

"One, two, three." Jun counted rapid-fire. She pricked her thumb on one fang and traced the rune for Dragel in the palm of her other hand. She held it downward, facing him, so George could see it. It flared and glowed to life, the red burning black and the black burning into a rich, bright green.

"You are familiar with runes?"

George shook his head as best as he could.

"I will call out the Dragel in you and bring it to the surface. You will transform almost at once and in doing so, you will destroy your Torvak side. I can only bring your true nature to the forefront, afterward, you are on your own. Do you understand?"

George swallowed. He released the breath he'd been holding and took another.

"Do you trust me?" She asked, voice soft.

…yes. How could I not? His mind hummed, his magic sparked, his soul fluttered. "…yes" his mouth answered.

Her sad smile turned brilliant. It made his heart catch in his throat. "Grantea ineekea solum-" within the confines of the neon fire, the circular rings began to glow an eerie green. "Shakshi. Dragel!"

The fire began to kindle within. George shuddered.

The fire burned and raged wildly around him.

But strangely, it was a comforting warmth. George found that he could not shy from it, yet he felt no need to do so. It was comforting and soothing, as if it were an old friend. It wrapped and swirled around him, dancing about with playful seduction. At first, it had felt as if some strange creature had taken over his body, forcing him to writhe, scream and fight, but then, as quickly as it had burned through him, it stopped.

George had simply lain there as the lovely fire licked at him.

He was on fire.

He was alive.

And it felt so good.

"Mum?" George cautiously edged around the corner of the kitchen. He stole a weary glance around him. Fred was puttering about somewhere, but he hadn't noticed when George had snuck off on his own. The younger twin hadn't wasted any time in making his way to the kitchen, where the heart of The Burrow seemed to truly be. He was searching for one thing and one thing only.

It was merely a matter of how to properly scheme for it, as Fred was always so careful about their twin-like reputation. George wrinkled his nose. It hadn't been hard to silently make his way to the kitchen. The house felt so odd when it was empty like this, everyone else missing. He was surprised that Mum hadn't sent them straight back to Hogwarts after the firework prank on Umbridge.
"Hmm?" Molly turned with a warm smile on her face. "Ah, George." She promptly swallowed him up in a hug, burying her face in his fiery hair and taking a deep breath. "I am so glad you are alright. What's the matter?"

"You're barmy woman," he managed, even though the words felt stale upon his tongue. "I'm Fred. Honestly, you call yourself our-"

Her hand caught a hold of his ear and gave it a quick twist.

He yelped and grabbed the offended appendage.

Warm brown eyes met troubled hazel ones.

"Whenever you need a hug, George," she drew him back to her bosom and hugged tight. Her arms were strong, warm and scented of cinnamon. "You just come and ask for it, you hear? It doesn't matter what Fred thinks." She kissed the corner of his temple. "And you needn't pretend to be him, to ask for one."

"Breathe, love." Jun's voice was somewhere overhead. "Slow breaths, come on now."

He did.

And he cried.

Tears of frustration, fear and hope trickled down his cheeks. The emotions swirled and settled in acceptance, freedom and understanding.

He understood.

This was no more a curse than it was a gift.

And he was lucky.

So very lucky.

Jun stood over the silently crying young man, reading the relief in his expressive features. She was curious to know and hopefully meet the lucky Submissive that would gain such a gem as a mate. The sheer complexity of this young dragel would make a mark on every one he came into contact with.

She steeled herself as she reached towards George with the runed hand. This would be easier than Percy's finishing rites. George was willing. He was not fighting her. He truly looked forward to this.

She couldn't help the smirk that stole over her solemn features. She was proud of him.

The Dragel within her stirred and roared. She laughed, aloud.

Her runed hand pressed flat against the sole of his right foot. His body jerked, rigid before his mouth opened in a soundless scream.

"Shakshi." She murmured. "Elomath Torqash."

She withdrew her hand and the rune once visible on it, was now transferred to the sole of his bare foot. It burned black, then red and then it began to weep and bleed. She drew on her runes,
watching the lighted stones hum to life around them both as she called the tainted blood to the surface and drew it out in the least painful channel.

The blood spilled over, seeping into the ground, filling the carvings she'd cast when George had been thinking. They filled with the tainted, black-red blood and suddenly, turned pure black, hissing as it melted away and returned the floor to its original state.

_Blood traitors._ Jun remembered. _Just a moment longer, George…_ 

The young man had blacked out at some time during the proceedings.

She did not blame him.

There were very few who could retain consciousness through such a ritual. Ideally, it would be best not to combine the two, but she had the energy to spare and there was no telling who else and where else he could find someone with the ability to perform a blood purification.

It was a long time before Jun straightened from her knees at his feet and wandlessly cast a flicker of magic to heal the rune inscribed on his foot. The healing magic spiraled through him, prompting a groan. She smiled.

George awoke to find himself shirtless and with a tremendous ache between his shoulders.

"George?" Jun's voice came from somewhere behind him. "How are you feeling?"

"Ow?" He suggested.

She laughed—the sound light-hearted and amused. "Ow is accurate." She allowed. "You did very well."

"I did."

"Mmhm." She patted his head.

He leaned into the touch.

She obliged, gently scratching her fingers through his sweat-dampened crop of red hair. "Your element is fire." Her free hand squeezed his shoulder, gently. "That is a very powerful element."

"Fire?" George hummed, eyes closed in bliss.

"Mmhm. I would wager it was your bearer's element as well." She smiled. "A variation of it though, black fire. That is a very rare gift. Most elements do not have a secondary function within their bearing. Black fire is one of the rarest kinds. You will have to be very, very careful from now on."

His brow furrowed. _Rare? Me?…impossible…!_

She rubbed the wrinkles away. "You will have to watch that temper of yours."

He pouted.

She laughed again. "From one redhead to another, temper is the least of our worries, hm?"

He nodded, vigorously.
"Good lad. Now, your wings are next, alright?"

He stiffened.

She pinched him. "None of that. The more relaxed you are, the better this will be. You need to have them out and I need to take a look at them, alright? It would be best if I was present for your first extension."

It hurt.
Far worse than anything else he could possibly recall.

It *hurt!*

There was blood everywhere.
And everything felt heavy.
And then he felt Jun's hands on them.

Tender, gentle and expert in their handling.

George hummed wearily.

"You said you'll take me with you, right?"

"I did." Jun squeezed the back of his neck, gently. She continued to work out the kinks in his shoulder, rubbing the tattoos until they swirled beneath his skin once more and faded into their necessary places.

"You will, won't you?"

"I do not make inaccurate suggestions nor promises that I cannot keep."

"...so yes?"

"Yes, you silly child."

"I'm not that young."

"I'm at least a century over you."

"What?"

"Shush."

"What will happen to me?"

"Nothing, really. We'll find that lovely little Harry of yours and you can court him proper."

George snickered.

She thumped him on the head.

"Ow."
"You will court him."

"I don't think he'd appreciate it." George rubbed his nose. "And I don't know anything about courting a bloke, anyhow."

"Then start using that impressive head of yours."

"Hey!"

"All done."

George didn't move.

"Up we go."

He let himself be dragged up to his feet. His body obeying even as everything else about him protested.

"...George?" Jun led him to the wall of flame.

He looked to her, inquiringly.

"They won't know what's happened to you until I have my hands on that twin of yours."

"Fred." George supplied.

"Yes, Fred. Him." She patted his shoulder. "You will not be able to influence him in any way, understand?"

George didn't. But he nodded anyway. That was what she wanted to know, anyway.

"Good. Now go."

Go? George turned and grabbed her in a fierce hug. He felt her start and stiffen in his arms. But before he could pull away, she relaxed and hugged him back—hard.

"You'll be fine. Now, out with you!"

He dodged her smack, but not the stinging hex. "Ow!"

He could have sworn she laughed.
The Choice of Fred Weasley

Chapter Summary

This is a LONG chapter! ;) The next one features Harry again.

RECAP: Septimus calls in Regulus Black—a botched Torvak hybrid and his Dragel wife, Jun. Jun gives Bill a wolfish inheritance, then Percy a Torvak one. Theo and Severus find themselves dealing with some very out of character submissives when Harry's mental connection to Voldemort begins acting up again. George has met with Jun and chose Dragel. Now it is Fred's turn to meet with her

WEASLEY MANOR: UNPLOTTABLE: TUESDAY EVENING

When George stumbled out and free from the neon yellow flames, a collective gasp of relief came from the mismatched audience.

"George!" Arthur moved forward. He surveyed his younger son with a look of worry and mild concern. "What happened? Are you alright?" He cast a look over his shoulder where Fleur was currently glued to Bill's side and Percy was conversing with Felix in quiet tones.

"Gred?" Fred slipped between his twin and his father, searching George's pale hazel eyes for any hint of what had happened and what would happen. "You alright?" His voice was pitched low, for George's ears alone and no one else's. His face didn't show the worry, but the faint twitch of one eyebrow, let George know that Fred was worried.

"She's waiting for you." George heard himself say. "It doesn't hurt—much."

Fred stared at him, oddly. "What doesn't—where's your wings?" He craned his neck to see around George's shoulder. Percy had been able to produce a smattering of black feathers up and down his arms and neck—with the proper persuasion of course. He was now beginning to worry about his twin that seemed to be mentally and emotionally retreating as a new weight shone in those clear hazel eyes.

A cold chill stabbed through Fred as he realized for once, he could not read George.

Could not read him.

At all.

"George?"

"I haven't all day," the flames dimmed to show Jun's exasperated face. "Can we please hurry up with it? I was planning on pasta for dinner."

"Pasta?" Regulus perked up. "With cream sauce?"

"No cream sauce." Jun wrinkled her nose. "You know it makes your stomach feel like a—"

"Never mind. Pasta is fine." Regulus interrupted. "Pasta and whatever you want to do to it." He
added, to himself.

Cedrella frowned at him, but did not comment. She turned to the older twin and patted his shoulder in encouragement. "Fred, go on up dear." She reached for George and froze when the twin visibly recoiled. "George?" There was a hint of steel in her voice. "Septimus?"

Septimus appeared at her elbow, wiping his forehead. "What, love?" His wife gestured to the younger redheaded twin. "What about him?"

"Ask him what he is."

Septimus perked a brow. "He has to be a Torvak." He half-rolled his eyes. "There couldn't possibly be enough Dragel blood for anything to happen." He frowned. "Arthur?"

"Father?" Arthur made his way towards the trio. "What is it?"

"This Molly of yours, which line did she hail from?" A look of consternation had now settled over Lord Weasley's features.

Arthur blinked. He thought long and hard for a good moment. Molly didn't speak of her family much at all—very much in the same vein as he never mentioned his. But he did know the answer to that, knew it because of her twin brothers by the names of Gideon and Fabian. "Prewett?" He said, at last. "I believe it was the Prewetts, she always referred to a Gideon and Fabian Prewett. Said they died in the first wizarding war, but that the twins always reminded her of them." They were her brothers, I think. He added, silently to him. Her favorite brothers, I saw them together once, they were very close...oh, Molly-!

"Prewett, Prewett, Prewett..." Septimus frowned. "I do not like that."

"Seppy?"

"Shush." Septimus remained buried in thought for several long moments and then his frown deepened. "Arthur, come with me."

"Seppy?"

"Do not worry that pretty little head of yours." Septimus paused to drop a kiss on his wife's head. "I simply wish to speak to Arthur alone." He paused and then leaned over to pat George's shoulder. He took note of the young man's stiff, defensive posture and then inclined his head, before shifting his hand to settle on the back of Arthur's neck. "This way." He murmured.

"A round of brandy then?" Regulus suggested. The air had grown tense the moment Lord Weasley and his middle son had disappeared. That could not bode well. He immediately reached for the automatic response. "You are all far too tense for this to end well, myself included. I wouldn't mind a touch of something."

Felix chuckled. "I can't say I would object. No firewhisky?"

"Can't stomach it." Regulus gave a regretful smile. "It was fantastic stuff, as I recall."

"Hasn't changed at all." Bill murmured. He rubbed one hand up and down Fleur's arm. Her warmth beside him was encouraging and desperately welcome. "Still tastes the same."

"Ah, that's good to know." Regulus grinned. "It was nice when I had the steel for it."
"I keep forgetting." Felix murmured, but there was the faintest glint in his eyes that suggested he really hadn't forgotten at all. He snapped his fingers for a house elf and ordered drinks for all who still remained. Thankfully, most the lords and ladies had eventually taken off, but Felix knew this was only because they had duties to their houses. His own concerns had shifted towards the newest recruit from Jun's prison circle.

"George, was it?" Regulus beckoned. "You're welcome to join us." He'd been studying the lad since he'd stepped out from Jun's clutches and George hadn't even made an attempt to hide that something was rather wrong. Regulus had a sinking feeling he knew exactly what was wrong. He sighed. Sometimes his darling wife wasn't quite the darling she ought to be.

"I shouldn't." George swallowed. His gaze flickered over his shoulder and towards Fred who now approached the flaming yellow barrier.

"Shouldn't?" Bilius snagged a glass from the tray the house elf held perfectly upright. "Why not? Tell you what, as your uncle, I say it's perfectly fine," He winked. "Not like you haven't stolen a few tastes yourself, eh?" He caught a glass and handed it over to Regulus. "Here's the brandy. Keep your feathers out of the rest, it should refill itself."

"My thanks." Regulus murmured, accepting the drink for the liquid peace offering that it was. Felix was the more understanding of the older Weasley clan, but Bilius had always kept an innate sense of how to diffuse a fight, unless his temper desperately wanted out. Felix had a habit of poking things until they bit back. "Cheers."

"Cheers." Bilius returned, his smile became a grimace as he downed half the glass and waited for the everfill charm to work its magic. "Come on now, the rest of you. We ought to have a toast to these young men."

"It will relax you some." Felix handed off a glass to Percy. "Drink." He ordered, noting his older nephew's imminent refusal. "I don't know what you've been through, but I do know a thing or two about seals. They're nasty, dark and wretched business. It'll take a toll on your magic, your mind and your body. Best to drown your sorrows before they crop up." He nudged the glass in Percy's hand upwards. "Drink, you'll feel better."

"Not you." Bilius caught Ron's hand before it could reach the tray. "Not until you've been in and out of there anyway." He frowned. "And I don't think quite so. Mum will have my head."

"But I'm sixteen!" Ron protested, incredulously. "and what about my nerves?"

"What about them?" George groused. "Can't have been any worse than mine." He curled his hand into a fist, refusing the glass. Alcohol was the least of anything that could ease the turmoil in his mind.

"This way." Regulus' soft voice was in his ear. He guided George away while the young man tried to figure out how the Torvak had managed to come so close without his notice. Regulus steered him to a quieter corner in the darkened hallway near a shuttered window. He set his glass of brandy down on the window sill and shifted so that he could stretch his arms—and therefore, by default his wings—up to shield them both from some of the dreary light spilling through the frosted panes.

George stood, staring at him, uncomprehending.

"Sit." Regulus said, patiently. He nodded towards the clean floor. "And don't think. Sometimes it's easier to handle that way."
George didn't have the presence of mind to argue. He sat and after a time, he found himself leaning against the nearly leg, soaking up the warmth from the older man.

Regulus shifted, barely, enough for his wing to angle downwards and rest, lightly, on George's head. Grey-black feathers mingled with orange-red hair.

Fred let himself be nudged forward by his grandmother. He was more concerned about his newly silent twin than whose turn it was to go. "Why can't Ron be next?" He murmured. But his father had already left the room and Fred wasn't very surprised to see his youngest brother trying to wheedle his way into the slowly forming drinking circle.

"George?" Fred turned in time to see George standing on the edge of the drinking circle. "Fred, hurry up." Cedrella murmured. "Do not keep her waiting, the sooner she is-"

"Mum, did you…?" Felix glided over, suspending a fluted glass of amber liquid into her open hand.

"Not now, Felix." She accepted the glass and took a sip. Then frowned and handed it back.

Felix sighed. He took the glass back and gave a slight tip of his head. He looked from Fred to the wall of neon flames and the blurred figure inside. "Aren't you going?"

"And miss the party?" Fred shot back.

"I'll save you a drink." Felix winked. "With your father's permission of course."

"That isn't stopping Ron." Fred shot back.

"No, your uncle Bilius is."

"It's harmless?" Fred tried to stall. He couldn't help sneaking a glance over his shoulder where he'd seen George and Regulus disappear. "I don't mind being last, in fact, it's probably a good thing if-"

"Twins belong together, don't they?" Felix interrupted. His hand settled rather meaningfully on Fred's shoulders. "You shouldn't keep George waiting."

"I won't." Fred tries to twist free from the hand. He was suddenly aware that his Uncle Felix's hand resting on his shoulder is more feathered claw than actual hand. "I'll just see if he's-"

"When you return." Felix murmured.

"George!" Fred called. His twin turned and perked a brow in silent question. Fred tried not to frown, his automatic response to being ignored for no reason. "Everything alright?" He tried to move forward, but the claw on his shoulder tightened a fraction more.

George shrugged. He stiffened when Heron came up to stand beside him, offering a small glass of sparkling drink.

Fred could not keep his frown from showing this time. Why aren't you saying anything? He silently demanded, all but willing his twin to somehow feel what he didn't dare voice aloud. What happened in there? What's wrong? Did something happen? Say something!

Regulus stepped in between Heron and the others. He studiously avoided Fred's gaze as he reached in and 'rescued' George from the center of attention. A moment later, the botched Torvak simply
herding the quiet twin out of the 'waiting room' and out into the hallway.

George! And suddenly, Fred didn't have any patience any more. He'd lost all connection with his twin when George had entered the flaming neon ring of fire and the barriers had sprung to life. It had been the most painful experience of his life to date.

He'd never felt something like this. He'd always thought that perhaps they shared a mutual magical connection, but losing everything like that—George had literally left him cold the moment he'd stepped inside the fiery ring.

There was no warm whisper in the back of his mind, no answering call to his magical probe and definitely no comforting weight of a nearly shared consciousness. Instead, Fred found himself very alone, very unbalanced and very, very confused.

George's return had been welcome, but lacking.

The whisper that had always let him know that George was ready and willing to prank or talk, was muted. The usual shared dance their magic often engaged in was reduced to a sealed wall. Fred had reached out to him, just as he always did, instead, the magic remained staunchly together, like a solid block. Not at all like the spirals and tendrils of spontaneous energy that Fred was so used to. The silent language that was theirs alone, seemed to have vanished when Fred stared into identical hazel eyes and read absolutely nothing from their depths.

Fred felt his temper flicker and flare.

His mind produced two images with conflicting memories.

George, before the yellow-fire-ring-thingy, normal, familiar and just so George.

George, after the yellow-fire-ring-thingy, not normal, not quite unfamiliar, but somehow, not quite George.

In that moment, Fred didn't care.

This had all been so confusing, so twisted and so wrong that he couldn't keep it in his head any longer. And then, that was it.

Without ceremony, Fred wrenched free from Felix's grip and stalked forward until he was nose to nose with the searing neon yellow flames. He didn't hesitate to reach out and grab the flickering fiery wall and pull it apart with his bare hands.

Pain erupted and seared through him, but then, suddenly, he stood inside the ring instead of outside.

"You blockheaded cretin!" The redhead woman practically snarled. "Patience is a virtue by which you have lost." She stalked forward, now nose to nose with him. She had reached through the flames and pulled him in when he'd attacked the fiery ring. "Do you hate your hands that much?" Jun glared at him and then whirled around and stomped back to the center of the circle, where she'd been rubbing out glowing runes. "I wasn't ready for you!"

Fred started forward a few steps before the sharp pain in his hands stabbed through him. It stopped him in his tracks. Jun's words registered. It hit him that he had just used his hands.

His hands.
His precious hands.
The ones that crafted pranks, spells and grabbed George before he could wander into harm's way.
His hands.
*Oh Merlin.*

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Jun skittered across the runed floor, pausing just barely at certain spots to smudge out the marks with her bare feet. She threw a glance towards the fidgeting redhead and took note of his red hands. They were nearly as red as his hair and she knew the pain hadn't set in just yet.

She muttered to herself as she interrupted the settling magic from George's ritual. When she heard his hiss between gritted teeth, she all but flew to his side. Expert eyes took in the abused skin, red and white.

The fire burned.

It continued to burn.

It was far more than mere flame.

"You foolish, foolish boy!" The words were filled with fear. Jun cast a look over her shoulder, an expression of conflict as her emerald eyes flickered between Fred's hands and the still glowing runes scattered across the floor. "I hope you can dance." She grumbled.

Raising one hand to her mouth, she pricked it on the customary fang and quickly painted a series of dots, lines and circles across one palm and a rune in the other. "Don't do that." She caught his gaze, square. "You'll make it worse." She shook her hands as if to dry them, then raised them to her mouth and bit—in quick succession.

Her deadly fangs made quick work of her hands and within seconds, they bled profusely. "*Cagaran naulith emika.*" Jun hissed. She clasped the hands and then released them, reaching towards Fred. "*Brindus naulith. Brindus. Shakshi.*"

Fred stared in horror as her pale hands became bloody. The pain in his own hands was no longer distracting when he couldn't tear his gaze away from the crimson dribbled hands. He started when she drew near and grabbed both his hands, holding them tight.

The blood was cool against his burning skin and he found himself holding tighter, even as his brain tried to process the illogical reality. Everywhere she touched, calmed and cooled.

"Stop that." Her grip tightened over his hand. "Don't move your hands. The blood has to work on its own. That is the beauty of this particular spell." Emerald eyes narrowed. "And it would serve you right for running headfirst into something like this." She looked down at his bare feet and her lip curled.

Fred resisted the urge to shuffle. The burning pain slowly shifted to a dull, throbbing ache. Several long minutes later, a distinct coolness sank into his skin, until it became a rather obvious chill traveling up the length of his arms to settle at his shoulders. He tried to pull away, but her grip did not slacken.

"Not yet." Emerald eyes locked onto his soft hazel ones. "This is a parasitic fire, it may have burned your hands, but in the time it took to heal the outside, the inside would've sustained far
more damage than you can recall."

He shivered, violently.

A flicker of compassion showed in the glimmering green eyes. "I am sorry for that. The fire reacts to the emotions of the caster." She sighed. "You were not supposed to enter until I called for you. The kind of fire—this one in particular—it is meant to kill."

Fred stared at her. "What?" He sputtered. "How could you-?"

"Your kind doesn't take kindly to mine." Jun shot back. "Call it a smidgen of self-preservation." Her emerald eyes glistered. "Why do you think all of those idiots are standing out in the hallway? It isn't like I could lose control of this." She gave a nod of her head to the flickering flames of yellow that shielded them from outside view. "It is as much a part of me as it is not a part of you. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that you'd better tell me what you did to, George."

"Lovely sentiment. Now, what were you thinking?"

"What did you do to him?"

"Nothing that he did not want. You are avoiding my question."

"You're avoiding mine!" Fred tugged on her hands again. "Let go of-"

"Gladly, if you do not wish to use your hands beyond decorative limbs at your side for the rest of your life." She sniped. "Now, answer me. What exactly did you mean to accomplish by this unnecessary display of idiocy?"

"How do I know you're healing me?" He countered.

"Oh by Arielle's-" Jun snorted. "Very well then, if you wish to be difficult, then I have no reason to be nice." A slender auburn eyebrow elegantly arched upward. She shifted to stand closer, this time, with her feet atop his cold toes.

Hazel eyes grew wide. The warmth of her feet on his was as different as the temperature of her icy hands. Her feet were warm to almost scorching as they rested lightly atop the frozen toes. She was careful to keep her weight shifted and on her heels, the pressure barely there. The chills in his shoulder began to move until Fred stood, chattering, his hands frozen in hers.

"I am healing you, because if I were doing anything else, you would be writhing on the ground and begging for death." She hummed. "Almost through, a few more minutes should do the trick."

He opened his mouth.

She glared at him.

He remained silent.

"Did no one ever teach you of parasitic fires?"

What could have been a blush dusted across Fred's face. It quickly faded into his pale skin.

"Must've skipped that day." He quipped.

"You will wish you hadn't, if you knew." Jun scolded. "Parasitic fire is a magical thing that burns
away at your magical core. It will extract it from you in the most painful manner and after it has
gorged itself on your magic, it will then burn your corpse—living or dead—to a crisp. It is
traceable to the caster, but only if you know them. It is identifiable by magical talent, in this case,
my fire is this lovely, blinding shade of yellow. I shall leave you to guess what talent that
suggests."

Fred didn't answer. A moment later, he shifted, uneasily. He had never heard of a magical fire
causing that sort of a reaction before and he knew more odd bits of lore than the entire restricted
section in the Hogwarts library. Sort of. He scowled. It was the strangest feeling to endure the
conflicting temperatures in such an odd way—her warm feet and icy hands. His warm hands and
cold feet. A great shudder ran through him.

Jun frowned. She took note of his flinch and did not like what it suggested. "Can you dance, love?"
Her voice gentled.

"...depends." He eyed her, warily. "I am-"

"Good. Shall we?" She stepped off of his feet. She stood on her own for a moment and then rolled
them with expert fluidity. She had certainly done this before. "Copy me, if you can." She nodded
downwards. "You'll need to work the feeling back into them."

Fred found himself shaking his head. "I can't-"

"Then just follow. I will lead. Do not step on anything that feels—wrong." She did not release his
hands, but she did step back enough to give the slightest of bows. It allowed him to remain in her
line of vision, but it also allowed the customary courtesy of one dancing partner to another.

He returned it with a short nod of his head.

"You know runes?" She gave a jerk of her head over her shoulder. "You know what they can do?"

He nodded.

"Good. I need to erase them." She studied his face. "Follow."

"There's no music."

"Really?"

"Can't dance without music." Fred stalled.

Jun licked her lips, then pursed them in thought.

A moment later, she began to whistle.

Emerald eyes locked with hazel—again.

Fred swallowed. "Don't know this...tune."

Her eyes laughed at him and she began to dance.

Fred willed his cool feet to move. He stumbled through the first awkward measure as Jun moved
easily around him. She drew him close, then gently pushed back. She circled once, twice and
ducked over, then under and led forward.
It took him twice to pick up the pattern in her steps and then he followed along as best as he could. Sharp stabs of warmth began in his feet and her cold hands warmed in his. He found himself settling into a rhythm.

It wasn't a traditional wizarding dance, he knew that much, but it wasn't one he was familiar with either. She managed to make it complicated even though their hands never once separated, there was nothing lacking from it, in all the proper necessities of a dance.

He realized, as they moved, that Jun led them forward, smearing out the runed marks on the floor with her bare feet, while he followed along. The glowing marks would fizzle out with a barely audible hiss, becoming chalk-like dust on the floor, swept away by the hem of her trailing skirt. He caught glimpses of pale skin as slender legs showed through the generously slit sides, her movements were graceful and elegant.

She didn't seem to lose her breath either, as her whistled tune never seemed to repeat itself, while the dance itself, did.

When the last rune had been rubbed out, Fred breathed a sigh of relief. He now had all feeling back in his feet and his legs moved as they should. His hands—arms and shoulders included—were painless and he was surprised to find himself feeling lighter.

"Very well done." Jun commented. She released his hands, at last. "Check the fingers and joints. See if it feels as it ought to."

He did.

It did.

"...thank you."

A wry smile stole over her face. "You're quite welcome." She tilted her head in acknowledgment. "You are a very good dancer."

Fred blushed. "Hardly. You're a very good—whistler."

She returned the compliment with a toss of her head. "You learn quick."

"Not quick enough." Fred wiggled his toes, meaningfully. George had always been more graceful than him in things like this. He would have two left feet if his twin hadn't insisted on teaching him a few of the finer points of etiquette among the higher wizarding society.

Of course, how George had known them in the first place was still one secret he'd never been able to wheedle from his twin. Yet, somehow, he'd never forced the issue. If George wanted to have his secrets, as long as they did no harm—he could keep them.

"So tell me. Why did you do that? It only earned you unnecessary pain, drama and embarrassment."

Fred shrugged. "And a dance lesson."

Jun gave a half-smile. "Indeed, but that is not the answer to the question. I did not send for you."

"Luck of the draw?" Fred suggested.

"It may or may not have been your actual turn, as you put it. Try again."
"What did you do to him?" The question was a slightly more tempered this time, and a calculating look settled in and faded from Fred's charming features.

"As I said before, nothing that he did not desire." Jun's eyes narrowed. "What would you prefer that I said?"

"You did something."


"Well, that was inevitable. You do not really think I could have done otherwise, do you?"

"It would depend." Fred returned. "Was that your only option?"

"That was all that was left to be done."

"Stop that."

"Stop what? That?" Jun's lips twitched, faintly. Fred's hands curled halfway and then slackened. He shrugged. "Fine then. He'd better be alright."

"I would never harm a child." Jun snapped. "However, we all have our limits. I would wager you are trying to find mine." She wrinkled her nose. "You will not find it."

"Really?" Fred perked a brow. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Really." Jun said, mildly.

They stared at each other for far longer than was strictly polite.

Neither willing to look away.

Jun finally tipped her head. "Shall we?" She dropped a curtsy. "I daresay there are a few steps I am sure you do not know."

Fred snorted. "Are you going to whistle this one too?"

"Scared?" Jun smirked. "I'll try to spare your precious ears."

"Wouldn't want you to lose something important." Fred retorted, smoothly.

"Then perhaps a little bit of magic should help, yes?"

"Magic is unpredictable."

"Only to the predictable." Jun smirked. "You think better when you are on your feet and moving about. Come. Another round will be good for you." She waggled her fingers. "You can even put your hand on my shoulder and I will not hex you for it."

"Small comfort."

"Small victory." Jun corrected. "I promise it is nothing dangerous. Nothing too dangerous, anyway."
Jun did not whistle.

True to her word, a glimmer of magic came to their silent rescue.

The first strains of music hummed to life, barely audible, if at all. It grew to an admirable whisper and then settled.

He took her hand in his and placed the other on his shoulder.

Emerald met hazel.

One smirked, the other grinned.

They danced.

"So, will you change me into a screeching bird or a scaly little dragon?" Fred prompted. He twirled her around him with a growing air of confidence. "Or am I allowed to choose?"

"I have not decided which suits you best." Jun shot back. "Neither seem horrible enough."

Fred chuckled. "So I can't choose?"

"Do you want to?"

He shrugged, then grimaced. A shrug did not really fit in with their current dance. "Guess it doesn't matter."

_Ah. But it does, to you at least, it does._ Why? Jun mused. "Which do you prefer? You are welcome to state a preference."

Fred snorted. "Neither. I'd rather just be me." He grinned, cockily. "Nothing wrong with me. Don't need any kind of creature enhancements."

"I see." Jun twirled around him and stilled. "No dragon scales or little black feathers?"

"I doubt it would match my hair."

Jun laughed.

"I bet you didn't dance with Percy."

"My, taking on airs already?" Jun shook her head in mock disapproval. "Really, that's quite unbecoming of you, Fred."

"You didn't." Fred repeated. "He's pants at dancing. Two left feet worse than mine."

"And yet your two left feet are matching mine quite perfectly," Jun noted. "I would like to mention that I believe my feet are one of each kind. A right and a left."

Fred winked. "I'd say you're lucky."

"And I might agree." Jun half-smiled. "You still haven't answered me yet." The music hummed around them as they swayed. "Which would you prefer?"
Fred shook his head. "Now there's a trick question." He countered.

"Really?"

"There isn't a safe answer to it." Fred spun her away from him and then followed afterward. The fluid movements slowly settled him into his skin. The anger had faded, the indignation had melted away and now a cautious interest remained. He silently gave the redheaded dragon-witch credit. She was very good at what she did. He'd much rather preferred snapping her head off for messing with George. He frowned.

She still hadn't said what she'd done or what she'd turned him into and he hadn't been able to grab a read on George. It fairly rankled. Fred resisted the urge to roll his shoulders, he worked at keeping them in line with his arms and keeping the tension from spreading. His mind was brilliant, but sometimes that was more of a curse than a gift.

"Then perhaps there is no answer?" Jun suggested.

Fred quickly shook his head. "There's always an answer, sometimes it isn't the one we want though." He frowned.

"Think out loud." Jun prompted. "I shall weed out all the pointless drivel and you may find an answer among the remains."

He almost laughed. He would have to sacrifice a touch of his pride for that, but the more he pondered it, the idea didn't seem so bad. "If," he began. "If I was a Torvak, then I might end up like Percy." He stage-whispered. "The poor bloke has it bad. Almost as if he was born to be a prat." He sighed. "Ickle Ronniekins isn't much better. But then there's Dad and the others. Dad's different now. A little—different."

"What kind of different?"

"Different like—darker. I don't know. I've never seen him like this before."

"It worries you?"

"Sort of, but not really. It's more like, it's like this is what he's supposed to be and he's been hiding it all this time. It just feels—strange."

"Many things feel strange because they are."

"But this is Dad." Fred shook his head. "This is Dad. He's obsessed with muggle things, experiments with stuff he shouldn't, is content with the lowest rung in the Ministry, scolds us when Mum tells him to and always smiles no matter what the situation." His grip on her waist tightened.

Jun eyed him carefully. "That's what he's let you think?"

"Obviously," Fred snorted. "Because all of a sudden, he knows how to a use a wooden staff like some traveling gypsy out of a wizarding tale. He sprouts feathers out of nowhere like an enraged owl and screams blue bolts of—ice—out of his mouth—like some creature, again, from a wizarding tale. He's not real."

"Ah, denial." Jun nodded. "Typical first stage." She pulled him closer and squeezed their joined hands. "Slide with your feet and point your toes. It will allow you better focus."

"Denial?"
"Stages of grief." Jun hummed. "You are mourning all that has been lost."

"What?" Fred jerked to a halt.

"Anger. Second stage. Lovely." Jun's emerald eyes sparkled with pure mischief. "This might not take so long after all."

"I-I don't know what you're harping on."

"Things will never return to the way they were, Fred." Her voice was more serious now. "Time has changed, your family has changed—your parents especially—and that's how it has to be. There was nothing you could have done. Nothing that could have been done. It was bound to come out sooner or later, it just so happens it came out sooner rather than later."

"You don't understand!"

"Then make me understand!"

"There had to have been something—anything! It didn't have to end like this and—and even, we're all split up. All of us. That's not—right. It's not supposed to be like this. Mum, Ginny—and Charlie. I don't even know if I'll see them again and Dad won't say a word about them. This is all wrong! It's not—I should've been able to do something. I should've seen that—this is all, it's—" he sputtered and stopped.

"Can't find a suitable scapegoat?" Jun interrupted, quietly. "That is usually because there was nothing you could've done and because all parties were innocent. There is no one person who can shoulder the blame."

"Mum wouldn't have—unless, she wouldn't have!" Fred protested. "And Dad, he should've—but he—and now!" He abruptly jerked away from Jun. The music stopped at once. He stood a few feet away, hugging his arms to himself. "I should have…" he muttered. "There had to have been something that I could've—"

"Why you?" Jun prompted. "Shouldn't that have been Bill's job?"

"Bill wasn't there. He's never there. Been that way for a long time."

"What about Percy?"

"That prat? He thinks of no one but himself ever since he earned that Head Boy."

"Ah, so it fell to you?"

"If I'd managed to-"

"If you'd managed to do what?" Jun demanded, viciously. "Throw yourself between a husband and wife squabble? Endangered your life by interrupting a confrontation between a Dragel and Torvak? Endangered your siblings by interfering in old truths, new lies and ancient magic? I think not!" She advanced on him. "Sit. Now!"

He opened his mouth to protest.

Her hands clamped down on his shoulders and pushed until his legs buckled beneath him. "Bargaining." She murmured. "Third stage. Now listen to me and listen well, child. There was nothing you could've done, you foolish, misguided child. You are too young to bear the burdens of
"your elder's follies, least of all, that of your bearer." She sighed. "There is no shame in taking on only what you can handle. Guilt is a powerful thing. Sadly it is employed by those who have no business using it for the things they demand. We are all individual beings, no matter how many things may bring us together, bind us together or tear us apart, we will always remain that which we are. Just as some circumstances are the same. This is one of those times. There was nothing you could have done."

"But-!"

"Trust me on this." One hand shifted from his shoulder to wrap around the back of his neck. It squeezed, lightly. "There was nothing you could have done. This would have come about one way or another. Be thankful that it has happened at a time where I am can still help you."

"Help me?" He spat. "I don't need-"
She dropped to her knees and hugged him hard from behind.
Fred froze. His breathing hitched for a moment, then, a single, solitary tear crept out of the corner from one eye. It slithered down his cheek, dropped onto his neck and disappeared into his shirt.
He stared straight ahead.
Jun made no comment.
He cried.
She held him.
He couldn't make the tears stop.
Why oh why couldn't he make those blasted tears stop!
His shoulders shuddered with the effort of trying to hold them back.
Something warm thumped him solidly on the back.
"There is no shame in tears, child." Jun thumped him again, hard enough to almost hurt.
It jarred him into thought.
He made a sound of protest, but she merely thumped him again.
"Tears are proof that you are alive. That you breathe, that you have a heart in this shell we call a body." She thumped him again. "It means the heart beats, the soul lives and as such, we have license to feel. We live, we lose, we hurt, we hope."

"Then why does it hurt?" He demanded. She thumped him again. He winced, but did not pull away from the next one that came. It was heavy enough to draw his attention, but her hand settled into a rhythm that he could only find soothing.

"It wouldn't help if it didn't." Jun countered. "Tears take away the brute force of everything that hurts us, it allows us to process the hurt and move on. Holding it only makes it worse."
Fred snorted.
She withdrew her hand and waited.

He turned to look at her almost at once.

She waited a moment, then tilted her head in invitation.

"I've been told that things are never simple." Jun murmured. She kissed the head of ginger-colored hair. Fred turned his head to the side, seeking the comfort offered. "And that they are never as easy as they seem."

"It's true."

"Perhaps. Sometimes the right thing is the simplest choice, the narrow path, if you would."

"And which path would I be on now?"

"Remains to be seen." Jun hummed. "Most people would be thrilled to think of all the power and prestige that would come of these two creature kinds. They are each magnificent in their own right."

Fred gave a short bark of laughter. "I don't give a rat's arse about power and prestige."

She tweaked his ear, meaningfully. "Very well then, it shouldn't be hard to choose then. Dragel or Torvak?"

He trembled. "Neither."

Her arms tightened around him. "Did you know your mother was a Dragel?"

The tears came again.

Fred didn't care that he stayed all but curled up in her lap as she finished the story. He didn't care that he'd cried a damp spot into the fabric draped over her left thigh, and left shoulder. Didn't care that he really was crying—since that wasn't something he could remember doing much of at all—and particularly didn't care that he still wanted to somehow be closer to her.

This strangely odd, mothering dragon-witch woman whose dry wit and sarcasm still hadn't crippled him. Her tongue was certainly sharp enough, but yet, she didn't carve him up with it, rather, she cut in careful, deliberate lines, smoothing bandages over each verbal wound afterward.

"Is it wrong of me to want to be different?"

"Never child." She soothed. "Never. We were all meant to be individual beings."

"...sometimes it feels wrong."

"Yes, sometimes new things do feel that way."

"It feels bad."

"Mm, perhaps."

"What does that make me?"
"Only what you want to be."

"I don't want to be like her." Fred swallowed, pained. "She is my mother and I—I am indebted to her, but I don't want to—I can't."

"Then be different."

Fred drew in a shaky breath. He swore softly beneath his breath. Stupid tears. They wouldn't stop coming.

"Shh." Jun gathered him up in her arms, cradling his upper half. She tucked his face in her neck and pulled sharply on her empathic magic.

Fred felt it as if the air was sucked out of him. He felt the spots of dampness on his own shirt fade to dryness as her magic rippled over him both. His spirits lifted, the ache in his chest dimmed a few faint beats.

"I don't want to be like her." He admitted. "I don't want to."

"Because she lied to your father and in doing so, practically betrayed him?" Jun mused. "That was very bad, was it not?"

"Even if she did what she thought was best, surely she could've done it—differently." Fred whispered. "Couldn't she?"

"There are always choices we make that sometimes hurt more than others."

"This is one of them, isn't it?"

"...yes."

"There isn't a painless option, is there?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Which one would hurt less?"

"You already know the answer, love."

"No I don't."

The hand stroking through his hair turned to knuckled fist, pressing gently against his scalp. "Shall I help you to remember?"

He squirmed as her free arm rearranged itself to lock tightly around his neck. "It's a bit fuzzy and—ow!" He fought against her grip, but it was fruitless. "I remember!"

"Good." She released him. "Because we've been at this long enough. I am sorry that you have to choose and that nature could not run its course. However, alternatives are not as horrible as you would make them out to be. Now then, have you made up your mind?"

"What did George choose?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I can't."
"Ah, well then, choose and then you can ask him."

Fred scowled. "Why won't you tell me?"

"Why do you keep asking? Would you choose as he did, just for the sake of your blood bond? You are twins, yes, but there is no crime in showing a bit of distinct difference."

"I don't want him to be alone!"

"He is among family that I believe, love and care for him." Jun perked a brow. "How could he possibly be alone?"

"Because we always have!" Fred shot back. "We've always been one from the very beginning! It's always Fred or George, it's never a specific one." He glowered at her. "And I know him! I know him better than you or anyone else. Better than Mum and Dad!"

"In that case, shouldn't you know what he would've chosen then?" Jun said, mildly.

A touch of red settled on Fred's flushed face. "I do!"

"Then why in Arielle's name, are you stalling? I do not have all day to spend here-"

"George never would've chosen to be a Dragel!" Fred hissed. "He's smart. He'd know that even if it seemed interesting on the surface, it wouldn't stick. It wouldn't be good. He'd pick Torvak, because he could fit in, because it wouldn't cause trouble. Because it's the right choice."

"The right choice?" Jun repeated. "There is no right and wrong choice."

"Yes there is." Fred retorted. "There always is." He pinned her with his hazel-eyed stare. "I'm right, aren't I? He would've weighed both sides and decided on the right answer. The practical choice."

"And so you will do the same?"

"Of course." Fred leapt to his feet. The sudden stabbing pain in his chest, made him grimace. He forced himself to ignore it. There were more important things to deal with now. Important things that would forever rule the rest of his life.

"You understand that once you choose, there is no recourse. No return, no second chance, correct?" Jun murmured.

Fred met her gaze steadily.

__________________________________________________________________________

"So, Dragel or Torvak?"

"You're asking questions you already know answers to." Fred couldn't help saying.

To his surprise, emerald eyes merely gave a spectacular roll. "Arielle save me from witless children." She muttered. "Indeed. I know, however, for the ritual, I must ask and you must answer."

Fred's cheeks pinked. "Oh. Sorry." He looked away. "Torvak."

"You are sure?" Jun rubbed her hands together, flexing the fingers.

"I am."
"Good boy."

"Am I?"

"You are making your own choice, are you not?" Her sharp gaze drilled into him. "This is what you want, not what others expect of you, yes?"

He swallowed. "Yes."

"Then you have done well."

He snorted.

"and as such, I commend you." She reached over with one hand and patted his head. "Good boy."

His heart nearly tore in two.

There was no smile on her face as she stared down at him. Her words echoed hollowly in his head and he could not piece it together, not that he really wanted to. He just wanted this to be over and done with. To put it behind him. To go back to his life and to find George. To make sure George was alright.

That pain in his chest dug a little deeper. He stifled a sound.

Jun's emerald eyes had become jewel-hard. She'd instructed him to lie on the floor and empty his mind in preparation for the ritual. She had neither commented on his choice nor tried to dissuade him from it.

It left him feeling uneasy.

"Will it hurt?"

"Most likely. Few things in life are painless."

"Name one."

"As soon as I know what it is, I shall gladly tell you."

"...very funny."

"I know. I thought it was quite amusing myself."

"You're using longer sentences now."

"As are you."

"Am not."

"That is not how you clear your mind, child."

"I'm not a child."

"I am at least decades over you in more ways than one." Jun sniffed. "You are a mere child."

She stood over him, as she'd done with Bill, her back to the blurred audience, one foot on each side
of his chest. "I have cast the runes, they will sing as I activate them." She explained. "You might
want to hold your breath, I am told that helps."

Fred nodded, wearily.

She waited while he sucked in a deep breath.

"Ready?"

He nodded.

Jun offered him a gentle smile, then raised her right hand to her mouth. She pricked her thumb on
one fang and traced the rune for Torvak in the palm of her other hand. She held it downward,
facing Fred so he could see it. It flared and glowed to life, the red burning black and the black
burning into a rich, bright green. "I will call out your creature sides and bring them to surface." She
explained. "Once I bring forth your Torvak, I will have to banish your Dragel side, this will be
perhaps, more painful than your actual 'birth' as it is. Just keep your mind empty and do not fight
me. I will be as quick as I possibly can. Do you understand?"

Fred closed his eyes. He could not bear to look into those bright emerald orbs, eyes that were so
similar to Harry's and yet, were not his own. It hurt. It hurt much more than he'd expected. Much
more than something like that ought to have hurt. It burned almost. It ached, certainly.

"Fred?" Jun's fingers caressed his cheek, gently. "Speak to me, love. Are you alright? I cannot go
through with this if you are not settled and-

Fred blew out the breath he'd held and took another. He gave a short, tight nod. He had to do this.
Had to. Once it was over, then he'd deal with everything else. He just had to hold on until it was all
over.

"Do you trust me?" Jun asked.

Have I any other choice? Fred couldn't stifle the shudder that rippled over him. His magic sparked
and the ache in his chest burrowed deeper—again. "Yes" he answered, softly. "I do."

He did not see the sorrowful smile on her beautiful face as she straightened to her full height. He
did not see how the rune in her hand glowed to life or how the magic enveloped them both. He did
not hear the words of the spell she cast, as a loud, anguished screech seemed to echo in his ears.

Fire licked at him, bursting to life from the cold, hard rock of the charmed ground beneath him.
They raged and burned.

Fred swallowed his scream.

The fire continued to burn and Fred exhausted himself in a somewhat dizzy haze. He could not
make sense of it all, but somehow, the warmth was strangely comforting.

It danced about him as if it were a thick, fat ribbon, playing with the numb limbs of his body. He
heard Jun's chants above him. He felt her hands, occasionally on his face and neck, cool in their
touches while the fire swarmed around him.

At first, he'd thought it would burn him alive, but then, as quickly as it had burned through him, it
stopped.
Just like that.

Fred didn't know how to react to that.

He was on fire and yet he lived.

It felt good.

So good.

How very, very strange.

Fred stared as George all but melted into their Mum's arms. He could see his twin's exhausted face from the vantage point beside the tall kitchen cabinet, the shadowed corner where he'd be safely hidden from sight.

He didn't know what had possessed him to follow George, but he hadn't been able to help himself. So he'd followed and he'd come in time to hear the tail end of a conversation that he hadn't expected.

It made him burn with shame, embarrassment and guilt. He'd almost turned away, when he'd heard her last words. Everything had felt so strange now that they were the only ones home. He'd been so surprised when Mum hadn't sent them straight back to Hogwarts after Operation Revenge The Toad.

And yet, it seemed George was experiencing the same bereft feeling. Fred swallowed again. He couldn't help the longing that blossomed inside of him as he watched George relax into a much-needed hug.

He'd always been the more sensitive of them. Fred nibbled on his lower lip. He watched as George left and turned to leave himself, before his twin thought to check on him.

"Eavesdroppers never hear the things they want to, Fred."

Fred gulped. He froze at the sound of her voice, kind, but firm. He didn't want to turn around—really didn't want to turn around—but somehow, he was turning already. He couldn't meet her eyes, didn't want to see what he was certain was there, but she tipped up his chin anyway and smiled in that way that let him know all was forgiven.

"Mum." He whispered hoarsely. "I didn't notice that he-"

"Hush." Molly hugged him tight and tucked his face in the crook of her neck for a long minute. "It's fine. He's fine. You're fine." She kissed his cheek. "Whenever you need a hug, my Fred," she held him at arms' length, searching his face. "You come to me, you hear? You needn't linger in doorways and skulk about in the shadows. It doesn't suit you."

He nodded.

She winked. "George went out that way—so why don't you take a few of these ginger snaps and go out that way, hm?"

He laughed and accepted the cloth wrapped bundle. Merlin, but he loved her. The steady pillar of light in the midst of their crazy lives. "Thanks, Mum."

"Shh, love." Jun soothed. "It's almost over now, almost. Breathe for me, love. Come on now."
He did—barely.

It hurt.

It ached.

It burned.

But he did not cry.

The scent of cinnamon plagued his mind and he gave a broken sigh.

Jun stood over the silent twin, allowing him a chance to compose himself in as much privacy as she could grant. This had been harder on him than all the rest, she could tell in the way the ritual had taken its toll upon him.

He wasn't a young man prone to fits of temper or emotion and the accident with her fire had drawn his heart up to the surface. She smiled, sadly. He was too young to be shouldering a burden that ought not to have been shuffled to his shoulders.

She dearly wished to have a good row with his idiotic parents, but knew it was a luxury that most certainly was not hers. She'd have to content herself with knowing she had done the best for each child.

Each strangely tortured child.

Jun sighed and moved around to sit behind Fred's head. The last bit of this ritual would cause him more discomfort than she liked, but yet, it was nothing more than all the others had gone through.

Her runed hand pressed flat against his forehead. His body jerked, rigid before his mouth opened in a soundless scream.

Fred writhed beneath that cool hand. His head was tipped to the side and he felt liquid bubbling up within and trickling out of his mouth. He couldn't taste it, couldn't stop it and so desperately wanted everything to be over.

It hurt, certainly. It hurt much more than he'd expected, but he made himself bear it. He thought of George and knew that his twin would have had to endure the same. So he would too.

The scent of blood hung thickly in the air, but he did not know where it came from.

He did not care.

This had to be close to end.

He hoped.

"Thank you." Fred accepted his newly cleaned and repaired shirt from Jun's outstretched hand. He fought back the blush as her emerald eyes took in his shirtless self. "Is there anything I should be worried about?"

"Ah, now you choose to be sensible." She snorted. "Such as?"
"After effects, side effects, things like that." Fred shrugged into the shirt and began to do up the buttons.

"You speak from experience?"

"Definitely," he said, ruefully. "So?"

"Pins and needles on occasion, aches and pains, for certain—your body is reworking seventeen years of chemistry, I believe? Hot baths at night and in the morning will help. Be care of what potions you take, I do not know how you Torvak handle things, but us Dragels prefer blood potions and they are easy enough to modify from the wizarding kind." She frowned. "A massage would be ideal, but that is up to you. You will have to see if any allergies develop in regards to your eating habits, your magic will fluctuate and may dim for a while. Avoid alcohol and speak to your father or grandfather about anything you do not understand." She yawned and covered her mouth. "I think that is about it."

"Wonderful." Fred grinned, impishly. "Just an entire library to remember."

"That was the condensed version." Jun retorted. "Imagine the original lecture."

"I'd really rather not."

"That is your own prerogative." Jun wrinkled her brow and rubbed the back of her neck. "How many more of you are there?"

"There's Ron." Fred tucked his shirt into his trousers, turning his back to the lady for a moment. Jun made no comment.

"And that's all of you?"

Fred hesitated. "No," he said, lightly. "Charlie's missing, he's after Bill and there's a sister, Ginny. She's with Mum."

Jun made a sound in her throat, but did not speak.

"Thanks again." Fred turned 'round once more. He stuck out his hand, avoiding the sharp green-eyed gaze. "For everything."

Jun looked at the hand for a moment, then gave it a firm shake and pulled him into a hug.

Fred didn't resist.
SNAPES QUARTERS : NEVARAH : WEDNESDAY

In the empty corridor before the front door of the Snapes' flat, a soft pop announced the arrival of a young girl, clad in a tatty grey t-shirt that fell past her knees. Looking to be roughly about nine-years-old, the girl stood tall, smoothing oversized trousers over her skinny legs. She walked with a shuffling step and tugged on the ends of her short crop of hair.

Niko.

The call repeated itself.

Niko yawned as she waited for the rest of her physical body to materialize fully on the doorstep of the Snape's quarters. She came into form in very much the same way as she'd left the bedroom in the safehouse. Well, the only visible difference was the amount of hair. She scowled and reached up to tug on the short strands once more. It would grow back within a few minutes, but she always hated having to wait for it.

With a sigh, she shuffled in a quick circle, checking to be sure the transportation had gone exactly as she'd wished. The safehouse where Tavit had left her was one of the rare ancient relics among the unknown, it was meant to keep someone like her safe and protected from the outside world. Safe. She snorted. As if 'safe' and 'Tavit' can belong in the same sentence. She wrinkled her nose at the thought of her current keeper, but he was off handling business and he hadn't said that she was confined to quarters, so—the little imp shrugged.

Free reign to terrorize. She thought, smugly. It's not like he'll know anyway, the big lump...

She looked up and down the long, empty hallway and noted the distinct lack of visible security. That was unusual, even for Dragels. There was almost always some form of security or protective measures, even if only evidenced by a sleeping Gheyo or Pareya by the threshold. Yet, she could not sense anything beyond the door or in the hallway.

Nothing of importance, anyway.

Niko pursed her little sorbet lips and thought long and hard about the mental puzzle. She hated dealing with new puzzles, they always brought her a headache. She fiddled with the hem of the oversized t-shirt and then waited a few minutes longer, while the short crop of hair began to lengthen and grow of its own accord.

She forced herself to remain calm and checked her hair again. It was up to her knees this time. That was good. She wiggled her toes, pulling up the baggy trousers to inspect her bare feet. They were cold. She should have remembered to pester Tavit for socks. Fluffy socks. Pink fluffy socks—no, wait—purple. Yes. Niko stifled a yawn and checked her hair's length once more.

It would be enough to gain entry into the protected apartments and from there, she could wander about until Aiden arrived. At the very least, it should be warmer in there anyway. She wanted to have a good look at this new consort. Grabbing handfuls of the thick, black, silky tresses, Niko gathered up the ends and held them up to the door.

"Will you let me through?" She inquired, polite. "I know these rooms are protected, I merely do not know how..."
The answer registered when she lightly wafted a hint of her powers towards the unguarded door. The wards had sprung to life and trapped the little wisp of dark essence within their raw energy confines.

*Hmmm, interesting…very, very interesting…how did you manage to lose your consort, Aiden?* She mused to herself. *Better yet, since when did you acquire a consort without my express blessing?* With a rather unladylike snort, the little girl cracked her knuckles and grinned widely up at the locked front door.

"There hasn't been a door nor a mind in centuries that can keep me out." She told it. The grin on her face began to twist into a sinister grimace. "In centuries," she hissed, softly. "I have always been the only one."

Standing inside the dark, gloomy interior, Niko was pleased to note that her bare feet made no sound upon the tiled and carpeted sections of floor. She glided through the entire flat, poking about in the kitchen, nosing through the coat closet and inspecting the linens.

The sitting rooms and the bedrooms were saved for last, for that was where she expected a certain unconscious young woman to be.

A dark glower settled over her face.

*She'd best be a she!* Niko thought, fiercely. As far as she knew though, Aiden certainly didn't swing the other way and it was practically guaranteed that any of his consorts would be female. It would also explain why he'd called her specifically.

*Then again, he's always hated Tavit.* Niko peered around the corner of the first sitting room and her thin eyebrows arched clear up into her hairline. "My, my, my!" she murmured. "A pretty little thing like you?"

Entering the sitting room, Niko threaded her way around the stuffed armchairs and matching settee. Her goal was to circle around the still, pale form of a certain young witch, lying motionless on a raised futon.

"But you're human, nothing special about you unless—*ooh,* now that's a lovely gift. Silvertongue? There hasn't been a holder of Silvertongue for decades. What a lucky little witch you are." Niko hummed. She could tease Aiden endlessly with this knowledge now.

"They didn't even have a bedroom for you?" Niko clucked her tongue in disapproval. "Then again, I bet they wanted them all for their own selves, didn't they?" She circled the unconscious form of the young witch and drew close enough to use her gifts to verify that this was indeed Aiden's intended.

The thick black hair slithered along the floor, catching up with the young mistress and eagerly awaiting her orders. "*Up.*" Niko murmured, waving a hand carelessly over the sleeping girl. The hair crept up the side of the futon and slipped beneath the tightly tucked sheets.

Several long moments later, the body twitched and jerked, restlessly.

"Enough!" Niko's dark blue eyes burned bright. The hair shrank back to puddle around her short
legs. "Shh, I know." She crooned. "But you can't play yet." She turned away with a huff. "Well then, that's that and I can't play with you, so I'm terribly bored now." The last line was directed towards the sleeping witch. "I suppose I'll have to amuse myself some other way." She yawned with a look in her eyes of age beyond her physical body.

Niko clambered up on the large, makeshift bed and arranged the blankets to compensate for her intrusion. She wriggled carefully into position beside the sleeping young woman. Her pink lips curved into a rather wicked smirk. "Fun, fun, fun!" She sang softly to herself. She snuggled into the warm, unmoving body.

Her hair splayed and strained, restlessly around her. Niko snickered. It meant that her powers had grown restless and she did not blame them.

Tavit could be a real bore at times.

It had been ages since she'd possessed anything.

Much less anyone.

Dark blue eyes fell shut.

The little body went limp.

A moment later, it seemed to grow transparent before it merged into that of the sleeping young witch.

Mere seconds later, a dark cloud of barely visible mist rose from the sleeping form. It settled along the ground and churned in a shapeless swarm, before forming itself into a ghostly image of the sleeping Niko. It flickered and faded until there was nothing visible, before it left the sitting room.

Niko breathed a sigh of relief as her physical self finally succumbed to sleep, safely hidden within the body of Aiden's consort. Now that she was once more in full control of her real self, there was fun to be had. It had been centuries since she'd been wakened with a purpose. Tavit had only appeared in the last century. Everything had been dreadfully boring before then.

Her consciousness divided itself effortlessly and expertly as she threw it out to encompass the entire flat and the Dragel occupants within.

It took her a few seconds to single out that the one who had cast the wards was the owner of the building. The magical signatures matched. He was currently coaxing his Alpha into a more intimate conversation where words would be the least of the things between them.

Niko lingered, faintly. There was a lovely dash of magic here, it was enough to hint at the power of the two wizards, but the sleeping forms of two more nearby, drew her attention. She drank in the sight of a lovely, pale young man and a delightful young woman beside him with hair the same color of pitch black as her own. Careful inspection showed the young woman to be with child and Niko immediately dismissed her. Children and women were hassles. She much more preferred young women and men of any kind.

Something sounded in the room and Niko twisted her wisps around to take a look. She drew near to inspect the interruption, a lovely young man with eyes the color of golden wheat. She admired his pale skin—though not as pale as the pretty boy who rested beside the pregnant woman—and reached a hand towards his curling, brunet locks.
She yanked the hand back almost at once, feeling the angry surge of power around him. Something had disturbed him. She wrinkled her nose, tuning in faintly to hear what was being said. Sometimes it was simply too annoying to listen to mortals speak.

"...you...know?"

"...specific...Mr. Nott..."

Niko turned with interest at that. *Mr. Nott, is it?* She hummed to herself and again attempted to approach the young man. He certainly would be a fun one to explore if she could just slip inside of his—ow! Niko recoiled, violently, her powers thrumming angrily.

She could force the issue, but she hadn't been looking for a challenge and her curiosity had faded with the same intensity in which it had roused. She'd simply wanted something to amuse herself, a diversion of sorts that didn't require any effort until Aiden arrived. Then he could be the one to amuse her. This young Mr. Nott would certainly take effort, as it seemed he had his own personal guardians hovering about him.

With a moment's patience, she could see them, two young men and a young woman. She scowled and slunk out of the room to avoid their detection.

Her good spirits were restored when Niko felt a familiar mental hum beckoning to her through the thick walls. She followed the magical pull until she found herself hovering over a strange young man. Another Dragel Submissive, she could tell—for he was safely cocooned in the arms of a larger fellow, who held the proper markings and bearings of a Beta. No pregnant woman nearby though. That was good.

_Hmmm. So curious._ She thought, delightedly. *But why are you calling to me, little one? I am merely seeking a bit of fun. Just to wander through the walls of your mind for a bit, I'm sure you've something amusing to share unless you've something to hide and that would be oh so much fun! I will be useless to you in anything but—Tom?* The familiar presence washed over her with a powerful wave. Niko's spirit form gasped, the grey wisps bearing her image beginning to writhe and struggle, distorting.

It had been years since she'd heard and felt this sort of connection.

It called to her, insistently, as if it had a right to do so.

_Tom!_

His magic called to her and Niko abruptly retreated, hovering a safe distance over the young man, with interest glinting in her wispy eyes. There were several available options, but she intended to take one that would bring about the best kind of result.

They were trusting. Too trusting. The entire lot of them. Foolish, foolish men. They did not know she walked among them. They did not know what she could do.

They did not know what she _would_ do.

The teen jerked and twisted within the arms holding him close. Niko sighed. Tom had caught wind of her and while she could run from him, it was never quite as much fun as teasing him back. She smirked. If he wanted to play, then she certainly wasn't about to deny him.

Never mind that the playground just happened to be a young man.
Without a moment's hesitation, the spirit form reared up and threw itself down into the unsuspecting body.

It worked.

The sleeping boy stilled.

Niko hurriedly acquainted herself with the usual motor functions and sifted through the handful of available surface memories. If she was going to play, then she would do so properly...

*Hmm. Harold James Potter. What a name for such a young boy...*

Severus rubbed his marked wrist, glowering at nothing and no one in particular. The wrist ached, faintly, but it was nowhere near the usual kind of ache or burn that he'd feel when his dark master was unhappy. This change in routine did not sit well with him. He definitely preferred to know what each unique summons meant and whether he had time to scheme before apparating to Voldemort's side.

A frown registered at that, as Severus realized that in Nevarah, he hadn't 'ported in decades, to be sure—he doubted apparition would work within an otherworldly realm—but still, the summons had not come. *This could only lead to wretched, horrible things,* he thought darkly. Harry's admission in the kitchen had not settled very well for him.

He currently could not feel anything through the mark—at least, not yet—and that could never be a good sign. It made his mind sigh and hum as it whirled to work, figuring whether Voldemort had decided to send the boy another false vision.

He certainly hadn't heard anything of the sort, but then again, he was not as close to the darkened wizard as he once had been. To gain the position he had once held, Severus had pushed for the sake of his spy work. He had done all that he could, following Albus' purported model for "the greater good" and for a while, it had helped. It hadn't hurt.

But then, things had darkened and twisted and Severus only knew that he wanted out—whether by death or his own darkened destruction—he had not been too particular over it. Then Draco had come along and Terius had followed shortly afterward. He'd been alone for too long to be able to truly refuse them and then, well, Severus pinched the bridge of his nose to refocus.

Now was definitely not the time to be reminiscing and worrying. Well, perhaps worrying. Severus frowned. He thought he had imagined it, but he could have sworn that he'd seen a flicker of red in Potter's eyes. While Potter's behavior was admittedly different that he was accustomed to seeing, it was Draco's sudden change in demeanor that had shocked him.

Draco was rarely touchy-feely—at least with him—those clingy pleasures were generally reserved solely for Terius. Not that Severus really minded, 'cuddling' wasn't quite in his usual repertoire of skills. His former godson knew him well enough to understand his personal quirks with things like public displays of affection, the proper arrangement of things in alphabetical order and his irrational evaluations of people in general that were often times eerily accurate.

Before anything had come close to his native instincts, Severus had extracted a singular promise from both his Sub and Pareya. It was the basis for their bonding. There would be no secret keeping among them. Not from him, anyway. That had been the first clue that something was terribly out of place.

Draco's refusal to admit him directly to his mind at first was all wrong. Draco had never refused
him that unique intimacy, it was a measure of trust between them. It was the strength of their trust between each other.

Between them all.

Terius had adapted easily enough and while Severus had worked to bring them to a point where they all shared with each other and not just with him, Draco's refusal—however brief—had definitely set his mind on a warpath.

Severus made a mental note to ask Terius about the wards again. He wasn't quite sure how his Pareya had set up the perimeter about their living quarters and it did not sit well with him to leave it alone. Nevarah may have been safer by Dragel standards, but experience had taught him that enemies did not always need a personal grudge to attack. It also sent a trickle of unease over him to know that he was keyed to the wards, but yet hadn't had a hand in crafting them.

Draco's cradled form suddenly slumped—and a moment later, hazy grey eyes popped open. Severus' frown deepened as he watched his Sub reorient himself with his current surroundings. It would seem that his guess had been right after all. Confusion, uncertainty and apprehension flickered through those eyes in rapid succession before Draco chose his favored mask of indifference.

"Draco." Severus murmured, quietly.

The blond's hands fisted tightly in Severus' dark dressing robe. "Severus…" he licked his lips. "What just happened?"

Severus shifted, a discreet pinch to a slender, well-positioned thigh, a silent signal for Draco to hold his tongue.

The slender hands fisted in the black robes—tightened.

"Severus? I brought a Blood Replenisher too, I figured the both of you could use one" Terius reappeared, several vials of the trade-mark Pepper-up Potion in hand. "Who needs it?" He extended one to Severus and looked to the young men.

It did not escape Theo's notice that there were two Blood Replenishers. He quickly banished the thought behind the reason for its necessity. There were some things he really did not wish to consider.

Terius seemed oblivious to that as he handed over a Pepper-up for Charlie and uncorked both the Pepper-up and the Blood Replenisher for him. "Water?" He gave a wave to the kitchen and a second later, a tray with glasses and a clear pitcher glided into the room. Terius served glasses of water quickly, fussing over everyone in equal turn before Severus finally spoke up.

"Stop that and come sit down!"

"Sev-"

"Now." The weight in the words again, brought another flickering look between Alpha and Pareya before Terius did as requested. He relaxed significantly when Severus shifted so their knees and arms touched—just barely. Draco seemed to be fast asleep again—still in Severus' lap, now that the Potions Master had seated himself on one of the plush sofas in the second sitting room.

"Harry, Pepper-up's here?" Theo gently roused him. "Something tells me that perhaps you should
skip it." Theo mused. The brunet half in his lap, gave a sleepy yawn and eyed the Potion with a mild scowl as his faculties caught up to his present state. Theo chuckled. "You don't have to take it right away, if you don't want to." He soothed. "You can nap right up to the last hour before we have to leave. Can take it then, if you like. You're exhausted."

"So'er you." Harry yawned. "Don't need a nap." But he didn't protest when Theo's arms tightened around him. His recently red-tinged eyes cleared, slowly as if a mental fog had begun to lift. He stiffened, suddenly. "Theo?"

"Rest then." Theo rephrased. "What?"

"It's morning already?" Harry blinked, slowly. His senses took their time in catching up to him. He could still taste the sweetness of the blood in the back of his mouth. That had been a lovely treat. A very unexpected one too, though he couldn't quite remember what he'd done to garner such a delightful reward. Harry blushed as those thoughts caught up to him and quickly pushed those thoughts away, even though the mental gymnastics seemed to take longer than usual. An ugly feeling lingered in the back of his mind and he strove to identify it.

A new shade of paleness stole over his features as he began to fit the pieces together to complete the mental puzzle. This had happened before—a little while ago—but it had still happened. He'd never forgotten this. The sudden fogginess, the feelings of helplessness and the horror of discovering his body was not entirely his own. Emerald eyes narrowed in points.

_Oh. NO. No way! This is not happening again!_

He was not going to give into this. Not again. This was _his_ body, _his_ magic and _his_ life—no one had any right to puppeteer him from the shadows, the only person who held any rationality of authority was him. The new spike of anger sent a rush of warm, fiery energy spiraling through him. Harry felt the possessive thread beginning to slide off him as if he were shedding one layer of skin for another. "Theo, lemme up." He pushed against the arms holding him. "Now." He tugged again, too agitated to recall the usual nonverbal prompts that would free him without protest. "What just happened? What'd I? What'd they make me do?" Panic began to show in those bright emerald eyes.

Theo looked to Charlie. The older mates exchanged a glance.

"Harry?" Theo released his grip on the agitated teen. "I don't quite follow you, I mean—well." He frowned. "That would explain it, wouldn't it?" He muttered to himself.

"My head." Harry stumbled to his feet, safely off of Theo's lap as his green eyes tinged to a murky brown hue. "Stop it, stop it, stop it!"

"Harry!" Theo was off the sofa in a heartbeat. "Harry, what's going on? What's wrong?"

"Harry?" Charlie was beside Theo, reaching towards the distraught teen. "What do you need?"

"N-no, wait!" Harry mumbled, clutching his head with both hands. "Don't let them—no, I didn't. I didn't do that. That wasn't me. I had nothing to do with that! I didn't know. I didn't know that it would—I did the best that I could! I didn't know any better!" He fairly screamed. "Enough! I don't care what you think. I don't care who you are or who you think you are. I'm sick and tired of people using me! Out! Out of my head! I want you both out of my head and out of my body—both of you!"

The murky brown eyes glowed eerily.
"Stand back!" Severus barked. He slid Draco off his lap and took up the flanking position that Terius offered him. He didn't bother to care that he'd taken a protective stance in front of the blond either. Draco could hold his own. Severus had definitely made sure of that, but there was no reason for him to do so right now. Severus also knew that a pair of eyes outside the immediate chaos was always a good thing. "There is something happening inside of his head-"

"What's happening?" Charlie reached forward again, shrinking back when Harry whirled to glare at him.

"Possession." Severus said, grimly. "Read the signs. It is painfully obvious. He's fighting it. Stand back and do not interfere! He has to do this on his own!"

"On his own?" Theo snapped. His golden eyes flashed as they shifted to a dark amber. The air in the room seemed to grow thick. "I won't stand idly by-"

"Can you cast anything?" Severus demanded of his Pareya.

"Perhaps." Terius hesitated. "It will be difficult, I hardly know him."

"Use what you know of him." Severus snapped.

Terius frowned. "Fine. Do not let him hurt himself. Whoever and whatever it is probably won't leave without a fight."

"Thank you for that illuminating insight!" Severus snarked. "Make yourself useful any time now!"

"I know a few binders, but I don't know the kind of magic that's in him, can't you feel it?" Terius grimaced. "It's—black."

Theo's golden eyes suddenly burned bright, their trademark lightened hue. "Black magic?"

"Black? I feel dark magic." Charlie scowled. "It feels like dark magic, it doesn't feel any less—what's wrong with it?"

Harry's head snapped up. The bandages on his arms swelled and burst to scraps of useless fabric on the floor beside him. His wild gaze took in the semi-circle of his mates and their current hosts partially surrounding him. His fangs sprouted at once, curling over his lips. "You foolish, foolish mortals!" He screeched. His hands began to tear at his face. They tugged cruelly at the tender flesh, pink and red scratches left in their wake.

"Harry, stop that!" Charlie's worried voice rose several decibels. His wand slid into his hand. "Not yet!" Severus' voice cut in. "Your magic's unstable, isn't it?"

"What?" Charlie had already begun to cast a protection spell to keep Harry's half-hands from tearing at his face, as they phased into claws.

"Er." Draco's quiet voice cut in. "That was not what I was expecting. I take it the possessor is nearby?"

"Stay back, Draco!" Terius snapped.

"I didn't move!" Draco retorted. "And I have no intention of doing so. Weasley, I suggest you do not finish that spell. Someone do something! Severus? Try a clear mind spell, you know, the one mother used to throw on father to make him remember things?"
"And body binder." Theo threw in. He seemed to struggle to keep his temper in check. "I can't cast it right now. I might bring the building down. Stop him from doing that!" His hand flashed out to stop Charlie. "They mean your elemental magic hasn't settled, casting something on Harry in this state may affect-"

Charlie frowned. He'd already cast spells on Harry since his transformation. This was just another bump in the path to understanding these strange creatures. He opened his mouth to protest, but Theo's hand on his arm seemed extraordinarily weighted.

"He'll be fine." Terius interrupted, smoothly. His blue-grey eyes flashed and then Harry doubled over, clutching at his throat rather than his face. "Now, Severus!"

Severus drew his wand in a single fluid movement. His lips moved, casting a silent spell that Harry could not avoid.
RECAP: Septimus calls in Regulus Black—a botched Torvak hybrid and his Dragel wife, Jun. Jun gives Bill a wolffish inheritance, then Percy a Torvak one. George has met with Jun and chose Dragel, Fred chose Torvak. Aiden's friend, Niko, snuck into the Snape quarters and possessed Harry, drawn to him through a mental connection to Voldemort.

Previously:

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SNAPES QUARTERS : NEVARAH : WEDNESDAY

The spell hit its mark.

The reactions were two-fold.

A horrible screech filled the air. The invisible being howled in fury and displeasure as a black mist began to dissipate from the scar on Harry's forehead. The brunet gritted his teeth and turned inward on himself. He'd had enough at last. This was the final straw. Severus casting whatever spell he had—and Harry knew it had been the Potions Master—had given him the edge he'd needed. It was just a moment of peace amongst the chaos, one single moment to gather himself together.

At first, it hadn't been anything serious. Just a strange little girl traipsing through his head and telling funny, odd stories. It'd been fun. He'd sort of liked her. It'd been a game. He'd thought he was dreaming. It'd seemed like a dream and she was small and funny, reminding him of Luna, almost. He'd needed a break from the muddled mess of his life and it had seemed like such a nice one.

It hadn't felt like possession, it hadn't sounded like possession and it certainly hadn't hurt like when Voldemort had forced his way through him.

But then, she'd taken control. He'd been unable to fight her as she'd waltzed straight to that mental
barrier he'd constructed—with the limited knowledge gleaned from Snape—and viciously tore it down.

He almost hadn't believed it. But she had. She'd then stood there and taunted the entity that connected him to the one and only Dark Lord. She'd dared him to come into Harry's mind and have a chat.

When Voldemort had responded—she had laughed in his face and taken off running through the corridors of Harry's mind.

He hadn't been able to resist.

Neither had Voldemort.

There was no earthly way Harry could have. Not in his current state.

*Think, Harry, think you idiot! You need to focus. You have one shot here, don't waste it. You can't afford to waste it...argh! Wand, wand, wand...where's my wand? I had it, didn't I?* His mind roiled and sloshed as he gathered the sputtering flames of his magic and demanded that it do his bidding. He could feel the weak flames struggling as they strengthened and fed off each other. His magic had returned—but was rusty from disuse.

Harry scowled. He would have to remedy that and there was no time for careful preparations! A familiar hilt materialized in his hand and Harry didn't need to look to know that it was his wand. He almost smiled. It would seem that he had summoned it into being through sheer determination.

His body shook, jerked and flinched in alternations. A fine mist rose up from the pale sheen of his skin. A foul stench peppered the air as the mist turned to vapors and wisped away.

It took no form nor shape.

Seconds later, former emerald eyes began to burn bright in their original green hue. They flashed with fire, conviction and determination. Harry raised his wand to his head and poked at the painful scar on his forehead. He felt the words scrambling over each other in his head and his powers multiplying swiftly to provide him with the necessary energy to cast the spell he knew nothing of.

He hadn't thought he had the energy nor the magic for this, but it appeared that his body had other ideas. He wasn't about to argue with it. He needed this far too much. This was enough!

"I said *out!*" Harry hissed and then, of course, he snapped. In a beautifully relevant and decidedly powerful way. Emerald eyes meshed with golden hue and magic wavered tangibly in the air as Harry spoke.

"*Solveran terran namius phaldah.*" The words were strange and foreign even as they fell from his lips in a steady stream with an almost musical lilt. They sounded magical to his own ears.

He had really and truly had enough of this.

He didn't understand the words. He didn't understand the powers. But he did understand the fleeting touch of hope and madness bundled into one. It was intoxicating and very, very welcome.

*Merlin's grey hairs, for the sake of...!*

The surge of magic was raw, unchecked and satisfying in every way possible. Harry was vaguely aware of glass shattering, temperatures rising and the floor shifting somewhere beneath his feet.
He didn't bloody care.

It was dark.

It was light.

It was beautiful.

It was absolute, undeniable power.

So perfect.

So wonderful.

So comforting.

It felt so good.

A dull roaring sound filled his ears as Harry sank to the swaying, pitching floor, his head still clutched between both hands, his wand pointing behind him. He shuddered, violently. The euphoria dimming enough for his consciousness to process his surroundings and the edge he still grasped over his invisible, mental opponents.

His hands scrabbled weakly at his throat for a moment, before he remembered his wand. He pointed it at himself, as the words seemed still forthcoming. He certainly wasn't going to argue, as it seemed the last spell had worked just fine. "Vengatius oram." He rasped.

The pain shuttling through his body came to a sudden, abrupt, shuddering halt.

Harry blinked.

He gaped.

His wand-hand, wand-in-hand, fell back to his side and he stared at it in a mixture of disbelief and shock.

Pain-free existence was an entirely new experience.

A very, very welcome experience.

The floor stopped moving and the temperature cooled to a tolerable level. Harry shivered. That was too cold. Something hot, nearly scalding wrapped around him from behind.

His adrenaline fueled body reacted with a set of muggle defense moves he'd once seen on the telly when Dudley hadn't known he'd been watching. It worked—somewhat. He was freed of the scalding hold and suddenly frozen again. He rubbed at his eyes—they'd blurred for some strange reason—and then at his forehead.

Oh ow!

He stopped rubbing. That had hurt! He really shouldn't have done that. He touched a hand to the sticky mess and stared, blankly at the bloodied fingers. He blinked, urging his sight to rework itself as he knew it would, until a blotch in front of him cleared out to be familiar, expressive golden eyes.

Gold eyes.
Harry's emerald orbs narrowed, faintly. He was running high on adrenaline and the very vivid mindscape he'd been functioning in just moments before. It took longer to orient himself than he'd expected. He pulled on his dragel nature, taking a careful whiff.

His nose told him what his mind was still figuring out.

Dominant scent.

Familiar scent. Chocolate and steel.

His eyes took part in the figuring and Harry stared into the golden gaze.

Gold eyes meant Theo.

Theo meant Alpha.

Alpha meant help.

Good.

That was as far as his muddled brain cared to puzzle through. Harry continued to stare. That was one puzzle solved. Weariness washed over him again and mutely, he held out his bloodied hand and waited.

He didn't know what to say or do, but his mind could think of a single word.

*Help...please...*

Theo took his hand, gently and touched his own wand to the bloodied fingers. A cleaning spell and a healing spell were cast in quick succession. He then raised the hand and kissed it gently. "Harry, my treasure?" His voice was soft, caring.

It nearly undid Harry just to hear it.

Harry felt his mind stutter for a moment and then continue to whirl. He licked his lips and stared at his newly cleaned—and kissed—hand. What had he done? He'd felt—no, he wasn't sure that he had—and suddenly, Theo's bright golden eyes seemed a tad too bright for his pale face. Harry frowned. He let himself be helped to his feet as he registered the fact that his present surroundings were currently quite demolished.

His memories suddenly slotted back into the fuzzy gap where they'd been and a tendril of fear snuck along his spine, stealing over him with slow promise. That was bad. He swallowed hard, unsure if he ought to ask, but knowing that he should.

"D-did I do that?"

"Yes." Theo said, simply. He stroked the hand still within his grasp, silently worried. "Harry?"

Harry did not answer.

Theo frowned. "Harry," he tried again. The verbal attempt did not bring his mate back to the present. The Slytherin let their hands drop to the side, squeezing gently to provide some inkling of a physical grounding. He could see the confusion in Harry's face and understood to some degree that it had been a burst of accidental magic. He walked them over to the sofa and urged Harry to sit.

Only when Theo weighted his request with the touch of his earthen element, did Harry reluctantly
perch on the edge of the settee. His weary gaze darted to every corner of the room and then to each occupant in turn. He'd all but blown the room up. He swallowed hard, trying not to visibly curl in on himself.

That couldn't have been good.

And Theo and Terius weren't even close 'friends' to be able to excuse something like this. He'd definitely done it this time. Sure, he'd had a good excuse, but excuses had never worked before. Not for something like this and certainly, it would not work. It never had.

Old memories and faded injuries rushed to the surface of his troubled mind, reminding him of things that he'd long wanted to forget. Things that ought to have remained forgotten. Things that made him squirm and twist inside.

Harry cringed, inwardly, as a scowling Severus Snape waved his wand in short, jerky movements, directing paintings, decorative items and pillows back to their original places and then restoring each item to their original state. Harry didn't have to be an art expert to know that magic couldn't fix them all—and it certainly would never restore them to their true perfection.

His stomach cramped, painfully. Harry closed his eyes, tucking his hands beneath his thighs, his wand still in hand. He didn't want to know what punishment they'd come up with. His mind argued with him that they would not react like that. That they would not treat him as the Dursleys or a few other unmentionables had. Old memories fought with new ones, reminders that he knew them—at least, he thought he knew them to some degree better than this. Surely they would not hold it against him. Surely they would not.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. This couldn't end well. He wanted it to, but oh, how it didn't seem likely!

He took a shaky breath and grimaced. Theo's scent mixed with something decidedly distasteful and he couldn't place it. He leaned forward, intent on burying his face in Theo's neck, if only to breathe the scent that had calmed him before.

"Easy, Harry." Theo murmured. He allowed the motion of comfort and gave a quick wave of his wand. Then suddenly the weird smell in the air was whisked away by someone casting spells—Harry couldn't figure who it was nor did he care—but he readily gulped in mouthfuls of cool, tasteless air.

"Harry? Harry, it's fine. Everything is fine now. We're alright. Everyone is alright."

Harry didn't dare trust himself with that knowledge just yet. Instead, he frantically dashed through his mind, searching desperately for the memories of his Occulumency lessons with Snape. The man had been a right bastard then, but there had been a few good tips somewhere in the whole mess—he was sure of it!

His mind methodically sorted through the information he demanded of it and Harry found himself formulating a quick, sturdy mental barrier.

A cage. He thought, hazily. That's what my mind should be a cage. Then everything around it...

He began to visualize a cage of metal, wrought with expertise that would put even the most talented of craftsmen to shame. He imagined it as an impenetrable force and began to close the gaps of the cage with solid, firm blocks. This would do. This would be his prison. This would keep his mind together and everything else out!
The shapes took their respective colors and sizes, meshing into the places that he demanded they fit. It took time, it took effort and perhaps, a little more than he honestly had to give.

*Almost there…can't give up…now-*!

Harry gritted his teeth and gave another, decisive mental push. The final square slid into the last empty space and the entire mass melded together. A seamless, special cube that would protect him. That was all he needed and it was more than enough for now.

A wave of tiredness washed over him and Harry fought against the blackness that came for him. He'd fought and won. Let ol’ Voldy take that. And whoever that strange little girl had been. Harry shuddered. Somehow, she was almost as terrifying as Voldemort. No, wait. She was more, because Voldemort was just a big, bad bully and this little girl—this little girl had almost been like a friend. She'd taken his dignity with the little kitchen act—but she'd also held Voldemort at bay for a few scant seconds.

Enough for him to know that she was no friend of the Dark Lord—and no stranger to him either.

It was with her help that he'd managed to shove Voldemort out—or was it? He couldn't be sure. It was too much to be sure. He couldn't be certain at all.

Gentle hands rested on his head, scrubbing softly through his hair in soothing, relaxing motions. The sudden, scalding heat returned, taking up residence somewhere beside him.

Harry opened his eyes, even though he could tell it was Theo and the heat, he could now identify as Charlie. Both of his mates eyed him with worry and no small amount of concern. Harry didn't have anything to say. He didn't know what to say. He only hoped he could stay awake long enough to hear what they wanted him to do as repayment.

He silently hoped he'd have the energy and magic to spare. Sleep was so close right now…

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Theo frowned at the sleeping bundle in his arms. Harry had well and truly exhausted himself this time—both emotionally and magically, it would seem. He could now sense Harry through the mated bond once more, in fact, it had snapped into place the moment he'd felt Harry's body grow slack.

Whatever his little treasure had done, he'd done it well. Theo was beyond relieved to know that, at least for the moment, he was cleared. It was something worth nothing.

"Charlie?" He turned to the Beta who hovered close behind Harry.

One of the dragon tamer’s large hands rested on Harry’s back, rubbing gently up and down his spine, offering warmth and comfort. His red hair gave off a few odd wisps of smoke, but thankfully, it had not burst into fire.

Theo was mildly grateful for that. It had taken some effort on his own behalf not to react to Severus’ close proximity to Harry in his distressed state. He hadn't liked having another Alpha so close.

"Is he alright?"

"He will be." Theo sighed. "Time?"

Charlie cast a quick tempus and muttered the hour. "What's the matter?"
"Perhaps we ought to visit the healers a little sooner than planned?" Theo suggested.

"I don't think Harry minded seeing the healers." Charlie accepted the shuffling of arms and legs, not at all bothered to hold the exhausted Harry. He worried, faintly, for the young man in his arms, the shadows beneath his eyes and the thinner than usual frame.

"I don't believe he minded." Theo frowned. "But from having no magic to enough to do this-" and here he gestured to the still partially destroyed room. "That cannot sit well with anyone, even Harry Potter. I would feel better to know that if something were to happen, we were within calling distance of a trained dragel healer."

Charlie matched his grim smile with one of his own. "I see your point." He stood. "He's light as a feather."

"I know. The inheritance only healed the visible scars, I suppose."

Charlie's head jerked up. "Visible scars?"

"Later." Theo murmured. "Not now." He turned to Terius. "Do you mind if we simply 'port out early?"

"No breakfast?" The older Pareya straightened with a wrinkle in his forehead. He'd been fussing over a protesting Draco. "You shouldn't skip the morning meal for-"

"I'll pick something up on the way." Theo interrupted. A faint sheen of sweat showed on his pale forehead. "and I am terribly sorry for all of the trouble, may we discuss it later?"

Terius frowned, but he looked from Theo to Severus. "Severus?"

"What's wrong now?" Severus growled. He looked up, feeling the gazes of both men upon him, in mid-repair of some artifact or another to hang on the wall. He moved to stand beside Terius, his dark-eyed gaze sweeping over Harry's cradled form in Charlie's strong arms.

"He's asleep." Theo looked up to the Potions Master who stood beside Terius, both of the men casting spells on Draco's annoyed form. "We were just leaving."

Severus gave a noncommittal grunt, his attention arrested by Terius casting another barrage of diagnostic spells.

"I'm fine, Severus!" Draco protested. "There's nothing left over, no residue and it didn't fight me, it wasn't a-"

"I shall be the judge of that!" Terius snapped, darkly. "You should have said something sooner." This was directed to Severus, who merely perked a brow at the rebuke.

"Really, then I shall do my best to inform you the next time I believe Draco is possessed!"

Terius' blue-grey eyes suddenly sparkled with mischief. "I shall be sure to listen well, then."

Severus frowned. "If you were possessed as well, then I would have given my hand away, yes?" He prompted, turning away. "Check on Calida, Hermione and that flying rat of theirs. I want everything accounted for."

"Of course." Terius murmured. "The wards feel the same to me though. I don't know how it entered."
"It's not a rat, it's a Nytura." Draco said, helpfully. "And I like it, can I have one?"

"Absolutely not." Severus snapped. "Theodore?"

"Asleep." Theo repeated. "I will let him rest. He needs it." He nodded towards Severus. "Could you?"

The Potions Master grumbled to himself, but stepped over in all solemnity and began to cast the same barrage of spells he'd been running over Draco. "Two." He muttered, a moment later.

Charlie frowned. "Two whats? Two spirits?"


"Oh, now I can move?" Draco couldn't keep the sarcasm from his voice. He yelped with Terius gave him a light poke from behind.

"Pairing off already, Severus?" Terius said, amused. "I assure you in this flat, we are fine. The wards are not individually keyed, but my entire family resides within the boundaries and without any ill effects. They are well. They are fine."

"That is precisely what disturbs me." Severus allowed a short, clipped sigh. "Your definition of 'fine' and mine, differ greatly."

Harry woke in the pleasant blackness with a sense of satisfaction.

It was so rare and unexpected that he couldn't help, but bask in it for a few scant moments, before he tried to gather himself together.

A soothing warmth moved around him and a comforting scent enveloped him, temporarily freezing all morbid and worrisome thoughts. It gave him the necessary push to sink into the welcome rest.

With his mind happily clear and for the most part, blissfully blank, Harry allowed himself the briefest of luxuries. He certainly deserved a few minutes of uninterrupted sleep for such a good feat.

He was vaguely aware of strong, familiar arms wrapping tight around him.

_Theo…_

The scent of smoke mingled with the hint of citrus.

Harry smiled in his sleep.

_Charlie…_

Perhaps this one time, he could rest—certainly, he deserved it.
Breakfast Interlude

Chapter Notes

RECAP: Septimus calls in Regulus Black—a botched Torvak hybrid and his Dragel wife, Jun. Jun gives Bill a wolfish inheritance, then Percy a Torvak one. George has met with Jun and chose Dragel, Fred chose Torvak. Aiden's friend, Niko, snuck into the Snape quarters and possessed Harry, drawn to him through a mental connection to Voldemort. Harry threw Voldemort and Niko out of his head and was then cared for by Theo and Charlie, who excused themselves from the Snape's quarters to leave early for the healers. Theo has decided to get breakfast on the way in.

Breakfast—or rather—brunch, was a quick affair that Theo seemed well-versed in. He 'ported them into a quiet section on the edge of the city square and procured several packed dishes for their enjoyment. He paid by the way of a golden charm bearing a crested sigil that dangled from one pale, thin wrist.

Charlie couldn't remember ever seeing the Nott heir with it before. He made no comment, merely filed it away for later use. He did tighten his grip on Harry though, as Theo led him away from the street vendors and towards a speck of visible greenery.

They walked for some time, the only communication being a moment where Theo paused to quirk an eyebrow in silent question.

Charlie shook his head.

The shorter Alpha gave a single nod and continued on. The edge of the city was far quieter than Charlie had originally expected. Having seen the town square and other central portions of it in fleeting passing thanks to Theo's very quick and very short tour, he was surprised when they finally stepped into a meadow.

For all intents and purposes, it really couldn't be anything else.

The technology and order seemed to end abruptly and the vast expanse before them was a wide carpet of green, dotted with a few large, branched trees and scatterings of flowers here and there. Charlie blinked and stared, before he made out the idea that it was some sort of mutual picnic area, if the various dragel circles present were any indication.

Everyone kept a respectful distance away from everyone else, yet Charlie could see that it was not just for manner's sake, but privacy as well. There were circles of varying size, with children present and a few babes somewhere, evidenced only by their thin, crying wails. A low hum of chatter and a pleasant tingle of magical energy was enough for Charlie to understand that they were in no danger by seeking out an unclaimed spot for their own.

One part of him was vaguely happy that he could see his fellow 'creatures' in action, natural interactions beyond the few glimpses that he'd had and that Theo was thoughtful enough not to take Harry straight to the healers. From what he knew of Harry, the younger man spent too much time in the hospital wing and often alone, if Ron's tales were ever to be believed. His youngest brother had once mentioned how strange it was that none of Harry's adoring fans or enemies ever
came to visit him while under Madam Pomfrey's care.

For Charlie, quite frankly he wouldn't be pleased to find himself transported directly into a hospital ward after a magical outburst like that. He'd much rather remain under his mother's care and oh—that thought hurt.

Theo's hand was on his arm and Charlie turned to find himself reflected in somber golden eyes. "Here is nice, yes?" Theo tipped his head towards a gnarled, flowering tree, thick with greenery. The ground was dry and soft, the shade adequate.

Charlie eased himself downward into a sitting position, then arranged Harry comfortably half-on and off of him. He sat with his back braced against the tree's smooth bark and with Harry's upper half cradled against his stomach, legs bracketing the smaller male.

Theo settled into his right, the bag of steaming food parcels balanced on his lap. Blue eyes met gold and nothing was said for a long moment. Then Theo broke the stare and began to focus on the neat parcels and packages before him.

He selected a carton of spicy-scented goodness and then fashioned the plastic fork into a pair of lacquered chopsticks. Chowmein with meat and vegetables, drenched in a thick, hot sauce. He stirred the contents expertly, then clicked the sticks together, selecting a sizeable mouthful before he held it up to Charlie's surprised face.

The redhead opened his mouth to protest, but the action was rethought when Theo's hand darted forward—quickly—and deposited the delightful mouthful where it needed to be.

"Jedeki is an excellent cook." Theo murmured. The golden eyes seemed to read things on Charlie's face that Charlie didn't say out loud. "I have always been fond of this dish. The herbs inside are similar to a Pepper-up Potion, it provides you with energy and chases away anything that could cause a cold or a stomachache." His smile was soft and gentle.

Charlie did not complain.

"The nuggets are familiar." Charlie chewed carefully, brow furrowed as he puzzled through the tastes that lingered on his tongue. "I've had them before, somewhere."

"Probably during the welcome feast. Sometimes they have all kinds of dishes there."

"Probably." Charlie allowed. He noted that Theo had carefully sectioned off each dish in portions of three, yet he'd made no attempt to wake Harry.

"He needs to sleep as long as he can." Theo said, quietly—as he'd done nearly everything so far. With little fanfare and little noise.

"He hasn't so much as twitched." Charlie retorted.

"True, but then he must be sleeping very deeply, wouldn't you think?"

"He's hardly breathing."

"He will be fine, Charlie."

"…not what I'm worried about."
"You will be fine too."

"...you don't know that."

"Everything always works out in the end."

"and if it doesn't then the story isn't over?" Charlie quipped.

"Then we rewrite the ending." Theo smoothed a hand down Harry's cheek.

"What about the middle?" Charlie sighed. "and why do you keep doing that with your face?"

Theo's expression immediately smoothed over. "Pardon?"

Blue eyes gave a spectacular roll. "Don't give me that." He warned. "I've lived with five brothers and two of them were experts at pulling faces. You don't have a thing on them and that's saying something."

"It is just a headache."

"The same way for Harry, it's just a bunch of seals?"

Theo scowled, darkly. "I will mention it when we visit the healers. It is nothing serious."

"Right." Charlie frowned. "Nothing serious as in nothing I should worry about when you're obviously-"

"I am fine." Theo snapped. He grimaced past the throbbing ache in his head and threw out a tendril of energy. It snaked around Harry's face and then slithered down his neck, disappearing. "Harry? Hey, wake up, hmm?"

The brunet stirred, faintly, in Charlie's arms.

Green eyes fluttered open and locked onto worried gazes of blue and gold.

Harry smiled. Sleep still clung from him, his features softened as wakefulness struggled to return. "Hey."

Harry relaxed against Charlie's broad chest, content to let Theo feed him the noodles, kept warm by a simple heating charm. He had opened his eyes only to close them quickly at the brightness of the morning light and the pain that immediately followed.

"Headache?" Theo inquired.

Charlie feathered a hand through the unruly mop of hair. He murmured a few words that a Romanian witch had taught him about healing powers. "This will help for a moment. It's probably too bright, huh?"

Harry relaxed as Charlie's hand covered his eyes, the fingers lightly splayed to let some light through but not enough to blind him. He felt a lovely, blessed coolness sink into the sides of his temples providing instant relief from the drum majors rampaging through his newly sectioned head.

"Better?" Charlie rumbled.
Harry nodded as best as he could with the hand still over his eyes. That was more than better.

"How are you feeling now?" Theo inquired. He clicked together the chopsticks, manipulating them with elegant fingers as he selected a suitable mouthful. "Chew. Swallow, then answer."

Green eyes sparkled as Harry chewed with deliberate slowness, then swallowed as directed. "Usually I wake up in the hospital wing." He waited while Theo twirled the noodles around the black chopsticks—again. "How long was I out?"

"A couple of hours." Theo hummed. He held up the mouthful and perked a brow.

Harry chewed thoughtfully. "Felt like five minutes." He admitted. He was relieved to find that he wasn't anywhere near Terius and the others—specifically the room he'd wrecked. A flicker of doubt danced over his face and he nibbled on his lower lip.

"Healer's appointment is two hours from now." Theo crumpled the empty carton and selected another one. He popped open the folded flaps and stirred the contents with the chopsticks. "You can rest as soon as you finish these."

Green eyes opened comically wide as Harry took in the array of takeout containers and Theo's determined expression. "Wha-I-I-can't!" He sputtered.

Theo simply stuck a chunk of roasted vegetable into his mouth.

"Whatever you thinking about, stop this very second." Theo scolded. "It isn't good." He poked the edge of Harry's near pout after the mouthful had been accepted.

Green eyes avoided both golden and blue while Harry fiddled with a spot on his trousers. He was glad to see that his pyjamas had been transfigured into decent daywear, a detail that had escaped him earlier.

His mates were good to him, his dragel purred. Very good.

Too good. His wizard side complained. It can't last.

Usually he would wake up in the hospital wing. Usually it would not be to kind faces and warm food. Usually.

"...did" Harry swallowed hard. "Did Terius throw us out?"

Theo blinked. "Pardon?"

"What?" Charlie coughed.

"We're not—you—we moved?" Harry tried to form the words together, but his mind was working faster than his tongue. It didn't sound right at all. Worry tangled up within him and Harry worked on mentally squashing and locking it away.

"...Harry, Harry, Harry!" Theo snapped his fingers directly in front of the pensive face. Emerald eyes grew wide and round with surprise.

"Yes?"

Theo sighed. "There is nothing to worry about and we are all fine. I simply thought it best that we
were to give the…others, a touch of privacy. Severus is a very private person and while Terius means well, he is not our Pareya.”

Harry scowled. Terius had been nice—sort of and kind of—that didn't mean that Theo had to hold things against him that the poor man couldn't help—Harry frowned. From what he knew of his own dragel side so far, there were some instinctual things that even he could not explain away. "Theo-

Thin lips pressed tightly together. "You may think of it as my own selfishness, if it allows you to come to terms with things. We were not thrown out nor will we be. We are guests and will conduct ourselves accordingly." He sighed. "I will send a letter to Oretta about the guest house, if you like. She will send mention when it is habitable."

"Selfishness?" Harry murmured, softly. "Is that what this is?"

"Harry, stop it." The arms holding him gave a light squeeze. Charlie rested his chin atop the dark head. "You're doing that thinking in circles thing where you believe it's your entire fault."

"What?"

"Hermione mentioned it once." Charlie said, delicately. He did not mention that the distraught, bushy-haired witch had all but had a minor breakdown after one of Harry's 'self-sacrificing' bouts of selflessness and had raged and ranted at him, Ron and the twins for a good half-hour. He hadn't known she'd had it in her.

Eyebrows knotted themselves together and Harry scowled.

"Harry?" Charlie nudged him.

The brunet sighed. "I should've had control." His thin hands clenched into fists. "I should've been able to-"

"You were possessed, I think that does excuse your behavior and-"

"Excuse?" Harry hissed. "Sure. Yeah. It does. It's okay. I can bring Hogwarts to the ground. I can wreck the Ministry of Magic, I can do anything stupid and—and it's fine. 'cause I was possessed. It's the best excuse of the century!" Anger flashed in those bright green eyes. "You don't understand. I always do this. I always hurt the things I-" his voice cracked and Harry lurched forward, no longer able to enjoy Charlie's warmth curling around him.

"Harry!" Charlie's hands caught his shoulders, tempered with their strength, but holding him nonetheless. "Hey, hey, calm down. Harry." He shared a look with Theo.

Theo immediately stabbed the chopsticks through the carton and lurched forward in a moment that was all grace fluid elegance. He blocked Harry's near escape by settling easily over the young men, straddling them both, legs on the outsides of Charlie's broad thighs. One hand caught Harry's chin and the other braced against his heaving chest, taking in the pale sheen of sweat, the wild eyes and the pain that seemed to silently scream at him.

"Enough, Harry." The word was weighted with the very essence of earth, demanding that Harry hear and listen. "You are not broken, you are not ruined, you are not a failure."

Harry jerked his face away from the insistent hand.

Theo let him.
Charlie didn't. He wrapped one arm around Harry's quivering shoulders and yanked him to rest back to chest once more. The redhead's free hand snaked upwards to grasp his chin and hold his face level with Theo's golden gaze.

Blue eyes held silent conversation over the messy head.

Theo's lips twitched, faintly. The spark of gold vanished almost as quickly as it had come, but it had been for Charlie and Charlie alone.

"If you are broken," Theo's hummed, voice as smooth and trapping as the delicious stickiness of sugaring honey. "Then we will fix you. We will put every piece of you back together and we will hold them and weld them together no matter how many pieces break, chip or shatter." He leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Harry.

The brunet gave a choked gasp when those fiery golden eyes broke that damning gaze. He fairly trembled as Theo eased forward, sinewy, strong arms sliding around him with promise in every squeeze. The weight of Theo's head was heavy compared to the feather-light touch of soft lips against Harry's ear.

"Always." Charlie whispered into the other ear. He pushed away from the tree trunk and released his grip on Harry's chin. He wrapped the newly freed arm around Harry's torso, tangling with Theo's dress robes as he heard the sound of ripping fabric from behind. His wings blew out with desperate force, flinging drops of blood and scraps of fabric everywhere. They arched forward, immediately forming a private cocoon for the trio.

"If you are ruined, then we must be too." Theo breathed. "Because goodness would surely never suffer itself to the ruins of-"

"No. No, no, no, no-!" Harry protested, frantically. That wasn't true. Theo wasn't ruined. Charlie wasn't. They were fine. They were good. Perfect, even. It was just him. Just the little freak that couldn't even fight off something as simple as possession.

"Yes, yes and yes." Theo returned. "Your darkness will only swallow you as long as you let it." He kissed the edge of Harry's ear.

"And it can't keep you, unless you let it."

"And lastly-" Theo's warm breath ghosted over the newly wet ear. "You are most certainly not a failure." There was a hint of laughter in his voice. "Surely you do not think my Slytherin vanity has left? Would I settle for anything other than the absolute best? Do you think I would not have known what I have taken responsibility of? Persist in your delusion, if you must." Theo nipped him, sharply. "But know that you are mine." His hands tightened deliberately around the slender form. "No matter what you are, failure, success, brilliance or darkness, you are mine."
Theo stretched his jaw, hearing it pop as his fangs surged through his gums. He wasted no time in fastening them deliberately over the mating mark on Harry's neck.

Harry gave a choked cry.

Charlie merely shifted to bring their faces together, swallowing the sound with his lips firmly over Harry's parted ones. He swallowed every protest and every cry, offering what comfort and reassurance he could with lips, teeth and tongue.

Warm tears spilled over Harry's cheeks. The emerald eyes squeezed shut.

Charlie broke the kiss, gently and nuzzled one flushed cheek. He kissed away the tears and hummed softly. "And you are mine as well." He breathed. "No matter what you are, what you think you are, what you really are or what you believe." He butted Harry's head lightly with his own.

One emerald eye popped open to look at him. The fragile trust visible, glistened with heartbreaking reality. A silent, tentative plea.

"Mine." He whispered. "And if I believe that you are more than this, more than everything, more than all the things that have happened to you, then believe me." He kissed the closed eye and smiled when it opened almost immediately afterward. "You are."

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"H-hey!" Harry tried to protest, but the words died in his throat as Charlie effectively silenced him with a searing, possessive kiss. His large, warm hands tangled easily in the brunet's outer robes, slipping within the folds to the hem of his jumper and then onwards, to lovely, warm, skin. Harry shivered, even as the radiant heat settled into him.

He would always know Charlie for his warmth.

A surprised squeak escaped when Harry realized that Charlie had distracted him from Theo's ministrations. Gentle, seductive touches from his Alpha that had quickly become more intimate. A low whine in his throat was the only token protest, but quite frankly, Harry wasn't really sure that he did want it to stop. His dragel side certainly didn't mind.

Charlie's wings afforded them a decent measure of privacy and all he had to do was to be quiet and-oh.

Harry squirmed.

Theo's expert fingers had slipped past the button and zipper of his trousers and parted the pleats of his pants to play with the stiffening flesh below. Theo smiled into the kiss as Harry moaned. His wicked, wicked fingers curled, stroked and teased in the way that made Harry literally melt. He writhed, sandwiched between Charlie's broad chest at his back and Theo's lithe form in front.

The kisses grew more heated and Harry realized that Charlie had taken over from Theo and he hadn't even noticed. It was a lovely, pleasurable haze.

It was precisely what he needed right then.

A sharp pain stabbed through his chest.

He whimpered.
Two answering growls soothed him.

Charlie's kiss demanded more and Theo's elegant fingers pulled.

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"If it hasn't set in yet, I am more than happy to remind you." There was a teasing hint in Charlie's sultry voice as he splayed his hands across bare skin, lucky to have made it under Harry's shirt when the brunet hadn't been paying attention.

Theo had been luckier. His hands had found their way beneath Harry's robes and into Harry's pants. Very lucky. Charlie smirked. "Round two, Harry?" He prompted, nuzzling the pale column of neck and nibbling on the marked skin.

"NmmMmmhm!" was the answer from around Theo's elegant fingers shallowly thrusting and exploring the warm, wet mouth currently cleaning them from the salty offering moments before.

Harry's flushed face said more to that than perhaps, his mouth would have. His lips were plump and pinked, evidence of the 'lesson' that had ended on a very pleasurable note. Theo's wicked fingers finally withdrew and wiped themselves on the inside sleeve of Harry's robe.

Harry opened his mouth only to have his gasp swallowed by Theo's insistent follow-up kiss. The slender body trembled and shuddered pleasantly in the dual embrace. Those fingers on his over sensitized skin nearly undid him again. He squirmed as Theo's expert hands tucked him back into his pants and did up the fly on his trousers.

Charlie murmured a gentle cleaning spell against his cheek, leaning forward to steal a kiss from Theo when the Alpha finally drew back from Harry. Theo smirked into the kiss and released one hand from Harry to take hold of Charlie's chin and guide the moment more to his liking.

Harry panted softly. The kiss was far more than it needed to be and he protested with another wriggle, his voice still deserting him. Twin heated gazes turned to fix on him and Harry swallowed what would have otherwise been a rather undignified squeak.

"N-no! We're in the middle of a—a park!" he managed to get out, burying his face in Charlie's available neck to dodge the kisses that were sure to follow, if the expressions on those faces were anything to go by.

"You didn't mind a minute ago." Charlie nibbled along one pinked ear.

Harry squirmed again. "T-that was—ah—different." He gasped out.

"Good different?" Theo rasped. He scraped his fangs lightly along the bared patch of skin where neck met shoulder. "Or bad different?"

Harry stiffened and froze. He shivered a moment later.

Charlie's hands began to rub gently, firmly and insistently. They reminded him of warmth, acceptance and safety, grounding him in the present.

Theo's elegant hands carded through the messy hair and stroked down the warm, blotchy face in soothing motions. "Different is different, Harry." He said. "Sometimes it is a good different sometimes it is a bad one, but different is different. It does not mean it is the end of things." He pressed a chaste kiss to Harry's wrinkled brow.
Charlie fluttered his wings lightly, drawing in a few drafts of warm, fresh breeze into their shadowed little cocoon. He slid his hands out from beneath Harry's shirt and folded his large hands over Harry's smaller ones.

Emerald eyes stared mournfully up at Theo.

The young Alpha moaned. "How can you still have that look in your eye?" He said, exasperated.

Harry blinked.

"That." Theo waved his hand at Charlie's silent prompt. "What happened this morning was not your fault. Neither was the episode in the Ministry. Being possessed does not make you weak, breaking free from it on your own—like you did this morning—that alone, is a sign of strength. Sharing with us, between us and with us—" he tapped Harry's nose with one long finger. "That is strength as well. It is proof that your past does not control you because you do your best to learn from it and continue on."

The emerald eyes shimmered.

"Oh for goodness sake!" Theo threw up his hands. "No one is upset with you nor will they demand that you-"

"You don't know that." Harry interrupted. "You're not Terius and-"

"I will kill him." Theo growled. Harry's dragel instincts were very close to the surface and it had prompted everything from the full emotional assault to the entire gamut of guilt, pain, confusion and despair. Most of it was toward himself and the rest had been toward Terius, Theo wasn't sure whether to shake Harry or hug him. He'd settled for both.

The older Pareya was gruff and somewhat traditionally set in his ways and it led Theo to wonder just how big of an impact he'd had on Harry during his first months as a Dragel. The very obvious guilt and worry from Harry suggested that the man held a position of some importance in his friendship circle and Theo wasn't quite sure what else to do now. They'd tackled more emotional issues in the past hour than he'd been prepared for and it had been exhausting for him as well as Harry. He didn't know how Charlie was handling it so well. "Twice." He added, for good measure.

"No!" Harry glared at him.

"May I have a turn as well?" Charlie asked, lightly. "After you're through of course." He didn't really have an issue with their current host, but he did not like the way that the older dragel currently had Harry so worked up. Whatever the man had done, Charlie would try his best to make sure it didn't repeat itself. Harry had enough ghosts in his past.

"No, Charlie!" Harry twisted to share his glare with the redhead. "No killing any—Theo!" The name was garbled when Theo's hand clapped over Harry's mouth.

The golden-eyed Alpha huffed a sigh and turned away for a moment. His mind changed gears and happily clicked over his current options. "Perhaps a letter of apology?" Theo suggested.

"What?" Harry tried to speak around the hand.

"For Terius." Theo kept his hands firmly over Harry's mouth. "If you persist in this guilt, I shall require more of you to rid you of it."

The pain reflected in those emerald eyes seemed to wan and fade, filled with relief instead. Harry
sagged forward.


Harry gave a weary nod.

Theo kissed the messy head of hair. "Good. Now I believe, you were supposed to be eating breakfast? We do have a healer's appointment within the hour."

"Your magic?"

Harry pursed his lips, shifting to try and find his wand.

"Other pocket." Charlie said, helpfully. "Let me." Warm fingers slid into one pocket and retrieved the wand. He placed it in Harry’s slightly shaking hand.

The young wizard closed his eyes in concentrating, working up a simple spell from the exhausted dregs of his wizard magic. He could feel a newer, fresher tint of energy inside him, but this new energy was strange and foreign. He didn't know whether he could trust it yet.

Yet.

Pale fingers gripped the wand and Harry sat up as he flicked it to Charlie's left, eyes still closed. "Stupify!" He hissed.

A faint flicker left the wand and something in the dirt stopped moving.

Harry sank back into Charlie's welcoming embrace and let his hand fall back to his lap. "It's hardly there." There was a mixture of worry, confusion and pain in his voice. "I can feel it, sort of, but I can't—I can't call it."

"You used up quite a bit this morning." Theo handed over the food carton and chopsticks to Charlie. The redhead took them with ease and settled the container in Harry's lap. "It probably drained your magical core."

Harry let his head thunk back on to Charlie's solid shoulder. "Again?" He gave a sigh of long-suffering.

His bored exclamation was met by twin looks of identical worry and disbelief.

"Again?" Charlie repeated. He poked at the noodles in the carton and settled on skewering a nice chunk of meat. "When exactly was this—again?" He really didn't like the sound of this now.

Harry shrugged.

"Harry." This was from Theo. Golden eyes drilled steadily into him.

Harry resisted the urge to shrug again in answer. Instead, he eyed the browned morsel in mid-hover courtesy of Charlie's hand in mid-motion and obediently opened his mouth. Lifting his own hands required far too much effort, especially now that he'd used what little energy he had to cast a spell to reassure himself that his magic was still there.

And he didn't have to answer. They'd already tackled one issue for the morning. It would do for now. He was just plain tired.
Quinn woke quietly.

He didn't move at first, because movement was the very last thing on his mind.

He remembered a large expulsion of energy, a great deal of pain and then of course, Bharin.

That thought brought a smile to his face and he relaxed somewhat, when he felt the facial muscles tug and pull to rearrange themselves to show the happy emotion. He took a quick stock of his current physical faculties and it was pleased to note only general stiffness and soreness.

The rest of his wits caught up around him as he blinked open his eyes to take in his current surroundings. He could make out the grey stone wall of the North garden—his mother's favorite—and the damp earth beneath him.

Quinn shifted, testing his current state and attempting to puzzle out how long he'd lain here. He could tell that he'd been placed in a hollow carved out from the rich dirt, a makeshift bed smoothed and brushed for his comfort. The dampness suggested liquids—water or oil—and the fragrance let him know that incense and oils had been spread and burn to hurry his healing.

His limbs splayed and rubbed pleasantly against each other, soft and with the smoothness of slicked oil. Quinn shifted to sit up, relieved to find that he'd been draped with a cut of silken cloth. He grimaced.

By the time he'd managed to stand up, warm, strong hands slid around his bare waist, tangling the silken cloth into a makeshift wrap.

"Quinn." Bharin's voice was rich and soft. He pressed a kiss to the blond's forehead.

Quinn turned with a smile and arms open for a hug. He was content to be held and soothed by the man who had all but raised him.

"How are you feeling?"

Quinn shrugged.

Bharin poked his side.

Slender fingers rose up to splay and curl in the signed language that was shared between them.

Bharin chuckled. "I'll stretch you out, no worries. You need anything before that?"

Quinn shook his head.

The tall, dark man gave a thin smile as he bent enough for Quinn to scramble up and balance, precariously, on one broad shoulder. Bharin held him steady with one strong arm and he stepped out from the earth-hewn mould in the ground.

Quinn pursed his lips and gave a soft, inquisitive whistle.

Bharin chuckled. "Yes, they did light the candles to call for you." He gestured towards the small circular indents on the ground. "Fifteen of them, actually."

There was a whuffling whistle in answer.

Bharin gave another laugh. "No, they didn't light for your age, they did it for the sake of your health and according to your chakras. You know that."
A moment of silence passed.

"Yes, I know there aren't fifteen chakras. There's one for each of the seven, then doubled and one final one for your stupidity."

Quinn elbowed him.

The dreadlocked head leaned away from the half-hearted jab. "You know fully well you deserved that, brat." He said, fondly. "I've warned you before about pushing limits that you don't have."

He sighed. "Yes, Quinn, even you have limits as do I. Do not push them."

Did mother do this The healing for me? Is she angry?

"Aye. Your mother also sent for your Father and your sire." Bharin snuck an upwards glance to the young man. "You will be smothered, I am sure."
NOTE: This chapter features Quinn and some of his family, the Kalziks. The Kalzik circle is HUGE, Quinn is the youngest Kalzik son by blood, (24 years old). Below is a quick table of some of the characters appearing, it is NOT necessary to remember all of them. Please remember that Bharin is quite large and as such, Quinn is very "small" to him.

Quinn's mind speak is in Italtics.

Bharin's mind speak is in Bold Italics

Quinn's mother, Surajini - SUB

Quinn's father, Hiram - ALPHA

Quinn's sire, Patrick - BETA

Circle fighter Bharin - GHEYO (fighter)

Quinn's older brother (meaning bro #4) Alejandro (Alpha)

Alejandro's Father - Arturo (Deceased)

Quinn's older sister, (sister #3) Dyshoka (Beta)

Quinn's twin younger sisters, Karnati (Beta) and Farnati, (Sub)

Bharin and Quinn share something of a mentor/student kind of bond, much like Ilsa and Theo. There is nothing romantic between them. Bharin is just very physical (as he is a fighter and Quinn does not speak, so he tends to be more aware of things and cues like hugs, tones in voice, etc.)

RECAP: Harry threw Voldemort and Niko out of his head and was then cared for by Theo and Charlie, who excused themselves from the Snape's quarters to leave early for the healers. Theo decided to get breakfast on the way in and it ended with a chat between Harry/Charlie/Theo with not quite as much talking as there could have been. Harry's circle is now heading towards the health clinic and Quinn has wakened from his healing sleep to find Bharin waiting for him, keeping watch.

KALZIK FAMILY HOME

Bharin carried Quinn indoors and away from the runed and shaped healing gardens. He hummed softly to himself along the journey, taking note of Quinn's light weight and faintly twitching hands and feet.

The healing had been good and necessary, but Quinn was one of those selfless hearts that too often disremembered to look after their own selves and souls. His grip on one pale thigh, tightened just
enough to be sure that his charge would not fall off of his shoulder.

Quinn's faintly trembling fingers took up their usual habit of playing with his neatly tied dreadlocks. The fingers twined and twisted between them, before attempting to count through the myriad of miniature braids and strands.

Bharin chuckled. "Counting them again?"

Quinn lightly thumped his chest with one well-placed ankle.

The dark man only laughed a little louder. "You could ask your mother you know, as my hairdresser, I should think she keeps count."

Quinn gave a snort in answer.

"You do realize that she will not be any happier than your father and your sire?" Bharin tilted his head to the side, looking for the answer. A moment later, the young man gave a faint shrug. "You should worry, I think. It would serve you right." He murmured. "The last time your father saw you, it was to your good health and in celebration of your new position at the clinic. The last time your sire saw you, it was from exhaustion from overworking yourself at said clinic. I seem to recall your promise that it would not happen again?"

_That is not fair, Bharin. Quinn chided. I did not have a choice!_

"We always have a choice, brat."

_I truly did not this time._

"You cannot save everyone!"

_But that does not mean that I cannot try!_

"Ah, so you admit that you willingly went through with this latest stunt of yours."

Quinn's pale cheeks colored rapidly and he looked away, even though the action would not hide his blush.

"I thought so." Bharin sighed. "You do realize how dangerous that was?"

_I wasn't too far gone. Quinn retorted. How else do you think you arrived on time?_

"I felt you." Bharin snapped. "That alone should say how far gone you were!"

Quinn made a strangled half-whistle sound.

Bharin stopped walking.

For a long moment, teal eyes stared down at dark brown ones. Neither said a word.

"Be mindful of your next words, Quinten." Bharin's voice was firm. "Or I just may be so inclined to let you walk to the bathhouse while I drag you by the ear."

Bharin did not follow through on his threat and Quinn was thankful for that. He didn't feel as if he could spare the energy for something as natural and mundane as walking. That, and Bharin was tall enough that riding on his shoulders often brought a smile to a face already showing the signs of
early age.

Quinn sat contentedly in the hot bath as Bharin had occasionally dunked him in the steaming liquid and generously lathered him with fragrant soaps and oils.

*Did you excuse me from the morning shift?*

"That monster of a woman should know better than to expect you after last night's events." Bharin shot back. He gave Quinn the moment of privacy to slide on his underthings while he fetched a towel to dry the blond locks.

*Bharin.*

"But I did send word this morning by way of air courier."

*Thank you.* Quinn reached for the stack of clothes near the stool and nearly wobbled over as his balance shifted.

Bharin caught him with a quick, thick hand, hefting him upright and guiding him to sit on the stool. "You should know better than rush things." He scolded, lightly. "This isn't the first time you've done this."

*I know...* A near pout flickered on the young healer's face and he held up one twitching hand to examine it and his present healing energies.

Bharin smacked him lightly with the end of the towel. "Do not push yourself before you are reading. You know as well as I do that your gifts are as fickle as the weather."

*Are not!* Quinn's protest was half-hearted at best. He did know. He knew all too well. He hunched his shoulders up as Bharin draped the thick, warmed towel over his head. His eyelids fluttered with contentment. A lazy smile stole across his face as Bharin's big hands took their care in working the fluffy towel through his damp hair. *Feels good. Thank you.*

Bharin smiled. "You're quite welcome." He let the dampened towel slide down to rest around Quinn's shoulders. He released it as the blond drew it around him like a cape. He snapped his fingers at a row of bottles along the vanity's edge. A clear container of sea-green gel leapt to his palm.

Unscrewing the cover, dark fingers dipped into the bright contents. Quinn grinned as he felt those familiar fingers shaping his unruly locks into the hairstyle he often coaxed it into.

"Are you ready for the exchange?" Bharin's words are gentle and measuring.

Quinn hesitated.

"There is no rush," The experienced Gheyo smiled. "there is time." he sent the container back to the sink and selected another one.

Quinn held up his outstretched arms. He gave a smile as the deodorized spray tickled him. A warm drying spell tingled over him and then Bharin was applying bruise balm and healing salves to his upper half.

A moment later, another drying spell settled the healing ointments well beneath his skin. "Oil or cream?" Bharin asked, while his hands hovered over the line of bottles on the vanity's edge.
Quinn's lips gave a faint quirk and he cocked his head to the side in question.

"the oil is herbed the cream is metholated. Both will have a warming, then cooling effect." Bharin does not say more. Quinn is quite a talented healer and he knows what Bharin means. The silent language between them is beautiful in its simplicity. "Oil?" Bharin prompted.

The wavy blond locks bobbed once.

Bharin poured the oil in his large hands and with a flicker of magic, heated it to a tolerable warmth. Quinn held out his left arm and waited. The large hands smoothed the warmed oil over the limb with precise, expert strokes. The fingers massaged and worked at the stiff muscles, prompting a small smile from a relaxing Quinn.

As a Gheyo, Bharin's knowledge of a Dragel body would show itself quite prominently. He would know every muscle group and the best natural remedies for any situation. Quinn's lips quirked into a deeper smile. The history between them meant that Bharin also knew just what he needed and just how deep to dig those talented fingers or how hard to pull those sore arms and legs.

In quiet efficiency, Bharin slathered on the oils and rubbed them into Quinn's pale, creamy skin until it glistened. Quinn's formerly tense figure went boneless as Bharin moved to stand behind the sitting figure on the stool. The embrace was loose and warm as Bharin grasped each slender wrist and began to manipulate the limbs in a series of stretches and reaches.

Quinn winced a few times, but did not protest. The exercises felt good and the discomfort was only temporary. He made a mental note to remember to check his pain thresholds again when he reached the clinic. It actually hurt more than he'd expected it would.

"Arms up and over." Bharin rumbled. "Let me support your weight." The last stretch was complicated, but worth it.

Quinn huffed out a happy sigh when Bharin finally released his wrists and nudged him off the stool. He slid off and braced himself on the aching, slightly pinked limbs, as Bharin moved to work on his aching back.

When his back was finished, Quinn was allowed to sit again. This time, he balanced carefully as Bharin began the tedious task of stretching out the knots and kinks in his legs.

A sharp rap on one knee immediately drew teal eyes to the serious face kneeling beside him.

"No repeats, Quinten."

Quinn swallowed. Yes sir.

"Quinten."

Yes, Bharin. It won't happen again.

"How did it actually happen this time?"

Accident.

"I figured. The call was very loud."

Quinn winced. Sorry.

"It is pointless to apologize for something that is out of your control." Bharin countered. "Foot. Up.
Rotate." He began to work his large fingers around the tendons and joints, feeding warm pulses of magic into Quinn's foot propped up on his knee. "Kyle was there, surely you could have wheedled his assistance out of him?"

_Bharin!

"Don't give me that." The older man said, mildly. "I know fully well how perfectly behaved your little pet is."

_Bharin! Quinn jerked his foot in emphasis.

Bharin's hand immediately tightened around his ankle the other pinching the sole of his foot, lightly. "You scared him half to death!" He snapped. "That is not how one treats a brother, that is more the actions of an owner and their pet, as if it is a creature deaf and dumb to the goings on of all around it."

Quinn's mouth opened in protest, but no sound came out. After a moment, he shut it and his head bowed. He sat in a broody silence as Bharin finished up with the massage oils and unofficial physical therapy.

"Tonight." Bharin rapped him smartly on the knee—again. "I had best see you before you take yourself off to bed."

Quinn snorted and looked away. _As if Mother will let me out of her sight once she sinks her claws into me._

The Gheyo stifled a chuckle. "Indeed, but you deserve that." He smiled and reached for the pair of slim-fitting breeches on the bathroom countertop. "You worried us all with that stunt." His hand hovered over Quinn's heart, feeding it a pulse of magic.

Worried teal eyes flickered up to him, at last, remorse, pain and frustration showing plainly in their expressive depths.

_It was necessary. I had to...save him. Please understand, Bharin, I didn't do this on purpose, I just couldn't let him stay like that. He was so—_

Bharin snatched off the socks from the pile of clothes and deftly slipped them on the twitching feet. Quinn's magical energy was slowly recuperating and from the signs, he'd be a nervous wreck in very short order. One of his inherited quirks from his Sire was the uncanny knack his magic held for exponentially recovering itself. Starting with smaller increments and working up to larger installments, Quinn would be fine by midday—as long as he ate and was careful.

Especially if he planned to return to work for the afternoon.

"I respect that you must try to save everyone." Bharin murmured, he shook out the breeches and held them up. "But I will repeat this to your deaf ears yet again, if you exhaust yourself helping them—then you are of no help. Do you truly believe any one of your patients could live with the knowledge that your death saves them?"

Quinn nibbled on his lower lip, brow furrowed. _That's a trick question, Bharin. He answered, at last. I don't want to answer it._

"I am not asking you to. Up. One foot at a time." Bharin held still as Quinn held his shoulders for balance as he stepped into the breeches. Quinn held his hands up as a simple vest came next, this tucked into the breeches and cinched with a belt. "But I am asking you to consider me." Bharin
turned him gently, so they were back to chest as he slipped the final, longer overtunic over the slender figure. It bore the crest of the health clinic and Quinn's own badge, showing his rank as a revered healer.

Quinn fingered the embroidered patches with a faint, fond smile. He signed thank you. Then nibbled on his lower lip again.

Bharin thwacked him lightly on the head and did up the laces along the front of the shirt. "Quinn," his voice was gentle. "Think next time, remember that you are not alone in everything that you do. I was free. I would have been happy to help. Even long-distance. I would not have complained."

… I was fine, Bharin. I just didn't expect to-

Quinn was jerked around to see a faint shimmer in those so very dark brown eyes. It vanished almost as quickly as it had come. The young healer was frozen in place as Bharin's hand caught his chin and held their gazes together.

"You bear my death seal, because you are selfless and selfish in equal parts, Quinten." The dark eyes narrowed. "I pulled you back last night." The gaze hardened. "How am I to explain that to your mother? She will never be ready to handle anything that you throw at her in this haphazard way of yours."

Teal eyes shimmered.

"She is not ready to bury her youngest son."

Quinn squeezed his eyes shut.

"You knew and I count that as punishment enough." Bharin sighed. He released his grip on the slender chin. His strong arms wrapped tightly around the quivering form. "I have not mentioned this to your mother, but I will not hold my silence if she asks."

Quinn drew in a shaky breath. His hands made fists in the bunched fabric of Bharin's sleeves. He allowed himself the rush of fear and panic that had come when he'd realized just how deep Harry's Blood Seal had run. It had nearly killed him to rip it out as he'd done, it had been a very long day after all and he'd used nearly every last ounce of his magic before Harry had entered. By the time he'd come to realize and notice what was off about the young submissive and then of the seals he'd borne, Quinn's restless soul hadn't been able to tolerate the thought of sending Harry back home without trying something.

A slightly shadowed curtain fell over his face and Quinn smiled. Bharin's dreadlocks were familiar and soothing in the privacy that they offered. He snuggled into the hug, craving the acceptance, reassurance and freedom that came with it.

Bharin?

The Gheyo hummed softly in answer.

Watch. Quinn commanded. He opened his mental channels, probing the connection between them and then pushed over the entire replay of Harry's visit and the circumstances that had led to his present condition.

Bharin's arms tightened around him, rubbing up and down his arms and back in gentle motions as he continued to feed tendrils of magic to him. His vow of loyalty to Quinn would be more than sufficient for the healer-patient confidentiality oaths between Quinn and Harry.
I'm sorry, Bharin. I didn't do it on purpose, but I felt so strongly that—forgive me. I do not mean to make excuses. What I did, that was inexcusable.

"We are all young and foolish once." Bharin rumbled. He accepted the hug that accompanied the apology.

I have already had my time. Quinn's long fingers skittered over the messy scars around his neck and the ones that continued further down his torso. He sucked in a breath and blew it out harshly. It was very foolish and I was not that young. He looked up, earnestly. I do mean it, Bharin. I am sorry. I never meant to force you to activate the seal, you saw, I just—!

"Shh." Bharin soothed. "Enough. I forgive you." He nudged their mental connection, allowing Quinn to see the sincerity of his admission. "You are forgiven."

…thank you.

"There are no thanks necessary. You know this." Bharin rested his chin on the soft, blond head. "Brat." He added, quietly.

Ride? Quinn prompted, impishly.

Bharin rolled his eyes as they strolled through the inner corridors, heading for the main room. "I'm quite sure you can walk now if you like, brat."

Teal eyes sparked merrily at him, mischief hovering in their depths. But it's so much fun being so high up.

"Are you calling me a giant again?" Bharin growled.

Oh no. no, no, no, I would never do such a thing. Quinn's lips parted in silent laughter as he darted down the hallway just far enough out of reach. Please, Bharin?

"What are you, five?" The Gheyo snorted. "Walk!"

But I'm tired and my feet hurt—! Quinn drew the words out in the closest imitation of a whine as he could in their mental connection.

Bharin perked a brow.

…brute. Quinn turned on his heel and ran. He threw a glance over one shoulder to see the happy mash-up of emotions that flickered over his guardian's face before it settled into a knowing smirk.

Brat. Bharin returned. He gave chase.

Bharin nearly caught him as Quinn skidded around a corner. He slammed face-first into a soft bosom and a tangle of jewelry, scarves and perfume. He winced.

A string of unflattering words sputtered out of the young woman before she heaved herself up to her feet and then, green eyes grew wide. "Quinn!" She exclaimed, horrified. "Oh, Quinn! Why did you have to show up now? Why now?" She scrambled to tug her skirts and jewelry to rights as she threw a few frowning faces in his direction. "I'm going to be late and Mama is going to yell." She fussed. "I hate it when she yells. It took forever, because Farnati wouldn't lend me her hairpiece
and I couldn't-" Karnati continued to babble.

He blinked at her in confusion and carefully held his hands up to show his younger sister that he didn't know what she spoke of. Not all of his siblings held a mental connection with him nor did they appreciate it when he projected his voice into their head, so he often refrained from doing so unless it was absolutely life-and-death necessary.

"What?" Karnati tugged her cropped top downwards, scowling at the golden chain linked around her bared midriff.

Quinn tracked her movements and his mind whirled and clicked into place, allowing him to draw his own conclusion. From her formal dancing attire, there was a family function likely about to take place, as well as the present time of year—Hunting Season—suggested that his younger sibling might be dressed up for one of the meeting dances.

"Oh never mind, we really don't have time for this!" She bent down to gather up the armful of flower necklaces she'd been carrying and hastily threaded her arm through it.

Quinn perked a brow and folded his arms.

She immediately reached over and tugged them out to hang at his sides. "No, no, no. Don't do that." She held his hands in hers, squeezed them lightly, then stood on tip-toe to press a kiss to each cheek before bobbing in a curtsy. She reached up into her ornamented hair and undid one of the colorful, gilt-edged scraps and tugged it free.

Understanding dawned as Quinn dutifully held up his left wrist and waited as she knotted it quickly and held still while he returned the favor with a kiss to her forehead and a single galleon from his purse. He hid a smile, remembering his forgotten thought to it—but Bharin'd always had a good memory. He would have remembered the family holiday for sisters and brothers and made sure that Quinn was prepared in case he ran into any of his siblings—a very likely occurrence.

"Health and long life to you, brother." His little sister murmured. Her green eyes searched his face rapidly. "And you wish the same for me?"

Quinn nodded, quickly.

Karnati smiled. "Thank you." The golden galleon was tucked into the front of her blouse and she gathered up her skirts, preparing to sprint again. She was halfway down the hallway before she remembered to call a warning over her shoulder to her sisters.

It was a warning that came too late, along with a collective groan.

Quinn blinked, turning his hands palms upward in a silent question.

Several pairs of elegantly dressed twins jostled and argued with each other. Bharin's presence quieted them as he rounded the corner at a more sedate pace than Quinn's earlier whirlwind and he moved to stand behind the blond.

"Don't even think of it." He warned, his eye on the girls, but his hand on Quinn's shoulder. "You'll let them off easy and they don't deserve it." His lips twitched. "And might I remind you that you owe some of them from last year?" He motioned towards the girls. "And you lot, be nice!" He warned.

Farnati was the one to push to the front of the gaggle of twins as she handed over her armful of garlands and trinkets to one of her fellow sisters, before untying a ribbon from her hair. "Health and
long life, brother." She murmured, tying it around Quinn's proffered wrist. "We're in a bit of a hurry." She pouted. "They're going to start up the dances. Father's returning and we wanted to practice. The portkey is any time now." She huffed. "And you're in the way." She ducked as she said this, catching Bharin's disapproving eye. "Sorry. But, 'Nati, you could have warned us!" She stepped up to kiss both cheeks and give her brother the expected hug.

Her dark brown eyes grew wide, pink lips forming an O when Quinn handed her a galleon and silently mouthed the blessing back to her. She smiled again and threw her arms around his waist for a second hug. He kissed the top of her head and squeezed back.

She tucked the coin into the top of her jeweled headband with a proud smile. Her first token for the day. From the rows in her hand-stitched headband, Quinn could tell that she intended to hunt down every one of her older brothers for her 'dues'.

He laughed silently and watched her skip off as the remainder of his younger sisters hurriedly arranged themselves into a line. The little ritual repeated itself with a few variations, in pairs of twins, as the famed house of Kalzik was known for birthing daughters in pairs of two or more. A single daughter was rare.

When they had all run off, he patted his waist pouch. *Methinks me be somewhat poorer.*

"In coin, not in heart and soul." Bharin said calmly. He cracked his knuckles. "I seem to remember you shouting out something and running off."

Teal eyes opened wide, innocently. *Me?* Quinn huffed in silent laughter as Bharin caught him before he could run again. He was gently slung over one great shoulder and carried easily down the maze of hallways that made up the North wing of the great Kalzik mansion. *Am I to be ransomed?*

"A scrawny little scrap like you?" Bharin sniffed. "I think not. You insult my intelligence."

Quinn shook with mirth and gave a little wriggle, just for the sake of it. He'd scared Bharin and now he wanted to make it up to the man. Although he'd shown the reason for his actions and he'd apologized, it hadn't eased the ache in his chest.

It still hurt.

"Quinten."

Bharin paused and Quinn's silent laughter petered off. A moment later, the blond was gently placed on his feet as he turned to face the fierce glare on the face of his fourth oldest brother.

"Alejandro." Bharin greeted. His dark eyes drilled into the young man. He spoke in Quinn's stead, knowing that this particular sibling did not allow mindspeak and did not understand whistlespeak or signing.

"I was not speaking to you." Alejandro wrinkled his nose. "I was speaking to you." His own dark-eyed gaze settled on Quinn. "I would have words with you, troublesome little brother of mine." The words were weighted and stiff, saying more than perhaps, the smaller hulk-like figure gave away.

Quinn stiffened. One of Bharin's great hands came up to rest in reassurance on one thin shoulder. The blond reached up to lightly brush his fingers over the hand. He cocked his head to the side, the best approximation he can offer to ask what the matter was.

"I would explain, but it might send your guard dog into a bit of a fit." The dark eyes sparked
dangerously. "Personally, I have no intention of being shredded and hung."

Bharin bristled, visibly.

Quinn shifted to place himself directly at the center between the two. It never failed to annoy him at how two idiots with the same general intent could be so incredibly dense—and hurtful. Bharin opened his mouth to speak when Quinn drew hard on his own dragel attributes and forced them out of him.

His clothing shifted around him with the aid of his recovering threads of magic as his wings burst from his back in a flurry of scales, shudders and something that may have been a hiss. The newly extended wings did as he wished, providing a suitable barrier between Bharin's revealed claws and Alejandro's vicious magic.

The soft, blue-gold, yellow-green merged with the teal scales a beautiful mishmash of green-hued color that speckled across his spines and the somewhat hardened scales. There were a few Alpha ridges along his upper shoulders, proof that he had not been borne into the Healer's title that he now held.

But now, his wings said what he could not and it served to calm both his older brother and Bharin. He rarely did bring them out after all, a habit he had taken up after his accident. He'd even worked hard to make it so that the transformation would not ruin his clothes—or his scarred skin—every time it happened.

A tense moment hung between the trio and then Quinn folded his arms across his chest. He waited.

Alejandro sighed. "I wasn't trying to pick a fight." He scowled.

"You were not attempting to avoid one either." Bharin growled. "It would be wise for you to remember that." One of Quinn's wings flipped back, lightly smacking the Gheyo's shoulder. "Quinn!" Bharin's bit back the words threatening to spill out.

*And you are both trying my patience! Really, Bharin, you are older. How you always manage to let him ruffle you like this?* The mental reprimand was accompanied by a patented look from Quinn.

Alejandro snickered.

Quinn whirled on him next with a glower reminiscent of his mother, the fire burning with unnatural light in his teal-hued eyes.

His older brother hunched forward, his own shoulders bunching to keep his wings back and at bay. His Alpha status was far too easily challenged and it never did him any good when it came to the pair of Bharin and Quinn. The blond would always defend the man who had essentially become a second father to him.

Over Quinn's shoulder and the stretch of one pretty wing, Bharin half-smiled.

Alejandro's jaw clenched tight, but he looked away for a moment, his hands morphing to claws that dug tightly into the toughened skin of his palms. Then he straightened and the claws melted back into the normal, pale digits. He ignored the scowl on the face of the older Gheyo and spoke to Quinn once more. "Come." He extended one tattooed arm.

Bharin gave a low growl, reaching forward again.

Quinn made a sound that could've been a sigh. *It is fine, Bharin. Let me go.* He twisted a bit for
emphasis and began to fold his wings back inside of himself, using the sluggish threads of magic to
ease the roughness of scales against tender skin. He really had overdone it this time, as evidenced
by Bharin's hovering, as the man still did not move away.

Alejandro's piercing gaze swept over his younger brother from head to toe as if searching for
something that was not immediately visible. He frowned and wiggled his fingers. The tattoos on
his arm, danced eagerly. "You are injured?"

Quinn?

Quinn shrugged. Superficial injuries. Nothing serious. You know that. You have been with me since
I wakened.

What does he speak of?

Alejandro has always been smarter than anyone credits him for. Quinn smiled, thinly. He knew
this particular brother, perhaps, much better than his other siblings. He will not hurt me, Bharin.
Does mother expect me promptly?

I do not think she will mind, as long as you arrive in one piece.

Ah, so she can tear me into little pieces? Quinn shuddered. I shall be eaten alive.

I am sure you would make a very tasty snack. Bharin returned, his face was solemn, though a
flicker of amusement showed at the corner of his eyes. Will you be alright? I do not think your
brother appreciates my presence.

He rarely appreciates anyone's presence. Quinn retorted. Be glad that you can walk away this time
—and that my wings are fine.

Sneaky. Bharin compliments. And it is a compliment, because it is the one thing he had not had
the time to double check of his charge. Not after coaxing them back into the pale body during the
night.

Quinn smoothed the front of his tunic and reached towards the hand. He did not wince when
Alejandro roughly jerked him the few feet over, away from Bharin. Most of the time it was simply
easier to let them trade him between them.

Their fights were always too real, too fierce and far too bloody. It always half-killed him to have to
heal them both afterwards. But he'd never been able to stand their suffering in the aftermath, not
when he knew that he could ease it in some small way.

"I shall take him to mother." Alejandro gave a dismissive wave, as if he were a prince speaking to
servant. "You're welcome to amuse yourself elsewhere."

Bharin's frown deepened and his shoulders rippled.

Quinn rolled his eyes and jabbed one pointed elbow into his brother's firm stomach. There was
more force behind the movement than visible to the eye, because Alejandro gave a grunt and
Bharin's eyebrows soared upwards to his dreadlocks, the crisis momentarily averted. Quinn made
to step forward, but Alejandro's thick arms shot out and twined about his shoulders, holding him
close. Quinn frowned, but held up his hands as best as he could and signed with them. Using
mindspeak now would only aggravate his brother.
Alejandro shifted uncomfortably behind him, but did not interrupt as light fingers formed signs and dark fingers returned the favor.

After a long moment, Bharin continued to sign back a few motions and then reluctantly tipped his head in a bow. He did not leave until Alejandro gave a stiff bow of his own—prompted by Quinn's not-so-subtle stomp on his foot.

"I am not your punching bag." Alejandro growled. He stalked down the hallway, pulling Quinn after him. He paused, when his younger sibling stumbled. Dark eyes narrowed as he took in the smaller figure's form. He dropped his vise-like grip on the slender wrist and yanked it out in front of him, expert eyes checking for any potential bruising.

There wasn't any.

He snorted. "I thought mother was joking when she said that you pulled out that brute's death seal." The glower in his eyes turned fierce. "What were you thinking?"

Quinn looked away. There is no way he can answer that and he understands that there are ghosts in his brother's past that prompt this question of almost-concern. He knows that the blood tattoos on the exposed arms are Death seals as well—all for the sake of honor—that Alejandro cast with every ounce of his will.

It is a sordid and dark history that lingers behind those equally dark eyes. For one terrible moment, Quinn isn't sure that he can look his brother in the eye. Uncertainty reminds him that he is not as untainted as he may appear.

Alejandro gave his arm another, gentler yank. A wordless attempt to recapture his silent brother's attention.

The blond head swiveled back to him, teal eyes wary in their grudging stare.

"That's not what I asked after you for." The older dragel huffed. His magical visibly flickered to life, an agitated silver strand that pulsed around them both. "I have news that could not quite wait."

Quinn perked a brow.

Alejandro scowled. "It's nothing you have to worry about." The young Alpha turned away and knelt, holding out his arms behind him in a familiar gesture. Quinn's jaw dropped. He hurried forward to circle around to see Alejandro's face. His older brother merely glowered and him and gave a jerk of his head over his shoulder.

"If you expect me to say please, you are in for a long wait and this is a time-sensitive offer." A flicker of silver danced through the almost-black eyes again. His Dragel was agitated and very close to the surface.

Quinn bobbed his head and circled around where he easily threaded his arms around the wiry neck and allowed his brother's magic to wash over him, the necessary featherlight charm. Alejandro's strong hands reached back, bracing and holding him as he rose and began to walk, with sure steady steps.

"Your magic has been screaming at me since you woke." Alejandro grumbled. "Why is it that you only find pleasure in tormenting me?"
Quinn sniffed in apology. There was precious little he could do to answer that.

Alejandro snorted. "Father will return with Patrick within the hour." He said, referencing Quinn’s sire. "I do hope you've decided on a suitable story for them, or at least whatever you've done for Bharin to think it is alright to let you out of his sight. If you do not, I somehow think that heads will roll." He scowled. "I like my head, you idiot. That brute of yours kept vigil the entire time you slept you know. Would it kill you to try to pretend to be careful? Not that I would mourn your loss, but I do not desire the endless headaches that would come with the wailing and bemoaning from those who would weep at your demise."

The threat wasn't really much of a threat at all, for Quinn has long learned to read between the lines of this particular brother. Alejandro is complicated. Quinn knows that he is complicated. Together, they complicate each other and that made a twisted sort of sense that often led to the kinds of situations such as the one they are in now.

"All night." Alejandro ground out. "Are you listening to me?"

And somehow, Quinn does know. He can recall shadowed shapes, sounds and flickers around him as his healing sleep never quite sucks him under into that blessed oblivion. He has never been that lucky as a healer, but it does warm him to know that Bharin kept watch over him, during such a vulnerable time. He smiled.

"You had best not have some stupid expression on your face." Alejandro grumped. "I came to speak to you because I went to visit the Northeast Clan from the Aired side. You were right about that and it will hold up in court, should you choose to pursue it."

Why wouldn't I want to? Quinn asked, silently, but he knew there would be no answer. The question remained in his head alone.

"If." Alejandro said, ominously. "If you do this, know that for sure, that harpy will not allow you to keep working under her roof."

Quinn shrugged as best as he could.

"Do not give me that. Use that pathetic brain of yours and think!" Alejandro snapped. He readjusted his grip on the slender figure. "I thought you said she had the ability to blacklist you and that is not something to think of lightly. It would ruin all the pointless years you've spent doing whatever it is they see fit to call training for you pacifists."

Quinn squeezed the neck a little harder than necessary.

"Do you want me to drop you?"

The choke-hold immediately slackened.

Alejandro growled in response.

The sound of chiming jewelry caught both of their ears and Alejandro paused for a moment, before he continued on again. A moment later, he cleared his throat. "Dyshoka?"

The sister in question popped out from around the corner, dressed in a far more elaborate costume than her younger siblings, a vision of a true Indian beauty. "Ale?" Soft brown eyes grew comically wide as she took in the present situation. "Quinn?" She ventured, cautiously. "Oh my starbred heart, what have you two done now?" One hand slapped her forehead and she sighed. "Never mind, this
is going to end badly, isn't it? It always does, why am I even asking?"

Quinn lifted his head from one broad shoulder and flashed a wry smile.

Her hands immediately went to her hips. "Oh stop that. Ale, put him down!" She barked. "Now!"

Alejandro rumbled warningly at her, but after a moment, he did straighten and allow Quinn to slide down to rest on shaky feet. He steadied the younger man with a firm grip on the arm, allowing him to recline against the corridor wall to find his balance.

"What happened to you?" Quinn's second-oldest sister fussed, the only single daughter in the house of the Kalzik. She felt his wrist, his neck and then his forehead. Her lips pursed into a pout, coffee-hued skin rippling with the evidence of her own dragel hovering beneath the surface. "Daddy and Patrick are back. Mother sent me to find you." There was a disapproving tone in her voice.

Quinn tried not to shy away from her well-meaning hands. Instead he toyed with her long, bejeweled braid that hung thick and heavy, over one shoulder, wrapped in fine golden chains, with glittering jewels embedded in the ebony strands. He gave it a playful tug.

Her glare softened and she reached for the end of the braid to undo one of the many colorful scraps of ribbon.

Quinn grabbed her hand, stilling it at once. It was too pretty to ruin just for the sake of a ribbon for his already beribboned wrist.

Alejandro snorted. His own wrist was bare and he leaned over to pluck Quinn's hands out of reach. "I sincerely hope you did not intend to skip me." He grumbled.

Dyshoka's head snapped up, a cheeky grin on her face. "Feeling jealous brother of mine?" She teased, but when her nimble fingers finished, there were two strands of colorful ribbon her hand. She waited until both wrists were held out, then knotted them around the respective ones. She finished with a kiss to both cheeks and the customary blessing.

"Health and long life to you brother." Dyshoka hugged Alejandro.

He returned the embrace—briefly—and then reached around his neck where he tugged free a golden coin necklace. He dropped it in her hand without ceremony. "The same to you."

Dyshoka stared at the gift and then grinned. "You are impossible." She murmured. "Thank you." She turned to Quinn and repeated the same, keeping ahold of his hands to hear his mental reply.

*Health and long life to you, sister of mine.* Quinn handed over two galleons at this, for Dyshoka had always been his favorite sister.

She winked in answer and took the coins to tuck them into her already bedecked hair. "You are generous and kind. Now come, before Daddy decides to let Patrick fetch you himself."

Quinn winced. He started forward, only to feel a sudden, harsh tug on his magic and the bond shared between him and Kyle. A hacking cough sputtered out and he tugged his hand free of his sisters to grasp at the burning pains settling in his torso.

"Quinn…Quinn?" Dyshoka's worried voice began to fade in the haze of pain. "Ale, do something!"

"Quinten!" Alejandro's face appeared directly in front of him.
Quinn felt his magic surge up and forcefully reset itself, the slender threads greedily sucking up the right that was theirs. He felt it like a tidal wave released from a leash of sorts, flooding, taking and swallowing whole.

He coughed again, lurching forward.

Kyle...

There was a flash of white and then nothing.

Dyshoka stared at the empty space where her younger brother had stood in silent agony just moments before. Her bejeweled braid was halfway to her mouth, before Alejandro snagged it in his fingers and gave it a tug.

She jerked it back, with a scowl. "How, in Arielle's name, are we to explain this to Mother?"

Her older brother shrugged. "You explain." He said, with a yawn. "I feel as if I am need of a nap."

He didn't yelp when she threw the stinging hex after him.

NEVARAH HEALTH CLINIC

Theo 'ported them directly into the transportation rooms that Kyle had showed them the day before. He was definitely exhausted in more ways than one, his energies were fluctuating wildly everywhere and of all things, it was practically killing him that Charlie held Harry at this precise moment.

Not that he was in any present state to do anything about it, but they hadn't been able to wheedle anything else out of Harry that morning. Instead, he'd only consented to Charlie feeding him—not Theo—and he'd fallen asleep the moment he'd swallowed the final morsel.

Sleep was the natural cure for regenerating magic, so technically, Theo couldn't fault him, but it didn't soothe his ruffled scales in the least. A tendril of pain skittered through his head and stabbed hard.

He grimaced and mentally reminded himself to keep the expression from lingering on his face. Charlie would most likely call him out on it.
RECAP: Theo decided to get breakfast on the way to the health Clinic in and it ended with a chat between Harry/Charlie/Theo with not quite as much talking as there could have been. Harry's circle has now reached the clinic, Theo still has a horrible headache and and Quinn has wakened from his healing sleep to find Bharin waiting for him. Quinn mother was so worried, she sent for his Sire and Father, but before Quinn can meet them, he is 'ported away by Kyle's frantic call.

NEVARAH : HEALTH CLINIC

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Theo needn't have bothered. Charlie saw anyway.

"Theo?" Charlie's voice was mild, testing. It held the whispers of disapproval and a hint concern.

"It is fine." Theo winced, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes for a moment. He dug them in until he saw sparks of light at the edge of his vision. "Bloody headache." He swallowed the rest of the impolite sentence that blistered on the edge of his tongue and let his hands fall back into his lap. It was far more than a headache, but he told himself that he'd dealt with worse. He had, surely. He merely could not remember when. It was only a matter of time for now and once their appointment began, he knew that the sharp-eyed Quinn would be sure to rectify his misery in short order.

"Headache potion?" Charlie suggested, he stood to the side of the transportation pads where they'd materialized in the clinic. He didn't notice that his posture was defensive to shielding his new Alpha in addition to his death grip on the sleeping Harry in his arms. He also didn't have any idea where he'd find a headache potion or whether he ought to leave Harry with Theo in the Alpha's present state. "Do they have those here for in between appointments? Is that alright?"

"Check-in first." Theo groaned. Charlie's rapid-fire questions did not help his condition any. "And yes, they do, but you have to find a nurse or an assistant to ask for it and I'd probably need it spiked."

"Spiked?"

"Blood." Theo said, tersely. He'd rather have the potion spiked with the blood of one of his mates, but their current conditions have nixed that idea. He hoped that Quinn or Kyle was nearby, as healers, they would be raised on a strict diet and exercise regimen of sorts and their blood would be undoubtedly pure. Wearily, he extended a hand to Charlie, prompting the necessary transfer of information.
"Oh." Charlie fell silent, remembering a discussion from before on the necessity of blood and the properties it held in mated circles. Theo's condition would be helped, if he had a little of Harry's blood—well, a little more—Charlie amended, Theo had taken a mouthful or so, earlier, but that was mostly for the sake of calming Harry than for his own good. The redhead stifled a sigh. Why did he always find himself saddled with the stubborn ones? "Can you wait until then?"

"Not like I have a choice." Theo growled.

Charlie rolled his eyes, grateful that the shorter man couldn't see him. He had experience dealing with younger siblings who pretended they were perfectly fine when they were not as well as a decent history of dragons who were the poorest of patients when it came to magical creatures. Well, unless they were horribly sick and then they were downright nasty. He found himself wondering if the same was true for Dragels. Theo was certainly lining himself up for the comparison "Is there anything I can do to help?" He tried to push the patience into his voice that otherwise was not there.

Theo blinked a few times and then rolled his head to the side before giving a sigh. "Sorry. No. I will be fine. We need to stop by the desk and have these punched." He produced the green appointment cards gifted to them the day before.

"Then stand in line?" Charlie huffed. "You look awful."

"Thank you, Charlie." Theo said, dryly. A flicker of his usual humor showed through. "This way." He led them out from the transportation rooms and followed some of the others towards the lobby, taking a place in line to the registration desk.

Mimei was not in charge this morning. Rather, it was a very disgruntled Madam Olivia. Her hawk-like-eyes roved over Harry's sleeping form, a calculating look in their darkened depths. She glowered at the mismatched trio and punched in the proffered cards. "Your appointment has been shifted down two hours."

"Two hours?" Charlie's eyebrows danced upwards. "What happened?"

Theo elbowed him. "Two hours is fine."

"You're now too early." The Matron said, primly.

"Being early is never a crime." Theo returned. He took the cards back and tucked them into a safe pocket. "Thank you."

The sour look on the Matron's face remained as she waved a hand towards the glass door. "A Gheyo will appear to escort you to the proper waiting space." She parroted, before she turned away. "Next?"

Charlie moved silently behind Theo, chancing a glance at Harry's relaxed face. At least one of them was resting and peacefully too, if the lack of distinct worry wrinkles on Harry's face was anything to go by. Charlie figured that the food and their, ah, other activities, had successfully tired their Sub for the time being. He didn't mind though. He had energy to spare and he certainly had no objections to carrying Harry's slight form to their next destination.

The door slid open and Mimei stepped out, preening her half-claws as she approached. A flicker of surprise showed in her pointed features before she turned to look over her shoulder. The next approaching Gheyo was the pink-eyed, dark-haired youth from yesterday.

Wikhn. Theo recalled, belatedly. He leaned to the side, searching for the familiar face of the young
woman who had escorted them previously. The strong lady warrior with the very obvious scar. Dahlia. He could not see her anywhere. He watched as Meimei spoke politely to a group breaking out from the line. They followed her back through the door as Wikhn arrived.

His pink-eyed glare—more of a rather dark pink—was very out of place on the scowling face, but his eyes found what they sought when they landed immediately on Theo and company. "Oh." He grunted. "It's you three." He gave a slight jerk of his head for them to follow.

Charlie exchanged a glance with Theo. "Er, excuse me, but Dahlia-

"isn't here today." Wikhn said, brusquely. "So please remember that I have a shorter temper than most. If you would be so kind?" He stood back and gestured toward the door as it slid open. A moment later, he filed in after them and quickened his step until he led the trio.

"Is Dahlia alright?" Theo inquired, politely. He adjusted his gait to compensate for the shorter Gheyo's quick steps.

Wikhn's head snapped around to study the young Alpha for a moment and then he inclined his head. "You may recall that Matron Olivia had words with us last night, yes?"

"I'd say that was more than words." Charlie frowned. "Is she always like that?"

"I have yet to know a time when she was not." Wikhn said, smoothly. He tapped in a code at the end of the hallway and it opening up into the large waiting room where they'd been ushered the day before.

Today now, the lines were long and there was a pleasant hum of chatter in the air, and other Gheyos walking about in full indoor drageel form. Patients chattered with each other and there were various nurses and assistants flitting out from the examination rooms to carry news or request new information.

In the midday feel, the white room was brighter and more cheerful than it had ever seemed the day before. It also appeared to be much larger than Charlie could recall.

Wikhn led them to a quieter spot in the room along the far side wall and gestured towards a pair of armless sofas. "Two-hour wait?" He prompted.

Theo nodded and then grimaced as if the movement cost him more than he wanted to share.

Charlie immediately took the left side of the sofa and eased Harry onto the expanse to his right. Theo took the right side, allowing Harry's feet to press against his thigh as Harry curled up, his head in Charlie's lap. A somewhat contented sigh slipped past the brunette's lips. Charlie managed a smile at that. He hoped Harry was having good dreams, if nothing else.

Magenta eyes tracked the expression and then the change in features. "Headache?" He prompted, taking a seat on the ground, cross-legged, his back to them.

"Something like that." Theo frowned. He contemplated whether he could handle tilting his head back or not. Since he'd entered the clinic it was as if all fragile strands of his control had snapped. He simply felt too strung out. "Nothing to worry about."

"Of course." Wikhn shot back, calmly. "Potion or blood?"

Charlie blinked. "Blood?"
"I can procure a potion from Healer Naber's stocks, but if you are agreeable to blood, I would be happy to assist."

Theo stared at the Gheyo's back in pure disbelief. "Pardon?" He managed, faintly.

Wikhn's head swiveled around to look at them over his shoulder. His sword had been unhooked from his waist and laid carefully across his knees, precisely balanced. His movements did not upset it. "I am from the Military circle headed and honed by her ladyship the honored Paielda, Lady Pai requires all of us to be on a very strict schedule and diet not so dissimilar to that of a standard healer." He inclined his head. "She rules with a heavy hand and a full heart. My blood is clean and checked by her ladyship and Quinn, on a regular basis. I would offer it freely in Dahlia's stead."

"For Dahlia's sake?" Charlie looked from Wikhn to Theo. He didn't follow that at all.

"Dahlia is my Ace," Wikhn said, simply. "My superior," he added, at the look of confusion on Charlie's face. "And if she were here, she would offer her own without a second thought. Her bloodlines are stronger than mine, but that is due to her parentage. I am covering all of her patients in addition to my own, today. She has always been generous to them."

"Lady Pai or Matron Olivia?" Theo shifted to lean forward. This he had to know. To simply offer blood to a stranger—especially being of the Gheyo class—was very unusual. Then again, his conversations with Dahlia had been rather unusual in their own way. He wanted to know who would be disturbed by this exchange.

"Both." Wikhn smiled, thinly, showing gleaming, delicate fangs. "Though perhaps, her ladyship would allow me an explanation first and your headache is so loud, if regulations did not necessitate my close proximity to you, I would be standing over there." Wikhn pointed to the farthest corner of the room. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Perhaps I should simply find the potion, yes? I did not mean to make you uncomfortable with my offer."


A look of concern flickered over Wikhn's face and he exchanged it with Charlie before he slung his sword over his back and let it hang there. He then unbuttoned one shirt cuff and rolled up the sleeve to bare his pale wrist. "I will cast a few wards, if you will."

"Of course." Theo mumbled.

Charlie frowned.

Wikhn gave a faint nod. A shimmer of magic moved between them, a possible ward to contain the scent and provide a semblance of privacy for the act. The young Gheyo then, he drew a dagger from the folds of his tunic and made a quick slash over the appropriate area. "No fangs." He warned, but held out his bleeding wrist. "I don't like them and I react badly. You shouldn't need too much though and I bleed easily enough."

Theo's golden eyes burned black as he caught the sight and scent of blood.

Charlie immediately whisked Harry's feet off of the Alpha's lap as Theo all but fell on Wikhn's wrist, greedily sucking away. He shared another worried frown with Wikhn who only shook his head, as if to say 'not now'.

It was several minutes before Theo finally eased away, relief coloring his features and a hint of pink returning.
Wikhn merely touched the knife blade to the cut and whispered the words to heal the wound. He unrolled the sleeve and rebuttoned the cuff, his magenta eyes tracking Theo's careful, jerky movements. "Something is wrong with you," he said, bluntly.

Theo smiled, wanly. "How good of you to notice."

They sat comfortably and mostly silent for the greater half of the two-hour waiting period. They were twenty minutes away in the queue, Harry having roused himself in the past five minutes. He sat up with a cute, sleepy yawn, cuddling close to Charlie for the warmth that his Beta fairly radiated.

There was less stress in his pale features and he seemed content to remain where he was, with no fuss at all. In fact, he poked Theo's thigh with one foot, when the distracted Alpha seemed too preoccupied to pay attention to him.

"Thee-oh…?" Harry wrinkled his nose, taking a few experimental sniffs. His brow furrowed, but he mentally pushed the puzzle away.

Theo sidled closer at that and they comfortably squashed Harry between them. The green-eyed brunet made no comment to that, but he did offer a sleepy smile for Theo's bright golden gaze. "Wuinn?" Harry slurred, his head lolling back to rest on Charlie's available shoulder, eyes already half-lidded. He was caught halfway between the realms of dreams and wakefulness.

"Quinn?" Theo repeated, translating. "Twenty minutes according to the cards." He took Harry's hand in his and squeezed lightly.

Harry smiled, the expression now bittersweet as the rest of his thoughts and wits caught up to him. "Think he'll fix me?"

"Can't fix what's not broken." Charlie said, firmly. He pressed a kiss to the top of Harry's head. "We are not going to go through this unless you are awake." He poked Harry's side. "You remind me of a dragon's mood swings during mating season."

Harry winked open one eye to stare up at him. His brow furrowed helpfully and then he managed to form a sentence. "Where are you going to work?"

"What?" Charlie blinked.

Theo gave a snort from his side of the duo. "I have no objections to your keeping your present employment," he drawled. "You are more than welcome to do as you like."

"Er, thanks." Charlie bit his lip. "I think."

Harry kicked Theo as best as he could from his curled up position.

Theo merely squeezed his hand in reply.

"Kyle?" Harry perked up as the harried assistant hurtled by. "Kyle!"

The forest-green haired head whipped around so fast that Harry flinched backwards. A moment later, a smile broke out on the young man's face and Kyle snapped off a quick salute. "Just a sec," he beamed. "And a moment to you to, Naber's!" He shouted over one shoulder.
There was an answering grumble from somewhere, followed immediately by several growls from all the Gheyo's present and Wikhn glared at him.

"Sorry, sorry!" Kyle held up his hands in a peace offering. "But seriously, I am not his personal servant!"

Wikhn snorted.

"I'm serious!" Kyle retorted. "I've been running about all morning to his every whim and Airelle knows he's not a tenth the healer that his mother thinks he is." He trotted over to the trio and skirted around Wikhn's pale, seated form. "Harry, right? Hey there, how you feeling today? Get some good sleep? You look pretty comfortable." His tone was light and friendly, almost coaxing.

Harry managed a grin at that. It was hard not to when Kyle was smiling so brightly. "Kinda." He shrugged. He did not want to talk about himself right now. "What's going on? Who's Nabers?"

"Huh?" Kyle blinked. "Oh, that." He wrinkled his nose. "Naber's is a conceited, self-centered, arrogant-" Wikhn's hand flashed out and a knife blade gleamed faintly within. "Right, right." Kyle huffed. "Nabers is a jerk." He said, bluntly. His glower flickered to Wikhn. "I'm allowed to say that much, aren't I?"

Wikhn merely tucked the knife back into the shadowy folds of his overtunic.

"Quinn's been out for the morning and even though he's due, I don't know that Mama would let him come. He was in quite a bad way last night. I think, if it wasn't so bad, Bharin would probably wallop some sense into him." Kyle snickered. "Then again, Quinn's always been good at talking his way out of that sort of thing."

"Talking?" Theo said, mildly.

Kyle snickered again. "Trust me. He can say more without speaking than some people could with a whole dictionary." He stretched his arms forward and rotated one shoulder. "Ah, that's better." He sighed. "I usually work exclusively with him, mostly for the, you know," he gestured to his head. "But when he's not around, I have to work with some of the others and well." He shrugged.

"And some of them must have bred with trolls as it sickens me to think why they have yet to perish from their own stupidity!" Wikhn growled.

Kyle's soft brown eyes grew wide. He blinked once, twice and then grinned. "Nice one, Wik. I didn't think you had it in you."

The magenta eyes darkened a few shades and one pale, sharp-nailed claw twitched toward the sheathed sword.

"Sheesh. Sorry!" Kyle's hands flew up again in the motion of surrender. "It was a compliment, I didn't mean anything by it. I am neutral." He scowled. "You're on a short leash." His brow furrowed. "And generally, you're not. Do you need to grab something?"

"What?"

"Do. You. Need. Something?" Kyle spelled it out with deliberate seriousness, the mirth leaving his face. "I am serious. Right now. Answer me."

"I am-"
The brown eyes narrowed. "How long have you been sitting here?"

"I'm fine."

"That is not what I asked. Go find something to snack on and take ten. I'll sit here for you."

"I am not going to-"

"If you give me some kind of junk about duty and honor and loyalty, I will wipe the floor with you!" Kyle snapped. He was on his feet, glowering down at the pale young man. "Your eyes were a perfect, pink shade this morning. You're a few winks away from blood red. Go!"

"M'fine." Wikhn protested, rebelliously, one last time, even as he shifted to his feet and slouched his shoulders forward.

A spark of white-golden energy leapt to Kyle's fingertips. He spun it into a little ball. "Yes, yes, and I couldn't care less how long Nabers waits for me, because I am only there to be his personal towel holder." Kyle rolled his eyes. "Go, now!"

The dark Gheyo skittered off without another comment.

Charlie gave a low whistle of admiration. "Could you really best him?"

Kyle grinned. "Most likely. He's sprained a few things in training and I happen to know which 'things' he sprained." The grin upped a few watts. "Fighting dirty probably wouldn't do me any favors though. Wik's a vicious viper when he's a mind to, injured just makes him a lot worse."

"Is he always like that?"

"Mm? Wik? Heavens, no. He's mild as a peach. Downright dirty in a cage fight, but that's his type. He's Fae you know, dark fae, the battle bloodlust and all that. Makes him temperamental every now and again." Kyle rolled his head in a neat circle, a few audible pops sounding from the movement. "He's got some elemental control, but I've never seen him use it. Dahlia usually keeps him in line though, you've nothing to worry about. He looks up to her. Makes sense as she's his Ace, I s'pose." Kyle frowned. "You don't have anything against Fae, do you? Because I rather like Wik." This was said rather bluntly, and again the humor vanished from the generally easy-going medic.

"It's fine." Charlie said hurriedly. "I don't think either of us have a problem wi-with."

"Fae are—not an issue." Theo managed to get out. He had found himself sitting leaned sideways, his head lolling on Charlie's available shoulder. His eyes fluttered open and shut.

"Good. Because I'd hate to ruin a potential friendship over something as stupidly mindless as prejudice." Kyle fixed both of them with a look. "I ought to mention that my father was Fae, that might explain my, ah, point of interest." He sighed. "Anyhow, Wik's good. Nothing to worry about. As I said, with Dahlia around, she's a good, calming influence to most of us here. A general voice of reason, almost like an angel."

"Right." Charlie hesitated. His blue eyed gaze flickered towards the half-snoozing Theo and he tried to catch the medic's eye.

Kyle gave a wry smile and winked. "He'll be fine." He mouthed, as not to upset the young Alpha. The little white-gold ball of energy leapt from his hands and circled around Theo's bent head, before silently melting into the resting figure.
"Make way, make way! Emergency!" Frantic shouts and yells threw the entire waiting room into a frenzied panic. "Call for all open healers, call for all open healers! On floor, on site, now!"

The scent of blood, thick and heavy, permeated the air as running footsteps announced the ones coming through. Every Gheyo present immediately drew their weapons and backed all patients to the walls, calling forth the Pareyas from examining rooms or other waiting areas in the clinic, to protect their respective circles.

The interruption turned out to be an exhausted young man, with thick, honey-gold hair and vivid brown eyes, covered liberally from the front to his thighs in rich, red blood. He stumbled into the newly cleared waiting room and leaned forward, bracing on his knees to catch his breath. "It's a girl! Eight years!" He screamed out, "hurry! Something went wrong, I don't know what, she's exploded and it's too much—she's too young and" he doubled over with a gasp of agony.

"Stay!" Kyle hissed, throwing a dark, warning glare at Harry and company before he bolted forward to where nurses and assistants were carefully peeking out of the examination room doorways. "Healers? Is there an open healer?" Kyle called. He wondered why there hadn't been any answers to the summons given yet, but He jogged to the center of the room and quickly whisked the pained young man aside. "Injuries your own?"

"Nay. Just a…cramp." The blond winced.

"Liar." Kyle murmured. Expert fingers poked and prodded in all the right places, taking note of the expression on the young man's face. "Cracked ribs?" He spun another miniature ball of white and gold energy on his fingertips.

"Three, possibly." He winced again. "Please, help her. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine for now. I've had worse. Someone must help her. I didn't know—this is the closest—"

"Mmhm. Quiet." Kyle's brown eyes flared with a hint of green a spark of energy leapt from him to the young man. He ran a finger down the blood-stained shirt and it parted beneath his spell. It hung in the way still and the Medic immediately torched it. "Name?" He inquired. "My name is Medic Kyle and I'm going to help you, alright? Everything will be fine. Now tell me, where is this little one? I can smell the blood and it worries me."

"Ariki." He breathed a sigh of relief as the healing magic sank beneath his skin with a soothing coolness. He winced as he felt it knitting together bone, muscle and more. "That's better. Thank you. She should be right here. Name's Meg."

"Meg? Alright, that's good. Very good. Now tell me, what's happened with Meg? Was there an accident? Are there more involved?" Kyle broke the stare to throw another garbled shout over his shoulder, a mouthful of pure dragel-speak. There were a few answering angry chatters to which, he glowered. "Not you idiots!" he snapped at the patients. "Get them out of here! Take them to the other waiting rooms!" Kyle barked. "Clear this floor, now!"

The Gheyos hurried to comply.

Ariki shuddered. "She's fluxing." He explained, leaning gingerly against the cold, white wall, with Kyle's help. "Something at the flight ranges, I don't know what happened. She crashed into me and I had to—to do something—"

A painful, agonized screech ripped through the building.
They brought Meg into the waiting room.

Meg turned out to be a young, eight-year-old girl, whose body twisted and writhed as her true Dragel form struggled to contain and restrain itself.

It was a grotesque, bloodied form of half-human girl and too-fragile, oversized dragon wings, tail and a claw. It took four attendants to levitate her through the hallway and into the waiting room, where she continued to fight against the magic binding her and trying to help her.

Kyle paled significantly as he took in the color of her face and the state of her transformation. He immediately sent off one of the freed attendants to find a child healer and someone with transformation experience. They'd be sorely needed.

The forest green hair stuck up every which way as Kyle raked his hands through it, before summoning a pair of fresh gloves from a nearby room. He donned them at once and began to cast a series of wards, allowing the attendants to help him.

"Meg? Meg, can you hear me? My name is Medic Kyle and I'm here to help." Kyle soothed.
"Please don't fight the transformation, alright? Everything will be fine. Don't fight the transformation. Let it out, we have plenty of room for it, alright? Meg?"

Her frightened whimpers and cries tugged at the heartstrings of those still being escorted out.

Charlie remained perfectly still, one broad arm having already moved up to grip Theo tightly around the shoulders. The young Alpha woke with eerie stillness, his golden eyes sweeping over the nearly emptied room, before narrowing and darkening.

"What's happening?" Harry shifted, uncomfortably in his spot sandwiched between the two of them. Charlie had immediately shifted him from the 'outside' to the 'inside' the moment Kyle had left.

"Botched transformation." Theo said, at last.

"Is that—possible?" Charlie frowned. "I thought you said nothing happened until the inheritance."

"N-no, I didn't say that." Theo shook his head. "I said that most of the time, nothing happens until the inheritance. Some children manifest their dragel attributes at a far younger age than expected. Some children are born as dragons and may not change until years later." He shrugged. "It is complicated. Do not ask me to explain what cannot possibly be realistically explained."

Harry blinked. "So she'll be fine?"

Theo frowned. One had come up to cover his mouth and nose, before he nudged Charlie. "Scent ward. Put up something to stop the-" he grimaced.

"Theo!" Charlie frowned at him.

"Hurry!"

The redhead retrieved his wand and quickly waved it about in the necessary motions to throw up a little bubble to prevent the smell of blood and panic from filtering through to their little corner.

"Theodore!"

"Not now." Theo growled. "She'll be fine, Harry."
Emerald eyes suddenly fixed on him. "Don't lie, Theo." Harry said, softly. "That's a lot of blood."

The golden gaze flickered away. "It is. But she's in the middle of a clinic that should be more than equipped for an emergency like this and I'm sure there's a child healer on hand. She should be fine."

"Should be." Harry repeated.

"Harry?" Charlie tugged him into an awkward one-armed hug. "Don't think about it right now, okay?" He looked over the brunet's head to see the frantic attendants scurrying about at Kyle's orders. He wondered, briefly, why there weren't any other healers coming to his aid.

The dragon tamer continued to watch as the girl's body spasmed and fluxed as it tried to shift from one incomplete form to another. The final blow came with a horrible screech and a terrible shudder, leaving a tiny, scaled human form lying limp upon the ground, with great, thrashing wings filling up nearly the entire room.

Kyle continued to shout out orders left and right, while others scurried to listen.

"Where are the others?" Harry's hands fisted in his lap. He let Charlie hold him for the moment and tried not to look. He couldn't help, even though he wanted. "Why isn't anyone else coming?"

"Don't know." Charlie muttered. A restless feeling curled through him as he watched the still fighting creature, now more massive dragon than little girl. Something twisted in his stomach as he watched two of the attendants slinking away.

"Charlie." Theo's voice was low and controlled. "Stop watching it."

"It?" Harry nearly exploded. "It's a girl! A little girl!" He lurched forward, even as Charlie hurriedly released his grip on Theo to lock him into a hug. "Charlie, lemme go!"

"No." Charlie tightened his grip. "No," he repeated, calmer. "Bad timing, Harry. I don't think you can help right now. You're not in any state to help either, are you?"

"I-!"

"Are you?" Charlie pinned him with a look. "You know how your magic is right now and I probably know more about healing than you would. I'm sitting here. We'd only be in the way if we interfered."

"There isn't going to be any interfering." Theo ground out. He drew his knees up to his chest in an uncharacteristically childlike way. "Just stay. That's what Kyle said." He leaned forward to rest his forehead on his knees.

"We can't just sit here!" Harry protested. He gave an experimental wiggle.

Charlie frowned. "Harry."

"There has to be something!" Harry nibbled on his lip. "Can't you do something? Theo?"

"NmmMmm." There was an unintelligible mumble from Theo's hunched form.

"Theo?" Harry's worry shifted gears. "Theo, what's wrong?"

Charlie resisted the urge to roll his eyes and smack both of his mates. It was difficult. He dearly wanted to. "Theo is being twice as stubborn as you." He informed his armful. "As such, I cannot
help him right now and-

Harry stopped wriggling. He froze as the weight of Charlie's words registered. "Charlie. Is he okay?"

"M'fine." Theo whispered.

But Harry didn't believe him at all. Theo looked anything but fine.
RECAP: Harry's circle has now reached the clinic, Theo still has a horrible headache and and Quinn has wokened from his healing sleep to find Bharin waiting for him. Quinn mother was so worried, she sent for his Sire and Father, but before Quinn can meet them, he is 'ported away by Kyle's frantic call. Kyle is at the clinic where a young girl, Meg, has been brought in, suffering from an early transformation and something more sinister at play. Theo, Charlie and Harry are on the sidelines as the emergency begins to play out and Wikhn returns to see what's been happening.

NEVARAH : HEALTH CLINIC

"He is not fine." Charlie shot back, exasperated. He turned his look from Harry to Theo. "You are not fine! You're a terrible liar." The redhead gave a snort when Theo gave a half-wave of dismissal with one pale hand. "But you had better hope you this is something passing when our appointment comes." He frowned. "Or else, I will have something to say about it." He reached over to feather a hand over Theo's warm forehead. "Speaking of which, you're right Harry, there should be more people here. This waiting is-

"Hunting season." Wikhn's droll voice made all of them jump. The now pale-pink-eyed Gheyo blinked in surprise. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you." He sighed in a way that meant the exact opposite. "We're short-handed to begin with, but Hunting Season makes it worse." He frowned, expert gaze taking in the situation. His entire posture shifted into something slightly more sinister. "This isn't safe. What are you lot still doing here without—oh right. Kyle Kalzik, I will wring your neck. Did he leave you here? I knew I shouldn't have left. That idiot is—attendants? They're leaving him out there with, did they all—drat that Nabers." He growled. "I ought to carve his heart out." The dark head whipped around. "Mimei! Get your lazy blades over here!" There was authority crackling through his voice and the temperature around them dropped several degrees. Charlie took note of Theo's hands shifting to cover his ears. He frowned and looked at Harry who was staring at Wikhn in something like shock.

Harry stared, even as he felt goosebumps prickle and dance up and down his arms. He could still feel Charlie's warmth beside him, but suddenly, everything was cold. Even though Wikhn's eyes were the palest of pink hues, he couldn't help feeling that this serious, dark aura around the young Gheyo was very, very bad.

Wikhn didn't draw his sword, but his sword hand rested meaningfully on the hilt.

Harry didn't need his imagination to know what it looked like, he remembered the broad, dark blade from the day before. He remembered Dahlia's offhanded comment. She'd said it almost carelessly, but he'd seen the faint flicker in Wikhn's half-red eyes. That same eerie calmness now came to the forefront and it made Harry's insides cringe, because somehow, it made Wikhn seem much older and much wiser, even though he'd barely seemed Charlie's height or possibly even Charlie's age.

The pale pink eyes flickered towards Harry and then flickered away almost as quickly as they'd
strayed. He turned, frowning, towards where he'd called over his shoulder. A nervous hum of energy ran over him.

The blonde, Mimei, appeared in short order, chewing on something that resembled a drumstick. She twirled the bone in her hand before she snapped it between her fingers and promptly began to suck on them. "I think I've been insulted." She drawled. "I'm not any more lazy than your worthless, pale hide and—what's the matter-oh."

And before Harry's eyes, the prissy blonde straightened and held her head high. She turned from princess to princess warrior in a matter of seconds, the moment that her eyes landed on Wikhn. She turned and spat the bones into a waste receptacle, then reached into her blouse and produced a tube of bright pink lipstick. In the following seconds, she proceeded to generously apply to her lips. "Talk to me. Where's everyone else? What's going on?"

Wikhn took a deep breath and then blew it out. "Can't scent any of the useful ones. Was this a full day or a half?"

"A half?" Mimei guessed. "I don't know. I never keep track of it. Dahlia does. I just try to keep from strangling people."

"We all do." Wikhn rolled his eyes. "Dahlia isn't here, darling." He snapped. "So if there's anything you would care to contribute, I'd appreciate it."

"Then you should've done it." The blonde snarked. She reached behind her to pull out a pair of sais. "I take it we're helping?"

"We're certainly not spectators." Wikhn retorted. "Does Kyle look even remotely competent to handling that? He's a Medic, not a healer and children aren't his specialty, not to mention that this one's really young. I can scent it. Kyle's versed in bone-mending and midwifery!"

"Three cheers and big whoop." Mimei rolled her shoulders back with practiced ease. Her bright pink lips pursed into a practiced pout. "Very well, where's Quinn? I thought he'd be here today. Was rather hoping for it, since Dahlia's out."

"You and me both." Wikhn frowned. "Let's go."

"Got a plan?"

"Of course not, idiot."

"I refuse to dignify that with an answer." Mimei groused.

"You three, stay." Wikhn said, ominously. He paused especially to glare at them, before stalking off towards the screeching and thrashing spectacle. "Throw up a few wards, it might be best."

Charlie gave a brisk nod.

"Good boys." Mimei cooed. She wiggled her hand in a little wave and then her eyes darkened. She tracked Wikhn's moves with diligence that betrayed her ease in doing so. "Wik? Talk to me, hun."

"Cue left." The dark elf's pink eyes narrowed to a corner of the room. He'd been doing the mental calculations and probabilities in his head. He'd found something of a solution. "Wings are in the way. We need to stop that. Someone could be thrown by them. Pin them down. I'll take one side, you take the other."
"Stab or pin?" Mimei twirled the shiny weapons in her hand. "She's jerking around a lot. It'll be hard to get a good hold."

"Pin." Wikhn reached for his sword. "And take care with it. She can't be much older than ten."

Mimei grunted in answer.

They left as a pair and moved as a single entity.

It happened rather quickly, though to those watching, it was something of slow-motion.

Wikhn's prediction came through with devastating accuracy.

There was a shadowed blur from one of Meg's flailing wings and suddenly Kyle's crouched form was hooked by one massive appendage and hurled backwards. He hit a wall with a sickening crunch and lay motionless on the floor.

Harry felt his breath catch in his throat. Kyle...!

Charlie's arms around his shoulders now felt like a burning vise. Without a second thought, Harry began to fight that warm grip to get free. His mind replayed the past few seconds and he could swear that the sound of Kyle slamming into the wall, echoed in his head.

Harry's frantic protests roused the disoriented Theo, who wearily raised his head, searching for the source of his Submissive's panic, before his golden-eyes grew pitch black. Raw power crackled over him as the golden eyes turned dark and ablaze with power that refused to be restrained. His eyes watered for a moment and he clung desperately to his frayed strands of control. He could not afford to lose it now. Not now...

Wikhn and Mimei surged forward as the last attendant rushed to Kyle's side.

"Kyle!" Someone yelled.

The giant flailing girl-dragon rolled over and bellowed out a screaming roar of weak flame. It scorched the ceiling and sent a shower of debris pelting downwards.

A brilliant burst of teal-colored magic sprang to life, providing a strong shield. The debris and ebbing flame were easily repelled by the powerful energy dome. Quinn's figure materialized beside the motionless Kyle, standing tall, hands at his side. The mute healer held the shield with an easy wave of his hand, while he took a look around. The present state of the emergency was rapidly deteriorating and Quinn's actions were quick and fluid. He spun lighted cords between his hands and threw them out as several binding ropes of pure, blue-green light.

They danced across the air and clear over to the other side of the waiting room, falling downwards with a weight that didn't seem natural to them. The moment they touched the frantic dragel Halfling, they pinned her to the ground, with little resistance.

"Quinn?" Kyle rasped from the floor. He tried to move and winced.

The blond perked a brow and extended a hand.

Kyle pressed his lips together to hide a hiss of pain.

Quinn frowned, a flicker of emotion passing through his teal-hued eyes.
"Yeah, yeah. I'd hardly call it lucky." The Medic grumped. A moment later, he gingerly picked himself up off the floor, accepting Quinn's hand and the quick-set healing spark of magic that came with it. "Ow. Ow, ow. That hurt." He gave a funny little, jerky wriggle and there were a few loud snaps heard, as if his body was cranking into its usual position.

Quinn perked a brow.

"Yeah, that's better. Thanks." Kyle gestured towards the still thrashing dragon. "How long will those ropes hold? I'm worried she'll hurt herself somehow. I don't know where everyone went and Nabers—well, do something?" He held up his hands, helplessly. "She's too young for this to happen and—" he hesitated.

Quinn poked his stomach.

"Ow, hey!" Kyle glowered at him. "And, I was going to say that I think there's something off with her. You take a look." The glower immediately changed to a look of exasperation. "No, Quinn, I just meant that—well, maybe. I don't know. It feels familiar, but it shouldn't, which is kinda why I called you. No. Ha ha. No. I'd never call you just for flying into a wall. You've thrown me into enough of them that I hardly even feel it these days."

Quinn affected something that could've been a pout and sniffed, imperiously.

Kyle punched him in the shoulder.

Quinn dodged, the pout morphing into a faint smirk. The energy shield dome flickered and vanished.

"Wikhn? Mimei!" Kyle called out. "Quinn's here, alright? I'm fine. He's fine. Now, listen up so we can—Quinn, wait, what are you doing—don't!"

A pained look flickered on Quinn's face. His teal eyes were locked onto something on Meg's suffering figure and he reached into his tunic to draw out the small, black, stone cross pendant. He touched it to his throat even as Kyle leapt forward to snatch it from his hand.

"Quinn, no! You used that already yesterday! You can't use it so close together. It's not good for your throat and Mama will ne-!"

Quinn's lips merely quirked into a half-smile. "Oroto Carmena." A disembodied voice parroted the necessary vocals for the spell to come to life. Quinn hacked out a sputtering cough as the magic twined itself through him. Thick bands of black stretched out from the pendant and sank into the pale, scarred flesh of his neck, hidden by the high-collared tunic he usually wore. It twisted around to depict the elegant scrolls of ivy and Celtic knots, before it flared then faded. Quinn's teal eyes flashed. "My choice, Kyle." He said, softly. "Not yours. I'm the one that has to live with it and I'm the one that would have to live with this." He gestured towards Meg. The ropes were straining as if they were about to break. His narrowed gaze flickered towards the current situation. "Wik, Mimei?" He called out, hesitantly.

"Quinn!" Wikhn appeared at the healer's side, his sword drawn and poised.

"Your call, Wik!" Mimei spoke from somewhere out of sight.

"Pin her wings down. Was that what you were trying to do? If so, then do it! Hurry. I can't bind her fully until the wings are out of the way. It could permanently affect her ability to fly later in life. Mimei!" Quinn barked. He lurched forward, bright green fire crackling at his finger tips. "You take one wing, Wikhn will take the other. Kyle, I need you to brace yourself and use that Anchoring
spell we did that time in where—you-know-when."

"That one?" Kyle squeaked. A flush of red crept up his face. "Quinn!"

"No time!" The blond snapped. He was terrifying and beautiful in the imperious image he
presented. Righteous indignation coursed through his elegant features and the burning, green glow
of healing magic swirled readily around him. "If she keeps this up, she'll hurt herself permanently
—and I, for one, refuse to live with that on my conscience!"

Charlie felt his grip on Harry loosening as something new captured the younger man's attention.
The redhead barely spared a glance to the side as he saw Harry gravitating towards Theo. That was
good. He released him, without a second thought, his mind fixed solely on the little dragon child.
Harry could help Theo, that was good—and maybe he could help this dragon.

Instinctively, Harry leaned towards Theo's compact figure. He could feel the raw power rolling off
of him in unchecked waves. It worried him, but the powerful aura was seductive and teasing. Harry
couldn't help wanting to move closer and help, somehow, anyhow, however that he could.

"Theo?" His own issues aside, Harry was now officially worried. He struggled to keep his mind
free and uncluttered, as Hermione had often chided him. He could hear her voice echoing in his
head, reminding him that a wizard with a clear mind always stood a better chance than one who
was too busy panicking to think straight. "Theo? Hey, Theodore, it's me." Harry reached out and
gently took one of Theo's hands in his.

It was pale and cold.

Harry cradled it to his chest for a moment, then pushed aside his robes and undid the clasps along
the collar of his shirt. He tucked Theo's cold hand into the newly revealed warmth. "Theo, it's
Harry. Everything will be fine, alright?"

Theo trembled. His lips moved silently, but Harry couldn't make out any of the words. He leaned
closer, only for Theo to lean away. The golden eyes squeezed shut.

Tentatively, Harry squeezed the captive hand and then rubbed the arm connected to it. There were
phantom pains ghosting through him and uneasy feelings pouring in by the bucketful every second,
but Harry stubbornly forced them away, willing himself to concentrate and focus.

Focus on Theo.

Tendrils of despair registered that perhaps, he was cursed in some way. Cursed in that everyone he
really did care about, came to some twisted, ridiculous end.

A whimper left Theo's lips and Harry couldn't help himself. He yanked Theo close to him and drew
up his robes like something of a blanket. He cuddled Theo close to him, and buried his face in the
soft, brunet hair.

Words he didn't know tangled in his mind and Harry felt his lips moving, even though the magic
that sprang to life in his veins was too foreign to comprehend.

Sledeare nea mea…

Emerald eyes burned bright and a strong ripple of magic washed through the entire the clinic.
Quinn reveled in the feel of pure magic that suddenly rippled over him. The energy was comforting and almost familiar, but he did not have the time to dwell on it. Instead, he tucked away the welcome memory for later perusal and silently sent up a prayer of thanks for the steadiness it afforded him.

He smirked.

Kyle roused beside him. He took one look at Quinn's face and stifled a groan.

"Something the matter?" Quinn asked, sweetly.

"You louse." Kyle grumbled in return. He rolled up the sleeves of his tunic and passed Quinn a pair of gloves. "Hurry it up, would you?"

And Quinn did.

It was beautiful.

Quinn's magic.

Harry stared.

He'd managed to shift from horrified, to terrified to downright awed. Quinn was a master healer and wielder of the healing arts. He hardly seemed to breath as he threw out waves of pure, shimmering, wholesome magic. His voice, even though called forth by that damaging spell, was beautiful, an ever changing melody as he called out his orders to every open ear.

When Quinn began to undo the buttons on his tunic, Harry felt a distinct ache burrow into his chest and nest there. He stared as the pale, scarred skin was revealed when Quinn finally shed his upper layers. The healer called forth his dragel gifts, the pale skin morphing as the shimmering colors came to the surface.

Quinn's colorful wings emerged and unfolded with little ceremony. But the moment they stretched out, they spanned the waiting room, as his body shifted and morphed, growing by a few feet and gaining more muscle to appropriately compensate for the large wingspan.

The moment his shadow settled over the struggling dragon form, a hiccup belched from the fanged snout and then, the body slowed its movements.

"Kyle?" Quinn called, softly.

"Behind and beside you." Kyle murmured. His own wings shot out, but they remained compact until he was clear of Quinn's commanding figure. Then they rose and grew, his own height towering over Quinn's impressive cut.

Harry watched as Kyle's lovely sienna wings stretched and arched themselves, forming a half-circle from the far end of Meg's prone form, opposite of Quinn. Like Quinn, Kyle sported a spectacular amount of scars across his torso and back, a few white-scar stripes visible on the spines of his pale orange wings. They didn't seem to affect him, as Kyle moved just as quickly and fluidly as Quinn.

It was like watching a mirror.

Quinn's magic, green, rich and vibrant.

Kyle's magic, soft, white and golden.
Harry watched in amazement as the duo of Quinn and Kyle took a complicated mess of a situation and calmly handled it as if it were everyday trials. Between the both of them stripped down to their trousers, calling forth their Dragel attributes and working a lovely sheen of magic, he could only find himself entranced.

Harry could honestly say he'd never seen anything like that before. Never.

The spell Quinn had intended, took some preparation.

It required a musical tune, provided by Quinn's expert whistling and Kyle's surprisingly good voice. The visible bands of light, turned into tangible silken cords that fused themselves with the ground, effectively restraining the young girl in her dragonesque form.

Wikhn and Mimei's participation had been a quick movement, though vicious, but necessary. A simple stab of their respective weapons into a particular spot on the huge, leathery wings; a spot marked by Kyle's glowing white energy balls, at Quinn's direction. In a matter of minutes, the thrashing monster fluxed into a frightened young girl with oversized wings splayed across the floor and up to the walls of the waiting room.

The wings shifted and shrunk to a more proportional size and a few audible whimpers came from the crying girl. As if an invisible gate had been lifted, attendants came pouring in, Medics following close behind as several healers inched into the waiting room.

Charlie bristled in his seat as he watched the proceedings. It rubbed over him in the worst way as he watched one of the aloof attendants approach Kyle and speak with a few wild hand gestures. He noticed how all of them avoided Quinn. Quinn, a mute healer, currently speaking with a very complicated and powerful spell—yet, they ignored him still. Charlie felt an unnatural warmth beginning to blossom in his stomach. He bit his lips, hard enough to draw blood. Everything felt like his mind was fogging over. Something was wrong. Wonderful, now that's all of us. He thought, darkly.

"Charlie?" Harry resisted the urge to elbow his tallest mate. He'd felt a wisp of restlessness from the redhead and had been mildly annoyed that it had interrupted his silent observation of Quinn and the others.

Harry vaguely realized that Theo had also stilled in his shaking and now clung to him fiercely. His pale fingers twined in Harry's dark robe and his eyes remained shut. Harry swallowed and rested his chin atop Theo's head. He stroked the pale face, wondering what had arrested Charlie's attention now. The blue eyes had tracked every movement around the dragon-child up until now. Charlie hadn't even seemed to notice the little display of power Harry had inadvertently summoned.

Harry didn't know what magic he had done, but it seemed as if it had eased Theo's suffering and he'd accept that in the wake of doing something strange and unusual—again. That horrible twist in his chest stabbed a little further and Harry scowled, darkly. He wondered if it was a seal that plagued him so.

If it was, then he wanted Quinn to remove that one today. He'd honestly had enough of quite a lot of things. All of the unexplained happenings, the dangers to his health and the mysteries surrounding each of his current mates. Theo was hiding something from him, Harry could sense it—and it wasn't just a headache.

He'd felt it before, though not so strongly after their moment in the park this morning. A feeling of being incomplete, one that had manifested even before Charlie's arrival and had yet to settle. Harry didn't like it at all. He liked Theo. He liked Charlie. He didn't like how confusing everything was
Annoyed, he realized that the present emergency meant that even though Quinn had arrived, things would not be settled for some time. His mind caught up to his musings and Harry nudged his beta again. "Charlie, is something wrong?"

"I sincerely hope not." Charlie managed. His vivid blue eyes returned to the spectacle of Quinn and Kyle, trying to work with the injured Meg.

Harry tracked his stare with no small of amount of surprise of his own. Then he shrugged it off. It was no big deal if Charlie liked watching Quinn too, he reasoned. Quinn was a very nice person—no, dragel—to watch.

Something happened and Harry's attention leapt between Quinn's lovely wings and the angry shouts coming from Kyle's corner. He frowned. When did all the others arrive? He didn't remember seeing that…

Charlie couldn't keep the low growl out of his throat as he watched one of new healers, a taller, slender man, elbowing his way to where Quinn had been working. He fought to resist the urge to move. His magic roiled uncomfortably within.

"Charlie?" Theo's eyelids fluttered open, seeking his beta. The darkening eyes fluxed between black and gold, as he struggled to keep a handle on his own powers, drawing a faint tremor in the ground. Harry hugged him harder, unsure of what else to do.

Theo grimaced as the pounding in his head began again. It had eased for a while, thanks to Wikhn's generous offer, but the following events and current situation had sent him back to the dark place in his head, where everything was reduced to counting the painful throbs resonating throughout his body.

"Theo?" Harry's head snapped between the alpha and his beta. Charlie twitched as if lit on fire. Harry connected the dots a half-second too late. "Charlie? Hey—wait!"

"Wait here." Charlie muttered. He was on his feet and moving forward before either of his mates could react to that.

Charlie strode directly to Quinn's side where he calmly reached over to grab the arguing healer and not-so-gently moved him aside. He dropped to a crouch beside Quinn's kneeling figure and took stock of the situation.

His creature training surged to the forefront as he recognized the familiar curve of the snout. Hebridean Black. He thought, fondly. It was rare to see one of these dragon-kind. The MacFusty clan usually guarded them quite jealously and any tamers outside the family underwent rigorous training and screening processes just to be admitted for an interview.

A happy, satisfied thrill rippled over him as Charlie subconsciously called his own dragel nature to the front. He felt a warm tingle of magic over him, and turned in time to see Quinn's half-wave of one hand. It registered as his clothes being magicked into a neatly folded pile beside him, just as his wings ripped free of his shoulder blades with a satisfying snap. Charlie hissed, softly, but the sparks of pain faded when Kyle looked up and threw a small ball of energy his way. He nodded his thanks.

Kyle gave a snappy salute and returned his attention to healing the collection of gouges and scrapes along the awkwardly stretched reptilian limbs. "Quinn? We're going to have to coax her into one
specific form, this can't be good for her."

Quinn grunted.

Charlie looked from Kyle's forest-green head to Quinn's bobbing blond locks. From the side of Quinn's face, he could see a scowl.

"Towel." The Healer snapped, not looking up, his entire focus on the small, delicate face cradled in his hands. "A bunch of them. Transfigure a pillow. Something soft, but sturdy." He bent over Meg's still form. His fingers twitched, but no spell was cast.

"I'm good with dragons," Charlie heard himself say. "She's a Herbridean Black. They're a little fussy, but not too much trouble. Nothing you won't be able to handle anyway. I can help, if you don't mind." He handed over a handful of towels from the stack someone had placed beside him. He slid his wand from the holster at his waist and cast the spell for the usual sturdy puff pillows they used at the reserve.

Quinn shrugged in answer, but his hands twitched again and he gently took the small head in his hands. He took the pillow from Charlie and eased it beneath the head. "Her head spines are missing, aren't they?"

Charlie leaned closer. He frowned. "Yes. They are."

"Hmm." Quinn shifted. "Sit here." He pointed above the pillow. "You'll have to hold her head."

"Er," Charlie said, eloquently.

"Sit." Quinn pointed, "Stay."

Kyle snickered from somewhere nearby.

Charlie felt himself blush as he sat and found himself virtually helpless as Quinn moved around him and arranged Meg, so that her smooth, scaled head rested in his lap, padded by the pillow. Feelings of awe and embarrassment conflicted within as he felt his curiosity taking over and his dragon training coming forward.

"Hold her head as long as you can, keep her steady any other way you know." Quinn said, distractedly. "This will hurt."

"The spines probably won't show, because she's too young."

"That's not what I'm talking about." Quinn said, stiffly. His eyes were fixed on her chest as if he were seeing something that no one else was.

From the sudden tension and Kyle's quick appearance, Charlie surmised that his guess was true. The Medic looked between patient and Healer, his own features taking on a new shade of pale. "Can you transform her?" Kyle prompted, at last.

"Not a matter of if, but how." Quinn countered. He heaved a sigh. "Where are the other healers?"

"You don't need them." Kyle snapped, brusquely. "Trust yourself. Trust me, anyway. I trust you."

"Kyle."

"Just help her, Quinn. You know out of all of them here that you're best suited for this." He
frowned. "What's the problem?"

"She's fighting me, but somehow, it's not her that's fighting." Quinn bit his lip.

"Quinn…?"

"I know." The blond twitched. "Bharin knows."

"Should I worry?"

"You always worry." Quinn took a deep breath and pushed a wave of warm, pulsing energy into the grey-scaled body beside him. "Come on, Meg, darling." He soothed. "It is alright. Everything will be just fine. You are fine. You are safe. Please, shhh."

Kyle tensed beside him and then, suddenly slumped to the ground beside Charlie. He listed to the side and braced heavily on the redhead, his eyes wide, lips parted. His breath came in short, gasping bolts.

"Er, Kyle?" Charlie twisted to look at him.

"Shh." The Medic closed his eyes. "M'fine."

Charlie did roll his eyes this time. What was with everyone and telling him that they were fine, when they clearly were not?

"I really am." Kyle gave a half-smile. "I'm just grounding that fellow." He gave the faintest of nods towards Quinn. "My gift's something of an anchor. If it is what I think it is, then I'm glad he's finally tapping in. It's about time. It would've been a pain to smack some sense into him. Idiot."

"There's something else in here with her." Quinn said, quietly. The green glow of energy snapped back to him and Kyle lurched forward with a gasp. "Kyle?"

"Warn me next time, you blockhead." The greenette coughed.

Teal eyes gave a spectacular roll. "Of course, whatever you say." He muttered, sarcastically. "This is a bad place to do this."

"Not like you have a choice." Kyle countered. "Suck it up. Deal with it."

"I'd like to see you-" Quinn began.

"Something else how?" Charlie interrupted. He didn't like the gaps in the conversation fluttering around him.

"Something else like, possession, maybe." Quinn's colorful wings fluttered enticingly in the air.

"Maybe?" Kyle scoffed. "Fine, then, you tell me that I'm losing my mind and we can both retire tomorrow."

" Shut up, Kyle." Quinn's lips quirked into a smile. "You were right, alright? I do admit it. You have your uses. Now, the both of you stand back. This really is a bad place to do this, even one of the rooms would be better reinforced."

"I could cast some wards, but I can't say how they'll hold."
"Don't." Quinn murmured. "I just borrowed half of yours to reach into it, I don't want it to latch onto your signature and cause more trouble."

"Point taken." Kyle allowed. "Ready?"

"Further back." Quinn said, smoothly. "I think you've met with enough walls for today."

Kyle grinned. "How charming of you. I appreciate the concern." Kyle's voice came from beside Quinn. His quick, gloved hands, shifted the pillowed head from Charlie's lap, back to the hard ground. He tugged Charlie away as the Healer rested his clasped hands on the small chest and pressed gently.

"I am sorry about this, little one," Quinn breathed. "I can help you and I will." He smoothed a hand over Meg's pale forehead, glistening with a faint sheen of sweat. "But it will hurt."

It did hurt.

And it didn't just hurt Meg.

Charlie was certain he'd never ever forget that transformation anytime soon. He instinctively covered his ears, but it was a flimsy barrier against the painful screeches and fiery roars.

It was the most excruciating of reminders that this was no ordinary dragon. It was a scared little girl whose powers were stronger than her physical body had been able to handle. She would be fine, now that Quinn had managed to coax her transformation over into her human form.

The lack of head spines had resulted in horrible screams with her claws and wings scrabbling towards her head, an attempt to find what was not there.

Too young. Underdeveloped. Charlie's mind supplied. Too young for this kind of pain. His heart returned. It was Kyle's strong hands gripping his arms that kept him from lurching forward too soon and too early.

"Whoa, hey, calm down!" Kyle urged. "Calm down before I have to spike you!"

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated on neat, even breaths, even as they came in short, huffing gasps.

"I suppose that's an improvement." Kyle muttered. "Relax. Everything will work out. I called Quinn because he's good at this sort of thing." He sighed. "Keep breathing. Your pulse is jumping again." And then Kyle's fingers gave a flick, his wand gave a dip and Charlie welcomed the blessed silence of a deafening charm.

It took a while for Quinn to finish. His efforts paid off when a fine, grey-black mist rose up and dispersed from the body, leaving the tortured form limp and pliant. They'd been right. Meg was possessed.

Quinn drew back from her motionless form, his own face deathly pale and streaked with perspiration.

"Quinn?" Kyle was the only one brave enough to speak.

"I've seen that." Quinn swallowed hard.
"Hey, you alright?"

"Immortals." Quinn closed his eyes and turned his face to rest in the crook of Kyle's neck.

His friend merely knelt beside him, allowing the contact and gently scrubbing a hand through Quinn's blond locks. "Shh. You did it. That was brilliant. Everything's working out now."

"I have to tell—someone." Quinn took a shaky breath. "Kyle, the Immortals are waking!"

Charlie felt a chill creep over him as he eyed the close pair and then look down at his hands. They trembled, faintly, though from what, he couldn't tell. He could only reply Harry's horrific episode that morning and the same fine black mist that exited via that curse scar. His hands clenched into fists.

Immortals. They certainly sounded ominous enough.

Quite frankly, Charlie didn't think he cared. Any authoritative being in power that dared to abuse their position and gifts, weren't worthy of whatever awards and lauds were heaped upon them. No, it was a betrayal, perhaps, of the very worst kind. Betrayal of trust, given by the people, that sort of thing, Charlie knew he couldn't forgive.

And it really didn't sit well with him as he watched Kyle continued to comfort Quinn, while the Healer slowly gathered himself together.

Time blurred.

Eventually, the healers and the attendants who could be spared, came to see what the fuss had been about. None of them had any decent excuses for their absences, save those who had just come in for the evening. Some had been outside, tending to the groups of injured helpers who had attempted to move Meg away from the heavily populated areas.

She had caused a great deal of damage.

It would take some time and considerable magic to right things again.

When the final dose of blood-spiked potion had been administered, Quinn rose from his position on the hard floor—with a gently cast heating charm—before he slipped off to join the audience of Medics and Healers forming an impromptu circle.

Kyle trailed after him for a moment, then detoured to check on Charlie. "Your help was much appreciated." He praised.

Charlie now sat cross-legged on the floor, the scaled snout of a properly sized Hebridean black—Meg—resting on the fat pillow on his lap. He gently stroked his hands across the chilled scales. He smiled as the heating charm warmed the floor beneath them. Quinn was good, he'd give the healer that.

Meg was doing much better. As a dragon, Charlie knew exactly how to help her. As a healer, Quinn knew exactly what kind of help was needed. Between the two of them—and Kyle—they'd managed to bring things to where they were now. He was very relieved, though he had to admit, somewhat afraid of Quinn's fiery temper. He hadn't known the fellow had it in him—and Kyle was right. Quinn scarcely needed his voice to say much at all. His expressive face did most of the talking for him.
Charlie surveyed the innocent, scaled face, feeling a page of sadness as he observed the faint furrows and shallow breaths. From what he could gather, Ariki—the young man who had come rushing in—explained that Meg was part of a visiting circle. They had all come down to the flying fields for a bit of exercise and practice. He didn't know what had happened, but at some point, Meg had collapsed. They'd taken her to a hospital, where her parent's had to be sedated before the Healers could even attempt to approach her. Then Meg had sprouted a pair of oversized, grotesque wings and everything went downhill from there.

Subsequently, Meg's transformation had become more violent and dangerous. She'd thrown herself out of a window and nearly killed herself. It had taken many hands to herd her towards the clinic as a last resort, when her magic went out of control.

Ariki turned out to be a teaching assistant at the flight academy, trained to work with young dragels learning to use their wings and physical therapy for the elderly. He had followed the family to the hospital in hopes of being helpful. He'd witnessed nearly the entire thing and explained how he'd come to help the flying group attempting to guide Meg to a less populated area, so someone could help her.

The clinic's large outdoor pen had drawn their eye and they'd worked to bring her down and then indoors. Kyle tended to him with renewed efficiency, now that Meg was taken care of and he insisted on staying on the floor beside her. The Medic hadn't seen anything wrong with that and allowed it.

Charlie smiled at that.

Quinn, on the other hand, was far from calm. The brief glimpse or rather, the only moment where a lack of control had shown—was with Kyle after the possession removal had taken place. Afterwards, Quinn had excused himself from Charlie and Kyle—and Meg and Ariki, respectively, before joining the newest gaggle of healers that had come. He then proceeded to royally ream out the head healer, the sullen man who had treated him so rudely earlier.

Charlie caught the name of Nabers, and felt some of the puzzle pieces clicking into place as he watched. Quinn had quite a vocabulary. The others in the unofficial audience had begun to others edge away when it appeared that Quinn wasn't about to wind down any time soon.

Apparently, none were foolish enough to interfere.

Kyle merely watched in growing amusement, and thoughtful enough to cast a muffling charm over the snoozing patients. "I suppose I ought to go and calm him down." He said, cheerfully. A pat was given to Ariki's shoulder, as the fellow slumbered on.

"Calm him down?" Charlie turned to look over his shoulder. He'd been listening to the argument and now, his eyes widened as he took in the sight of Quinn's furious figure, enhanced and punctuated by his flared wings. They seemed to fairly glitter in the overhead lights, the dark blue patches surfacing and seeming to darken everything else. A warm flush danced over his face.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Kyle's knowing gaze flickered between the dragon tamer and the Healer. "The prettier they look, the more dangerous they are, you know."


Kyle grinned. "You're pretty good with dragons."

"Dragon tamer." Charlie heard himself say. "Romania."
"Nice." Kyle beamed. "We were lucky to have you around then." He winked. "In that case, look all you like. Quinn's wings are one of a kind."

This time, Charlie really did blush.

Kyle snickered. "Well then," with a huff, the Medic was on his feet and heading towards the two arguing dragels. "Quinn? Hey, take it easy and let him-"

"Take it easy?" Quinn whirled on him, the teal eyes flashing madly. His wings quivered. "How can you possibly-!"

"Whoa, whoa! Take it easy. Shhh. That's enough. Calm down. Come on." Kyle reached towards Quinn even as Quinn flinched. Kyle ignored it, and continued forward. He expertly backed the irate Healer away from the group and towards the two patients in the center of the floor. "You didn't even thank your assistant."

Quinn blinked, comically. "What?"

"We're lucky to have him, you know." Kyle continued. "Dragon tamer isn't exactly a popular line of work you know, the Dragons can be tricky."

Quinn's head snapped around, his teal gaze settling on Charlie's careful form. The blond brows furrowed and after a moment, Quinn spoke, his voice decidedly softer and more measured. "Dragon tamer?" He repeated.

Charlie turned, a smile quirked across his lips. "At your service."

"Charlie." Quinn murmured. The confusion melted away. "Oh. Oh. That Charlie. Hello again. That means—where are your mates?" The furrow deepened and Quinn turned his head to the side, taking a deep breath. It took a half-second for his brilliant teal eyes to zero in on the duo of Theo and Harry, sitting on the sofas at the far end.

And Charlie swore he saw the fire rekindle in those gleaming teal eyes. He winced.

Somehow, the miserable trio found themselves safely ensconced within Quinn's healing room as they'd been the day before. This time, the irritated Healer sat them all on the waiting couch and dropped to his knees before them.

"Eyes open wide." Quinn snapped. He held up the cross-pendant and a flicker of light showed on the end. "Lumos!" Quinn intoned. "Indea nautica." The glow dimmed to an acceptable level and Quinn caught Theo's chin with one expert hand. He flashed the light quickly in each fluxing, golden eye and frowned. "Not good." He muttered.

Kyle hovered nearby, his wand twirled between his fingers as he silently observed Quinn's careful restraint.

"You have a mentor, yes?" Quinn inquired. The question was directed to Theo, as he moved down to Harry, who was sandwiched between Charlie and Theo, as usual. "Harry, right?" He murmured. "Eyes open wide, please." He flashed the light into the emerald depths and his lips pursed again, with a disapproving hum.

Theo gave a faint nod.

Quinn waved his hand at Kyle.
"Name please?" Kyle prompted. He leaned down to appear less threatening, a gentle hand on Theo's quivering arm. "We need them here for a minute, it seems that you—well, Quinn?"

"A name, Kyle." Quinn snapped. "That is all I need."

"Are you sure you do not need Bharin as well?" Kyle retorted. "You're as prickly as a-!"

Quinn turned to glare at his assistant.

Harry sneezed.

It immediately drew the attention of everyone.

Quinn frowned. He produced a handkerchief and pressed it into Harry's hand. He feathered a hand against Harry's throat. "Hmm."

Harry's pale face flushed a lovely shade of pink.


Harry gave a muffled squeak as Quinn's face was suddenly much closer than it had been a moment ago. Emerald eyes grew wide as Quinn pressed his forehead to Harry's, his teal eyes shut, lips pursed in concentration.

"Quinn?" Kyle ventured.

Quinn withdrew, his brow furrowing. "That is not good either. Potions," he snapped his fingers. "Fever reducer, mild calming draught, blood replenisher." Quinn ticked them off, quickly.

"Spiked?" Kyle whirled around to the counter, where he began to pluck colored potion vials off the rack hanging from the wall.

"I'll do it." Quinn murmured. "The name, now!"

"Mm." Kyle returned to his earlier position beside Theo. His voice was gentle and soft, in cadence as he spoke to Theo, before straightening. "Ilsl. Ilsl Gorgens."

Quinn's eyebrows arched upwards in surprise and then gave a slow nod. "Why am I not surprised?" Kyle snorted. But Quinn turned to Charlie and caught the pointed chin in one hand. "Look at the light, eyes wide." He instructed. The pendant fizzled out a moment later when Quinn shifted to his feet. "Look at me, all three of you." He instructed. His expression was dead serious, as clear teal eyes meet each of them in turn, emerald, gold and blue. "Do you trust me to heal you?"

The weight in his words hung heavily in the room.

Theo released a shuddering breath. "Yes."

Charlie bit his lip. "Yes." The word was forced through him.

Harry flinched beneath the deliberate stare. "Yes." He whispered.

"Thank you." Quinn said, cordially. "Solumn sania duermo." He clapped his hands. A single, loud clap.

All three patients slumped forward in a forced sleep.
Quinn sighed.

Kyle moved to stand beside him, one hand resting on his friend's shoulder. "Quinn?"

"Potions?" The Healer said, wearily. "It's going to be a long day."

"You never minded before."

"Papa is going to have my head on a platter, the moment Mother notices I'm not home."

Kyle smothered a laugh. "So 'Mama' is Mother now?"

Quinn's lips quirked into a fond smile and his worry smoothed away. "Shut up, Kyle. We have a lot of work to do."
RECAP: An Emergency at the clinic in the form of young Meg, being transformed into a dragon at a too young age. Quinn and Charlie come to the rescue of Meg, who was formerly possessed by Niko, the little Immortal girl. Theo's horrible headache prompted Harry to unknowingly cast a spell on him as he watched the emergency at the Clinic, waiting for Quinn to finish for their appointment. Harry's circle is spotted by Quinn at the last moment, where he realizes what is happening with Harry, Theo and Charlie. In the examination room, Quinn spells them to sleep while urging Kyle to prepare for what lies ahead.

NEVARAH : HEALTH CLINIC

The Potions were spelled into the necessary stomachs, by way of Quinn's careful magic. Kyle helped him to maneuver the three bodies into three separate beds, a few feet apart, so that the Healer and Medic could walk freely between them.

"Make sure they can be moved together quickly." Quinn cautioned. He rubbed his throat, discreetly, a gesture practiced to alert him to the current time remaining on the speech spell.

Kyle snorted from the floor where he finished the transfigurations. "You can nudge them together however you like." He straightened and wiped his forehead. "And I've warded the door, we shouldn't be interrupted."

"My schedule?"

Kyle snorted. "I already shifted it this morning when Bharin called in."

"Thank you."

"They haven't bonded yet, have they?" Kyle moved between the beds. He held two fingers to Theo's wrist, checking his pulse manually. "I can feel it. Can't think of a good reason why though, I mean, they're perfectly healthy, hot-blooded, young-men without-"

"Kyle!" Quinn choked out the name. "Not the time for it!"

"What?" The Medic ducked his head, anyway. "I am merely observing. Leaving a first mated triad open is just asking for trouble. Just my observation, I mean from a medical standpoint, apart from the little things—and there are a bunch of little things, but—really there isn't anything that could prevent them from sealing the bond. If they'd sealed it sooner, perhaps they wouldn't suffer so."

"You and me both." Quinn sighed. "It's tearing them apart, isn't it?"

"Indeed. And what for? You'd think they could spare a single night for each other."

"Or a few hours." Quinn grumbled. "Surely it does not take that much time. But I honestly do not think they have been in Nevarah for very long." Quinn frowned. "The papers I reviewed showed
that these two," and here, he gestured to Harry and Charlie. "Were only registered recently."

"Recently? Exactly how new are we talking here?"

"Didn't I—oh, I didn't," Quinn mumbled. He stretched out a hand. "Here."

Kyle twisted and leaned over to touch his hand to the proffered one. The spark of energy leapt between them and the transfer was complete. It took a moment to register and then the head of forest-green hair, bowed, hiding those soft brown eyes from view. "Thirteen seals? Thirteen? On a new Submissive? That's *inhuman* and people say we're monsters."

"I am not so sure that we are not." Quinn murmured. He chewed on his lower lip, gleaming white fangs peeking over the edge of his lip.

"Please do not start freaking out on me." Kyle deadpanned. "No talk of freaky immortals or whatever, until we are home and I know whether I'll be hanging around here solo for the rest of the week."

"Solo?" Quinn blinked. "Why?"

"Do you really think you'll be able to talk your way out of this one?" Kyle countered. "They called Patrick back. Your Father."

"Wha-oh. Right." Quinn flushed a light shade of pink at the mention of his sire. There was definitely a silent message in there somewhere and he did not feel up to figuring it out just yet. There were more important things to deal with at the moment.

"Yes. Oh." Kyle mimicked. He moved away from Theo and waved his wand absently, for the information to add itself to the parchment Quinn was scanning. "Need any help with the summoning?"

"NmmMm." Quinn moved to the cleared spot in the corner. The sofa had been transfigured into one of the bed and now, there was a nice, empty area for him to cast the magic he intended to. "She is an earth type, I may have converted my element, but I never renounced it." He smirked.

"Should I hold my breath?" Kyle joked. He took Harry's pulse and waved his wand for a scan of his vitals. He checked along the same vein as Quinn had, frowning when he could see the evidence of the seals for himself. A dark look flickered over his face. He threw up the necessary shield over the three still forms as Quinn sent the message out to one, Ilsa Gorgens.

"This is Healer Quinten Auwren Kalzik from the... Health Clinic, division... seeking one Ilsa Gorgens for... in relation to patient, Theodore Gorgens Nott... Please respond. Coordinates are contained within this message, kindly 'port to the immediate vicinity... Thank you. Message repeat. This is Healer Quinten Auwren Kalzik..."

Ilsa moaned from somewhere under the thick pile of fluffy blankets. A tuft of short, spiky hair appeared near the top of the covers. Her next moan turned into a groan as she stretched carefully. "It is far too early for this." The short Gheyo sat up, clutching the blankets around her bared form. She squinted at the message for a moment, then flopped back into the pillows.

"Ilsa?" A softer, huskier voice broke the silence of the small room. "What's the matter, babe?"

"...some...message." Ilsa yawned. She rolled over and snuggled into her lover's warmth.
"Message 'bout what, Mmm?" Slender, tanned arms stretched above the covers, then slid downwards to caress soft skin. Greta smiled, turning to press a kiss to one bared shoulder. She had missed Ilsa—had missed this.

"…Theo."

There was a snort, followed by a snicker. "Oh, hon, you're not really awake yet, are you?" Another kiss. "Need a wake-up call?" Those tanned arms pulled the sleepy figure closer. "Room, temperature control, raise by six degrees." Greta spoke clearly. She waited for a moment, then the air vents began to hum.

"Hmprhf?" Ilsa mumbled.

The snicker turned into a quiet laugh. Dry lips pressed a kiss to a sleep-warmed forehead. "On second thought, I don't think you're awake enough to appreciate it." Her calloused fingers began to rub exhausted limbs. "You just said there's a message in the room about Theo, somehow I think that's going to be important. Come on, wake up, love. Theo. Theodore. Your precious little princeling of-"

Ilsa froze.

A second later, she scrambled out from the tangle of sheets and duvet, panic written on every feature of her waking face. "Oh, Arielle—Theodore, I hope for your sake that you are alive and nowhere near death, or so help me I shall-"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Greta sat up, drawing the blankets around her. "It's alright. It is alright, Ilsa, please, calm down. I'm sure he's fine."

"You don't know that!" A faint quiver ran through the shorter Gheyo. Ilsa raked a hand through her spiky hair. "I should have, I ought to-"

"If he wasn't fine, you would've felt something and I doubt we would've had such a delightful afternoon to celebrate your return." Greta said, firmly. "Now, please. Calm down. You'll only work yourself up into a state and that would ruin everything when you 'port in, now wouldn't it? I am sure that Theo needs you clear headed right now."

Ilsa closed her eyes as that familiar hand settled around her neck. It squeezed gently and then rubbed in that way that she loved so much. She pressed her lips together. Greta was right on that count, of course. But the tension remained. Theo was hers and the fact that something might have happened to him without her knowledge, burned inside.

"Center." Greta purred, softly. "Gather your energies."

There was a wellspring of warm summer energies that rippled through the entire room and then a crackle of magic. Ilsa felt herself relax as her magic swirled around her in its own, familiar way. It calmed her considerably and whisked away her borrowed nightshirt to replace it with day clothes and her preferred Gheyo armor.

"Nice." Greta complimented. "I almost forgot how lovely you look in plated silver."

Ilsa rolled her shoulders back as two short swords materialized on her left hip. The armor was a simple chest bustier with a plated skirt, her boots, knee-high with hidden joints in all the right places, allowing freedom of movement and seamless appearance. The armor's weight settled over her, easily and seemed to ease her newly frazzled nerves.
"I'll see you...when I see you." Greta kissed her cheek.


NEVARAH CLINIC

The bright, blue-green glow of magic died down with a final rush of wind. Quinn stepped away from the carved marks on the floor. They were permanent etchings to allow for quick summonings within an examination room. He smoothed a hand over his blond locks, now sticking up every which way, Bharin's earlier work already undone.

"Is she coming?" Kyle screwed in a potion's vial into the silver contraption in his hand. A moment later, he sprayed the dose in a concentrated, fine mist over Theo's face. "Don't bother, you're making it worse."

"I sent the message. She should be on her way." Quinn paused before a small mirror hung on the wall. He tilted his head to the side and checked the flickering band around his neck, signifying the binding of the spell and depicting the current time remaining as he prompted it. "It's can't possibly become any worse than it already is. How's the Alpha?"

"Ever met her?" Kyle inquired. "I've heard of her." He set the sprayer aside and reached out with gloved hands to check Theo's eyes. "He's out, thankfully."

"Then I have heard the same. I am sure she is perfectly reasonable. And he had best be out, still." Quinn retorted. "What kind of spell did you think I cast?"

"Don't know. Never heard it before." Slender shoulders hunched upwards. Kyle stifled the urge to roll his eyes. "Quinn."

"Not now, Kyle. Busy."

"That wasn't a jab at you. I just meant that I never heard you use it before."

Quinn paused. "Usually it requires three or more, before I can cast it."

"Three or—oh. Nice." Kyle approved. "See, that wasn't so bad. You're skimming pretty close to the surface, aren't you?" The Medic sighed. "Fine. I'll be careful. Now, how do you want to do this? There's three of them and two of us."

"Is he up yet?"

"Not quite. I can time him, if you like." Kyle took up one pale wrist, timing for a pulse. A ripple of his white-gold magic washed over Theo's sleeping form. "Are you ready for him? The spray usually works very quickly."

"Yes." Quinn donned a pair of gloves and snatched a handful of potions vials.

"Specifics?" Kyle prompted. He adjusted the examination table, tilting it upwards, raising the head and shoulders at an angle.

"None. I have a hunch."

Kyle watched as Quinn suspended the vials in the air, with a whisper of his newly regenerated magic. This was one of the things that made Quinn such a joy to work with. He knew how to use
magic for the instinctive and useful things—and how to keep an uncluttered workspace. Soft brown eyes flickered to the opened collar of Quinn's shirt. He frowned. "How long?"

"Mmm?"

"You know what I mean, Quinn. The spell, how long?"

"Long enough for him, I hope." Quinn sighed. "Keep your head empty for me."

"My mind is always open for you."

"I know. Too much rattles around in there." Quinn half-smiled.

"Hey!" Kyle protested.

"I speak only the truth." Quinn drew near the waking Alpha. "Watch the other two, will you?"

"Don't need my help?"

"I always need your help." Quinn countered. "And you already called Bharin, didn't you?"

This time, Kyle smirked.

Blinding light.

Pain.

Incessant throbbing pain.

In head.

Theo's chocolate-gold eyes flickered up to a white ceiling. He shut them immediately. His forehead wrinkled, fingers twitched, lips pursed into something resembling a pout. That had taken far too much effort and the result gained was virtually useless.

"Too bright?" Quinn's mellow voice cut through Theo's muddled thoughts. "Welcome to the land of the living. You may remember me, Healer Quinn?"

Something leathery unfolded with a loud whoosh and Theo was immediately grateful as the light dimmed considerably. A pleasant musk—sandalwood probably—seemed to envelope him and the temperature warmed comfortably. He sifted through the confusion in his head. Yes, he did remember Quinn, remembered quite a lot of things, actually.

"Open your eyes when you can." Quinn murmured. "How are you feeling? I expect you are probably in some degree of pain, but until I know exactly how you are doing, I will not be dispensing any painkillers. Please bear with it." He moved in careful, measured strides around the examination table, his wings canted forward to block the light from Theo's raised form. "You are inside the examination room from yesterday, I spelled you asleep shortly after you were escorted in—with your permission, of course. Do you remember that? If you cannot open your eyes or speak, try any sort of movement, alright?"

Theo focused for a moment. His left hand twitched. He worked on trying to open his eyes again.

"Hand movement. Alright. Well done. That is good." Quinn congratulated. "We'll work on the other things later. The spell I used to send you to dreamland is a little complicated and it might take
you a little bit to fully wake and I think there might be a touch of confusion. Please do not fight it or stress yourself, everything will return to normal, given enough time. Now, I have something that might speed that up a little and I need you to take it."

Something hard and cold was gently pressed against his lips. Theo flinched.

"It's a glass dropper, and there's some blood replenisher inside and I have some very, very sweet tea for you afterwards to wash it down. I am sure you understand the significance of sugar?" Quinn's gloved fingers gently brushed against Theo's hand, then finger-walked up the alpha's side and shoulder, before moving up to his face. Here, the hands guided the glass dropper fully into Theo's mouth. The movements were carefully calculated to the temporarily 'blind' Alpha could track his whereabouts without worrying himself. "Small mouthfuls." Quinn cautioned. "If you cannot swallow, I will help you."

A trickle of coldness filled Theo's mouth, a shallow sip. He focused on making his throat work, the familiar motions of swallowing. He trembled, faintly, when he felt one of the gloved hands on his cheek, move down to his throat and coax his body to respond as it should.

He is too muddled to make sense of it.

But Quinn's movements are slow and careful, his voice is low and soothing. The lights never become too bright and eventually, Theo can hear the Healer keeping up a constant stream of chatter as his own memories return.

The sleeping spell was powerful. Theo can silently admit that he has never felt such raw power in something as mundane as a mere sleeping spell. He cannot help but admire the teal-eyed, blond-haired Healer. There was something different about him and Theo was glad for it.

"Earth has always been your element?" Quinn holds up the cross pendant with the gently lit orb to Theo's eyes. "How do you feel now?"

"Head hurts." Theo blinks once, twice and then thrice, by prompt. "Is it—is it my-" and the words are caught in his throat. He found that he could not voice the awful truth that rattled around in his head. He'd known this would happen-sort of. He hadn't actually expected it to, when there hadn't been any symptoms straightaway. It had seemed too good to be true and now it appeared, that had been the truth.

"Headaches are generally one of the first symptoms in this case." Quinn dropped the pendant back to his chest and the tips of his gloved fingers glowed a soft, baby blue. "This will be cold." He warned.

Theo still flinched when the cold fingers settled at the corners of his temple and began to rub in sure, smooth circles. It felt good. It felt horrible. He didn't deserve such assistance. It felt—like failure. His eyes squeezed shut.

"Were you aware?" Quinn prompted.

Ah. So he did know, Theo mused. Then again, the blond did seem to be a different sort of Healer. It would only make sense that he would know of things like caspered guardians and deep elemental energies. "Does it matter?"

"...Yes." Quinn's hands gentle even more.

The kindness is more of a torture than Theo expected. "I did."
"And you thought you could handle it on your own?"

"It's never happened before!"

"There is always a first time for everything." Quinn sighed. But there is no disapproval in it. "If you had waited longer, this would be far more difficult." The coolness faded from his fingers, replaced. "Tilt your head back and gather your energies. How is your movement?"

Theo tested his limbs, carefully, cataloguing all possible movement in comparison from what he can remember. "Fine." He reluctantly tipped his head back. It is caught by Medic Kyle's capable hands. The forest-green fae-born flashed a cheery smile, but his face is carefully masked.

Quinn passed by, a moment later, Kyle wore the same white mask over his face as the Healer did. "You felt the energy of my spell?" The Healer inquired.

Theo nodded, not trusting his voice to speak for him yet.

"Then you understand that for the necessary use of it in some of the more delicate—areas, I require a grounder. Kyle cannot always ground me, so I use the services of one of my family's Gheyos. Bharin, the tall dark one, he was present yesterday? He carried me home?"

Theo nodded again.

"With your permission, he will enter the examination room. I also share a mental connection with him as well, in the event that Kyle is otherwise occupied and this particular spell ends, I shall be using him as my voice. Is that acceptable? Verbal answer, please, if you can manage it."

"That is—fine." Theo is surprised to find that speaking aloud doesn't quite require as much effort as he was expecting it to. It also answers one unspoken question for him. He distinctly remembers the Healer's lack of voice from the previous day, but now that the fragments of memory in his mind make sense, he can see the blond casting the spell that is now twined around his neck, granting him the ability to speak once more.

"Thank you. Now then, shall we begin?"

_Not like I have a choice..._

"Is your Submissive aware of the depth of your password?" Quinn's hands are quick and deft in their movements.

Theo finds himself shirtless atop the examination table, his head still held in Medic Kyle's hands, his eyes staring up at the rippling illusions of a sky that serve as a distraction. Illusions that came to life when Kyle's gaze caught his own and Theo couldn't be sure of the Medic smiled behind the mask, but he did appreciate the gesture.

It was easier to focus on answering Quinn's questions, when the colorful images danced overhead. It reminded him that there were other things than strange hands wandering over his body.

It stopped him from touching the guilt.

"I gave it to him." Theo answered, at last.

"Did you explain it to him?"

"I tried."
Quinn sighed. "Did you explain it in simple terms for your submissive to understand?"

The fact that the Healer is using generic terms over Harry's name, bothers Theo in a way he didn't think it would. Quinn's words hit harder in a place that Theo has tried not to think of. He doesn't want to think of it—not now. "...no." His voice is too quiet, but somehow it seemed loud in the room.

"I assume your password is to allow full access to your element?"

"You may assume." Theo said, darkly.

"I will not ask the words of you." Quinn said, mildly. "This is merely procedure. Most earth element use an absolute word to grant the holder the entirety of their magic, all reserves included. Some choose a substitution ritual by trading a familiar, some prefer a blood oath and others take the sacrificial route. I am merely attempting to determine which one you have chosen. Do make it easier?"

Theo licked his lips. The hint of authority was barely there, but it was there and he resolutely shut his eyes. "Sacrificial."

"Your power or your life?"

"...both."

"And your Submissive is unaware of this?"

"...most likely." Theo sucked in a careful breath. It sounded so shallow when spelled out this way. Guilt curled softly in his belly.

"I would advise you to inform him of the gravity of the responsibility that you have entrusted to him." Quinn said, briskly. "It will be best for all of you. This is not something to keep as a secret between mates." He frowned. "Your Submissive knows of this, how fares your Beta?"

Theo seemed to shrink inward on himself.

"Does he know?" Quinn prompted.

"No."

"You have not had the chance to share it yet or you did not intend to?"

"Pardon?" A flicker of anger slipped through Theo's self-loathing mask.

"Some Alphas use a secondary phrase for their Betas." Quinn's voice was even and matter-of-fact. "I was merely attempting to discern if you did the same."

"Speaking plainly instead of in riddles would travel a long way in-!"

Kyle fisted hands shifted beside Theo's heads, turned enough for hard knuckles to press meaningfully against the sides of the pureblood's head. "Quinn is trying to help," Kyle spoke very softly, a near whisper. "And it is costing him to help you right now. He will not call Wikhn, because Wik is not used to the way we work, so consider me a temporary stand in for Dahlia right now. We do not insult Healers when they are trying to help us."

"Leave him be, Kyle." Quinn ordered. "He has a right to speak his mind, if he cannot do so here, then where can he?" To Theo, Quinn directed his next words. "Please excuse my assistant, he is
sometimes overprotective." The Healer sighed. "Check on the other two, please. And you may open your eyes, Mr. Nott."

Theo winced. The weight of the Nott title had finally settled for him, but it was still a reminder of something that he had come into a little too young. A flicker of magic passed over him and golden eyes snapped open, battle-ready.

"Easy." Quinn cautioned, holding up his hands. "It was a privacy ward. Sometimes Kyle cannot help his big mouth."

Somehow, Theo cannot help but feel that this is not very reassuring.

"This is a tad tricky, but be assured it is nothing too risky or dangerous." Quinn said, calmly.

"How can something labeled as 'Soul Casting' be anything but dangerous?" Theo shot back. The uneasy feeling still remained. He shied away from the gloved hands that approached with a new, pink cream globbed on the fingertips.

"Casting." Quinn repeated. "Kind of like craftwork, to create a cast of something. You know, a mock up of sorts? I could do it the other way, but this one tends to be more accurate and use less energy." He gave a jerk of his head over one shoulder. "And I intend to conserve my energy today, so that I can tend to you all properly, so you will simply have to bear with this."

"And you are doing this because?"

"Because something inside of you is trying to kill you and another is trying to save you." Quinn said, bluntly. "Now then," he rubbed the cream between his gloved fingers to warm it. "I will need to place you in a temporary trace, so please alter your breathing cycle on my count. One—in—two, three—out, one—in—two, three—out…"

"He's very young," Kyle murmured.

"You're not that old." Quinn threw back.

Kyle snorted. "Neither are you." He stood beside Quinn, watching as the Healer manipulated the colorful pulses of light showing the readings of the magic within his patient. "And that's a lot of power in one like him."

"Mm." Quinn's teal eyes remained locked on something at the very center of the mish-mash of color. The Soul Casting was essentially a magical reading taken while the individual was caught between a stake of awareness and waking, it read the magical pulses within the body and compared them to the life force. The results were then displayed accordingly, in a selection of colors. Sometimes, they simply hung over the body, as if a handful of colored ribbons were suspended in space, at other times, they were twists, knots and braids, or perhaps bent in an odd shape.

Theo's reading as a tightly twined ball bearing all the rainbow colors. Quinn poked at it, cautiously, then frowned.

"Quinn?"

"His mentor arrived?"

"Wearing a path at the end of the room over there." Kyle gave a half-jerk of his head. "I don't think
I can keep her from charging over here much sooner."

"She can charge and pace all she likes." Quinn frowned. "But I foresee several uncomfortable conversations in her future."

Kyle winced. "Are you really-?"

"He needs to speak to her."

"Maybe he's worried about something. He has his rights."

"And I have mine." Quinn shot back. "Take a look here and tell me what you see!"

Kyle frowned. "A ball of colorful yarn." He shrugged. "You know I cannot read-"

"Not that!" Quinn gestured to the not quite awake nor asleep figure. "Him. Tell me what you see?"

"I see..." Kyle's voice trailed off and his shoulders slumped. "Oh."

"Yes. Oh." Quinn snapped. "I see a young Alpha with too much on his shoulders, believing that he must do this on his own and fighting himself at every turn. He would be doing mostly alright, except for he has pushing himself too hard and too fast in too short a time, resulting in a burnout. Which, is not uncommon for new, young Alphas, but he is older than sixteen, meaning that he should have had time to come to terms with his rank and his purpose. Besides that, he is mated to a Beta, who seems to have recently been released from an inheritance seal, meaning that the mate meant to support him in this, is not one he can immediately rely on, not to mention that he has not fully completed the bond between them. His Submissive is under the influence of more seals than is legal, hasn't completed the bond between the three of them, is having his entire life catch up to him in his inheritance year and to top it all off, they're fairly impressive magic users! What part of that combination is good?"

"Er, none of it?"

"How come no one has noticed this?" Quinn pretended not to notice when Kyle reinforced the privacy bubble cast about them.

"You're one of a kind you know." He soothed.

"I ought to wring their skinny little necks!" Quinn snapped.

"Quinn?"

"He should have asked his mentor for help!" Quinn bristled. "He should have asked and if he could not ask, then he should have spoken to his guardians. He shouldn't have given out a password he could not modify and if he was unprepared to take a Submissive, then he should have restrained himself!"

"Ah. Right." Kyle sighed. "You need to continue on?"

"Of course I need to-!" Quinn broke off abruptly. He crossed his arms over his chest and huffed. "This is not-!"

"I'd offer my neck for the wringing bit," Kyle half-smiled. "But I don't think you'd take any satisfaction from it." He shook his head. "and I haven't seen you this worked up in quite some time. Can you really handle this?"
Teal eyes blazed at him. "I shall." The words were clipped, cool and precise. "Do not presume to
think otherwise."

"Just checking." Kyle held up his hands in surrender. "What about the other two?"

"The Beta is a mess, inside and out and-"

"And Harry? You can use their names you know, saying the titles doesn't really put that much
distance between them."

A pained expression flickered across the Healer's face. "It isn't that simple, Kyle."

The Medic looked away. "I know. It's affecting you, isn't it?"

"As if you're immune." Quinn shot back. "As dragel-kind, we are always intimately aware of the
pain of our fellow dragels, especially in close quarters. One of them is an empath and it's not a
primary gift either."

"Theo?"

"No, he's Earth, the Beta's Fire, which means it's Harry, which means that empathy is an inherited
trait, meaning that his inherited gift is-"

"Not an element, but a Nameless," Kyle breathed. "By Arielle's fangs. I wouldn't have even
considered that without—how did you know?"

"Theo." Quinn said, simply "I am working on him, because Harry, I would wager, is entirely
unaware of his Nameless status especially as to what kind of Nameless he holds. There is a spell on
Theo, one keeping him moderately calm and restraining the warring forces inside of him, as if
someone simply put them on hold for a time. It bears Harry's signature, but I cannot confirm it,
because I have never seen him cast anything."

"I haven't either." Kyle frowned. "He shouldn't have cast anything though. You did tell him this,
yes?"

"Oh I told him alright," Quinn's lips curved into a smile that did not reach his eyes. "And we are
will have a discussion about that. I shudder to think of the result."

"The result—oh, heavens!" Kyle groaned, as if suddenly remembering something. "His magic was
missing. Completely missing like-"

"Yes, like that." Quinn sighed. "I would wager he did not know that and it didn't occur to his Alpha
as well and the Beta wouldn't have known anything either and well, that leaves them all in the dark,
especially if Theo was not communicating regularly with his mentor and his Beta does not have
one in addition to Harry not having one either," the Healer threw up his hands. "It's a perfectly
wretched mess!"

"Are they dead?" Kyle wanted to know.

"Harry's mentor?"

"Ha. So it's Harry, but Alpha and Beta for the others?"

"Shut up, Kyle." Quinn glowered at him. "Fine. Harry. His mentor should still be alive and if they
have died, then it is only recently, because as of yesterday, the seals placed on him, still pulsed
actively."

"Can't you trace the signature?"

"To some degree, but it'd be best to seek the services of a tracking or hunting team." Quinn shrugged. "I have already put through a request, but it is Hunting Season."

"Don't remind me." Kyle shuddered. "Emily wants to attend the Dog Run."

Quinn winced. "My sympathies."

"Oi! I am not attending without-"

"I do not think I should unravel this Soul Cast."

"What? Why not?"

"The spell that was used to freeze it, look closer, Kyle."

"Tell me what I'm supposed to see." The Medic grumbled, but he leaned forward and squinted at the mass of colored strands tangled together into a ball. "Oh, bugger that." He grunted, a moment later.

Quinn smiled, sweetly. "Three guardians, two fighting, one restraining."

"They're killing him!"

"As per their ordered instructions." Quinn sighed. "The problem with young holders of great powers is that they never fully understand the duality of the magic inside of them. My guess is that his mentor has gifted him three guardians to help with his changing magic and did not know of his mating, otherwise, the bonds would not have been Brindus bonds."

Kyle shuddered, visibly.

"You alright?"

"M'fine. Just—you know, remembering."

Quinn took a slow breath. He knew what memory the Medic referred to.

They'd called in a Spellweaver the last time, to slow the death of a young Beta who had given his password the mateship's youngest child. A charming little girl who had been kidnapped and nearly killed. The child had used the password as a last resort. She had been saved. The entire mateship had stormed the compound and killed the Hunters who had taken her. The Beta, had collapsed shortly afterwards.

Quinn had been the acting Healer on that case and he'd requested a Spellweaver in hopes of rewriting the invocation and stopping the inevitable end.

It hadn't worked.

In the end, he had only been able to grant the mateship a handful of days for their goodbyes, before he'd had to explain that drawing out the spell would be inhumane. The Beta had died within an hour of the Spellweaver's interference being retracted.

Quinn hadn't slept for a week.
Neither had Kyle.

"...did you know?" Kyle swallowed hard. "How soon?"

"I didn't. Not until this afternoon. I wasn't looking for it." Quinn forced a smile. "He's borne it silently all this time. He has to know on some level, what is happening to him and why."

"I doubt it." Kyle hesitated. "When I saw him earlier, he looked as if he was in so much pain. I threw a general scan over him and he didn't even react to it. But it didn't show up as-"

"Brindus bonds are personal, private and very rare." Quinn said, quietly. "It wouldn't have shown up. It is not your fault." Teal eyes drilled into soft brown ones. "Focus, Kyle. There wasn't anything you could have done."

"There is now." The Medic frowned. "You have to try."

"What?"

"You can't leave it like this. I'll call for Riven again, Sephira, someone, but you have to try to unravel that. You can't leave him like this and-"

"I am not leaving him like anything." Quinn coughed. He rubbed his throat, annoyed.

"Quinn?"

"It's fine." The Healer turned away. He rubbed the scarred column a few more times, then coaxed another tendril of magic into the spell. It needed to hold up just a little more. "I noticed in time. He'll be fine."

Kyle hesitated.

"Kyle." Quinn gently touched his arm. "Trust me."

"I always do."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, so we got some answers in this chapter, woohoo! We now know that Harry is definitely a "Nameless" (Someone without an assigned element) and that he has his empathic gift (confirmed by Quinn), we know that some of his aches, pains and troubles with his magic is due to his suppressed dragel nature and a partial backlash from using Theo's password. Theo is paying for the use of said password, which is why he is in his current state. Don't worry. He is "not" going to die! :) Thanks for reading!
RECAP: Theo's horrible headache prompted Harry to unknowingly cast a spell on him as he watched the emergency at the Clinic. Afterward, in the examination room, Quinn spells the trio to sleep while urging Kyle to prepare for what lies ahead. He starts with Theodore, worried about the young alpha's lack of response and phantom pains. To better understand the situation, Quinn decides to use a SOUL CAST, he summons Ilsa and Bharin to come and help with the procedure.

NEVARAH : HEALTH CLINIC

"I think we are about ready for Bharin." Quinn mused. He'd waited, thinking a bit. He needed Bharin's calming, steady presence to ground him for this next step.

Soul Casting was something of a rare talent, it was manipulation of magic in a way that would affect the physical body when the session was over. It required tremendous concentration and meticulous attention to detail, as just touching a single strand could alter the individual's magic or physical body in a permanent way. It was also the quickest and least painful way to handle most dragel-magic related maladies.

It consisted of seven colors, corresponding to seven points of the physical body and psychology, sometimes known as Chakras to some and energy centers to others. Kyle's definition of a tangled ball of yarn was correct—a very tangled ball of seven different colors. Quinn's job would be to separate each strand with the utmost care and weave it into a circle, before setting it back into the host's body.

_Easiest and least painful way_, Kyle reminded himself. _Tricky, rare and bloody difficult talent_. He fought his nerves by taking a calming draught and smiled faintly when Quinn threw him a worried look. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

"I will be." Kyle breathed in deeply. "You can use me, you know" he murmured. "I know these can take a while and you have those two over there when you're finished."

"I have the energy to spare." Quinn rolled his shoulders back. "Bharin made sure I slept very soundly."

"Good. But still, use me. I don't mind being an extra pair of hands and I know you need them. I figured this might make me a little easier to handle." He chucked the empty vial into the recycling container. His magic, white and gold swirled around him in slender, silken threads. Soul Casting was one of Quinn's rare talents, but it always unsettled him to see his friend use it.

Quinn smiled, softly. "You are too good of a friend to me." He murmured. "Bharin will be here when I call him directly. How are those two faring? Is there any backlash?"

Kyle waved his wand in a complicated pattern directed towards Charlie and Harry's still,
slumbering forms. "Their vitals read at a low average and their energies are dormant, mostly. Harry's is completely drained. Charlie's is fluctuating."

"Drained?" Quinn made his way over to the brunet's bedside. The frown deepened as he read the floating list of stats hovering over the young Submissive. "And how in Arielle's name, did he manage that?"

Kyle shrugged. "Not sure. The last spell he cast isn't in any of the known references we have on the clinic database."

"What about yours?" Quinn eyed him. "You're fae, is there…?"

"Nothing." Kyle sighed. "I thought about it, but whatever spell he used, it isn't a known one and when I mean his magic is drained, I mean both his wizarding side—and his dragel side."

"His dragel magic came in? Last night?" Quinn's eyebrows arched upwards into his hairline. He looked from Kyle's grim face to Harry's sleeping one. "Well, of course it would have." He muttered to himself. "If he went ahead and exhausted his wizarding magic, it would have forced his dragel side to come to the surface."

"Forced it?" Kyle tapped on the glowing chart still hovering between them. "This is all the data recorded since we've brought him in here. Look at this."

"Mmm." Quinn flipped through the holographic pages, skimming for the basic information. His eyes widened when he saw it.

"Quinn?"

"You'd best clear my entire schedule for the day." Quinn turned away, sharply. "And we had best start. Do you need more time?"

"No. Theo shouldn't have to wait any longer. None of them should." Kyle drew in a breath, counted on his fingers and released it. "Just a moment," he waved his wand and a scrap of parchment appeared. "Here, sign this."

"What am I signing?" Quinn waved a hand at the parchment. His signature curved across it in a flare of gold lettering.

"Your excuses for changing your schedule." Kyle magicked his own signature to the paper and sent it off. "Any time now, is fine."

"Bharin." Quinn closed his eyes visualizing the image of his guardian in his head. A flare of blue-green energy swirled at his fingertips.

The answer filtered back in slow beats. …coming…Quinn.

A moment later, the Gheyo 'ported in, drenched in sweat and breathing harshly. Clad in comfortable, loose trousers and a damp sleeveless shirt, Bharin tested the first few steps forward as the portal closed behind him. A few shallow cuts on his left cheek, dribbled bright red blood and his lovely, long dreadlocks were twisted up into a complicated bundle at the nape of his neck, held in place by a metal rod stabbed through the shiny, black mass.

"Quinn." The Jamaican rumbled. He stood up straight, to his full height, towering easily over the Healer and Medic. His worried gaze took quick stock of the room, his stance shifting, faintly, towards something more protective of the occupants.
Teal eyes grew wide with alarm the moment they caught the reason for the scent of blood in the air. "Bharin! Did I—are you alright? Where were you? What happened-!" He reached for the injury on his guardian's face, the glow of healing magic already lighting at his fingertips. "This is a clean room, Kyle-?"

The Medic hurried to cast wards and sanitize the newcomer. The barriers he'd put up earlier, continued to hold, preserving the cleanliness of the rooms and each individual patient.

"You're using that spell again." Dark eyes regarded his charge, silently. "I will hold you to that."

Quinn blushed, the faintest hints of pink along his creamy complexion. "It is my choice and you know it, Bharin." He frowned. *If it helps you, I will pretend I am not using it.*

*Sarcasm does not suit you.* Bharin frowned. "And it is a mere scratch, nothing serious. I should have ducked when I dodged." He sighed. "My apologies for 'porting in with such a mess." A wave of his hand immediate swapped out his sweat-soaked clothes for clean, fresh ones, a secondary cleaning spell, ensuring that he is able to remain inside the examination rooms. "You, however-"

"Later, Bharin, please?" Quinn hesitated. "You are alright?" It looked like more than a scratch to him, but he had learned long ago, to take Bharin at his word, when the Gheyo spoke.

"Midday training exercises." Bharin reassured him. He leaned down for Kyle to cast the necessary spells that allowed him to legally be present. He smiled in thanks. A moment later, he leaned down just enough for the glow at the end of Quinn's magicked fingers to soothe the wound away. "Just preparation for the cage matches."

Quinn winced. "I wish you wouldn't remind me."

"Then I shall not mention them again." Bharin took a longer look around the room, noting the three younger dragels and the positioning of the bed. His dark-eyed gaze rested on the incomplete Soul Cast hovering over one brunet specimen. The understanding dawned at once. "How may I be of assistance?"

"First, find a place you won't mind collapsing. I may have to draw a little heavier on you than I usually would. Then, you can take this-" Quinn paused to hold out his hand for the transfer of information. He was now doubly glad that he'd shared his mind and worries with the older Gheyo. Bharin would understand. He always did. "And explain it to her," he pointed towards a barrier at the far end of the examination room where a short, spiky-haired woman paced in rapid steps.

"Her being…?" Bharin trailed off. A perplexed expression settled on his tanned features.

"Lady Ilsa Gorgens." Kyle's lips twitched. "The wards will clear her for entry into this room, if you calm her down enough to enter." The smirk slipped out. "It was nice knowing you."

"That stupid, idiotic child!" Ilsa fumed. She stopped in mid-pace, but one foot still tapped along the ground as if it wished to continue on without her. "I swear I will kill him with my own two hands and be done with it!" Her hands went to her head and she tugged at the spiky, black-tipped strands. "Surely that would be the most logical course of action?" The words were muttered beneath her breath as she pinched the bridge of her nose, trying and failing to regain her usual composure.

"Hardly, though I do not mind if you consider it for a moment." Bharin placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, staying her pacing. "Believe me," He said, gravely. "I often find myself suppressing the same urge." His dark eyes flickered to Quinn's hurrying figure and back. "Try to control yourself?" He suggested.
"Oh believe me, I am always in control." Ilsa huffed. "I warned him." She sucked in a breath and pressed her fist to her mouth for a moment, before twisting out from under the taller man's hand. "Arielle, what else was I supposed to have done? I did warn him and I told him to send word as soon as he was settled in here. I transported them all of halfway here!" Her rage was beautiful in the way that it animated her so. "I cannot run his life for him! That is neither my place nor my duty and he is old enough!"

Bharin frowned. He could understand her frustration. He dealt with it often enough and he knew what a fine line the responsibilities of mentorship demanded. To play guardian, not parent and teacher as well as confidante. And he already knew what would help. He hoped Quinn would forgive them a few minutes delay, Lady Ilsa was nowhere near a clear state of mind to be present in a room containing an active Soul Cast. "Do you need, mayhap, a-?"

"I do." Ilsa cut him off. "Oh, believe me I do. I know violence is not the answer, but so help me, right now, I would—I could—can you set spar?" She turned to him, with wide, hopeful, black-golden eyes. "I need to. I am so terribly sorry to ask this of you, I swear I would not even consider it, especially that we are strangers, were it not so very necessary. I beg of you, I need only a few minutes to—"

"Kyle, wards!" Bharin called out. "It is no inconvenience." He explained, stretching his arms out. "From one Gheyo to another." He inclined his head. "I was practicing before I 'ported here, so this would be appreciated as well. I am looking forward to the cage matches this year."

Ilsa managed a small smile. "As am I. Though I fear I am spending more time meditating than practicing, lately."

"There is unrest." Bharin agreed. "I have felt it as well, things are moving and debts are being recalled."

The golden eyes flickered a few shades darker. "You speak as if you know that of which you share."

"There is always truth to be known and spoken aloud." Bharin shook out his hands, testing the grip on his fingers. "Your name is familiar."

Ilsa laughed. "It had best be. As a daughter of a—ah, sorry, adopted daughter of the Tribal Chief, of the Earthen clans, I must craft and maintain a suitable reputation." She rolled her neck, carefully, then stretched out her arms in similar fashion to the Gheyo opposite of her.

A moment later, the barrier restrengthened itself. Bharin cracked his knuckles and stretched his arms again. "I know modified sets, the one from Kurtar, are you familiar with them?"

"Intimately." Ilsa rolled her neck and shoulders with practiced ease. "Thank you kindly."

"Do not thank me yet. We haven't even started."

"They your boys?"

"Quinn and Kyle? No. But you would think they were."

"Impressive. They certainly act the part."

"Hardly." Bharin settled into a ready stance. "They merely know not to cross me. Our first encounters were rather—difficult."
Ilsa mirrored his stance. "You came for which one?"

"The blond."

"Ah. I see. We're exceptions to the rule then, aren't we? Ones like us should never be mentors for those with such pure souls." Ilsa's smile was sad. "But I suppose, it's hard to help ourselves, isn't it?"

Bharin shrugged. "If the exception is necessary, then I would never question it."

This time, her smile lingered. "How strange that we've never had the pleasure of meeting before."

"Indeed. Please do not worry about your—mentee. Quinn is an excellent healer. I trust him with my life."

"Kalzik, right?" Ilsa threw the first punch. It was well met with an instant block. "I know the name. Good healers. All of them. Never knew one that wasn't. I suppose I shall have to take your word for it."

"Only if you wish to. I mean to put your mind at ease."

"I am glad to know Theo is in good hands." She ducked and threw the next jab. They settled into an easy rhythm of trading and blocking blows, increasing in speed with each alternate strike. "Can he really undo a Soul Cast?"

"You noticed?"

"Kind of hard not to. That kind of magic is rare. There are a few talented healers in my father's circle. I have seen the procedure a handful of times on his favorite Gheyos. It is a fine line between death and darkness."

"Not as dark as one would think." Bharin smiled. He leaned to the side, using the momentum to carry him full-circle. He swung easily, inspite of his bulk and flashed a hand towards her neck. "Merely a fragile process. If you are impure to begin with, then everything you touch would be tainted, yes?"

"High praise, then." Ilsa flinched and ducked, the hand passing harmlessly by a hair's breadth. "Hardly. Trials are merely the experiences in which we are purified by the fires of destiny."

"You sound like a friend I once knew."

"Ancient words are always a comfort in times of need." Bharin ducked and threw up a quick block with one forearm. "Your speed is notable."

"As is yours. For one of your size, I am surprised."

"Allow me to count that as a compliment."

"By all means, do."

"I shall. Please do not worry. Quinn is one of a kind by Kalzik blood."

"So it would seem."

"He mentioned something of Brindus bonds, can you actually do anything about that-?"
"I would not have said it, if I could not back it up." Ilsa smirked. She landed a solid swing to his left shoulder. "I invented the Brindus bonds, that does give me some leeway."

"I look forward to seeing your magic in play, then." Bharin smirked.

Ilsa grunted. "Stop dropping your right hook."

"You keep half-stepping on your dodges."

"Quick eye." Ilsa danced back a few steps and touched her right fist to her left shoulder. "That is enough. Thank you kindly. I think I can manage now."

"You will," Bharin murmured, softly. "We always do, for their sakes."

"That we do." The short woman straightened.

"I can never believe it." Kyle stood beside Quinn, holding up the necessary preparation items. He shook his head at the two Gheyos. "They bond over trying to kill each other."

Quinn looked up briefly, then rolled his eyes. "They're Gheyos and they're not trying to kill each other, idiot." He said, fondly. "If they were, they'd bring the whole clinic down. They can't help what is in their nature."

"That is not very reassuring." Kyle waved his wand again, strengthening the protective spells over Charlie and Harry's sleeping forms. "If they're not tearing for blood, then what do you call that?"

"Working off some steam." Quinn stripped his gloves and held out his hands. "If they wanted blood, there'd be blood. There isn't and I am grateful, therefore, we shall take what we are given. Are you ready?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"You're stalling and you're bad at it." Quinn took a deep breath. He checked his hands. Blue fire flickered on one hand, green on the other. He pressed his lips tightly together and the flames shifted colors as his magic separated and reworked itself together.

"Quinn?"

"Clear."

Kyle sighed. "Good. Tell me again why I have to call them?"

"Coward." Quinn retorted. "They won't bite." He waited while Kyle waved his wands over his bare hands. A cleansing tingle rippled through them and a moment later, a soft, white-gold glow settled on them. His own teal-hued magic began to lighten as the gold and white tendrils of energy mingled. "Thank you. Now go before this wears of."

"Hey! I'll have you know I can cast a long-term holding spell for—I'm going." Kyle did an about face. "Be careful, alright?"

Quinn didn't answer.

Ilsa sat at the head of the examination bed, with a pillow in her lap and Theo's upper body cradled on said pillow. She took his hands in hers and held them at his sides, waiting.
Quinn stood the right, with Bharin behind him. The older Gheyo stood just far back enough to give Quinn some breathing room, before he rested one massive hand on each of the Healer's shoulders. He'd opted to stay close instead of seated on a stool at the far end of the room.

Kyle stood opposite of Quinn on the other side of Theo and when he finally lifted his own brown-eyed gaze to Quinn, it was a split-second before his eyes suddenly burned bright teal.

_Quinn?_ Kyle tested. He couldn't move a single muscle.

_It's fine. Feels weird. Work on that._

_very funny. You good?_  

_Yeah. Do what you have to do. I am your loyal servant._

_what did you eat this morning?_  

_Focus, Quinn, focus._ Kyle would have smirked—if he could have. Sometimes Quinn was _too_ easy.  

*I'll try and keep my mind shut—er, sorry—open. Go for it._

_You spoil me. I will never manage without you._

_Good. I like being indispensable. Now hurry up. I hate standing still._

Quinn almost laughed. He studied the myriad of colors twined into the ball hovering above Theo's chest. There were three wispy white tendrils still anchoring the cast to Theo's body. Quinn checked himself once, twice and then thrice.

Then he reached for the glowing ball.

The first layer was about mid-level, Quinn decided. It was easy enough to observe. He searched for the typical seven strands of the rainbow and then for the two additional strands of energy that would connect Theo to his mates. First, he would have to find the colors belonging to said mates and then tie them off to the side, so he could work on the soul strands themselves.

Charlie's branch seemed to be a pale orange-yellow and it was short and ruffled, with strands fraying as Quinn gently coaxed it out from the tangled, multi-colored orb. He went to work, searching for Harry's neck, surprised to find a slender, pale green thread—rather than a thick, strand—as Charlie's had been, though it was smooth and stronger than it appeared at first glance. Quinn was impressed when the thin thread seemed to wrap all the other colors together, rather than being interwoven through it, as Charlie's had been.

_Interesting, Mr. Theodore Nott..._ The Healer hummed to himself as he continued on. Once those two strands were out of the way, he was free to do what he needed to, without affecting the new, mated, triad bond. The two strands of Charlie and Harry were wound into a single spool apiece, then, placed one on each side of Theo.

Now, Quinn was free to focus. He flexed his fingers and eyed the rainbow orb. He knew from the charts that Theo had Brindus Bonds, three of them, in the form of Caspered guardians, but he had yet to see them. Though of course, there were three, thick wisps of white anchoring the orb to Theo's chest.
Most likely those. Quinn made a mental note not to touch them as he cradled the orb and gently began to pull it apart, loosening the strands enough to poke his fingers through. His teal eyes flashed with determination and resolve, the magical energy in the room, rising rapidly.

There were a few patches where several strands of vivid scarlet scattered everywhere throughout the colored ball, and they were easier to pick apart, now that the others were loosened. Here, Kyle's hands came into play, as did Bharin's. With his mental command of both assistants, Quinn knew it would not affect Theo as he handed off the yellow and blue soul strands to Kyle's outstretched hands. Violet and orange went to Bharin and Quinn smiled at the remaining colors.

He took his time in separating the soul strands, using the extra available hands to hold stretches of the variously colored components. The lack of red, worried him. While most of the other colors were fairly well balanced out, the lack of that lovely, rich red hinted at something that Quinn hadn't expected. He could definitely work with this, but it would take time.

A lack of red meant a direct correlation to a lack of security, survival instinct and stability.

Three essential areas that any Alpha should be nearly overflowing in.

Quinn frowned.

A lack of security, either in Theo's position as reigning Alpha or certainty that he could function in his natural role, was a worrisome thing. The Healer was suddenly glad he'd sent for Lady Ilsa after all. From this perspective, he could understand how certain events had played out up to now. From what he had gathered from Kyle, the trio had arrived at the clinic appearing definitely worse for the wear than when they'd left the day before.

Theo in particular, had been somewhat out of it. According to Kyle, both Charlie and Harry had worried, but Theo had brushed them off, insisting that he was fine and it was nothing that a simple potion couldn't fix.

Trying to prove yourself? Quinn wondered. He turned enough to cast a cursory glance over Charlie and Harry, before returning his attention to Theo. The other two rested peacefully, which wasn't unusual in itself, except that with a mateship as new as thiers, it was rare for all mates to remain so—agreeable. He had used a natural sleep spell, one that would encourage them to rest on a deeper level—if their bodies desperately required it—apparently, it was actually working. They were fast asleep and it didn't look like they would wake without some external assistance.

Exhaustion was written on every inch of their features, a faint paleness lending some credibility to it and Quinn understood in a heartbeat, when he turned back to Theo. He gently nudged the resting subconscious of his patient. He would not wake Theo for a serious conversation yet, but he would offer what little reassurance that he could. Theo deserved it.

It isn't your fault, little Alpha. He continued to separate the colored strands. It would have helped you all to complete your mating as soon as physically possible, but, you did not fail them in the ways you are thinking. You should not judge yourself by their pasts, but rather their futures together with you. Sometimes, the most difficult responsibility is to stand back and allow others to find their own way. I am sure you have done all that you could, to protect your new mates. I am sure that you did what was necessary and secured all other options. Even yesterday, you were not at your best, but you are still stable enough for those two. Harry relied on you, Charlie looked to you. You may not see it yet, but they have already accepted you.

It did take time.
Quinn did not linger with his mental pep-talk. He simply left the message, with a gentle pulse of magic, before he began to consider the second phase of the Soul Cast. It took quite a while to unravel and he knew it would take even longer to rework them together. He did the best that he could, until the ball was now neater, more evenly formed and of a perfect spherical shape. The colors seemed to be all present in nearly the same amounts, with the exception of the bright red.

Eventually, Quinn was no longer able to avoid the white, caspered strands anchoring the cast to Theo, so he'd had to engage them. Thanks to Ilsa's presence, the Brindus Bonds were considerably easier to manipulate with her assistance. Her Earthen element was very deep and very strong, willing to work with Quinn's healing energy and able to mingle easily with Theo's magic.

Kyle silently expressed his gratitude for Quinn having physical control of his body. He hadn't been prepared for the three wispy, warriors that leapt from the pureblood's body at the first moment Quinn dared to touch the Soul Cast. They were invoked by the incantation of Terris, the Brindus bonds showing as golden shackles upon their wrists and necks.

It was a terrifying encounter by the Medic's standards, as the Caspered guardians were fierce and unyielding in every way. He was mildly grateful for having given Quinn control of his physical faculties. It helped him to remain standing still and impassive as Quinn had deftly swiped the other colored threads out of the way and directed Ilsa to take hold of the white anchoring threads.

When she'd finally held the separate threads in hand, the three guardians had come fully to the surface. She'd called them by name as they emerged.

*Terris Sukey. Terris Makindor. Terris Alomath.*

Proud, powerful caspers, they had screamed and raged at Ilsa in turn.

"You lying witch!" The tallest guardian, Terris Makindor, screeched. He rose up from the prone body, a wisp of whiteness from the waist down, a decorated soldier from the waist up. The medals and ribbons adorned his entire jacket and short cape, his hands bejeweled, even as his red eyes glowed fiercely. "An honest host's body, you said!" He growled. "One that does not lie! And you would deny this?"

Theo's body gave a painful jerk with an accompanying writhe.

Quinn's frown darkened and with a wave of his hand, restraints flickered to life, carefully anchoring Theo's body to the examination table. Kyle checked the bonds for comfort and durability with a flicker of his white-gold magic.

The next casper spoke without waiting for a prompt or reply. Priestly garb seemed to fit him, as Ilsa identified the second spirit as Terris Alomath. Also in his spirited form, a silvery-white wisp from the waist downwards as he stretched forward, towards Ilsa. "To the individual that cannot even keep his word, they are nothing but ash, burned from their pedestals and cast upon the passing winds." His own eyes burned a deep, dark red. "We made a pact, Earth Mistress and you have cheated us."

"Be thankful," Terris Sukey's whisper was soft and deceptively light. "That I am more forgiving than my fellow guardians." A bustier of flowing silks was her only adornment, save for a scepter in one hand, bearing a spiked circle. "I spared their lives," she gestured beyond the group at Theo's side and then to the lying forms of Charlie and Harry. "I spared them. I did not have to, but I did." She sighed. "Rightfully, you know they are Death's."

"And yet they do not bear Death's mark." Ilsa returned, calmly. "I would never take from Death,
that which is hers."

"You are hardly in a position to speak, Earth Mistress." Terris Makindor growled. "This is a blood pact. You will defy it?"

"She will not." Terris Alomath shifted, rising fully from Theo's still form to float, untethered above Quinn and the others. "Thought, it may only be, because her life is forfeit if she does and to leave this youngling without guidance, that would be against her own tarnished code of ethics, wouldn't it, Earth Mistress?"

"Ergen has chosen to favor me for whatever reasons he sees fit," Ilsa's golden eyes flared an even darker shade to bronze. "Do not pretend to think that one of your kind can know what he thinks!"

"We would never be so presumptuous!" Terris Sukey twisted free of the ball of colorful light, still swirling above Theo's chest. She loomed closer than before, her wispy form, somehow casting a darker shadow than expected. "Nor are we that naïve. You have much to answer for!"

"And I have much to say." Ilsa merely lifted her head, and kept one hand wrapped firmly around Theo's limp form, resting directly over his heart. "So you are going to wait and listen."

And then, Ilsa began to speak.

And when she did, she spoke with a terrible voice in an age-old tongue, calling up the very powers that Ergen, first bearer of Earth's element, had gifted to her.

Quinn closed his eyes and bowed his head under the weight of the ancient magic. Kyle mimicked the action without comment.

Time passed quickly.

And the matter was sorted in an odd, roundabout sort of way.

Quinn's quick hand threw up several sound barriers, protecting the ears of those present, while Kyle added his magic to the ward. He had briefly considered such a thing happening when he'd sent Kyle for the information to contact the Lady Ilsa.

He'd considered it and summarily dismissed it.

Theo was and still remained, his first priority for the moment.

And if it took housing three angry caspers and a grossly overpowered lady Gheyo, then he supposed this was one of those times where his Healer's heart had simply managed to surprise him yet again. He couldn't see Bharin, but he could still feel those steady hands on his shoulders and the comforting presence behind him, signaling that his guardian was there. Once they'd shown deference to the ancient magics, they were free to move about again.

Quinn hadn't wasted a single moment.

He snuck a glance towards Kyle, hoping his Medic fared the same, once Ilsa's powerful energy had passed over them. Generally, he preferred to do his Soul Casting with both Bharin and Kyle on the other side of an impenetrable barrier, with a dampener on their mental connections. Most of the time, he could avoid the issue of needing extra hands, by working with his wings fully extended and draping the colorful strands over the pointed spines. Lately, he'd needed the extra hands though, as the complicated casts had required more care than he could handle with his wings. It
wasn't worth risking the magic or the possible results when another pair of hands could be provided, via a willing Bharin or Kyle.

Now though, Quinn hoped that he'd made the right call. Soul Casting was an exhausting procedure—for some—and Kyle, he thought, might be one of those. The bowed head of forest green hair, prompted Quinn to tug gently on their mental link, lightly lifting the dampener to be sure that his friend was alright.

Quinn? There was a hint of mild panic in the single word. The dampener-!

It's fine. You're fine. I only lifted it a moment. Wanted to be sure you're alright.

Me? Kyle shifted in the equivalent of a mental facepalm. I'm fine, you idiot. What about you?

Perfectly fine as well—idiot.

Hey!

You started it. Quinn suppressed the urge to smile. A too cheerful spark in his emotions could alter the magic he currently channeled. How are you holding up?

I am not sleeping for a week.

…I just might join you.

That bad?

I shall only say that these are very…unique caspered guardians. I'm amazed they were able to spare Harry and Charlie. And I'm worried, if this is what Theo deals with on a daily basis, it is no wonder he ended up like this.

Really?

Really. It would seem that he has been dealing with more than he should have—all alone. Were there any next of kin listed in his records?

You read the same file I did.

Humor me. Were there?

No. The father was the last one living, a Nott Sr. He died some time ago, a few months?

Over the summer.

So it would seem. Kyle shifted uneasily. Why?

Then our little Alpha hasn't exactly had the chance to be testing his wings on his own, has he?

What?

He would've just started school immediately after the death, there are no training sessions listed under the physical activity section, so Lady Ilsa was not present to offer any comfort or aid, after the father's death, meaning that Theo was likely on his own for quite some time. Quinn frowned. On his own and then he started the school year, stumbled into a Submissive, somehow found a Beta and then wrangled his way here. I'm surprised. Impressed, but surprised. He's held himself together quite admirably.
Apparently, if you're so impressed. Kyle tugged at the mental bond, lightly. *How much longer?*
*The rooms will hold the energy, but I need to be able to access my wards. I can't do it with you kicking about in my head.*

*I'll see what I can do. Will they hold?*

*Probably for another hour or so. You know the ones I used.*

*Mm.*

*What language is that anyway? Do you know it?* Kyle made sure not to look in Ilsa's direction.

Quinn's lips quirked. *Not particularly, but it is probably a language of the ancients. Just pretend that you didn't hear any of it. And whatever you do, don't look. No eye contact. It's disrespectful and this has to be the oddest set of caspers I've ever had the displeasure of witnessing. Hopefully, she'll let us know when she's through.*

*She'd better. So just keep up the wards?*

*Yes. I'll hold the earplugs.*

*Generous to a fault, you charming devil.* Kyle teased.

*…shut up, Kyle.* And Quinn mentally recalled the dampening barriers to their original state.

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The Caspers were forced to obey.

In the face of Ergen, they could not deny him and Ilsa brooked none of their excuses nor protests as she wagered for her apprentice's life and that of his two unconscious mates. In the constant trading of insults and proposed compromises, the changing of the bindings she had already recast once before, a solution had to be found.

The trio refused to rework the already wrought magic, but they accepted that they would no longer be allowed to fight inside of Theo. They argued quite viciously with Lady Ilsa, who, in the end, demanded that they finish the discussion elsewhere and allow Theo and Quinn to continue with the healing process.

Quinn had only been able to watch helplessly as a mistress of magic wielded her might and forced the beings to settle on a different alternative. Bharin's hands were a calming, steady presence behind him and Quinn was thankful for it. Kyle's presence was welcome as well, his hands helpful and his magic, carefully twining around Quinn's own teal wisps.

When the Caspered suddenly hissed, jerking their host's body along with their displeasure, Quinn had it. He reared up, wings bursting forth in a flare of blood, power and dominance.

The blue-green in his eyes swirled to a true teal shade, burning with fire. "You will watch yourselves!" He grated. "I do not care what your grievances are. I respect that which you are, but you shall not visit Death today with a soul for her collection. Now, if I understand correctly, this is your creator, yes?" He gestured towards the still half-entranced Ilsa. "Then kindly take your discussion elsewhere. This body will remain here and I shall be tending to it, from the 'tender mercies' you have wrought upon it! Out. Now!"

"Please tend to Theodore. I will return as soon as I am able." Ilsa tipped her head in greeting. The
When Theo woke, the first thing he did was frown.

Quinn smiled, warmly. "Welcome back to the land of the wakened."

Theo blinked, slowly. He licked his lips with the same, careful slowness.

"Water?" Kyle offered. He approached with a chilled glass of purified water. He held the straw up to Theo's mouth and coached him through slow sips and careful swallows. "And nicely done. Would you like some more? I could add a touch of sugar, if you like."

"Or blood." Quinn added. "Perhaps just some blood on its own?"

Theo thought about it for a moment and then shook his head. "Harry and Charlie?"

"They are fine, remember?" Quinn moved slowly so his hands could be seen, helping to turn Theo's head to the side, so he could see across the room where Harry and Charlie were within view, protected by Kyle's wards and a shimmering barrier of pale cream-colored energy.

A soft sigh of relief left his lips and Theo's body relaxed once more. "I've been out for a little while, haven't I?" He tugged at his wrist and grimaced when the movement was pointless, thanks to the restraints. "What did I do?"

"Pardon?"

The golden eyes looked away. "I remember sitting down and then everything turning dark. I remember waking, I think. I'm not sure."

Quinn was silent for a moment, then he waved Kyle off to tend to the other two. "I think," he began, softly. "That we need to have a little talk, hmm?"

"...and so I would suggest speaking to your mentor. We all bear burdens of many kinds and weights throughout the centuries. There is no rule that insists that we must do it on our own. I am sure you will find there are those who are willing to help and support you, if you should only ask. Now, if you do not feel comfortable discussing this with your mentor, I am able to listen and advise you to some degree. I have a third-level certificate for counseling and I am happy to make myself available, should it be necessary."

Theo half-smiled. "...it is probably necessary." He acknowledged. "But I don't see why it would be a problem."

"There isn't a problem, until you find yourself here and those two are over there." Quinn gave a slight jerk of his head. "Otherwise, there isn't a problem."

"I see."

"Do you?"
Theo tested the bonds holding him down to the examination bed. "Are these really necessary for a little chat?"

Quinn's lips quirked into a near smile. "How familiar are you with Soul Casting?"

Golden eyes blinked in disbelief. "I have heard of it…" Theo's voice trailed off uncertainly. Worry creased his brow. "You are not, by any chance, suggesting that—"

"Good. It always helps when you've heard of it before."

"…and that's why I'd like you to speak to her or to someone you trust, if not, then someone who is at least qualified in handling drangel matters. You might be surprised at the clarity of thought that comes with sharing and explaining your thoughts." Quinn smiled. "As I said before, a Soul Cast does not lie, because you cannot lie to yourself on such a level. You always know the truth."

Theo gave a tiny nod. "…I understand."

"Good. I am glad. Now, there's another issue we need to cover as well."

Theo swallowed. "How many are there?"

Quinn blinked. "…I wasn't counting."

"…and so the best thing would be to solidify your triad bond as soon as possible. If you do not have suitable facilities to do this, the clinic has private rooms available for a few hours on request." Quinn checked the floating chart again and then the time. Ilsa was taking a little longer than he'd expected. He mentally checked the repaired Soul Cast again.

As long as Theo didn't move and Quinn remained by his side, keeping the bobbing, colorful ball hovering above him, things would be fine. He looked to said patient in time to witness the reaction to his earlier statement.

Theo blushed a faint shade of pink. "Er, it's not quite that we haven't had the facilities more of the, ah, time."

"Time?" Quinn frowned. "I understand there must be a great deal that I do not know of your situation, but if you seek sanctuary here, in Nevarah, during Hunting Season, then sheer dumb luck is the only reason you're all still together. Your bonds are open and raw and Harry will not be able to solicit any potential mates when there is one present who hasn't been fully claimed." His brow furrowed. "Which does surprise me somewhat, as the alpha, you should be driven to complete them. The same for your Beta, seeking to either dominate you or submit to you. He shouldn't be this—complacent in his ranking when you have yet to be fully mated. That's another side effect to what I mentioned earlier."

"I am not trying to accuse you—"

"No, it's fine. I know. I really do know." Theo fiddled with his hands for a moment. He finally sighed. "It is not that—easy though. Not the way you put it. It seems that way, but it really isn't."

"I am not suggesting that it is." Quinn said, calmly. "I am merely explaining why things may have been a tad more difficult for you than you expected." He patted one shoulder. "You would definitely find it easier if you were to take my advice on this, at least, if nothing else. Might I suggest tonight?"

This time, Theo really did blush deeper than a sheer pink hue.
"Sit." Kyle nudged a stool over from one end of the room. "And check the charts I'll send you in a moment. I think Harry's having a nightmare."

Theo twisted against the bonds. "Wake him."

"Stop that." Quinn frowned at him. "You cannot move from those and twisting will not help. Kyle, you know how to handle that. Please do not-"

"You have to wake him up." Theo bit his lip. "The nightmares are horrible and he's not easy to wake."

"Kyle will handle it." Quinn reassured him. "He's had these nightmares since you've known him, then?"

"Yes. I think he's had them for a long time."

"Hmm. Does he ever sleep peacefully?"

Theo half-smiled. "When I hold him or Charlie does."

Quinn nodded, slowly, tucking the information away for later use.

"…and so Harry told us about the seals."

"That was very brave of him." Quinn smiled.

"Is that why you had us leave?"

"Well, at the risk of sounding repetitive, you were not completely bonded as a starting triad ought to be and that was a deciding factor. Your Harry had no magic of any kind, no permitted access to your password—in its present state—and your beta reeked of poisoned blood." Quinn held out his hands. "What would you have had me do?"

"Nothing." Theo tried to sit up again. He scowled when Quinn's hands urged him to stay still. "Nothing at all. I am not, I was merely—never mind. I can't—this—I want to move."

"You cannot." Quinn scolded. He tapped the brunet lightly on the nose. "Stop fighting the bonds. If you disturb the Cast, I'll have to start over and goodness knows how that will turn out. It is literally sitting on your chest."

"I can't see it!"

"You're not supposed to!" Quinn resisted the urge to roll his teal-colored eyes. "It is forbidden for one to see their own cast. You know that. Now please settle down. Harry is fine, Charlie is fine, you will be fine—eventually. Now, as I was saying, on that previous note, I would suggest seeking a Gheyo of your own as well." Quinn sighed. "They are often neutral enough to take the place of our resident ones, to allow an impartial and fair appointment, regardless. Meaning that if you were to visit another clinic, then you would not have to worry quite as much as you did when Dahlia escorted you out. Also, you are in Nevarah and you will find that most of the situations you may stumble into are best resolved through them."

"So I've been told." Theo murmured.

"There is one thing you can help me with though," the Healer was on his feet, all business and
intensity once more. "Harry cast a spell on you before we came here. I don't suppose you know what it is or what it was?"

Theo blinked. "What?"

"You were unaware of it?"

"It felt like my brains were scooped into a container and pressed out through the corners." He said, wryly. "I wasn't exactly able to notice much of anything."

"Has he done this before?"

"...I'm not sure."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Well, this morning there was something that well," Theo hesitated. "This morning was a little complicated..."

Finally, Quinn paused to hover at his side. "Might I make another suggestion?"

Theo's golden gaze flickered to him, worry, caution and a hint of defiance shimmering in their light-hued depths. He inclined his head in silent acceptance. "You've made plenty already."

Quinn stifled a smile. "Indeed I have. Actually, might I suggest seeking a Nevarean mate?" Quinn studied the impassive face.

The only hint of surprise from Theo, flittered across those golden eyes, before all expression became shuttered once more.

The Healer fixed a light smile on his face. "I do not mean to be forward, but I would suggest a Pareya or two, however your Submissive is inclined. It will travel a long way in easing some of the transitions between your current life and dragel life."

"Such as?" Theo prompted.

"Pareya would insist that you all take proper care of yourselves." Quinn's mouth twitched. "Insist to the point of physically doing it for you and all Nevarean-raised Pareya would be able to lend some traditional stability to your circle. They need to look after their mates and so they would find pleasure in tending to all of you, while also helping to smooth over some of your mated bonds. Besides a Gheyo, which would be purely for political and social maneuvering, as well as physical protection—they tend to be protective of Pareya, so it would bring them all full circle and you would not have to worry."

"I am—we are—only in Nevarah for as long as it is safe. It wouldn't be right to uproot them from everything familiar when it is time to return." Theo gave up trying to test the bonds.

"Safe?"

"Safe." Theo turned away, with no intention of elaborating further.

"I see. Then you definitely might want to secure a Gheyo before you leave. They do not mind moving much as long as you allow them plenty of time for physical outlets, they adapt quickly enough." Quinn extended his hand to take the proffered needle from Kyle. "Normally, nearly all of our procedures are non-invasive, with the exception of this one. It might pinch a bit."
Theo twitched when the slender needle slid under his skin. "What is that for?"

"Essence." Quinn murmured. "It would be difficult to explain, but I need your magic and your blood in the same way, a ceremonial cut would not hold the same significance." He pursed his lips. "Just a moment, then you may speak again."

A moment passed.

"What do you intend to do with that?"

"Read it and then destroy it." Quinn said, calmly. "We never keep samples of these, it isn't right and those that do, deserve what comes to them." He set the syringe on a floating platter beside him and drew up a little bottle with green gel inside. "This will heal it. It might burn."

Theo choked back a squawk. It did burn.

Quinn looked to his left. The syringe on the platter shimmered. The Healer picked it up, gingerly, and crossed the room where he fed it into a machine. There were a few beeps, flashing lights, and then a manual confirmation required, before a print-out scrolled from one corner. "Ah, here we go." The sample was ejected a moment later and Quinn walked back to the examination bed. He held it up, in plain view, and calmly burned it to ash with a bolt of green-blue flame. "And that's that. Now, you have three caspered guardians, three very vicious guardians, I might add. Could you tell me about them?"

Theo hesitated. "Ilsa is really the best one to speak about them. I've—I haven't had them as long as she has. She can explain." He shifted, uncomfortably, as best as the restraints would allow. "Where are they anyway? Is that why you can't finish the Cast?"

"Something like that. They were anchoring you." Quinn explained. "You have quite a bit of the earth element running through your veins. I am impressed."

Theo flushed lightly. "It's nothing—important. But I can feel they're nearby, I can feel that she's somewhere close. I don't see her though," his eyes grew wide. She isn't in the room, is she?" The golden eyes darted about, nervously.

Quinn settled on the stool once more. "She is here, but not in this room. She ah, excused herself, after I drew the Cast out and your caspers came to your defense."

"Sukey, Makindor, Alomath." Theo took a shuddery breath. "Those are their names. They like it better when you use them." His fingers twitched.

"Thank you for sharing." Quinn waved Kyle away. "And you care for them?"

"They have taken care of me well before my time." Theo said, simply. "It is hard not to. They were the first friends I ever had."

"I see." Quinn was thoughtful for a moment. "So why were they called out in the first place? And how is it that your Harry called them out the way he did?"

Theo smiled, wanly. "Funny you should mention that," He said, softly. "It is a rather long story."

"I have plenty of time." Quinn returned the smile.

"I see." Quinn said, at last. "That is quite a—tale."
"Nearly everything to do with Harry, usually is." Theo smiled fondly. "I am beginning to grow accustomed to it already. You said you had a sister? An alpha one?"

"I do, actually." Quinn said, lightly. "She turned sixteen on the last Hunting Season and had already formed a Friendship Turning Circle. They all presented themselves on the Eve of Blessing and sealed a mateship of twelve."

"Twelve?" Theo stared. "That's-" he looked away and swallowed. The very thought of that many mates sent his head spinning. It would never work. Surely it could not. He hoped the young woman was still sane. To think that she was two years young than him and able to participate in a planned mateship was mind-boggling.

"Yes, twelve." Quinn's smile held a hint of pride. "A bit on the large side, but they are content and well-matched to each other. They have four children at present. This Hunting Season marks their tenth-year, first-decade anniversary."

"How…lucky."

The teal eyes regarded the younger dragel. "Shareena was sixteen—and, as I said before, she was the Alpha. There was very little luck involved. She has maintained her position with some difficulty at first, but it has been a learning experience for all of them. Our family always supports our own and we have always supported them. She claims it has made a difference. Her mates are within their second decades and fifth centuries, it is well varied. Age is naught but a label that we use when we do not know any better."

"A useful label sometimes." Theo countered. "She was very lucky."

"More hard work than luck." Quinn shot back. "And I come from a very large family. We all stood beside her. Anyone, with the right support, can do anything." He sighed, teal-eyes narrowing. "Your mentor, when she gave you those three, what was the reasoning behind it?"

"Pardon?"

"Why did she give you those three?"

"Oh. Huh." Theo was quiet for a moment. "She said, she wanted someone who could protect me when she wasn't there."

"I see. Interesting."

"How much longer?"

"Pardon?"

Theo fidgeted. "If I know my Oretta, I'll have an earful the moment you deem me well enough to stand on my own two feet. I'd rather have some warning."

Quinn chuckled. "I know the feeling. Bharin is the same. Your charming mentor will return in a little bit, I believe she intended to have some—strong words with your caspers."

"She is too kind." Theo closed his eyes with a faint smile on his face.

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BLAISE
It was a very unassuming manor.

Or so he'd originally thought.

Now, Blaise stood before the sprawling gothic mansion, indigo eyes flickering from the sharp black spires to the equally ominous, wrought fencing that lined the entire front of the property. It seemed more like a gated prison than the local training camp for new Gheyos. He summoned up the tendrils of courage that had prompted him to travel this far.

In hindsight, now that he considered it, perhaps he should have spoken to Terius when the man was somewhat less occupied with Severus and Draco.

Definitely less occupied.

Blaise swallowed hard.

There was a small buzzer installed near the small, shuttered window to the watchman's post. He lifted a hand to press it and then hesitated.

A soft flurry of chirps and chitters came from the little, black scaled creature on his shoulder and the Italian resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Of course. He'd almost forgotten about the pesky Nytura. "Would you stop that already?" He snapped at the thing.

Intelligent dark eyes regarded him, silently, then began to dig its tiny claws further through his traveling cloak with the intent of securing said claws in his shoulder. Blaise shifted, trying not to shrug it off or encourage it at the same time. He couldn't understand why the little thing had latched onto him, especially if it was supposed to be Potter's and Nott's. He frowned.

He'd left before the newly mated trio had returned from their healer appointment. It bothered him to be in the same quarters in his current capacity. It also bothered him when he'd been asked about the extent of his powers and hadn't been able to conjure much of anything to substantiate his claims. His mother was a good teacher, with the exception that she didn't teach very often.

The lovely Mrs. Zabini spent most of her time courting, flirting, marrying and well, murdering.

Blaise winced and silently asked forgiveness for acknowledging the darker side of his darling mother. She had been a good teacher and now, he hoped that he could learn a little more. It had become increasingly more difficult to restrain the newer, bloodthirsty side of his personality since his inheritance had dawned. He found himself wanting to settle things with his fists—hang all pureblooded traditions and training aside—and to move.

He hadn't felt comfortable staying at Hogwarts nor at home and then, he hadn't felt very safe either when Terius had arrived at Hogwarts. But it had spiked his interest and he'd been able to wrangle some information on Neverah out of his mother. It had sounded like the most wonderful, perfect place he could imagine. Then, quite by accident, he'd managed to mix himself up with a certain Potions Master and to be present when the entire group of Potter, Nott and Weasley had 'ported over to the otherworldly realm.

The Nytura chirped helpfully in his ear and Blaise resisted the urge to smack it. It was far too cheerful and chirpy for his liking, but something suggested that it was tougher than it looked. He sighed. "Very well. I will knock."

And he did.
He was ushered into a lovely, expensive sitting room and served lemon scones with light green tea, while the lady of the house, an esteemed Matron by the name of Lady Paielda, said she would see him. It was tastefully decorated with rich wall hangings, printed lampshades and velvets and silks screaming of status and power. A coat of arms hung over the fireplace and smaller crests flanked it.

Blaise managed to hide his nerves behind the years of pureblood upbringing, that allowed him to lounge comfortably on the settee with Shadow wrapped around his shoulders, a cup of tea in hand, the saucer held perfectly beneath it and his dragel senses keenly aware of the fact that a maid nor a house elf had served him. Rather, it had been a young redheaded dragel, dressed in actual, plated armor, bared midriff and long, lean limbs on display.

She'd introduced herself as Mika and explained that Lady Pai, as she was oft addressed, would be with him shortly.

So Blaise really was mostly prepared for anything, but the entire West wall of the parlor to come crashing in. He was just surprised enough to stay sitting exactly where he was, as Shadow snarled softly at his ear.

A tall, muscled woman towered over a smaller figure, two curved swords held flush against her arms as she didn't halt in her attack.

The dust covered figure rolled to the side and scrambled to her feet, amidst the wreckage. The white, crumbled stone was smudged against coffee-colored skin and Blaise found himself staring in fascination. The young woman was clad in barely more than what would be a swimsuit costume among the female persuasion of Hogwarts, with a prominent scar slashing across her face and downward to her clothed hip.

Mika cleared her throat beside him and Blaise instinctively straightened even more. He averted his eyes in gentlemanly fashion, somewhat relieved when Shadow crept from his shoulder to sit in his lap. At least, then his hands would have something to do, as holding the cup and saucer for much longer, would give away with the faintest of tremors now in his hands.

"What is it, Mika?" The older woman whirled in a vicious swirl of power and speed, her swords gleaming.

"A guest to see you, Lady Pai." The redhead said, respectfully. She also, did not look directly at the fighting duo.

"Then see them in." Lady Pai snapped.

"To another room?" Mika suggested. "I had already done so before you…smashed the wall in."

"Just spit it out, Mika." The younger woman spoke. She tossed her head for the messy braid of hair to flip over one bony, sweat-slicked shoulder.

"He is here?" Mika ventured.

Both women turned as one and Lady Pai's hand flashed out a split-second after wards, knocking the younger woman to her knees. She held her there, with both swords angled, one against her throat and the other, pressing down that dark-haired head with the flat of the blade. "My apologies." Lady Pai tipped her head in greeting. "I was not expecting anyone today." She waved a hand at the wall.

Chunks of concrete and metal leapt up to replace themselves in the giant, gaping hole in the wall, as if nothing had ever happened before. The younger woman shifted, uneasily, the blade unyielding against her neck as the one pressing her head downward was removed.
"Enough, Dahlia." Lady Pai sheathed both swords and then thwapped the top of Dahlia's head. "Yield."

"I do, under protest." Dahlia shot back. She ducked away from the second hand and quickly rolled up to her feet. Her brow furrowed. "And I refuse to elaborate, I will hold my silence."

"Then you may deal with this." The older Gheyo said, brusquely. "Report to me at the end of today—and you do have until then to change your mind."

"I will not change it." Dahlia returned, steadily. "It would be pointless of me to do so, after holding out for this long."

"Be gone." With a flip of her light brown crop of hair, the esteemed lady of the house stalked out of the newly repaired parlor. "Mika!"

"Coming, your ladyship."

Dahlia watched them both leave. She ran a hand through the tangle of her sweaty hair and then scowled at the unruly braid. She tugged the leather wrapping free at the end and began to unravel it. "Hello, please excuse all of that." She gave a light tip of her head. "My name is Dahlia. I take no family name. I am simply Dahlia from the house of Lady Paielda. Did you come on business to see her ladyship? I fear I have not set her in the best of moods for the day."

"Er, no. Not quite." Blaise shifted to his feet, uncertainly. Shadow scampered back up to his shoulder. "I was—sent here, well, pardon me. I meant that I had inquired as to local training camps and—"

Dark brown eyes flickered over at the movement. "You have a Nytura?"

"Not of my own accord, I assure you."

Dahlia smirked. "They are pesky, loyal little critters like that." She gave a smile. "So, how may I be of assistance? Shall I assume you are interested in joining a the Royal Army, searching for a military circle or merely in need of fellow sparring partners for the upcoming fights?"

Blaise blinked. "Well…"

"You can think about it." Dahlia's smile warmed. "Come this way, we can walk and talk."
RECAP: At the clinic, in the examination room, Quinn spells the trio to sleep while urging Kyle to prepare for what lies ahead. He starts with Theodore, worried about the young alpha's lack of response and phantom pains. To better understand the situation, Quinn decides to use a SOUL CAST, he summons Ilsa and Bharin to come and help with the procedure. The results show that Theo has been suffering from mental and psychological issues relating to stability and security, as well as his ability to be a good alpha. Harry had a nightmare and Kyle went to tend to him.

Character Note: Blaise and Shadow turn up at the house where Dahlia's military circle resides. He is looking to be trained as GHEYO (fighter).

NEVARAH: HEALTH CLINIC

By the time Quinn had finished with Theo, Ilsa had indeed returned.

Kyle and Bharin were busy at the opposite end of the room, tending to Charlie and Harry.

Quinn returned to Theo's side, waking the napping dragel to meet his stern-faced mentor.

Golden eyes met golden eyes and Theo swallowed hard.

Quinn noted this development with interest. He hadn't wanted to pry too much, as Theo seemed to be a locked box full of prickled corners and rough edges. He was surprised to see this equally prickly and touchy Gheyo having such an effect on his patient. She returned without the three floating spirit forms beside her and instead, her golden eyes seemed fixed on Theo alone.

"...Oretta." The brunet acknowledged. He cast his gaze downward in a show of deference and respect.

"Theodore." She returned. Her golden gaze flickered away from Quinn, then about the room before it settled on Theo once more. "How are you feeling?"

His smile was bittersweet. "Chained. Trapped…drowning."

A pained expression flickered across her face. Ilsa drew in a breath and softly released it. She understood what he did not outright say. "Are those restraints necessary?" She inquired, at last.

Quinn frowned. "Absolutely. The slightest movement can undo everything that I have already done." He waved a hand to show the rewoven Soul Cast shimmering as it hovered above Theo's chest.

"And if I hold him down?" Ilsa met the teal-eyed glare steadily. "Would that help?"

Quinn blinked. He looked from her to Theo. It wasn't something that he was entirely sure he ought to allow. But then again, this circle had been different from the moment they had entered the clinic.
As a Healer, it was his responsibility to adjust to them and now appeared to be one of those times. Still, he had to be sure. "You would—restrain him of your own accord—and he would submit?"

"He will not move." Ilsa murmured without the slightest hesitation.

Quinn was momentarily shocked speechless.

She studied the resting figure, then shucked off the metal gauntlet on her right hand. "You may judge me by what has taken place, but I do not expect you to understand." She smiled, thinly. "We have an understanding between us."

And here, for one eerie moment, both pairs of golden eyes darkened to the exact same hue of honey-brown.

The Healer hesitated—one last time.

Then Ilsa spoke. Two single words. "Be still." Standing beside the center of the bed, she stretched a hand and curled it gently around Theo's exposed throat. She squeezed, lightly and then gave a single nod to Quinn, her eyes never leaving Theo's. "He will be fine. He fought the bonds since they were engaged, did he not? I give you my word that he will not undo what you have done."

Theo had indeed fought the protective bindings, but Quinn wasn't about to answer that outright. He was more impressed and interested in the interplay between mentor and mentee. This incident was yet another one of those variables he had counted and dismissed, knowing they would work themselves out later. He studied the pair for a long, silent moment, then clicked his fingers. The bonds of energy dissolved, but the thread of blue-green fire lingered at his fingertips, just in case.

But it wasn't necessary.

The tension drained out of Theo at once. His body went lax, the agitation slowly fading away. His gaze remained locked on that of his mentor's. He did not fight her grip on his throat, simply lying still and relaxed.

A position of vulnerability and trust, in the face of a show of dominance and strength.

Quinn tucked that moment away for later. This was a pair that was, perhaps, deeper intertwined than his own relationship with Bharin. His lips quirked, faintly and he waited a moment longer, before he began to coax the newly rewoven ball to mesh together. The Soul Cast hummed to life beneath his fingertips and Quinn kept an eye on Theo, noting that his patient was awake this time.

He was pleasantly surprised to note that neither mentor nor mentee had broken their locked stare.

That was good.

Quinn began to submerge the Cast when he realized what was missing. He frowned. He had wondered if she would call him on it, but it appeared that she would not. Theo certainly wouldn't be able to say anything on the subject, as no individual ever saw their own Soul Cast. "Lady Ilsa?"

She grunted, not bothering to correct him.

"The anchoring threads…?" He teased the Cast, lightly, keeping it momentarily suspended. It was not good to recall it multiple times in the same casting.

"You will not need them."
His fingers twitched. He had guessed this might happen. It was why he'd woven the cast together—at
after the lady had left. But he had to sure, just the same, "…pardon?"

"The Caspers are not required to anchor him. They are no longer contracted to do so. If Theo still
wishes it, he will make a new pact and contract on his own terms, not mine." She did not look at
the Healer.

Quinn frowned. His throat itched and he suppressed the urge to rub it. The speaking spell would be
wearing off shortly. He hadn't said all he'd wanted to yet. How unfortunate. His body would not be
able to handle recasting it so close together. A few hours lag was an absolute necessity. He tried
not to sigh. "You made this choice for him?"

"No." Ilsa said, lightly. "It can only be terminated by him, but I do not think a healing clinic is the
best of places to seal a contract with potentially destructive caspers."

"Thank you for your consideration." Quinn could barely keep the sarcasm from his voice as the
Soul Cast begins to sink into Theo's exposed chest, the life energies in the body, flickering to life
and stretching up to hold and accept it back.

"Some things are best left unexplained." Ilsa said, softly. "You have been professional and
compassionate in your work. I thank you for it, but please, do not interfere with this."

When the lady Gheyo turned to look at him, Quinn felt the weight of Theo's gaze as well. He
pursed his lips together and gave the faintest of nods as the Soul Cast completed itself. He saw it
evidenced as the wheezing, gasping breath that made Theo's hands snap up to his throat to claw at
the restraining hand. He watched, interested, when Ilsa did not release her grip, but rather,
smoothed the chocolate-colored waves off of his sweaty forehead, in a soothing motion. Theo's
hands wrapped around her wrist and he tugged, but she did not release him yet.

"Is there anything else?"

"Pardon?"

"If you do not require him for any further treatments, I shall be taking charge of him."

Quinn did allow his frown to show through; this time, but he directed it to Theo. "You need rest
and quiet." He said, meaningfully. "And some sugar and blood would help significantly, though I
would recommend that it is not from your Charlie or your Harry, in their present states. You may
find yourself exhausted while your magic rescripts itself, so it is to your best interests that you seek
a relaxing place and stay there."

"Thank you kindly." Ilsa returned.

"One moment," Quinn cautioned. "Before you leave…"

"Handle it. Just handle it. Of course, he wants me to handle it." Kyle muttered to himself, as he
hurriedly approached the thrashing form of one Harry Potter. Worry creased his young forehead
when he saw the skinny limbs flailing about, half-tangled in the standard issue clinic sheets.
"Harry? Harry, wake up, please!" With a twitch of his fingers, he shifted and reworked the wards
around the beds and the barriers that were soundproofed, allowing him to interact soundlessly with
Harry.

He threw out his magic in the trademark wisps of white-gold strips that caught hold of Harry's
ankles and wrists, moving with them in controlled jerks and twists. Kyle snatched the sheet out of
the way and called up the current readings on the patient's vitals. He frowned at the readings and then at the fact that Harry wasn't reacting to the magic that should have prompted him awake. He did not want to sedate the brunet.

"...not good, not good...not good at all...come on, Harry. Wake up." Kyle lurched forward and caught the shoulders of the thrashing Harry. His eyes widened as he found himself exerting a tad more pressure than he'd expected. That was definitely not good. His head snapped around to see Charlie's resting form. Kyle muttered softly to himself and then raised his voice. "Wikhn? You out there? I could use a hand."

There was a pause, as Kyle continued to carefully wrestle with the desperately fighting Harry. He couldn't let the smaller brunet tumble off the bed and the sticking charm he'd tried was immediately repelled. It was a scarce-half second before the requested Gheyo materialized by the Medic's left elbow. "Help me wake him." Kyle ducked one flailing hand. "My magic is rolling off of him. I'm not sure why—but he'll hurt himself if he keeps this up." He tried to keep the lightest of pressures on Harry's thin shoulders and slender limbs. For someone of his size, Harry fought viciously against whatever plagued him on the dreamscape, the actions translating in the erratic swipes of his arms and kicks of his legs.

Wikhn looked from him to the sleeping Charlie. He made the connection faster than the worried Medic. "He'll be fine. Wake that one. He's part of his circle, isn't he?"

"The Beta." Kyle returned. "Quinn spelled them to sleep. I'll have to wake him with something else. There's a vial on the counter." Kyle gave a jerk of his head. "It should work, though I hadn't planned to use it until about an hour from now."

"Can you adjust it?"

"If you wouldn't care to hold this?" Kyle leaned away from the still fighting Harry.

They traded.

Wikhn ducking in as Kyle ducked out, his hands sure and quick. He caught Harry in a spare sheet and wrapped it carefully around the flailing figure. A moment later, Medic Kyle busied himself at Charlie's side, rousing the sleeping Beta from the magic-induced sleep. He coaxed the waking redhead to sit up and teased out his wings, while keeping up a soothing stream of murmured explanations.

"...Harry?" A sleep-fogged Charlie managed to mumble.

An awkward handful of minutes trickled by as Kyle woke Charlie enough from the sleep, twisting Quinn's spell to release the redhead enough so that they could unite both Beta and Sub.

Harry's struggles eased when Charlie's broad arms circled around him, awkwardly, to hold, his wings curving around to give warmth and privacy. He still pressed against the hold, he still shifted, restlessly and his shoulders shuddered as if his wings would emerge at any given moment.

"Has he done this before?" Medic Kyle moved about the duo in slow, carefully tracked movements. Wikhn had backtracked to holding a relaxed stance by the door, his pink-red eyes ever watchful and his sword missing from his ensemble. Kyle helped Charlie to settle comfortably on the merged examination beds in a cross-legged position with the tormented Harry cradled in his arms. "At all? Ever?"

Charlie grimaced. He could feel the sleep spell fading the longer he fought to stay awake and
succeeded. "Once." He allowed. "No, twice, I think. Once before, this—us—" and here he gave a slight nod to himself. "Before we were—bonded—one night he had a nightmare and I couldn't wake him. I tried everything. A water charm, shaking him, Ennervate." He tried to shrug and half-wince'd instead when one of Harry's half-hearted flails clocked him in the jaw. The sheet trick had been a good one, it helped him to keep a better hold on Harry, though it seemed as if the moment, Harry had actively caught his scent, his panic had receded by half. "Nothing worked, until Shadow came, then he just kind of relaxed and kept on sleeping."

"Shadow?" Kyle perked a brow.

"A—our," Charlie amended. "Nytura—at least, that's what Harry told me it was. I've never seen or known of one before and I have more than witnessed my fair share of oddities in Romania." He frowned. "It stopped the nightmare, but Harry didn't wake."


"The second time was this morning, I suppose." Charlie twisted to look around him. "Where's Theo?"

"With Quinn. He's fine." Kyle reassured. "There's wards and barriers between us and him, however, so please do not develop any sudden, inexplicable urges to begin shattering them. What happened the second time?"

"He started to toss and turn and then he woke up and said he wanted Theo." Charlie's frown deepened. "And that's when he stopped acting like himself. Can Theo come and—?"

"I'll ask Quinn," Kyle interrupted. "What do you mean, he stopped acting like himself?"

Charlie let out a huff. "I meant just that. He started acting like—"

"Did you try biting him?"

"-pardon?" Blue eyes blinked incredulously.

Kyle rolled his eyes in response. "Did you try calming him by biting over your claim mark? You have claimed him, he bears two marks, unless that one is not yours, though I doubt it, because your scent is all over it."

Charlie hesitated. "I can't."

"…because?"

"Theo." The redhead shrugged. "Something about blood purity and the ritual that I had to—well," the Dragon Tamer rubbed the back of his neck, sheepishly. "I know the technical terms, but it doesn't make it any easier to explain—"

"Oh." Kyle cocked his head to the side. "That's easy. No worries there. You don't have to actually use your fangs, just put your mouth to the mark and try to manipulate it, with the intent to calm and bring peace to your mate." He shrugged. "Usually, only the Alpha would have such control over the Sub, in this case, your Theo, but Betas have it to some extent as well, and so do the Royals, if you should ever take a Royal as a mate. It puts you all on an even keel."

Charlie hesitated.
"Would you prefer some privacy?" Kyle asked, courteously. "I am sure I can busy myself for a moment," he turned his back to the couple, without waiting for an answer. "Wik, lend me a hand here for a moment."

Charlie stared after the pair for a moment, before Harry's struggles began to renew themselves. He reacted, instinctively, to restrain, even when he tore the tangled sheet, in an effort to catch Harry's arm before the younger man could injure himself. "I wish you would wake, Harry." He murmured. It took him a few moments to wrap his fingers around the right arm and then to rip the robes and shirt away. He'd have to repair them later, he thought, when the tattooed marks were suddenly visible.

Theo's Alpha crest showed plainly on Harry's pale neck, with Charlie's own mark several inches lower. Here, Charlie rubbed his thumb over the black swirls and lines, watching anxiously for some response from Harry. It pained him to restrain the smaller figure so forcefully, but the fighting was worse than he'd ever seen it, granted, he'd only witnessed two instances.

"You have to bite him." Kyle's voice drifted over from the far end of the room, a slightly disapproving tone in his voice. "Any time now would be helpful. I do not wish to further sedate him, as Quinn's spell is rather complex one and I would have to wake him before I could administer anything else."

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut and bent his head. Lips, tongue and teeth closed over the tattooed mark in short order.

A second later, Harry's body went blissfully limp in the tangle of sheet and Charlie's arms.

Surprised, Charlie straightened, staring—when Harry began to twist again—and then quickly bent his head back to the mark. He held his teeth gently in the skin and as an afterthought, administered a few testing swipes of his tongue. When he withdrew the second time, Harry did not resume his thrashing, but rather turned and cuddled closer, still mostly asleep.

"Thank heavens." Kyle appeared at his side, Wikhn returning to his post at the door. He held a glowing jar of pale green goop in one hand, his fingers of the other, coated in the substance. He allowed Charlie to examine the ointment, then began to smooth it over Harry's newly exposed chest. "This should help with waking him up—and with helping him breathe. I was worried something would happen." He frowned. "And I do not like that I could not wake him. Fae magic is strong in the healing arts, especially for those of us closer to the earthen clans. I should have had some effect on him, but never mind, I shall mention it to Quinn. Perhaps there is something neither of us know. Now then, I believe you were telling me of how he was not quite himself this morning?"

Kyle listened to the entire story of the morning's events, the possession, the return and subsequent loss of Harry's wizarding magic. The twisted, tangled tale that didn't make much sense at all to him. He silently relayed the relevant portions to Quinn, hoping that his Healer friend was able to process the extra information in addition to Theo's Soul Cast.

Harry had not wakened yet, but the counter to Quinn's spell was working. He had fallen into a relaxed slumber, content to be cradled in Charlie's arms alone. When they had tried to move him, he had begun to fuss and the magical energy in the room, swelled to a nearly unbearable pressure. Kyle had managed a small smile, before suggesting that Charlie keep his arms securely around his Sub.

The Medic then set about the preparations to test Charlie for any remaining residue from the Blood
Purification Ritual. He explained the necessity of bloodsharing and especially how He worked with quiet efficiency, handing over a blood-filled pipette at one point, for Harry. "Quinn says Theo can't quite join you two, yet, but that this might help. Did you try blood for any of the other times?"

"Er, no. I—it wasn't—no."

"Then let's have a check of it. Just put the tip at the side of his mouth and squeeze. See if he relaxes even more afterward." Kyle motioned to the sheet-coconed Harry, snuggled up to Charlie's stomach. "On a primitive, subconscious level, he should recognize it and in the future, if you cannot actually approach him, as it seems this was a rather mild episode, then the scent of your blood in the air, will usually do the trick."

Charlie did as instructed, glad that it wasn't too hard to actually do. Harry had buried his face in the warmth of his midsection, his face nuzzling against Charlie's firm figure. Charlie took advantage of the position to wedge the tip past the pink lips. He was rewarded when Kyle's prediction turned out to be true. Hazy emerald eyes fluttered open, confusion, panic and uncertainty written in their lovely depths.

He lapped weakly at the final mouthful of blood, before Kyle snatched away the emptied container and banished it to the sink, where others washed themselves by aid of magic.

"Pureblood." Kyle explained. "We try not to let it linger. The taste of it can be addictive and while it is not distinctive, the magic of the individual who has gifted it, is. This way, Harry will only remember that it tasted very good and not much else." He turned to look at Harry, who had now shrunk back into the cotton nest, his head nestled against Charlie's neck for warmth.

"Ch'rly?" Harry slurred.

"Hey." Charlie found himself half-smiling down at the teen, his grip tightening instinctively. "You alright?"

The emerald eyes blinked slowly a few times, while Harry processed the question. "M'fine." He managed, after a while.

"You weren't fine a minute ago." Charlie retorted. "You were thrashing around in your sleep. Kinda scary for a bit there…nightmare?"

The thin shoulders gave the faintest approximation of something that could have been a shrug. "…Theo?"

"Theo is with Quinn." Kyle appeared beside them, careful to stay in both Charlie and Harry's line of vision, when Charlie gave a low growl from deep in his throat. "Theo wasn't feeling well and Quinn is helping him."

"Like me?" Harry struggled to wake himself further from.

"Something like that," Kyle allowed, cautiously. "Were you having a nightmare? We were worried. Couldn't wake you up."

Harry twisted in the sheets. He fist a hand in Charlie's shirt, feeling like a child. "Is it bad?"

"Theo? No. Quinn will take good care of him." Kyle smiled. "He is good at what he does, never mind what anyone else will tell you." He chuckled. "Because he's busy though, that means it is my turn to help you two." He began to lay out a series of colorful wands beside them.
Harry shifted with interest. Emerald eyes locked onto the colorful lengths of wood. "What are those for?"

"Soul Cast preparation." Kyle smiled, warmly. "You two are going to have quite an afternoon arranged for you."

Dark brows knitted together and Harry studied Kyle for a long, silent moment. "What's a Soul Cast?" He asked, at last.

The forest green-haired fae broke into a wide grin. "It is actually a very interesting procedure. Let me tell you about it…"

Theo felt the familiar pull of his surroundings being forcefully yanked away from him as everything faded away, save for the very earth beneath his feet. There was blackness and emptiness and nothing. Then the light and color came rushing back as the portal of Ergen closed and he crumpled to his knees, at Ilsa's feet. He felt rough grass beneath his hands, dampness from the dew, seeping through his trousers and pale warmth from light.

"Theodore." Ilsa murmured and then, she was beside him in an instant.

He closed his eyes, feeling her alter her shape and he didn't protest when she scooped him up in her arms, this form taller and better able to handle his awkward body of long limbs of youth. When he dared to open his eyes again, they were seated under a tree, the fading sun in the distance, the light playing across his mentor's face. "…Oretta." He whispered.

She sat, braced against the thick tree trunk, holding him close to her, his head pillowed on her shoulder. She did not speak right away, but her hands combed through the chocolate curls of his hair in soothing, soft motions.

He leaned into the touch, seeking the comfort she offered and relishing in the fact that the weight on his shoulders had lifted. Quinn was better than he credited himself, for the Soul Cast had yet to show any immediate negative reactions. Theo stiffened, barely noticeable, the weight on his chest remaining. He may have survived the brisk Healer's efficiency, but he would not escape Ilsa's sharp tongue.

He knew that reality all too well.

"Breathe, child." Ilsa's voice, husky and low, coaxed him. "I will not kill you."

He closed his eyes, hiding his face into the flexible leather armor guards on her shoulder. He hummed miserably in answer.

Her hand shifted from tangled in his hair to resting on the back of his neck, squeezing softly and rubbing small circles on the achy spots at the sides. Her free arm curved up around his side to hold him securely. "I am sorry I did not notice, little one."

"I did not want you to notice."

"Even when you know you cannot hide everything from me?"

"…wanted to do it on my own."

"I would not have stopped you."
"...on my own."

"Do you still desire them?"

He lifted his head to look at her. How could he answer that? As far as he could remember, since the first day that she had come for him, she'd brought the mismatched trio. At first he thought he would hate them, it would be like having three separate people living in his head and telling him what to do.

Except that it wasn't. It never had been. They were silent, uncompromising pillars. They held his magic, controlling and soothing it, so it would not tear him apart until he was ready to fully bear it. They protected him when he could not protect himself—and even when he did not dare call for Ilsa. A steady, unwavering influence, a shadow at his back to remind him that he did not walk alone.

They never spoke, if at all. He'd found himself coaxing them into speech, learning of their lives, their histories and how they kept him safe. Ilsa had meant them to be guardians for him, when she herself could not come. They had performed their duties admirably. Which was why he'd chosen them when Ilsa had finally granted him the admission that he could freely govern his own element and powers. That crucial moment where the mentor moved from teacher, to guardian, as the student now stepped onto the same plane of knowledge.

She had smiled when he had asked for the same bindings that she wore so proudly. He had relished in the reality that he had not one, but three caspers, all of them willing to oversee his element and bind their gifts to his fragile thread of life. They had accepted the proposal Ilsa had outlined. They had all sworn oaths.

To live without them, Theo didn't know if he could. They were always there, lingering somewhere in the background, never quite visible and always only for him. His hands clenched into fists. The fight with his father—the moment in the Dark Lord's mansion—he'd never thought that he would make it alive out of that one. He had his magic. He had his gifts. And the Dark Lord was paranoid enough to have certain measures in place.

He was to take the mark or die.

And he'd nearly died.

Without Sukey, Makindor and Alomath, Theo knew he surely would have perished before any of Dumbledore's cronies arrived to grant him the moment's breath it took to escape. That was when he knew it was time to take charge of his complicated, delightfully abnormal life. He had learned all that he would need to take the Nott inheritances and politics. Everything that was necessary for him to make something of the family name that nearly been run to the ground.

Nearly.

Not quite.

The name had still garnered some pull and he had done his best to restore it. Yet, there was no suitable place for him in the Light Side, and certainly none for him on the Dark Side and that had left him tangled somewhere in the middle, before things had begun to happen. Blaise had come to him, mentioning that his Inheritance had been forced out of him before its time—when his birthday was not that far away.

Draco had disappeared shortly after his own important day of birth and then, subsequently, the
Malfroy name and lot in life, had seemed to have vanished overnight, swallowed by the secretkeepers in the stalemate of a wizarding war.

Theo had returned to an empty home that year.

A soft pang stabbed through his chest. He swallowed a breath and choked on it. His fingers reached up, half-morphed into blunted claws as he half-heartedly scrabbled at his throat. He remembered so much. He squeezed his eyes shut—tighter. The weight on his chest had grown, it seemed. Words gave name to them.


Guilt for what could have been prevented. Shame that he had not the strength nor courage to face his own demons—alone. Wounded pride, for pride was certainly no longer whole after his recent ordeals. Wistfulness, as Ilsa's hands shifted to rub across his shoulders and then scratch lightly up and down his back. Surely he did not deserve such kindness.

He had all but nearly sacrificed his new circle and given himself over to Death on an ornamented platter. He bit his lip—hard. He didn't want to know what Ilsa would have bargained to have those three release him. He didn't want to know what it would cost her, cost him—cost them. A hiccup lodged in his throat. He remembered embarking on the Hogwarts Express and discovering that first wisp of scent that had shook him to the core.

A suffering Dragel Submissive—by the name of Harry Potter.

He still didn't know why he'd entered the compartment—or why he'd chosen to enter and lock it afterwards, to allow them some privacy. Fate had tempted his tongue, it seemed and while it had pained him to speak lightly and pleasantly, at first, the same haunted look he'd felt, was reflected back in a pair of bottomless emerald eyes.

And so he'd decided that perhaps everything wasn't as dreary as he'd first thought, so he gave into it, a little at a time. Surprised to find that befriending Harry Potter was an experience all on its own—as was falling in love with him. The ache in his chest burned. His eyes watered, fiercely.

"Breathe," Ilsa whispered, again. "Memories are not made to haunt us, but to remind us of what we have lived through."

"...even when we want to forget?" He moved from her lap to the cold ground, on his knees. The images flickered through his mind. Things he remembered. Things that were fuzzy. Things that scrabbled at the corners of his mind where he wanted to forget. Faces, people, magic. His breath came in short, shallow pants. The ground shuddered and rumbled, uneasily beneath them both.

He could feel its anger, he could feel its sympathy, and yet, still, its acceptance of him.

Acceptance that he surely did not deserve.

He had known the moment that he had given Harry his password, that he ought to stay his own bindings. But then Dumbledore had stuck his overly meddlesome fingers into his newly burgeoning financials and Theo had let himself become distracted. His claw-hands clenched tight. The caspers had reminded him—bluntly—to tell Ilsa and he'd insisted that nothing would happen. He'd bound them for silence then and hurried along to keep his affairs in order.

Then Charlie had happened and Theo wasn't even sure how that had all come about. Everything had changed in a heartbeat. All the carefully laid plans he'd once crafted for his lovely life, all the things he had looked forward to. Tthe hopes, dreams and wishes that had never included a
redheaded Dragon Tamer or petite brunet with soulful green eyes. The things he had given up, before he'd realized that they would never be his—not anymore.

The ache in his chest wavered, burning even fiercer, then sensations growing more intense.

Ilsa had shifted with him, moving away from the tree to hold him tight from behind.

He sagged in her arms, as he felt the ground quiver and shake. This was all his fault. He'd been selfish. He'd wanted more time. He hadn't expected to find himself mated and bound before his twenties. He hadn't expected that the ranked role appointed to him would come into play so quickly. He hadn't been prepared to be Alpha. He had wanted more time and more-ow!

Ilsa smacked him lightly over the head. "Not selfish." She murmured. "Not selfish at all, but things never turn out the way we want them to."

Theo swallowed the words threatening to continue spilling out. He'd spoken without even realizing, it seemed. Ah. He hadn't wanted to be a burden, but yet it seemed as if he had managed to make an inconvenience of himself afterward.

"...I am sorry I did not notice sooner."

Theo blinked. No, that couldn't be right. Ilsa—his Oretta—had no need to apologize to him, much less to clean up the lovely mess he'd made of everything.

"...And if you don't stop thinking that empty head of yours in circles, I will bite you." The older woman said, severely. Her grip around him tightened. "We are all young and foolish, once, Theodore. Some of us for longer than others and some of us for times that are so fleeting, we think it never happened. What is done is done and cannot be undone, but you are not mine by name nor guise if you cannot pick yourself up and forge onward."

"But-!"

His head was suddenly seized by her two hands and turned to her grim face. "Perhaps I have spoiled you somehow. My own hands are tainted enough that everything I touch, crumbles away." She leaned forward and kissed his brow. "But I thought that I had managed to make you understand what you mean to me." She shook him. "You are my world, Theodore! How can I make you understand this?"

The tears prickled at the corners of his eyes and Theo opened and shut his mouth. He felt the burn spreading through his chest, writhing and fighting as if it were alive.

"I would give you anything you desired, so as long as it was within my power to do so." She held him at arms’ length, one hand freed to reach over and tip his chin up, forcing his pale, golden eyes to stare at her own, nearly black ones. "I am always here for you. Always. I have even demanded of Ergen, himself, to 'port me to your side, regardless of any occasion and situation, so as long as you are the one calling me."

Theo felt the first traitorous tears slip out of his eyes. They burned down his cheeks and the ground beneath them, trembled once more. "...yes..." He wanted to curl in on himself and hide away from the honesty in her eyes. She had never lied to him. Never. This he knew like the reality of the sun
rising in its designated horizon and the moon reigning over night.

"Then listen to me say it again." She pulled him into her arms and hugged his head to her chest. "You are my life." The grip tightened, bordering on painful. "And you know I would do anything for you, you need only ask it."

She made him repeat it.

He did.

"If you are my life, Theo, then what do you think would happen, if you were no longer here?" Her voice was deceptively light.

Theo felt his stomach clench. He knew that tone. He knew what came with it, too. Things that he never wanted to hear. Things that he did not want to acknowledge.

"Surely you know I would not rest if your death was linked to chance?"

The ache throbbed again and he sucked in a gasping breath, trying hold himself together, even as the cracks began and he felt himself falling apart.

"…You know what I can never say aloud, little one. Yet you tempt me still."

His arms curved up around her, holding as tight as her own around him. "…No…I didn't mean…I didn't-"

"Your life has value." The ground shook. "Even the earth, our element, agrees with me." She rested her chin atop his head. "You nearly died, you foolish, idiotic, child. Do you think so little of yourself?"

Theo hiccupped.

She shifted, enough to bend and nip his ear with razor-sharp fangs. He held himself still, even when he felt the warm trickle of blood slither down his neck, before the wound healed. "Do not ever throw it away like that again. Ever. Do you understand me? You know this, Theodore. I know you do. If you really think yourself selfish, then you are right. For to choose death over facing your problems is a coward's way out. Then yes, you are being unreasonably selfish and I will call you on it. I do not care why. Swear to me that you will never do this again."

"Oretta-"

"No, Theodore. I want your sworn oath that you will not seek to sacrifice yourself as an answer when there are a thousand options before you."

"I didn't-!"

"You did. There was a choice to be made. There were other options. You chose, Theodore. And the choice you made nearly cost you a price that you are still unprepared to pay."

"I-!"

"At the expense of your life? Your own, life, Theodore?"

His breath hitched, softly.
She squeezed the back of his neck, lightly. "Your life is no longer your own, you know. There are two others now that depend on you for direction, support and care." She squeezed a little harder. "Two that are the first of others, for there will be others. Swear it to me, that you will think of them and reconsider should you ever find yourself in such dire straits again."

His hands fell to her sides and silence filled between them.

"...I will swear."

"Then seal it in blood." She drew her clawed hand swiftly across her neck and a line of thick crimson welled up at once.

Theo's golden eyes flickered brown, then black. He shifted. Seconds later, he sank his fangs into her neck, drinking greedily. He didn't even feel when her own fangs pierced his wrist and their elemental magic sang between them. He slid his fangs free when she did the same and with the bloodied mess on her neck, she took a fingerful of red and painted it across his face.

He closed his eyes and held out his wrist. He waited, patiently while she took his own blood to add to the shapes she traced across his features. She whispered the words of the spell that would accept, receive and acknowledge his oath.

"Swear it."

And he did.

The weight lifted enough for coherence to return. Theo shuddered as the headrush of magic nearly made him giddy. He'd almost forgotten what Ilsa's blood tasted like. Pure, rich and clean. As a Gheyo, she adhered to a strict diet and exercise regimen, as a dragel of considerable power and influence, the inherent magic in her blood always hit him hard.

He struggled to pull himself together as she inquired after the caspers and his choice. He turned to her with confusion written over his newly cleaned face. The blood markings had faded beneath the skin, showing nothing.

"They wait for your answer." Ilsa inclined her head.

Theo turned, following the line of sight to see the three, wispy, white figures, hovering in their corporeal forms, several yards away. He wondered why they didn't approach until he realized the tree they sat under, held the caspers back. He blinked. Large, complex branches snaking out into the sky, speckles of lingering light flickering through the shadows to the ground. "I…I…"

"When you first took them, I bound them on your behalf. You were not old enough to handle the entirety of such official things." Ilsa gently disengaged herself from him and rose to her feet. She extended a hand, her expression softening. "If you still wish to keep them, then you may. It will be solely your decision and you will be the one to cast and secure the bindings."

Theo swallowed. "…even if I choose…?" He couldn't voice it aloud.

"No matter what you choose, the choice is yours. I only ask that you be absolutely certain why you chose what you will. I cannot ask for anything more."

Theo let himself be pulled to his feet. The ache in his chest began to hum, the pain easing as his mind clicked together the necessary pieces of the puzzle. His grip on her hand tightened.
"You will have to make three contracts and you will seal them with a single binding." Ilsa instructed. "They will be of more use to you in this way and with individual contracts, you need never place yourself in the situation that you did." The black eyes glittered. "You need never sell your soul as payment to appease them."

Theo hung his head. His hands twitched at his sides, the claws having receded.

Ilsa's hands rested lightly on his shoulders. She gently nudged him forward. "You know they cannot approach you. You must be the one to make the first move."

He stumbled forward the first few steps and then stopped, turning back to look at her.

The smile on her face was bittersweet. "We are many things in our lives, little one." The endearment was tender coming from her lips. "But we must always be ourselves. Change is always difficult and some of us always fight it." Her smile was wry, now. "I suppose I should set a better example for you, but sometimes, we cannot help what we are. You have come into wonderful things, do not throw them away, because you wish to hold onto the past. You have a Submissive who is strong and beautiful, who will stand beside you even to the end of the world, I should think. That is a wonderful thing. You have rescued and protected a Beta, ensuring his loyalty, life and love to you for the years ahead. That is a wonderful thing. This may not have been the life you thought you wanted, but Theodore, when you're holding this right here in your hands—can you honestly tell me that you desire anything else? Anything more than this?"

The tears trickled down his face in slow, solitary trails and Theo shook his head—once.

"If you truly believe you have been cheated in some way and you wish to leave this all behind—then come with me now." She took a step forward, hand extended. "We will leave. We will run. No one will ever find us."

Theo sucked in a quick breath.

"But be sure. You decide."

He swallowed hard.

Her hand remained steady.

He turned, halfway, looking to where the three caspers hovered. "...and if I won't run?" He asked, hoarsely.

"Then stand up and act like a man." Ilsa's voice was strong and hard. "Walk over there and accept the consequences for what you have done and reclaim the rights that are yours."

Theo looked from her hand to the caspers. The ache in his chest fairly seared, blazing as if he would burst into fire. He squared his shoulders, lifted his chin and brushed away her hand. He turned and walked steadily to the edge of the shadow cast by the tree. He did not hesitate to step over the shadow's rim. The three caspers slammed into him the moment he cleared it.

He did not fight them.

They wrestled above him, then plunged into his chest without warning.

A half-second later, he screamed.
Harry sat calmly on the examination bed beside Charlie, wide-awake and curious. He leaned against the taller dragel, taking comfort in Charlie's unusually warm skin—a trait of Fire Dragels, Kyle had informed them—and watching the Medic's every move. "What does it say? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing's wrong with you." Charlie and Kyle chorused in the same breath.

The two stared at each other for a moment and then Kyle chuckled. "I see what you have to put up with." He teased, lightly. "Harry, there is nothing wrong with you. Yes, there are a few issues that need to be dealt with, but you—you are you. And there is nothing wrong with you."

"I know that." Harry scowled. "I wasn't implying that-"

"Fae." Kyle reminded him, tapping his forest-green hair. "I actually do have some threads of empathy in here, you know." He turned away, examining the scroll that bore the readouts from the preliminary testing for the preparations.

Harry's brows furrowed together adorably. "What do you mean?"

"It means if you are actually meaning yourself when you're asking if there's something wrong with you, I can tell the difference." Kyle waved a hand, dismissively. "Shush. I need to sort this out."

Harry opened his mouth and shut it when he suddenly found said mouth covered by Charlie's in a warm, comforting kiss. He blinked, a moment later. "What was that for?"

"I felt like it." Charlie said, smoothly. He winked.

Harry felt himself beginning to blush. He swallowed and elbowed the taller man in the side. He waited a few minutes longer, watching as Kyle muttered to himself and scowled in alternate phases. "Well?" He burst out, when he couldn't wait a moment later. "Is it good?"

The Medic sighed. "Not quite." He released the scroll, allowing it to hover happily in the air once more. "Your—colors—are very dim."

Harry hesitated. He looked at Charlie and then back at Kyle. "That's bad?"

"Er, not necessarily. It is best if they are all bright and in near equal proportions." Kyle explained. "But sometimes, when many things are off-kilter, they can become distorted, unbalanced and also lose their color." He brightened. "You do have some color and you are very strong in one of them, of which I cannot tell you, of course, but it is nothing that cannot be tended to. Quinn will handle it as soon as he is through with Theo, I am sure."

Harry gave a sigh of relief. "Good. The sooner I can feel more," he grimaced. "More like me. The better it'll be." He twitched, uncertainly. "Do you think Hermione's okay?"

Charlie slipped an arm around his shoulders and squeezed gently. "Snape said that he'd sent for healers and he's there with Terius and Draco. I'm sure she's fine and if something were to happen, they would contact us."

"Hermione?" Kyle inquired. He settled himself on a stool, with a bowl and a slender brush. "Hand please."

"What are you doing?"

"Testing which thread Quinn needs to start on first." Kyle explained. He set the bowl on a nearby
tray and dipped the brush in the dark green mixture. He began to paint a series of runed symbols across the back of Harry's left wrist, when the smaller teen suddenly jerked away.

Emerald eyes grew wide and then flared to a rich, vivid gold. His mouth opened in a soundless scream and Harry reached, wildly, for Charlie. He squeezed the redhead's arm, tears forming and spilling over out of his eyes. "Theo-!"

"Harry? Harry!" Kyle slid off the stool and immediately pushed everything away from the examination bed. "Quinn!" He shouted.

Harry released Charlie's arm only for his body to begin shaking with spasms as it had done before with Niko's possession.

"Harry!"

Quinn burst into the room, a grimace on his face and a hand at his throat. He took one look at Harry and his teal eyes fairly burned. He threw out threads of teal-colored magic, ushering Charlie to lie down, with Harry atop him. He was obviously shouting orders—mentally—to a frantic Kyle who bustled about, throwing out a few commands for Bharin and Wikhn who came forward to help.

"What's happening?" Charlie gasped out. He struggled to keep his grip on Harry.

"Hold him tighter." Bharin instructed. He moved to rearrange Charlie's grip on Harry. "Do it this way. It is a typical hold for a Gheyos to use on an opponent we do not wish to harm." He frowned. "Your Theo must be in great pain."

"What?"

"Pain." Kyle sighed. He exchanged a glance with Quinn. "Something is happening. Where is Theo?" He frowned at the answer that Quinn gave in return, but did not voice it aloud. Bharin stood at Charlie's head, keeping Quinn's magic off of the Beta. "Harry is deeply bonded to Theo, isn't he?"

The blond paused for a fraction of a section, before he continued with his efforts to splice himself between Harry and Theo. Kyle frowned, but moved forward again, offering his hands and his voice, where he could be of help.

AIDEN : HELLHOUND : NEVARAH

Arythmoor.

The name was boldly emblazoned across the wrought, blackened gates, the silhouette of thorned roses adorned it, while the roses themselves, a red so dark as to be black, grew heavily over the tall wall and around every available space granted to them.

Aiden gave a dismissive snort as he passed between the bars and entered his estate. It had been a very long day and a very trying set of days following the long day. He did not want to deal with them and yet, he would have to. He scowled, darkly. The shadows rose up to greet him in customary fashion. He ignored them, continuing his brisk approach to the looming, gothic mansion that sat atop the dreary hill. He brushed absently a few times at the clinging shadows, sending the more annoying ones away with a simpering, red-eyed glower. He would have to speak to the Reapers again, in regards to their harvesting treaties, it was nearing the appointed time for the
prophesied Night of a Thousand Years.

Gloomily, he wished he had behaved himself enough for Mistress Death to allow him to sit it out again. It was always a time of too much fuss, too much heart and far too much sentiment. His glower increased as he continued up the solemn walkway, the darkness growing even darker still as he moved forward.

"...Lord Aiden!" A youth of about ten, stood in the door way of the massive metal slabs. Dressed as a pageboy, his eyes glittered the same familiar red as Aiden's, his skin holding a similar translucent paleness. "You have returned!" He called. "We are glad."

Melacor, his favored messenger child among the pack. Aiden studied him from afar, red eyes seeing what human eyes could not. The child was relieved and weary to see him and exhaustion radiated from his little body. Aiden frowned. He had left the boy in good health and good faith. His lips pressed tightly together. A hallowed house in disorder atop a new human consort was far more of a headache than he cared to deal with.

"Wonderful." Aiden blurred up to the entryway in a burst of blackness and dark feathers. His humanesque form twisted around him for a moment, before the angry swirls settled back into the two-legged form. "I have not left long enough for my excursion to require an immediate return." The burgundy eyes narrowed. "Did the house tend well in my absence?"

"Always, Lord Aiden." Melacor bobbed his head. Chin-length hair, pitch-black, danced along the pale jawline. Bejeweled hands clutched the edge of his ornate overtunic, the knuckles turning white.

The hellhound suppressed a sigh and paused long enough to drop one long-fingered hand atop the immaculate hair. He ruffled it—carefully—and continued on inside the mansion. The giant doors creaked shut behind him and the soft, near soundless patter of feet announced Melacor when he appeared in a burst of black shadow beside his Lord.

"I wish the consort's quarters to be cleaned and made ready." Aiden commented. He darted a glance downward to see the boy's response.

The hands clenched into knuckles, then unclenched and Melacor turned up a cheerful smile, raising his face. "For how long and of what kind, my lord?"

_He earns his keep in more ways than one._ Aiden mused, to himself. "For an unforeseeable future and a human female." He snorted. "Her majesty supposed that I had extra time to spare." He resisted the urge to show any outward sign of displeasure. This was his own house, his own estate and perhaps, the only place where he might show his true colors and yet—there would be eyes and spies everywhere.

Melacor sighed for him. "How unfortunate." He commiserated. "Especially when Lord Rasputin seems to have enjoyed himself while you were out."

"Oh?" Aiden said, interestedly. "And what did that blackguard do this time?"

"Nothing that you may kill him for, your lordship."

"Ah. How disappointing."

"I am sorry, your lordship."

"It is no fault of your own." Aiden turned down the twist of murky hallways. He paused before the
doors to his study. "Send for Briar, Thorne and Weide." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "And continue to do your duties. I shall attend to my duties for an hour and then I shall be otherwise occupied until tomorrow morning."

"Shall I have the consort's rooms readied before or after?"

"Within the hour."

"Yes, my lord."

"Oh and Melacor?"

"Hmm?"

"I expect you to join me tonight and I expect a full report on everything that Rasputin has been up to, in my absence."

"Of course, my lord."

"Be gone." Aiden turned away and a flick of his fingers, the door to his study swung open and then shut, behind him.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry for the delay with the chapter folks. This is a little longer to make up for it! (8k, instead of the usual 4k). School is keeping me busy and I have a ton of second week homework to deal with. UGH. Anyway, so, we have Theo and Ilsa moments, Charlie and Harry moments and plenty of Harry coming up in the next chapter. To explain, the issues Theo had, as discovered by Quinn from the SOUL CAST, insecurity, instability and a survival instinct that should have kept him 'fighting' are all things that he was dealing with. Ilsa chose to help him handle it in part, hence the reason for the scenes between them in this chapter. Harry is feeling the backlash more than Charlie, because Charlie isn't directly bonded to Theo, like Harry is and therefore, he isn't getting any spillover from it.

Anyhow, as of 9/9, this fic is current with the FF version and y'all will have to wait for updates just like everyone else. LOL. Enjoy!

~Scion
Secrets and Scarlet Strands

Chapter Summary

Harry and Theo working on their individual trials during the healing arc.

Chapter Notes

RECAP: Quinn uses a SOUL CAST on Theodore and summons Ilsa and Bharin to come and help with the procedure. The results show that Theo has been suffering from mental and psychological issues relating to stability and security, as well as his ability to be a good alpha. Harry had a nightmare and Kyle went to tend to him. Ilsa and Theo recover enough to have an important and necessary conversation of their own, while Charlie and Harry have some special time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEVARAH: ILSA'S VOID

Theo retreated back into his mind where things were clear cut in black and white. He sectioned off the portions designated as "Charlie" and "Harry" and threw up a mental barrier to protect them. It wasn't his finest work, but it was there for a reason and he hoped that his Caspers weren't too angry to process it. He would gladly endure whatever they threw at him, so as long as their punishment did not cross over to his blameless mates.

Well, mostly blameless.

He had a feeling Harry using his password would have resulted in a little bit of backlash.

Just a little.

The kind of little that Harry, himself, didn't deserve. He had been through enough and Theo would not let him suffer for more while it was within his power to change that. There was a small part of him that fussed and whined over the fact that if Harry was exempt, then he ought to be too— instead of shouldering Harry's portion of the blame and punishment. It was the part of him who had never quite settled into the Alpha role that he now, could no longer afford to embrace half-heartedly.

He willed himself to push such thoughts away and out of his head. He reached for the instinctive curl of raw magic and the slender thread that upheld his mental connection to Ilsa, summoning the confidence and drawing security from it. He could handle this. He was more than capable of handling this.

It worked.

Theo tempered his breathing and checked his magical reserves, both wizard and dragel.
Harry invoking his password was part of a deal wrought with Death herself. Caspers had the ability to dodge Death—at a terrible price that none would ever voice aloud. Theo had absolutely no doubts that something dark and personal would be required of him tonight. He bit his lower lip, nibbling in contemplative thought. He could bargain. He could wager. He could *bribe*.

Or, he could grow up and deal with it.

A wry smile painted itself across his face.

Growing pains—what a truly accurate description—they would surely never stop, if one kept on growing.

The young Alpha coughed and winced. Then he took a careful, cautious breath. "...Sukey? I am... sorry. Please...I need to speak to you." He felt a rush of cold behind him, near his shoulders and knew the casper had come, even though it owed him nothing. "Harry." He managed, bracing himself inward and outward.

Terris Sukey appeared over him, her face a solemn, sorrowful view as a golden scepter in her hand twirled around idle fingers. "Shall I spare him?"

"Always." Theo choked out.

"You understand that this will cause him pain *anyway*, yes?"

"Stop arguing with me." Theo sucked in a breath. "Do it."

"It will cost you."

"It is nothing I cannot pay." Theo countered. "Stop stalling. I know this has to be filtering over to them—to Harry, if not Charlie."

With a sign born from centuries of patience, the wispy figure wrung her hands together. "As you have said," she droned. "It shall be done." Her white figure brightened to a shimmering golden hue and then intensified until she was nothing more than a brilliant, blinding ball of light.

Theo braced himself for the incoming onslaught.

Theo's eyelids fluttered open, golden orbs staring up into equally golden eyes. He blinked at the proud expression that hovered above him and did not protest, allowing himself to be lifted and carried, by the strong arms of his mentor. He felt completely shattered, torn apart and fused back together. He trembled in her arms and she hushed him with nonsensical words.

He had done it.

He didn't think that he would have lived, but then, when he had stepped forward, it was with the knowledge in mind that he would not leave Harry alone. Not Harry and not Charlie. It had anchored him in the blinding pain that had followed. He had struggled to try and block it from filtering through the bonds, unable to do so completely, but able to mute it somewhat.

He hoped that Quinn and Kyle were close on hand to help, should the bonds rouse Harry and Charlie. He hoped it wouldn't. Harry had been through enough in his life and he knew Charlie had been through enough pain from just recently. It was most likely that Charlie wouldn't feel much of anything, because their bond hadn't yet completed itself. It was something he made a mental note to take care—as soon as possible—tonight, kind of soon as possible.
Theo resisted the urge to squirm. The feeling of little hands and feet crawling all over him, had yet to subside. His magic had come back in full, fighting force and with three caspers behind him, no longer muting the raw power, but rather channeling through him right along with it, Theo had to admit that he felt positively wicked in a thoroughly delightful way. He tested his range of movement in careful twitches of his fingers and toes, until he was assured that he could move, safely, without any negative repercussions.

A groan slipped through his lips as he felt a very familiar ache he hadn't known in a handful of years.

He'd grown and it had hurt. It felt as if every single fiber of existence in his body had been burned out by acid, cauterized by flame and then refilled with ice.

*It hurt like a bloody-*!

"You will be fine, little one." Ilsa chuckled from behind. "I suppose growing up quite literally was not what you had in mind?" She took in his new two-inches of height and examined his building energies by way of an examination spell, quickly cast.

He dodged it half-heartedly. "I feel fine, Oretta."

"You look dead on your feet." She countered, holding him still with one firm hand. Several minutes later, satisfied as to his current wellbeing, she backed away, a ball of golden fire crackling to life at her fingertips.

Theo's lips twitched, a faint ghost of a smile summoned to his face. "I suppose it is only wishful thinking to hope that this might not be what it seems?"

Golden eyes gave a spectacular roll. "Really, Theo." Ilsa said, mildly. The golden flames morphed into a simple, bright ball of magical energy. It crackled, fizzled and danced along the palm of her hand. "I am ready whenever you are." There was a faint smirk playing about her face. "You know the words of binding?"

"I do not believe you have ever allowed me to forget."

"Good boy. Remember, this is your turn now. I will not interfere unless you are dead and if you are, then I shall see to a splendid funeral."

"Tassels and wailing gravesseekers?"

"Aracle can supply the mints." Ilsa shot back.

"No tears?"

"I shall cry an ocean."

"Ah, now I feel loved."

She smacked his bum with a little more force than necessary. "Off with you. Before I decide you could use a little more encouragement."

Theo laughed, gathering up his magic around him like a thick cloak. He didn't need any more encouragement or incentive. Ilsa was right—she usually was—he had wonderful things already in the palm of his hand and even more to come. It would be a lovely, beautiful future.
"Quinn? Quinn, what are you doing?" Kyle's panic was tempered—but barely. "Bharin!"

"Channeling, I think." The older Gheyo hovered nearby, careful to keep from approaching the snappish duo of Charlie and Harry. He did not want to be in the way, nor did he wish to incur a young Beta's wrath. Charlie was charmingly protective of the agonizing Harry, whose pain was not yet fully siphoned off.

"Channeling?" The forest-green eyebrows arched upwards. "How in Arielle's name is he channeling—oh." Light brown eyes grew comically wide. "Oh, heavens no." He growled. "Don't let him do that! He can't handle holding—"

The Medic's words were cut off as Bharin glided forward and rested his large hands on Quinn's slender shoulders. He held them there as the Healer fairly trembled under the channeled stress and pain. Kyle immediately glided forward, resting his own hand on Bharin's steady arm. He winced when the backlash crackled through in the form of raw magic. He held out his free hand, blindly, relieved when Wikhn took it.

Pain coursed through him in its rawest, most primitive form. Kyle shuddered, thankful that Quinn at least had been able to share the burden among them, rather than watching helplessly as Harry tried to absorb it himself. He wasn't particularly happy that Quinn thought he could shoulder the pain on his own, but he resolved to have words with him later.

The minutes seemed like hours of agony until, just as abruptly as it had begun, it ended. Harry was left as a gasping, trembling mess in Charlie's arms, while Quinn sagged backwards into Bharin's welcome embrace. Kyle stood, dumbly, unprotesting when Wikhn moved forward to gather him in a soothing, congratulatory hug of his own. He was relieved for the stronger arms curving around him and the knowledge that something horrible had just passed.

When he could speak again, Kyle glowered at Quinn. "What," he nearly spat. "Was that?"

The blond head lifted wearily, the teal light momentarily dimmed in those eyes. That was what it feels like to cheat death.

Kyle swallowed hard. "Cheat death?" His voice wavered. "I beg your pardon?" There was too much to read into that and Kyle, quite frankly, wasn't sure that he truly wanted to know. He twitched, irritated.

Quinn made a faint sound that might have been a sigh. He was not about to explain about passwords and blood promises and magically binding contracts. Kyle was bright. He'd figure it out on his own. Quinn turned, allowing Bharin to lift him up onto the newly vacated examination bed. He braced, carefully, leaning against his favored guardian for comfort and strength. I think that Theo has straightened a few things out.

"Things that resulted in this?" Kyle huffed. He leaned forward and then rolled his eyes, before stomping a foot backward to have Wikhn release him. The younger Gheyo's arms dropped back to his sides without comment. Kyle stalked forward to cast the necessary diagnostics over the newly relieved pair. He gave a thin smile to Charlie. "I believe you are fine for the moment," He snapped his fingers, throwing up a new ward for privacy and ignoring the painful ache that blossomed in his exhausted arms at the effort it required.

Caspers. Quinn explained, his own exhaustion coming through. I did not splice them back into his
Soul Cast. His mentor assured me that I did not need to. He looked to Bharin and directed a thought at his guardian, hopefully.

The Jamaican gave a small smile and turned to Wikhn. "Something warm to drink?" He suggested.

The pink-eyed Fae tipped his head lightly in answer and exited the room. Quinn watched him leave and then beckoned Kyle over.

"I already threw up a ward." The Medic grumbled. He bit back a yelp when Bharin suddenly leaned over and hefted him up to sit on the examination bed beside Quinn. "Ow. Hey." He couldn't duck the swat that tapped him lightly on the head. "I wasn't."

"Sit and relax for a minute." Bharin scolded. "Both of you!" He sighed. "Really…must all of you healers be so self-sacrificing?"

"I didn't do it on purpose." Kyle grumbled. He elbowed Quinn when the Healer jabbed him in the side. "I didn't know caspers could have that kind of effect on a new triad."

Not a triad. Quinn interrupted. A bonded pair. That was a perfectly normal reaction for a bonded pair. They have not completed their mating, remember?

"Huh? Oh. Right." Kyle frowned. "So that's why sir redhead was all fine with this?" He gestured towards the duo on the examination bed several feet away. Charlie had turned his back to them and now cuddled a slowly reviving Harry, close to him.

Something like that. Remember Harry's threads?

Kyle frowned. The ones all wrapped around the cast?

Yes. Remember that they were wrapped around it, not through it?

…oh. Kyle blinked. He did remember, actually and he could see proof of it now as he stared at Charlie's broad back, the wing tips jutting through the pale skin, the tattoos half-faded. The redhead would probably need another wing massage before the day was over. Charlie had retracted his wings, unable to keep them properly coordinated and out of harm's way, when Harry had first started screaming. Kyle couldn't blame him, but he did hope that Theo could pull his Alpha act together rather soon. Both Charlie and Harry could use some flight lessons—if only for the wing care sessions—along with some native schooling, for Nevaraean customs, etiquette and what to expect for the present Hunting Season.

The Medic shook his head with a sigh. Charlie was more hands-on and actively engaged in both of his mates, most likely due to his personality. It would explain why his thread ran through Theo's while, Harry's was more subtle and cautious, wound around Theo, with the ability to dissolve at a moment's notice, if he was no longer desired or wanted—yet strong enough to hold his own Alpha together. Kyle almost hadn't been able to believe what he'd been seeing.

Casts never lie. Quinn projected, solemnly. His head lolled to the side and nestled comfortably on Kyle's shoulder.

The Fae rolled his eyes, but subtly listed to the left, enough to bear Quinn's weight without discomfort. "Did you exhaust yourself there?"

Nothing that lunch won't fix. Quinn stifled a yawn.

"And a nap." Kyle added.
The teal eyes flickered toward him, faintly disapproving. *I don't need a nap!*

*Shall I tell Bharin that?*

…I hate you.

*The feeling is mutual.* Kyle swallowed his chuckle. *Now close your eyes for a few minutes. I doubt they'll be ready for anything so quickly, anyhow.* He checked his own power reserves, they were fairly within their usable range. He'd probably be able to get the diagnostics together and cross-check their vitals with a few other charts…

Waking up to pain wasn't an unfamiliar thing, but Harry hoped that one day it would be. He knew he wasn't quite awake yet, but that he would soon be, if he continued on with the usual things that led to waking.

At present, he didn't quite want to reach there.

Harry tried not to grimace or groan at the spikes of pain that rippled through him then dulled, considerably. He really did need to stop waking up that way. His mind flickered back to a recent memory—waking up sandwiched between warmth and gorgeousness—Charlie's sleepy snuffling and Theo's possessive arms wrapped around him. That was a much better way of waking up than this.

Trying to take stock of his physical inventory was a little more complicated, but he was relieved to find that he could manage it decently enough. He automatically took store of everything he could understand in the usual, methodical thought process that he'd worked out years before. Yes, sometimes things could be confusing, but only when one did not slow down enough to properly translate it.

Harry fitted together the memory—and reality—of the pain flickering through his body with the strange dream that seemed as if he'd been Theo and that Theo had somehow grown. He'd been Theo, suffering through a jury of three and their painful judgment and then of a reward for enduring his punishment without protest. Here, Harry wasn't entirely sure he'd been dreaming, because it had all seemed so very *real*. It was as if he kept watching, the dream would morph and shift and he would discover that he really was Theo.

But then it had dimmed.

The entire dream had dimmed, fading away from its vibrant colors and magical lure, until a filmy white curtain seemed to force his consciousness apart, until Harry knew for sure that he was a spectator and that Theo stood apart from him. He watched, with growing worry and apprehension as Theo hung suspended and magic, in rich, vivid golden strands twined around him, strangling, stretching and comforting, all at once.

Harry watched, transfixed, unable to participate and too horrified to look away at something that seemed terribly private and horrifically vicious. That was when the pain had first transferred to him and Harry slipped into the little mental box where he sometimes retreated to block out the unwanted physical sensations. It helped—a little—not much, but that little bit was always what he needed in order to gather his wits about him.

Once he had sorted through the mess that something had happened and consequently been fixed with Theo, Harry felt the first stirrings of his temper rumbling from where he'd buried it last. He made a mental note to have words with his Alpha as soon as possible—one, to verify the dream,
two, to verify that morbid truth of his password and three, because he rightfully deserved to be on equal footing.

Yes, Dragel life was considerably more complicated, headache-inducing and magic-wrecking than he could have ever expected in his wildest dreams, but there were limits to everything and ways to enforce said limits and deal with them. Harry rooted through his own mind, searching for the precious little stashes of sanity that he had to be so very careful about it.

Ah, there they were. He'd had to hide them when this Dragel business had all started up.

Now that he could mostly sort of think—after all, thinking was far better a distraction from the pain than anything else—he found himself settling into the idea with relish. His earlier convictions and acceptances seemed to pale as Harry finally drew out the little thing in the back of his mind that identified itself as his dragel self, very much in the shape of a baby dragon. He poked at it, cautiously and when it uncurled itself, creeping around him and purring with happiness, Harry knew that he would no longer bother to keep them separate.

It was giving him enough of a headache anyway.

He coaxed it towards him and showed his depleted magic. The little thing hummed from where he cradled it in his arms and together they went walking. At some point, they stopped and Harry found himself staring up at a giant, barred door, heavily chained and fairly radiating with darkness. He hung back, his grip on the little dragel thing, tightening. Those doors were dangerous. They'd have to be careful.

The little dragel thing wrinkled its pointed snout and then nudged his elbow, as if in encouragement. Harry felt it slip out of his hands and he watched as the thing grew larger until its chin was now even in height with his shoulder. Together, then? Harry thought, wryly. This could be fun...and dangerous.

The moment he laid his hands upon the door, a brilliant seal of gold and pink-red flared to life, a magical medallion imprinted across the massive, black doors. There were runes and shapes that he didn't know at all, carved into the inner and outer circles, while other markings seemed to dim as he cautiously passed his hand over them.

What is this?

…bad things... The dragel side of him explained. It nudged his shoulder.

Harry automatically reached up one hand to chuck it under the chin, scratching deeply and methodically, aware that his human hands were probably a mere tickle to the thick scales. The head thumped heavily on his own and Harry leaned forward under the weight, with a soft laugh. No, no, no. you're too heavy.

…No... The protest was an almost whine.

Stop it. Harry scolded. He ran his free hand along the still-glowing symbols again. Is it a seal? Is this one of them? Quinn said I had seals, lots of them. His hand trembled, then steadied as he brushed his fingertips very deliberately across one vaguely familiar symbol. It flared brighter beneath his touch.

Seal. His dragel agreed. Big seal. Important.

I saw this somewhere, before. Harry thumbed the red-gold mark. Where? Where did I see this? He leaned to the side, craning his neck to watch his dragel side think. I know you remember. He
His dragel side whuffled, a moment later, Harry winced as he felt his two selves twist, blur and then mesh together. He stood, surprised, a few seconds later, surprised it had been painless, surprised it had been that easy. A fine smattering of scales decorated his arms and hands, running further up beneath his clothes. He shifted, impressed when the movement held no stiffness and more fluidity that he'd ever thought himself capable of.

So this is what togetherness feels like… The thought lingered, comfortingly and Harry rubbed at his right shoulder. The itch did not subside and irritated, Harry yanked the shirt sideways and stopped. The tattooed mating mark on his shoulder was definitely familiar. He stared at it. Then at the door. Then back at his arm and slowly sank down to the floor to continue connecting the dots.

Theo's mark…why is Theo's mark in me? No, that's fine. It would be in me, but why is it here? Why is it on a seal?

"You are very lucky, Submissive." The voice was feminine, but icy cold.

Harry jerked about faintly, searching for the source and digging deeply into the newly connected bond between himself and his dragel magic. He was slightly relieved to note that while it was also running low from whatever he'd done with it—he could not remember what—that it was still present should he need it.

"Do not trouble yourself." The voice continued and the seal shuddered, the golden-red lights flickering again, the magic continuing its hum through every carved speck. "I do not mean any harm to come to you…I cannot."

And this time, Harry saw her. A lovely young woman—from the waist up—dressed in a handful of colorful silks and a golden scepter in one hand, with a spiked circle adorning the top. There was something vaguely familiar about her, but Harry couldn't yet put his finger on it. He couldn't tell the colors of her, beyond the silks that twined into a makeshift bustier, everything else about her was white, grey and the palest of blues, lending credence to her spirit form as her lower half was nothing more than a swirling mist and her hair, of the same matter.

His fuzzy mind sifted through the collection of confusing memories from recently and belatedly placed her. Harry sucked in a breath. He hoped this wasn't hurting Theo. "You're Theo's."

There was a very unladylike snort from the filmy young woman. "I am Sukey." She said, stiffly. "I am no one's."

"What are you doing…inside of me?" White eyes gave a spectacular roll in a nuance so Theo, that Harry had to bite back the words hovering on the tip of his tongue. She was definitely Theo's and on that basis, he would grudgingly trust her.

"Helping."

"…helping do what?"

"This." She waved a hand at the thick black doors. "Do you know what lies beyond here?"

"N-no." Harry's brow furrowed. He couldn't piece that part of the puzzle together, but he did think it would come to him if he kept thinking of it. "Can you open the doors?"

"I can." She folded her arms over her chest. The scepter stuck out at an odd angle. "I probably should not."
"…This is weird."

Her filmy-white lips twitched in something that could have been a smile. "Indeed." She moved, floating with ease as she turned to hover before the engraved medallion on the black doors. "Do you know what this is?"

"I already said-"

"What it is and what lies beyond it are two entirely different things." Sukey interrupted. "Think quickly, little Submissive."

"Harry. My name is Harry."

"Mmm." She murmured, noncommittally.

"It's a seal, isn't it?"

"Well of course it's a seal, but do you know what kind of a seal?"

"No. I didn't know anything about seals until I came to Nevarah—until Quinn told me about it yesterday."

"Hmm." Sukey hummed again. She caressed the dim marks, coaxing them back to their full potential. "It is a Soul Seal."

A jolt of coolness stabbed through him and Harry held his breath, waiting for the shock to pass. "I have a soul?" He inquired, mildly.

This time, she really did smile. "You almost did not." Her arms fell back to her sides and she twirled the scepter absently in her hand, as if it were a toy. "There are forces bargaining for your soul."

"Really?" Harry met her unnerving gaze, steadily.

"There was one here already, before I came." She reached for the door and rubbed it gently. Harry could have sworn it trembled beneath her touch. "A little girl?" His mind caught up to the implications. "There was a little girl—in my head. I don't know who she was, but she—Voldemort—I think they fought or talked. I don't know what happened. Everything was—so fast, a blur—and it hurt."

"What an ugly name." Sukey wrinkled her nose. "I do not know this Voldemort of which you speak, but a shred of darkness embedded itself in the heart of your soul. You were lucky it did not consume you at once."

A mother's love…her sacrifice…Lily was a gifted witch…Mum…!

The thoughts mingled and smashed together in his head and Harry shook himself, to clear it. A mother's magic was a powerful, potent thing and perhaps he had her to thank for his life and his soul. "Is it still there?"

"Hmm? Oh no." Sukey twirled the scepter lazily. It glowed, faintly. "The—little girl, you said?—she took it."

"What?"
Sukey effected the closest thing to a shrug that a Casper could. "I did not ask her what she wanted with it, I supposed it was a blessing in disguise, so I let her have it and then I sent her out where you could argue with her."

Harry's green eyes narrowed, dangerously. Arguing was most certainly not what had happened during that intense mental battle. He'd never endured something like that before, it hadn't sat well with him at all and now, he wasn't exactly any happier to hear that part of it had been engineered. He scowled. "How long have you been in here?"

"In here?" She sniffed. "I am not exactly here, little Submissive. I am everywhere and nowhere. I merely happen to be here right now, because you are antagonizing this." She tapped the glowing seal with her scepter. "And I am not sure that you should be doing that." The filmy white-grey edges of her caspered forms began to tinge with the rosy-golden hue that the medallion gave off.

That was the final clue that Harry needed, he lunged to his feet, his hands passing harmlessly through her. "You put this seal on me!"

"In place of another, yes." Sukey inspected her nonexistent nails. "And stop that, it tickles. I do not feel much like laughing."

"Take it off." Harry felt his magic freeze and shift according to his tumultuous emotions. He took a hasty breath, attempting to calm it, before the flicker of rage resurfaced. Seals. Pointless, bloody seals! "Take. It. Off!"

"…No." Sukey leaned down to press her face hair's breadth away. "Not yet. It is not complete."

"Complete?" Harry hissed. "This is my soul. I have more right to it than-"

"Who is Albus Dumbledore and why did you let anyone of Torvak decent meddle with your magic?"

Harry blinked. His mouth opened and closed, mind working to connect the dots to the newest puzzle the casper had thrown at him. It didn't make anywhere near as much sense as he had hoped. "What?"

"I did not place this seal on you with good intentions, little one." She swirled teasingly around him the smile turning dark and malicious. "I should have swallowed you alive the moment you breathed those forbidden words. Her wispy fingers pretended to close about Harry's throat.

Surprisingly, he felt it this time as a distinct coolness circling about him. "What are you talking about?"

"Ah, so you do know them? Well, then. That does change things now, does it not?"

"Stop speaking in riddles." Harry felt his magic roil and rumble.

Sukey's pale eyebrows arched upwards. "A cretin by the name of Dumbledore crafted a seal to lock away your soul." Her white eyes drilled into him. "The penalty for the words you spoke, makes your life forfeit. I came for it." The scepter glowed. "And I was denied, because there are seals upon your soul, however, this seal in particular caught my eye."

Harry squared his shoulders and met her gaze. "You're welcome to my soul, if I owe it to you, then." His eyes hardened. "But I have things to do before you can have it."

She laughed, long and loud. "I cannot have it, as it is no longer mine for the taking." She pretended
to yawn, as if bored. "But, as I no longer need to kill you, then you are welcome to have this back, except…” and here, she sighed.

"Except what?"

"Except that in trying to remove the original seal, it ah, latched onto me instead. So I sealed it back." She waved the scepter at the wall. The medallion flared. "I could undo it, but it would bring about a host of painful things and some physical discomforts."

Harry snorted. "I doubt it could be any worse than what I have already been through." He informed her. "Take it off. Now!"

"Now?" And this time, there was weight in her words.

Harry swallowed. He could hear a foggy echo of Theo's words in the back of his mind. Words that he hadn't been able to make sense of at that time, lying helplessly in Charlie's arms. The memory replayed as he stared up the hovering Casper, both terrifying and beautiful in its existence.

"Terris Sukey. Brindus. Terris Makindor. Brindus. Terris Alomath. Brindus. By the honor of my soul and the stake of my life, to the three guardians of the earth that protect me, I beg of you to spare the life of my disobedient mate. The contracts with you are upheld by my hand and mine alone. I gave access, but meant no disrespect by it. Judge as you wish. I speak no dishonesty. Exact your price upon my body alone. I offer my innocence and accept your binding. Brindus!"

He lifted his chin. "Now."

"So be it." The scepter twirled again and Sukey pointed it at the medallion. "Terris Sukey—Brindus!"

Harry clenched his teeth and retreated to the little happy place. Something flitted over him, a touch of coolness and he could have sworn, she'd patted his shoulder. Could have.

He grimaced, bracing himself for the expected onslaught. He'd have a lot of explaining to do when he woke—and he was not particularly looking forward to it.

"Harry?" Charlie rolled to his side, keeping his arms around the trembling figure, his grip never loosening. "Harry, it's alright. It's over now. Shh." He shushed as gently and comforting as he could. It pained him to see the slender form still twitching and flinching in alternate moments. "It's alright. It will be alright." Charlie found himself mumbling a soothing litany of nonsense in Romanian—a habit he'd picked up from some of the other Tamers when they worked with the younger, injured dragons.

"Char-?" Harry's sleep-slurred address came a few minutes later. He started to stretch, then whimpered and curled in on himself, his arms sluggishly moving to curl around his stomach. "Ow." The brunet murmured, very quietly. A moment later, he relaxed, the stiffness bleeding away.

Charlie's eyebrows arched upwards in a mixture of surprise and worry as he took in the reaction and the expression on Harry's face. "Harry?"

"It hurts-?" But this time, there was a hint of wonder in his voice as Harry froze again, his brow knitting in confusion. And now it doesn't...what's happening? The thoughts jumbled and swirled over each other as Harry continued to stare. "What happened to me?" He held up an arm, ignoring
the minute sparks of pain to see that his shirt-sleeves were a bit shorter than he could remember. Harry blinked, his mind scrambling to put the pieces together, there had been quite a bit to process in his mindscape. "Theo-!"

"Harry?" Charlie nearly sat up, but he caught himself in time, as not to send Harry tumbling to the floor from the magically enlarged bed. His brain connected the dots at the same moment that Harry did. He nudged him over a bit, so he could see.

The brunet held up a hand in wonderment, the shirt-sleeves short enough to speak of a few inches of growth. Green eyes grew round and Harry sat up, unheed of Charlie's hands attempting to keep him still. "Ow, ow, ow." He muttered, wincing as the painful aftershocks rippled through him, but faded almost at once, the moment they were over. He stared at his hands and then down at his feet, his legs, halfway tangled in the sheets and Charlie's own long limbs.

Charlie sat up, belatedly, his own blue-eyed gaze following Harry's as they stared at the evidence of skinny legs suddenly too long for their trousers. "Well," Charlie swallowed, after a moment. He reached over and hugged the smaller teen to him. He tucked the dark-haired head beneath his chin and bent to nuzzle along Harry's cheek. Magic was strange. But it was also a beautiful thing. This, he could whole-heartedly agree with.

"Theo." Harry repeated, a moment later, a little more firmly. "Where's Theo?"

"He was with Quinn." Charlie tightened his grip on the lovely armful.

"Quinn's over there with Kyle." Harry leaned away from Charlie's happy kiss. "M'fine, Charlie." He protested, half-heartedly. "It was Theo. I saw him, he was—he's alright? I-I need to see him. I feel like—I need to, can I?" He wriggled, faintly, wanting to slide off the bed and stand on his own two feet. The words were not coming out as simply as he wanted them to, but it seemed that Charlie could understand him.


Harry slid off the bed, testing his weight on legs that seemed to be all out of coordination—again. "Whoa!" He grabbed backwards, steadying himself with a hand on Charlie's arm. A few careful breaths later, Harry stared down at himself, having the faintest feeling of déjà vu, remembering his sixteenth birthday. While he hadn't grown for his inheritance—and he had wondered about that—it seemed as if the mystery growth had finally caught up to him.

A giddy smile danced across his face, fading a second later, when he turned on Charlie. "Theo." He said, quietly. "I want Theo now, Charlie."

His beta opened his mouth and shut it a few times, before he finally effected a half-shrug. "Theo. Right. I'll ah, see what I can do."

"Good." Harry tested his arms, stretching them in and out, grimacing at the popped buttons on his shirt-cuffs. That was yet another reason to avoid wearing button up shirts. Pesky buttons.

"Charlie?"

"Hmm?" Charlie stood up, rolling his shoulders forward and back, attempting to settle his slightly rippling wings, hovering beneath the surface of his skin.

"Could you?" Harry gestured to the outfit.

Charlie flashed a grin. His wand appeared in his hand with a half-thought and with a flick of his wrist, he transfigured the clothes into larger, neater versions of daywear.
Harry gifted him with a brilliant smile for his efforts. The smile beautiful and bittersweet.

"Thanks."

"Harry?" Charlie reached a hand backwards to feel along his side. He frowned. These wings were complicated…

"I never thought I'd ever grow any taller." Harry said, softly. He smiled down at his bare feet. He didn't know where his shoes had gone and when it had happened, but he couldn't actually care. He could feel the aches in the right places—growing pains indeed—but somehow, it didn't matter. He could feel and see everything as if it were newer, brighter somehow.

Funny how a few inches could do that.

"Truly spectacular." Ilsa congratulated him, later.

Theo roused to find himself staring up at her from the cool, damp ground. He couldn't recall much, but it seemed as if a great deal of time had passed over him somehow. He grimaced, finding his limbs virtually useless due to the pain singing through his body and the lack of energy to spare for movement. "That bad?" He croaked.

"Oh do waste your voice, why don't you?" Ilsa drawled. She uncorked something from her waist and a moment later, dribbled cool water at the corner of his mouth. "I sincerely hope you worked everything out, because I am not a casper therapist to be-

"S'fine." Theo twisted away from the bottle. "We did. We're fine."

"Good." Ilsa screwed the cap back on and returned it to her utility belt. "It was quite spectacular you know," She repeated. "Lots of flashing lights, explosions and such. Very pretty."

"You have a horrible sense of humor." Theo coughed and winced at the jarring movement. "Show it to me sometime." He rasped. "How long?"

"Long enough." She settled beside him, stretching out on the cool, damp grass.

Together they stared up at a dark, starry sky.

Theo sighed. "Aracle's void?" He questioned. It was the only place he could think of and he'd long since decided, years before, that he would never count the places that his mentor chose to secret them away. Ilsa had her secrets and she allowed him his own. It was something of an understanding between them. Aracle's penchant for spellwork, especially those of a time-altering nature, was a worthy secondary gift to his own earth element. One of his courting gifts to Ilsa had been a little floating patch of earth in a place where time was slowed to the outside world. Theo could make an educated guess when the situation called for it.

Ilsa snorted. "That obvious?"

"If I am away too long, I'm fairly certain something will explode on the other end."

"Charlie or Harry?" Ilsa quipped. "They'll be fine."

"I still need to see them." He returned.

"I am not stopping you."

Theo shifted to look at her. He turned his head enough to take in her profile, deceptively relaxed,
He knew that look and he had known, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he would not emerge from this ordeal unscathed. "Of course." He sighed.

"Working up the nerve?" Ilsa inquired, lightly.

Theo half-laughed. "When I can feel my hands," he promised. "Right now, I think my feet itch."

Her laughter mingled with his and Theo tried to let the sound of it comfort him. What would come next would be brutal and very real for both of them. It was part of their understanding.

He swallowed hard.

To leave the void, he would have to fight her—and he would be entirely at her mercy as to whether his winning or his submission, would grant him the passage he sought. He sighed, mentally gathering and pulling himself together for possibly the third time for this session. He would not protest this—mostly because he knew he deserved every minute of it.

Her hand, rough, calloused and warm, slipped into his as they lay on the grass. It squeezed—once—gently and nothing was said.

Theo understood it as all the things they didn't need to say. He squeezed back.

It would be horrible, terrible and entirely wretched—and then, it would be over and they could return to their usual roles, routines and relationship. His lips quirked unwillingly into a smile. He stared up into the sky, seeing the shining specks of stars blurring as his eyes refused to cooperate, hot tears stinging at the corners. He'd almost given this up.

Almost.

And it hurt to finally understand.

He willed his body to function, drawing himself up on shaky arms and legs, relieved when threads of strength settled into his bones. Evidence of his caspers working with him, proof of his increased power, resolve that he had missed. Theo managed a smile this time, tinged with a hint of bittersweet reality. He waited while his mentor rolled fluidly up to her own feet, her hands crackling with her elemental gifts.

His own magic leapt to life as he cupped his hands together, summoning out a light-cream-colored orb. He rolled his shoulders back and settled into a bracing stance, the positioning feeling right, the reason feeling even better. He had missed this.

"Count of three?" Ilsa hummed, her own golden eyes snapping brightly in anticipation. "Three!"

Theo threw himself forward, mouthing the first spell that came to mind.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry for the delay with the chapter folks. I think I'll have to switch to biweekly installments at the rate uni is going. UGH. Anyway, Thank you all for the well wishes, the suggestions and encouragement! I really hope this chapter was worth the wait! :)
Returning To Your Arms

Chapter Notes

RECAP: At the Health Clinic, Harry had a nightmare and Kyle tends to him, with Quinn's help as they discover the bond between Theo and Harry is affecting Harry negatively. Theo has to fight his caspers to prove his worth and then Ilsa, who tests his resolve, in the mean time, Harry wakes in Charlie's arms and worries for Theo and himself. Terris Sukey visits Harry in his mind and breaks the Soul Seal that Dumbledore had originally placed on him. Harry suffers the painful aftermath of channeling some of Theo's changes as well as the unintended soul seal unraveling.

NEVARAH : HEALTH CLINIC

"I feel fine," Harry tried not to dodge the well-meaning hands of Medic Kyle that poked and prodded when he least expected it. "There's nothing—in fact, I just feel a little sore. Like after a good Quidditch match." He twisted, trying to see what the gloved hands were doing behind him. He couldn't exactly remember a really good Quidditch match, like most times, he often ended up in Madam Pomfrey's loving care afterward, even when he was positively sure he hadn't been injured. Harry sighed, fighting and losing against the urge to squirm.

Charlie had told him that he would find Theo and while his beta had yet to actually leave the room, Harry was certain that he'd done something, somehow and that Theo would be arriving soon. He couldn't wait. He wanted to see Theo so badly, that his magic had begun to reach out to things in the room, making them rasp and rattle until Quinn had bopped him over the head with clean towel.

From there, Harry had been seated on the second examination bed, within sight and sound of Charlie, but just slightly out of reach, so that the healers could move easily and comfortably between the two. Since then, Harry had all but been vibrating with energy and it showed in ways he could not keep to himself.

"Head in front!" Kyle snapped out, speaking in Quinn's stead, even as he busied himself with something over at the preparation counter. "You shouldn't turn like that when he's pressing those pressure points, you'll sprain something or trigger another."

Quinn rapped him lightly on the head, fixing him with a mildly disapproving look to accompany the words.

Harry sighed—loudly. He couldn't help it. There was practically a literal itch scrabbling around inside of him that made him want to run and jump and fairly tackle Theo the moment his Alpha was anywhere near in sight or touch. To touch him, hold him, squeeze him, tease him and well, pretty much an entire host of indecent things not quite suited for public company—and Harry didn't care. He just wanted Theo. There. Now. Any time now.

He gave another wriggle. He was feeling better than he had felt in a considerably long time. If this was what it felt like to have his soul free, then everything for the past few months, no, even his entire life, suddenly became startlingly clear. To live as he'd been living, weighted and bearing such a burden, it had drawn things from him, things he hadn't known that he wasn't able to give.
Now, he felt lighter, happier and somewhat—*playful.* It was almost an alien feeling. He shifted again. "I feel—fine. *Really.*" He tried to give his best smile, but it was hard. This new weightlessness was so—strange.

Quinn didn't buy the smile if the withering glance he gave the brunet was an actual response. His speaking spell had worn off quite some time ago, Harry figured and while he was grateful the Healer hadn't renewed it, he was having to adjust to the fact that said Healer could say more with a single pointed eyebrow, than perhaps, an entire mouthful of words. Quinn spoke just fine without speaking and Harry supposed it made sense, seeing as he'd probably lived with the handicap for years. At any rate, he was simply glad that the spell was no longer in use, having remembered what the Healer had told him about the incantation. He did not want to be the reason that Quinn was never to use his voice somewhere in the future.

As it was, Kyle spoke up instead. "That is partially what we are worried about." Kyle retorted. "Quinn, move. No, I didn't check that—what? Oh, yes, I did it already. No. You didn't tell me *that.* Fine. Yes. Of course." The Fae's distraction was interrupted by Bharin's quick, efficient movements a few feet away where Charlie lay, face-down on one of the examination beds, while the older Gheyo cared for his wings.

"Charlie?" Harry called.

"I'm fine, Harry. Sit still for Quinn."

Harry fought the urge to stick his tongue out. He really couldn't help it. Now that he could properly appreciate what had happened—somewhat, anyway—he couldn't help himself. The conversation with Sukey had been dire and serious and the entire aftermath hadn't been something he wanted to relive at all. Ever.

But she'd done something that he could feel in his veins. A Soul Seal was apparently something very big and very serious, because for once in his life, Harry felt as if he were free. No pressures, no inherent pains and no flickers of worry. He was free and happy, for whatever that was worth. He'd been flooded with a sudden barrage of rich, wild energy that seemed to be cramming itself into every available space within his body and it made him want to dance, scream and fly from the highest points of the city—a city that he knew virtually nothing about.

The brunet squirmed again.

The blond healer scowled and a second later, Quinn pinched the soft, fleshy lobe of Harry's nearest ear, annoyed.

Harry huffed a sigh. It hurt, but not badly. Just enough to remind him that while Quinn could not speak and scold him for moving around like a fluttering pixie, he could still gain his attention in other ways. Irritatingly painful ways. Harry reached up to rub his ear, gauging as to whether he could move his hands freely without repercussion.

"I feel fine." He repeated, tucking his hands beneath his thighs when the teal-eyes gave him a *look.* "Really, I mean, yes, my hands hurt a little—ow—whoa, oh. That's nice." His protests swallowed themselves when Quinn extracted his hands to daub a bright green gel over the joints with a fat cotton swab. "My feet?" He inquired, waiting. To have that lovely stuff on his feet would be absolutely *wonderful.* He wondered what it was, but such thoughts left his mind when bliss came by in the form of that lovely substance being smoothed over his feet.

Harry let out a satisfied purring trill that filled the room.
Quinn's thin lips quirked into a smile and he gave Harry's leg a light pat, before resuming the massage, deftly manipulating the tendons and joints in a way that spoke of definite experience.

Harry flopped back, boneless on the examination table, eyes half-closed, enjoying the attention in a way he'd never really been freed to before. He knew it was partially because of his own past, because just the fact that someone was willingly touching him—and helping with said touch—made little sparks of happiness explode inside of him. For a moment, his lips quivered and then Harry pressed them tightly together, willing the overflow of emotion to stow itself away for another time. Right now, he just wanted to enjoy this. Every single minute of it that he could.

Quinn definitely had magic hands and for one brief, irrational moment, Harry wished that Quinn was his so that he'd never use those magical hands on anyone but him.

Of course, as quickly as that odd thought had come, Harry dismissed it and returned to living in the moment, where he enjoyed the feel of the soft, sure fingers rubbing, tugging and smoothing the cool gel over his aching feet and ankles. Growing as he had done was infinitely less painful than the entire lifetime up to now it had taken him to gain his other height. Now that he knew of this option, he wished he'd had it long ago.

But, as it was, Harry wasn't quite sure that he followed everything that had happened, after all, there were so many things happening, that it almost gave him a headache just figuring them through. He did know that something gravely serious had happened with Theo and that Ilsa was missing along with him.

He worried, automatically for Theo. Knowing that his Alpha was strong was one thing, but knowing that Ilsa was with him was somewhat calming. He hoped the temperamental lady would at least help Theo with whatever was going on. The dream-like trance had honestly scared him. The pain had felt very real and the image of seeing Theo being ripped apart from the inside out was an experience he never wanted to relieve.

Harry sucked in a breath and blew it out harshly. He'd also have to make a point to never sleep alone—anywhere. It seemed that nightmares would leave him alone, as long as he rested in the arms of another. He wrinkled his nose. There was really no reason to avoid taking advantage of such a simple solution, especially as he had two mates that he was fairly certain wouldn't mind if he slept close at hand.

Emerald eyes wandered about the room and settled on the Medic. Kyle was busy at the end of the room preparing something, a moment later, he tossed a container over his shoulder. One that Bharin caught and unscrewed the lid, taking out a generous fingerful to spread over Charlie's left wing, the right already folded back into his body.

_Hmm, maybe that's where Quinn learned those magic hand tricks..._ Harry watched as Bharin's large hands worked the ointment into Charlie's large wings. It was applied in even strokes and the motions, coaxing the wings back to their hidden state.

Harry twisted to take another good look his head to the side, eyes lazily opening a little wider to see better. He couldn't help it. He'd had some time to appreciate Theo's tattoos—especially on the nights he had been able to convince the Slytherin to sleep without his pyjama top, which hadn't been too hard, but Theo was a pureblood of habit and certain habits were hard to break. Harry wondered how Charlie would fare between them as a beta. He wondered how they would spend the night. He could only recall that one night in the Burrow with Charlie, where he'd cuddled close for warmth, mildly disappointed that Charlie also wore pyjamas to bed.

His mind flitted off as he idly wondered if he'd find another mate that perhaps, would like to sleep
without pyjamas. A laugh bubbled up inside and Harry hurriedly swallowed it down. He could already see the looks on Charlie and Theo's faces if he were to find a handsome fellow with an inclination to sleep in his birthday suit. That would be fun…and most likely distracting.

There were conversations floating around him and at some point, Harry had asked what they'd meant about the incomplete bondings. A reluctant Kyle had explained how Charlie and Theo had a simple dominance fight, but no confirmation that the outcome had been accepted. Apparently, the only way for that to come about, would be with Theo topping Charlie. A threesome would then follow, required to establish the operating triad functions that belonged to their little circle.

At that, Harry had blushed the richest of pinks, leaning towards reds, before his lips had quirked upwards into an odd smile and then he'd turned to stare hungrily at Charlie's mostly bare figure, his mind whirling away at the implications imparted to him and how best, they might be carried out.

Granted, he was a normal young man with the necessary urges from time to time, but since Theo, Harry had to admit that he found his nights far more enjoyable and not just for the obvious reasons of no nightmares and a warm pair of arms cuddling him close. He'd yet to really spend a real night with all three of them together and he could see how that might affect them all.

Sleeping was an intimate act, made even more so when shared amongst one's mates. In that way, Harry could understand the importance of his resting period. His mind flickered off to the fact that it was scarcely a week away and he wondered if he would spend it here in Nevarah or back in the wizarding world.

Regardless of how odd and strange everything had been, he did feel marginally safer in Nevarah, if only for the fact that here, he did not have people actively seeking to kill or recruit him. No crazy dark lords either. Harry sighed, wistfully. He really did need to speak to Theo and Charlie soon. Not a necessary, boring conversation about things like seals and such, but rather, concrete plans to know where his crazy life was headed next.

Emerald eyes glazed over with an appreciative haze as Harry admired Charlie's tattoos as Bharin helped his beta fold his lovely navy wings in. Watching those lovely scripts and scrolls was now an entirely new pastime and Harry was already addicted. Charlie's tattoos seemed to hold a rich navy hue, compared to Theo's black-to-cocoa brown shades. Compliments to their wings, he supposed.

Subconsciously, one hand began to creep upwards to his shirt collar and Harry was startled out of his thoughts when Quinn grabbed his wrist. He stared at the healer in confusion, before he realized that he had caught his bonding necklace and begun to worry it in his hands, resulting in a newly restless Charlie just a few feet away.

"Have you not exchanged scales as yet?" Kyle flitted between them, calming Charlie with deliberate hands on the redhead's forehead and shoulder and a look cast over at Harry. "You have mated, you both bear the marks for it and generally one does exchange scales during that first, ah, night."

Harry nibbled on his lower lip for a moment, then shook his head as Quinn released his wrist. "We didn't." He admitted. "I didn't know about that."

Bharin perked a brow, circling around to stand by Wikhn, out of the way, allowing the healers to work more efficiently now that his hands were no longer needed. He exchanged a glance with Quinn and then spoke. "Perhaps you would like to?" He suggested, his voice dark and rich. "If you do not wish for witnesses, we can step out of the room."
Harry found himself shaking his head, quickly. "I-I don't know how to do it." He felt his face warm as he recalled that Theo had presented him with the finished product that he now wore around his neck. He had no idea how or when Theo had really done it or what had been involved.

His Alpha had teased him that the scales had been taken during one of their passionate nights and that Harry had been far too preoccupied to notice. While he certainly didn't doubt the levels of his own awareness when Theo was using his hands in *that* way, Harry wished that he had noticed.

"Tis' nothing to be ashamed of." Bharin's voice gentled, oddly soothing in the room as Kyle brushed past again, with another potion in hand that he gave to Charlie.

The redhead shifted to sit up, downing the proffered potion with a grimace. Kyle handed him a glass of water afterward and picked up his wrist, timing his pulse without magic.

"Even if I don't know what to do?" Harry shot back.

"The scales along the top of the wings or near the curves in the bottom spines, are usually loose."

Bharin explained. "Most dragels find it easier to handle their dragel and wizard sides, when perfectly blended—as I see you have already done. To maintain the balance, things like using your dragel forms in various everyday activities can help. Things like taking a shower, morning meditations and daily exercise for both your magic and your body, can be helpful." His gaze flickered over to Quinn, who had stood on tip-toe to levitate something from a high cabinet shelf into his waiting hands. "Using oil rubbed into the scales will help you to remove the old ones and a good shower brush usually does the trick."

"It works in either order." Kyle added. "You can rub oils into them before you bathe or after, so as long as you use the brush to give them a good scrubbing. The scales generally do not shed much, unless you are still growing or your wings have yet to adjust and even so, it is nothing overly excessive or necessary to worry about."

Quinn shook with silent laughter as he took up a position beside Kyle, handing him the jar he'd taken from the shelf. Bharin gave a quiet chuckle to whatever joke had been shared between them.

Harry rolled up from the bed to sit with his feet dangling over the edge. "What's so funny?"

"Some Submissives are a little picky." Kyle explained, mirth shimmering in his soft brown eyes. "I once knew a new triad who had yet to exchange scales properly, because the Submissive insisted that the necklaces should match."

Harry's brow furrowed. "They didn't?"

Kyle stifled a laugh. "No, Harry, they didn't. Every scale is unique, it isn't like hair. There probably are no two scales alike, so the poor mates were practically beside themselves with worry over their Sub's obsession."

"What did you do?"

"Er, well." Kyle shrugged. "Quinn did, actually and I'm not quite sure I want to know what he did to make them see sense, but in the end, they decided to have the scales mounted on gemstones and instead of using a haircord, like yours, they used silver chains. I do not believe they have ever had any trouble since, but that is an extreme situation. It is more so the circumstances under which the scales are exchanged that really matter."

"How?" Harry wanted to know. "I don't even know when Theo..." his voice trailed off and worry clouded over his features.
"If they are given willingly." Kyle answered, promptly. "If they are given and not taken, then it does not matter which scales are gifted or when it happens."

Harry stared. "What?"

Quinn gave a soft smile and touched Kyle's arm again, handing him off the jar of thick, blackness and moving over to draw out a long, tapered paintbrush.

"Do you want to exchange them now? We could witness, if you are so worried. I am sure you will be fine." Kyle soothed. He looked at the jar in his hand and then over at Quinn. "I had the smaller brushes over on the left." He instructed. "The black-bristled ones, yes?"

Quinn obediently shifted his search to the left, rummaging through the neatly organized drawer for the necessary implement. He gave a nod, a moment later, in answer to the question.

Harry fidgeted. "I don't know."

"There is absolutely no rush or pressure." Bharin cut in, quickly. "Please do not feel as if you must. It is only an observation."

"What is it so important and what are you doing?" Harry had to know.

"You have just had a blood purification ritual without some of the other protections and aids that a professional healer would have taken care of." Kyle explained. He began to 'heat' the jar with a pale glow of white-gold magic as Quinn approached, two new brushes in hand and dipped one into the jar of black goop-like paint. "We are rune-casting. It will purge his body and his blood of any lasting and lingering effects so you may safely share blood between each other again and so that his body will be better prepared and able to hold the Soul Cast." He turned his attention to the silently amused Charlie with Quinn standing before him, brush poised to paint. "This might tickle."

It was his turn before he knew it and Harry sat still, trying his best not to fidget as Quinn painted symbols and complicated patterns of runes over his pale skin. The healer's brow furrowed in concentration and his strokes were quick, light and sure. Harry shifted, feeling the chill in the air when Kyle caught his gaze and then turned to Charlie. Harry watched as the Medic approached his beta and whispered a few words to him.

A moment later, Charlie slid off the examination bed and padded over, hiking himself up to sit beside Harry, his movements careful and slow as not to mar any of the newly painted runes, still drying on his tanned skin.

For a moment, Harry didn't understand at all and then he felt the first tendrils of warmth beginning to reach out to him and he turned, wondering, to meet Charlie's equally warm gaze, those sparkling sapphire eyes shimmering over at him with something akin to pride glistening in their depths.

A faint smile tugged at his lips and Harry was thankful that his unruly hair was somewhat in his face so that he didn't have to see those brilliant blue eyes in all their glorious intensity. If he did, something hinted that he would not be able to sit so calmly beside Charlie and let Quinn continue to paint runes on him.

A light giggle tripped out and Harry clapped a hand over his mouth, emerald eyes wide.

"Ticklish spot?" Charlie inquired, his eyes gleaming wickedly.

Harry blushed and made as if to shove him off the table, but Charlie caught his hand and curled his
own around it, lifting it partway up to his lips, even as Harry jerked back.

They were both returned to the present moment and their current situation when Quinn deftly
flipped the brush around and poked them both with the wooden handle, a sharp quick jab and a
warning look.

The playfulness subsided, but their hands remained linked. Harry returned to the business of staring
at his own chest to try and make sense out of any of the symbols that Quinn painted, while Charlie
held that slender hand in his and gently caressed each digit in turn.

A comfortable silence passed while Kyle began to bustle around them again, always hovering close
enough with the jar for Quinn, whenever he needed to dip the brush within. He explained, when
prompted, how the runic cleansing worked and how it would be their own magics doing the work
for them. In the end, they would be placed inside a clear room with a specific aging spell and
allowed for the spell to work at an accelerated pace to complete the process in the same day.

"An aging spell?" Charlie gave Harry's hand a light squeeze, looking from the Medic to the brunet.
"I've never heard of such a thing before."

"Dragel magics and medicines are a far more dangerous and different branch of healing than any
other creature," Kyle chuckled. "Do not worry, it is not half as complicated or horrible as I may
inadvertently make it sound. You will hardly feel anything, if at all and it will save you from
having to spend the next few days in hospital custody."

Harry shrugged. It sounded odd, but he wasn't exactly keen on staying in the clinic longer than
necessary. Already they had come and he was thankful that for the most part, it hadn't been
anything too serious so far—well, then again, his viewpoint of serious was probably rather skewed,
considering—but he already wanted to be home. A real home, where they would not be in the way
of a certain dour Potions Master, a pregnant Malfoy and a busy Councilman.

His mind flickered back to Hermione and he rubbed his arm, absently, fingers traveling up to brush
over the mating marks on his neck and shoulder. Right now, he didn't care about medical
procedures, rituals and magic and all that, he just wanted Theo and he wanted him now.

As if on cue, the door to the examining room slid open and two shadows fell across the entry way.

Harry felt the scale nestled in the hollow of his neck grow warm just as he pulled his hand free
from Charlie's grasp. The scent of citrus was so faint in the air that if he hadn't felt the brush of
warmth, he wouldn't have known. But somehow, instinctively, he did.

The door had no sooner slid open by Wikhn's admission, when Ilsa and Theo entered the room.
Harry stared at him for a long, silent moment. The changes were obvious in some ways, Theo was
taller—then again, so was Harry—but the height suited him well and his hair, lovely and thick,
waved gently about his head, a few tufts brushing against his shoulders. A gleam of silver caught
his eye and Harry vaguely remembered once seeing tiny double silver hoops in Theo's earlobes in
his Halfling dragel form. They were now present in his human form. The warm, honey-gold eyes
shimmered with warmth and humor as they raked over Harry's half-bared form possessively.

He was dressed in a new suit of black and brown leathers, trim trousers, fitted shirt, and flared
overcoat, his robes open and hanging just right. His feet were booted and the wide neck of his shirt
showed of the thick black cord with its singular silver-peach tinted scale. Dusky lips curved
upwards into a smile, fangs showing at the edges.
"Theo!" and Harry was off the examination table and launching himself forward in a heartbeat.

"Harry." The name was breathed with happiness and Theo caught Harry up in a tight, warm hug, with a little bit of a lift. "You're alright." He pressed a kiss to that dark, messy head of hair. "And you grew too."

"How are you? What happened?" Harry buried his face in that familiar neck and breathed long and deep. "Theo." He murmured again, nuzzling the warmth there. "I saw you—and it—everything—it hurt. Theo, what happened?"

The golden eyes held the faintest tinge of sadness. "Something that will take me considerable time to explain." He kissed the edge of Harry's famous scar. "May I tell you later or do you truly want to know this very minute?"

Harry leaned forward, giving a little bit of a jump, relaxing when Theo's arms automatically curved around him to hold tight enough, so his feet were off the ground. He balance carefully and took Theo's face in both hands. "As long as you alright." He allowed, searching that solemn face for any sign of untruth.

"I am better now than I was before." Theo said, honestly. He leaned forward enough to touch their noses together. "And I will tell you later. It is no secret."

"Both of us?" Harry questioned. One hand splayed over a warm cheek and the other tangled easily in Theo's thicker hair. "Charlie too?"

"Charlie too." Theo agreed. His grip tightened on the lovely armful as he cast a knowing eye to the runic symbols. "Are those dry?"

"Hmm? Yes." Harry tapped his cheek, wanting those golden eyes back up on his face and not lingering on his skinny, painted chest. "It's fine. They're dry."


"Missed you too." Harry's eyelids slid half-way shut and he leaned forward, resting their foreheads together. "Worried about you. Couldn't feel you." His hands dropped to fist in the collar of Theo's jacket and robes. "Really, really worried, Theo." He butted his Alpha's forehead, lightly. "Don't do that again. Don't disappear on me when I need you, when I can't know where you went."

A ragged breath was stolen slowly and Theo gave a short, jerky nod. "I won't." He promised, softly. "I will not. I—this was the only time." He offered, pressing a kiss of apology to one pale cheek. "I will not do that again."

"Good." Harry tried to smile, but his mind continued to whirl away. "I met Sukey," He trembled, a giddy smile plastering itself on his face. "She took my Soul Seal off." Dark chocolate eyebrows arched upwards in a mixture of surprise and wonder. "Did she now?"

"Mmmhmm." Harry hummed. He could feel raw magic feathering and crackling around and over Theo, intertwined tightly with his Alpha and reaching out, curiously to him. He tested it, carefully, with a brush of his own and was warmly received. It made him smile for a moment and then an overwhelming wave of want splashed over him.

For all of a split-second, Harry stared at that gorgeous face of pale skin, golden eyes and rich, thick, dark hair. The glints of silver in his ears and the half-smirk, half-smile with a hint of pride
mixed in, smiled back at him.

Harry reached forward and slanted his mouth over that near-smirk. He was gratified to feel Theo's arms tightening deliberately around them and his shoulders itched for a scant second, before he felt them jerk and knew that his wings were coming out. They snapped outward with a satisfying flick, a thrum of magical energy leaping inside him, the wildness having a new, sudden outlet.

Harry didn't have time to think beyond that, before the kiss deepened and Theo's scent flooded around him. He felt the mated bond between them sing and hum with happiness, approval and contentment. An additional layer of warmth surrounded him and the light darkened enough for Harry to understand that Theo had his wings out as well and curved around them for privacy and protection.

It made him wish they were far away from a public audience so he could really make use of the wild energy singing through his veins. As it was, he fluttered his wings encouragingly, brushing them seductively against Theo's own strong ones as they circled in closer, lightly touching back, caressing but not encouraging the first flickers of arousal that stirred as pleasurable shocks rippled through him.

Lips parted willingly, an approving trill sounding out as Harry curled his arms around Theo's neck and gave and took in equal measure. Theo's lips were soft, but roughened around the bottom edge and his mouth was hot, wet and warm, with the faintest hint of chocolate left behind. The kiss shifted, little nips, licks and then deeper again, tongues tangling and tasting, as Harry willingly molded himself to that perfect moment of bliss.

Theo pulled away, long enough for them to breathe and then his head dipped down again and he swallowed Harry's breathy moan. The kiss was light and teasing, growing with intensity as it progressed. Theo's magic shimmered and sang around them and Harry was vaguely aware that they were moving somewhat.

He shifted, wrapping his legs around Theo's waist, uncaring beyond that. Theo's arms rearranged themselves to better hold him, cradling him close. When they parted again, Harry turned his head, enough to catch the corner of one of Theo's ears in his mouth. He nipped it, lightly, in reprimand. He was serious. As happy as he was to see Theo, he did not want a repeat of this again—of Theo disappearing off somewhere that he could not follow or know of, someplace where even Charlie could not reach him and Harry knew the redhead had tried.

If Theo and Charlie had been fully bonded, Harry knew the outcome would have been different, but he had no intention of changing his mind on this matter. They were all in this and he determined that they ought to make the best of it, no matter what came their way. He was sick and tired of fate meddling with his life whenever it so chose to. By whatever stroke of good luck, he'd been allowed Theo and even Charlie, it was more than he could have ever hoped for and he would do everything that was within his power to keep it.

He'd given up enough.

"Don't disappear on me again, Theo." He warned.

There was an apologetic kiss to his cheek, baby-soft and almost hesitant. "I will not, treasure, in this, I give you my word."

This time, Harry kissed him.
Seamus frowned as Dean shuffled nervously beside him yet again. He elbowed his boyfriend a little harder than necessary and fixed him with a faintly green-eye-tinged glare to ensure his cooperation. A moment later, the dark head ducked in embarrassment and understanding, but neither said a word.

After another moment of restlessness, the tanned wizard excused himself from the tension-filled room and disappeared up the stairs intending to take up another round of the watch. It wasn't exactly safe to stay in the Burrow, but Dumbledore hadn't sent any other instructions and told them that the possibility of another attack in the ruins of the last one was quite unlikely.

Seamus was inclined to disagree. From what he understood, the newly repaired and restored condition of the Burrow and everything else, was largely due to an accidental burst of creature magic from the pureblooded Theodore Nott. It spoke of things that the Irish lad was not yet sure he wanted to puzzle through.

He'd had to send word to his mother to explain that he'd cast his luck out and would have to see it through, at least for the moment. She'd scolded him—as he'd expected—and made him promise to be careful. He'd said he would try and do his best—and he hadn't bothered to tell her not to scry for him or cast out her own strands of luck.

What would happen, would happen.

It had been a scarce three days since the attack at the Burrow and neither Mr. Weasley nor the Weasley children had returned nor sent word. Mrs. Weasley had been moved indoors to the couch where Ginny kept watch by her side, sponging her forehead with cool water, while Lavender had been dispatched with Neville to see about finding a healer in the form of visiting Madam Pomfrey.

He'd heard via floo, when McGonagall had firecalled and he'd sent Dean to handle the conversation, not trusting himself to let things take their natural course. It was far too tempting to use his luck when things were so horribly gone awry. At it was, it pained him to hover nearby, watching Ginny's pinched, drawn face as she tended to her mother, who had literally become lifeless the moment Arthur and her other children had vanished.

Her rosy-hued skin had grown deathly pale and her charming, auburn-orange curls had gone flat, limp and straight. Magic, Seamus knew, his own Mam had a similar trick and he knew to run when her hair went straight, but this was far more disturbing than anything he'd ever known.

"Gin?" He moved forward, cat-quiet, eyes raking over the pale, female form of the older witch. "How is she? How are you? Any change?" There was none, he could tell, his gift told him that much, but he asked her anyway, knowing the signs and stages of grief and depression. Ginny was swiftly turning into the same haunted ghost as

The redhead turned teary eyes towards him, her lower lip trembling faintly. "I don't understand." Her voice cracked. "Why would Daddy—why would—how could—"

"Seam?" Dean's voice rang out from somewhere on the upper floors. "Something's coming."

"What?" Seamus jerked around, the pendant worried between his fingers falling back to rest on his chest, hung by the leather cord. "What do you mean?"

"Get up here!"
The young wizard scrambled to his feet, taking the stairs two at a time and meeting his boyfriend on the landing between floors, in front of a large, misshapen window. "What is it?" He squinted, seeing nothing.

"Keep looking, it's drawing closer." Dean's hand dropped on his shoulder, squeezing tight. "...use your sight if you have to, I'm not sure about this, Seam."

Seamus clasped the pendant in his hand and squeezed it tight. A moment later, he felt the tingle and blinked away the tears as his eyes shifted to something sharper and clearer, allowing him to see what was approaching. His breath caught in his throat and he felt his stomach flip. "T-Torvak?"

"I think I know understand that Mum means when she says the truth is stranger than fiction." Dean said, grimly. He turned away, abruptly, taking the stairs down two at a time. "Something tells me that spears aren't friendly things to come calling with."

"Shouldn't we give them the benefit of doubt?" Seamus hurried after him, biting his lower lip. His luck could extend to Mrs. Weasley and it had always circled around Dean, now fixed around his boyfriend as natural as breathing, though to include Ginny, Lavender and Neville would certainly be stretching things quite a bit. It wasn't something he wanted to chance. They were his friends yes, but meddling with certain things required experience that was only gained with a little bit of luck and chance—not with complete dependence on one's lucky talents.

The sickening feeling in his stomach doubled over and back. Seamus rubbed it absently and looked away. He couldn't think of anything outright that he could do just then. Everything he could consider would require significant preparation time. Tiemmt that he was somehow sure that they did not have.

"I have more doubt than benefit right now." Dean shot back. "I don't know about you, but this doesn't feel right." They arrived in the crowded living room, taking up positions beside the sofa where the unresponsive Mrs. Weasley lay.

"I'm not saying that we trust them, just that, maybe they're here to talk?" Seamus suggested. "I mean, we haven't heard anything from anyone and, what if they're bringing news? We should hear them out."

"Hear who out, what's happening?" A pale Neville appeared in the kitchen doorway, slightly turned away from Lavender, who held him up, with of his arms slung around her curvy shoulders. She held a half-eaten custard tart in one hand and was attempting to stuff it in the Gryffindor's mouth as he spoke. "Lav-hey-mouf." The words were muffled and Neville reluctantly accepted the treat, chewing hastily and swallowing.

The curvaceous girl scowled, darkly. "You need to eat." She reminded him. "You can't just recover your energy by wishful thinking!" She poked him in the side, watching him jump. "Ugh. Boys! What I wouldn't do for a nice, big man..." The words trailed off in a mutter.

"Hey!" Neville protested, but he let her lead him to a chair in the living room and sat down, leaning heavily against her.

She frowned, but guided his head to pillow it on her shoulder, stroking her hands through his hair, her plump lips quivering. "What's wrong now? Did something happen?"

"We will have some visitors in the next few minutes," Seamus said, far more calmly than he felt at the moment. "I think it best if we are all prepared for things to be...worse."
"Worse?" The round-face witch squeaked, she sat bolt upright, nearly upsetting Neville. "Finnegan!"

Seamus winced. Dean rolled his eyes. Ginny looked between them and then back at her mother. One single, pale finger, twitched.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hi everyone! I actually did manage to get another chapter out this week. YAY! I hope you all enjoy it. I'm a little worried that Harry might seem too OOC, but *shrug* it just came out fluffy. Do let me know what you think. :) Thank you to everyone who read my A/N last week. Uni is still being a bear, so I have a ton of papers/projects/homework to wade through, but I'm surviving. The well wishes are much appreciated. Review responses are complete, so find your replies in the forum.

Also, some shameless self-promotion. LOL. Thank you to everyone who is following the new fic, TBDH: The Snape Circle. It will feature how the Snape circle met and formed as well as all the missing "glimpses" of them from this fic. If you liked the Snape circle or wanted to know how Draco ended up with his godfather and a stranger for mates, you'll want to keep your eye out on that fic. :)

Thanks for reading!
Tell Me My Secrets, Part III

Chapter Notes

RECAP: At the Health Clinic, after his SOUL CAST, Theo has to fight his caspers to prove his worth, then Ilsa tests his resolve in relation to his new mates. Harry wakes in Charlie's arms and worries for Theo and himself. Terris Sukey visits Harry in his mind and breaks the Soul Seal that Dumbledore had originally placed on him. Harry suffers the painful aftermath of channeling some of Theo's changes as well as the unintended soul seal unraveling and discovers that he has grown. Theo returns to them all and is greeted warmly by an excited Harry and relieved Charlie. At the Burrow, something dark is approaching and Neville, Seamus, Dean, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley must prepare for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEVARAH : HEALTH CLINIC

"Charlie." Theo greeted, warmly. He shifted the armful of Harry, having walked forward to the examination bed where his beta had observed his entrance amusedly.


"It will not happen again." Theo moved close enough to ease Harry onto Charlie's lap, sharing the warm weight of their Submissive, even though the brunet's arms remained looped around the Slytherin's neck. "I am glad to see you are alright." He reached for Charlie and the redhead had no time to react, beyond a surprised squeak muffled in his mouth, when the young Alpha calmly leaned forward and gifted him a bite to the ear.

Charlie sucked in a short, quick breath, completely taken off guard by the unexpected greeting. He hadn't been expecting that at all and especially not after the decidedly clingy and obviously romantic display between his younger mates just moments before. It was sweet in a way that suited Harry, Charlie supposed, but he'd found himself hoping that Theo would not allow him the same. He wasn't exactly in the mood to be trading light, polite-for-company kisses.

It was mostly why he was further surprised when Theo gripped his chin in one hand and bestowed a warm kiss of welcome, followed immediately by a sharp nip to the lower lip as if he'd read the Dragon Tamer's mind. Charlie swallowed. That caught his attention for sure. It was definitely not too sappy or romantic. That, Charlie could handle. He kissed back, teeth and tongue and lips, in mild show of defiance and acceptance when Theo returned it in kind, a little more forcefully.

Harry made an inquisitive sound between them and the two older mates broke apart to turn their attention to him. He blushed under their combined gazes, but there was obvious joy and hope in his expressive emerald eyes.

Theo smiled down at them both and ran a hand lightly along Harry's tattooed back, careful to avoid the painted markings, feathering the same light touch on Charlie's arms a moment later. His golden gaze raked appreciatively over the dragon tamer's bared upper torso, taking in the well-defined muscles—product of hard work—and the scrolls of navy-blue ink. "Lovely." He pronounced.
Harry followed his line of sight and broke out in a grin once more. He reached a hand out to trace the tips of the navy scrolls along Charlie's upper back. He was glad to be able to put his hands on Charlie, though the urge to pounce on either of his mates hadn't quite yet dissipated. He sighed, longingly. He really wished they were anywhere else but where they were at present. A low whine sounded in the back of his throat.

Charlie's blue eyes immediately flickered away from Theo's weighted stare to look at Harry in concern. He gave the quietest of rumbles, something that could have almost been a purr.

Theo's golden eyes warmed at once, watching the wordless interaction between beta and sub. "Tonight." He promised. "We will have all night, tonight. I have no other pressing engagements and neither do either of you—not tonight, anyway."

Charlie shifted as flickers of interest washed over him. That was a slightly possessive and assuming stance to take on things, but he wasn't about to argue with that. He really didn't have anything that necessarily had to be done straightaway—nothing that couldn't be figured out the next day anyhow. At the moment, he did not have any objections to simply retreating to a quiet, private room and engaging in something decidedly filthy and pleasurable and most likely unfit for the viewing of their current audience.

Having Harry around him at present, with those fancy runes painted on his slim, pale chest, had definitely tripped one of his triggers. He'd always had a thing for brunets—and Harry was simply delectable with his messy dark hair, now sticking up even more so with the way he'd been fussing with it earlier, worrying about Theo. His green eyes seemed to have taken on the task of speaking for him, because while his hyper-energy remained buzzing below the surface, it had only taken one of Kyle's aggrieved sighs and one of Quinn's pointed eyebrows to curb his chattiness from the preparation routines.

Charlie bit back a smile. Harry hyped up on raw magic was rather fun. He was like a vibrating ball of energy just waiting to be released. The promise in Theo's voice had suggested that his new, young Alpha was thinking along the same lovely lust-filled line. He hoped the Soul Cast wouldn't drain the excitement from Harry, a night filled with eagerness and curiosity promised to be singularly delightfull.

Rationally, he wagered that Quinn intended to keep them for the greater part of the evening and most likely perform the Soul Cast as he'd done for Theo. His thinking was interrupted when Theo cleared his throat, as if requesting his attention. He looked over, silently.

Theo's gaze had settled on the mating necklace fastened around Harry's neck, boasting the single, shiny brown-gold scale, then on Charlie's decidedly bare neck. He squeezed the back of Charlie's neck, once, then trailed his fingers around the bare column.

Charlie mentally resisted the urge to reach a hand upwards. He usually wore a dragon tooth necklace or something on a cord with a fang or claw of the sort—freely given, of course. When Theo had challenged him and won—he'd snapped it free from around his neck and Charlie had felt rather bereft in the wake of it. He couldn't quite remember a time when he didn't have something around his neck. Seeing Harry playing with the single scale earlier had set him on edge in an instinctive way he couldn't explain.

"I had almost forgotten." Theo murmured. "Too many things to keep straight." His lips quirked into a smirk. "Hold this." He deposited Harry directly into Charlie's available arms and lap. "Harry, stop squirming." He planted a kiss on one blushing cheek and then braced both hands on Charlie. One on each of the redhead's bare shoulders.
Harry instinctively caught on first to what his intent was and immediately fought the arms holding him. "Theo, no! They just went in. You can't bring them out again-"

"Shh, treasure." Theo soothed. He leaned forward to thump his chin on Harry's head. "This will be painless and I will help him refold them after I call them. This is different than before. If they are called out in harmony, they will not pain him."

Harry gnawed on one pink, sorbet lip for a long moment. His hands had shot up to grab Theo's wrists and pull. The Slytherin hadn't so much as budged, but there was warm and honesty in his eyes. Harry gave the wrists one more squeeze and then reluctantly withdrew his hands, gripping Charlie's tanned forearms instead.

"Thank you." Theo smiled. "Charlie, do you mind?"

"I guess not." Charlie half-shrugged. "What exactly will you do?"

"Call out your wings—with my Alpha rights." Theo's eyes burned a sudden, bright golden hue and a visible strand of magical energy leapt to life, crackling and dancing from his shoulders downward and into Charlie. There was a silent moment of anticipation and then, Charlie's wings burst forth in a seamless, fluid movement. They stretched up and then curved around, reaching towards the energy that had coaxed them free.

Charlie stared in a mixture of surprise, remembering how painful they had been moments before. Bharin had magic hands, most likely or Theo was very good with his Alpha-rights. The dragon tamer swallowed, waiting.

Theo rewarded him with a smile and then reached a hand towards his left wing. The rich, navy scaled appendage curved closer, trembling with the faintest of quivers at the first, firm stroke that Theo bestowed upon it. "They healed well." Theo murmured, drawing the wing closer and running his hand along the top, smooth, muscled spine. "May I?"

Charlie licked his lips. "Of course…"

"Good boy." Theo's lips twitched and he curled his fingers, gently scratching along the top-hand corner.

Charlie shuddered for a moment, then straightened, his shoulders moving back. That felt very good. Not overtly sexual in any way, but rather more like a good scratch on an annoying itch. His eyelids slid half-way shut in pleasure, a burring sound catching itself in his throat.

Harry shifted in his beta's lap to sit front-to-back, able to reach out and touch the wings on his own. He ran curious, wondering fingers over the leathery spans, watching Theo's skilled hands work their way on a patch of what seemed to be faintly loose scales. "Does it hurt?" He peered sideways to see Charlie's bliss-filled expression. His own face softened at the sight and he began to administer the same, albeit in lighter, more careful motions.

It took a whole minute before Charlie's self-control slipped away and he was audibly purring for the entire room to hear.

Harry worried at that, looking up to find that except for Ilsa standing in the corner of the room, examining her hands-turned-claws, Medic Kyle and the others had stepped out. He was grateful for the unexpected privacy as his mind connected the dots for what Theo had really wanted. They would exchange scales within the next few minutes, it seemed. He was both happy and a tad annoyed. Glad that he now knew something of what was to come next, instead of feeling entirely
and utterly clueless about important things like exchanging scales. The moment he'd seen the look in Theo's eyes, he'd instinctively known what was coming when his Alpha had braced his hands on Charlie's bared shoulders. He'd reacted, remembering Charlie's previous distress with those gorgeous wings and was relieved to see that his beta was handling it so well right now.

Happy, Harry allowed a soft purr of his own to join Charlie's a sound that was mixed when Theo gave a pleased rumble of his own and withdrew one hand bearing a handful of rich, dark blue scales. He held them in the palm of one hand and picked them over with a critical eye. Harry leaned forward in interest, nudging Charlie to garner the redhead's attention.

Both watched curiously as Theo picked through the dozen or so scales he'd scratched free from the wing and sorted out the ones with dents or bent edges. He finally had two dark blue scales, with the faintest hint of blue-black sheen to them and with a flicker of gold magic, had banished the rest somewhere, extending the offering to Harry. "What do you think? Do you like these, would you prefer one with red?" He smiled as Charlie's other wing curved even closer, effectively cocooning them all.

Charlie surveyed the dark blue-black scales with uncertainty. He hadn't really had much of a chance to take a good look at his own wings, but he'd take Theo's word for them at the moment. He wondered if the scales were prettier in some areas than others. A blue-red sounded rather pretty, but he looked to Harry, wondering if the brunet minded either way.

Harry reached for the scales taking them one at a time and turning them over his hands before handing them back to Theo. He bit his lip for a moment, brow furrowed in thought before his cheeks pined slightly. "They don't feel...right."

"A little dark, maybe?" Theo mused. "That is fine. Let me check somewhere else..." He stepped out from the winged-cocoon and moved to the side, taking the other wing in hand and beginning his gentle scratching.

Charlie felt his eyes roll back in his head as stabs of pleasure rocked through him. He tightened his grip on Harry, jolting when he felt a tentative kiss on one ear and a very light poke in his side. A light poke bordering on ticklish. One blue eye popped open to survey Harry's innocent expression. He could recall a certain little black Nyatura, tickling and remembering what it felt like to pin Harry to the floor with his hand up the brunet's shirt. His eyes narrowed and then he readjusted his grip to pin Harry's arms to his sides.

Emerald eyes grew wide in comical expression before quickly shifting to a look of panic when Charlie skimmedthe fingertips of one hand along the exposed skin in the barest hints of a tickle. He froze for a moment, green eyes meeting blue before he tried to fight the embrace.

Laughter spilled out as Charlie tickled him generously for a moment, squirming and jerking at a few moments when Harry managed to get in a few good pokes and tickles himself. A moment later, they still and quieted. Harry gave a few huffing laughs, tears at the corner of his eyes. "Ch-Charlie!"

A mysterious smirk settled on Theo's face as he'd circled back around to watch them, a new handful of scales awaiting Harry's inspection. Charlie looked up in interest, noting that he hadn't even felt a thing. He'd been too preoccupied. Harry perked up at once, spotting the shiny scales in Theo's hands and shifting eagerly in Charlie's lap.

It took a significant amount of self-control to keep from groaning aloud as Harry wriggled and leaned forward. Charlie silently began to count in Romanian in his head. It hadn't slipped past his notice that Harry hadn't even once tried to move from his lap since Theo had deposited him there.
It appeared that the brunet's clinginess extended to him as well and Charlie wasn't about to complain, seeing as this was the happiest and most content he'd ever seen Harry at all.

"That one." Harry's hand darted out, snatching up a perfect specimen. A scale of both red at the top and blue at the bottom with a deep indigo hue swirling in the middle. "This one, Theo. I like it." He turned the scale over, humming in approval, then touched it to his necklace. He made a sound of surprise when the scale seemed to glow and then meld itself around the rich, brown cord already holding Theo's scale. "Wow."

"Indeed." Theo chuckled. He selected one for himself and then banished the remaining scales in his hand before locking gazes with Charlie. "Look at me." He commanded, firmly.

Blue eyes met gold.

"Trust me." Theo's words were velvet and iron tangled together, weighted with his circle rank.

There was an invisible flicker of magic meshing together and then, in a heartbeat, Charlie's wings retracted, folding into his back without a single hitch.

Harry's jaw dropped and Charlie stared.

"Fast and painless."


Theo called Harry's wings out in very much the same method he had used for Charlie. Harry found that he could not complain when he experienced it himself. It was something along the lines of a very needy want to please the ethereal figure before him and his magic rose up and responded accordingly. There was absolutely no pain at all as his wings unfurled and he felt the weight settle. He was rewarded for his troubles with chaste kiss to the scar on his forehead. It made him hum in happiness.

He was now balanced chest-to-chest on Charlie's lap, so that his wings could stretch out and relax enough for Theo to explore the scales. Charlie balanced him carefully and expertly, without comment. Harry gratefully nestled his head in the available neck, breathing in his beta's scent while Theo's magic fingers scraped gently along his wings, rubbing off loose scales and soothing the new, tender ones beneath the rough patches. He found that he couldn't withhold his own purrs of pleasure and made a silent point to himself to be very careful of allowing anyone near his wings in the future.

Charlie and Theo were fine, but if the result happened to be the new hardness trapped inside his trousers, Harry had a feeling that he'd have to be very careful about his wings. He squirmed in Charlie's lap, seeking a touch of friction and hoping that neither of his dominant mates would notice his current predicament.

His face warmed at the memory of the recent park escapade and he had absolutely no doubt that if either of them noticed, that Ilsa would most likely have to leave the room. Harry froze at that and it was a good enough thought to effectively turn him off. He snuck a glance over one shoulder and spotted her, still standing at the entryway, her attention on one clawed hand.

He swallowed hard, grateful for her presence, if only because it had saved him from certain embarrassment. He shuddered, unable to process that particular line of thought any further as he felt a warm hand trail between his shoulder blades, where scaled wing met supple skin. He felt his wings receding before he could process anything further and gave the faintest shudder as they
folded all the way in.

"Charlie?" Theo extended a hand filled with a few peach tinted scales bearing the faintest of silvery hues. "How about one of these? Do you like any of them? Harry isn't exactly shedding scales at the moment, do you want to wait or would you rather a temporary-"

"That one is lovely." Charlie reached for an irregularly oval-shaped speck of pink-orange loveliness. He held it up in the light, noting that it shifted to have the silvery, pearlescent hue that Harry's overall wing color sported. "I like it."

"Good." Theo turned. "Oretta?"

The short Gheyo pushed away from the wall and trotted over, her hands falling at her sides. Her golden eyes were rich and sharp as they swept over the trio with a practiced eye. "Ready?"

Harry straightened. "Ready for what?"

"The cord," Theo grinned. "I can spin an excellent one, but Oretta taught me and she is much better at it than I." He reached over, carding a hand through Harry's hair. A moment later, he drew back, holding a few short strands pinched between his fingertips.

Harry blinked. "What?"

Theo handed the hairs to his mentor and waited.

She rolled them between her fingers for a second and then squinted. There was a flash of golden magic when she rubbed and rolled a moment later. To Harry's surprise and shock, it seemed as if his hair and pure magic morphed into something of an elegant, gleaming cord, that hung from her suspended fingers as if she'd spun it out of nothing.

Ilsa looked it over with a critical eye and then handed it over to Theo. He pressed two scales into it, watching as the magic did its work and then held out the finished product for inspection. It was a lovely, thick cord that held one brown-golden scale and one peachy-silver. He twirled it in his hand and then handed it to Harry.

Harry took it seriously, turning it over to check the craftsmanship himself. Admiration shone in his sparkling eyes as he turned back to Charlie and tugged on the cord gently to part it. He circled it around Charlie's neck and then pinched the parted tips, a moment later, the cord meshed together as if it had never come undone. Harry fingered the scales lightly, relieved and amazed to find a portion of his inner self settling down significantly, satisfied with the knowledge that his beta bore more than a mere mating mark.

"Congratulations on your mating." Ilsa said, formally. "Do not waste any time." She pressed a hand to her ear and a moment later, grimaced.

"Oretta?"

"Work." She bit off, pressing her left ear a little harder. "Mauriel? I swear, woman, if you are calling me as your-" There was a flash of golden white with a hissed "-temptrificus Ergen!" and the room was now empty, save for the trio.

"Work?" Harry questioned, staring at the spot where the grumpy woman had stood a moment before.

"She's a trained fighter." Theo reminded him. "and she works the gates, meaning that she is all but
a general for the front line defenses for Nevarah."

"Works the gates?" Charlie repeated.

"Border patrol." Theo shrugged. "She monitors the walls and barriers of Nevarah with a special attack unit. They fight back the Fabrine—dark things."

"Fabrine?" Harry's eyes narrowed. "What kind of dark things are we talking about?"

"Anything, really. Fabrine is a blanket term." Theo explained. "It covers little wisps of darkness, possessed creatures, negative energies in sentient creatures and so forth."

"Sentient?" Harry cringed. "Inferi?"

"Worse." Theo frowned. "Do not think about it. I do not, because I know what it entails. Hideous creatures with waves of dark magic coming off—the wrong kind of dark magic."

"There's a wrong kind of dark magic?" Charlie said, wryly. "I was entirely unaware."

Theo looked at him sharply. "Do not repeat that outside of this room." He scolded. "There are Shadow Dragels in Nevarah. You rarely see them outside of Nevarah, if at all and they are the very essence of dark magic. They may not be as visible as other elements and such, but they are Dragels like ourselves, just the same. Suggesting that their magic is wrong or evil is a grave insult of the very worst kind."

"How?" Harry wanted to know.

Theo sighed, softly. "You know dark magic, yes?"

Harry nodded. They'd all learned about that in DADA classes, the whole 'Defense Against the Dark Arts' bit had rather ensured it.

"Alright then, wrap your head around this." Theo sucked in a breath. "There is dark magic and there is black magic. Black magic is the very worst kind. Filthy, abominable and downright evil—it is called black for a reason. Dark magic, is simply light or neutral magic that has shifted priorities. It is hard to gather the line between dark and black, but I assure you that every Shadow Dragel is fully aware of it and struggling with the boundaries every single waking moment of their life. To keep from casting something unforgiveable to modifying their spell repertoire. Dark magic often invites shadow magic."

Harry scowled. "Does it have to be so confusing?"

Theo smirked. "I did not create the system so I cannot answer that. To keep it straight, any Shadow dragels you see here, are most likely either shadow magic users or dark magic users, we can say that our mutual enemy, a certain dark lord, uses black magic—if you need a specific comparison."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Voldemort." He snapped. "Why does every insist on using ridiculous names and titles and-"

Charlie's hand clapped over his mouth. "Because sometimes there's a taboo on the name. You say it and you give yourself away."

Emerald eyes widened in a mixture of shock and horror. He shoved Charlie's hand away, turning to Theo. "I didn't-!"
"I am unaware if there is one on the name at this time." Theo said, smoothly. "We shall leave it at that and assume that we can all fill in the gaps for each other, yes?" He tugged the sleeves of his robe even with his wrists. "Now then, it is becoming rather late in the day and I have the most delicious urge to take both of you home and do things that are definitely not meant for polite company." The golden eyes darkened wickedly.

Harry swallowed hard and Charlie shifted, restlessly.

"I will be call the Healers back in now, if you have nothing particularly pressing to ask of me."

Charlie looked to Harry, who seemed to be lost in thought. After a long moment, the brunet finally nodded. "That's fine. I don't want to stay in here all day."

"I doubt Quinn will keep us that long." Theo grinned. "Did he trouble you in any way?"

"Huh? No. I mean, not really. I was worried when you were—I couldn't." Harry faltered, frustrated. He couldn't parcel into words the intense emotions, energies and feelings that had channeled through him when he'd realized that Theo wasn't physically present beside him. The experience had resulted in some rather acceptable side effects, but Harry knew it was something he did not want to repeat again. Above all, today Quinn had been nice. Well, except for the poking and the scowls since his speaking spell had worn off. Harry silently wondered if the Healer had any alternate forms of communication and if there was any way for him to regain his voice.

When Theo asked the others to return, Quinn was the first one in the room. His bright teal eyes immediately latched onto the newly exchanged scales hanging from their respective cords around the trio's necks. His lips twitched into a smile and he sketched a formal bow in silent congratulations.

Theo returned the gesture with an inclination of the head. "My apologies if I have caused more trouble for you with my temporary absence."

Quinn waved a hand dismissively and turned at once to Medic Kyle. They held a silent conversation, stares locked for several minutes before both turned away abruptly.

Bharin had declined to enter and he stood outside the door, chatting with Wikhn.

"We need to finish the runes," Kyle explained, bustling around them. "and Quinn would like to know what prevented you from using the gel he sent home yesterday?"

Harry winced. "I forgot?"

Kyle stifled a smile. "Then you are lucky that we would not lay a hand on a Submissive, I daresay Quinn would like to smack you upside the head. It was not a friendly suggestion. Your current state of health is rather lacking, the gel would help with more than I could explain right now. Suffice it to say that it is just as much the little things as the big ones that affect your health. Please do not forget to use it tonight." He threw a glance over at Quinn. "Would you could that as scolding enough and stop scowling, please?" There was a barely audible huff from the opposite end of the room and Medic Kyle rolled his eyes. "Never mind him, can you stand? Both of you? We'd best be hurrying things along or we'll run out of time again and there really isn't a good breaking point anywhere between these preparations."

Charlie and Harry slid off the shared examination bed and Theo steadied them both with a hand on their shoulders. He squeezed, gently and then looked to Quinn who was fiddling at the end of the room.
"Good, thank you." Kyle extracted his wand and held it at temple-level with Charlie. "This is a quick, simple and painless diagnostic." He informed them. "Please stand still." He skimmed the wand down the front of the redhead's body, eyes narrowing at the resulting feedback. He then did the same to Charlie and gave a pleased grunt, moments later. "They are ready for the spell, Quinn. Have you made up your mind?"

Quinn's gave a scowl in answer, but he washed his hands at the sink, dried them and then donned a fresh pair of gloves. He stood beside Kyle, checking the results from the diagnostic and occasionally shaking his head.

"Is something wrong?" Theo shifted closer to Harry, waiting expectantly.

"Not quite." Kyle hedged. "It's—well, can I tell them?"

Quinn hesitated, then shrugged. He turned away again, this time to the rack of filled potion vials lining the back wall.

"Thank you." The Medic shook his head fondly. "We were hoping for some different readings since the Soul Seal was removed." He began. "Removing a Soul Seal is pretty serious business and there can be countless side effects both positive and negative if it is not done properly."

"But none of you removed it." Harry frowned. "Theo's Casper—the Sukey, she did it."

"Which brings us to the next issue." Kyle offered a lopsided grin. "The initial projection for the Soul Cast is different now. The results of that little scan was testing your present state to how you were a few hours ago when we started. It appears that the Cast is changing and the colors are shifting. Also, the fact that a Casper removed it means that there may be residual magic from a new signature as well."

"What does that mean?" Harry looked from the Medic to the Healer and then over at Theo, who rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I thought you said mine was pretty bad and if I already have thirteen signature things on me..."

"It was and still is." Kyle emphasized. "However, the removal of the Soul Seal seems to have affected you on several levels. In the short time it was removed to where you are now—it has improved considerably. As for the thirteen, you should only have eleven now, counting the Blood Seal from yesterday and the Soul Seal from a moment ago, but the additional Casper touch, would make it twelve. You follow?"

Harry blinked. "...really? I guess." Theo's hand squeezed gently on his shoulder and Harry leaned into the touch as he puzzled through the new information. "So you wouldn't use the Cast now?"

"Quinn thinks that it would be best to make that decision after we've removed the runes." He gestured towards the painted markings on the bared chest of both Charlie and Harry. "Since Theo's appearance, both of you have reacted favorably to his presence and your magic has responded accordingly." He motioned to Theo. "As these are their Casts, they cannot see them, but I can show you and perhaps you can follow our reasoning?"

Theo stepped away from Charlie and Harry, moving to stand beside Kyle. He looked at the proffered charts in interest and after a moment, gave a short nod. "I see."

"Then you understand?" Kyle seemed relieved. "Of course, we cannot say for certain, but after the runes...?"

"Then runes it is." Theo acknowledged.
The process for removing runes wasn't as complicated as Medic Kyle had made it out to be. Harry and Charlie stripped out of their robes and wore standard-issue, white bathrobes to be escorted to the chamber where the spells would be activated. It wasn't very far from the examination rooms, merely further into the clinic and behind a series of carefully guarded doors.

The spells, Kyle had explained, could be mildly dangerous in terms that it advanced the age of the recipient and so, to be sure that none others were affected, a glass room was needed. The glass would darken to allow some privacy inside and Quinn would cast the spell while Kyle monitored the outcome.

Theo made it clear that he had no intention of being anywhere else but as close to his mates as possible, and surprisingly, Quinn had not argued with that at all. Instead, he'd simply included the young Alpha right along with his plans and had Bharin and Wikhn as their escorts.

When they reached the chamber, Quinn accessed it by pricking his finger to provide a blood sample and appropriate confirmation for the security level.

Charlie had raised an eyebrow at that.

Kyle chuckled. "Quinn has the kind of—clearance, I suppose you should say, for things that most Healers don’t." He smiled. "Do not worry, you are truly in good hands."

An empty chamber greeted them and Kyle moved to the control panel beginning to fiddle with the switches and screens. Quinn set about checking the printed readouts for a moment and then, gestured towards the empty room. They entered one at a time, Charlie opting to be first and spare Harry the nerves, so he could see what would happen.

He was first presented with a large bottle of water and a vitamin packet, then two shots of adrenaline and insulin. "Normally, you would not need either of them," Kyle explained. "But this is a special kind of spell. You are going to age and your body will suffer the kind of consequences that might cause you to crash."

Here, Charlie shrugged and accepted the fare. He downed the water, munched on a granola bar and tried not to wince when they poked him with the needles. It made him growl in annoyance.

"You can leave your robe here." Kyle motioned to a hook at the side of the room. "It is best not to be wearing anything inside the chamber. It will age with you and it might interfere with the casting."

Charlie scowled at that and reluctantly slid it off his tanned body.

Kyle punched a few keys on the control panel and the glass walls darkened, adding some extra measure of privacy. Harry shifted nervously, definitely not looking forward to having to bare all in front of anyone other than his mates. Thankfully, Bharin and Wikhn were keeping watch outside the door and the only other two were Kyle and Quinn, but still…

Theo calmed him with soothing rumble while holding Harry tucked against his side, one arm wrapped possessively around the white-robed waist. Harry did not fight the closeness, but rather watched with sharp eyes as Kyle and Quinn set about working around each other with a synergy that was difficult to ignore.

They worked as matched Healer pair ought to, with the occasional mumbled phrase between them until Quinn gave the signal for the go-ahead.
Harry's hands clenched into fists and he watched as Kyle toggled something on the panel and then Quinn pressed his hands to the glass walls and simply poured his magic into it. His breath caught in his throat and Harry felt Theo start behind him. For a moment, it wasn't Quinn, a mute Healer, but rather some powerful and terrifying creature with magic both new and old, twining, twisting and crafting even darkness itself, into lightness to be used. They stared, transfixed as Quinn's head bowed, his hands splayed along the glass and magic in vivid blue-green twined out from his fingers and enveloped the entire room.

Charlie flinched and then several minutes into it, shuddered violently falling forward to his hands and knees as the black painted marks on his body began to evaporate in fine, wispy mists. He trembled for the remainder of the spell and finally gave into it. A handful of minutes later, Quinn entered the room and fed him a vial of blood, a bottle of water and three packets of sugar.

When the dragon tamer could stand again, the Healer supported him with an arm around the shoulders and walked him out and into Theo and Harry's welcoming arms.

"Charlie?" Harry fuss ed over him, worriedly. His fingers skittered over bare skin and he was grateful for Theo working the spell that began to clothe his beta. As much as he did like Charlie's bared form, he was now worried for the lack of immediate response from said mate. Charlie had looked so vulnerable for a moment that Harry had nearly thrown himself at the glass in an attempt to hide the private moment and protect his newest mate.

"He will be fine, Harry." Theo assured him, with a glance over at Kyle and Quinn, who were now resetting the chamber for Harry's turn.

Harry snorted at that, but did not relinquish his grip on the redhead, even when Theo guided them to a backless sofa to sit down for a moment. He simply wrapped his arms around his beta and held tight, until he felt the broad, tanned shoulders twitch faintly in response. "Charlie?" He tried again.

The ponytailed head thumped gently against Harry's shoulder. "Harry." He said, faintly.

Quinn paused to detour over and hand Theo a large bottle of water. He made a gesture with one hand and then pointed to Charlie, before returning to Kyle's side.

Theo looked at the bottle for a moment, then unscrewed the cap and sniffed the liquid. It seemed to be pure water and after a moment of studying Charlie, Theo calmly pricked a finger with a single fang and dribbled a few drops of blood into the bottle. It turned into a lovely, pinkish hue and satisfied, Theo shifted to place it in Charlie's hands and wrap those large, tanned fingers around it. "Drink up." He advised, smoothing a hand down the sweat-soaked ponytail.

"Was it supposed to be this bad?" Harry turned accusing eyes to Quinn and Kyle. Emerald eyes locked with teal ones and a moment later, Quinn elbowed Kyle.

Kyle's head snapped around and he gave a small smile. "He is actually handling it rather well. There is nothing to worry about. He will be fine. He needs to be kept on fluids for at least three hours, blood-spiked is best. Some sugar will help, but the blood more so than the sugar. A few good meals wouldn't be amiss. His body needs to adjust, this was a fairly intense spell. It forcefully aged his body in a strictly enforced time period." He sighed. "It will most likely work to convert the food to energy and the energy into magical power. It will do this until it feels it is safe once more."

Harry frowned, now looking uneasily at the glass room.

"It is painless." Kyle assured him. "And you will be fine." He nudged Quinn and the Healer trotted over with the same assortment of water and a nutrient square as preparation. "This will let us know
if you should actually take the Soul Cast today or not.” He frowned. "Neither of us have any desire
to push you further than you can handle at the moment, I do understand you wish to have all of
these seals removed, but some things cannot be rushed."

"Thank you," Theo said, smoothly. He accepted the items from Quinn and transferred them to
Harry, taking over the brunet's job of supporting their beta. "If you wouldn't mind, a moment of
privacy would be much appreciated."

Quinn bowed, formally and moved away to work beside Kyle once more.

Before he knew it, his turn had come and Harry found himself standing inside the chamber. There
wasn't really a way to properly describe the experience, as it was something he'd never even
thought possible. All he knew was that he had no point of reference and that it felt very, very odd.

Time seemed to blur past and the next thing that happened, he was flat-out face-down on the
ground and everything was too bright, too cold and too hard. He shivered and shuddered, eyes shut
against the whiteness.

A gentle caress on one arm drew his attention and he leaned towards it, instinctively, seeking the
warmth from the figure and then rousing himself enough to see that there were treats brought. He
allowed himself to be fed a bottle of deliciously cold, clear water. A moment later, a few precious
mouthfuls of the most delicious, warm blood filled his mouth and slid down his throat. He chirred
happily at that and a blissed-out purr came when a few servings of gritty sweetness was emptied
into his mouth as well.

Harry let himself be moved and carried outside to where he was vaguely aware of familiar scents,
hands and touches. He snuggled into the warmth of a faintly smoky scent and buried his face in the
neck of the one holding him tightly.

"It will take about fifteen minutes before he is a little more of himself." Someone was saying. "Do
not worry, it is mostly the age difference between the two that is allowing for the variation in
reactions."

Harry snuffled at that, but he didn't care to protest. Something cool and hard pressed against his
lips and he opened his mouth to receive a sip of water with the faintest tinge of blood inside. He
smiled leaned back, tiredly, drinking in slow, careful gulps as his eyes remained stubbornly shut.

He felt a warm hand resting on his knee and thigh, while smaller hands carded through his hair.

Theo. Charlie. Harry thought, fuzzily. He heaved a sigh and turned away from the water bottle. A
whisper-soft kiss was pressed to his brow and he let himself fade into the welcome blackness of
sleep.

"You forced his resting period?" Theo's voice was stiff and formal. His hands twitched, faintly as if
his claws wanted to make an appearance of sorts. He was torn between the luck of the matter and
the fact that he would have rather have been informed of it later.

"No." Kyle soothed. "We did cycle it longer than we'd originally intended though."

Theo frowned. "You should have-"

"You said his resting period was a week and a half, yes?"
The Slytherin gave a short nod.

"You also have a pending note in your file that you do not intend to stay in Nevarah very long. Now, far be it for us, mere Healers and Medics to interfere, but Harry," Kyle's expression softened. "would not have fared very well outside of Nevarah handling his first resting period between all three of you."

Understanding dawned at once. "I see."

"Quinn did not mean for it at first, but when Charlie went first, his reaction was cut short in the middle of what would have been the appointed time for the Resting Period. He thought it was in your best interests to simply cycle the time forward to ease additional discomfort and unrest."

"I find myself agreeing," Theo half-smiled. "Though I do wish someone had mentioned it first."

"I would have," Kyle acknowledged. "Except for I am sure you are aware of your Alpha Rights when it comes to these sorts of things. You needed to be there for both of them, without worrying about the politics of it."

Theo shook his head. "You are the strangest Healers I have ever had the misfortune of interacting with."

Here, Kyle beamed. "We aim to please." His shoulders relaxed, minutely and he tipped his head in acknowledgement. "That said, we have no wish to be keeping any more secrets or in-the-moment decisions from you. Quinn would like to speak about the Soul Seal removal and once Harry is awake…"

"That would be most appreciated." Theo nodded his assent. He paused for a moment. "Er, Medic?"

"Hmm?" Kyle looked up from the control panel. He was the only one in the room, Quinn having left after he'd tended to Harry, to return and prep the examination room.

"My oretta—er—Lady Ilsa, she signed off on this, did she not?"

The Medic's lips twitched faintly. "Aye. Indeed she did."

Theo returned the faint smile. That completed the puzzling equation in his head and he did not worry. Ilsa would have signed off on the release form for the aging spells and likely would have been the one to point out the timeline to Quinn. A tendril of warmth curled through his belly, brightening his countenance at the thought of his mentor looking out for him again—his entire circle included.

**CHARACTER SNIPPET : SEAMUS FINNEGAN : THE BURROW**

"Mrs. Weasley?" Seamus dropped to his knees beside the distressed woman. Her eyelids had begun to flutter and her hands began to move, the first signs of life they could attribute to her since the rest of her family had left. He exchanged a glance with Dean and then gently nudged Ginny out of the way.

"What's happening?" Lavender demanded. "And what exactly did you mean by worse?"

"Worse in that we should be worried." Dean shifted, restlessly. "Ginny, firecall McGonagall, she said she'd be in the office for most of today. Neville, how are you feeling? Do you think you can
move, if you have to?"

The pale Gryffindor gave a wan smile. "If I have to." He winced. "if."

"He shouldn't be moving at all," Lavender griped. A touch of concern flickered across her pretty face. "And I swear, Longbottom, I hardly took anything at all! Now will you please tell me what is going on before I-"

"There's some winged—things—approaching." Seamus said, carefully.

"Winged things?" Neville repeated. His face took on a whole new shade of pale. Lavender squeezed his shoulder gently and drew out another treacle tart from a cloth napkin she'd had in one hand.

"Torvak, I think." Seamus sucked in a breath. "Mrs. Weasley?"

The redheaded witch was now awake, her soft brown eyes snapping with sudden clarity. She forced a grimace. "Seamus." She acknowledged. Panic flickered through her face. "Ginny!"

"Right here, Mum." The little redheaded witch skipped back into the room. "The floo's blocked. What did you do to it?" Her accusing eyes settled on Lavender.

The curvaceous girl straightened at once. "Excuse me? It's your bloody floo! I didn't do a single-

"Girls." Dean interrupted, patiently. He sighed. "It seemed like there was a barrier along the far end of the property and that there were three young men with black feathered wings trying to break through it."

"...break…through…it?" Ginny's words faltered. "Mum?" She turned her worry directly to the witch she'd always looked up to. "Mum, what's going on? I'm really scared now."

Mrs. Weasley slowly sat up with some help from Seamus' capable hands. She trembled, faintly, beneath his touch and fatigue could clearly been seen rolling off of her in waves. "Torvak?" She looked him straight in the eye. "No redheads?"

Seamus swallowed, understanding the unspoken question. None of the Torvak were Weasleys. "Yes."

A flicker of resolve burst into flame in those warm brown eyes and Mrs. Weasley drew herself up with a resigned, capable air. "I never thought..." her voice trailed off. "Never mind, what I thought does not matter now, apparently. Is this all of you?" Her encompassing gaze swept over them all. "Aye, it is." She answered her own question, grasping Seamus' shoulder to stand upright. "You have all had the chance to speak to your parents?" She rubbed her face and then smoothed her hair back, tucking the limp red strands behind her ears. A smattering of red-orange-pink scales began to blossom along the length of her face, disappearing down her neck and lower. "Speak freely, please. If there is any time at all to tell, it would be now."

The young wizards and witches exchanged looks with each other. "I have nowhere to go. That's why I came with Ron, if you'll excuse my using him." Lavender ducked her head, lightly. "My Mum dinna care." She flipped a lock of honey-brown hair over one shoulder. "I'd be encroaching on her territory if I went home anyhow. Haven't got a Da and he won't care even if I did."

Mrs. Wealsey nodded, briskly. Her slowly sharpening gaze flickered to Dean.

The dark-skinned Wizard quirked a smile. "Native magic." He inclined his head. "Nothing you
need worry yourselves of. I am mated well enough, we will bond when the year is legal. My folks will not worry. They know I can take care of my own."

Seamus nodded in confirmation. "The same. Me Mam wishes us luck."

"Neville?" Mrs. Weasley turned to him. "How is Augusta?"

The pale wizard took a shaky breath. "Couldn't reach her."

The redhead witch gave a faint smile. "She is fine, lad. No worries." Her fond gaze settled on Ginny and she reached at once for her only daughter. Ginny went willingly, allowing the tight hug, starting only faintly when there was the sound of rustling fabric and then a leathery snap.

A collective gasp alerted to her to the fact that something had happened, but she could not backtrack from the tight embrace. "Mum?"

"Shh." Mrs. Weasley beckoned to them all. "Come quickly. We have not the time." Her wings curved forward, protectively. "Stand just inside of my wings, you must trust me."

"Mrs. Weasley?" Neville licked his lips.

"We shall visit your Gran, first." Mrs. Weasley said, smoothly. "The only reason anyone would be stuck at the barriers around the Burrow would be if they had intent to kill or bring about grievous bodily harm."

Eyes grew wide and the young witch and wizards scrambled forward. They stood, awkwardly, half-together and half-touching as the broad wings, peach and faintly red-pink along the spines, sheltered them. The ground shook and the sound of something exploding outside had Lavender grabbing onto Neville and Dean placing a steadying hand on Seamus, who had grabbed the Weasley Matriarch's outstretched hand.

"I honestly did not expect they would send them so soon." Mrs. Weasley said, wistfully. "I thought perhaps, they would eave me alone. That maybe I'd suffered enough, even by their standards." She squeezed Seamus' hand and tightened her other arm around Ginny. "Trust me." The words were deceptively soft. "Everything will be alright."

Something rattled and shook, the door to the Burrow burst open.

Molly Weasley turned with a smirk on her face and magic in her mind. "Temptrificus Saurenth!" A ring of fire exploded outwards, burning around the floor, circling them all. Peach-hued wings glowed the faints of pink-reds and then, an unbearable wave of heat surged upwards with blackness rising along with it.

Seamus turned in time to see one angry, scowling face and a mess of black feathers and blue-magic hurtling towards him as the red flames leapt upwards and everything blurred away.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey guys. A new chapter, finally! Our boys will be leaving the clinic soon and moving somewhere to get a bit of privacy for other, *ahem* things to be taken care of. Thank you for the well wishes, those of you who have been following the info on the forum. A dear Aunt of mine has been in the ICU for over four days and it's been quite
stressful. Writing out this chapter helped me to deal with it, so I apologize if it seems a little slow, compared to the last few ones. We'll get back to the action and Harry/Charlie/Theo in upcoming chapters. I promise.

Also, thank you for everyone following the TBDH: The Snape Circle, fic. I had no idea the Snapes were that popular. :) Your reviews make my day. Thank you for reading and letting me know what you think!
RECAP: At the Health Clinic, Harry suffered through the painful aftermath of channeling some of Theo's changes as well as the unintended soul seal unraveling and discovers that he has grown. Theo returns to them all and Quinn is ready for the next phase of treatment, the runes painted on Charlie and Harry. At the Burrow, hostile Torvaks have attacked and, leaving Neville, Seamus, Dean, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley to seek sanctuary elsewhere.

NEVARAH : HEALTH CLINIC

When Harry woke again, he stretched and yawned, finding himself more relaxed and rested than he had been in quite a long time. He was cuddled to Charlie's chest, his feet spread out on Theo's lap and as he wriggled and moved, they leaned out of the way, bracing and supporting him for said stretch.

"Welcome back." Theo greeted.

Harry stifled another yawn. "What happened?"

"Time travel." Kyle winked.

Charlie snorted. He'd wakened first and thus been able to catch himself up to their present time and circumstance. They had all been waiting for Harry to rouse himself and now that it had happened, there could be some questions answered. "The aging spell accelerates time for an individual during a set period—it blew you through your Resting Period."

Harry blinked. He opened his mouth, then shut it and licked his lips, searching for an answer that didn't seem to be forming yet. He finally held out a hand. "Water?"

Quinn sat on a stool beside the preparation counter, fiddling and tinkering with things, while he'd projected his answers through Kyle's link. He turned at Harry's request and spun something on his fingertips, throwing it over with a wave of one hand.

By the time Harry held it, the little blob had turned into a lovely tinted crystal glass with clear, cool water inside. He gulped it down, thankfully and then grinned when the glass refilled itself. He drank the second glass down partway and then offered it to Charlie without a second thought.

The redhead bent down to accept the cup and finished it off. He nodded towards Theo when the glass refilled itself again. Theo hid a smile and drank his fill, before the glass finally melted away, the enchantment apparently over.

"How are you feeling?" Kyle moved over, wand in hand. "I need to run a few diagnostics, alright?"

Harry nodded.

"Can you please stand?"
Charlie ushered the brunet off of his lap, bracing him with a steadying hand at the small of his back. After a moment, Harry settled into himself and moved forward enough to stand in front of both his mates. He realized they had moved back to the original examination room at some point in time and had been seated along the couches at the far end of the room.

"Thank you." Kyle murmured. He tapped his wand in one hand and a pale, white-gold glow flickered over the tip and held steady. He held up a hand, two fingers extended and moved them carefully in front of Harry's face. "Tracking, Quinn?" He called over one shoulder.

The Healer slid off the stool in the corner and trotted over. He took the wand from Kyle's hand and performed the rest of the test, apparently satisfied with whatever result it produced, as a wide smile settled on his handsome features. He tapped the wand at Harry's heart, noting when the glow at the end flickered pink, then lower to the stomach, the kidneys and finally back up to Harry's forehead. After a long moment, he nodded.

Harry perked a brow. "Well?"

"It seems that the aging spell worked wonderfully and a certain, wonderful side effect was entirely unexpected." Kyle held his hand out for his hand and Quinn twirled it in hand, before passing it over. He tucked the wand back into the holster clipped to his utility belt and motioned to Harry to take a seat.

"What kind of side effect?"

"A good one." Kyle clicked his fingers together and the second couch swung over to be in the front of the next one. Another twitch of his fingers transfigured a stool into a lovely, rectangular table.

Quinn appeared a moment later, a steaming teapot in hand and a tray of biscuits in the other. He set them both down and then sat, his feet tucked up beneath them. He served the tea with some ceremony and then reached over and clasped hands with Kyle.

The Medic's lips quirked into a smile and he squeezed the hand back, before his eyes narrowed. "I see the girls caught you before you left the house."

Quinn chuckled silently and made a few signs with his hands.

Kyle rolled his eyes. "You know I don't understand that." He elbowed him, lightly. "I actually didn't see them."

"See what?" Harry wrapped his hands around the warm cup of tea, feeling slightly out of his depth. He'd never known any Healer's appointment to end with tea and biscuits and this was a first for him.

"These." Kyle held up their joined hands. "Quinn, show them. Take the glamour off."

There was a fizzle of teal magic and then, Quinn's pale arm was decorated heavily with colorful, gilt-edged bits of ribbon and cord, with a few tiny golden ornaments hanging from the bows.

"Ah, everyone?" Kyle's eyes lit up, fondly. "Lucky."

Quinn nudged him back and the Medic looked away for a second. Quinn nudged him again, perking a brow in question.

"I…left earlier than usual this morning…to make up for your absence."
Teal eyes narrowed faintly and Quinn abruptly released his hand half-way to rising.

Kyle immediately grabbed for him. "Wait! Stop, Quinn!" He ducked an angry elbow jab. "You can't just waltz in there and ream her out—besides, it was a perfectly logical decision. If you couldn't make it in, then I should've been able to make it up in your absence. You know this clinic only has one pair of us."

Quinn snorted, crossing his arms over his chest.

Kyle sighed, reluctantly releasing his grip on the newly stoic Healer. "I'm sure I'll see them tonight and they probably weren't even—well," he shrugged, palms up. "It's only a-" the words died in his throat when Quinn turned on him with a fierce glare, a strip of scales beginning to shimmer along the edges of his face.

Kyle swallowed. "Okay. Fine." He said, carefully, slowly. "I was only—Quinn, we're in the middle of a-"

Quinn reached over and snatched up one of Kyle's hands. A moment later, the Fae's brown eyes burned with teal fire and Quinn faced Harry's circle.

"Please excuse that unseemly display." The words were polite and formal, and odd, coming from Kyle's blank face, punctuated by Quinn's neutral expression.

Charlie stared for a moment.

"He is used to this." Quinn squeezed the hand, gently and after a moment, affected a sigh via Kyle. "Sometimes I borrow his voice for moments like this. Please do not let it worry you and again, my apologies for such a personal matter evolving before you."

"No need to stand on formality," Theo said, generously. "I think we have shared enough of our own faults to speak freely."

"If you wish it."

"I do." Theo said, firmly. His golden eyes flared. "You said there were things to discuss about Harry's Soul Seal?"

"There are." Quinn settled back, snitching a few biscuits from the plate. He could chomp away happily, as Kyle's mouth did the speaking for him. He waved a hand towards the plate, gesturing for them to take some.

"Thank you." Charlie acknowledged. He nudged the plate towards Harry. "Biscuit?" He slipped a few of the sweet brown squares onto the little ceramic plate in front of Harry. "Eat."

"This is…weird." Harry allowed. He took a biscuit and nibbled on it, the sudden hunger in his stomach overriding some other logical thought process. "What was wrong with the Seal?"

"Nothing is really wrong with it," Quinn was quick to say. "Rather, it has presented a rather interesting development for the rest of your seals."

"What do you mean?" Theo swiped a biscuit off of Harry's plate, before realizing what he'd done. He scowled at his own empty plate a moment later.

Charlie stifled a laugh and deposited a few squares in his Alpha's plate, with a flick of his wand, hidden up his sleeve.
"Well, for one, we have the way you were affected by the Seal." Quinn waved towards Theo and Harry. "Your height, for one." He wiped his fingers on the edge of a napkin. "Are you familiar with Dragel offspring?"

Theo shrugged. "I know of them. Charlie and Harry do not."

"I see." There was a pause as Quinn seemed to be in thought and then he held out a hand, level with the table, about waist height if standing. "Most Dragel children remain at this height and slight of build until they are about thirteen years old. Then, if they have any tendencies towards anything other than Submissive traits, their physical characteristics begin to change. By the time the inheritance comes in, either right on time at about sixteen years of age, or mayhap a tad later around eighteen years, the Dragel has settled and most height, weight and rankings have settled into their very beings."

Harry blinked, processing that for a second. He looked at Theo with the faintest of frowns on his face and then over at Charlie. "I don't understand." He crumbled his biscuit into his plate. "Theo grew."

"As did you." Quinn countered. "This is two-fold. Your Soul Suppression Seal, kept your growth spurt at bay, you are also very deeply bonded to your Alpha, which is remarkable considering the short time you have known each other. Your Theo had a moment of clarity that resulted in his physical transformation, it traveled down the line and triggered your own response. Most Dragel Submissives are a scant few inches shorter than their respective Alphas." Quinn's teal-eyed gaze flickered between them. "It is very rare for the positions to be reversed. The Beta is usually larger than the Alpha as well," and here, he nodded to Charlie, who was doling out more biscuits into Theo and Harry's plates, respectively. "You are all right on track at the moment."

"I see." Harry scowled. "So I grew because Theo figured something out and we-"

Theo leaned over and kissed away the complaint, a patient look on his face. "Because we're connected, treasure." He whispered, so very softly, for Harry's ears alone. "Please let him finish explaining. I think Medic Kyle might like to enjoy his own refreshments, eventually."

And here, Harry quickly hid the coming smile in his teacup. It was a little unsettling to be talking to Quinn, with the right facial expressions to boot, while Kyle sat straight and stiff as a statue, his lips moving and eyes mostly unblinking. He shifted uneasily again, calming when both Theo and Charlie shifted closer so their thighs touched. Warmth spread through him and he took a deep breath. "Alright, so what else?"

"The Soul Cast, as you know, helps to make sure you are in harmony with yourself," Quinn continued. "Setting your Theo to rights resulted in the growth spurt that in turn fed back through the bond and triggered your own reaction after the Soul Seal was removed."

"Lot of soul involved in everything." Harry muttered, quietly.

Charlie nudged him beneath the table and added another biscuit to his plate.

"In harmony with yourself filters back to the mated bonds and sets your circle at ease." Quinn perked a brow. "That is usually the reason the Soul Cast exists."

Here, Harry blushed. He wasn't trying to disparage anything, but he hated when things always turned out to be overly complicated and this was starting to feel like one of those things. "You said mine was bad."
"I said it could use some work, there is a difference. Tea?" Quinn extended a hand towards the pot. He refilled their respective cups and there was silence for a moment. "The secondary function of a Soul Seal is to keep power from overwhelming a specific individual. Some magical beings have more than one inheritance or a specific thread of native magic that may not mesh well with another half of their genetic makeup. As such, Soul Seals were invented to gift individuals the power of choice and peaceful coexistence with a symbiote or secondary creature instincts. It effectively represses and restrains the dual nature, allowing the individual to exist as a single being with no other influence."

Harry gulped. "Symbiote?"

"Some individuals choose a parasite to help them when suffering through certain disabilities." Quinn explained. "Blindness, for instance, can be cured that way. Peaceful coexistence allows one to use the visuals provided by the parasite while also retaining their usual traits and without affecting their magic." His lips quirked. "After all, magic cannot cure everything. My issue with your Soul Seal was due to the fact that you were unaware of it, meaning a distinct lack of choice or consent as your respective inherited seals did not share the same signature, as well as the fact that it attempted to suppress a portion of your wizard magic. This would explain why you were unable to access it for a time. Your wizard magic fed itself into the seal to keep the rest of you properly functioning without additional problems. I would wager that perhaps you used your magic for something significant in recent months and as a result, there was not enough left for it to regenerate in the method it usually would."

Quinn paused and his gaze flickered over to Kyle. "The third point would be your actual Soul Cast, because of the damper, you would not be like your true Dragel self any way, shape or form. You would likely have found yourself suffering from odd urges and with your natural instincts quite out of whack. In this case, I would give example, without offense, that knowing your Charlie bore a stigma as Blood Traitor, the Soul Suppression would have prevented your Dragel instincts from warning you away from him."

Horror painted itself plainly across Harry's face. "I wouldn't have—Charlie?" He set the teacup down a little harder than necessary. Emerald eyes narrowed.

"No offense taken," Theo interrupted, quickly. He placed a calming hand on Harry's arm. "He said without offense, Harry. Read between the words there. He is only using it as an example," The Slytherin paused. "Besides, you do remember that it was the first thing I did ask you after you'd decided on him, don't you?"

Harry scowled for a moment longer and then grudgingly nodded. He didn't like the thought that he wouldn't have even looked at Charlie if it hadn't been from having a harmful seal plastered over his soul. He liked Charlie. Liked him very much and was doubly glad to have him in the capacity as his beta and not just as Ron's older brother.

Kyle cleared his throat, drawing their attention back to the odd Medic-Healer duo. "The Soul Cast also would have prevented your soul—your innermost spirit—from naturally developing the way it should have, resulting in difficulties with your magic, accepting your mates and general clear-headedness. You would have found yourself suffering from low self-esteem, mild depression and extreme stress, as you would have overcompensated in all areas you could control, to make up for the lack of control everywhere else."

A faint paleness began to settle into Harry's face. He leaned back from the table and allowed Theo to draw him flush against his side, accepting the warmth.

"The tests I ran earlier allow me to see whether you can handle a Soul Cast or not. It is not a
procedure for everyone nor for the faint of heart. However, there has been an interesting
development following your readings after the aging spell to burn off the painted runes." A flicker
of excitement showed through the Healer. "Your Soul Cast was altered just by having the Soul Seal
removed. It has steadily improved since and I do not want to force anything by rushing into a Soul
Cast, the same for your beta, Charlie." Quinn nodded towards the redhead. "I would recommend
taking the weekend off and enjoying yourself, as well as the celebrations—this week the Water
Prince will surface and the Royals from all elements will meet, so there is bound to be something
entertaining to catch your eye. I should think about, ah, four days, perhaps? That is enough time to
relax and take care of necessary matters." Teal eyes locked onto Harry. "I would suggest that you
simply let yourself be exposed and indulged in Dragel culture. Spend the time with your mates and
practice a routine with your magic to warm it up to you again. Your Alpha's records show he spent
at least two years here, so he is knowledgeable enough in things you ought to know. Ask him
questions—and, I have already filed for paperwork to see about that missing mentor of yours." He
frowned. "Speaking of which, the witch that inflicted you with the Blood Seal," and now, Quinn
looked to Theo. "Have you claimed your rights?"

Harry stiffened.

Theo shook his head, lightly.

Quinn frowned. "Why not?"

Theo's arm around Harry's waist, tightened by a fraction. "Because Harry requested that I
relinquish them and showed great distress in my acting upon them. I would never willingly be the
cause of his discomfort."

"Even when the discomfort might be warranted for general justice?"

"Harry is my responsibility, Healer Quinn. A responsibility I take very seriously."

The Healer's frown deepened. "I see and will you sign, legally, according to that?" Teal eyes
flashed with fire. "Before you leave today?"

A knowing glint flickered through Theo's golden gaze. "I would."

"Good. Thank you then, I believe this covers everything for the moment." Quinn looked down at
his beribboned wrist and then over at Kyle's bare one. A different expression flickered over his
face. "I shall see you in four days. Clear your appointment cards at the counter on the way out." He
rose to his feet in a single, fluid movement. "I wish you health and happiness. Good day." His hand
brushed Kyle's still form and the teal glow faded from the Fae's brown eyes.

Medic Kyle came back with a gasping lurch and he threw a handy scowl over one shoulder. "You
could've at least let me drink the tea." He grumbled. "While it was hot?" He spun a touch of magic
with his fingers and a wisp of steam rose from the ceramic mug. His soft brown eyes flickered to
the trio. "I take it he covered everything?"

"Everything except who cast it." Theo said, evenly. "Or was he avoiding that part on purpose?"

Forest-green eyebrows painstakingly knitted themselves together. "He wants to be sure about it,
Quinn does not rush into things, nor does he make accusations without sufficient proof. So far,
nearly every seal appears to have a different signature, meaning that there have been more than one
magical being meddling with Harry."

Charlie bristled, faintly. "And he can't say who-"
"Please don't hold that against him." Kyle smiled, thinly. "Because once he knows who it is and what they have done, exactly. There will be nowhere they can run and hide to be free of a Healer's wrath. Our society protects them for a reason." Kyle downed the tea in a few quick gulps. He stood up, slipping his wand free to undo the arrangements and transfigurations cast.

"Ah, I'll sign for us, give me a moment." Theo slipped free of Harry, with a silent command in his eyes to Charlie.

The redhead perked a brow, but did not question filling the newly vacated space beside their Sub. He rolled his shoulders back and rubbed his neck. "Feels like I've been stuck indoors all day." He grimaced. "Miss the sun."

"and the dragons?" Harry wanted to know. He threw a smile upwards for Charlie. "Did you have a favorite?"

"All of them." Charlie said, wryly. "They are all delightful little monsters in their own way." He gave a happy sigh. "Hurry up, Theo."

"Maybe we can wait outside?" Harry suggested. "There might be some sun left…"

"Do that." Theo flashed a smile, all pointed teeth and fangs. "I will be with you shortly. Do not invite trouble from anywhere."

Harry childishly stuck his tongue out at that. Charlie snickered. "I don't do it on purpose."

"I know, Harry, I know. It just kind of follows you, hmm?"

"Yes!"

Theo approached the reception desk, noting that Mimei seemed less frazzled than she had the day before.

The blonde looked up, snapping her bubblegum expertly. "What're you signing out for?" Her hand hovered above a tray of colorful parchments.

Quinn appeared around the corner before either dragel could answer. He leaned across the counter and selected two parchments, a golden-brown and a faintly pink tinged one. He snapped up two quills and splayed the parchments before Theo. He gestured for the young Alpha to read and then stabbed one quill into his arm. The resulting bead of redness had Mimei sucking in a breath. She scowled at him, one hand moving to pinch her nose. The Healer pretended not to notice, casting something over the wound that apparently blocked the scent of blood, because Mimei moved her hand a moment later.

Theo sketched the parchment, noting the clauses and the shortness of the contract. On one hand, short was good on another, it was bad. It meant there weren't many things to be argued over in that he would be signing over blanket rights. Quinn finished, tapping his quill impatiently.

Theo signed and swapped parchments. He sketched the contents with the same expert eye he'd used before and then picked up the proffered quill. He pricked a finger with one fang, rather than stabbing himself with a quill and nodded his thanks when Quinn threw the same little spell to keep the scent of blood contained. It was a handy trick he'd have to remember to start using himself.

By the time they'd both signed off, the parchments glowed with the binding contract and Mimei
wrapped them with black cord and a muttered spell that added her own magicked signature to them as a witness. Her sharp gaze flickered over Theo and then back at Quinn.

"You do realize when you give up your Alpha rights, they never return to you?"

"Only for this matter." Theo smiled, tightly. "I had no wish to upset my Submissive."

"The pretty one with the green eyes?" Mimei shook her head. "You'll have to work that out of his head. There is nothing wrong with a bit of necessary revenge." She gave a jerk of her head towards Quinn. They were waiting for the parchments to glow the final flash of white to show that the contracts had been approved. "Then again, knowing Quinn, I can say that handing him Healer's Rights is a deliciously dark alternative." Her lips curled into a smirk and she nodded to Quinn. "Happy hunting. Make them suffer."

Quinn lips quirked in the faintest of twitches that might have been a smile. He touched Theo's arm, briefly and then turned away, retreating to the inner rooms of the clinic.

"Suffer?" Theo repeated.

"Quinn used to be an Alpha." Mimei's smirk settled on her pretty face. "It was a downright bloody and vicious fight that took his voice. Just because he's taken Healer's Oaths doesn't mean he's forgotten how to fight. You won't regret handing over your rights in his stead."

"I hope not." Theo said, lightly.

"No worries. In fact, you'll never know it was him." Her shoulders shook with laughter. "What I wouldn't do to travel with him. Ach, well. Anything else I can see to for you?"

"Appointment cards." Theo handed over the green cards.

Mimei took them, swiping them through the calibration slot. A moment later, she handed them over. "Health and happiness to you and yours." She parroted. "Next!"

Theo stepped out into the daylight, moving out from under the shadow of the clinic's awning. He spotted Charlie and Harry a few yards away, Harry pointing at something in the sky and Charlie craning his neck backwards to get a good look. He studied them for a moment, before approaching. Noting how calm and relaxed they appeared, considering what they had all experienced in the space of a single afternoon.

He was bone-weary in a way he hadn't been in years—however few years he had to complain of—and was looking forward to rest, food and sex. Not necessarily in that order either. His acceptance of his true Alpha instincts were now clamoring for him lay claim to the handsome redhead and then to take his fill of Harry.

The very thought buzzed pleasantly beneath his skin, a hum of magic and instinctive want. Theo made his way through the exiting circles, careful to avoid the marked Submissives and a few glowering Alphas. He really did not want to place himself in any situations where his burgeoning triad might be questioned—afterwards, then perhaps he might chance it—and then only if absolutely necessary.

"What is it?" He drew near, a hand on each of their shoulders, following the gaze upwards.
"Something shiny?"

"Dragel?" Harry asked in something akin to awe.
Theo followed the pointed finger and relaxed when he caught sight of the creature that had arrested his mates attention. "Air Dragel." He confirmed.

"It's beautiful." Charlie murmured, blue eyes transfixed.

Theo resisted the urge to elbow him. "Most of the Air ones are," he admitted. "They often have to fly for a few hours every day and they like to take prolonged sunbaths." His lips twitched. "I'd say those are Gheyic in nature though and most likely patrolling."

"They?" Harry's attention snapped to Theo. "I only see one."

"Don't look directly at it." Theo advised. "Look to the corner of it, watch for something that gleams. It won't glitter, but you'll see it and dismiss it."

"Invisibility spells?" Charlie wanted to know.

"Nay. They're Air, they can simply phase their bodies at will, it is the quirk of their element." Theo gave them a moment longer. "See them yet?"

Harry's amazed gasp confirmed that they had. "There's so many of them!"

A moment later, Charlie made a strangled sound in his throat as apparently he saw the same thing.

Theo smiled to himself. The Air dragels always had that sort of mystery around them and most of the time, they flew high enough above Nevarah to be out of sight, save for when the Hunting Season would begin. Then, some of the bolder, more daring ones would chance to glide a little lower and into the visible heights for those below. They would flip, circle, hover and chase each other around with gleaming, metallic-hued wings and pale hints of color.

"You can watch the pretty fliers later." Theo prodded them both, a moment later. "We should not be standing out here gawking up at the sky, anyhow." He cast a glance about the clinic courtyard. "Evening will come quickly. Mayhap in an hour or so. You have four days with which you can spend your waking hours staring up at the sky—well, some of them anyway." He cast a tempus and frowned at it. "Charlie? Harry?"

"Where will we stay?" Harry finally turned away to look at Theo once more. A hesitant look flickered across his face. "I'd rather not...be in the way."

"Terius would tell us if we were in the way." Theo sighed, pushing away his exasperation. "However, I understand and acknowledge your concern and so I spoke to Ilsa about it. She assures me that the guesthouse promised would be cleared and cleaned this afternoon and that no one will bother us."

"A guesthouse?" Harry perked up. "Where?"

"The outskirts of the city." Theo smiled. "Somewhere near to the water's edge, back up that way." He waved with his arm in a general direction. "Charlie?"

"Hmmm." The mumbled acknowledgement was not accompanied by Charlie's actual attention, but Theo rolled his eyes and threaded his arms around each of his mates in turn.

"Temptricus Portgas, Lot Twenty-five, Ilsa Gorgens!"

Harry was grateful for Theo's supporting arm around his waist when the transportation spell
washed over them. A moment later, they were deposited on the clean swept wooden deck of a lovely beachside cottage, with the sparkling Merrow waters in view and plenty of vibrant green grass before it bled away to crystal white sands.

"Wow." He managed, staring.

"Reminds me of Shell Cottage," Charlie murmured. "Mayhap a little…prettier." He looked around, taking in the short, front deck and then the sparse scattering of trees in a few odd clumps. "It's a bit isolated, isn't it?"

"Mated circles tend to be large," Theo offered. "And with the exception of sleeping, most circles spend their time out of doors, large spaces are absolutely necessary and it would be a hassle to worry about neighboring circles and whatnot."

"Ah." Charlie mumbled.

"How come you don't use the other one?" Harry moved away from Theo's side and went to look over the edge of the railing. It looked like one of those beach houses he'd once seen in one of Aunt Petunia's travel magazines. A house on stilts, with a comfortably shaded 'bottomhouse' view to add to the charm. He'd always wondered what it would be like to visit one and whether he could jump over the railing. That, of course, prompted him to take a more calculating look and Harry was mildly gratified to note that there wasn't a significant drop, at least, not one large enough to discourage him hiking himself up over the railing rather than aiming for the tangle of stairs.

"The other what?" Theo made a move to hurry after him. "There are stairs, Harry. They built them for a reason and—never mind."

"Wow." Harry's muffled voice came from below. "There's a hammock down here! Hey, Charlie!"

The ponytailed redhead did not waste a moment in all but vaulting over the railing himself. He landed easily in a crouch and gave a whistle of appreciation a moment later as he disappeared from view after Harry. "Nice!"

Theo rolled his golden eyes and with a resigned sigh, hefted himself up and over the edge. He landed easily and found Charlie poking at a clay stove and Harry tangling himself up in a hammock. The Slytherin pinched the bridge of his nose, counting slowly to ten and back, before deciding to stand to the corner and let his mates explore freely. He'd been to the guesthouse before. As a matter of fact, he'd spent several weeks at a time here, with Ilsa, during their early years together. She'd explained that he ought to have somewhere to run to when he wanted and that they needed to have one place to call their own. The guesthouse had become it. He watched now, faintly amused as Harry managed to situate himself in the hammock and start it swinging and Charlie discovered that his hands could ignite the coals inside the little clay stove-turned-grill.

"Theo!" Harry's excited voice carried everything in it that he couldn't quite articulate.

"I see you've each found something." Theo glided over to catch the hefty suspension rope for the hammock and gave it a tight tug. "Settle down." He instructed, pulling the rope a little harder, the equivalent of a push on the swing.

Harry grinned up at him. Theo grinned back. "There's more hooks, I think." Harry twisted, his sharp emerald eyes searching out the S-shaped hooks to hang up other hammocks. "We can each have one."

"Absolutely not." Theo retorted. He ignored the surprised look on Harry's face. "Why I should care
for my own hammock when I could easily have you in mine is beyond me."

The surprise faded back into a hesitant smile. "What about Charlie then?"

"Enlarging spell." Theo said, haughtily. "We are wizards."

It was the way he said it, because Harry dissolved into laughter that clearly rang through the bottomhouse and out into the air. Charlie looked over from his fireside fiddling and shared a fond smile between his Alpha when he took in Harry's cheerful face. The smile melted away a moment later when the laughter turned in unexpected sobs.

"Harry?" Charlie flicked his hand at the flames he'd just conjured and tugged with all his might to extinguish them. He was relieved when they did flicker out and he hurried over to where Theo had stopped the hammock and now stood beside it, holding Harry's face to his stomach.

The smaller figure shook with effort and a moment later, tear-filled eyes stared up at both mates in misery.

"What happened?" Charlie looked from him to Theo and then back. He'd missed something, somehow.

"Hysterics." Theo supplied, bending down to be at eye level with Harry. "It is quite alright, Harry. It has been one of those days."

"I feel like a girl." Harry snapped. He scrubbed ineffectually at his face, unable to stem the sudden flow of tears.

"I know many charming young women who would take offense at that," Theo said, lightly. "Sometimes we laugh to keep from crying."

"And sometimes we cry when the laughter runs out." Charlie finished. He stretched out a hand and cupped Harry's tear-stained cheek. Harry leaned in the warm palm, however slightly. "Feel better?"

Harry took a faint, shaky breath. "Sort of. Maybe. I…I don't know."

"It is perfectly fine." Theo repeated. He leaned forward and kissed that wrinkled brow. "Cry, scream and laugh all you want." He thumbed away a stray tear, now that the others seemed to be fading. "Was it something we did to trigger it?"

"N-no." Harry shook his head. "It was—I mean," he gestured ineffectively.

"The hammock?" Theo guessed, his own confusion showing plainly on his face.

"…kind of."

"First time?" Charlie guessed.

Those lovely emerald eyes brimmed with tears that Harry tried to blink away. "Something like that."

"Ah, Harry." And Theo stood, pulling him up out of the hammock and straight into his arms. "Shh." He hugged him tight and then began to shower his face in soft, light kisses. "You were just waiting for the right hammock, hmm?"

"That—I-" Harry sputtered and then he had to laugh, the tears forgotten. "That was bad." He said, accusingly. "That was really bad."
Theo smirked and Charlie shoulder-bumped him from behind. "It worked, didn't it?"

Harry blinked. He smeared his sleeve across his face once more and managed a watery smile. "Yeah. It did."

"Good. How about you check out the actual house?" Theo nudged him towards the shadowed stairwell nestled between the two open areas at the bottomhouse. "Check for essentials and let me know if there's anything missing that we might need."

"Like what?" Charlie was already heading for the stairs. He paused for a moment, frowning at his fingertips. The expected flicker of flame did not appear. He sighed.

"It takes practice." Theo reminded him. "And in the meantime, you're a wizard, use your wand."

Charlie offered a rueful grin and drew out his wand to cast a lumos. He started up the stairs first and then gave another whistle of appreciation.

"What is it?" Harry scampered after him, his attention firmly fixed on a new distraction.

Theo watched them disappear up the stairs and hid a smile. He knew what had caught their attention. The house was magical—as was nearly everything in Nevarah—and Charlie had just realized where the magic was being used. The stairs did not move unless prompted and that was usually for the benefit of pregnant mates, or so Ilsa had told him. The rest of the time, the stairs were deceptively short, considering that they spanned at least two stories inside of the house.

There would be plenty for Charlie and Harry to explore and for once, Theo was glad that there was something interesting to keep both mates out of trouble and his hair. He looked down at the hammock and sighed, running his fingers through the familiar patterned cloth.

This had been his favorite hammock when visiting with Ilsa. It was big enough to hold them both and he'd spent many afternoons lounging in there, cuddled up to her side while she read a book on whatever struck her fancy for the moment. He could easily recall feeling safest beside her and comfortable to admit it.

He hoped he'd have the chance to add a few variations of that memory with Harry. It might do them all some good, he mused. He paused to check the clay stove that had drawn Charlie's attention, checking to be sure the flames were out—they were still faintly smoldering, but Theo chalked that up to the magical device rather than his beta's newfound use of his fire element.

It would take some time and a great deal of practice before either Charlie or Harry could master the fire element. He knew it was a difficult one to grasp. With a wave of his own earthen element, he quelled the flames and directed his steps towards the stairs. He'd given them enough of a headstart for sure.

Harry stared down the dark stairwell and then over at Charlie, whose own shocked expression mirrored what he felt.

"Wow?" Charlie offered.

Harry nodded. "Four floors?"

"I suppose it was made for very large circles." Charlie offered. He shrugged. "It's kind of nice."

"I guess." Harry stepped out into the landing and then looked down the wooden paneled hallway.
It felt friendly, he could sense the faint traces of ancient magic twined inside the structure and it was comforting in a way. "Left or right?" He inquired, casting a look down the right and then to the left. Both sides of the hallway looked identical.

Charlie leaned over his shoulder, the lumos casting a bit of a light through the shadowy hallways. "Right?"

"And here I was going to say left." Harry snorted. He reached for his own wand. Charlie frowned and Harry scowled. "My lack of magic and its return does not make me an invalid!"

"I didn't say anything." Charlie held up his hands. The lumos bobbed.

"You were thinking it." Harry sniffed. "You take right, I take left. The layout of the house will probably let us circle around."

"The wrap-around balcony?" Charlie figured, following the train of thought. It made sense, in an oddly logical sort of way. "Alright then."

Harry tapped his wand against his arm for a moment, as if priming it, then focused, lips pressed together. "Lumos!" A faint glow of light sputtered to life and he smiled.

Charlie grinned and turned down the right corridor.

Harry amused himself by poking through various rooms along the left corridor. The doors were all open and most contained absolutely nothing, save for a simple, plain bed and a simple, equally plain dresser and nightstand. They were curiously absent of actual blankets, though there seemed to be an abundance of clean sheets if the fully stocked linen closet was to be believed.

There was a shared bathroom at the end of the hallway and a small kitchenette.

Poking about the kitchenette, Harry took note of serviceable pots, pans and the distinct lack of groceries. He made a mental note to tell Theo and continued on. It was a charming sort of place, a few carved swirls in some places along the wooden walls and floors, a faint layer of dust and grime in a few spots.

Harry wrinkled his nose at that, not looking forward to having to clean anything. He wondered if it really was impossible to find a house elf. Calida had gifted him some basic knowledge spells for housecleaning and clothes, but he wasn't in a hurry to sort them out to use. A sigh slipped past his lips and he continued poking through the empty rooms.

There was a staircase at the far end and Harry found himself wondering what kind of a house had so many staircases and why. It seemed like a veritable maze of sorts and he was fairly certain the house was magically enlarged in more ways than he cared to know. It certainly hadn't looked anything like this on the outside.

Light streamed in from a side window and Harry spied the wrap-around deck through the wooden slats, perking up at the thought of stepping out in the warm air. He reached for the door, pausing to fiddle with the assortment of locks and bolts, before swinging it open.

A yelp escaped when he found himself face to face with a pale, white-blond dragel with their wand drawn. Harry's hand snapped up, wand at the ready, even as a flicker of panic began to settle in.

CHARACTER SNIPPET: AUGUSTA LONGBOTTOM & SEAMUS FINNEGAN
When the fire gave way to the rich, elegant furnishings of Longbottom Manor, Molly Weasley was decidedly worse for the wear. She collapsed straight into wrinkled, steady arms that held her up even as her legs gave out from beneath her.

"Auggie." She murmured, magic flickerly weakly at her fingertips.

"Molandria!" Augusta Longbottom's sharp voice cut through the mental fog and made the newly transported children straighten subconsciously. "Good heavens, woman!" She gave the weary witch a faint shake.

"Just Molly, Auggie." The redhead corrected. "Only ever Molly. No one has called me otherwise in years."

"Humph!" Augusta's thin lips pursed together and her gaze swept through the newcomers, lighting on her favored grandson. "Neville!" She breathed a silent sigh of relief and made a motion with her hand.

"Gran." The young wizard exclaimed, fervently. He pulled away from Lavender's nervous hands to latch onto his grandmother's side.

She hugged him back, as a matter of course, and stroked his hair and face.

The chubby-cheeked Gryffindor leaned into the caress, his eyelids drooping.

"Don't you dare fall asleep on me now, Neville." The fearsome witch snapped. She wrinkled her nose. "Loopy?" The House Elf popped in. "We've guests. Tend to them, please."

The house elf surveyed the new house guests with a grave air, then bowed in acceptance.

Satisfied, the matron of the house returned her attention to the plump, pretty witch that had been supporting her Neville upon the unexpected arrival. "Succubus?" She inquired, stiffly.

Lavender's lovely face burned bright red. "Yes ma'am." She managed, ducking her head, nervousness showing plainly in her body language and soft speech.

"I'll thank you to keep your hands away from my grandson."

"Gran!" Neville protested. His ears turned a lovely shade of pink. "She didn't—we didn't-!"

"Hush, Neville." His grandmother scolded. Her hawk-like eyes narrowed faintly. "And if you absolutely must, then do it where I can't see hide nor hair of what you two are up to."

If Lavender could have become any redder at that point, Neville thought she'd self-combust in some way or another. As it was, he wished that accidental magic still happened so the ground or the walls could swallow him whole. Then again, his Gran always had a knack for calling out the most embarrassing things in his life at the most inopportune times. He frowned. "Gran, I think Mrs. Weasley—"

"She'll be fine." Augusta spared a glance for her grandson. "Do not worry for her. The rest of you, identify yourselves."


"I am." Augusta said, evenly. "And you?"
Dean held out his hands, palms up. "About the same. Native magic, creature traits from far back."

"And you wouldn't care to share what creature?" The elderly witch sniffed.

"I would not, ma'am." Dean met her gaze squarely. It was a secret that he'd waited two years to share with Seamus. Now that he had, it was a private matter between bonded mates and he saw no point to revealing it. Not with his own kind of creature nature lurking beneath the surface anyway.

"Humph!" Came another snort.

"Dryad?" Dean countered, pleasantly. His instincts screamed at him to reveal his nature and publicly show his dominant status to the newest threat.

The old witch eyed him for a long moment and then gave another huff. "Come along, the lot of you. This way." Augusta drew out her wand and cast a spell, levitating a now sleeping Molly Weasley beside her, with a crooked finger at the witch's redhead daughter. "And you must be hers." She frowned. "I have not seen any of you in years."

Seamus hid a smile and lingered long enough for Dean to move up behind and urge him forward with a hand to the small of his back. He did it on purpose, knowing the touch would ground his already agitated boyfriend. A trickle of worry registered as he remembered the angry faces and magic from the attack on the Burrow. He hoped that Mrs. Weasley was very good with her transportation spells—and that those attackers wouldn't be able to trace them anytime soon.

Dean's arm slipped around his waist and drew him subtly closer as they began to follow the head of the Longbottom house further into the manor. It looked like they would be in for a long adventure with plenty of surprises. Seamus' lips quirked faintly as if sensing Dean's tangled train of thought. He stepped closer for a moment, their sides almost touching and then broke apart before Lady Longbottom's gaze could catch them over one shoulder.

Ginny shuffled along beside Lavender, her hands in tight little fists beside her. Lavender moved with her head faintly bowed and her own hands twitching nervously.

Neville had slipped out from his Gran's embrace and trotted alongside her instead, with the occasional glance back over his shoulder. He seemed to be recovering quite admirably from his bout of lethargy and weakness at the Burrow.

_Dryad._ Seamus reminded himself, thinking his boyfriend clever for pointing that out. He'd never reveal Dean's true nature, not unless absolutely necessary for either of them, but he did like knowing what he was up against. Dryads were not immune to Luck. He'd be sure to be very, very lucky.

Playing his cards right would ensure they all lived. Dark times always called for dangerous games.
The Introduction of Bahn Deveraine

Chapter Notes

RECAP: Theo, Harry and Charlie leave the clinic after Theo signs over his Alpha right to Quinn so he can take care of the business of revenge over Harry's Blood Seal. Meanwhile, the triad travels to the guesthouse that Ilsa promised them. At the guesthouse, Harry runs into a strange new dragel with familiar features, while exploring. Meanwhile, the others have met up with Dryad Augusta Longbottom and are warmly welcomed in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEVARAH: ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE: DEVERAINE PROPERTY

As far as Harry knew, he didn't have any enemies in Nevarah—not yet, anyway. He swallowed hard and lifted his chin in a show of defiant confidence that he didn't quite feel. He knew the power behind Dragel spells—Theo had been trying to teach him for some time, after all and this was most certainly a dragel standing before him.

If this were to come to blows, he'd have to rely on his wits alone—his wits while inside a very tired and exhausted body. Grimly, he gripped the wand tighter. He did not want to go through with this.

Theo…Charlie…where are you NOW? The mental scream was for his head alone, but he hoped that perhaps the bond would transmit something or the other. Something helpful, at any rate.

They continued to stare at each other for a long, tense moment. Harry found himself taking in the almost elfin quality of the figure that he could now make out as a young man. The face was nearly aristocratic with the high, sloping cheekbones and there was an air of richness if the intricate jewelry was anything to judge the stranger by.

The rounded midsection had caught him off guard and Harry realized, belatedly, that the young man was very pregnant and coiled to strike in defense of a potential danger.

His mind clicked the puzzle pieces together as Harry found himself thinking that the young fellow looked eerily similar to another certain, white-blond haired Dragel—Bhindi. He wore a similar outfit, his pale, skinny arms exposed, the right arm showing off no less than a dozen small, black tattoos denoting his mating marks. His light hair was gathered into something of a topknot and his shoulders twitched, faintly as if his wings were about to make an appearance.

"This is private property." The dragel said, uncertainly. "You really shouldn't be here." He shifted, uncertainly it seemed.

Harry's eyes narrowed. He could tell the difference between a shuffle and settling one's weight in preparation for a fight. This Dragel was gearing up for a potential conflict. He opened his mouth to speak when he heard voices and running feet.

The pale, pretty boy immediately backed away, bracing on the deck railing, tensed as if to flee, his eyes darting back and forth. Something rippled beneath his tunic, around his shoulders.
Definitely wings, Harry guessed. He contemplated as to whether taking a step back would be a bad move. He didn't want to cause any kind of incident now. It'd been too long a day.

"Harry!" Theo came to a stop beside Harry, his own wand at the ready, with Charlie scrambling after him.

Harry found himself half blocked when both Theo and Charlie reacted on instinct, pushing him to the back of their little group and standing in front of him, Charlie's hair crackling in its true, fiery flames and Theo's shoulders arched forward as if to bring his wings out. "Hey!" He protested.

"Harry, don't—Bahn?" Theo's voice turned to pure shock. "Arielle's fangs, I—Bahn, it's me, Theodore. Ilsa's Theo. Theodore Nott? I, er, wands down!" Theo whirled on them both and pushed their hands down, his own wand disappearing up his sleeve. "Harry, Charlie. Back. Stay back." He turned back, palms open and outstretched, careful not to approach. "Bahn?" He tried again. "We have permission to be here, I swear we do. You are fine, perfectly fine, no one is trying to attack you. I spoke to Ilsa before I came here, she assured me that it was alright to-"

Bahn stared at them for a long moment and then his wand arm dropped back to his side. The pale eyes surveyed them all for a moment and then he made a motion with his hand. "Step out into the light. I can't see you."

Theo started forward, pausing at Harry's touch on his sleeve. "It's fine, Harry. Really. I know him. It has been a while since we've seen each other, but he would not hurt us."

Charlie frowned, but didn't comment on that definition.

Theo moved away from his mates and stepped out into the sunlit balcony. He stood near the doorway, enough to show himself, but not to be threatening. He waited, patiently for the realization to dawn.

"Theo." Bahn acknowledged a moment later, relaxing minutely as he took in the solid figure. "It has been a while." The wand finally lowered and was held in one hand for a long moment. He made no other movement or acknowledgment, and then suddenly twirled the wand in his fingers and used it as as a hair chopstick in twisting the rest of his lovely pale hair into a knot.

An expression of trust and weariness, for a dragel with free hands was equally dangerous as a wizard with a wand. He regarded Theo silently, as if waiting for him to say something more.

"Time passes differently." Theo tipped his head in a ghost of a more formal greeting. "I am sorry if we startled you. I honestly did not think anyone would be here."

"There has not been anyone here in years." Bahn allowed. "No one comes. You have been offworld, then?" He straightened from leaning on the deck railing. "It has been years since I have last seen you. You look well. Taller, I think. Thinner. You are not eating well? Ilsa will not like that. She worries far too much for you."

Theo blinked. "Er,

Bahn frowned, nibbling on his lower lip. "I am sorry to take so long with this," he gestured towards the beach house. "I did not think it would take this long, but it appears I miscalculated. I was terribly bored at home. Delani drove me up and over a wall." He blinked. "A series of walls, I suppose." There was a faint sigh in his voice. "I daresay she will be terribly upset when she finds me." His lips quirked into something of a smirk. "I did warn her not to hover though. I wager she'll snap at Alma first and that won't hover …" His voice trailed off and the pale eyes darkened faintly.
"Hover?" Theo blinked. His golden eyes flickered down to the young Sub's stomach and then back to the pale face. He connected the dots without further prompting, his inherent Alpha nature surfacing on instinct. "Bahn, have you been casting since—oh for Merlin's sake, sit down!" He started forward and then stopped, uncertainty showing in his face. It was not good politics to touch a pregnant sub that he was not bonded to and given Bahn's initial reaction to him, Theo didn't want to start any issues with the Deveraine Circle. "I probably shouldn't touch you, right?" His hands fluttered, having nowhere to rest and finally hung at his sides. Instinctively, he knew that Bahn needed some measure of help and preferably in the next few minutes, but he was not quite sure how to be about it.

"It would probably be best." Bahn managed a wan smile. "Perhaps I could come in?" One hand skittered over his stomach, a glow of pale orange magic shimmering at his fingertips. "Terribly sorry to intrude."

"Of course, come in." Theo turned, showing the way. "It is no intrusion at all, I did not mean for—ah, these are my mates. I should have introduced them. It has been a long day, please excuse my apparent lack of manners. My Submissive, Harry and our beta, Charlie." He inclined his head. "Charlie, Harry, this is Bahn, the second Submissive in Ilsa's circle. He's nice."

"Nice?" Charlie repeated.

"We like him." Theo said, firmly. "Bahn, this way. Watch your step. I haven't been here in years, but I do believe everything is the same…"

"Bhindi?" Harry said, uncertainly. He wasn't quite sure whether he could accept a blanket statement such as 'nice' for someone who looked so much like a dragel that had been anything but nice.

"Twins." Bahn corrected, with a faint smile. "We are twins. She is my sister. I take it you have met her?"

Charlie snorted. "Oh we did." He finally stepped aside to show Harry a little better. "Quite charming, isn't she?" Bahn gave the faintest of smiles. "I often find my receptions to be quite dimmed the second time around when it comes to those who have had the misfortune of meeting me first."

"Which makes seeing you again, all the more a pleasure." Theo said, smoothly. "Come this way, in here. I saw a table and chairs…"

"Oh. I had forgotten the furnishings." Bahn sighed, warily. "Again, my apologies and—"

"Shh. That's fine. Sit." Theo pulled out a chair and frowned. "You've used too much magic for the moment, haven't you?" He accused. "Harry, were there any blankets or sheets or something?" He turned back to Bahn who sat mechanically and began to hug his arms tightly to his front, rocking back and forth, pale eyes zoning out.

"What's he doing?" Charlie seemed torn between trailing after Harry and staying to watch Theo. "What's happening?"

"Pregnant dragels do not experience pregnancy the same way wizards and witches do," Theo said, softly. "Where you might expect a lack of magic and energy in the wizarding world, a pregnant dragel's magic doubles or even triples, depending on the element and the child and the carrier themselves are usually very, very active. They have to exhaust their magic on a daily basis and they..."
interact with the unborn child after the first three months, forming a bond in both mind and magic until the birth. He's likely just used too much magic and the child has sucked out his reserves. It should regenerate in a few minutes, if he was prepared for something like this to happen." Theo hesitated. "Dragel pregnancies are very different and extremely intimate. It is also why dragel children are very highly prized."

"Very different." Charlie managed. He turned and caught a rushing Harry with an armful of clean, white sheets. "Whoa, easy Harry!"

"Sheets." The brunet managed, worry showed on his face. "Is he—Theo?" His head snapped around to look at his Alpha. His instincts screamed at him to help a fellow submissive in need. Just as he'd found himself reacting to Draco's stress, apparently the same was true for Bahn.

Theo snatched up the sheets, shaking out one and immediately draping it around Bahn, chair and all. He shook out the others and quickly cocooned the pregnant submissive, before giving a gentle, one-armed hug. Physical contact would be necessary for grounding, but as a stranger with dominant tendencies, Theo's interference would not be the least bit welcome should Bahn's circle mates catch the new scent. The Slytherin bustled around the little kitchenette, checking cupboards and the tiny pantry. "Is everything empty?"

"Seems like it." Charlie waved a hand in front of Harry's face. The brunet was staring solidly at the rocking Bahn, his lips pressed tightly together. "Harry, did you find anything?"

"Nothing. No blankets either. Just sheets." Harry swatted away the offending hand, his emerald eyes fixed on Bahn's swathed form. His fingers tingled and itched with the urge to reach out and touch the weary submissive.

Theo blew out a frustrated breath. "I did think that someone would at least have-" he started and then stopped, running a hand through his tousled locks to calm his temper. "Neither of you are in a position to cast anything." He muttered to himself, golden eyes flickering between Bahn and Harry. "Not for the moment, anyway. This will not do." He started towards a small brown panel fixed into the wall. "I could order something out or perhaps…no…well, maybe." He reasoned aloud.

"What are you doing?" Charlie nudged Harry into a chair, his blue-eyed gaze tracking Theo's every movement. "Sit." He added, when Harry made a move as if to stand. He didn't know the finer points of dragel interaction, but if Theo's careful avoidance of touching Bahn was an accurate guideline, then he'd be sure to keep his distance and his hands to himself—Harry's hands included.

"Tea." Theo said, flipping the panel open. He fiddled with something inside and a moment later, stepped back.

Charlie could see it as a hollow in the wall—big enough to fit a medium-sized package by owl post. "Tea?"

"Ordering out." Theo explained. "Bahn? Talk to me, how are you feeling?"

The shaking and rocking had stopped and while his face remained rather pale, Bahn eased upwards, shoulders relaxed. "It will pass in the next few minutes." He said, calmly. "My apologies for startling you."

"Startling?" Theo snorted. A moment later a golden package popped into existence in the little hollow in the wall. A tray of plain white china and a steaming teapot, along with containers of cream and sugar. Theo extracted the tray and carried it over the rectangular wooden table. He set it down and began to arrange the tray.
Bahn's eyebrows arched upwards to his hairline and he snuck a glance over the staring Harry and then settled on staring into his lap.

Theo pretended not to notice and served the tea with little ceremony.

Two cups later, a hint of color had returned to Bahn's cheeks and the sheets had fallen down around his shoulders. He held out his cup for a third refill and wrapped his hands around the warm offering. "Thank you kindly." He nodded, regally.

"You are most welcome." Theo returned the nod. "I ordered some biscuits but…"

"It is Hunting Season." Bahn offered a thin smile. "Everything is in disarray during Hunting Season. I suspect the orders at the window are more pressing than the ones placed on parchment." He sipped the tea, delicately. "I do not wish to be of any inconvenience." He rose from the chair, the sheets pooling at his feet. A flicker of silvery-white magic sparked in his eyes and a moment later, a bright silver glow enveloped him from head to toe.

A half-second later, the glow vanished and Bahn stood to the side looking quite well-rested and alert, with a more obvious baby bump than previously. One hand rested on the swell with a fond smile and he gave it two pats, before snapping his fingers at the rumpled sheets. They snapped to attention, folded themselves and stacked neatly on the table. He waved his hand over the stack and the sheets seemed to stiffen and shrink.

"Thank you again." Bahn reached over his head, drawing out his wand and undoing the topknot of silky, platinum blond hair. He snapped his fingers behind his head and the hair leapt to obey, twining itself into several plaits, loops and twists, so that it was successfully gathered away from the elfin face. He stretched his arms out, the wand held securely in one hand before the pale eyes narrowed. He made three quick sharp slashing motions and a twirl, followed by another swirl and dip.

"Groceries and kitchen utensils?" He inquired, calmly and politely.

Theo blinked. "Er, should you be-"

"A minor problem. I knew it would happen, I merely wasn't sure when." He tapped the wand on his opposite arm. "Well, then? Am I right? Is there anything else you need?"

"I couldn't possibly ask you to-" Theo started.

"The expense account can handle it." Bahn pointed his wand and continued to cast. "Besides, I would be an extremely poor host if I could not outfit the house within my estate of which has been offered to my guests." He started forward and reached for the door to the stairwell. "If it no trouble to you, I would like to continue. It is quite horrible of me to have you staying in-"

"It's no trouble at all." Theo soothed. "Really, er, we probably came in too early. I ah,"

"Early?" Bahn blinked in puzzlement. "There wasn't a time marked on the sheet..." He began to mumble to himself and then suddenly his head cocked to the side. "So you don't mind?" The lilt in his voice suggested that he intended to continue anyway, regardless.

"I guess not." Charlie spoke up. He looked between Harry and the uncertain Theo. He knew that look and tone from experience with his mother. "Sorry to put you to the trouble though."

Bahn brightened at once. "It's no trouble at all." He assured them. "And if I do not use the extra energy, I'd just have to find another outlet for it and right now, that is most certainly not
happening." He paused in front of the door.

Theo caught on first and immediately moved forward. He opened the door, checked the hallway and then stepped out, holding the door open.

Bahn thanked him with a smile and stepped out.

They went through the next floor rather quickly. Bahn tended to talk in the same smooth, cultured tones, no matter what surprises the dusty guesthouse had for them. He cast his spells with ease and grace, belying years of experience and immediately caught on to Harry's lack of participation.

"I would not be particularly averse if you were to help, you know." It was punctuated by a look in Harry's general direction.

"He would, if he could." Theo inserted. "It has been a very long day, Bahn. We've spent the majority of it in a Health Clinic off in-

"And you're awake?" The elfin dragel surveyed him with interest. "Impressive."

"...pardon?"

"Most people who visit a Health Clinic usually sleep it off for the rest of the day or the week, whichever is longer."

"...that makes no sense at all."

"I am not trying to make sense—you were. If you are sufficiently confused, then kindly explain to me why you are deflecting every comment or attempt to engage your Submissive? I was not under the impression that I required your permission to speak and interact with him."

"Er," Theo rubbed his forehead. "Instinct." He muttered after a moment. "I cannot seem to help it at the moment, please do not take it personally."

"I see...and is that your Beta's excuse as well?"

"You don't miss much, do you?" Charlie smiled.

"Either spit it out or think of a better excuse." Bahn snapped back. "I am not made of glass."

"Harry doesn't have a mentor." Theo said in a single breath. "Because of that, he could not possibly know any of the more subtle protocols for guests, hosting or even—those." He gestured towards the household spells. "I did not want him to accidentally offend you."

"Hey!" Harry protested. His chocolate eyebrows knitted together and his lip half-curled. "I wouldn't have-"

"That was extremely generous of you, but entirely unnecessary." Bahn's lips twitched. "Thank you for the consideration. I am of the Royal Elves, but I do not stand on formality in day to day interactions such as this. Besides, you belong to Ilza and she is one of mine. I have no quarrel with her." He inclined his head. "And even if I did, it would not affect you. My Circle certainly has no quarrel with yours, as far as I am aware. And even if it were to be a simple breach of manners, I would not hold it against you. I am nowhere near as fussy as my twin." The smile threatened to appear again. "Please understand that."

"...it is understood." Theo found himself finally able to offer a genuine smile. "And I am sorry to
"Think nothing of it. I have more years behind me, after all." Bahn surveyed the guest room. He was preparing another barrage of spells to set the bare room to rights. "When you say no mentor, I assume something is being done about that?"

"That was the whole point in coming here, I think." Harry sighed. He moved a little closer towards the other submissive, now that Charlie wasn't obviously shadowing him.

"…really? And what have you done?" The pale eyebrows curled upwards. "A missing mentor cannot possibly be anything good." Bahn wrinkled his nose. "And I shudder to think of a reason strong enough to prevent one from finding their intended. You have mentioned it to the proper authorities?"

Harry huffed. "Yes. We went straight to an official embassy."

"Good, then. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help." Bahn gave a decisive nod. "And would you two please stop standing over there where I cannot quite see you? I would much rather have you in my line of sight. Not seeing you makes me uneasy. I trust you, but my hormones do not and I am five months pregnant, so I cannot help listening to them."

Theo and Charlie immediately readjusted their positions, careful to stay in front and off to the side. Harry was beckoned closer and he approached, wearily, after a moment. Instinct compelled him to befriend the pale elf, in much the same way he had felt the urge to stay close to Draco and interact with Calida.

It had to be a Submissive thing, he figured, hoping that his body did not betray his initial reluctance to move forward. Something about Bahn hinted that he was not all that he seemed on the surface. Harry was not sure that he wanted to deal with any more surprises for the day. He just wanted food and sleep and maybe a little something more in between of the two.

"I do not bite." Bahn informed him, primly. "Now hold your wand like this," he demonstrated. "You point and do this, with feeling."

And Harry found himself mimicking the wand movements and posturing, when Bahn insisted on showing him the various spells. Some of them he could remember from the knowledge transfer that Calida had been kind enough to gift him. Others he hadn't even known existed. Bahn was certainly far more capable than his pale, delicate appearance let on.

Seeing such spells in action and with Bahn's instruction was a completely different thing. Bahn was somewhere between not quite impatient and not quite a teacher, but he knew to explain some things and ignore others. His movements were quick and fluid and the one time he actually reached over and touched Harry's wrist, his fingers were light, soft and very cool.

They finished up the second floor with a quick hand and then lined up at the stairs to proceed to the third floor. They'd just opened the door when Bahn recoiled with a hiss. He was behind Charlie so fast, that the Beta was torn between grabbing Harry and shifting so that his back was not to the strange dragel.

Theo was the first one in front, his shoulders twitching and the fabric stretched over them, rippling as his wings simmered beneath the skin's surface. He took a deep breath, scenting for the threat, puzzled when he could not discern what had been the cause of Bahn's immediate distress. He was about to call out to the elfin dragel when a new, familiar voice spoke.
"Theodore? You're early. I didn't expect you for another four hours. Are you all up there?"

"Oretta?" Theo rolled his shoulders back. He called down to her in native dragel tongue, waiting for a moment. The exchange was brief and light before he finally moved away from the stairwell doorway. "Quinn threw us out, said to come back in four days and then he'd try again."

"Did he really? And here I thought he had a good head on his shoulders."

"Oretta!" Golden eyes flickered towards Bahn's rigid form and he opened his mouth to speak, only to find those pale eyes fixed determinedly on him, as if daring him to give away his presence.

"If you must joke about things like that, then pick things that are actually funny." But even as she spoke, a small smile hovered at the corners of her mouth. Ilsa stepped out from the shadowy stairs a half-second later, her wand tucked away, a hand feathering through her short, cropped hair. "I meant to have this place cleaned and stocked before you ever set foot in it again. It's been years since I've visited."

"I can tell." Theo said, dryly. "The dust is everywhere."

Her eyes grew wide at once, the gold darkening to a near copper hue, zeroing in on the scent that had suddenly hit her full force.

A low growl left her lips at the same instance that Bahn's lips curled back in a soundless snarl.

Theo froze.

Charlie immediately shifted, his bulkier frame subtly shifting towards shielding Harry. The short brunet had already slid his wand free, and now stood, uncertainly looking between Bahn and Ilsa. He'd reacted on instinct, but from what he knew, they should be in the same Circle…

"Ilsa." Bahn's voice was deceptively sweet. "What an unpleasant surprise. I did not expect to ruin your day quite so easily."

The older Gheyo blinked, her shoulders already tensing, her jaw set and lips in a thin line. "Bahn." The name was bit off, cleanly. A hint of uncertainty flickered through.

"I would have much rather been fully prepared to do so and then chosen not to." The smile on his face remained stiff and polite. "I do not make a habit of alienating those I care about, though I have not seen you for several years."

Ilsa bristled and then frowned, puzzling through the twisted words. "You're—that's," Her eyes darted quickly about the room and then she wearily eyed him from head to toe. "...I didn't realize you were here... I should go. My... apologies..." The words were spoken as if it pained her to voice them aloud. Her head bowed and she backed up two steps, with a faint tilt of her head, before turning towards the stairs.

"Ilsa." There was a weight in his voice this time and Bahn strode forward, brushing past the Charlie-Harry duo and stopping exactly a wing's breadth from the Gheyo. "I did not mean for you to leave." He tipped his head in a short approximation of a bow. "If my presence makes you uncomfortable, then I shall excuse myself. You were obviously the one to invite them here and I am sure you intended to have a lovely visit. My sincerest apologies." The elfin Submissive sketched a bow and raised a hand in the necessary position for casting a transportation spell.

Worry spelled across Theo's face as he read between the lines, realizing there was little he could do for the present situation—after all, he had told his Oretta to stay out of his mateship, and it was
certainly none of his business how she interacted with hers—even if he should disagree. He'd known, since his acceptance of her as his mentor, that things were not all as they should be in her mateship. Yet, she'd never complained to him or Aracle, as far as he knew and she'd done her best to limit his contact to them when she was not present.

He hadn't minded, because Bhindi was a dark little witch and the others tended to steer clear of him, if only because he 'belonged' to Ilsa. The few pleasant interactions he'd had with the Deveraine circle had been with Bahn and his former Alpha, now the Deveraine Beta, a strong woman by the name of Delani. The fact that Bahn had immediately hidden his pregnancy from a Circle mate was not lost on Theo. There was something very wrong between these two and it pained him to witness the beginnings of what appeared to be another misunderstanding.

The very act of hiding his current state, had Theo feeling protectively towards Bahn, as an Alpha to a Submissive. He was sure that Ilsa wouldn't deliberately hurt the young man, but he also knew her Gheyo instincts tended to be strong to overbearing. Her sense of honor was likely the main reason that had led to her unofficial leave of absence from her circle. He remembered asking her what had happened only for her to smile and kiss his forehead, whispering that such words ought never to be repeated to living ears. Theo bit his lip and sent a warning glance to Charlie and Harry.

The Alpha in him itched to grab ahold of both of them and stand protectively before the threat—even though, rationally, he knew there was nothing wrong. He hoped there was a peaceful resolution to this that didn't end with claws, fangs, wings and blood. He could do without it.

They all could.

It had been a very long day.

"-what? Wait!" The words tumbled out of Ilsa's mouth and she blinked afterwards, as if she couldn't believe that she'd spoken them. She looked away from the pale face and defensive posture, her golden gaze fixed on the floor. "...I have no quarrel with you."

"Neither do I." Bahn returned, evenly.

"...but you're angry."

"Tell me you are not." He countered. "And I will call you a liar."

Ilsa huffed a short breath. "Fine. What are you doing here?"

He snorted. "...my sister is otherwise occupied. I was merely lending a hand."

Ilsa started, visibly. "What?" She seemed to be understanding something that hadn't been explained.

"Apparently, Aracle simply added 'clean the guesthouse on the shore' to the list of chores. I thought it best to see to it myself." Bahn confirmed. He did not look at her.

There was a groan from the older woman. "I'll strangle him." She muttered, to no one in particular. "Slowly...so I can feel him dying. I told him to! You weren't supposed to-""

"So as long as I do not have to watch, I do not care." Bahn returned. "Staying for dinner?"

"D-dinner?" Ilsa blinked. "What?"

The blond turned on his heel and headed back towards the newly restocked kitchen. "I wanted to
show Harry a few tricks." He rolled slender shoulders back, not quite angling his back towards the Gheyo, but still keeping them all in his line of sight. "Coming, Harry?"

"…showing Harry?" Ilsa repeated, somewhat dumbly. "I…Bahn…"

"I do not wish to hear whatever it is you wish to say," He snapped. There was a sudden sharpness in his voice now. "Whatever you have to say now, would only be an excuse and I have heard more than my share of them. Set the table." He stalked off to the kitchen, with a growled "Harry!" as he passed the redhead and brunet.

Bahn was a very expressive cook.

Harry was mildly impressed at the way the elf-dragel could effectively manage his household spells without so much as twitching an eyelid. And also the amount of noise he could generate by magically banging things together. While, Bahn explained his movements and spells in clipped, single sentences, his temper simmered just beneath the surface. He finally sat, floating in midair, his legs tucked up beneath him, in a cross-legged pose, ignoring Harry's initial look of surprise.

"Air." He grunted. In answer to the unspoken question. "Sometimes it's handy. To our kind, air is a tangible thing that we can craft and mold." He sighed. "I'm actually sitting on something, but to you, who has no air element, it seems as if I'm just floating here in midair." Bahn tapped his wand on the counter. "How's the stew?"

Harry stirred it, carefully. He tasted it, by pouring a touch of the gravy into a tiny white bowl and taking a sip. It was a rich, full-bodied flavor that he couldn't place. Delicious, surely, but with a satisfying warmth and depth that he hadn't expected. He'd stood to the side and watched as Bahn's magic had summoned ingredients from the cupboards and pantry, then diced, mixed, chopped and pureed themselves before jumping into the pot to be cooked.

"Does it need more salt?" Bahn painstakingly unfolded his legs and touched down to the clean, tiled floor once more. He padded over to stand beside Harry and peer into the simmering pot. He wrinkled his nose. "Maybe too much sage, hmm?" He sniffed again, then reached for another little white tasting bowl. He held it out and let Harry fill it for him, then tasted it, delicately poking his tongue out to lap at the tasty gravy. "What do you think?"

"…it's very good." Harry took a careful whiff of the aromatic steam. He couldn't quite pick apart the scents as Bahn was doing, but he had learned by simply watching. Bahn was a lovely thing to watch, especially in a temper, as his magic was swift and elegantly terrifying.

"I'd wager you've never had this before." The elf managed a smile at this. He waved his wand over his shoulder. "Heating charm," he explained. "You want the dough to rise, remember?"

Harry nodded. He did remember, though not from the way Bahn had meant. He remembered learning to bake from Aunt Petunia. He suppressed a shudder. There were some memories that were best left where they were. If he'd been allowed to use magic then, perhaps, he would have managed to make that first batch properly, but then again, he'd only been a witness to-

"-would you like to try? The recipe's tacked to the inside of that cupboard door," Bahn waved a hand in the general direction. "Just follow it."

Harry swallowed. Bahn was working around him with a quiet, respectful efficiency, apparently content to unofficially adopt him in terms of educating him on the basic duties of a dragel submissive—kitchen and household duties, at least. Harry was jolted from his memories when a
hand gently rested on his arm. He forced himself not to flinch, only to turn and find pale white-blue eyes inches away from his face. Before he could move, those slender arms reached further and pulled him into a careful hug.

For a moment, Harry couldn't move. He quivered, emotion and fatigue warring within, before he felt a tendril of warmth spreading through him. He heard a soft, purring sound and realized, surprised, that it came from Bahn. The older Submissive, simply held him, with the occasional twitch of his hand, which Harry knew was a wave of the wand, to continue directing their dinner to completion.

When he'd finally composed himself, Harry drew back, ready to speak, only to feel one slender finger against his lips.

"Shh." Bahn hushed. He took a step backwards and bowed, formally, a hand over his heart, one foot slightly behind the other, a lovely vision. "The House of Deveraine, has no quarrel with yours. I extend our hospitality and goodwill towards you and yours. May this be a prosperous friendship." He straightened a moment later.

Harry felt his mouth go dry. "I-I," he began. Ancient magic swirled up around them and he felt it sink into his bones with a sudden, warming finality. "Bahn, I-!

"Take a step back, dominant hand over your heart, keep your chin down, head forward and simply repeat what you'd like to extend in the name of friendship."

"...we didn't decide on...I didn't take his name—we," Harry faltered. "I don't know what to say." He exclaimed.

"You worry too much." Bahn flicked him lightly on the forehead. "And this isn't something to be worrying over. I'm only saying that I would like for us to be friends. I have no quarrel with you."

And those simple words made more sense than anything else Harry could have expected. He took a step back, right hand fisted over his heart and he copied the bow, somewhat clumsily that he'd seen Bahn give. "The House of...Nott, has no...quarrel with yours. I offer the same hospitality and goodwill that you've given me." He licked his lips, straightening up. "To you and yours?"

Bahn greeted him with a wide smile, that cast a near angelic smile on that pale face. "I thank you kindly." A flicker of ancient magic swirled up again.

This time, Harry watched in awe as it swirled around the elf and then sank into him with a faint golden shimmer. "...that's-?" He prompted.

"Ancient magic. Old magic." Bahn shrugged. "One our talents." He winked. "No matter what anyone tells you, it is us, Submissives that hold the power in this world." The smile on his face turned to a wicked smirk. "And I am sorry to have messed up your evening so. I know you had more important things planned, I can scent it. I would never have intruded, had I known. I am sure the messier floors would have been of little consequence, but as I have interrupted, I do hope you'll allow me to make amends with this little gesture. I'll be sure to take Ilsa with me, when I leave, so please do not interfere when I convince her, would you?"

"Er," Harry felt himself blushing. "You're not—we-" He gave up.

Bahn snickered. "You cannot deny something that is so obvious." He explained. "And it is nothing to be ashamed of. This stew is a special elfin recipe. I hope you enjoy it again in the future. It is called the Stew of Friendship. It encourages warmth when shared among friends and strangers, to
make journeys and interactions smoother." The oven chimed and the blond head snapped towards it. "ah, there we go." He checked the rolls and smiled.

And Harry found himself smiling right along with him. "…Bahn?"

"Hmm?"

"…thanks."

"Say nothing of it."

In spite of his earlier temper, Bahn had considerably mellowed by the time dinner had finished. He'd effectively barred Theo, Charlie and Ilsa from the kitchen, so the three mates were seated restlessly outside in the dining room. They'd gone about finishing up the cleaning and preparations of the guesthouse, then settled down for the evening meal, or rather, tried to.

They all started when the kitchen door had finally burst open and Harry came out first, balancing a careful tray with a breadbasket and a tray of smoked meats, cheeses and grilled fruit. Bahn followed him out, directing his armful with waves of his wand. He surveyed the table and then murmured something to Harry, before waving his wand to bring out the floating serving dishes and necessary utensils.

The table was filled in short order and Bahn seated himself at the end of the table, while Harry took the other side. A table seating six, Ilsa sat beside Theo and next to Bahn, while Charlie took the left side of Harry, opposite of Theo.

Theo and Ilsa immediately clasped hands and held them up over the table. Bahn taking Ilsa's hand, as Charlie and Harry hurriedly did the same.

"For that which we are about to eat, we give thanks." Bahn murmured, head bowed. "Shoksaneh." Twin murmurs of the salutation came from Ilsa and Theo, before they relaxed, ready to partake in the meal.

Harry looked to his Alpha, expectantly.

Theo blinked. "What…? Oh. Right. Er, we do that." He shrugged. "You've seen me do it before."

Harry shrugged. "…right, but not with that much ceremony? It's simply a good practice. We should be more thankful for many things in this lifetime." He reached for the stew and dished out a portion for Harry, then Charlie, before a sheepish grin showed on his face. "…sorry."

Charlie chuckled, taking the dish from him. "I didn't know your arms were that long." He teased. He added more stew to his bowl and then selected another dish to help himself. "What is this, anyway? It doesn't smell familiar…"

And so a general conversation started up, innocent and polite in a way that only old strangers and new friends could be. Harry understood, belatedly, what Bahn had meant when he asked him not to interfere between him and Ilsa. Their relationship was evidently strained, but still Ilsa seemed to be struggling even more than Theo, in curbing the instincts that demanded she look after her present Submissive.

Harry watched as she finally gave in and fixed a simple sandwich out of the meats and cheeses and deposited it in Bahn's bread plate. The elfin Submissive didn't miss a beat, as he simply picked it up, took a bite and continued on eating and talking, as if nothing had happened. This had Harry
wondering for a moment, as he filled his mouth, with a roll of his eyes when Theo nudged him.

He’d noticed that Theo was careful in prompting him to eat, but still, that he always made some sort of excuse to find a way to add more food to his plate or to feed him something directly. It was how they often ended up bloodsharing, as Harry wasn't exactly keen on being stuffed to the gills for no real reason other than Theo's Alpha worries. Since some of the feeding sessions had ended up with both of them in bed, Harry was hard-pressed to complain.

The very remembrance of that, made him squirm faintly. His earlier feelings and the combined itch to simply touch and lick every inch of his mates was now returning in full force and it was making him antsy. Theo and Charlie seemed to be having some weird reaction of their own as they were brushing hands nearly every moment that they could, and Harry had to confine his own hands to his own plate. He couldn't complain as all their feet were tangled together under the table, but he knew if he allowed himself to start touching, he likely wouldn't stop, regardless of their present company.

He really hoped Bahn could make good on his promise to take Ilsa with him—and to leave!

He wanted his mates and he wanted them alone!

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CHARACTER SNIPPET : LUNA LOVEGOOD : WIZARDING WORLD

Luna Lovegood tumbled out of the Floo and into the living room of her home. She skipped towards the table at the far corner that usually held spare floo powder. She lifted the pot and balanced it on one hip, slipping her wand out from behind her ear and tapping it to the wooden surface of the chair. She murmured the words that made charcoal writing appear on the grained surface.

It was simple and to the point. Her father had left and would be gone for quite some time. He felt a disturbance and knew that something bad would happen. He left his love and an emergency pack for her, as well as a warning to be careful and to run. It was the final line that said to 'run' that actually registered. The blonde-haired witch banished the message away and then replaced the jar of floo powder.

She cast a careful, cursory look around the house. Everything seemed mostly in place, which meant that her father had likely only stopped in the house long enough to leave the message before hurrying on his way.

The fact that he'd taken the time to leave a message was appreciated, but it also worried her to realize that it would be the only reason that he had stopped. Something quite serious was afoot and she was not sure that she liked it very much at all.

Luna pursed her lips together and glided on through the house. She stuck her head in her bedroom and looked around, seeing and liking what she saw, but also realizing that she'd have to things as they were. She found her father's room and then looked in the secret compartment in the old-fashioned wardrobe for the emergency pack.

Lugging the pack to her room, she rooted through her things for clean underwear and unmentionables, then a change of jewelry and her field journal, along with a seven-year, self-inking quill. She tucked them into her pack, a nicely oiled dragon-hide knapsack. She dug out her travel gear, sturdy boots and trousers and a blouse. She found her forest green adventuring robes and slipped them on over the unconventional outfit. They weren't her usual style, but they would work for now.
She needed to be able to move quickly and without incident. She snatched up the living comb from her dresser top, one that her mother had often used. She shook the shell until the limp strands of green fell out, then pressed it to the back of skull.

_Braid. Braid. Braid._ She thought carefully. _Something to keep out of my face. Important. Braid._

The odd creature quivered in her hand for a moment and then the limp strands began to twine through her fine, blonde hair. It immediately took charge when she finally released it and then twined through the strands, creating a neat plait of hair and twisting it up around itself.

Luna surveyed the result in a chunk of old mirror. It would work for now. She stopped by the kitchen again, this time for water and a snack. She mixed the water in with henna powder and painted her hands, one at time, using a drying spell to hurry up the process, before washing them out in turn.

The result was elegantly scripted scrolls that spanned her hands, wrists and a little further up. The protective symbols and signs would grant her extra protection while traveling and it would also allow her passage through certain places. The Fae were protective of her own and she was thankful to her mother for teaching her such things. She had hoped the day would not come when she would have to use it, but at least she knew how.

With a final look around, Luna emptied the bowl of fresh fruit into her food sack—silently thanking her father for the kind gesture—and then hurried for the front door.

She stopped, turning around and heading for the backdoor instead. She stopped on the worn mat and pricked her finger, invoking the blood wards that protected their home. Her father hadn't renewed them in the event that there were people tracking his blood signature. People that wouldn't know to track her sign or her signature.

Luna waited until she felt the protection take hold on their modest home and then she skipped forward. She reached out with one hand and snatched a flower blossom from the overhanging tree. She touched her still bleeding wound to the perfect white petal and then kissed the other side of it.

She let the scrap of white float off and smiled. _Tell the Queen, I am coming…_

Chapter End Notes

A/N: To clarify, Neville and Augusta are Dryads. Lavender is Succubus. Dean is a rare African creature, he has native magic, which makes him compatible with Seamus. Luna is Fae. (Light Fae, to be exact).

Thank you for the well wishes for my Aunt, they moved her to a third hospital last week and things dipped down quite seriously again. She is recovering very slowly right now, and is doing a little bit better this week. They don't have her on a breathing machine, so this is good news. I hope to visit her sometime soon. It has been quite a difficult experience these past few weeks. I appreciate the kind words and patience in regards to this fic and the RL craziness. Thank you!

And Thank you for reading and letting me know what you think! I apologize if this is
more angsty than usual. Writing is my therapy right now and I'm not exactly in happy-hyperness.
A Sixteen Year Gap

Chapter Notes

See first chapter for disclaimers/warnings/summaries. Read A/N at the bottom, please and thank you!

RECAP: Theo, Harry and Charlie leave the clinic after Theo signs over his Alpha right to Quinn so he can take care of the business of revenge over Harry's Blood Seal. Meanwhile, the triad travels to the guesthouse that Ilsa promised them. At the guesthouse, Harry runs into Bahn Deveraine, Bhindi’s twin brother and the other Submissive in the Deveraine Circle. Bahn is happy to befriend Harry and instinctively takes the younger dragel under his wing. Ilsa turns up and things become strained when Bahn invites Ilsa to stay for dinner. Meanwhile, the others have met up with Dryad Augusta Longbottom and are warmly welcomed in. Luna receives a hidden message from her father and decides to get moving, sending a message ahead to her Fairy Queen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEVARAH: ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE: DEVERAINE PROPERTY

"...dinner was lovely, thank you, Bahn." Theo positioned his utensils properly across the surface of his soup plate. It had been an exquisite meal, even if only made so by the fact that Bahn had served dishes made with otherworldly expertise from his native Elven realms. It was both a gesture of goodwill and a blatant show of skill to reinforce the recent display of Submissive Power. Bahn's subtlety was very subtle in terms that he'd simply meant to state that his pregnant status did not make him anything less than what he projected himself to be.

Theo had graciously acknowledged that with his verbal appreciation. He folded his napkin in his lap and lightly dropped it on the center of his plate. As a partial host—and he was being careful, still, not to step on Bahn's toes—he knew an after dinner tea would be wonderful. However, as an Alpha, he'd have to have been rather hard pressed to miss the rising tension in the room.

On Harry's side—his Submissive burned with muted desire under the circumstances, and the faint signs of fidgeting and squirming, only served to fuel Theo's own natural instincts to have both of his mates as soon as physically possible. He wanted to smuggle them away to shadowed privacy and feast himself entirely on all they had to offer. Alternately, his dominant dragel side simmered beneath the surface with the primal urge to stake his claim on each of them. It was enough to drive any well-bonded dragel to the limits of their patience, but Theo found himself struggling as he searched for a way to politely ask his Oretta to amuse herself elsewhere for the night. Normally, he could bluntly speak his mind and with very little regard to how he phrased his request—as they did have an understanding between them. It was only the apparent unease and distrust between Bahn and his mentor, that stayed his tongue.

On Bahn's side, the very fact that he was acting as if nothing had really changed between them, seemed to key up Ilsa even more. He didn't refute any of her instinctive urges, such as adding food to his plate, occasionally touching his sleeve and refilling his drinking glass if he so much as took three sips from it. Theo could tell it bothered her, as she'd sat stiffly and spoken minimally through
the entire meal. He knew she was trying to work out why the sudden protective urges had become so insistent. He was mildly sorry for her, understanding that her dragel would sense that Bahn was pregnant and thus want to smother him in any way allowed, while her rational side could not understand her own instinctive urges in relation to his apparently fine, physical state. Theo swallowed back a blossoming sigh, knowing that there were three reasons exactly for any dragel mate to hover over their Submissive. One, pregnancy, two, severe injury and three, the Alpha's orders. Judging from Ilsa's face, she was mentally turning the list of reasons over and over in her head, attempting to puzzle them out. Theo had a feeling she would be saying quite a bit the moment the first opportunity was afforded to her—regardless of whether she had an audience or not.

Theo was returned to the present by the sound of Bahn's light, lilting voice in answer. He made himself smile, hoping that his musings hadn't shown on his face for the split-second of inattention.

"...you're quite welcome, Theodore. Harry helped by the way, do thank him. We worked wonderfully together. I must admit that I am impressed, he's quite handy in the kitchen. Quite a difference from what I am used to. I am very glad to be afforded the opportunity to meet him. I am also sure you and yours will be able to enjoy this meal again in the future, as he is a very fast learner."

Theo's eyebrows arched upwards and his appreciative gaze flickered away from Bahn to rest on his own delightful Submissive. The golden eyes darkened with the first obvious hints of lust, a flicker of possessiveness filtering away from him and through the mated bond between them. Theo saw his interest received in the sudden flush of redness that colored Harry's cheeks, those green eyes flashing at him in a mixture of annoyance, embarrassment and appreciation rolled into one. Theo swallowed the smile that threatened to break free, he would have so much fun with this bond in the future to come.

Harry squirmed beside him, before one slender foot traced out one of Theo's legs and delivered a meaningful kick. It only served to make Charlie's smiling lips twitch into something more of a heated smirk when he turned his attention to the near silent battle of wills taking place mere inches away from him.

"I hope that was for Theo," He murmured, softly. "Because I can't think what I could've have done to deserve it."

Harry's feet immediately retreated from the odd tangle beneath the table and he sent a warning glower at both of his lovers, trying and failing to keep from feeling slightly flattered at the thought that apparently both of them didn't mind if the evening was to end on pleasurably loud notes that centered around him. He'd be a liar of he dared say that he wasn't interested, in spite of the temporary obstacles of having two guests in their new home. Harry's attention was diverted as he felt the faintest spike of earthen element tremor and quiver in the air. He shot a glance at Theo, only to catch his Alpha's worried gaze, the lust retreating from those darkened eyes to lighten to the hue of pure gold that radiated worry as they darted between Bahn and Ilsa.

Ilsa stiffened beside them both, her golden eyes darkening from bright yellow to a rich hazel hue. Her hands curled around her utensils, the fingernails beginning to morph into clawed tips.

"It is really very good." Charlie chimed in. His rich blue eyes sparkled in appreciation. It was a reminder that burned dully in the back of his mind, dredging up memories that he firmly pushed away for the time being. Mealtimes at The Burrow had always been chaotic, frantic and loud—but they had been wonderful, bittersweet times just the same. Sibling squabbles living and dying over his Mum's famous cooking, prank wars brought to an end when threatened with the possibility of no dessert. For one fleeting moment, he allowed himself to worry for his siblings and how they
were faring. "I've never eaten something like this before and I have traveled quite a bit. It makes me wonder what else you could have whipped up in there."

"Ah, thank you then." Bahn blushed quite prettily under the praise, the faintest of pink dusting his white features, the aristocratic face seeming more ethereal in that moment than ever before. It was easy to see how his looks alone would have attracted dozens of potential suitors. "I do hope that I can continue to live up to such grand expectations." And here, he turned his pale-eyed gaze to Harry, with the faintest of twinkle at the corners of them, a hidden signal between the two.

"Dessert!" Harry popped up from his seat, his face flushed, his hands straight at his sides as he caught the signal and took the out that it granted. "We nearly forgot dessert. We'll be right back." He made a beeline for the kitchen, before any of the others could follow. "Bahn?"

Bahn coughed delicately into his napkin and rose from the chair with the grace that seemed to be blanketed around him, a product of years and ingrained elegance. "You really shouldn't tease him, you know." He winked at the table's occupants and glided towards the kitchen door. "Harry, my dearest…" his voice and figure disappeared from view.

"Breathe, Harry." Bahn advised, shutting the door behind them both and throwing up his own wards.

It was nearly the same sort of reflex action that Theo had, Harry noted. He wondered what had happened to make the elf-dragel so wary. He wouldn't pry, but he hoped it was nothing serious—then again, perhaps he could ask Theo later. There was something in him that made him loathe to trouble the pale-haired Submissive, who seemed happily content to hover beside him, offering friendship and subtle mothering in the same instance.

"You really need to take them both in hand you know, or they will smother you later on." Bahn warned as he came to stand beside him, amusement coloring his voice. "and eat as much as you can now, for I doubt they will be stopping for more than a snack break once they have their claws in you."

Harry stood at the kitchen sink, his head already under the tap, cold water flowing over him. "You put something in that stew!" He accused, his scowl made less fearsome by the fact that he was, effectively half-drowning himself in icy water from the tap to keep the urge to jump his mates at bay. He shivered, faintly, at the sudden flash of coldness.

The elf-dragel sighed and padded over, snagging a clean kitchen towel as he went. "There was nothing in the stew, that is entirely your own instincts and your inner dragel playing off what your bonded are offering you." He sighed, reaching out to tug on Harry's shoulders. "That's enough. Stop it. You're merely embarrassed when there's nothing to be embarrassed about." Bahn snorted. "We'd be on equal terms if my Delani was here, she does not care whether we have an audience or not, so as long as we're both on the same page. Towel?"

Harry took the towel, blindly, straightening up, his head somewhat clearer than it had been a moment ago. He swabbed his face and then scrubbed the towel at his hair, turning to give the elf a piece of his mind. "I doubt that your mates would:"

"Bonded." Bahn corrected, almost at once.

"What?"

"Only wizard-born that don't know any better use the plebian term of 'mate.'" Pale grey-white eyes
gave a lovely roll. "We prefer Bonded. Ones you are bound to are your bonded, ones you are interested in are your Intended. It's really much easier that way, not to mention more dignified in polite company." Bahn lifted his face upward with theatrical air.

Harry found himself fighting a bubble of laughter. "That's…thanks." He thought it over carefully. "So both Theo and Charlie are my…bonded?"

"Of course and the moment you marry them in a formal ceremony, you can call them your husbands, spouses or whatever you like. I prefer to keep the title of Bonded, but it really is up to you and what works best for your circle." The last word hitched and Bahn winced, one pale, long-fingered hand skittering over his stomach where the noticeable bump was concealed by magic.

"Bahn?" Harry stepped forward at once, brows drawing together. He hadn't seen anything happen.

"It's fine. Nothing to worry over." The elf-dragel took a shuddery breath. "Well, maybe a little nothing to worry about."

"Bahn!" Harry lurched forward as Bahn doubled over once more, clutching his stomach. "What's happening? Theo-!" He began to call, only to have one of Bahn's hands dart out and cover his mouth, in spite of the awkward positioning.

"No. Don't. If you call them now, I might not be so…forgiving." The elf winced again. "Instinct and all that, you know. Ach…I'd forgotten how painful this could be…then again, the last time, there wasn't any reason to know—ugh." He winced, and dropped the hand from Harry's mouth, settling it on his stomach instead.

"But Bahn-!"

"Ow…shh." The older Submissive hissed. He lowered himself carefully to his knees and leaned forward his arms wrapped around his upper shoulders, a painful grimace registering on his face. "Don't…call them…" He clenched his jaw tightly, a tiny sound of pain escaping. "This is fine, it is normal. I was expecting it—perhaps not quite this soon, but I was expecting it. Everything is fine. Just please, help me. Do exactly as I say." He coughed and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, battling the sensations within. "…wards, Harry. Can you cast wards?"

Harry gaped at him for a moment. Half of him wanted to listen and the other half shouted at him to find Theo and drag his Alpha in here to fix things as he had when Bahn's first attack had come about. "But you're—I shouldn't-"

"Ilisa can't come in here. Do you hear me? You can't let her come in here!" Eyes snapped open, wildness showing in their pale depths as Bahn reached out again, grabbing Harry's arm, the fingers-turning-claws digging into the robe's sleeves. "Please, Harry! Not if you want me to survive this and I beg of you—cast them. NOW!"

The brunet hesitated, a flicker of the golden magic surging through him, a stab of golden-white, proof of Bahn's efforts. The elf-dragel was very serious. Harry bit his lip, but reached for his wand. This part did feel right to him and he'd learned years before to listen when this rare feeling settled over him. Whatever it was that compelled Bahn to ask this of him, Harry would grant it to the best of his present ability. The new magic thrumming through his veins would be enough for him to cast a simple ward and a more complicated one, maybe. He focused for a moment and then threw the magic forth with a single breath and ordered mind. He felt it respond to his touch, singing happily and doing his bidding without complaint. He then dropped to his knees beside, Bahn, hands hovering uncertainly. "There. It's done. I did it. Wards up. Now what? What's happening? Are you alright? How can I help?"
"...No...no, Harry, I'm not alright...and I won't be for some time." He gave a pained smile. "I don't think I could explain, save to say...that...Ow. Ow. Ow." Bahn pressed his lips tightly together and whimpered.

Harry twitched, muted feelings of panic settling somewhere in the back of his mind. His mind screamed at him to do something, while the other half of him demanded that he stay put and not leave Bahn's side. "Can I bring you something? What do you need? Tell me what to do!"

"Time." Bahn forced the word out, his hand grasping and releasing on Harry's arm. "Just need time...and a silencing spell." He took a ragged breath. "Cast it. On me. I'll likely be unable to hold my own."

"What?"

"Silencing spell on me. If she hears me, any ward you have up won't hold up against a Gheyo's rage. It's a pure kind of magic. They'll crumble, even if you, a Submissive, did cast it. That's the way our world works."

"...I don't understand."

"You don't have to. But please..." Bahn coughed and then choked, panic showing in his pale-white-grey eyes. "You can help me, if you do this."

Almost as if in a trance, Harry found himself casting a silencio over the pained Submissive. He was surprised to see Bahn relax almost at once, the moment the spell settled over him. He watched in horrified fascination as Bahn collapsed to the floor, writhing in silent agony, tears streaming down his nearly child-like face as colorful wisps of pink, blue and green energy began to circle around his swollen belly now quite visible, with the disillusionment charms having worn off. The elf rested a hand against his stomach and whispered words that brought about a beautiful, white-gold magic that surrounded him from head to toe.

Harry watched as the glow grew brighter and Bahn lay limply in its cradle. Soon, the white-gold was joined by a different set, these centered solely around the Submissive's midsection. The colorful strands were meshed together, overlapping and as time passed, they began to separate, until there was a single blue meshed around the pink, both encircled by the green. The entire process seemed to happen in fast-forward, taking place in the space of mere minutes.

Harry felt his breath catch in his throat, his hands trembling beside him. He understood that something wonderful and incredibly private was happening before him, but he had no time to even process it, as Bahn's hand on his arm tightened once more. With some effort, the elf, now even paler than before, accepted help in sitting up, braced against the lower cabinets.

At that, Harry sprang to his feet, extracting his arm to move freely. He found a glass, filling it with water from the tap. He offered it to the sweaty-faced Bahn, who screwed up his nose in protest, but downed the clear liquid anyway, agreeing to a second glass and then a piece of jerky found from the groceries clustered on the island in the kitchen. Bahn nibbled the piece of dried meat from Harry's shaking hands.

After a few moments of silence, the brunet couldn't take it any longer. "What just happened here?" He demanded.

Bahn managed a wan smile that made him seem more like himself again. "Twins." He said simply.

"...what?"
"I am elfin, before I was dragel." The blond sighed. "And I am cursed. It is why I have had my sister carry all of my children, up to now and what few I have…they are precious to me. The twins…I wasn't sure it would be successful this time, but I suppose I was lucky. The twins separated."

"I don't understand." Harry felt himself falter as he dropped to his knees beside the newly complicated Submissive. "What do you mean?"

"…a cursed twin, will always carry twins." Bahn said, simply. "Elfin twins are different, they are not like your regular kind of twins and you are not elfin. I cannot explain it to you, suffice it to say that we are two halves of a whole, if that helps." He took a shaky breath. "These…are twins," He rested a hand gently on his rounded stomach. "I am sure you saw their colors, they were so bright. They will be wonderful. I intend to carry them to term. They are generally one, until their second parent is present, then they separate. Dragel children are products of love, magic and harmony. We cherish them all."

Harry frowned. He still didn't really understand, but it seemed like his friend was unlikely to elaborate further than that, as Bahn leaned back, bracing his head against the wooden cabinets. "…do you need anything else?" He was now feeling the urge to hover and couldn't decide if it was just his protective instinct wanting to make sure his new friend was alright or if his dragel was trying to tell him something.

"Nothing that I can ask of you, I'm afraid." Bahn smiled, the expression bittersweet and beautiful. "Shall we go? I am sure we took far more time doing this than you think we did."

"Go?" Harry repeated, incredulously. The rest of him caught up to that sentence as he realized the implication behind Bahn's words. If they'd 'disappeared' to find dessert and taken longer than necessary there were one of two possible outcomes. Theo had calmed Ilsa down and they would all play nicely for another few, strained hours or Theo had not calmed Ilsa down and all three of the dominant-instinctive dragels would be likely to break the door down. He shuddered. He wasn't sure which option was worse.

"Yes. Now. If we wait any longer, they're liable to be unable to maintain what little control they've shown thus far."

"Control?" Harry found himself repeating as he moved forward to help the stubborn elf. He watched as Bahn began to cast spells to set his hair and clothes to rights as if nothing had ever happened.

"Thank you." Bahn said, calmly. "Yes. Control. As in one reason I am hiding my signature at the moment, has to do with my lovely Alpha and her last promise of exactly what kind of trouble I would be in, if I managed to outwit my Pareya."

"Big trouble?" Harry sympathized.

Bahn chuckled. "Nothing I cannot handle, though I will say that it won't be very pleasant." But there was the faintest hint of laughter in his voice, as his temperament seemed to have already recovered. "Which, by the way, leads me to remind you of our pact. Please do not think that I offered the friendship of my house, lightly. It may seems so, in hindsight, but I meant it in all true sincerity."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I did not swear friendship between us solely so I would have you beside me in case of
"I am truly honored to make your acquaintance and I shall speak to Delani of bringing our circles together for dinner or some such outing. Must mention it to Theo. I will see that it happens soon." He winced, straightening. "I must also ask you to remember your promise. Please do not interfere between myself and Ilsa."

"What happened between you two?"

"Something that it is not in my place to say." Bahn smiled thinly. "Correction, I could explain, but it is private and I would wish to keep her matters her own. I will only say that it was not my doing nor was the inciting situation something that I approved of. I am deeply disappointed and hurt, if you will, that she chose to handle the situation by running. She could have come to me. She did not."

Harry felt a protective surge at that. Ilsa had her flaws—and he was fairly certain he'd seen a good handful of them before he'd even seen her good point. For someone of Ilsa's caliber, to run from her own circle, Harry couldn't even begin to understand how she must have felt. He did remember how he'd felt though, when she'd gently snapped the dishtowel on his arm in the kitchen in the Snapes' quarters. It had completely inverted his perspective on the prickly warrior woman. If she'd felt the need to run, then she should have. It wasn't Bahn's place to judge her for that.

It must have shown on his face, for Bahn perked a pale brow at that. "You think I am wrong."

"Did you ever wonder why she didn't trust you?" He snapped.

Bahn blinked. After a moment, his trademark smile, the one that Harry had begun to associate with the slender dragel-elf, surfaced. It was a broad smile that held a hint of mystery and power and yet, was vaguely unsettling to see on such a small, angular face. "I did, actually." He said, softly. "Especially to know that whatever it is that happened, must have been something of terrible greatness, to spark in her the urge to flee. I knew Ilsa long before I considered her seriously for inclusion into our circle. She is a woman of great power and compassion. I can only imagine that what took place to wound her so deeply was something that should never have happened." He sighed. "However, I do have duties and other bonded to tend to. Ilsa and Aracle have always been close, the same for Greta. I assumed, incorrectly, that she was fine—until the years started to build."

"Years?" Harry frowned.

"I have not seen Ilsa for nearly sixteen years." Bahn said, quietly. "Which is three dueling seasons and one hunting season. She visits Aracle, Greta and the children, attends her work, but hasn't been seen in either official capacity or as one of the Deveraine Circle, in nearly twenty years." He frowned. "And she has been avoiding me." There was the faintest hint of steel beneath those words and Harry caught a glimpse of something deeper, darker and stronger in the pale, pretty Submissive mask. "I have sent messages, summons and short of forcefully 'porting her to my immediate presence, I have not spoken to her until today."

Harry blinked. He wouldn't call the strained conversation between Gheyo and Submissive as much of a conversation at all, but it did explain the weird tension and the odd words that seemed to have hidden and double meanings between them all. He frowned. "Maybe she doesn't want to."

"What do you know about Gheyos, Harry?" Bahn's voice was deceptively light, a near warning it seemed.

"…they fight."
Bahn chuckled, softly. "Oh, they fight. They most certainly fight in nearly everything that they do." He inspected his fingernails, fluxing his claws in and out on the surface. "And they are so much more than fighting machines. They are just like the rest of us, only with an extra layer of armor and perhaps, a battlelust like we experience bloodlust. They are powerful, prideful and possessive creatures. The fight is everything to them. They live it, breathe it and feel it. To die fighting, is an honor. Your mentor would have explained them to you in greater detail than I can allow at the moment."

His lips twitched. "We simply must meet for tea, if neither of our Circles can be bothered for a proper social gathering. I will only say that Gheyos are…physical. Very, physical. A slap upside the head means more to them than a carefully rehearsed monologue. A pinch is more than a glare and so forth. Gheyos are special in this way. It is also why Ilsa has Aracle and Greta. As a Gheyo, she has a need to submit and to be dominated. So she trades it off. She does not trust her Alphas, so she trusts Aracle—they have history between them and I see nothing wrong with this. The same for Greta. I suppose I am making a horrible mess of explaining this, suffice it to say that it is different. It will be nothing like your other itendeds nor your bonded. It is why I am here right now, it is why I have been through this" and here, Bahn gestured to his baby bump. "Please, do not hold it against me. I knew the space would do her some good, I simply didn't think she would make me chase her." He straightened the cuffs of his robes. "Ah, we have dallied long enough. We will most certainly be in for it, I do hope you are prepared."

"It?"

"Oh yes. Remember, please do not interfere. You do not truly know what has happened between us." Bahn took a deep breath, fixed a smile on his face and brought the wards down.

Harry had no chance to react.

The door to the kitchen burst open, showing Ilsa in her Halfling dragel glory with Theo and Charlie right behind her. The trio rushed into the kitchen, instincts running high and wings taking up a significant portion of the room.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Harry heard himself squawking as they were pounced upon.

Ilsa growled, loudly, her clawed hands reaching for Bahn, as Theo and Charlie both made to grab Harry.

They all froze when Bahn gave a loud, angry yowl, squaring off against all of them.

The pause was enough of a distraction for Harry. He hurried forward, making a successful grab for Theo and Charlie's robe collars. He yanked them to the side and pushed at their stronger arms, attempting to squish him in an odd sort of two-way hug. He could understand Bahn's words now—interference could be anything at this moment. "Hey. Hey. I'm alright. Stop it!" He snapped at both of them. "Calm down. I'm fine. Theo. Charlie. Stop it. I am fine. I am alright. Calm down."

"Not fine, Harry." Charlie rumbled, his blue eyes flickering with a hint of red in them, the fire element fighting within. "Not fine at all. You disappeared."

"What?" Harry sputtered, the shock surprising him enough that he stopped fighting the sandwiching embrace. "I did not. I was right here and-!" He stopped. He had thrown up his own magic, but it had been magic that was mixed with Bahn's. Bahn, who hadn't wanted Ilsa to know what was going on. Harry groaned. New friend or not, he dearly wanted to strangle the dragel-elf for that little bit of oversight, then again, he hadn't thought to ask, having been overwhelmed by concern and then worry.
"What kind of magic was that, treasure?" Theo hummed, his hackles not quite relaxing, but his claws shifting back to hands as his wings fluttered faintly. He held Harry to him, stretching his jaw for his fangs to come out. There was a faint thread of panic running through his Submissive and his Alpha instincts clamored at him to quiet and comfort Harry.

"It wasn't—oh." Harry blinked, dazed at the powerful, insistent aura swirling around and over him. A moment later, he sagged forward into Charlie's arms as those familiar fangs notched themselves in the mating mark on his shoulder. "No..." The protest came out as an almost whine. He didn't really want to protest because it felt so good, and he'd been craving this brand of reaffirmation. "Theo." He squirmed, feeling Charlie's scaled arms morphing back to their human state as they curled tighter around him. "Bahn!" He tried to explain, as an overwhelming feeling of panic began to wash over him. He was still worried for his fellow Submissive. "Something's wrong with him, we have to help. Earlier, he-!

Theo growled, lowly. His fangs still buried in his Submissive's neck. The feeling within was transmuted through the bond and affirmed through the strong bite.

"Theo!" Harry shuddered, fighting the instinctive urge to give in to the Alpha demanding his compliance. His mind was not on Theo, but on Bahn. The tall, pale and pregnant elf with more fire and surprises in him, than any single dragel that Harry had met, so far. "Stop!" He felt his own fangs surging out of his gums, and he growled, baring them in a display of defiance. "This is important!"

Theo merely growled back in answer, his lovely golden eyes a rich, dark shade of brown.

Harry huffed in frustration, turning his angry green gaze to Charlie. "Charlie!" He snapped, sifting through the humming bonds inside of him and seeking out the one that was twined of fire and fierceness—Charlie's bond. He drew on it sharply. "Charlie, I'll bite you if you don't-!"

His beta came to life, drawing Harry closer to him and appealing to their Alpha with an apologetic whine, and a hand gently nudging at the head, nestled in Harry's neck.

There was a pause and then Theo's fangs slid free, his head, straightening up, an angry look in his lovely face as he took in Charlie's taller form. He hissed in answer, reaching for Harry, who was now safely ensconced in Charlie's arms. Theo did not like this. He hadn't laid full claim to his beta yet and it was showing in the triumphant glitter of those blue-red eyes. Charlie was pleased that he'd managed to gain the approval of their Submissive and his dominant side was gloating at the apparent victory.

Harry resisted the urge to groan. It seemed that he was the only one currently not in the instinctive throes of primal urge. *Why do these things always happen to me?* He thought despairingly, but even as his thoughts turned dark, his mind was furiously working away. He craned his head to the side, trying to see what had happened with Ilsa and Bahn. His dragel side was worried and that was enough for Harry to be doubly worried, especially as he'd heard part of Bahn's story and witnessed snatches of Ilsa's explosive temper. He couldn't see it ending very well at all.

He didn't know what history was between the Gheyo and Submissive, but he hoped their initial relationship had been based off of good times and happy memories. He didn't want this meeting after so many years, to be an encounter that would end in sorrow. He'd seen a few glimpses where Ilsa had seemed pained by the current circumstance, while Bahn had seemed resigned and sorrowful. As if there were some gap that could not be bridged. Even with what Bahn had shared, there was so much more that he hadn't said, that Harry genuinely worried for them both.

"...don't touch me!" Bahn's angry voice rang out, with a very obvious ripple of magic, a wave of
white-gold.

It made them all freeze and Harry wriggled free when Charlie froze, surprised enough to released his hold on Harry to turn and see what had happened.

"Bahn?" Harry moved out of reach of his protesting mates, silencing them with an audible growl of his own. He was beginning to see what Bahn had said about taking them in hand before they smothered him. A little bit of smothering would be nice, but preferably in the privacy of their quarters and not in the middle of what appeared to be a near crisis of sorts. Harry moved in careful slow movements, aware that Ilsa's Halfing Dragel form was not something to ignore, as he moved closer to the other Submissive.

The elfin-dragel spat out a string of words in Elvish tongue.

To which Ilsa growled and snapped back a string of her own.

Harry blinked. He hadn't known that Ilsa spoke Elvish. He looked from one to the other, then turned back to frown at his mates, gesturing with his hands. Theo seemed to get the message, because a moment later, his Alpha stood beside him in his usual form, deliberately standing between Harry and Charlie. Harry rolled his eyes at that, but didn't comment. He'd let Theo have his Alpha moment, if it was that important. He'd handle that side of things later.

Bahn huffed and gestured with his hand. A ripple of magic showed again.

Ilsa physically recoiled as if struck. "...you're pregnant!" She stumbled back a few steps, her eyes riveted to his stomach. Her arched wings began to droop as if the fight had been sucked out of them. "Since…what? When? No…"

"Brilliant as always," Bahn drawled. "Which leads me to wonder, how stupid you can be at times!" He drew himself up to his full height. "And if you don't trust my word, then trust your own instincts as they obviously never have led you wrong!"

"But that's—it's—you couldn't have! You couldn't!" But the protest was weak, even as she stared at him, the open hostility had faded away to something along the lines of horror. "That was years ago, Bahn. Decades, surely I wasn't even worthy of-!"

"Spare me." He snapped. "You were more than worthy. Have I ever treated you as something less? I had no quarrel with you." He glowered at her. "I said as much, that never changed!"

"But-!"

"However, in light of recent events, I would like to change that. I am not simply angry at you, Ilsa. I am furious. How could you?"

"I-I-"

"You thought I was the same as my sister?" His eyes, furious and accusing drilled into her. "After all this time, after everything that you've known of me—and you knew me before she was ever in the picture. Even after all of that, you see us as the same? Sixteen years, you stubborn, foolish woman. Sixteen years of running wild on your own, leaving your children to my hand to raise, your father visiting our home every weekend in hopes of catching a glimpse of you and leaving a trail of-"

Her head snapped up defiantly, the golden eyes half-darkened to brown-black. "Leave my children out of this!"
"I would, if I had not been the one they cried on at night, the one they brought their shy smiles to and the one currently preparing them for their first Hunting Season!" The words rose in volume as Bahn continued on, his pale eyes darkening to rich, black-grey depths. "Was I so invisible? Such an oversight that I never occurred to you?"

"...I."

"You left! Not even a note, not even a whisper, nothing. You're lucky Delani was there. She brought your three to my bed and left them there. She wouldn't say a word. She couldn't. She didn't know what had happened. She had nothing to tell me, save to ask that I please do right by you." He snorted. "As if I would have done otherwise. You were mine—you are mine! You're very lucky…I had no reason to take them, you know. After all, you'd never asked. There was nothing that suggested I ought to look after them and not Bhindi." His hands clenched at his sides. "Sixteen years? Or is it longer? No, let's stick with the sixteen, I'll allow you those first four. More than enough time to hide away in your shadows and lick your wounds. I sent messages upon messages, summons, gifts, even and yet, you couldn't find the common courtesy to send a single reply? You knew fully well when you joined our misfit circle that there were things to be worked through. You knew this, and yet, the first instance you encounter a little problem—"

"It wasn't a little problem!" Ilsa shot back. She had folded back her wings by now, but her hands were clenched as tight as her Submissive's. It looked as if both were hanging on to the final threads of restraint. "There wasn't anything little about—!

"I wasn't finished speaking!" Bahn's icy voice sliced through her protest. "And you will wait until I am finished, before you speak, Gheyo…Ilsa. I am sorry I was not there to speak up on your behalf. I would have, had I been there. I am sorry that you did not think I was a suitable option for discussing your disagreement. I am sorry that I have apparently failed you in some way, because even though I have never held anything against you, never meant to hurt you in any way, I was still not an option when you left Nevarah." He paused for a breath. "Even when you were something to me…I was nothing to you."

Ilsa stared at him, her golden eyes flickering even darker.

"Sixteen years, Ilsa. I didn't even know what happened until nearly two months later, when Greta, of all people, walked into my room with Dahlia on her arm and asked for my permission to live in the Dueling Pits. She walked in and asked. And she wouldn't tell me why. She also asked if I could continue to look after the children as she might be absent for a little bit." His pale eyes burned with fire, a ripple of wind slashing through the kitchen. "A little bit. As if one ever spends less than ten years in the pits at a time. I hurried home, you know. I found that there were mates missing. Aracle, Ithycar, Bhindi and you." He smiled, thinly. "Imagine that. Two months later and nearly everyone else scattered about, because they are taking sides, never mind that no one knows what really happened. They're simply reacting, because what shouldn't be broken, appears to be torn down the center. Do you even have any idea what it's been like? What have I ever done to you? What did I do that was so terrible, you could not even come to me?" The pale fire in his eyes continued to burn, the pale white-golden glow of magic swirling angrily about him. "You couldn't even answer and now you have the nerve to be worried over me? The one you couldn't even be bothered to look at beyond our bonding night?" His lips curled back and he hissed. "You hypocrite!"

Shock registered plainly on Ilsa's face. Her lips moved, no sound coming from her mouth and she simply stared for a long moment. "I—that's not—you can't!" She stopped and took a deep breath, gathering her words together. "I don't, I didn't mean anything by that. Really, Bahn. I swear I didn't and I'm…sorry. That was childish of me…I suppose…I would have gone to you, but you wouldn't
have been able to do anything. It was just a...a silly fight. Childish, even."

"Liar." Bahn ground out. "You just interrupted me to tell me that it wasn't something little."

"Then why don't you ask that perfect sister of yours?" Ilsa shot back. "If you're so determined to be the missing piece of the puzzle, then why don't you talk to her? Ask her what she said or was that too much to even do on my behalf? How could I have known that you would have cared? You've never given any inclination that I was anything more than another blade to be used in-"

"I tried. I'm still trying." A hurt look registered on his face. "I have always cared. When have I ever treated you as anything less that one of my treasured, bonded? I am sorry if you think I am not doing enough, but I have tried. Bhindi won't breathe a word of what she said or did. And she is my sister, what would you have me to do her? Delani said she only noticed in the last minute, where she had to step in and tell you to take a walk." He took a breath. "She didn't send you away, you know. She's always reminding me of what she said. She thinks it's her fault you left, even though I told her it wasn't."

Ilsa half-snorted. "Of course not. How could it be anyone's fault but mine? I'm no one's concern and I was never anything to her anyway. I must be blind then, because I can't recall any specific moment where I've ever been more to you than-"

"Her?" Bahn frowned.

"If you're as smart as you believe you are, then figure that one out for yourself."

"I am not trying to pick a fight with you, Ilsa. I am trying to understand something that has been festering for over sixteen years and I will have my answers tonight!"

"Of course." Ilsa shot back, bitterly. "You need only demand it and your wish is my every waking desire. After all, I'm merely another pawn in your-"

He moved so quickly, there was simply a blur and then nothing. His hand flashed out so fast, there was no time for her to avoid it, but the slap threw her head back to the side. His eyes had shifted from the dark-blue-grey to a vivid, bright blue and the temperature in the room plummeted.

"Enough!" He stood toe to toe with her, magic rippling off of him in waves, his robes shredded as beautiful, silvery-gold-white wings burst forth. They were plain on the inside, but covered with shimmering, silver swirls on the outside that pulsed in time with the thrumming emotions in the kitchen. "Don't you dare speak of yourself that way." His voice was guttural and rough. "The woman I know could have caught my hand before I even moved." His eyes glittered. "I have stood back for sixteen years and let you be. Now is more than enough. If you think so little of me for demanding what is my right, then you may keep your belief. I will not take it from you, but I will not withdraw my claim either. We will sort this, whether you wish to do so or not. I will not have you running away from what you need and suffering in silence because of your bloody pride! There is no honor in this—none! If I cannot appeal to you as my mate, one who is treasured and precious to me, then I will do so as a warrior."

Her head bowed and a shudder ran through her. "...you don't understand." Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper. "You don't know the-"

"Then make me." He pleaded. "Show me." His hands came up to cup her face, one thumb smoothing gently over the pinked handprint on one cheek. He leaned forward to touch his lips to it, laving the mark gently with his tongue. A show of tenderness in the wake of his recent actions.

The older woman squeezed her eyes shut, another shudder rippling through her. Her body
tentatively reacting to the soothing, comforting touch that she had missed. The light sting faded, the pink fading back beneath the surface as if it had never been there. She took a shaky breath. Her magic cried out to mingle with his, acknowledging and craving the familiar touch.

He kissed the newly healed cheek. "Please, Ilsa. Am I really nothing to you?"

Her stricken face said more than, perhaps, her mouth would have and she reacted to that, pushing him away and moving backwards to place some distance between them. She forced herself to look at his face and not his eyes nor his wings. She couldn't afford to give into him like this. Not when she'd held out for so many years for this…”You can't solve this the way you're thinking you can."

"Then tell me what I can do to fix it."

"If I need to tell you, then this has all been pointless." A flicker of fire showed through, her darkened eyes burning black. "Nothing is the same anymore. This is not something that can be fixed." The final word came out as a growl. "And you'd best keep your distance."

"Or else what?" He shot back.

Unanswered questions hung in the air, the silence stretching and the tension growing.

Charlie had eventually brought himself under control, folding his wings back, coming to join Theo and Harry, worry showing on his tanned face. He rested a protective hand on each of his mates' shoulders, his beta instincts telling him that something important was happening now between the two dragels before them.

Theo stirred faintly at the touch. He looked between Bahn and Ilsa, sensing that there were words and actions that could not take place with an audience before them. His gaze flickered over his shoulder where a pie had been half-way sliced and smaller plates set up around it. He sighed, then shifted, curling one arm around each of his mates. Harry turned to look at him in confusion and Theo wanted to kiss those peachy lips, to ease the worry, if he could not erase it. Charlie looked down to him, with a perked brow, a silent question.

The golden-eyed Alpha merely offered a fanged smile. "...Temtrificus Portgas!" The rest of the destination, he shouted in his mind, knowing his magic would hear it. They needed to be away from this situation.

A wash of blue-white energy washed up and the portal whisked them away.

"Theo!" Harry's protest was first as the trio tumbled out onto the bedroom's thick, carpeted floor.

It was a lovely room, wide enough to easily house the three of them with a large, curtained, four-poster bed at the center of the far wall, colored with rich burgundy and black. There were no windows, but an en suite was hidden between two packed bookshelves and there were four chairs angled around a large fireplace, and two double-door wardrobes braced beside each other on the second room. Theo smiled, recognizing the room as one he knew from years before. It held good memories. He was glad it was mostly the way he remembered it.

Harry shot to his feet, having untangled himself faster than the others. "What did you do that for? We can't leave Bahn with-"

"With Ilsa?" Theo caught him before the brunet could reach the bedroom door. "Harry, calm down. Nothing is going to happen." He grunted when Harry resisted and the result ended with Harry shirtless and scowling, and him with Harry's shirt in one hand and robe in the other. He
stared at the items, comically for a moment. He hadn't known Harry was that flexible or creative.
"Harry!" Exasperation covered the momentary surprise.

"She could hurt him!"

"Ow." Came Charlie's quiet addition to the conversation. He sat up, gingerly poking at his head.
The unexpected transportation had caught him off guard. He'd expected apparition, not one of the
transportation portals and this had been the worst 'portal yet. He stifled a shudder, wondering what
Theo had cast wrong. It felt as if there had been cold, slimy things wrenching him apart and
throwing him out on the other side. "What happened there?"

Theo rolled his eyes, a golden hue beginning to return to its natural state. "You both fought the
transportation, so it spat you out for being disrespectful." He sighed. "I was the caster, so it had no
issue with me." He fingered his wand, slid up the left sleeve of his robes. "I'm sorry I couldn't give
you any warning." He frowned. "And you, Harry, you are not leaving this room. We can't interfere
down there. It's dangerous and we'd only be in the way. Ilsa wouldn't hurt anyone, not any of us or
Bahn. Trust me on this."

Harry scowled. "It's only dangerous if you leave them alone! You're not listening to me, you don't
know what's happened between them and-"

"You're right. I don't know what's happened between them, because it's none of my business. It is
not dangerous to leave them, it's dangerous for us to stay there. We'd be in close proximity to a
dragel with dominant instincts and a pregnant Submissive. That's a volatile combination. Even if
Oretta gave into her instincts and managed to restrain herself, it would be on the grounds that I'm
her mentored student. You and Charlie would have no such protections. Bahn can handle himself, I
know he'd have ways." He sighed. "And Harry, I am trying to understand you, but you're making it
hard. I'm completely missing the reason why you're so worried. Ilsa would never do anything to
hurt Bahn. In fact, I'm more worried about her than him, it looked like she was the one bearing the
larger half of the situation." Theo tensed, his words seemed to be having no effect as Harry was
still inching towards the door. The young Alpha hesitated, not really wanting to start an argument,
but having a feeling that if he wasn't very careful there might be some bruised pride and wounded
egos before the night was gone. Thoughts of his lovely, potentially passionate night had already
begun to slip through his fingers, but it didn't bother him the way he'd expected as he took in
Harry's legitimately worried face. He didn't know what to say to explain what he instinctively
knew.

"You don't know that!" Harry protested. His hands twitched, agitatedly, betraying his physical
distress as well.

Theo silently pushed a wave of calmness through their bond. "Yes…yes, I do, Harry. I know Ilsa
and she would never do anything to hurt Bahn or any of her lovers. She can't. She's dragel. It's in
her blood to protect them. The same is true for Bahn, he wouldn't have been able to touch her, if
she hadn't let him. They have a different dynamic in their Circle than others. I don't expect you to
understand it, Arielle—even I don't understand it, but dragels are different. I don't know how to
explain it to you beyond that."

Harry glowered at him. He respected Ilsa—a great deal, and he was really worried for Bahn. He
hadn't know Ilsa could look like that, nor had he realized that Bahn would react so defensively.
"She could still hurt him. She was angry enough to-!"

"Shh." Theo hushed. "She is his Gheyo and he is her Submissive. They are bonded. That is
everything between them." Theo raked a hand through his chocolate curls. "You're right that I don't
know what happened between them, I only know it was very serious. I do know that when Ilsa
joined the Deveraine Circle, Bahn was the Submissive that she pledged to. She refused Bhindi on the ground that she was not...inclined that way. They have a similar bond like you and I, between them. I know it seems like it was a bad idea to leave them alone together, but it's really best that way. Bahn can handle himself and honestly? I'm more worried for Ilsa."

"That's because she's your mentor!" Harry shot back. "You don't understand that-

"Is he just reacting because Bahn is a Submissive too?" Charlie perched on the edge of the bed. He'd listened to the exchange, unsure what he could offer, knowing even less than Harry of Circle politics and intercircle relationships. He hadn't felt particularly inclined to stay in the kitchen, as he'd had the distinct feeling that they'd be in the way. He was now worried about Harry and said brunet's reaction to the situation. He was also trying to fight back the little happy voice in his head that was cheering of how Harry had chosen him earlier.

"Most likely." Theo sighed. "Submissives are picky, but if they like one another, they usually become fast friends, to the point where they'll land themselves in situations like this, I suppose." He frowned. "Harry, did Bahn say that he wanted you down there? If he did, then I'm not stopping you, but if he didn't, you'll be in the way if you interrupt them right now." He said, firmly.

Charlie hummed at that, tugging his robes off and then his shirt, with a wince and a hiss.

"Charlie?" Theo's attention snapped to him at once.

"Shoulders." Was all the redhead said, now shirtless as well, his hands feeling carefully about his neck and shoulders, with stiff, careful movements.

Theo's attention immediately shifted to the newly exposed expanse of lovely, tanned skin. He was worried about Charlie, as new wings shouldn't be quite so troublesome, after all, Harry hadn't seemed to have any problems—then again, Theo reminded himself, Harry'd had to deal with some things like that on his own. He let out an approving hum, admiring his soon-to-be-claimed Beta, stifling a sigh when he heard Harry growl. Apparently their Submissive was not inclined to share their mutual interest at the moment.

Harry reached for the door, only to find that it would not open. "Theodore!" He whirled on the golden-eyed Slytherin.

Theo immediately held his hands up. He hadn't cast anything. "It wasn't me, Harry." He started forward, stopping when Harry shifted into a defensive posture. "Harry?"

"Open. The. Door." Harry's lovely emerald eyes shifted from their natural state to the cat-eyed pupils that the dragel-kind favored.

"Open. The. Door." Harry's lovely emerald eyes shifted from their natural state to the cat-eyed pupils that the dragel-kind favored.

"I didn't lock it." Theo repeated, but he slowly moved his wand just the same and cast an unlocking charm at it. The charm bounced back, repelled by whatever magic was currently locking them all in.

"Do something!" Harry hissed. "They shouldn't be-"

And suddenly, understanding dawned in those vivid golden eyes. Theo backed away instead, holding up his hands to show he meant no harm. He angled towards the fireplace in the bedroom, and gave a jerk of his head towards Charlie. "Want to lend a hand with the fireplace?"

"Hmm?" Charlie leaned to the side to see the fireplace better and then slid off and padded over. He lowered himself down on the thick, plush rug and then concentrated on his fingertips, willing his fire element to come forward. He snuck a glance at Theo who was now studying Harry with a
contemplative gaze. He sighed softly and then returned his attention to the task of lighting the fire. The room wasn’t really that cold, but then again, a nice fire would be lovely. Something inside of him warned him to stay out of the possible argument brewing between the two.

"...Harry?" Theo's voice was soft and coaxing. "Bahn and Ilsa are fine. They are both two very stubborn, strong-willed individuals. They used to spar with each other. I know Bahn is pregnant, but he would never do anything to harm his child and Ilsa would never let him reach a point where he could harm the babe either. They are adults, well into their decades, at least a century or so, I believe. They are responsible adults, they have their own way of handling things and we would only be in the way if we went down there right now." He repeated the words again, hoping they would come through.

"They could hurt each other, Theo." Harry turned sorrowful eyes towards his Alpha, the desperation showing through. "They were so angry..."

And Theo blurred forward, wrapping his arms around the newly unresisting Harry as the truth of the matter finally came out. "Oh, Harry." He breathed. "They couldn't. I swear to you, they won't. It's in their blood. They cannot. Right now, they simply care too much for each other and that caring is making everything out to be one big, open wound. They will be fine. Everything will work out in the end. I promise. They are angry, they're also hurting, but they will not physically harm each other."

"He hit her!" Harry burst out. He pushed against the arms holding him together as fragments of unwanted memories came bubbling to the surface. Moments where he'd suffered through situations that never should have happened. Blows and kicks that had come from hands and feet that should have cared for him. Pain of a different kind lanced through the skinny brunet as Harry trembled faintly in those strong, caring arms.

Theo winced at the pained look in Harry's expressive emerald eyes. He hugged the smaller figure even tighter to him, bending his head to mouth at the mating mark he'd bitten earlier. He willed all the calmness and reassurance he had, to pass through the bond between them and a moment later, Charlie's rumbling purr filled the room, as his rich blue eyes focused on them. He'd obviously caught some feedback from the bond through Harry. Theo straightened with one final lick to the mark. He kissed Harry's cheek with tender, soft lips. "I know he did, treasure, and I don't agree with that. But I do know that if Ilsa really didn't want him to hit her, she would have stopped him, Harry. You must trust me on this. She would have stopped him. Do you really think someone like her would let anyone do something they didn't want?"

"W-why would anyone want to-to be hit?"

And there was the other half of the truth of the matter. Theo sucked in a deep breath and slowly let it out. He nudged Harry forward, guiding him towards the fireplace and then to sit on Charlie's lap, now that the redhead had successfully started the fire. He pulled out a soft throw blanket from the small end table holding up a chess set and handed it over. He took his time, thinking of an answer.

"Gheyos," Theo said, finally. "They're the strangest type of dragel among us." He nudged Charlie, settling in beside his mates. The redhead quirked a smile, but lifted a blanket covered arm, allowing Theo to join their little huddle. "They are very tactile and physical. They push boundaries and expect to be pushed back. They understand a darker side of our world—of drageles—the side with power, control and pain. Things are different to them, always different. They understand force, respect and loyalty. It is one reason they can die easily for their circle, even if they were only bonded for a day. There are things that mean more to them, things that can't be explained." Theo sighed. "When you find a Gheyo for our circle, you will understand a little bit better."
"...I don't want to understand that." Harry swallowed, miserably, a hunted look in his eyes. "I don't want to hurt people that I care about." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Not people that I...love."

Theo pinched the bridge of his nose, willing himself to keep it together. That simple phrase tore at him in a way that reminded him of previous conversations with his mentor. Conversations where she'd warned him to never hurt Harry the way others had. She'd promised to kill him herself, should he ever venture down that path, against all odds and instinct. It was oddly reassuring. Theo swallowed. "Harry...what makes you think something is wrong?" He forced himself to remain calm as he heard Charlie's sharp intake of breath when Harry nearly curled in on himself, slowly making himself smaller, in the bigger wizard's lap.

"...always that way." Harry's voice was barely audible. "It's always that way. When they're angry. It hurts."

Theo could not stop himself from grabbing Harry right out from Charlie's arms. The redhead protested, but silenced himself when Theo shot a glare and a growl over Harry's messy head of hair. The dragon tamer shifted then, to awkwardly wrap his arms around them both, understanding a need to offer comfort in some way, as Theo drew Harry to him and squeezed tight.

"Harry. Harry. Shh. It's alright. Everything is alright." Theo felt his chest tighten when he heard Harry's breath hitch softly. "...and if it isn't, then it will be soon." He soothed.

Charlie quivered beside them and Theo tilted his head to look up. "Wings?" He mouthed.

Theo gave the faintest of a shrug and tugged on the edge of the blanket to pull it free from the broad, tanned shoulders. He wrapped it around Harry as Charlie called his beautiful, navy wings out.

With absolutely no hesitation, the gorgeous expanse of blue and red-scaled loveliness curved around them all, encasing them in a faint hollow of privacy, warmth and comfortable darkness.

Theo stretched out his fingers to brush gently against the warm, blue scales. Charlie hummed contentedly and leaned closer, his wings fluttering ever so faintly. His earlier unease faded somewhat as he was able to offer some part of himself to ease the distress of his Harry.

Harry's hands fisted tightly in those expensive robes and he tried to push himself closer. "...thank you...thank you...thank you..." the thanks spilled out like a mantra as he trembled.

Theo found himself wondering about the rest of the seals attached to their Harry. He was starting to wonder if there was any hint of Empathy in Harry's family ties. He didn't know much of the Potters or the Evans, which he had known to be a muggle family, but still—for Harry to be the dragel that he was, both parents would have had to be dragel.

An Empathy gift would explain the sudden ups and downs in Harry's emotional state—especially the most recent ones. A young wizard normally known for his strong character, steady opinions and powerful magic could only be thrown so badly off-kilter if there was something significantly upsetting.

A creature inheritance might be a suitable example, but Theo was instinctively inclined to think it was more than that. From what he'd known of Harry, the young man was grounded and dependable. His recent breakdowns had been just as odd and unnerving for Theo as it likely had been for Harry and it was really starting to worry him. From the shared look over Harry's head,
Theo knew that Charlie was thinking along the same lines as well.

Holding said wizard in his lap, Theo rubbed his hands up and down the slender back in reassuring strokes. Harry had gained some weight, but very little muscle in spite of the few weeks of training they'd done and Theo hoped to fatten him up just a touch. He forced his hands not to longer over the bony shoulders and focus instead on the faint shivers and tremors.

Ilsa had spoken plainly of Harry's shaded past in regards to abuse. Quinn had been properly outraged about things that Theo knew no average, well-adjusted individual would suffer from. Perhaps it was time he started to put his Slytherin upbringing to good use. It lit a fuse inside of him that Theo had long ago assumed he'd burned out. It was a sudden, burning need to protect everything that was his with every scrap of magic and his dying breath, if need be. The inner strength of a dragel Alpha.

The young Alpha pressed a kiss to the top of that head and silently whispered a prayer that he could reach inside the heart and soul of this beautiful individual. He beckoned to Charlie to lean closer, nearly sandwiching Harry between them. The movement and increased warmth caused Harry to burrow closer and then, the shaking stopped.

Charlie smiled, leaning forward to brush a kiss of his own to one pale cheek. Theo breathed a sigh of relief. They'd be fine. They'd all be just fine or so help him, by Arielle and Merlin, he'd rip the realms apart to find the ones who had dared hurt Harry to such an extent.

On second thought, they didn't need to be fine for him to do it anyway. Excuses were pointless.

In the shadows of the kitchen, Ilsa sat, slumped on the floor, braced in the corner of the wall, where she’d been cornered—caged by the natural architecture and Bahn's expertise. She'd forgotten this side of the pale, lithe Submissive that now perched in her lap, straddling her sprawled legs, carefully, his expressive eyes fixed on her face, judging her reactions by everything she wasn't showing on her face.

Her breath hitched faintly as he leaned forward, readjusting newly bared thighs as he guided one of her hands to rest on his clothed waist, testing her and himself in the same breath.

She didn't dare move, beautifully frozen as he slowly and carefully took charge in his own quiet way. He hadn't forced anything out of her, except perhaps, to demand that she listen. Her lips twitched faintly, realizing once more the very obvious difference between the Deveraine twins. Bhindi would often force the results she desired, while Bahn would simply demand them and then wait to see whether you'd agree with him. She had definitely forgotten that.

A decision that now rested its entire guilty weight upon her, a reality made even clearer when she registered the fact that Bahn hadn’t relaxed yet. He didn't rest his entire weight on her, a subconscious action that spoke more of what had been lost between them in regards to what was now being tentatively restored. He didn't trust her enough to support him.

He was often too quiet and too invisible, that save for the precious few interactions they’d had, it had never occurred to her that he was an option. There was plenty of blame to be shared between them, but then again, the lion's share was hers.

She'd never considered giving him the same courtesy that he'd obviously extended to her dozens of times over the past decade, at least. Her dark brown eyes shimmered, the last flecks of gold fading away entirely as her head fell back against the wall. This truth hurt. It ached and burned in a way she'd been trying so very hard to ignore.
His arms rested lightly on her shoulders, his hands curving around her neck and weaving through the soft tufts of two-toned hair at the nape of her neck. She pressed her lips together fighting back everything in her that threatened to break free. It had been so long, so very long since she'd had this sort of feeling. Of all the ways she'd expected the situation to turn out, she'd never imagined it would end with a lapful of half-naked, pregnant Submissive sensually insinuating himself into her lap, and spelling away her armor to the traditional Gheyo wear of an armless, cropped bustier and equally short cropped skirt. It left her feeling quite underdressed.

*The devious little bugger.* Ilsa thought, helplessly, amusement threatening to break out as her inner dragel sorted through the situation, apparently pleased with the outcome. Bahn was quick on his feet, she'd allow him that, for she hadn't even realized that he'd played her instincts until she found herself backed into the corner of the wall, holding his shredded leggings in one hand. She hadn't even known how they'd ended up fighting in the first place, but she did remember when her protective instincts had caught up to her. She'd seen it in his face when he'd witnessed her realization of his orchestration. The smirk on his face was good in the worst sort of ways and when he'd lunged forward, she'd dropped to the ground, instinctively, to brace him for an impact that never came.

From there, he'd pinned her arms to the side and begun the difficult task of snogging her senseless. By the time her thoughts had successfully scuttled away, he'd gently initiated a mindlink, slowly feeding images, emotions and memories through the link, coaxing their bond back to life, with whisper-light caresses of the mind and body. She shuddered, faintly, under his touch, feeling distinctly unworthy of the tenderness being lavished upon her.

Silken strands of white-gold spilled free from the braids woven on his head and brushed against her bare arms and shoulders. He bent his head to nibble along her jawline in soft, sucking motions, punctuated by the occasional lick to her cheek—the same cheek he'd slapped earlier. She felt her eyelids flutter in pleasure as happiness began to spiral up inside of her.

He then shifted his attentions to her neck, licking over the faintly salty skin. His mouth dipped lower in the hollow of her throat, hinting at his intent. She arched her neck backwards, making room. There was absolutely no reason to deny him, her own issues aside—and in truth, she hadn't even allowed Aracle or Greta this particular pleasure. Bahn hummed appreciatively as he selected a spot on her neck and nipped it gently, sucking in preparation for the bite to come.

She drew in a breath as he pressed a close-mouthed kiss to the reddened area. There was a moment of dread and anticipation mixed together, her mind trying to recall just how this specific pleasure felt.

Sharp fangs sank deeply into her neck, sparks of pain blossoming outwards. Bahn's soft lips worked gently, as he drank with care, one hand slipping up the front of her bustier to caress the mating mark on her left breast. Pleasure spiked through her at once, the pain muted to nearly nothing.

There was no comparison.

She panted softly, a moment later, when another powerful wave of pleasure rocked through her. His free hand was curved in her hair once more, the grip warning her to remain still, as he had not consented to allowing her to return the favor.

Several torturously sensual minutes later, his hand slackened in her hair and guided her head forward to his exposed neck. He fully intended for them to reaffirm their bond as best as they could without taking her directly on the kitchen floor.
The Gheyo was distinctly grateful for that particular consideration and she licked his neck in apology before calling out her fangs and notching them delicately into his soft neck. The taste of blood, rich, sweet and thick flooded her mouth at once, drawing a moan she couldn't hold back.

He chuckled, the sound muffled as he rocked his fangs inside her neck, extracting another delicious moment of exquisite, painful pleasure. The moment was private and sacred, the bloodsharing speaking that which was unspoken between them.

Bahn hummed as he gently disengaged, sliding his fangs free and licking at the reddened bite mark on her neck. It would heal within a few minutes. He rested his head on her shoulder, waiting for her to finish.

A few heartbeats later, she gave a final pull and withdrew, licking the wound clean and urging it to heal faster with a whisper of her magic. She had forgotten what a precious thing this was and it prompted a shiver inside and out.

Bahn smirked into her neck. "I can't believe you made me hit you." He whispered in her ear, turning his attentions to the neglected appendage.

She started, feeling that talented tongue laving the curve of her ear, before that sinfully hot mouth enveloped the entire lobe, teeth playing with the piercings, fangs teasing lightly. "Bahn-!"

"Shhh." He purred. He released that ear to nuzzle his cheek up and down on hers. "You should have stopped me." He nipped her ear in reprimand for it, then returned to sucking and nibbling, apparently enjoying himself.

"...didn't think you would."

He snorted, straightening. "And whatever gave you that idea, loveling?"

She peered up at him through heavy-lidded eyes, feeling another tendril of her magic ebbing away from her and curling towards the new swell of dragel, proof of the new life growing within her Submissive. "No idea."

He smirked, leaning forward again, hovering inches away, licking his lips with that wicked, pink tongue. "You have always been incredibly thick-headed." He bumped their noses together.

"However, I did solemnly swear that I would return you to your senses, regardless of necessary methods, no matter the situation, given the proper chance, a clause I believe you included in our bonding contract."

"You actually read it?"

"You didn't?" He shot back. "Of course I read it." He licked the tip of her nose and then kissed the corner of her left eye. "I also included the little note that went something to the effect of allowing you whatever time you deemed necessary...to the effect of five years."

"Then what took you so long?" She hated the way her voice shook at the end.

His thighs tightened, his weight settling fully on her. Serious blue-grey eyes locked onto her, until her own dark ones wearily opened to meet her. "I did try—three times in person—every five years. I brought the children with me in turns." That delectable mouth curved into a faintly disapproving frown. "You turned us away each time. They are not very happy with you."

"I visited them." Ilsa looked away. "...and they never said..."
"They didn't want visits." He caught her chin and gently turned her face back to him. "They wanted their mother—just like these will want you." He took her other hand, bringing it to rest on the swell of his stomach. "And they wouldn't say, you mean the world to them. Do you really think they'd risk losing you?"

"I didn't mean to…it just…" Ilsa licked her lips, her fingers trembling faintly over the taut fabric. "They're really mine?"

He bopped her on the head with one closed fist. "I worry sometimes that you've taken one too many hits in the arena. Yes. They're yours."

"But—all these years-?" The dark brown eyes began to bleed back to golden, shimmering, pleading showing clearly in them. If the magic sharing hadn't hinted to her at first, she wouldn't have believed him, except for she'd scented her own signature upon him the moment she'd walked into the same floor. Her magic's immediate reaction had been the icing on the cake.

"Of course all these years." He countered. He smiled, even though it trembled. "You are mine, even if it does take you several decades to realize it, the reality is unchanged."

Her hands fluttered, the one on his thigh stroking the bare skin, savoring the feel of it, while the other curved around the bump. Her magic reached out to him, being warmly received and caressed in return. Her head fell forward to rest on his shoulder, her lips pressing against the bared expanse of neck, offered to her. "They're really mine?"

"As if I couldn't tell the sire of my own children!" Bahn huffed. His arms fell from her shoulders and he crossed them over his chest.

She hid a smile in the hollow of his neck and drew him close to cuddle, his head tucked under her chin. "Sh. I'm sorry. I know. Of course you know. I only meant…I never though you or Bhindi would even-"

Bahn growled faintly. "Do not mention my sister when I am sitting half-naked in your lap." He squirmed lightly, to make his point, pale skin kissing tanned skin. Her grip tightened on him, her breathing skipping a breath or two.

"Bahn, we're in the kitchen of-"

"So?"

"Bahn!"

"Fine then. My room."

"NO!"

"No one should be there."

"Greta's."

"Greta's?" Bahn repeated, incredulously. He pulled back enough to survey her face. "Why?" He prompted.

"...you're too kind."

"Am not." He chuckled and uncrossed his arms, one to cup her cheek, the other to trace shapes on
her bared torso, teasing along the edge of her bustier. "However, if it is Greta you want, then Greta you shall have. I will watch."

Rich pink immediately flooded her cheeks. "That's not what I meant-!" She protested. The blush deepened. "And I-!"

Bahn laughed richly in her ear, pressing himself closer against her. "I know." He sighed, tugging gently on the shaggy tips of her hair. "The others will not mind you."

"Yes, they will!"

He pinched her midriff, a little harder than necessary. She twitched, faintly. He growled. "They will not."

"You don't-"

"Surely I can handle my own circle?" He twisted to look her straight in the eye, holding her gaze until she had to look away. He then looped his arms around her, in a traditional carry hold. "It seems I have just as much to make up for, as you do." He planted a wet kiss on one cheek, ignoring her theatrical wince. "Very well, to Greta's first."

She perked a brow. "Really?"

He yawned and snuggled closer. "Yes and don't use that ridiculous Ergen, I have a sensitive stomach, you know."

"Ah, of course." Ilsa waited a moment longer. Bahn didn't budge. "I suppose this is your way of informing me that I will be carrying you?"

Bahn merely sniffed in answer.

Ilsa opened her mouth and then shut it. She adjusted her hold on the pregnant Submissive and easily rose to her feet, the added weight accommodated as if it were nothing. "Anything else you desire, my precious?"

The sarcasm was entirely wasted on the nearly napping dragel-elf, for he only sighed in answer, with a mumbled "leggings…those were my favorites, you know."

"For home, I hope." Ilsa grumbled. "You shouldn't be out in public wearing those, are you trying to invite trouble?"

"Alloras." Bahn reminded her. He wriggled again.

She tightened her grip, instinctively. "Yes, yes, I know." She lightly threw her magic about the room, setting the kitchen to rights as if their confrontation hadn't left such an obvious mark. Satisfied with the results, she drew her wings out, positioning herself for the 'portal she was about to cast.

She was completely caught unawares when Bahn's looped arms tugged her head sideways and downwards to touch their lips together. Magic exploded and rippled between them, the Gheyo-Submissive Bond singing to life as Bahn offered and Ilsa accepted.

They parted, Bahn with a hint of tenderness and looking entirely too smug for his own good, Ilsa with a flicker of laughter in her golden eyes, the sadness lurking at the corners, no longer the center.
"Temprificus Alloras!"

Bahn smiled as the portal opened beneath them.

*Thank you, Harry, my friend.*

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**CHARACTER SNIPPET : AIDEN : HELLHOUND : ARYTHMOOR ESTATE : NEVARAH**

Aiden lounged on his bed amongst the silken, blood red sheets in his private rooms. Melacor was safely tucked against his side, atop the sheets, and the smaller hound-child snuggled even closer when he ran a reassuring hand across hunched shoulders. The lad twitched faintly in sleep, but relaxed at the soothing rumble of reassurance from above.

It brought a faint, bittersweet smile to Aiden's face. He'd listened as long as he could bear and then he'd used a touch of magic and his Alpha's voice to coax his aide to sleep. The boy had been working nonstop since he'd left, with snatches of sleep here and there. It angered him, somewhat, as he'd expected his betas to take better care of the boy.

His pack was restless, but they were generally good at heart. Enough so that he knew their lack of remedy for Melacor's present state was something he ought to look into. The present Hunting Season would calm the commotion significantly as his untethered Hounds would have the opportunity to take mates and consorts, thus quelling the troublesome aspect of their combative nature while preserving the natural instinct that allowed them to function as an extension of Death, herself.

He wondered exactly how much trouble Rasputin had caused in his absence. From the sound of things, the Lord had been busy, both in machinations and subtle manipulations. Aiden found himself wondering how many apologies he'd have to talk his way out of in the upcoming weeks.

It was a bad omen to be inviting trouble during the Nevarean Hunting Season, especially when it meant the additions of newcomers to their precious fold.

For the moment, at least, he had far more important and troubling things to deal with besides an unruly second-in-command and an unnecessary human consort. The hellhound sighed, wearily, his head nestled in the mounds of pillows, as his mind flickered through the necessary preparations.

He hoped that Niko had arrived, because he simply hadn't the patience to wait for her if she hadn't. Calling her early was something of a habit as he'd known the childlike Immortal long enough to know that her leash was long, but her travel methods questionable. Niko would arrive whenever she liked and not a moment sooner, unless she was bored.

He rather hoped that she was. Waiting on her to waltz on over was not something his frayed temper could handle. As for the Miss Hermione, herself, he couldn't feel anything wrong with the mortal witch through the crested mark that he'd bestowed upon her and thus reasoned that she was fine. He'd visit the house that held her in the morning. He wasn't in the mood to be wandering in there in the night—not when a good harvest was imminent and most certainly not when he'd left his pack untended for so long.

Making a mental note to run them to the ground for troubling him, Aiden settled in for a quick nap. He'd wake in a few hours and take his pack to task for what they had or hadn't done. He was sure he'd think of something. They certainly wouldn't complain.
Sleep came as he courted it and within minutes, he'd drifted off, curled protectively around Melacor. He'd deal with the rest of the realms when he woke.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Erm, this kind of turned into a monster chapter...I'm really sorry about that. Yeah. I hope everyone enjoyed it. :) (But don't get used to whopper 14k installments.) I hope that clears up some of the Ilsa and Bahn drama. We won't know what made Ilsa leave, but we do know that Bahn is willing to accept her back, issues and all and she's ready to be back. ;) I hope you enjoyed the little interlude and now as the two of them are out of the Guesthouse, our boys can get down to business. The threesome is next chapter, I am one third of the way through it. :) Harry's overemotional state at the moment is due to his Empathy gift making itself known—he was literally reliving Ilsa and Bahn's sorrow, regret and love for each other. Also, I debated quite a bit of having Bahn's "slap" in there, and I absolutely do not condone any kind of physical violence, etc in a relationship, but for fiction and story purposes, Ilsa is a Gheyo and is pretty much hardwired to pay attention to the physical cues that Bahn uses for her, (the pinch, tugging her hair, letting her carry him without spelling it out for her, etc). Harry will have his own set of issues to deal with when he takes on his first Gheyo into the circle as well.

Thank you all for the well wishes for my Aunty. I finally got the chance to visit her this past weekend. She cannot speak, as they are putting her back on the mask and tube again, because she can't breathe on her own. Her vitals are holding steady though, so this is good news. I truly appreciate the kind words and patience in regards to this fic and the RL craziness. Thank you!

I apologize if this isn't as Harry-centric as other chapters will be, but writing is my therapy right now and Ilsa insisted on her own scene.
RECAP: Theo, Harry and Charlie travels to Ilsa's guesthouse where Harry runs into Bahn Deveraine, Bhindi's twin brother and the other Submissive in the Deveraine Circle. Bahn befriends Harry and instinctively takes the younger dragel under his wing. Ilsa turns up and complicated things are finally straightened out between her and Bahn. Aiden returns to Nevarah and checks in with protege, Melacor, resolving to go and pick up Hermione soon. In the meantime, it's the big night at last...

NEVARAH : ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE : DEVERAINE PROPERTY

Eventually, Theo stirred, as his legs had gone to sleep and Harry's breathing had evened out, the younger man having fallen into a light sleep. He was loathe to disturb the younger man's rest and so, he was careful to keep his movements to a minimum, as he ran through the usual mental checklist. He'd dozed off at some point himself, but something had happened to wake him.

Harry was still curled up in his lap, peacefully asleep, while Charlie's head was pillowed on the side of Harry that he could reach, from the awkward jumble where they'd huddled together. It couldn't be comfortable, Theo mused to himself, but he reached out with one hand and gently stroked the rich red strands, marveling at the thick tresses and wondering how exactly a Dragon Tamer had managed to keep long hair in a career field where it certainly would've been a hindrance. His smile turned fond as he recognized the signs of Charlie's Fire element beginning to mix in, the red hair was no longer the same red hue all the way through, but now more pronounced with tones of light and dark scarlets and auburns.

That was good. Theo continued his light petting, when Charlie shifted to present his head at a better angle for the caresses. It seemed that both of his lovers enjoyed an affectionate touch—something he made sure to tuck away in the corner of his mind. He did not have any problems at all, with being a touch more physical.

His mind returned to the task at hand as something clanged below. Lightly throwing out his senses, Theo sifted through the varying wafts of magic filtering through the air to read what he could from
it. The guesthouse was secure, as it ought to be. There were no new signatures added to the mix, meaning that no newcomers had joined the private moment downstairs. Theo was mildly relieved at that, he thought Bahn and Ilsa could use the privacy. He rolled one shoulder back, keeping his other arm wrapped around Harry's bared shoulders. He frowned at the scattering of gooseflesh in the wake of the disturbed warmth. It prompted him to send a light tug down the bond to ensure that Harry was sleeping and cold, instead of locked in a nightmare of sorts. He was happy when it returned a positive feeling, albeit sluggishly. He pressed a kiss to the messy head of hair and then turned his neck to the side, cracking it audibly.

"Theo?" Charlie yawned and stretched, his muscles popping softly in tandem with the crackling from the embers in the fireplace. "Awake?" His wings had retreated and folded on their own, sometime in the passing hours. He hadn't even noticed, having fallen asleep, his neck sending messages of protest at the awkward angle in which he'd fallen asleep, pillowed on the warmth of Harry's bare torso.

"Never fell asleep?" Theo quipped. He found himself yawning a second later and contemplated whether he ought to shift Harry so he could move his legs. The combined weight of Harry and Charlie's upper half was not to be underestimated. Technically, it shouldn't have bothered him, but he was tired too and the lack of proper restful sleep could take its toll in various ways. Of course, he was loathe to disturb his sleeping armful, knowing that Harry needed rest, just as much, if not more, then the rest of them. "You alright?"

"Neck." Charlie managed a rueful grin as he gingerly sat upwards. Every single muscle in his body ached, his shoulders and neck uncomfortably sensitive. He winced, making tentative movements with his arms and head.

Theo shared a sympathetic smile. He knew that feeling all too well, a common occurrence when he'd fully come into his inheritance. It was nothing a good massage couldn't cure. A few mouthfuls of blood would also help, if Charlie didn't particularly mind it. "Did you bring the prescription oil from the clinic?"

"You had it." Charlie's brow furrowed. "No, wait. I think it's on the porch." He blushed, remembering that his first reaction upon entering the guesthouse had been to vault over the porch railing and head after Harry.

Theo chuckled. "Ah, so I did pick it up. It would have been…" He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. A moment later, the golden eyes opened and flashed. A small knapsack sized bundle materialized at the foot of the giant bed at the end of the room. "I'd be happy to help you work out the knots in your shoulders, your wings shouldn't really be troubling you so much."

Charlie found himself smiling. "Thanks."

"How do they feel?"

"…rough and raw."

"Ah. You should probably practice with some extensions in open air—with enough room to stretch them all the way out."

"Sounds…painful."

"Are they still that sensitive?" Theo perked a brow. "The air bothers them?"

Charlie tried to shrug and hissed softly at that. The movement was not appreciated at all. "They
come out and I can't help it." He turned his hands palm up. "I can't even control them right now. I didn't notice when they faded."

Theo nodded. "The oil will help. I can blood-spike it as well and that would help some."

Charlie wrinkled his nose. "Wouldn't that be messy?"

Golden eyes darkened to a suitable brown. "Not the kind of mess you're thinking of." Theo drawled. "Let me be the judge of that."

A sudden, powerful surge of magic rippled outwards, washing violently over them all, drawing a rather undignified squawk from Charlie and a growl from Theo, who recognized the blended signatures the meaning behind it. He smiled as it tapered off.

It woke Harry, who lifted his head from his pillow on Theo's shoulder, blinking blearily at his surroundings. He was fully awake a few second later, when a second wave washed through, several minutes later. He thunked his head a little heavier than necessary against Theo's shoulder and neck, an unspoken question as a soft sound burbled up out of his throat.

Theo found himself smiling as he cooed softly in answer to the questioning chirrs from both of his lovers. "Oretta's magic." He murmured, curving his head to the side to rest affectionately on Harry's. "It's the only touch that's so strong and so soft at the same time. The other one is Bahn's. It seems they've renewed their bonds." The smile grew wider. "That's wonderful for them." The dark brown eyes flickered a few hues darker. "And I do believe they've warded the house and left us to our own imaginations." A downright wicked grin stole over his face as he splayed one interested hand on Harry's bared lower back, curving around to his stomach. "Imagine that." His heated gaze shifted to catch Charlie's lovely blue eyes.

Charlie couldn't stop the shiver that rippled through him. The look on Theo's face spoke of delightfully filthy promises to be kept. Suddenly, being a bit messy sounded rather good.

Harry shifted, stretching slowly and carefully as he lay on his stomach on the bed, his head propped up on his folded hands as he lazily watched Theo slathering Charlie's broad back liberally with the medicated, fragrant oil. The two distinct itches bothering him mere minutes ago had faded away, now that he could sense a renewed atmosphere of calmness and harmony.

He did admit that he'd felt the wards around the room fall away. Wards with the very faintest trace of Bahn's magic in them. He'd had a taste of the elf's white-gold magic, and there was a whisper of it in the locking charms that had fallen away, after he'd sensed that, he'd also felt the faintest brush of magic from his new friend, that things were fine. It was enough to allow him to shift from worried to embarrassed as he remembered his near melt down. Charlie and Theo were saints to put up with his recent mood swings and he knew he hadn't been the best lover or good company, recently.

It helped significantly to hear Bahn's thankful, mental whisper, before the magical signatures of Gheyo and Submissive had exited the guesthouse. He had to admit that Theo's definition of Ilsa's signature was spot on. Her magic was rich, deep, strong and very, very soft, it slipped away as if hadn't been there. Bahn's had been more direct, straightforward and with a whispery touch of his own to it.

He'd worried even though Theo had assured him that they were both fine and had left—exactly as he'd sensed—Harry had wanted to see for himself. The inability to do so, had left him with an itch that he couldn't scratch. Of course, Theo had been quite persuasive with those delightfully wicked
hands of his and between that and another hot, open-mouthed kiss on a certain, tattooed mark was all it had taken for Harry to trust his Alpha's instincts. He was half-convinced anyway and easily surrendered with a sigh. Theo had him stretch out on the rich, silken sheets and then had Charlie do the same.

Of course, Harry hadn't exactly done that—he'd inched over to half-lie on Charlie, for warmth and because he could, while Theo rummaged through the little knapsack to find the prescribed oil. It didn't miss his attention that they were all quite shirtless by this point, with neither of them wanting to be the first to strip their trousers off. Harry tucked that detail away for later, wondering if there was some significance attributed to it that he didn't know of yet.

There was a smile lurking at the corners of their Alpha's mouth when Theo turned back to see their altered positions. He'd then chuckled and spelled the oil warm, before liberally drizzling it over them both. Harry had flinched and squirmed when the first ticklish streams poured over him and the wriggling resulted in Charlie's iron arms immediately clamping around his shoulders and waist.

"Oi! Hey!" Charlie protested, but there was laughter in his voice even as he spoke. Harry's squirming did things that he knew the younger man was not quite aware of—yet. "Harry first?" He prompted Theo.

And Harry found himself laughing as Theo coated his hands and skimmed them lightly along his exposed sides.

Warmth sparkled in those familiar, golden eyes, the yellow shine returning as Theo devoted his attention to covering every inch of Harry's available body in warm oil, squeezing, stroking and pressing, to loosen the muscles beneath the pale skin. Harry's laughing squirms settled down and he gave the occasional tremor, as Theo's fingers plied their magic on his willing body. Theo's long fingers teased lightly, circling and pinching those lovely pink nipples, drawing happy little noises from Harry as he finished the massage with a light slap to one trouser-clad thigh. Harry shifted, faintly, finding himself being moved as Theo removed him from Charlie's embrace and settled him on the sheets just within reach.

"Theo?" The name was faintly yawned as Harry had then rolled over on to his stomach. He didn't really want to move or be moved, he'd been hoping things would take a more pleasurable turn—not that he'd been complaining about the massage. That had been delightful too. But he didn't really want to sit on the sidelines if the happy thrums shared between Theo's bond was any indication of the possible turn certain relaxing activities could take.

"Charlie's shoulders." Theo had reminded him, waving a hand at Charlie to have his Beta change position. "I want to put some weight into this." He cracked his knuckles and rocked back to sit on his heels. "Set yourself up so I won't accidentally put too much pressure where it shouldn't be."

Charlie did as requested, with a faint wince. It was easier to be distracted when he was holding an armful of laughing, slippery Harry. He bit back a hiss as Theo shifted to straddle him from behind, already pouring the medicated oil out. The warm oil spilled down his shoulder blades and trickled down his spine, leaving a faintly warming trail. He made an inquisitive sound when the warming sensation increased, before turning cool.

"Shh." Theo soothed. "It reacts to injury, helps to relax the muscles. In a few minutes, you shouldn't feel anything. It is better than a muscle-relaxing potion."

Charlie hummed in acknowledgement as Theo positioned his hands carefully along his spine and pressed. He exhaled, sharply, feeling something click into place. That felt unbearably good, even though his sensitive shoulders screamed for a second, before a blissful numbness began to
tingle along the edges. With his head carefully set sideways, Charlie found himself gazing into relaxed, emerald eyes.

Harry stretched out a hand and gently brushed the fingertips along Charlie's shoulder and the mating mark present.

A pleasurable jolt spiked through the redhead and he felt his breath catch, lightly.

"Breathe out." Theo instructed, from above. "And keep breathing."

Charlie didn't answer. He had to focus on breathing.

A sparkle of mischief showed plainly on Harry's face as the brunet transitioned from lazy, relaxed compliance to lust-laced interest. His little experiment had been twofold. He'd felt the same spark of interest trickle back to him through the bond. His hesitant fingers pressed a little firmer as they skimmed over the tattooed mark. This was certainly a far more interesting distraction than simply lying there.

This time, Charlie nearly groaned as the intent in that 'innocent' touch went straight to his groin. He shifted, only to feel Theo's weight settling even more firmly on his thighs. His mind caught up to the predicament, much sooner than his body did. Theo's hands were firm and sure, a contrast to Harry's sensual brushes as the mischievous brunet sidled closer, to better run his hands up and down Charlie's bicep and side.

It was a matter of minutes before Charlie realized he'd have to speak up. Pure desire alone was being channeled through the bond forged between him and it sang happily as it was fed, while his body began to warm under the attentions. Harry's hands began to wander a little more, only to be lightly slapped away by Theo's working ones.

"Har-ry." Theo's drawl wasn't exactly discouraging, as he seemed to catch on to what was happening, when Charlie began to shift beneath him. "He needs to stay still until I'm finished."

"I didn't want him to fall asleep."

"Play with something else." Theo suggested. "Or try rubbing the furrows out of his forehead."

"Don't have furrows." Charlie protested.

Harry stifled a laugh. The exact way in which Charlie made his face of complaint, did indeed furrow his forehead. "Let me see." He shifted, moving over.

"You could take all night at this rate." Charlie heard himself mumbling into the coverlet.

Above him, Theo smirked.

By the time Theo's massage had finished, Charlie was comfortably relaxed and uncomfortably aroused. His body felt heavy and weighted as if Theo had hit him with a weight charm. Just the thought of moving, filled his mind with protest, even as certain portions of his body clamoured for attention and friction. He groggily shifted gears and when Theo finally climbed off of him with admonitions to give the oil time to sink in. He certainly had no intention of leaping off the bed and dancing around, now that his shoulders didn't burn and ache with every half-breath he processed. He did, however, hope that the night was not ending on the note of a well-delivered massage.
Before he could protest, Theo had already begun wiping his hands on a clean handtowel, plucking up the bottle of medicated oil. The young Alpha slid off the bed and set the oil on the nightstand, before clicking his fingers. The light in the room dimmed to have point and with another flick of his fingers, the fireplace rumbled and came to life, the wood refilling and the flames sizzling upward. Theo then cast his own set of protective wards within the room, before he padded over to the en suite, and calmly went about his business, the door halfway open. He hummed as his brushed his teeth and rooted out a pair of fresh pyjamas from an empty wardrobe.

Harry and Charlie looked over at him in a mixture of surprise. But he seemed oblivious as he went about his nightly routine, a fresh bath towel in hand, his intention clear.

The door shut a moment later.

Charlie blinked. He looked to Harry. "I thought…" he began and then stopped. It was easy to push away the feelings and emotions, he'd had practice at it over the years. Perhaps he wasn't what Theo was looking for at the moment or maybe something else had distracted the Slytherin. His mind whispered ugly words of scars and inexperience, but Charlie stubbornly shoved them back where they belonged.

He was ready for this and if not right away, close enough for that right away to be very soon. Harry had to know what he was and how he was, before he'd considered him for his Circle and if Theo disagreed, well, Charlie hoped that he would have rejected him earlier and sooner—not simply left him hot and aching in the middle of the room while he went for a shower. The feelings of insecurity and uncertainty still simmered, but at least, Charlie could remind himself that he'd had lovers of both sexes and knew he wasn't necessarily lacking in the art of pleasure.

Perhaps something else was bothering Theo. He looked to Harry, who was staring at the door of the en suite.

Harry slowly shrugged for the both of them. He'd been thinking too and his thought process hadn't stopped the way that Theo's appeared to have done. In fact, the reality of having Charlie half-naked in front of him was slowly rekindling the earlier passion he'd been forced to push aside. If Theo wanted to take a shower now, then that was his loss, Harry decided. Charlie twisted, stretching towards him, a content and not entirely innocent smile on his face. Harry allowed himself to admire the gorgeous expanse of oiled, tanned skin that was soft to the touch, thanks to Theo's expert touch.

Their Alpha had certainly done quite a thorough job of it and while the faintest hint of citrus hung in the air, it was a muted fragrance that wasn't anywhere near overpowering. A hopeful gleam flickered in Charlie's rich blue eyes as he waited for Harry to take his hands.

"What?" Harry wanted to know, still busy cataloguing Charlie's current assets. He took the hands offered as Charlie seemed eager to have him hold them.

"I can't turn over." Charlie said, lightly, changing what he'd meant to say when Harry's emerald eyes roved hungrily over him. "Wouldn't want to undo all of Theo's ah, hard work." Charlie's hands squeezed, gently. "You're a little too far to reach."

A warm flush began to spread across Harry's pale face. He inched closer, but remained slightly out of reach. "How about now?" He prompted.

"Still too far." Charlie propped himself up on his elbows, tugging on Harry's hands again. "Closer."

"…now?" Harry scooted closer. He licked his lips, emerald eyes wandering carefully over the
tanned and slightly scarred face. He dropped one hand to run it along the ridged bump. He wondered, briefly, why Charlie's inheritance hadn't canceled it out, before he realized that Ilsa had forced Charlie's dragel nature out. The ritual had likely been the reason the scar was so faded, but it still remained.

Sapphire eyes fluttered in welcome appreciation as Harry's soft fingers tentatively explored the familiar face, now made new again. He was grateful to read the acceptance in Harry, as those smaller fingers traced over the scars on his face. He had noticed the curious absence of markings on both Theo and Harry, but he'd chalked it up to both of them being involved in less dangerous careers than his own. He'd then, of course, amended that, remembering the Twins' tales of Harry's adventures and then marveled over the fact that no visible scars remained. That was good, in his opinion, anyway. Harry didn't deserve the scars that he collected, especially the jagged slash of lightning on his forehead, a scar that seemed to both Harry more than anything else. He'd seen Theo deliberately kiss the mark several times and witnessed Harry's relief at the action. It was something special and private between them, but Charlie couldn't help wondering if he could be included in the moment. From the very first day since he'd met the younger wizard, the small body, wide-eyes and subtle, powerful magic had called out to him and he'd been hard-pressed to remain in character for the rest of his family.

Harry's magic was a near siren call, if you were brave enough to open your ears and listen. Listening for magic was a talent he'd been taught at the Romanian Reserves and Charlie had never given it a second thought until he'd returned home and realized just what a powerful talent it was in close proximity to powerful wizards. He'd never recalled Dumbledore even having the same magnificent signature and he'd been to the Order meetings, at his Mum's request. Meetings where he'd spoken on Bill's behalf and agreed to speak to his employers about including the dragon's in a possible, future war.

Charlie's hands flexed on Harry's thighs, missing the action of holding something, but soaking up the soft, gentle touches as Harry continued to explore his scarred face. The scars were recent enough, the ones on his face anyway, he'd been careless—no, careful for the dragon and not for himself—and the result had been a barrage of new scars. His Mum's scar salve a special recipe combined with something he'd never been able to recognize, but now guessed it to be a blood-based magic, had often faded or erased the marks. It warmed him inside to see and know that Harry didn't mind the marks, slashes and tears. Some of the scars were far from pretty, but Charlie was gratified to know that Harry was indeed as special inside as he was on the outside. The young wizard had a knack for seeing beyond the physical appearances and reading the true intentions beneath, easily seeing the inner beauty and treasuring it.

Their bonding moment had been wonderful and beautiful, but there hadn't been any time for the kind of interaction taking place now. Charlie held his face still and angled upwards as Harry dropped his other hand and began to trace the features, one at a time, an indescribable expression on his young, vulnerable face. Thin fingers skimmed over full lips and a generous nose that didn't look the least bit out of place on the lightly freckled face. Spots of freckles so light, they melted into the well-tanned face, serving only to highlight high cheekbones as the bedroom light flickered over them.

After a time, another contented sigh slipped out as Charlie led his head fall forward and Harry's fingers began to tangle in his hair. Harry's searching fingers settled in the spell-cleaned tresses and worked their way down to scratch gently at his scalp.

An audible purr filled the room and Charlie started, faintly, before he realized the sound had come from him. Harry chuckled overhead, digging a touch harder with his blunt fingernails, the pleasure multiplying exponentially in the following moments. It was why he was completely unprepared
when one of Harry's hands snuck downwards and dug into his sides with a deliberate tickle.

The Dragon Tamer squawked and jerked away, laughter spilling out as Harry darted in closer, tickling hands refusing to stop. In a matter of seconds, it became a light wrestling match as hands stretched and legs intertwined, both careful in their movements, so that Charlie remained on top and Harry sprawled out beneath him, to keep from aggravating his sensitive shoulders. Several minutes later, Harry lay breathless and helpless as Charlie gifted him one last tickle. The redhead half-collapsed on that, slender pale chest, still heaving with gasping laughter. He smiled, the expression softening as he caught Harry's lighted eyes.

The laughter tapered off and the silence between them was broken by the quiet, shallow breaths and then Charlie leaned downward and Harry leaned up.

Lips met in the middle and Charlie shifted, settling himself more comfortably half over and half on Harry. He shifted to cradle Harry's head with one large hand and focused on ravishing that smiling, willing mouth. Harry wriggled beneath him, until he could reach around those broad shoulders, one resting tentatively on the back of Charlie's neck, the other a little lower down, skirting the edge of the sensitive shoulders and upper back.

Lips, teeth and tongue, began to dance in sensual play, as Charlie nibbled lightly on Harry's lower lip, teasing and asking for entrance, that was given after little resistance. Harry sighed into the kiss, angling his head to enjoy it better. Happy feelings and seductive threads of magic spiraled over the pair, twining together and meshing as the Beta-Submissive bond hummed to life, strengthening and reaffirming itself.

The kisses did the trick and Harry soon arched upwards, seeking a touch of friction as he rubbed up against the hard, firm body hovering just barely above him. Charlie broke the kiss to smirk down at him, his own blue eyes darkening with lust.

Freshly bitten lips parted to show budding, half-present fangs delicately sliding out as Harry chirred encouragingly. Charlie turned his head to the side, yawning, even as he stretched his jaw and heard it pop. His fangs were extended and full, aching with need as he nuzzled Harry's neck, nibbling, but not biting.

Harry hummed into the ministrations, his hand falling free from Charlie's neck and moving downwards to tease along the waistband of Charlie's pants. Any potential shyness had long flown, easily attended by the light play-fight they'd had earlier. Now, Harry was relaxed and confident, his intentions clear and his need growing as Charlie continued his light, teasing touches, never quite granting him the pressure and deeper stimulation he craved.

"Charlie-!"

Charlie caught a patch of skin in his teeth and worried it, taking care not to bite. He wasn't quite sure about the biting and the blood, bit, but he was very sure about how he wanted this night to end when Harry's half-frustrated, half-groaned exclamation of his name was uttered right by his ear. "Hmm?"

"Stop…that…I want-!"

The protest was cut off as Charlie shifted his weight so he could slide one hand between them, palming the erection in Harry's thin pants. He rubbed the pad of his thumb over the tip and watched as Harry twisted pleasurably beneath him. "Did you say something?"

"…tease." Harry growled out, arching upwards into the caress. "Stop…ughh…" he groaned in
frustration as that warm hand disappeared from where he wanted it to be. "Charlie!"

"Shh. Patience." Charlie bumped noses in consolation. "The last time was a little bit of a hazy daze. I want to take my time."

Harry's response was to twist and turn, trying to free his legs to wrap around Charlie's waist. He wasn't quite in the mind to argue against Charlie, but he'd gladly show the redhead what he wanted.

Charlie laughed overhead, the sound rumbling in his chest and coming out as a near, light growl as Harry fisted his hands in the reddened strands and tugged. Harry's grip slackened when Charlie's hot mouth found one peaked nipple and focused his attentions solely on the pale bud.

His breathing hitched, breath coming in soft, welcome gasps as Harry squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to calm down and simply feel. There was absolutely no reason in the world to rush this except that oh—a new scent caught his nose and Harry's arms shifted at once to lock around Charlie's neck, holding the redhead down, as he scented Theo's entrance into the bedroom.

He did not want Charlie's attention to shift from him, to Theo. At least, not in the way he knew it would, as Charlie's current state was more relaxed and unreserved than Harry had seen him in a very long time. He didn't want Charlie to change just because Theo had entered the room.

Theo hadn't had the chance to prove his dominant status as yet. While it did make Harry antsy to feel the two powerful auras from his older bonded, it bothered him to see that Charlie couldn't take the same comfort and strength that Theo so readily offered. The depth of Theo's earthen element afforded Harry the same kind of steady, silent strength and solid foundation, even more so since Quinn had done the Soul Cast bit.

At least, Harry had felt it as a rock-solid thrum of magical energy and warmth that he could fall into. Emerald eyes locked onto golden ones as Theo's silent exit from the en suite went purely unnoticed by Charlie as Harry made sure to keep the redhead's face buried in his neck.

Mischief danced in those pleased golden eyes and Theo winked at him, over Charlie's shoulders. Harry felt a thrill of delight ripple down his spine as Theo advanced towards the bed, subtly calling out his dragel nature, his Alpha's aura muted, so as not to startle Charlie.

Feeling quite pleased with himself to be included in the mischief, Harry slackened his grip on Charlie's neck, pulling the dragon tamer up for a kiss that he happily gave into. Harry shifted, feeling Theo's weight slowly settling on the bed. He wriggled purposefully again and twisted away from Charlie's questing lips.

"Wings," He whispered into one available ear, then licked said ear and clamped his half-aroused fangs into the fleshy lobe. Quinn's purification ritual meant that they could all share blood tonight—Harry fully intended to take advantage of that.

Charlie shuddered above him, turning his head, experimentally as the small fangs clamped down around his earlobe and by default, the metal piercings there as well. He couldn't suppress the reactions racing through his body as Harry began to work his lips and tongue in tandem to produce delightful sensations of pleasurable pain.

It reminded him of the day he'd had the piercings done and then of the achy week that had followed, as these particular piercings did not heal in the usual way most magical body modification processes did.

Something tingled behind him, but Charlie ignored in favor of gasping as Harry's fangs finally
drew blood and prompted him to accidentally bite the thin shoulder presented to him. Before his mind could catch up to his unintended move, instinct crawled to the forefront and Charlie moaned into the first mouthful of blood.

Theo's blood had been strong and rich, but Harry's blood, oh Harry. The pale, slender beauty tasted like rich sweetness, a sugary hint that only made him want to drink more and more. He felt Harry tremble in his arms and looked up, worriedly, in time to see his Submissive's gorgeous silvery-peach wings tentatively stretching outward. He sucked on the bite one last time and then slid his fangs free, licking the puncture wounds. He gave a cursory lick to Harry's cheek, before his eyes lit on the mating mark on Harry's pale skin.

Charlie turned his attentions to that lovely mark in time to feel something moving behind him. Before he could react, strong arms wrapped around his upper half, one about his neck, the other around his waist. His mouth opened with a growl.

"Don't even think about it." Theo's silken voice purred from behind and he bent his head, to make his point.

Charlie twitched when sharp fangs pierced the unmarked side of his neck and dug in deeply. He reacted a second too soon to realize that his acceptance of the bite meant that he'd given in. He twisted, prompting a whine from Harry as the myriad of complicated emotions began to war within. Half of him wanted desperately to give into Theo's silent strength and the other half demanded that he fight back.

Harry's repeated whine drew Charlie to the present where the smaller brunet had released his ear and now licked his neck, repeatedly, the whine growing louder when no one seemed to be addressing it.

Theo rumbled reassuringly from behind and Charlie fought back the urge to rebel against the warm feeling welling up inside of him. He tried to focus on Harry and instinctively bent his head to press a wet kiss to the arched throat presented to him. An apology, he realized, belatedly.

He felt another growl building up in his throat, when Theo worked his jaws lightly, fangs rocking in and out of wounds on his neck. It was a sharp, stark reminder that he could not protest this—not when Theo had managed to catch him unaware—he didn't deserve to challenge the rank if he could not keep his awareness around him at all times. A ripple of guilt traveled through him.

It was stopped by a light slap to one flank and Theo's Alpha growl from above. The bite deepened a touch more and then those wicked fangs slid free. The scent of chocolate teased through the air and a warmed breeze blew over the trio. Theo's warm tongue lapped at the new wound and the Alpha hummed softly, gently pressing himself against the sensitive upper back of his Beta.

Charlie inwardly winced, bracing himself as a few sharp twinges of discomfort registered from the skin on skin contact. He was pleasantly surprised to find that Theo's touch cooled and soothed, rather than inflamed. Instinctively, he pushed back into the embrace that tightened, obligingly, allowing more of the coolness to register. A questioning noise managed to make its way past Charlie's lips, prompting another one of those lovely, dark chuckles from the young Alpha.

"Alpha's rights," Theo murmured, gently pulling the older wizard back. "I would never leave you in pain, if it were within my power to. Let Harry up a bit."

Harry scooted further up on the bed, at Theo's prompt, the moment that Charlie was lightly lifted off of him. He stopped at the quick nod from the golden-eyed Theo and waited to see what the Alpha had in mind.
"Claws." Theo purred into Charlie's reddened ear. He licked the abused appendage and nuzzled along the redhead's hairline. "Call them out, slowly."

Worry trickled through Charlie's consciousness, but he tried to focus as instructed and found that it was easier than he'd expected. Instinct was closer to the surface than he'd thought and within minutes, his hands had morphed into, neat, compact claws. He flexed his fingers, noting the sharp, dangerous tips and marveling at the feel. He tensed as Theo's hands around him, morphed to claws as well.

"Pants." Theo instructed, his velvet voice still seductive. "Harry doesn't need to be wearing pants right now, don't you agree?"

Charlie slowly nodded.

"Good. Make use of those claws."

"We didn't bring extra!" Harry's half-yelp was cut off as Charlie leaned forward and did exactly that. The bright green eyes gave an exaggerated roll. "Theo." Harry directed his protest at the smirking Slytherin.

Theo's answer was to simply remove one arm from Charlie's neck and nudge him down again. His claws set at the edge of the dragon tamer's pants and shredded them in short order. "More fun this way, isn't it?" He inquired, suggestively. One clawed hand slid lower down to play with what had been newly freed. "You focus on Harry…I'll focus on you, alright?"

Charlie sucked in a breath, his earlier thoughts struggling to mesh with what was happening to him right now. "But-

"Do you yield?" Theo's wicked claws scraped meaningfully over sensitive skin. "I would never ask anything of you that you did not wish to give. You are not losing anything, my dragonheart. You are only gaining."

Chapped lips pressed tightly together in thought. He recalled every interaction he'd seen between Alpha and Submissive since his addition to their little snapshot of happiness. It wasn't at all like he'd originally thought, before he'd know anything of Theodore Nott. Instead it was so much more. So much more. Theo was everything dark, deadly and dangerous, as long as it meant keeping Harry happy, safe and loved. Instead of smothering either of them—and Charlie knew that to take some significant restraint—Theo seemed to be angling towards a bonded pairing where they were equals.

All of them.

All three of them.

That final thought took an extra handful of seconds to process and it was the final piece of the puzzle. The instinct to fight this particular threat—this Alpha—finally flickered out. There was no need to push this issue. Charlie's shoulders quivered as he grasped that new revelation, turned it over twice in his head and accepted the outcome. He leaned forward, the battle won, his body explaining what his mouth could not.

"Shh." Theo soothed and this time, he sank his fangs directly into the vulnerable softness of that tanned neck as he followed the downward movement, still keeping them chest to back. He'd showered to ensure that his skin would hold the rune magic he intended to use. It seemed as if it were working, as Charlie had sought more of the cooling sensation when they touched. Theo was
glad for that, he knew that new wings could be one of the most painful parts of a forced dragel transition. To be able to help and show his intended Beta that he truly did care, made the nearly unbearable hiccup in their night, worth it.

He hadn't wanted to leave, but his rational mind had won out in the end and so he'd left both Beta and Submissive to their own devices, knowing that a little time between each other wouldn't be amiss. Neither of them had managed to really spend a bit of one-on-one anywhere and then there'd been the whole mess at the healers.

Theo stroked his claws over the slightly scarred, tanned skin of Charlie's sides and hips. He worked his fangs into the willing neck and this time, he did drink the blood. The mark made before in the Snape's quarters had been incomplete, it required more to solidify it and they simply hadn't had the time. Now, however, they had all the time in the world and Theo was more than happy to make use of it.

Charlie's blood was light and filling, sliding easily down his throat, compared to Harry's delightful sweetness that always reminded him of his sweet tooth. But his mind easily clicked over from blood to the roughened skin texture beneath his hands. Theo had to admit that the scars added a certain amount of attraction to the dragon tamer, and the tan was an extra bonus. His own skin was far too pale to handle a decent tan, but Charlie wore it well and it made Theo want to lick and taste every inch of that skin as he staked his claim.

Mine. His inner dragel growled, contentedly. Theo smirked into the bite and his eyes flickered a bright, deep golden hue as he poured his magic into the mark. When he withdrew his fangs this time, the mating mark was dark and permanent. This time, was for keeps.

The Alpha-Beta bond snapped to life and hummed as a jumble of emotions, feelings and magic zipped by, adjusting to them both. Theo had made sure that Charlie wasn't in the position to refuse as he'd done in the Snapes' quarters. He'd made absolute sure that refusal wasn't even an option, given Charlie's current positioning and state of dress, after all, one was Slytherin for life and beyond.

Just the same, Theo hadn't wanted to force anything out of his fierce dragon tamer either. For Charlie to give in of his own accord meant that he had achieved the original goal intended. He rewarded his Beta with a firm stroke, fisting the heavy, swollen cock with one clawed hand. Another bubble of laughter threatened to spill out and he swallowed it back, feeling and sensing his magic at work.

Neither Charlie nor Harry had paid him any mind when he'd been working, so he'd taken a moment to trace in the necessary spell for delayed release. It had eased the harshness of having to take his shower alone. He could see evidence of the spell in Harry's aroused body, flushed and waiting for relief. This would be so much fun…

Harry was prepared for anything but Charlie’s hot mouth on his cock when the dragon tamer suddenly winked up at him. In the second it’d taken for the wink to register, Harry clapped both hands over his mouth at the girly squeak that had emerged as Charlie swallowed him whole.

That warm, wet heat brought him easily to the edge, but refused to take him over. Harry squirmed, even as Charlie’s clawed hands dug into his thighs, holding him still enough to bob his head up and down.

“No hands, Harry.” Theo’s rich voice wafted over to him. “Hands at your sides or in Charlie’s hair. We want to hear you, don’t we, Charlie?”
The redhead hummed in answer and Harry half-arched off the bed, his hands scrabbling in the sheets. He grabbed ineffectually at Charlie’s tangled, scarlet strands and bit his lip, drawing blood as a litany of moans and pleas began to fall from his lips. He was close, _so close_ that it felt as if he’d simply burn alive if something didn’t give. He hadn’t known that Charlie could do _that._

“Charlie, Theo!” He pleaded again, yanking on Charlie’s hair and succeeding in the counterproductive move of drawing the redhead up and off his prize.

Charlie’s own smirk matched the wickedly dark look on Theo’s face as he blew softly on the moistened flesh, the change in sensation making Harry mewl. He didn’t remember Harry being quite this responsive when they’d bonded, but he wasn’t about to complain. “I should ask to see your eyes too,” Charlie said, huskily. He felt Theo’s hands stroking his sides and arse, the strokes becoming firmer and more purposeful. He knew what would happen next, but appreciated the fact that Theo wasn’t surprising him as he’d done moments before. That was unexpectedly thoughtful. Charlie redirected his mind towards lapping at the bead of blood on Harry’s lower lip. “If you need to bite something…” He offered.

Brilliant green eyes popped open, fixing on Charlie with a lust-filled glare. “Tease!” Harry managed, even as Charlie licked his lips with deliberate slowness. “You did-!” He suppressed a shudder as another unbearable wave of pleasure rocked over him. Someone had done something, Harry wasn’t sure which. He was liable to think it was Theo, except for he couldn’t recall Theo having cast anything over him before and thus had nothing to compare it to. His body didn’t feel any different, except for the unbelievable waves of pleasure rocking through him. He could burn alive and nothing would change it seemed, his damp hair clung to his forehead, a pale sheen of sweat glistening on his skin.

Yet, even as Harry tried to think, those hypnotic blue eyes stole his breath and demanded his attention. He’d wanted this so badly earlier and now that it was in front of him, Harry wasn’t sure how much longer he could bear being just on the brink. He wanted to tear into Charlie with claws and fangs, to make a bloody mess and feel the slip of scales and skin as Theo had once done for him. In the wake of the night of claiming night, Theo had showed him pleasures he hadn’t even imagined.

Claws shifted back to hands and Charlie returned to his earlier task, this time, his hands busied themselves with reddened nipples, even as Harry tugged on his wrists, body contorting in pleasure and need. In all that he’d ever experienced, Charlie had never found a lover as responsive as Harry’s delightful cries, twists and shudders. So open, so perfect and so mind-blowingly tantalizing. It made him want to love and treasure this exotic, green-eyed creature for as long as fate would allow.

Theo sat back on his haunches, watching them both, his eyes roving meaningfully over Charlie’s delectable arse. He’d allowed both Beta and Sub the moment that they needed and undone Harry’s spell for the time being, knowing fully well just how insatiable their Submissive could be.

Harry would likely wear them both out, if given the chance and the wild look he’d seen in those emerald eyes certainly promised pleasurable retribution if he hadn’t undone the spell straightaway. The moment he’d released the trigger, the response was both beautiful and immediate. Theo had
watched with lust-brimming and spilling over as Charlie had skillfully brought Harry to a blistering orgasm. His trembling, softly shuddering body was immediately stilled and warmed as Charlie stretched out over him, bringing him down from the hazy high with slow, thorough kisses.

Theo smiled to himself and watched a moment longer, before lazily fisting himself to attention. Not that it wasn’t enough to be watching them, but he’d made use of his shower time in order to make the most of their night now. Without the rush of a first orgasm hanging between them, he could be patient and take his time to purposefully drive them crazy. He fully intended to have them both before the night was over, once to complete the bond and twice because he felt like it. His fingers twitched, summoning the bottle of favored lube to his side with the whisper, feather-touch of his earthen element. Mentally checking the room’s wards one last time, Theo gave himself over to the moment.

Squeezing out a generous dollop of lube, Theo moved to a better position, patting that tanned lower back to hint at the intent. He watched as Charlie twitched, his body still sensitive, half from arousal and half from his wings rippling just beneath the surface of his skin. Theo knew they’d be out before the night was over, but he also knew that Charlie was too keyed up to draw them out properly. He’d make use of the moment in the meant time. His own wings shifted beneath the surface, but it was an easy thought to keep them folded in for the time being.

One properly lubed finger slipped between firm arse cheeks, seeking out the tight ring of muscle usually hidden from view. Theo smiled when Harry’s slender arms came up to wrap around Charlie’s neck, sliding under the redhead’s arms before curving upwards. Harry’s pleased chirrs filled the room from the appreciative kisses being slowly traded. It was a good distraction for Charlie as Theo continued his intimate exploration with slow, smooth movements.

Theo smirked to himself, grateful for his element that gave him control and for the show in front of him that was everything he’d known it would be. The view would be even better in a moment, he thought to himself, adding another finger and stroking the velvety insides. Charlie took it well, the occasional twitch the only sign of discomfort, as he shifted, lifting his hips slightly to accommodate the process. Theo smiled outright at that and leaned forward to press a kiss to sweat-slicked skin as he added a third finger, scissoring expertly. Charlie was hot and tight and the third finger coaxed him open even wider. That brought a sound of discomfort and Theo magicked another glob of lube into his free hand, nudging Charlie to his knees, with a murmured “up.”

Harry was the one to protest at that, but his attention was swiftly redirected when he caught sight of Charlie’s thick, bobbing cock. Theo’s free hand wrapped around that heavy thickness and gifted it a few firm strokes. Green eyes grew round and then filled with renewed interest when Theo wiped said free hand on Charlie’s stomach and then tossed him the lube, his direction clear. Charlie and Harry exchanged a glance, then Harry flipped the cap open and squirted a bit into his hands. His eyes remained fixed on Charlie’s face as his lubed hands reached downwards.

Charlie hissed when the smaller, slick fingers found his throbbing erection and gently squeezed. The light touch was not to be mistaken for shyness or uncertainty, because Harry fistied him completely a moment later, swirling one roughened thumb around the swollen, weeping head. It made him keen softly as Harry’s free hand went for his balls, fondling and massaging them, coaxing him to walk the fine line of fiery pleasure and tolerable pain. It was a pleasant distraction from Theo’s thrusting fingers.

“Your turn?” Harry settled back a moment later, a pleased look on his face. He reached for the lube and held it up to squeeze a bit into Charlie’s hand.

Charlie stared at him for a moment.
Harry rolled his eyes. “Charlie.” He tilted his head forward. “Me?” The hint of daring in his voice was almost challenging.

Charlie hesitated long enough for Harry to bare his fangs and hiss. He held out one hand, supporting himself as best as he could and accepted the slightly cold glob of lube. He rubbed it quickly between his fingers, warming it before tracing that hand down Harry’s side and lower still. He watched as Harry deliberately made himself relax, still clenching his lower lip between delicate fangs. Twin beads of blood appeared as the fangs bit through once more and two of Charlie’s fingers slid home.

Harry squirmed at the intrusion, already prepared for the sensations that were still yet to come. He found himself staring upwards in fascination as Charlie’s smooth strokes became somewhat jerky and sloppy, due to Theo’s efforts. A happy chirr bubbled out as Harry spread his legs wider to welcome the thrusting fingers as two became three and one of them curled. A choked gasp left his lips as he stood to attention once more, the earlier orgasm already a memory.

“Charlie. Charlie. Charlie.” The name came out as a chant. Harry wiped his slick fingers down that warmed chest and reached for Charlie’s red hair once more. He wondered, briefly, if Charlie might have a headache in the morning and then dismissed it with the thought of headache reliever potions. Magic was a wonderful thing sometimes. He’d think of that later. He wanted Charlie in him, now. Anytime now, to be exact.

Charlie lurched and shuddered, suddenly held still, his hands grabbing at the soft pillows beneath Harry’s head and shoulders, his own head resting heavily on Harry’s chest as his breath came in short, quick pants.

“Charlie?” Theo’s voice was light and careful. “Relax.”

The redhead bobbed stiffly in answer—once. Harry’d done a wonderful job. He hadn’t been paying attention when Theo had found the spot that made lights dance behind his eyes. And he definitely hadn’t been paying attention when Theo’s cock had replaced his fingers. The intrusion was not entirely unwelcome, but it was uncomfortable and it had been some time since he’d been on the receiving end, evidenced by the way his mind had instantly blanked and was now vaguely aware of Harry’s hands in his hair.

Theo stroked his hands down Charlie’s sides, tracing over the faint scars and tempering the coolness in his hands to his Beta’s warmth. The touch was soothing and relaxing on the tanned skin as Theo waited, balls deep, for Charlie to relax. “You’re lovely, you know that?” Theo murmured. “Everything about you…Harry has excellent taste.”

Harry sniggered, wrapping his hands around Charlie’s head and hugging his Beta to his chest. Of course he had good taste. Charlie was perfect for him—for them. He was glad to see that Theo had no objections to Charlie, especially now that he could understand what was happening between them. He much more preferred this dominance fight compared to the snarls, claws and growls he’d witnessed in Snapes’ quarters. Harry smiled as he gave small pats to Charlie’s head, rubbing his cheek up and down the sweat-dampened locks, trying to transmit feelings of camaraderie through their renewed bond.

It took a moment longer, but when it happened, both Alpha and Sub felt it.

Pure, complete, unadulterated submission.

Charlie’s fiery warmth exploded outward to both of them as his magic rippled and sang. Wizard and dragel halves connected, his position proposed and accepted.
“Perfect.” Theo whispered, bracing one hand on Charlie’s lower back as he slid out, hovering for a second, before thrusting back in. Charlie gasped and groaned as the pace was set.

Charlie’s orange-red hair sparkled to cool flames that danced around Harry’s adoring fingers, blue eyes fluxed purple with the fire element bleeding into his natural, physical traits. Tanned skin darkened as a smattering of navy blue scales began to surface along his sides. The tops of his ears shifted, pointing faintly at the tops, his forehead taking on several additional wrinkles from the ridged bump.

Harry found himself smiling up at the fierce face, a faint prickle of wetness in the backs of his eyes. He blinked it away, forcing a smile as he ran his hands through Charlie’s flaming hair once more. He was lucky, so very lucky to have something this beautiful and perfect. If fate should think to steal it away from him, Harry had no reservations of chasing fate down to the depths of hell for it.

Charlie moaned softly again.

Harry pushed the morbid thoughts aside and leaned up to kiss whatever he could reach. There was no mistaking the pleasure in that particular groan as Theo’s pale hands gripped those tanned hips and settled into a rocking rhythm. “He’s good, isn’t he?” Harry murmured, his eyes laughed over Charlie’s shoulder at the smoldering look in Theo’s golden gaze. His own needs were temporarily dimmed in the heat of the moment where Charlie’s pleasure had taken precedence.

A rough groan of aching pleasure was Charlie’s answering response as his hands caught Harry’s shoulders and dug into the pale skin.

Harry wriggled, experimentally. He had some range of movement and he wasn’t quite about to forget where Charlie’s fingers had been several minutes ago. He’d been satisfied once, but there was a whole night ahead of them and he had no intention of letting Charlie and Theo have all the fun.

“Not enough?” He inquired, impishly, shifting his knee to rub against Charlie’s leaking cock. He watched those blue-purple eyes roll upwards to the back of Charlie’s head. Ah, that was a good move, then...he repeated the nudge. “…can I can fix that?” Harry propped himself up on his elbows, enough to catch Theo’s eye. “Theo…”

It took a bit of careful maneuvering and a touch of patience before the trio was carefully situated, Harry beneath Charlie and Charlie under Theo.

Overall, a gorgeous Charlie sandwich that was served at least twice.

Harry squirmed pleasurably into the sheets as every thrust from Theo rocked Charlie even deeper into him. The second time around was even more enjoyable than the first and he knew to brace himself well, this time. It felt so incredibly good. He felt their magic rising up and twining together, sparks of energy and stabs of raw emotion filtering down to him. He could taste the hesitance, the relief, the pain, the hope and the new, humming threads of love and affection. It meshed together in a way that was beautifully bittersweet.

Charlie’s tingling heat, Theo’s steady coolness and Harry’s tempered warmth, a perfect trio of blended elements. He could see why the others had been worried about their incomplete bond as now he could feel everything flowing together in a neverending circle, where Theo’s steady
presence bled into Charlie’s comforting warmth and they both fed back into his own tempered strength. Whereas before, he’d felt as if there were something not quite put together, the pesky feeling had vanished and everything was settled comfortably between them.

Instinct took over and when Theo stretched forward, settling his weight over Charlie and his fangs in the redhead’s neck, Harry arched upwards and notched his own fangs in the other side of Charlie’s neck, directly over the mating mark.

The reaction was instantaneous and utterly enchanting.

Harry heard Theo murmur a handful of words, muffled by his fangs buried in Charlie’s neck. The response was Charlie’s body freezing, then writhing in a series of shudders and tremors as he groaned through his release, head buried in the sweaty curve of Harry’s shoulder and arm.

“Shhh.” Theo soothed, withdrawing his fangs and lapping at the wound. He was quite pleased with himself and Charlie’s lovely reactions. A scant handful of seconds later, Theo drank in the sight of Harry coming as well, the combined stimulation and feedback through the bond, prompting his second release for the night. Entirely satisfied for the night, Theo gave three more solid thrusts before he gave a choked sound of his own and emptied himself yet again into Charlie’s scorching heat, the aftershocks rippling through him in short bursts.

They relaxed into each other, a pile of sweaty, sated bodies, breaths coming in harsh gasps, shaking hands patting and stroking whatever they could reach. Harry made a sound of discomfort as Charlie’s softened cock slid out from him. A breathless chuckle was Charlie’s answer. Theo sighed and rested a hand on one pale flank, his clawed fingers pierced the white skin, drawing blood.

Harry whined at the strip of painful fire, but didn’t protest, knowing that Theo was casting the usual magic that would heal whatever scrapes and marks their bonding session had brought on. It would also help with the soreness.

"Sleep?" Harry croaked, feeling a wave of sudden tiredness wash over him. The sensation felt mixed as if it weren't entirely his own and he traced it down the bond to Charlie's half-closed eyes, the purple-hue fading away from the vibrant blue eyes.

"I think we wore him out." Theo murmured, slipping out from the pliant redhead with a touch of concern. He dug his claws into the firm side and began to trace the shapes and runes as he'd done for Harry.

Charlie twisted with a warbling sound in his throat. Theo rumbled comfortingly in answer as Harry elbowed his way to a better position between the two of them.

The green-eyed brunet snuggled up to Theo's chest, his arms holding one of Charlie's captive, as their legs tangled together. Theo reached across Harry's slender, pale form to skim his fingers reassuringly over Charlie's tanned bulk, his own legs tangled up with theirs. The young Alpha gently prodded at the new bond, checking each of his bonded's current statuses before slipping towards the welcome blackness of sleep.

A faint quirk of his lips showed when his Slytherin mind whispered one detail that hadn't occurred yet. The bond had settled and while it now happily accepted Charlie into the fold, he could sense that it was still unsatisfied. Now that their triad was fully established, the circle instinct in all of them would prod them to continue building until both magic and personal preferences were at equilibrium. Harry would definitely be hunting this Hunting Season.

Theo smirked. He hoped Harry's next choice would be a Nevarean native, a Pareya would be nice, he mused. Then again, unless a specific pull manifested between him and another, the choosing
was all Harry's. He was curious to see how this would turn out, as knowing Harry, the brunet wasn't likely to set his Hunting criteria on shallow limits, but rather deeper and with purpose, just as he'd done with Charlie.

That made Theo smile as he waited, knowing the feeling would be shared between his Beta and Sub, albeit in muted tones. Charlie was a lovely addition, while he'd enjoyed the one-on-one time he'd had with Harry, having Charlie had significantly eased the Alpha burden on his shoulders. A Pareya would ease Charlie's worries and from there, the ranks could fill in time. There was absolutely no rush at all. Sort of.

Harry had nearly drifted off before it registered.

Theo smothered his laugh in Harry's sweat-dampened hair as the brunet groaned aloud. The same sound he'd made after their bonding had completed and he'd realized the need for a Beta.

"No..." The protest was a near whine as Harry burrowed his head deeper into Theo's chest. "No."

He mumbled, faintly. "Already have Charlie."

"Wha-?" Charlie slurred, sleepily.

"Nothing." Theo rubbed the arm within reach. "Harry's being cute. Go back to sleep."

"Cute?" Charlie yawned. "S'how?"

"Sleep." Theo yawned in turn. He gathered up his Alpha authority and gently pushed the command through the bond.

It took a half-second to register. Harry's warm, soft body went slack with sleep within a heartbeat, as Charlie's own breathing evened out and a comfortable silence filled the room. Theo mentally threw his senses out, feeling through the guesthouse and then about the property lines, before he was assured that everything was well and where it ought to be. Satisfied in more ways than one, he settled down and finally let his eyelids slide shut. Sleep would come quickly.

Harry was the first of the trio to wake when daylight settled in. He couldn't tell the hour or the time, because the lack of windows prevented any actual access to the outdoors, the charmed picture on the wall hidden by the curtain Theo had drawn out of habit the night before. A dull ache settled in his lower back, but nothing that he wasn't used to dealing with, on the grounds that magic could heal quite a bit, just not everything.

He was content to discover that Theo and Charlie had him sandwiched between them, Charlie's hands reaching across to rest on Theo's side, while Theo's pale fingers settled on Charlie's bare hip. Each of them leaned closer towards him, their heads sharing the same soft pillow. Harry shifted until he could curve his hands up to touch the mating marks on each bicep that would allow him the freedom of movement he sought.

Brushing his fingers over the familiar tattoos, Harry hummed happily to see the darkened mark on Charlie's neck, proof that Theo had completely claimed him the night before. He pressed a congratulatory kiss to Charlie's cheek, even though the redhead wasn't awake to appreciate it. His bladder was currently reminding him that he needed to see to it, and the uncomfortable stickiness in his lower regions reminded him that someone had forgotten the cleaning spells before bed.

Theo and Charlie shifted in tandem until Harry could crawl out from his position between them. He watched them cuddle up to each other as he slipped free, smiling when Charlie's larger frame curved around Theo's smaller one. He found the differences in height to be interesting as Theo had
always been taller than him, yet Charlie was taller than Theo. He wondered at the significance, recalling to mind Terius and Snape, with the DADA professor being perhaps an inch taller than the Potions Master, while Draco had been decidedly shorter than both. Bahn was also a touch shorter than Ilsa and Harry knew the lady Gheyo had been shorter upon their initial meeting. Then again, he'd seen her alter her height at least once.

Sliding off the bed, Harry stretched carefully, cataloguing his aches and twinges, unable to find anything wrong. That was good, considering the night they'd had that had begun in careful, gentle motions and eventually turned rougher, harder and compelled by instinct in the later hours. Harry made his way to the en suite, tickled to see that Theo had laid out fresh changes of clothes and towels on the racks and along the sink.

They'd traveled to Nevarah with nothing, so it was a welcome relief to see clean—familiar—clothes awaiting him. He fingered the neatly pressed collars of the wizarding robes and then trailed his fingers over the thick, dressy trousers and soft, dressy shirt. He didn't exactly feel like dressing up today, but when his fingers settled on something that wasn't silken, Harry explored the pile to see a change of pyjamas and a pair of cuffed shorts with brass buttons and short-sleeved cotton shirt with a pressed collar and buttons at the neck.

Harry poked through the pile with interest, remembering when Theo had dragged him to Hogesmeade for that particular outing. He hadn't really wanted to go shopping, mostly because it was embarrassing and his school clothes were still mostly serviceable—or so he'd thought until his Alpha had caught sight of them. He'd emptied Harry's trunk and wardrobe in short order and immediately seen to a day off so they might replace every single item.

In spite of his protests, Theo had been firm and unmoving on the topic of replacing every item, school clothes included. Why, Harry didn't try to figure out, surprised when Theo had offered him the option of muggle clothing as well as wizard wear. He'd shyly accepted, surprised to find that his pureblooded wizard was perfectly adept in fashionable wear for either side of society. The highlight of his day had been a comfortable pair of trainers with solid rubber soles in black and silver. Black because it would match with everything, Theo had told him and silver, because he liked it.

Now as he wondered where they'd been left, Harry looked down at the floor to see them neatly lined up along the edge of the vanity. Theo had likely summoned them or 'ported them or whatever, the night before and it was a gesture very much appreciated. Harry selected the shorts, and causal collared shirt, digging through the pile to find clean pants and socks. Poking through the cabinets showed them to be stocked with his usual body lotion, deodorant and other necessities.

Sending a burst of happiness through the still humming bond, Harry finally headed towards the shower, relishing the thought of the luxury of unending hot water. He noted the twin showerheads and shook his head, knowing that it was both practical and impractical. He turned on the taps and stepped under the steamy sprays, relaxing almost at once as the soothing heat sank into his tired body. He had slept, but he certainly hadn't rested, as his dreams had been something of an erotic blur based on the night's activities. He'd woken once in Charlie's arms and twisted around to cuddle back up to Theo, waking the Alpha to silently request the forced sleep.

A worried Theo had groggily granted it to him and then locked his arms around Harry for the rest of the night. Harry was surprised that none of them had woken in all the movement he'd made to extract himself from the bed. He was even happier to find his favorite shower scrub, shower gel and shampoos lined up for his use and smiled outright at Theo's thoughtfulness. He'd wondered what had prompted their Alpha to leave them alone on the bed and walk out after such a sensual beginning.
One particular moment niggled in the back of his mind and Harry recalled Theo's murmured words before Charlie's first orgasm. The Slytherin side of his Gryffindor mind eagerly fitted the pieces together, deducing that Theo had likely cast some sort of magic in the wake of his abrupt exit the night before. That thought settled with a touch of a frown as Harry resolved to mention it to Theo the first chance he had.

"...that's a very solemn face, my treasure." Theo's quiet, dulcet tones filtered through Harry's musings.

The shorter brunet turned in time to see Theo holding the shower curtain back, happiness shining in his golden eyes as he drank in the sight of Harry's wet, naked body. "Morning." Harry greeted, taking a step back.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Would you stay out if I said yes?" Harry countered.

"Always." Theo murmured, stepping in. "and I reserve the right to read between the lines."

"Is that what you did yesterday?" Harry eyed him as the Alpha stepped into the shower and tapped the second showerhead with one faintly golden-tipped finger. He wasn't surprised when hot water began to fall from the second nozzle and watched as Theo bent his head to wet the chocolate-brown locks.

"Hmm?" Theo leaned into the warm water, raking his hands through his hair.

"I tried to tell you about Bahn." Harry reminded him. He nudged Theo to the side, reaching up to angle his showerhead more to the side so they wouldn't bump in to each other. "I said to stop. You didn't listen."

Golden eyes blinked in surprise. "I did."

Harry arched one perfectly curved eyebrow in question.

"Har-ry." Theo drew the name out with a sigh. "I did. You wanted me to help Bahn, correct? I have known him for longer than either you or Charlie have—I've known him since I was about ten years old. He carried me around and taught me to bake sweets in the kitchen."

"...carried you around?" Harry blinked at him, trying and failing to reconcile the tall, handsome Alpha to anything smaller and shorter than his present state.

"All dragel children are small until their teenage years." Theo reached around him, plucking the dampened washcloth from a slack hand. "Between thirteen and sixteen we gain the majority of our height and looks, by sixteen, our inheritances activate and from sixteen to twenty-one, we grow into whichever rank we've displayed for." He frowned. "That is off-topic. I did listen to you, Harry. You said to help Bahn, I did. I know him. His sole thought was for you to be safely protected, because while he could manipulate my darling mentor, he couldn't guarantee your safety. He likes you and didn't want anything to happen to you, so I removed all of us from the equation."

Harry's frown remained.

Theo reached for the bottle of Harry's shower gel and squirted the liquid onto the fabric. "If you were any more agitated than you were when we left them in the kitchen, your pheromones might have begun to interfere." He squeezed the cloth, working up the foam. "I did listen, Harry and I chose the best course of action according to the situation." He leaned forward to kiss Harry's wet
Harry tugged the washcloth free from Theo's reluctant hand. "I understand that." He agreed, at last. "I'm glad it…worked out."

Theo smiled. "Is that alright?"

"...did Bahn really carry you around?"

A low groan came in answer and Theo's head fell forward to thump on the tile of the shower wall. Harry found himself snickering and he didn't protest when Theo shot a sideways look at him and then took the washcloth back.

They finished the shower, by that time, Charlie had roused himself from the bed and Theo stayed back to help him rinse his wings and reapply the oily potion. Harry shimmied into his fresh, new clothes and carried the rest out to stash in the bedroom wardrobe. Harry shimmied into his fresh, new clothes and carried the rest out to stash in the bedroom wardrobe. He was pleasantly surprised to see it magically expanded on the inside and divided into three specific compartments, one for each of them. He arranged the shirt, trousers and robes, opting to go without for the day. He took the socks and trainers with him, not really wanting to put anything on his feet, but not wanting to be in a position where he couldn't have something nearby in case it was necessary.

He made his way downstairs, through the winding halls and smiled as windows opened as he walked past. They were charmed to respond to the first riser in the house, it seemed and he liked the warm, cheery feel of the sea-scented breeze that filtered through the open upper windows. It took some searching, but he found the kitchen, unsurprised to see that everything looked quite different in the daytime than it had in the evening.

Poking about was done in lazy, half-hearted motions as Harry took eggs from the fridge and tomatoes and lemons from the crisper. Salt was found in the spice cabinet and he doubled back to the fridge for the jug of milk. He counted in his head, multiplying eggs by the number of bonded and then settled on eight eggs and hunting for the wire whisk. He couldn't find one and ended up using a slightly oversized fork instead.

Whipping the eggs together, he poured in a touch of milk to make them fluffy, some lemon juice to remove the eggy-smell when frying and then some tomatoes because veggies were good to eat and he liked them. The result was a nice, thick omelet, bright yellow with hints of red tomato chunks. Bread was in the breadbox and Harry sliced off a few slabs toasting them in the oily frying pan, now that the eggs were divided into plates. He couldn't find anything else to make, but he was hungry and his stomach demanded food. He hoped Theo and Charlie wouldn't mind the simple fare.

Coffee and tea weren't anywhere to be found and Harry puzzled over that, recalling that he was sure he'd seen Theo and Bahn both serve tea the day before. He covered the plates and left them on the counter, heading out to the dining room, where he found a bright cheery white and gold card propped up on the table. There was a familiar magical signature attached and Harry drew his wand from his pocket to run a quick diagnostic over it. Unable to find anything wrong with it, he poked the card, gratified to see the name "Bahn Deveraine" scribbled along the bottom.

It popped open and Bahn's happy voice read out the message within.
"Harry, dearest!" The tone was teasing. "I'm sure you've had a wonderful night—at least I hope you made the most of it, considering I helped to strengthen the wards so you wouldn't be disturbed—I will be very disappointed if you didn't. Good morning or afternoon, which I'm sure it will be, by the time you wake. I am well. I am fine. Quite alive and unharmed. Ilsa is alive and well—grousing as can be expected."

There was an unladylike snort in the background, followed by Ilsa's voice interrupting the message. "I am not grousing. You're the one that couldn't be bothered to wake up beyond a--"

"Hey. Shh. He's recording." A new voice cut in. "Bahn, hurry up, love, would you? We're not supposed to be sending messages from down here in the--"

"—do ignore them. They are always like that." Bahn sighed. "I'd like to invite you and yours to a beachside brunch. If you can make it, then please touch the invitation in the left corner, the glowing side and say yes. I will be bringing my Circle down to the water for a bit of relaxation and family time. I'd like to include you. Expect us within two hours of accepting the invitation and be prepared to meet just about everyone. We'll bring plenty of food, both salt and sweet so you needn't worry of cooking anything or even helping. I have extra hands for that. Just come with Theo and Charlie. If I don't hear from you by three in the afternoon, I'll assume you're otherwise occupied for the day and we can do this some other time, hmm? If I do hear from you, we'll come to your side of the beach at the guesthouse. Just keep an eye out from the balcony." The message flickered off and the left corner of the invitation card began to glow.

Harry smiled at it, thinking for a second. He liked Bahn and didn't mind taking the opportunity to visit on more friendly terms now that the awkwardness had been sorted out. Not having to cook was an added bonus and he knew that Theo would be happy to see Ilsa for himself and know that his mentor was content and unharmed. Even with Bahn and Theo's reassurances, Harry had worried for her—the woman who had taught him to make butterscotch pudding from scratch and kissed his forehead as if he were Theo.

Squeezing the end of the card, Harry cleared his throat and spoke clearly "Yes." The card glowed and then fell from his hands back to the table, the magic gone. Harry waited a moment longer and when nothing happened, he took his breakfast plate and headed out to the balcony. He was too hungry to bother with casting a temporus, but he circled around the balcony until he found the table and chairs in the shaded half of the balcony.

Trotting over, he chose the chair affording him the best view of the wide, white beach stretching out before him and then angled himself towards the door a few feet away. He didn't know where that door was, but he was fairly certain Theo would most likely emerge from there and Charlie would be in tow. He settled down, comfortably, bare feet tapping on the smooth, wooden floor as he hugged the plate to his chest, rather than setting it on the clean table. He ate without hurry, but with large bites, enjoying the tastes and textures of an omelet made the way he liked it.

His magic twined contentedly inside him of him, proof of the solidified triad bond between Alpha-Beta-Sub. He had to admit that it felt good. He could finally feel his magic back the way it was supposed to be—even better than before, if he had to be honest. It had never felt quite so powerful or strong before. Today, he could feel it in his bones, in a way he'd only felt a handful of times before, in moments where he'd taken every ounce of life in his soul and channeled it into fighting Voldemort. Possession at the ministry, his hands on Quirrell's face, the spell cast in the graveyard…moments that he sometimes wishes he didn't have to remember, because they are so vivid.
He would do it again in a heartbeat, though this time with a different mindset. This time, he knows what he is doing and Harry is sure that he can push the extra inch forward to wipe Voldemort out of the history books. Knowing what it has cost so many—his own sacrifices aside—Harry tore a vicious bite out of the toasted bread and chewed stiffly. Now that he is alone, with time to think, his mind is wandering back to what it has known for so long.

Leaving the Wizarding World in such a rush has left so many things open and tangled. Harry rolled the thick slice of toast into an awkward log so he could chew on it without thinking about the crispy crust and soft middle. Thinking of things in such simple terms brought back even older memories that he honestly did not want to deal with. The miniature breakdowns since he'd set foot in the guesthouse were unsettling and unwelcome. He did not want it to become a reoccurring practice, thank you very much. He had more important things to deal with.

His mind flickered back to the Weasley house, noting that Charlie had seemed saddened and lost a few times since the recent slew of changes. He'd been uprooted from the Wizarding World in very much the same way Harry had—except that Charlie hadn't had a Theo to guide him along through things for the past few weeks. Harry squeezed the roll of bread into a weird shape. He chewed morosely on the end, his mind flitting from memory to reality.

There were things to be looked after. Personally, there wasn't that much left in the Wizarding World. His entire life had honestly been Hogwarts, tea and rock cakes with Hagrid, weird conversations with Luna, Quidditch—which reminded him of wings and then the fact that he hadn't actually had the chance to test his wings—and then Ron and Hermione and Ginny and oh—Hermione.

Harry sat upright in the chair, his omelet forgotten. Hermione! The image of his friend hovered in his mind's eye as he remembered the confusion, her disappearance, everyone's lack of information regarding her and checked it over with all that he could recall since the school session had begun. Hermione's scent had changed around the same time as Ginny's, sort of. He remembered the changing scents, how Ron had eventually become too distant and immature, while Hermione's had taken on an oddly sweet scent. Ginny had definitely moved from friend to acquaintance and now, Harry's brow furrowed in thought.

Something had clicked with Hermione. Something had happened, he'd seen it or sensed it on an instinctive level and when no one had stepped forward to protect her, he hadn't been able to help himself. He'd reached for her with the knowledge that she could not be one of his intended, but that she could be the next closest thing. His breath caught in his throat as his mind continued the sorting through the past memories up to now.

The gossip at Hogwarts. The restlessness in the teachers. The reason Terius was DADA professor. Harry mechanically began to eat his omelet, sufficiently mentally distracted, now that he was calm enough to be thinking through the most recent adventures. He had promised himself that he would use his newly enhanced senses to make sure that he never missed anything at all. And still, he'd missed something. He'd missed—no, wait—he had caught the change in scent from Ron. He'd noticed that Lavender's scent was mingled with nearly every male in the Gryffindor dorms as long as a few of the girls. He hadn't read anything into that because—ew. He hadn't wanted to, but he did remember.

And Lavender had been almost exclusively with Ron, even during the time while he was there at the Weasleys. In fact, her scent had never filtered over to Seamus and Dean, while it had spilled over a touch to Neville, Harry hadn't thought anything of it. He'd been preoccupied with Charlie, even the Twins-!
Harry swallowed. The Twins could wait for now, there was something in the back of his mind niggle on that, but the most obvious thing stared him straight in the face. Lavender was with Ron, leaving Hermione with... no one. His fork clattered to the table with a dull rattle. Hermione was a brilliant witch, everyone said it all the time. But it was just that, exactly. Hermione was a brilliant witch. Singular. Not plural. Alone. Always. Even since first year where their tentative friendship had come together, Harry had known—knew it the same way he knew that accepting Bahn's invitation without needing to double-check was fine.

Hermione had always been a loner, busy with her books and quick with her hexes. Her bossy attitude and sharp tongue had rarely endeared her to anyone—even the teachers. He'd never known what he could do for her, save for speaking up the few times it had been in his power and place to do so, she'd always been grateful to him afterward, but he'd always had a sense of failure afterward, as if he should've been able to do more.

Instinct screamed at him to do something, but it could not tell him directly what to do. Harry forced himself to focus on the task of eating. He could think and puzzle through the mental marathon, but his stomach was still hungry and he needed to fill it. Harry thought long and hard, even after he'd finished his eggs and wondered what was taking Theo and Charlie so long. He could feel that they were both content and happy through the bond, so he didn't push it, taking care to keep his worries from filtering through.

He could easily imagine that Theo's wicked, wicked hands had managed to have their way with Charlie. Personally, he would have liked to witness that particular episode, but right now, intimacy of any kind was the furthest thought in his mind. He sifted through the neatly ordered memories recalling everything that he could of Hermione in the past few weeks since the term had begun. Ah-! The thought registered and Harry slumped back in his chair as remembrance flooded through him. He'd been noticing that as he'd searched out Theo, Hermione had been busy with some secret project of her own.

She was always studying with a frown on her face and occasionally, he'd seen her downing gulps of headache potion, a pained grimace stuck on her face for days at a time. He also remembered fetching it from Madam Pomfrey for her and realizing that he'd known when she and Ron were growing apart. He'd been caught up in his own troubles and hadn't thought to spare the extra effort toward ensuring that she was perfectly alright.

No wait, Harry gave his head another shake. That wasn't right either, in fact he'd almost tried and-! A sudden angry squawk left his lips and Harry stood bolt upright as the memory charm began to unravel. His memory was good—too good—and he hadn't stopped to wonder why. He remembered an incident where she'd passed out while visiting Hagrid with him, on the way back. He'd taken her to Madam Pomfrey, surprised when she'd simply signed out a little leather pouch of headache reliever and then pushed him out of the hospital wing before the Matron could return. She'd gone straight to her dorms then and lay down for 'a bit of a rest'. The next day, she'd been pale and feverish and by the end of the week, a slip of her former self.

He'd panicked one afternoon, finding her puking in one of the stalls in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. At first, he hadn't thought anything of her being in there, until he'd remembered that neither witch nor ghost were particularly fond of each other. He hadn't worried then, he'd hurried to help her, casting a half-glance in the toilet bowl and seeing shimmering ribbons of silver mixing with the water.

His hands clenched into fists. He'd ignored it, helping her to stand and half-dragging her over to the sink to wash, feeling her forehead and neck, realizing how utterly weak and thin she'd become. He'd made to send for help, when she'd suddenly come to life. She grabbed his chin, begged him to
Harry shuddered.

The sight of her wand pointed in his face was the one thing he'd never expected. From Ron, from Draco, from Voldemort...maybe even Dumbledore, alright, yes, from Dumbledore too—especially after that other memory, but never from Hermione. The sight of her pain-filled hazel eyes shimmering at him tore into his heart, spilling out fresh ribbons of guilt. She'd suffered even more after that. He vaguely remembered waking up in the Common Room, his face planted in a book as if he'd simply dozed off. He couldn't recall even walking back there in the first place.

A hand went to his mouth and he squeezed his eyes shut. Hermione...what happened that was so terrible you couldn't even share it with me?

He'd failed her, just as he did with so many other things. He should have told someone about Dumbledore's spell, but then again he'd never been able to tell anyone about it before until Quinn had...Quinn had done something. Harry felt his eyes sting with the telltale pressure of tears building. He stubbornly blinked them back, reminding himself that he'd cried enough. It took a bit of effort, but soon he was able to control his breathing as the pressure faded. His hands remained clenched and he could feel the claws just beneath the surface of his skin. From frustration or relief, he didn't know, he only knew that he was, perhaps, thinking too much and that he needed to see Hermione, to look her straight in the eyes and find out what had happened.

To save her.

He had to.

He could feel it in his magic.

"Harry?" Theo's head poked through the door at his right, an expression of worry creasing his pale face. "There you are." The young Alpha stepped out fully onto the deck and turned back. "Charlie, he's through here." Theo moved over, his golden eyes shimmering faintly as they skittered over Harry's not quite finished plate and the clenched fists. "Harry?"

"I'm fine." Harry answered.

Theo perked a brow, but said nothing though, simply crossing over to press a kiss to one cheek. He took up a standing position near the railing and relaxed. He was dressed in swimming shorts, bare chested and barefoot. The black and burgundy swirling tattoos stood out prominently on his creamy skin, the slight muscle definition only adding to the lovely image. The tip of a wand holster peeked above the waistband of the swimming trunks and three tiny golden hoops visible at the tops of his ears.

His mind flickered back to his train of thought and Harry hesitated for a moment, before clearing his throat to gain his Alpha's attention.

Theo's golden eyes flickered patiently back to him. He gave an encouraging tilt of his head, waiting.

"I need to see Hermione."

"We can visit them tomorrow, if you like."

Tomorrow? Harry frowned. No, that wasn't soon enough. "As soon as possible."
"…I shall call Terius."

"Before Bahn comes?" Harry tried. His hands unclenched and he crossed his fingers.

Theo blinked. It was certainly possible, but it also certainly wouldn't be happening. "That wouldn't be very polite," He said, at last. "And it would be bad manners to drop in unannounced. I doubt we could send word and receive an answer before Bahn arrives." Theo's fingers twitched in a partial tempus charm to check the time. "From the moment you accepted Bahn's invitation, I can promise you that he was ready and waiting to leave. They will likely be here earlier than you expect. Elves are always very punctual if nothing else."

"Terius said that we could come to him for anything." Harry reminded. "And they couldn't really mind, I mean, Hermione's stuck in their living room. What if she woke up? What if she's in the way? She doesn't know where she is and I feel like—I have to see her, Theo."

"If she woke, I am sure they would have sent word to us and I doubt she is in the way. Severus is likely working on some potion and Terius is likely with Draco and Calida. I am sure that someone would have said something." Theo soothed. He frowned, his mind puzzling over whether Harry's empathy could be showing itself or whether there was something else thing he was missing.

"Call him now?" Harry prompted. He didn't bother to sit down, but rather moved forward, coming to stand in front of Theo. He wanted the older dragel to see his sincerity. There was more to Hermione than met the eye and he'd just figured out a Pandora's box worth of mystery in his head. He was not about to tell Theo of the witch's memory charm, not after he'd seen Theo's reactions to Umbridge's little fiasco. His Alpha might be strong and steady, but he was very, very protective and Harry did not want to stir those protective instincts up unless they were necessary.

Hermione had always been a good friend to him, which was a little more than he could say for Ron, but then again Ron never had the smart witch's intuition and quick tongue. Until he could prove otherwise, Harry swore to think nothing but the best of her. Something had gone wrong somewhere and he would find out what and why as soon as he could.

Theo slowly released a breath. "We don't have a floo." He said at last.

Harry inched closer. This was important. "Please, Theo?" Emerald eyes met gold.

Theo finally nodded. "As you wish, my treasure." He stretched forward to press a kiss to the furrowed brow. He then leaned back and the air around them seemed to still. The golden eyes widened and fluxed black as Theo's face took on a faraway look. He raised one hand and rested it over his heart, head tipping forward in a mild approximation of a bow. "A message for Councilman Terius Snape, on behalf of Theodore Gorgens Nott, immediate vicinity. I wish to inquire about his extra guest and request a suitable time to visit. Our evening is currently full. I ask that he respond at his earliest convenience. Teacher Terius, it is Theo. Harry wants to know about Hermione. Please send an update as soon as possible. My thanks and well wishes to you and yours."

Harry found his breathing eased as the nearly faint pressure evaporated and Theo's dark eyes returned to their normal, light hue. "No floo?" He said, cautiously.

"Dragels send and receive messages in much the same way as our transportation spells." Theo reached for him, curling two arms around Harry's slender waist. He drew the smaller dragel towards him and smiled indulgently when Harry let him. "We address the message to their formal, legal name and sign it with our formal, legal name. Messages can be left at the Circle's message center and accessed when either the Alpha or Submissive returns to the flat, or they can be sent directly to the individual. However, that is risky and you cannot possibly know where they are and
what kind of a situation they are in. Causing any sort of a fuss could be detrimental to your social growth and as such, you shouldn't send any messages unless you are sure of where the recipient ought to be."

"You aren't in trouble are you?"

"Now you worry." Theo chuckled. "No, love. We are fine. If I am not mistaken, I do believe that Draco's realignment is drawing near if it has not occurred yet again and on that basis, I doubt that either Terius or Severus would allow him out of the house, meaning they are home and it is fine to send them a message."

Harry relaxed. "Thank you."

"Think nothing of it. Now finish your food, you hardly eat enough as it is." Theo released him from the light embrace and gave Harry a nudge towards his chair. "Go."

The sound of the door swinging open drew their attention as Harry reluctantly returned to his seat. He would have rather stayed in Theo's arms for the time being, but he didn't want to waste the food either and he didn't exactly feel full, so that wasn't a suitable excuse to leave it.

"You forgot your plate." Charlie called out, coming over to join them. He was dressed similarly his tanned skin showing off black and navy scripted tattoos over his back and gracing the tops of his shoulders. His multi-highlighted red hair was twisted into something of a careless ponytail, showing off the textured strands, a few short, stray pieces curling around his ears. His swimming trunks were navy blue and grey as opposed to Theo's brown and black. A sated look shone in his rich blue eyes as he slid the plates onto the table beside Harry and leaned down to hug the smaller wizard in welcome.

Harry leaned back into the strong arms, relishing and enjoying the contact. It was warm, grounding and very, very welcome. Charlie gave great hugs. Theo gave nice cuddles.

"I'd say morning, but I think it's more afternoon." Charlie chuckled. "Thanks for the food. It looks lovely."

"It does, thanks." Theo chimed in, he pushed away from the railing, his golden eyes fixed on something far out of sight. He turned back to the present, a faint smile twitching at the corners of his lips as he took in the site of Charlie's broad tanned arms wrapped around Harry from behind, Harry's head tilted back to rest on the firm chest. "No swimming trunks?" He inquired. "Bahn said a beachside party, do expect to be soaking wet at some point or another."

Harry shrugged. He'd forgotten that little detail and a lifetime of wearing clothes meant to hide rather than display, made him shyer about showing off his skinny self, compared to his Bonded's luscious bodies. "I forgot." He stuffed his mouth and chewed slowly, swallowing down the final mouthful.

"Green and silver?" Theo suggested, mischievously.

Charlie wrinkled his nose. "Not gold and burgundy."

"Black." Harry wrinkled his nose. "And I didn't see any swimming trunks in the wardrobe."

"I didn't 'port those over until I read Bahn's note." Theo took a seat at the little table and reached for his plate. He drew his wand with his other hand and tapped it on the edge of the table. "Dark brown and blue?" He suggested, gesturing towards his own swimming trunks. They had stripes down the sides and the cuffs as well as colored drawstrings with metal tips.
Harry shrugged. "Doesn't really matter." He didn't really know. He'd never had the chance or the opportunity to choose swimwear before—not really. The Triwizard Tournament hadn't afforded him any personal options, it had been standard Gryffindor colors and classic black. He was used to wearing the dark red and gold hues of his house, never mind what everyone thought of his green eyes and dark hair.

"Green and black?" Charlie suggested, finally unwrapping his arms and reaching over Harry's head to retrieve his plate. He lounged against the railing rather than taking a seat, sniffing appreciatively at the plate of eggs and toast kept fresh by the charms.

Another shrug came in answer. Harry watched Theo eat for a moment and then mentally backed up. "What were you looking at?"

"Hmm?" Theo's head snapped up again. He was idly twirling his wand and eating his late brunch with annoyingly small, perfect motions.

"You were looking out there," Harry gestured beyond the guesthouse at the beach.

"Bahn." Theo grinned. "He'll be coming around as soon as he can round up his entire circle, which reminds me. This will be the first time either of you are interacting with a full circle, so I'd like to ask you to remember a few things."

Harry swallowed back a sigh. He was hoping it would be fun, after all Bahn had seemed fairly wonderful and not quite as snobbish as his twin sister. However, he remembered that the elfin Submissives shared a circle. Certainly the other Circle Members were something like Bhindi, then again, Ilsa hadn't been anything like either of them, Harry mused. He tried not to let anything show on his face at the thought that a potentially enjoyable afternoon would now be bogged down by formalities and things he shouldn't do. Theo probably had a whole list of rules for etiquette and manners that he'd have to keep track of.

"Bahn is likely bringing his original Circle, plus Ilsa. There are six of them, not counting his Alpha, Delani. Ilsa makes seven, Delani makes eight. I know the Circle has children, I don't know how many or who they are. I've never met them. They have likely heard of me, being Ilsa's apprentice, though some of us have never met. They will know of you two, thanks to Bahn, I am sure. However, I want you to be aware, because Oretta has warned me that some believe I was responsible for her…absence from the Deveraine Circle. We dragels are sneaky, devious creatures. They may be perfectly polite on the outside, but not so nice until they are sure about you—please be careful. I highly doubt that anything will happen and I know Delani has a firm grip on her Circle, but it cannot hurt to be cautious. You both know if you have need of me, I will likely always be within sight, do not hesitate to call and remember that I can feel you." Theo smiled. "And have fun. The parts of us dragels that aren't sneaky and devious tend to be playful and curious. If there are dragel children under the age of ten, then be sure not to touch them or approach them first without either Bahn's permission or Delani's, unless the child engages you. The entire Circle will be fiercely protective of them."

"Bahn said we had no quarrel last night." Harry spoke up, carefully. He remembered the exact phrasing and the exchange of magic. "Doesn't that mean something?"

Theo's eyebrows arched upward to his chocolate curls. "He did?" There was a note of amazement in his voice. "He really likes you then, Harry…all of us. That is not a vow to give lightly. In that case, simply have fun, but do be careful. It's not likely that we'll cause any trouble by being ourselves."

Charlie snorted. "Since when doesn't being ourselves cause trouble?"
"Do not make me answer that," Theo countered. But he smiled as he spoke and then refocused his attention on his plate. He paused at one point and tapped Harry's shorts, transfiguring them into swimming trunks of black, with brown and green stripes adorning the sides, finished off with a hint of gold and silver detail. "If you don't like those, I can change them later, but I can almost guarantee that you will spend the afternoon half in the water and half on the sand." He gave a tilt of his head towards the beach. "You'll be more comfortable if you are shirtless and in swimming trunks." His brow knitted together. "I suppose it does not need to be mentioned that as dragels we are very physical. Expect it." He stood up abruptly, head cocked.

"What is it?" Charlie subtly straightened, his blue eyes narrowing. "I don't see anything-

"You won't see it, but I can feel it." Theo smiled. "They're on their way."

"Already?" Harry rose to his feet, plate in hand.

Theo flicked his wand at the dish, banishing it to the sink. "You'll see them in a minute or so. Keep watching over there," he pointed. "Can you feel my element? Tune into it, just like we've practiced. Search through all the sensations and try to find Bahn, once you find him, simply be. You'll sense the rest of them in no time and they will be here soon enough."

Harry hesitated. It was there, he was sure, but he couldn't be certain what exactly it was that he was feeling. Theo's suggestion for Bahn helped though. He could do that. He would definitely never forget the feel of Bahn's magic, powerful, seductive and so very gentle. A faint smile touched his face and Harry reached inside of himself and pulled on the magic twining around him.

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**CHARACTER SNIPPET : JUN BLACK : Weasley Manor**

"George?" Fred stumbled out of the energy ring and into his father's arms. He was surprised to feel their magic react to each other, a happy thrum of energy and he managed an awkward smile before the realization of his twin's absence registered. "Dad, where's George?"

"He went to stand in the hallway." Felix came over, a wide smile on his face. "Celebratory drink, now?" he tried. "We were waiting for-"

"I can't feel him." Fred interrupted, a new tinge of panic beginning to bleed over. He'd expected to feel something when he'd accepted the Torvak transformation and yet, his twin seemed to be even more distant than before. He twisted out of his father's embrace, eyes rapidly scanning the room. "George?" He called. "Forge!"

"Fred." George's quiet voice came from the doorway where he stood, half-shadowed and sheltered by Regulus' broad, dark feathered wings. He managed a wan smile as their eyes met and no words were needed.

Fred was across the room and snatching him up in a hug, before the truth of the moment settled fully inside of him. He gripped his twin a little tighter than necessary, uncaring of whether this particular embrace was uncomfortable and bordering on painful. George did not protest. He simply stretched his head to the side and laid it on his twin's shoulder, with a heavy sigh.

"Forge?" Fred hated the way his voice shook.

"S'okay, Fred." George murmured, numbly. He wondered how he'd miscalculated and then he recalled that he hadn't been calculating anything at all. Jun had asked what he'd wanted and he had...answered. He had no one but himself to blame if they didn't match and yet, wasn't this
something they had once fantasized about? Being different and unique in ways that were perfect for each other?

"...Forge." Fred repeated, stubbornly.

George slowly worked his arms free to return the painful hug. "...Gred." He answered, softly. Understanding the connection his twin so frantically sought. The weight of Jun's words were now settling inside of him and he realized, belatedly that this choice may have been perfect, but it would also cost him dearly. He was not prepared to leave—not Fred.

"What did you tell her?" Fred's whisper was harsh and broken.

"...the truth."

"I can't...not without you." Fred's head bowed and he touched their cheeks together, seeking warmth, comfort and reassurance where there had always been something and now, seemed to have disappeared. "This can't...they-"

"Ronald, you're next." Cedrella eyed the twins worriedly, but waved the youngest Weasley child forward. "Hurry up now, we do not want to keep Lady Black waiting and I am sure she must be using quite a bit of magic to be keeping this up." She snatched the half-eaten meat pie from the wizard's fingers and brushed a few crumbs for his face. She frowned when he wiped his mouth on his sleeve rather than his kerchief that was nowhere to be seen. She didn't want to know how he'd managed to sneak something from the kitchen after meals, her house elves were quite firm on some points.

"Did it hurt?" Ron looked to Fred and rolled his eyes when he caught sight of his older brothers clinging to each other as if they were drowning. He'd seen their odd displays of affection before and this was another one of those moments. He wished that he hadn't seen it, because it always made his stomach churn. There was a closeness about them that he'd never been able to reconcile himself to, especially with their twinspeak and wild magic—and he knew their magic was wild, he'd felt it a few times when he'd inadvertently made himself the targets of their pranks.

Cold hazel eyes turned in identical synchronization and glowered at him.

Ron stumbled back a step, the sheer intensity of raw emotion in both gazes made him feel hot and cold all over. He stumbled towards Jun's yellow wall of fire and hoped that she would call him in soon. He did not want to burn his hands as he'd seen Fred do, but he couldn't wait to be a creature like the rest of them. They were treating him like a child, some clueless snot-nosed brat that didn't know what was really going on. He'd show them. Once he was a Torvak, then he'd show them all…

"...you despicable child." Jun stumbled out from the energy ring circle, rubbing her arms vigorously. She backed up until she was flush against her husband's left side and she trembled, faintly, even as his winged arms twitched at her agitation.

"Jun?" Regulus carefully maneuvered his arms around her, wings and all. He was used to her reactions and bursts of wild magic, though as the energy walls and flickering neon yellow flames now faded, melting away due to her absence, he could tell something else was wrong. "What happened? Is the boy alright?" He'd come forward with George and was surprised to see her emerging scarcely two minutes after she'd just drawn Ron in.

The lady dragel visibly shuddered in his embrace. "He's fine. Quite fine." She swallowed hard.
"And I want nothing to do with him." She turned at once in his arms. "Take me home, Reg. Now. I want to go home. I don't want to be here." There was a vacant look in her eyes, proof that her mind was somewhere.

Regulus blinked. He tried to tighten the embrace. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"I'll be fine when I'm anywhere but here." The redhead snapped, fiercely. She crossed her fingers and reached up to scratch bloody marks from her cheek down to her neck. She muttered a few words and all the live, glowing runes in the room immediately died, turning to black ash. "Home. Regulus, I want to go home."

Understanding dawned with a sudden, new surge of protectiveness. "Shh." He soothed. "It's fine."

"No, it's not!" Her voice was shrill and loud. "It absolutely is not. Take. Me. Home."

"...have you ah,"

"I want nothing more to do with that selfish, boastful, arrogant...prig!" The words were ground out, the last one ending on a feral hiss as Jun Black turned and threw a green-eyed glare over one shapely shoulder at the bewildered figure of Ronald Weasley. "You-!" She fairly shook with emotion. "I refuse to spend another minute in your appalling presence, the same for this entire house of ignorant, uncultured, self-serving feather-brained incompetents!"

Regulus winced. "Must you insult them to their faces?"

One auburn eyebrow arched delicately. "Is there any other way?" Jun said, primly. The air seemed to grow dry and a faint tremor rattled through the room.

"Jun, please...calm down." Regulus frowned, straightening even more. His dark eyes darted quickly about the room, seeing things that apparently no one else could see.

"I am perfectly calm, darling." Jun retorted. "but I am not stupid and I should hope that you are exactly as I have left you before this started." Her shoulders twitched, faintly and her glare remained fixed on Ron. "You will never be a dragel, I have insured that." She licked red lips, her green eyes glowing even brighter. "However, it is not by my hand that you will be a Torvak, either. I refuse this responsibility in every capacity that is mine and I call you all as witnesses." She paused for a breath.

Cedrella exchanged a look with her husband, Septimus and then heaved a sigh. "Lady Black," she began.

"Page five-hundred and ninety-two of Slyvania's Home Potions for the Cautious Witch." Jun ground out. "Brew the ingredients according to the instructions on page four-hundred and eleven. Cool for fifteen minutes, add two tablespoons of his blood and that of his father. Divide it into three doses, each to be taken twelve hours apart from each other, no sooner and no later. Cast the spell of anchoring to keep his magic intact before he takes the potion or you'll have a squib." She wrinkled her nose. "...not that I believe it would be a disappointment..." The witch gave a little huff. "You must not under any circumstances combine the doses and they must bleed directly into it, the blood cannot be stored, it must be fresh. Lastly, it cannot be brewed by a woman nor administered by one. Sort out amongst yourselves who will do what. I wash my hands of this mess." She folded her arms, clawed fingers wiggling. "And I clean my claws of your blood." She leaned into Regulus. "Home, Reg. Now." She turned towards the younger Weasley twin who hovered uncertainly beside them. "George, hold onto his wings and my arm. Do not let go. This is nothing like apparating. It is far more complicated. Good day to all of you and a miserable night."
"Now wait just a minute!" Arthur Weasley came forward as the outcry began. "What is the meaning of this?"

Those vibrant green eyes flickered dispassionately at the elder Weasley. "Surely you didn't think I'd let you keep him." She mocked. "A dragel in your ranks, you'd try to tear it out of him in some way or another."

"We would not." Bill said, strongly. He frowned, moving forward to take up a position beside his father. Fleur fell into step beside him, their fingers still intertwined. "We are family and that is all that there is. None of this ridiculous-"

"You made him a dragel?" Arthur's voice was deceptively light. "Even when-"

"I aksed." Jun threw back. "I asked every single one of them and whatever it was that they asked, I granted. You cannot turn this on me."

"I will not let you take my son."

"I am not taking him, he is coming of his own accord." Jun wrinkled his nose. "Ask him, unless you are afraid of the answer."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well. I guess we shouldn't take my word as far as monster chapters are concerned. LOL. Do enjoy it. I'm going through finals at university this coming week. wish me luck! Thank you all for the well wishes for my Aunty. I will visit her this weekend and I hear she is doing well. :) This is wonderful news for the holidays.
Meeting Bahn's Side of Things 1

Chapter Summary

Harry, Theo and Charlie finally have a chance to meet Bahn's original circle and share a beachside brunch.

Chapter Notes

NOTE: The spoilers for the Weasley twins are still TRUE. They will both be draegels. I just didn't say HOW or WHEN I would make it happen. ;)

RECAP: Theo, Harry and Charlie are finally fully bonded. Harry's Empath instincts override him for a bit, but he is able to bring them under control. Harry has some time to think and remember about the school semester and unravels a memory charm that Hermione had cast during the school session. He does not tell Theo, but resolves to go and see her straightaway. Bahn Deveraine sends Harry a brunch invitation for a beach party with his original circle Bonded and his children. Harry accepts. In the meantime, Jun's empath nature is disgusted by what it reads off of Ron and refuses to turn him to either draegel or torvak. She leaves instructions for a potion, then prepares to leave with George.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEVARAH : ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE : DEVERAINE PROPERTY

When Bahn's half of the Deveraine Circle came into view, Harry felt his breath catch in his throat. If he'd thought that Bahn was fairly good-looking, then it appeared to be something he valued in his Bonded. Nearly every draegel walking up the beach towards them were dressed in variations of white, with pale-silvery blonde hair and creamy, unmarked skin. There was nothing out of place and plenty of sparkle and shimmer to be seen, even at a distance. A few of them held young children balanced on one hip, while Bahn himself, cradled a small, well-wrapped bundle to his shoulder, a protective hand resting along the back of it.

They were dressed in various styles of swimwear, variations of white and silver though two things were painfully obvious at once. They were all women, with the exception of one. The second was the hair. Various braids and loops and twists held together knee-length tresses, even on the single male draegel as the Circle slowly approached. They walked in some unspoken rhythm, each step precise and unfaltering, the heads turning and mouths moving as they spoke amongst themselves. It was perfection in motion.

Harry swallowed hard. He had mostly been prepared for nearly anything, but there were some surprises that were simply too…surprising. He made a sound in his throat and hurriedly swallowed it back down. Just because they were all women did not mean that they couldn't all have a wonderful time.

Theo looked at him, a flicker of worry shuttering through his golden eyes. "Harry?" He tested.
"Er," Harry answered, intelligently. He tried and failed to piece together a coherent string of words. He'd never had much success with women of any kind, specifically if he would remember Cho and the past year and things that did not quite work out. He shifted uneasily, because remembering Cho, brought back memories of Ginny—who had stated she'd been dating Dean Thomas at the end of the last school year. Yet, when he'd visited The Burrow this year, Dean had seemed to spend more time with Seamus and Ginny had latched onto him again.

Granted, he'd been able to make his feelings mostly clear in terms of romantic feelings, but Ginny was a Weasley and Weasleys were a stubborn lot. His mind reminded him of her constant scent during the interrupted school session and he welcomed the relief that coursed through him. The female form had since been decidedly unappealing to him since. It was too much of what he didn't want, but hadn't realized until he'd held Theo in his arms and been held by the Slytherin in turn.

Then again, Theo was nearly liquid seduction, as far as Harry was concerned. His Alpha was an experienced and attentive lover. He had no disillusions that if he hadn't exactly been Theo-oriented, a single night—no, a single hour—would have convinced him. She hadn't treated him any differently than she usually did after the first transfer of her affections to Dean, so he'd counted it as a victory. He wondered how she was doing now, with his thoughts flickering to the Weasley family in general.

He didn't remember much from screaming for Charlie when the Death Eater had thrown that spell. He had a vague memory of throwing out his magic with such anger and despair that he'd felt the earth shift beneath him. He'd called for Theo and had passed out before his Alpha had returned. Then of course, he'd wakened and Ilsa and Aracle had been there. Harry sifted through his thoughts with more patience than he'd originally expected.

He did wonder if Aracle would be present, but considering the last time he'd seen the kind Rhyeo had been in Bhnid's presence, he wasn't keen to repeat the experience. He'd much rather meet Bahn's circle without any of his twin's particular brand of vitriol. Ilsa would surely be present and Harry had a feeling a meeting between those two would be explosive. He definitely did not want to be present when it happened.

Theo waited a moment longer, but when no answer was forthcoming, he looked from Harry to Charlie, before following their line of sight. His brow furrowed, apparently missing what they were both seeing. "Charlie?" He tried this time. He was mildly relieved to see that Bahn was bringing his original circle and not anyone from Bhnid's or Bhnid, herself. Not that he expected the elfindragel to do so, Bahn was surprisingly perceptive the few times they'd met and interacted. Theo wouldn't put it past the older Submissive to have slapped leashes on each of his respective Bonded for the afternoon. He'd simply have to wait and see how it went. The few times he'd had the rare pleasure of meeting the Deveraine circle had always been—intense. He could understand if the mere sight was unsettling, but he thought they were managing well enough for the moment. Ilsa had always taken care to keep him apart from the others, worried that her own strained relations would affect him, so he'd only befriended three of them.

Harry had a faint look of envy on his face and Theo stored it away for future question. He could understand the reaction upon seeing a circle such as Bahn's in such perfect harmony, but only time and experience would allow them to move with the same graceful ease as the group traipsing across the sandy shores towards them.

"Bahn has a…lovely circle." Charlie managed at last. "a very…curvy circle." A faint flush of pink dusted over his tanned face, barely noticeable against the darker skin, but there nonetheless. Harry was definitely his heart's desire, but that did not mean he didn't hold a healthy appreciation for a beauty in any form and gender. Bahn's circle was pure, undiluted loveliness. He hoped they were
friendly and polite—especially to Harry.

A wide grin broke out on Theo's face as he finally made the connection. He hadn't even considered that. It hadn't even crossed his mind. "Ah, that." He was hard-pressed not to laugh outright, remembering that his own reaction to Bahn's elfin beauties had been rather similar when Ilsa had first introduced them. Elves, like Fae, were quite wonderful creatures to admire. "I suppose I should explain that Bahn is very, ah, traditional." He winked, understanding what neither of his tongue-tied Bonded could properly articulate.

One blonde tossed her head, pale, plaited hair streaming out behind her as she leaned just out of reach of the small grabbing hands from the child cradled in her arms. Her laughter floated through the air, musical and light. A string of Elvish accompanied it, followed by another round of laughter from her companions.

Theo hadn't thought to warn them, simply because it hadn't occurred to him that they would need warning. "I didn't think I had to mention it, but they are rather…lovely. Aren't they?" Neither Bonded answered. Theo pressed his lips together for a moment, then took pity on them. "Most Battle Elves from the Air Clans are. In spite of it, you will find they are quite normal. The physical beauty is a bit alluring at first, but you will not notice it after a time. They do not notice their own vanity among each other—only when in public or among their fellow Elves."

"Battle Elves?" Harry's head snapped 'round to stare at Theo. He hadn't even heard the rest of it. "Battle Elves?" He repeated as if daring Theo to repeat that and further skew the equation in his mind. Surely those lovely, light creatures couldn't possibly be the lethal, wicked bunch that DADA had warned of. DADA had taught very strict, specific sections in the curriculum in handling dark elves, enraged elves and elven sorcerers. Battle Elves were a classification all on their own. Harry swallowed. Then again, they hadn't really had the chance to properly study them, but now, he could understand the danger. If something that lovely flew into a pure rage, he could imagine it would be significantly terrible.

A smattering of goosebumps rippled over his arms and Harry deliberately shrugged them off. There was absolutely nothing to be afraid of—how many times had he been judged on his celebrity past, rather than his true personality? He would definitely allow them the same chance he'd always hoped others would gift him. He couldn't stop the strangled sound in his throat though, when his mind attempted to overlay one of the old printed, pictures in the DADA textbook with the carefree, golden group traipsing across the sand.

Theo didn't appear to be the least bit affected, but instead tucked a few chocolate curls behind his ears, the sunlight glinting off the silver earrings. "Of course. Can't you tell? See the bone and muscle structure? If they weren't then you would be able to tell, because it is one of the most defining features among them." His brow furrowed. It made perfect sense to him…

Harry made a noise in his throat, the words tangling up again.

Theo rolled his eyes. "Harry, I am being serious. Battle Elves tend to have smaller more compact bodies, especially from the Air Clan. The Earth Clan tends to be tall, willowy hulks—and that is more of a contradiction than you need to know—but you can tell the difference in elements. The Fire elves are simply brunettes and there are no such things as water Elves. There are three divisions of Elves, the Royal Elves, Battle Elves, and Magecraft Casters. Each division exists with light and dark counterparts," Theo nearly shrugged. His shoulders flinched backward. "That is how you have light and dark elves. Please tell me you did not believe what you read in those old DADA textbooks?"

"Can't believe everything you read." Harry heard himself say, he shook his head faintly. He'd think
about this later. For now, it didn't matter. He'd just be normal—well, as normal as he could be—and treat them as normally as he could manage as well. "Bahn is a Light Royal Elf?" Harry confirmed.

"Exactly." Theo smiled, pleased. "You are paying attention. Shall we greet them now? If we wait much longer, Bahn will likely 'port himself directly up here, never mind anything else."

Charlie flashed him a reassuring smile, slinging an arm around Harry's shoulder as Theo started for the door. "They'll love you." He gave the shoulders a light squeeze. He was looking forward to this afternoon almost as much as Harry. It had simply been one thing after another and he wanted a break—from the look of things, that break would be soon in coming, as long as they all did not take things too seriously for a few hours. "You had fun with Bahn yesterday, didn't you?"

Harry nodded. He had and things looked as if they would be fun. But he hadn't been expecting this picture perfect vision of beauty waltzing towards them on a milky white beach.

*Remember to smile*, he told himself, warily.

"Harry!" Bahn's excited voice traveled clearly across the open air, perhaps aided by a touch of his own elemental gift. The dragel-elf quickened his step, involuntarily spurring on the rest of his Circle to copy the increase in pace. He was shadowed by the only male dragel, who came to a stop behind his Submissive, a hand's breadth away. "Tak, hold this." The sleeping child on his shoulder was expertly transferred over to the waiting arms and Bahn turned to gift Harry with a hug, his smile wide. "Harry." He breathed.

The tension drained away from Harry as he found himself hugging back. Bahn gave good hugs too. "Bahn." He heard himself say.

"It's good to see you." Bahn squeezed him tight, then stepped back, the smile on his face upping a few watts. "I am glad. You look rested…and worried. Did everything work out? I thought for sure it would be a good night…" His smile softened at the sight of Harry's blush. "Ah, then it was. Whatever else you're worrying about, don't think so hard about it. Come. I want to introduce you to everyone, starting with this idiot here." He gave a teasing nudge to the fellow rocking the sleeping toddler in his arms. "Theo, Charlie! Come on!" He waited while the other two dragels made their way over with easy grace. "Theo!" Bahn happily hugged him as well, before pulling Charlie down for a hug as well. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks." Theo greeted. "It is good to see you again. Thank you for the invitation, there was no need to-"

"Shush." Bahn wrinkled his nose. "I wasn't thinking of you, I was thinking of Harry." But he grinned widely as he spoke, betraying the teasing glint in his eyes.

Theo's golden eyes warmed considerably. "And it is much appreciated." He said, quickly. "It has been a while since I've seen you and yours."

"Ah, no worries." Bahn straightened. "I'll introduce everyone—seeing as Harry and Charlie are new faces." His smile softened. "Speaking of which, I was about to introduce this lump." He nudged the fellow gently rocking the babe in his arms. "This is my Beta, Takar. He's special. We treat him very nicely. Tak, this is Harry. The one I've been talking about since this morning. The redhead is Charlie and I think you do remember, Theo, yes?"

Takar fixed his Submissive with a look, but did not bother to correct the introduction in any way.
There were crinkles at the corners of his eyes, suggesting that perhaps this particular dragel did not speak much, but that he was not immune to the laughter and youthfulness that seemed to be fairly radiating off of Bahn. "Theo, Charlie." He inclined his head to the higher-ranked dragels as a matter of course.

"Tak, it's good to see you again." Theo greeted, smiling widely. "You look well."

"I am, thank you." The Beta flashed an answering smile. "Charlie, was it? It is a pleasure."

Charlie extended a tanned arm, accepting the clasped forearm in exchange. It did not miss his attention that he'd been offered more than a mere handshake. Theo had been correct in his warning, to remind them that dragels were physical creatures. The dark brown eyes that raked carefully over him were curious and serious at the same time. The redhead found himself hoping he'd be able to spend some time near the older Beta. There was a muted aura of confidence and calmness surrounding the dragel and he wanted to know more. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Takar nodded. "Likewise." He turn to the green-eyed brunet at last. "And Harry, it is a pleasure." He greeted warmly. "Bahn has not stopped talking about you since breakfast. I am pleased to say that he did not over exaggerate. I'd offer you a handshake or a hug, but I'm afraid this little one might wake." He hummed softly when the child made a sound of distress. "It took nearly two hours to make the little monster nod off."

"Do not call my son a monster!" Bahn smacked him lightly on the arm that was not cradling said child. "What if he hears you?" He ran a reassuring hand along the blanket-clad body and curved a finger down to stroke a chubby cheek that was slightly hidden from view. "Shhh." He hushed, murmuring a string of Elvish, twined with a faint white-gold thread of magic that leapt from his fingertips and into the swaddled bundle.

Harry managed what he hoped was a friendly smile, noting the ease and friendliness between them. That was good. Bahn's cheerfulness was catching and Takar seemed vaguely reminiscent of Aracle. "That's alright. It is very nice to meet you." A faint blush startled on the hollows of his cheeks. What exactly had Bahn been saying about him…?

"Call me Tak." The older dragel offered, generously. "I'm more used to hearing it, Takar usually means that Lani's about to have my head for something." Dark brown eyes twinkled merrily. "And Bahn had nothing but praises to sing for you, so do not waste any time thinking of it." Takar turned at the sound of raised voices when the little armful began to stir again. "And they are at it again. I told you, they would, Bahn. You really should have said something."

"What was I supposed to say?" Bahn perked a brow. "It isn't as if you said anything, either."

"That…is beside the point. I told you and you know I can't take sides. That's a death wish waiting to happen. I happen to like being alive and intact." He paused. "And I thought you preferred the same, unless I am mistaken."

"You're horrible." Bahn informed him, calmly. He tossed his head, enough for the free, blond plaits to slap gently against the side of his Beta. "Ask nicely and maybe I'll consider it." His pale-eyed gaze shifted to the rest of his approaching Bonded. It was apparent that they were in deep discussion of some issue, because the serious looks and half-pouts said more than the vehement Elvish would have. "Are they really still arguing over it? It was only a swimming costume. I don't understand what there is to fuss about."

Takar winced at one particularly passionate stream. "By their example, I would say, plenty." He sighed. "Bahn…?" He prompted. "Please?"
Shouts and voices rose a few feet away and Bahn gave a dramatic roll of his eyes before his fingers twitched faintly towards the half-asleep babe. A shimmer of his signature white-gold magic flickered to life and then faded, a muffling charm that would keep sound out, without silencing the child. "Please excuse them," He told Harry and the others. "I'm sure they are unaware that they now have an audience." He turned around to face the bickering women, one slender brow perked in question and spoke plainly. "Nara, Bu, I don't care which suit is shorter than the other and I told Soula she could come as long as she was on her best behavior. I did not censor her outfit or yours. She is fine. She is among family. Harry and his circle are not inclined that way. She is safe."

"I wouldn't call it safe." A short, pouty-faced blonde muttered beneath her breath. "If I caught hold of her, she'd be over my knee so fast, she wouldn't have a chance to double check those honey-sweet words spilling out of her mouth. She wouldn't be sitting for a month."

Bahn blinked, reading between the lines in regards to the oldest daughter within their present company. "…what exactly did Soula say?"

"Oh for goodness' sake, don't repeat it." The second tallest woman shifted the young girl perched on her hip. "Bahn, loveling, my dearest, do not ask, because you do not wish to know. I would not repeat it. Send her home or do more than just scold her. She's been carrying on like this all morning and I am fed up with it." The girl on her hip snuck a glance at Harry and then blushed a bright pink, turning back to hide her face in the woman's neck, her small fingers playing with the necklace around the woman's neck. "This is supposed to be a relaxing and enjoyable excursion for all of us and right now, I am with Edora, I am sorely tempted to do more than simply bring it to your attention."

"I thought you said Ilsa would come." Another blonde adjusted her armful of little boy, pressing a kiss to the wrinkled forehead when the child squirmed to be set down. She murmured something in Elvish, but did not let him down, simply readjusting her arms to better hold him, even when he protested with a half-wail. "Shush, you. Do not give me that fake crying of yours. Nothing will happen if I hold you for a few minutes more and you know you're not allowed to be running about until the wards have been cast. Now behave." She admonished. "I'll handle it, if I must Bahn. But honestly, I thought there'd be more of us, where is our illustrious delinquent and when will she be here?"

Bahn's lips twitched faintly. "I had a craving." He said, simply. "She volunteered. And please do not call her that to her face, if you wish to keep it that way. I was entirely serious when I addressed you lot this morning."

"She was gone for sixteen years, a little longer if you count from the last time I actually saw her." Sueh leaned forward, fangs gleaming as she lightly nipped the ear of the squirming boy in her arms. He stilled at once and curled forward, a pout on his cute face. "I can excuse many things, but please do not ask me to be insufferably polite. I simply couldn't bear to."

"I would never ask you to be anything other than what you are." Bahn smiled. "I merely suggested that you might not wish to say it to her face. Her temper is, perhaps, even shorter than what it was. The years have not been kind."

"I feel a headache coming on already." Sueh sighed.

"Bite Lani when you see her. That should fix it. I have my midday potions in me, you likely won't like the taste of it." Bahn looked at her in concern. "Is it really there or only-?"

"Blech." Sueh wrinkled her nose. "Most certainly not. Those things are nasty. I shall be fine until she arrives."
Bahn's lips twitched again, in the close approximation of laughter. "At least I warned you. Now, if Soula is being such a brat, then leave her alone. You know fairly well that she is only trying to gain a reaction from any of you. I will have Ilsa talk to her when she returns. You know she only listens to her and I really do not wish to be starting-"

"If we can last that long." The shorter one, Edora grumbled. "You never wish to start anything. Where is Lani and Alma?"

"Lani went to fetch Alma, who, if I am not mistaken" and here, Takar perked a brow in Bahn's direction. "Decided it would be amusing to lose his morning tail for the day." Takar sighed. He had copied Bahn's earlier movements and now steadily ran a hand up and down the back of the napping child cradled to the crook of his shoulder. "In the future Bahn, if you do not want one of us to accompany you, then say so. Do not engage in these sorts of games, you know it puts Lani in a terrible temper."

"And your point is?"

"You're impossible." Takar returned.

Bahn blinked, innocently in answer, holding out his arms for the return of the sleeping toddler. Takar frowned. "It might be best if I hold him for a while." He hedged. "Lani is bound to be furious when she returns."

"Nothing I cannot handle." Bahn returned, calmly. "Besides, the weekend does not end until tomorrow, therefore, she is still counting."

"By counting, I feel obligated to ask if you intend to sit down this week." Takar shot back. "Honestly!"

Bahn snorted. "Your concern is touching. Talk to her in my stead, if you are so worried for the sake of my bum."

"Only because you look horrid when you cry." The Beta threw back, easily.

"My son, Takar?"

The Beta sighed, but gently transferred the toddler over to the waiting arms. The little boy made a sound of protest, but settled down when Bahn cooed softly in his ear, a whispered mishmash of Elvish and something else. He straightened then, turning back to Harry who was watching with an expression of uncertainty and surprise on his young face. "If you frown too much, you will find yourself with wrinkles before your time." He informed the younger man.

Harry felt his face pinken. He'd simply been surprised to see the first-hand interactions of such a large circle. Bahn was comfortable in his role as their Submissive, easy to tease and be teased, to offer a solution and to present a problem. It was a lovely trade of give and take, one he hadn't yet understood as belonging to dragel-kind. He couldn't quite squash the tendrils of envy for wanting a circle with similar ease of interaction. He'd have to make sure he made the effort to make it come through.

Bahn ignored the partial blush. "My apologies for the muddle. It's been quite an interesting mess since Ilsa's return—and they haven't even met face to face as yet." He stifled a chuckle. "I am sorry you had to witness all of that, sometimes I forget when we have an audience or not." He turned, waving them forward. "Everyone, I'd like to introduce you to Harry and his. I know some of you have heard of Ilsa's Theo, this is his Circle. Theo, everyone. Everyone, Theo. The redhead beside
him is their Beta, Charlie. Charlie, everyone." Bahn inclined his head. "And lastly, the reasons I wanted to come this afternoon, their Submissive, Harry." The elfin-dragel shifted to nudge the brunet with one shoulder. "Harry, this tall one is my Advisor, Nara. Nara, Harry. The fussy one is Edor or Edora, depending on what they feel like being for the day. They are Gheyo, our current Ace." Bahn frowned. "Speaking of which, Edora—speak to Ilsa. Do not blindly challenge her. I'd like to remind you that it's a terrible idea to do so. I would rather you resettled your ranks with as little bloodshed as possible."

"Easy for you to say." Edora scowled.

"You know it upsets me." Bahn returned, calmly. "I do not mind if you are fighting, but I will not have you fighting each other." He fixed the Gheyo with a look, until the blonde gave a grudging nod. "Thank you." He now turned back to Harry. "The one with the slanted blue eyes is Sueh, one of the Pareya. The one on her left with the grey eyes is Bulsph, we call her Bu, for short." Bahn's lips twitched. "And she is shorter than Ilsa."

Bu threw another glare in their direction, but her lips twitched as if to smile as she did so. "Thank you for establishing that fact, loveling."

"Does it matter?" Harry heard himself say, before he could double-check the words. He blushed when all eyes turned towards him.

Nara sighed, softly, a look of warmth and interest in her pretty grey eyes. "That's easily answered actually. A Submissive is always the shortest in a Circle. It's simply the way it is. Our Ilsa is a scant two inches taller than Bahn. She alters her height by using magic to hold her Halfling form. It's not very common. Bu is shorter than her, meaning that she's barely taller than Bahn, which makes her ideal for certain, ah—pranks."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean always the shortest?"

"It means everyone is taller than me." Bahn explained. "It makes it easier for our Bonded to pick us up for a cuddle or to shield us. On our behalf, it makes it easier for us to run when we're trying to hide from them because we've eaten their favorite pudding without asking or—"

Bu snorted. "Small size is not useful when it comes to hiding. I can think of a half-dozen moments where it presents a distinct disadvantage to the one who is doing the—"

"Bulsph!" Bahn's panicked voice cut her off straight away, his pale eyes wide and round. "You said you wouldn't!"

"Hmm?" She hummed, innocently.

"Don't!"

"If it troubles you so, then I shall not." She said, mildly. "I already gave my word that I would not and you know fairly well that I keep my promises." She swung her hands in a careful arc at her sides. Two young children stood patiently beside her, content to have their hands in hers, swinging back and forth. "Now, will someone throw up the wards so I can let the little monsters run free?"

"Sunscreen and swimming caps?" Bahn returned, a crease of worry flickering on his forehead. "And why exactly are we all referring to our adorable offspring as monsters today? Did I miss something? A memo, perhaps? And speaking of them, where are the rest of them?"

"Coming with Soula." Sueh stifled a smile. "I told them all to behave and then we left."
Bahn sighed. "That wasn't very nice of you," He frowned. "And it won't put her in a better mood either. Honestly, between you three, I ought to—oh never mind. Alma can have at you when she returns. I refuse to be involved with this one." He Very well then, come on. Once I've warded the stretch, then you can let them run wild." He turned towards the beach, head snapping back to flash a half-smile at Harry. "Coming? The food's not here yet, I sent Callistair to fetch it. The other missing members should be turning up with the other things, chairs, beach towels and sweets." He paused. "Well, there'll be more than sweets, I simply have a bit of a craving."

"A craving?" Takar snorted. "Your cravings, my dearest, are nightmares." He paused, perking up. "Did you say Callis is back? I didn't know he'd returned."

"I did. He did. He's fine. I don't think Ilsa will want to see him though." Bahn said, quietly. "I will not remind you all to play nice." 

"Callis and Ilsa? Arielle save us all." Nara winced. "Please tell me Greta is coming. Knowing Aracle, he's the only reason we haven't been interrupted since her return, so I don't expect him to show his face. But I am not sure either of us can handle your idea of reintegration if Greta is not present."

"You will handle it as you have weathered other things." Bahn said, calmly. "And Greta said the pits would release her today—it was a ten-year-contract. Should be up or close enough to it. She said she'd see. I do not know if she will come or not. Dahlia's coming. Ariki too, both of them seem to have had a rough week. Hugs and kisses for all of them—remember, please."

"Dahlia? Is she alright?" Bu's soft grey eyes clouded over. "I hope they aren't working her into the ground, the poor thing. She's been run ragged ever since Lady Pai regulated her to that Healer's Clinic. I wish she'd quit. I had far more peace about her ranks when she was on patrols."

"They always do and she never complains. I believe she's fine, it is more of an inter-circle matter. The clinic might not be her first choice, but she does like it there. I have asked her. Patrols require her to pull rank more frequently than she's comfortable with. For the present moment though, I believe Lady Pai had some complaint, so I sent the request to her second, a Captain Garrow? I asked on the grounds of it being a family outing during Hunting Season. They should not have any other problems, though if they do, I expect we shall hear of it."

"Will Lani be here before Ilsa?" Edora reached for one of the children by Bu's left side. She scooped one up, balancing it expertly on one hip. "I would be much happier if she were here before Ilsa. Please." There was a faintly pleading tone in her voice.

"Ilsa will come when Ilsa is through." Bahn said firmly. "And she's more terrified of you lot than you are of her. Honestly. You are behaving like children and not full-grown adults." His free hand propped up on his hip, sticking out, an annoyed expression on his face. "Then again, that is an insult to my adorable children." He huffed. "What did she do to either of you, I'd like to know!"

Eyes averted and heads bowed faintly. No one spoke.

Bahn's lips pressed tightly together for a moment and then he gave a stiff nod. "Nothing. I thought so. She only has a temper that rivals Bhindi's and that's more than enough for you all to write her off on a single incident where we cannot even confirm all of the details," He huffed. "She's suffered enough at her own hands, I will not have any of you compounding this." He sighed. "We are supposed to be having fun." Pale eyes narrowed. "Lots and lots of fun, for I have been extremely bored."

The last word prompted a round of horrified looks from his Bonded and Harry found himself
staring after them in amazement as they scattered across the beach, one of them calling out about
the warding. He turned to see a faint smile tugging at the corners of Bahn's mouth.

The elf-dragel turned to him with a sly wink. "That should keep them busy for a bit. They're really
quite good at heart and very well-meaning, though once in a while I do find myself stifling the urge
to whack them with something wooden." He murmured. "Sometimes they seem to forget that there
is so much more to life than everyday drudgery and pointless gossip." He turned to angle his
shoulder towards Harry and by default, the little white bundle he cradled. "This is my son, Camalis.
Seven months old and a touch shy." From beneath the hooded blanket, a tiny face remained angelic
in slumber. "He belongs to me and Alma, the missing Pareya at the moment. He is my—our—
youngest." He started forward. "Shall we?"

By the time Theo and Charlie had begun to mingle with the others, Harry found himself able to
relax and settle down to enjoy himself. True to Bahn's words, his circle was indeed quite kind and
rather well-meaning, if a bit unsure about him and Theo. Takar was handy to smooth over any
potential awkwardness and Harry found himself with a growing respect for the Beta and Bahn.
Their interactions were virtually flawless, in spite of the continuous banter.

The children were Harry's second point as far as the shock factor went, because they were quite
certainly unlike anything wizard or muggle that he had ever seen. As it was, they were all dressed
in white playsuits, swimming trunks and shirts, every single one of them had a swimming cap
snugly fitted to their head. Every single child had a pair of golden stud earrings glistening from
snowy white earlobes and the girls were identified by delicately scrolled bracelets on each wrist,
while the boys wore solid ones.

"Harry, hold him, would you?"

"Wha-Bahn!" The protest came too late, for Harry found himself clumsily balancing seven-month
old Camalis, with Bahn rearranging his arms to better cradle said child. "Bahn!" He whispered,
fiercely. He didn't know if the spells transferred over or not and he had no desire to hold a
screaming baby.

"I'll take him back in a minute," Bahn said, simply. "You are simply holding him, there is no need
to panic."

"I'm not—this…" Harry sputtered. He'd never been in this particular position before, it had simply
never come up. He didn't know anything of younger children—though he had helped a few firsties
here and there, in the case of house unity, but never anyone below eleven. He'd certainly never
expected to be holding a baby or finding himself in the position where children under the age of
eleven were swarming around him.

The bundle made a distressed sound and Bahn leaned over, clicking his fingers. The noise stopped.

Harry gulped.

"Sleeping spell," Bahn grinned. "He was fine, but he is magic sensitive, if you keep on worrying,
he'll know it. He doesn't like strangers, but you are not a stranger." Pale eyes locked with worried
emerald ones. "You are one of us. I mean it. Now really, all you're doing is just sitting here and
holding him. There's no need for you to be worrying and there is absolutely nothing to worry
about. I strictly forbid you to panic until you have one of your own."

Harry licked his lips nervously. "Right." The words registered and emerald eyes grew wide and
round. "Bahn!"
The elfin-dragel chuckled. "You'll have little ones of your own, someday." He said, practically. "It's virtually impossible to be otherwise."

"I'm not—we haven't even—I-!" Harry spluttered. That particular train of thought had never occurred to him—in fact, he'd been studiously avoiding thinking of it ever since he'd come to terms with the fact that Draco Malfoy—no, Draco Snape of all people, was pregnant. "I don't even-!"

"Speaking of which, you are using the contraceptive spells, yes? Now that you are fully Bonded, once you speak of children, your body will be receptive."

Harry forced himself to take several deep breaths and then he spoke as calmly as he could. They had indulged themselves all night, of course, but Harry mentally crossed his fingers, hoping that "I do not. Could you show me?"

"In a moment. You need not worry, if you are thinking of last night. I assure you that unless you and your Bonded are in unanimous, verbal agreement as to the conception and care of children, you will have nothing to worry about. Once you do, then the contraceptive spells will be useful and you truly only need to use them once. After that, magic takes care of the rest."

"How?"

"It's a bit difficult to explain." Bahn nibbled on his lower lip. "Hold on a moment, let me set the monsters to rights." He winked. "If your curiosity can suffer a few minutes more."

Harry blushed and nodded.

"Good boy." Bahn praised. He patted the brunet lightly on the head with a fond smile teasing at his corners. "This will hardly take a minute. Line up, little ones." He turned to the gaggle of children crowded on the clean beach towels and jabbering softly to each other in Elvish.

"...why white?" Harry heard himself asking as Bahn squirted out a glob of special sunscreen into one hand and rubbed it briskly between his palms, beckoning to one of the impatient children, standing in a line.

"First blood." Bahn said, simply. "When they are young, sometimes they are also quite clumsy. You know, arms and legs growing in and not quite in the proportions they ought to be. White is the easiest color to use and since their magic and immune systems are not up to par as yet, it makes it easier for us, the parents. When they are older, they may wear whatever they wish."

The little boy whined, squirming in the hands that expertly coated his exposed arms and legs with the necessary cream. "No wiket, Mummy!" He whined. "No!"

"Hush." Bahn thumped his chin atop the capped head and holding the boy still with one hand, quickly applied the cream to the pouting face. "Harry, this is Bruen. Bruen, say hi to Harry. We like him, we will be nice." There was a hint of warning in his tone as Bahn straightened the little lad, giving him a pat on the bottom. "Say hi."

The little white dragel child blinked at Harry, curiously, his restlessness somewhat forgotten as he studied the stranger for a moment. He turned back to Bahn, one hand reaching out reassuringly.

"Harry." Bahn said, encouragingly. "His name is Harry. Say hi. Tell him how old you are."

Bruen blinked again, with eyes that were too big and too grey as he inched forward towards Harry and then smiled, a gap-toothed smile. "Haweh." He lisped. "Myf name if Bruwen. Imf fiwe wears olf."
"Which translates into, my name is Bruen and I am five years old." Bahn chuckled. "Good boy. Now go and show Bu that you're all covered, alright?" He planted a kiss on one chubby cheek, smiling even as the lad tried to wipe it off. "Next!"

The children came forward in shyness, clustering around each other, but apparently only wanting Bahn to apply the sunscreen and no one else. The elf-dragel was quick and efficient, slathering each child in turn and sending them off with a pat or a kiss after he'd introduced them to Harry.

"...is that all of them?" Harry asked, amazed. It was one thing to see a busily casting Bahn fixing up a guesthouse and an entirely different thing to see him playing Mummy to several children under the age of ten.

"Do you need any sunscreen?" Bahn inquired, solicitously. He tapped his wand on his knee, having already cast a spell on his own self. "It's painless and useful, especially if you're prone to sunburn. I am not, but it does not hurt to be safe rather than sorry."

Harry shrugged. He wasn't actually sure. He'd never spent time at a beach long enough to know whether he did burn or not. Then again, his mother had been a redhead and they said all redheads burned easily, but still...a faint tingling ran over him and he looked up in surprise as the white-golden glow of magic faded into him.

"Safe than sorry." Bahn said, calmly. "I can take him back now." He shook his hands as if shaking water from them, wand tucked into nowhere. A flicker of white gold magic suggested that he'd used a charm of some sort to clean them as he now turned back to Harry, his pale eyes fixed on the sleeping form of his son. "That wasn't so bad now, was it?" He eased the wrapped bundle of baby from Harry's stiff arms.

Harry couldn't find it in his heart to glare at the blond. He watched as Bahn returned to the earlier task of cradling his infant son, now that the older ones were taken care of. A look of infinite tenderness spread over the elfin-dragel's pretty complexion. It suited him quite well and for a moment, Harry wondered what it was like to have children that apparently adored him. He remembered the earlier trail of conversation and hesitated, unsure of how to bring that up.

A steady, contented thrum of magic radiated out from Bahn's relaxed figure and Harry idly stored the feeling away for later. Theo had spoken to him of Quinn's explanation of having an empathetic gift and he vaguely recalled the first appointment where the Healer had spoken of ancient, noble families by the name of Evanson and Perevell. He sighed, softly. "Bahn?"

"Hmm?"

"...the spells?"

"ah, thanks for the reminder." The elfin-dragel drew his wand out of thin air. He stifled a laugh at Harry's blink of surprise. "Air element." He reminded. "It is surprisingly handy at times. Now then, copy the movements exactly and the incantation is Poscah et Nivida."

Harry mouthed the words back, watching the wand movements intently. "Thanks."

"You are most welcome." Bahn's smile rewarded him. "There is a trick to it though."

"A trick?"

Bahn laughed softly. "Dragel children are half-magic." He explained, stroking a hand down the bundled babe. "Every time you are...together with one of your Bonded, there is an exchange of
Harry felt his face grow warm. "How is that even possible?"

"Magic makes a great deal of impossible…possible." Bahn reminded him. "And Dragels are very special creatures."

"Why would that—I mean,"

"I understand." Bahn interrupted. "Let me explain it this way. Suppose one of your Bonded had a dangerous occupation and you did not wish for them to give it up on account of you, because you knew it made them happy and fulfilled in a good way."

Harry nodded, carefully.

"Then suppose something happened. Swift, sudden and no way for it to be reversed. Suppose that your Bonded vanished. You may have wished to bear their child and raise them in the sire's memory and as they are no more, you would no longer have that opportunity, yes?"

"...it's a bit much." Harry admitted.

Bahn laughed. "You are infinitely amusing," He informed the younger dragel. "I am Elven before the dragel in me was brought out. I do not put too much thought into it. I only know that it is a comfort to know that should anything happen to mine, I would have a very specific remembrance of them." He paused. "It also means that you can recall them to your side."

"What?"

"When pregnant, the sire of your children is often kept close at hand. Instinct on both sides. You will want them near and they will not want to leave. If the sire is not present when you chose to bear their child, then wherever they are, your magic will reach through the bond and urge them to come home." Bahn offered a faintly sad smile as his fingers trailed over his baby bump.

And Harry suddenly understood. "...Ilisa?" He heard himself say, disbelievingly.

Bahn's smile trembled. "I couldn't lose her." He whispered, softly.

Harry didn't hesitate to reach over and hug his friend, baby and all.

"...Harry?"

"..hmm?"

"I know it is absolutely not my place to say anything at all, but in thinking that the absence of your mentor leaves you uninformed, please excuse my forwardness."

Harry snorted. Sometimes the elfin-dragel's strict adherence to formality made him want to smother his new friend. "What is it?" He asked, plainly.

"I noticed that your…Theo and Charlie haven't exchanged scales yet…have you given them time alone?"

Harry blinked. He rolled over onto his side, propping up his head with one hand, a thoughtful look
on his face. He had wondered about that briefly, remembering the exchange of scales between himself and Charlie at the Health Clinic. It hadn't slipped past his notice that Theo hadn't offered any of his scales—at any time. Now it appeared as if he'd somehow missed something. "What do you mean?"

Bahn's worried expression softened considerably, as if now assured he wasn't crossing some invisible line of propriety. "You don't know?" He verified.

This time, Harry did roll his eyes. "If I knew, I wouldn't be asking." His lips twitched. "Did I miss something important?"

"Oh, no. Well, not exactly. I mean, you're still fairly new as a triad, it's nothing to worry of straightaway." Bahn absently tapped the swaddled bundle resting beside him. "What do you know of the Alpha-Beta bond?"

There was a moment while Harry thought back over what little he'd read of it in Theo's special Encyclopedia and then of Quinn's mention of it at the clinic. He chewed on his lower lip for a moment. "Not much, really."

"It's nothing complicated. They simply need some time alone and together every now and again." Bahn flashed him a smile. "I handle it by making Takar take Lani out for sweets once a month. It puts him in a horrible mood and her in a rather good one." He sniggered. "And when he returns, then I can fix his bad mood and Lani is happy to be taking care of everything else while I do that." He winked. "It is part of our dynamic. You'll find your own with yours."

"How?"

"Well, firstly, they will need to know that you're alright with them spending some time together. I don't know if you've noticed, but yours are hovering, while mine are happily playing away as far along the beach away from me as they possibly can." Mischief shone clearly in his eyes. "Apparently the thought that I could be bored is quite terrifying, so they are quick to be sure that everyone is content and ah, amused. Because if they are, then I am. Do you follow?"

Harry shifted to lie on his back once more. He threw an arm over his face, shielding his eyes from the warm sun. He actually did know. Bahn was correct. If he was fine, then Theo was significantly more at ease and relaxed, which in turn filtered through to Charlie and then traveled back to him. Harmony was easily achieved when he was at peace with himself and whatever was happening around him. "I do." He admitted. "It's a little, odd, isn't it?"

"That we Submissives have more power than we're ever told?" Bahn snorted. "Hardly. The Alpha's all know it and the Beta's are well aware of it and we have them perfectly wrapped around our fingers, which makes the rest of them fall in line." He winked. "It's a natural cycle of shared authority. A give and take that can only happen when we are willing to give and take. In this case, to take some time for yourself and give Theo and Charlie some time of their own."

"Oh." The understanding dawned almost at once and Harry was surprised to find that he didn't really mind it. In fact, some time to himself sounded quite wonderful.

"Must never forget to take what you need to keep on giving." Bahn reminded. "Sometimes it is too easy to be giving and accepting and understanding of everything that you forget to look after your own needs and self. Pareya are instrumental in making sure that you do not run yourself into the ground, but it is also a bad habit of theirs as well. They look after everyone else so much that they might forget to look after their own selves. This is why you have to keep your head and your wits about you and do it yourself."
"…speaking from experience?" Harry said, wryly.

"You could not possibly fathom exactly how much experience." Bahn laughed. "Just remember that it won't be the three of you for very long, but the foundation of your entire circle will be built on whatever you three experience in the short time before a fourth is added."

Harry sighed. The fourth. He hadn't even wanted to think of that yet, but he'd felt a distinct pull and stretch in his magic, settling itself in preparation for another Bonded—just as it had done after he'd taken Theo. "What if I don't want a fourth?"

Bahn choked, turning the sound into a cough. He half rose up and then stared over at his fellow Submissive. Pale eyes locked with emerald ones for a good long moment, then the elfin-dragel calmly eased himself back down to his earlier position. "I shall pretend," he began, at last. "That I did not hear such a preposterous thing."

"I'm not-!"

"Shush."

"Bahn-!"

"Repeat it and I will box you soundly about the ears." One pale brow arched. "You will not be happy as a triad. Your magic alone will demand at least five more Bonded, maybe more. I am no judge of such things, but your magic would not require more than you could handle. Your dragel side will crave more than Theo or Charlie could ever hope to grant you." He frowned. "It is not fair to them or yourself, to think that you will simply settle for 'enough'." He scolded. "Do not mention that to me again."

Harry stared for a moment. A faint warmth skittered over him and he licked his lips. "I'm not ready."

"We seldom ever are." Bahn said, quietly. "My own circle is a mess, it would seem, but I assure you there are things. There is so much more beneath the surface, inside all of us and in everything there is to come, I could never even begin to explain or show you." He smiled, faintly. "I know it's quite terrifying at first, after all I was raised Elven. I never considered anything of my dragel heritage until I passed my majority." He laughed. "It was quite a realm-shattering revelation when I was told what was expected of me."

"Marry and produce heirs?" Harry guessed.

Bahn sniggered. "Something like that. Then Bhindi went and found herself an Alpha and it all went to the ruins after that."

"What happened then?"

"We were disgraced in the eyes of the court, so we left. We had no other choice and by then, she'd found Okahn and was leaving me." He sighed. "For all that she is, we are twins. I need her in the same vein that she needs me. Shortly afterward, I ran into Delani and Takar. Things began from there." He smiled, fondly. "What strange days those were. I can never regret them. They were beautiful."

Harry found himself smiling back, as his mind fitted together the pieces. "So you…you didn't have a mentor either?"

"Oh no. I did." Bahn's smile was pained. "After my majority of course. I was also of age and I met
mine shortly after accepting my inheritance."

"...what happened?"

Bahn's voice became whisper-soft. "The Elves live apart from Nevarah. It was a trial to leave and travel to here. After all, there are limits to magical transportation and some things will never change. The trip was quite perilous and it was before Bhindi and I had met anyone. We three traveled to Nevarah. It was...a very special time."

"You both had the same mentor?" Harry's brow furrowed.

"Elven twins are different." Bahn said, simply. "We only needed one."

Harry frowned. "And then?"

"Even dragels can die." Bahn's eyes shimmered for a moment, before he looked away, copying Harry's pose of an arm braced over his face. "Suffice it to say that a mentor to a young dragel is in loco parentis. There were things required for half-elves and half-dragels." He drew in a short breath. "I will always remember them."

"...I'm sorry." Harry said, a beat later.

"There is nothing to be sorry for. I treasure each moment we had and I will not spoil it by being greedy and wishing there had been more. I respect them by not calling the name that was gifted to me. In turn, I shall do my best to pass on every bit of knowledge that was granted to me by their kindness. It is one reason I have never had a problem with Ilsa and Theo. I understand. Granted, it is extremely rare for a Gheyo to hold a position as mentor—generally, only Submissives or Pareya do, but it is something of a sacred bond. It is also why it distresses me to think that yours never showed."

Harry was silent for a minute, processing that bit of information. "Thank you."

"...pardon?"

"For explaining stuff." Harry nearly shrugged. "A lot of things, I didn't know and you didn't...you didn't make me feel like rubbish for asking."

Bahn's response was to extend a hand, palm up and open.

After a moment, Harry took it.

Their fingers laced together and Bahn squeezed gently.

"...what's the Hunting Season like?"

Bahn's thumb absently stroked along Harry's hand, where their fingers joined. "It's quite fun actually. I haven't been for the last one, but the times before I have. It's wonderful. There's food, there's music, plenty of dancing and singing and friends, both old and new."

"It sounds important."

"Ah." Bahn acknowledged. "I suppose it is for some. It's mostly an excuse to meet with friends and family for the rest of us. Nevarah is quite large, there are many sections to it and it only houses what is unspecified."
"Unspecified?"

"Simple. The Air dragels live above, up there." Bahn tipped his head back a bit. "In the clouds, the castles and such there. Only the Air dragels and elementals. If your circle elements outweigh your Bonded with the Air element, then you cannot live there. Air dragels—and pure Air dragels—are very different from those you see walking through the Capital City and such."

"Isn't your element Air?" Harry frowned. It had been his understanding that dragels were community creatures, in a sense, drawing pleasure and security from large families and shared magic. Granted, their society was complicated, but he didn't like the way this was sounding. "That's...prejudiced."

"Not really." Bahn said, quickly. "The Air types, they need to be in the air and above in the clouds. It's the best environment for them. I am of the Air element, but I am half-elf and half-dragel. I would never feel the pull as a true air elemental would or as a native dragel. I would be miserable in the clouds, never seeing the ground and my Elven nature would torture me in other subtle ways as well. I'm sure you've noticed that my entire circle, with the exception of one, possesses some Elven nature in addition to their dragel attributes."

Harry nodded. He had noticed. "I wondered if it was...on purpose."

"Quite." Bahn chuckled. "Compared to others, I suppose I am somewhat traditional. I did have other offers, but I wanted Bonded that I could connect to on both levels and with the exception of Takar, my tastes are exactly what they seem. There are things I will do and continue to do that are decidedly Elven in nature, while there are other quirks that most definitely dragel. By choosing Bonded that shared the same similarities, we are all happier and content on more than one level."

"So you can choose?"

"Of course. You chose yours, did you not?"

Harry hesitated. "It was...different."

"Different how? Tell me."

Harry did.

Bahn listened.

"...I can see why you would worry." Bahn said, at last. "But it isn't anything to really worry over. There are three types of cries that one can produce. A Heartcry, a Soulcry and a Soulscream. There are all specific reasons and situations for using them and it is solely for the Submissive's benefit."

"Why isn't there a Heartscream?"

"Because the heart only cries." Bahn chuckled. "The soul screams and cries."

Harry sighed. "Does it have to be so bloody complicated?" He huffed.

Bahn squeezed his hand, lightly. "It's actually rather simple. A Heartcry is used when you are interested in courting a specific Intended or a group of Intended. They cannot legally and publicly pursue you unless you give them leave to do so, by way of a Heartcry. It is the only cry you can do voluntarily. The others all have to do with Soul Magic, Soulmates and Soulbonds. That is old and ancient magic. A soulcry is usually pulled from you by someone you trust through either exquisite pain or pleasure-"
Harry shuddered. "Exquisite pain? What kind of a-"

"To each their own, Harry," Bahn interrupted. "To each their own. Pain can pleasurable in certain circumstances and if you have such…tendencies." He shivered. "I do not, so you may rest in good company on that point."

Harry swallowed back his own shiver. He'd never known pain as anything but horrible, twisted and dark. He whole-heartedly abhorred it. "That's good to know."

"A soulscream, on the other hand," Bahn sighed. "That is produced only under excruciating duress and without aid, meaning that something terrible would happen to you, where you are helpless and alone, so you call with the last of everything inside of you. There are only a few circumstances where it was not a near-death experience that prompts such a call."

Harry felt a chill ripple through him. "And what do each of these do?"

"A heartcry is the equivalent of a friendly courting. A soulcry opens a connection between you and those who are compatible in both mind and magic, whether you have been friends before or if they are realms apart. A soulscream drags all Intended from wherever they are at whatever stage in life they may be and links your magic directly."

"What if you don't like them?"

"You will not have a say in that." Bahn explained. "This is on the grounds that your magic would never select an unsuitable Bonded for you. It understands your needs and knows what will mix best, so when you do meet, there is very little that you won't have in common. It is the closest thing to a perfect match, or so they say."

"...are yours...?" Harry hesitated. It seemed rude to ask, but Bahn had been open and friendly through all of their discussions.

"Heartcries." Bahn answered, readily. "All of them. You?"

"Heartcry for Theo." Harry frowned. "I'm not sure about Charlie."

Bahn perked a brow. "Really?"

Harry tried to shrug. "It's actually quite muddled."

"Hmm." Bahn hummed. "That's very curious. Have you noticed anything odd since?"

"Odd?" Harry echoed. "Like what?"

"You could have given a soulcry." Bahn squeezed his hand again. "As such, if you encountered any of your potential Intended since arriving in Nevarah, you likely would have noticed. A faint tug on your magic or a sudden attraction. It could show in many different ways, but those are usually the most obvious."

"What other ways?"

"Most likely already imagining them as your Bonded and in whatever role their rank places them. It really does vary, Harry."

Harry sighed. He squeezed back, drawing on the steady, calming emotions pouring out from his friend. He was surprised to find that he didn't mind the whole hand-holding bit anywhere near as
much as he might have before. A faint sour scent tickled his nose and he wrinkled it, wondering when Camalis began to cry.

"Ah, shh." Bahn crooned. He released Harry's hand to roll over, half sitting up, to hover over the waking baby. "Nappy change?" He inquired, bending to sniff the crook of the baby's neck. A glow of white-golden magic flickered at his fingertips and he whispered a spell into the tiny, pointed ear.

Harry found himself mildly surprised at that. Not that he had any experience with nappy-changing, but he hadn't thought that magic could be used for it. His face must have shown something though, when the clean powdered scent now replaced the earlier whiff of unpleasantness.

Bahn chuckled. "Whatever you wish to say, simply say it." He encouraged.

"Magic?"

"You can use magic for nearly everything." Bahn smiled. "Nappy-changing is a tricky spell, but well worth learning. It needs to be altered as the child grows and you do have to change them at least twice yourself before you can actually perform the spell." He purred, rubbing his cheek along the white bundle, scenting the child.

Harry mentally made a note to be sure to learn it, if—*IF*—he ever did manage to have children.

Harry continued to enjoy himself by having absolutely nothing to do by lie on the clean, soft towels spread over the sand, staring up at the clear sky. It was comfortably warm, but not too hot. Bahn had settled back down on the towels, with Camalis tucked carefully beside him, fed and happy once more as he was sheltered from the sun.

They'd been talking for hours, undisturbed, it seemed and Harry was infinitely grateful to the older Submissive. Bahn was so easy to talk to, he found himself wishing that the elfin-dragel had been his assigned mentor. He'd said as much and his friend had blushed quite obviously, before thanking him quietly.

"*How* many children are there?" Harry asked, unable to process the last sentence.

"You heard correctly." Bahn snickered. "and I will not repeat it, lest one of my Pareya should hear and thus decide to increase it. Not that I would mind, but two on the way is more than enough for the moment. I prefer to have them spaced out at least a year in between."

Harry didn't answer straightaway. He was mildly impressed and somewhat horrified. That was quite a bit of hands, feet and mouths under the same roof, spells not withstanding. His daydream had shifted to something nearly nightmarish and he quickly stopped thinking about it. There was more than enough time for that later and he certainly was in no rush to be having children. He was barely sixteen years old, for Merlin's sake!

"So that's definitely not all of them here?" He looked to the side, squinting to see the white-clothed figures jumping and playing around in the surf. A portion of the water had been sectioned off and the Pareya alternated between joining the others in some odd beach game and watching the little ones.

"Hmm? No. Only the young ones, there's a few older ones and then of course, there's Ilsa's children and Bu's. They were the first ones to be with child, so theirs are all older. In fact, they are around your age, Ilsa's own I mean. She should bring her missing two when she arrives, I doubt she'd show up without them anyway."
"Ilsa has-?" Harry faltered. He could not quite reconcile the no-nonsense woman to the lovable image portrayed by the various Circle members. Everyone was laughing, smiling and playing with the children—not a whit of seriousness around them. Light, playful banter that he'd never even seen a hint of in Ilsa. Then again, he remembered standing in the Snape's kitchen as a soft towel slapped harmlessly over his poised stance. He remembered her hug, gentle, but warm—offering strength and comfort.

"Three actually." Bahn's smile grew. "You did not think her capable of it?"

"That's not what I meant-"

"No one ever does." Bahn said, cheerfully. "In fact, she's such a study in contrasts, it is actually quite surprising. She has three and believe it or not, they're all barely a year apart, if at all. I rather think that she didn't rest in between."

Harry felt his face grow warm again and he looked away, gaze searching for Theo and Charlie. Earlier, his Bonded had helped to align a large, rectangular stone at the proper position marked off for the pavilion. Now, whenever a team member was on penalty, they would stand atop the rock. Theo was currently climbing onto to it, a carefree smile on his pale face. It helped to calm him faintly. Bahn's particular brand of teasing seemed destined to keep him in a state of perpetual blush —much as Blaise Zabini's own had been at the start of the school year.

"I'm only teasing." Bahn's voice softened. "And they are lovely children, though there are times when I dearly wish I was Soula's father, if only for the fact that I know she would listen to me more, if I were. That child is so thick-headed, I know she could not possibly be anyone else's but Ilsa's."

"Soula?"

"You saw her, remember? The one that was sulking about? As I said, there are three of them, Dahlia's the oldest, Ariki is next and then there's Soula." Bahn's brow furrowed. "How old are you, if you do not mind my asking?"

"Sixteen." Harry shrugged. "It's not a secret."

"You are young." Bahn murmured. "Not an issue, but you are young." He sighed, softly. "I am sorry to see the sorrow that hangs around you—no one of your age should have ever had to suffer through whatever it is you went through to earn those. Never mind though, Soula is the same age as you and she is a Submissive as well. You two might find yourselves in similar company. She's been too absorbed with herself to really notice you, but she is Aracle and Ilsa's."

"Oh." Harry processed that bit of information and then tucked it away. Theo had spoken fondly of Ilsa and their times together, sharing of how his mentor was always nearby and quick at hand. It made him wonder now, to think of how readily she had been there for Theo and yet, had her own children growing up somewhere, without her. He frowned.

"Don't even think in that direction." Bahn elbowed him lightly. "Or she'll give you an earful for it. I assure you that her children are quite fine, upstanding members of society and from their interactions with her, you would think she was beside them every single day and not showing up every few years in between." A thoughtful look registered on Bahn's face. "Then again, she's likely been there more than every few years and they all have a knack for keeping their secrets. Dahlia is a Gheyo though, she works at a specialty clinic in the city. I do not like the clinic nor do I approve of her particular assignment, but she seems to like it, mostly. Lady Pai—the sponsor for her Military Circle—had a disagreement with her over something and the reassignment was something
of a punishment." Bahn sighed. "That is where Dahlia is exactly like her mothers. Ariki is a flight instructor, he was in the news this week. There was an accident somewhere, a little girl was brought out before her time. They say she was part of the Kadel Circle, which is rare, if you know what I mean."

The familiar names rippled inside his mind as Harry immediately thought of the scarred young woman assigned to them the first time they'd visited Quinn. He tried to recall anything familiar about her and Ilsa only to draw a blank. He frowned. "I don't, actually." He said, at last, catching up to the end of Bahn's sentence. "The Kadels?" It was fun to talk to Bahn, because his fellow Submissive had a way of sharing news that wasn't petty gossip, but rather, interesting, important facts to keep track of.

"Seers." Bahn rolled his shoulders back, carefully. "They are a very old and noble family within this realm. They are all known for being Seers, Fortune-Tellers, Futuresight Bearers and Holders and all of that." He shrugged. "I'm told the gift is dominant, but they are extremely private and closed off to society, so we rarely ever hear anything of them, unless there is some prophecy that requires translation or better explanation."

Emerald eyes narrowed faintly and Harry visibly perked up. That sounded quite useful, actually. He had to know more. "Exactly what kind of…translation?"

"Clarity really." Bahn looked thoughtful for a moment. "They are quite an odd bunch, though I say that with the utmost respect. There are usually only two children per Circle and every single Submissive has something of a…well, I wouldn't want to be impolite, but you would know straightaway if you ever met one and they usually identify themselves, if only to say that they don't wish to be spoken to." He stifled a giggle. "Which has happened on more than one occasion. Once in a while, you will see one or two of them during the Hunting Season. They only move through the upper rings of society though, so unless you're at least of considerable social status, you wouldn't have to worry of running into them. Speaking of which,"

"Clarity." Harry repeated, completely ignoring the rest of Bahn's ramblings. He was thinking of that stupid prophecy and remembering another stupid black-furred mutt. His lips pressed tightly together and his shoulders twitched for a moment. *Sirius.*

"Harry?" Bahn's warm voice sliced through his thoughts. "I am sorry if I said something to upset you…" Worry showed plainly in those pale white-grey eyes.

"You didn't." Harry blinked rapidly for a moment and then forced a smile. "I was only… remembering something. It's nothing. If—if I had a prophecy—or if I knew of one and wanted to, well-"

"Have it verified?" The elfin-dragel's expression softened considerably. "Well, the best thing to do would be to make an appointment and not to expect anything to happen until the Hunting Season was over. Hardly anyone does anything during the Hunting Season, save for the Health Clinics and the Marketplace and that is only because they are absolutely necessary. After that though, I'd expect, depending on the urgency of your claim, you'd likely have an answer within a reasonable amount of time. Maybe a week or so. They work fairly quickly and it doesn't hurt to pay extra for a rush job."

Harry blew out a frustrated breath. He reached inside and gently tugged on the bond connecting him to Theo. As long as there was the possibility that there could be more to his prophecy, he would be sure to investigate more thoroughly. He'd waited enough already, what was a few more weeks? He was fairly certain that there would be a way they could afford whatever bribe was necessary.
"Harry?" Theo appeared at his side within a minute, it seemed. He was covered in a fine sheen of sweat, showing off well-toned muscles and a faint flush from the workout of running, jumping and tackling.

The brunet turned to greet his Alpha at once. He smiled to ease the look of worry on Theo's face and offered his hand, prompting Theo to fold his taller frame down to take a seat on the towel beside him. "Bahn said that there's a Circle that could explain prophecies, the Kadelphia," he began.

The Slytherin's brows knitted together. "And…?"

"He said that we could make appointments to have a prophecy clarified." Harry waited. He knew Theo could connect the dots on his own, his Alpha seemed to have an uncanny knack for understanding nearly everything that he didn't feel comfortable asking out loud—yet.

The golden eyes blinked once and then twice and then Theo sighed. He leaned forward and kissed Harry's cheek with warm, dry lips. "I will see about setting up an appointment. You need only have asked." There was a look of fondness in his gaze and settled comfortably, drawing Harry to him with an arm around those pale shoulders for a light—though sweaty—one-armed hug. "Thank you, Bahn."

"Nothing to be mentioned." The blond waved a hand dismissively. He nodded towards Harry. "You have done quite well—both of you." His lips twitched faintly. "Take good care of each other."


This time, Harry didn't blush.

"Will you be presenting tomorrow?" Bahn's question was directed to Theo, interesting glittering in his pale eyes. He'd already fielded Harry's question of what the Hunting season was like, now he wanted his new friend to join him for the fun.

"That is actually up to Harry." Theo said, smoothly. "Will you and yours?" He looked at Harry, tugging gently on the bond to read the emotions filtering through his Submissive. "Harry?" The green-eyed brunet had settled on his side, half-asleep due to the warm sun. He mumbled an answer, shifting to lie on his stomach. Theo stifled a laugh, reaching out to trail his fingers over the sun-warmed skin, skimming over the intricate tattoos fading in and out on Harry's pale skin.

"I think we would dearly love to." Bahn mused. "But that decision lies with Ilsa. We have not shown ourselves as a Circle in any public function or social capacity since her absence. It did not seem…right. If she is amenable, then yes, we will."

Theo's brow furrowed lightly at that. He knew his Oretta had adored her Gheno life, the presentations, the fights, the duels and all of that. She'd never once complained of giving them up in order to spend her training time training him, but he had wondered. "Have you asked her?"

"I intend to, whenever she arrives." Bahn smiled. "After which, I hoped to invite Harry to join our entrance. I would be happy to introduce him."

Theo's golden eyes lit up at once. "Truly?"

"Indeed." Bahn smiled, warmly. "Harry?"

One emerald eye opened lazily to look them. "What for?" Harry yawned, tugging on Theo's hand that remained tangled with him. The towels weren't quite as comfortable anymore, now that he had
"There's quite a bit of social and political maneuvering that takes place during the Hunt." Theo explained. He amusedly let himself be tugged and pulled into position by an adorably half-asleep Harry. "The higher up you are, the better off you are and the more power and influence is at your fingertips. Bahn's Circle, the Deveraines, are fairly high up in society. It automatically grants you the same social status as they have. It's a good thing and the higher society circles tend to be more powerful and more knowledgeable."

Harry snorted.

Theo hesitated. He looked to Bahn.

"What Theo means is that an introduction into the upper echelon of our society means you have a better chance of running into the Kadel family or the Cairothes, the Arythes, the Kalzik, the elemental clan chiefs—for instance, you will be associated with the Gorgens, if you accept my invitation, as it is well known that Ilsa is a part of our circle. Not to mention there's even the possibility of meeting the Royals. It doesn't mean you can't meet and mingle with others, but it does allow you more freedom and it's really quite fun."

"Harry." Theo caught him gently in a hug and pulled him forward to half-cuddle, half-snuggle. "Better?"

Harry tested the new position carefully with a wriggle. He hummed in satisfaction.

Theo tugged gently on one ear. "I think the sun has sufficiently fried your brain." He said, dryly. "Yes, no or do you need to think about it?"

"Yes, if Bahn will attend." Harry agreed, after a moment's consideration. He was interested in the Hunt and he would rather be introduced with Bahn, than alone. Not because of names and ranks and all of that rot, but because the blond dragel was swiftly becoming a very dear friend.

"Lovely." Bahn preened. "It will be wonderful."

Theo perked a brow, but didn't comment. From the gleam in the older Submissive's eyes, he knew his Oretta would not stand a chance—not that he thought she'd complain. With that settled, he turned his attention to the armful of Harry and flexed his fingers. The tattoos had stopped flickering out and had remained visible on the creamy skin. Theo smiled. His Submissive was indeed, quite beautiful.

A second later, Harry all but melted when Theo's talented fingers dug into his neck and shoulders, massaging deeply. He snuggled closer and purred, contentedly.
He knew she would explain whatever was needed from him, if he allowed her a moment rather than granting his curiosity full reign.

"You look horrible." She pronounced, reaching out with one tanned hand to feel his warm forehead. "I honestly wish you wouldn't let them work you to the bone like this. You're absolutely useless if you're dead, you know!"

Quinn perked a brow in answer. His lips twitched into what might have been something of a smile at his sister's concern. He waited while she felt his throat next and then manually took his pulse. Dyshoka never relied on spells to tell her what a true healer's instincts could. She was the best of their family yet, for the accuracy of her readings and the quick, non-magical methods of acquiring them.

"Well, you're mostly fine." She fussed, brushing his shoulders and straightening his healer's garb. The standard issue overtunic was deftly unbuttoned and pulled away.

Quinn didn't protest, appreciating the help, however minor, as the day's weariness had finally begun to set in. He'd felt it in the faint tingle that had sparked over him when he'd 'ported in.

"You'll want some blood later." She eyed him, critically. "Do you want it from me?"

The blond immediately shook his head. Most definitely not—Dyshoka was his favorite sister and as much of a necessity as some things were, he hated the thought of biting her, even though it was quite normal of her to offer. He'd manage for the moment, his mother would most likely make him feed—if he ran into her tonight. If he didn't, a blood replenisher potion and a full night's sleep would do the trick.

Dyshoka frowned. "You'll have to take it from someone." She scolded, lightly. "And if you work yourself into a fit again, I'll march you to the training rooms and take it out on your shabby defense."

He bristled faintly at that—but fixed her with a glower rather than projecting any conversation between them. It took effort and energy and he desperately wished to seek his bed at the first opportunity. The emergency at the clinic, then that Soul Cast for Theo, then that pretty wood nymph and her Circle with the pesky Water Flu and then the list had simply gone on and on.

Dyshoka hung the healer's cloak and overtunic on the respective peg inside the transportation room. She reached over to rub a hand along his shoulders and back, a comforting touch. "...you do know why I'm here, yes?" There was a hint of regret in her voice.

Teal eyes blinked in surprise and Quinn mentally backtracked. He was puzzling through the day's events when the realization dawned. He winced.

She sighed. "I figured you forgot. Is there anything you need first?"

Quinn slowly shook his head.

"Good boy." She praised, softly. "Your Da is in his rooms...he's working on Bharin."

Surprise flickered over his face and the teal eyes grew wide. Quinn grabbed her hand, pushing lightly against her mental shields.

"Bharin went to him." She soothed. "And I'm sure he knows you well enough by now to know who is responsible for what." She clucked her tongue. "Mother was very upset when you 'ported out this morning. I did explain my side of things, but I'm afraid she is still quite upset with you."
The blond head bowed and Quinn affected a sigh. His fingers curled lightly over his sister's own. Thank you, Dy. I'm sorry.

"I'm not the one you need to be apologizing to." She squeezed his fingers back and stepped away. "Go on. Drawing it out will only grant you a headache."

…thank you.

"You're welcome. Now go!"

Quinn trotted off down the opposite hall where he'd intended. The Kalzik family had always kept the traditional rooms for the sake of tradition and privacy. It allowed his parents to keep their private lives private when they wished and allowed some of the rest of them a few more degrees of leniency, by having their rooms on the opposite end of the house.

Too soon, he found himself standing in front of the double wooden doors bearing a badger's seal, his Sire's mark. These were his personal rooms. The dial at the left of the door showed blue, meaning he was occupied with a Circle member, but that others could enter. Quinn raised a hand to knock, then thought better of it. He knelt before the door, hands on his thighs and tugged on his magic, pushing his aura out to make his presence known.

He would not enter without an explicit invitation.

Minutes passed. Then, the latch on the doors clicked and slid open a mere inch. Quinn relaxed, surprised to find how worried he had been over the expected response. He wedged his fingers through the opening and carefully pried it apart, wide enough for him to enter without difficulty. The room's large interior was shadowed and earthy, faintly lit by the various candles positioned all around it. It was exactly as it had been from the last time Quinn could remember.

The young healer rose gracefully to his feet and stepped fully into the room. He kept his eyes to the floor and bowed, hands at his thighs.

A second later, his Sire's magic washed forcefully over him and Quinn straightened. He turned back to the door and closed it, turning the dial to red, to show that the room's occupants could not be disturbed at present, then resumed his kneeling position, awaiting further acknowledgment.

Soft pants and the occasional grunt broke the silence in the room.

Quinn mentally withdrew himself from the room, counting his breaths in and out, feeling the unusual warmth in the room beginning to reach him. He hadn't realized he'd felt chilled, except for now the heat had caught his senses and begun to coax his body to relax.

"Did you finish your meditations?" Patrick's voice was low and silken, sounding from somewhere near the center of the room to the right.

Quinn shook his head. It was a healer requirement that all of them had to complete on a daily basis.

"Finish them. You know what to do." Came the quick, clipped reply.

Quinn nodded. He rose from the floor, careful to keep his eyes on the floor, as they adjusted to the shadowed surroundings. He made his way over to the closest corner in the room and pulled a soft, velvet pillow from a slender wooden shelf. There were candles of various sizes and lengths stored on the shelf as well and Quinn withdrew seven, short, white ones.
He backtracked from the corner to give himself some space, then set the pillow down. Deliberately turning his back to the room and its occupants, Quinn knelt on the pillow and carefully stood the candles on the smooth, polished wood floor. He touched a finger to the first one, reaching inside of himself to find the appropriate magic and channel it outward.

The white candle turned a pale pink, then a rich red as magic mixed with the waxy contents from a single finger. Quinn gripped it firmly, then blew at the wick. There was a snap and a spark, before a calm, yellow flame appeared.

Quinn sighed. That was not what he wanted, but it would have to do. He set the candle to the side, knowing his magic would keep it safe as he reached for the next one. The process was repeated until he had all seven candles colored in the appropriate hues of the seven chakras. The flames still burned a steady golden hue instead of their expected colored flames, proof that he had indeed pushed his boundaries further than he should have.

With all the candles lit, Quinn then folded his hands in his lap and closed his eyes, focusing on his breathing. He worked to clear his mind, check his mental shields and defenses, then to isolate any emotions present.

Nearly twenty minutes later, a pained gasp jolted those teal eyes wide open.

Quinn was half on his feet, before the rest of his wits caught up with him.

"Bharin is fine, Quinn." Patrick's voice was steady and calm. "It is nothing to worry about. Finish your exercise."

Hands clenched and unclenched, Quinn hesitated, frowning at the velvet pillow.

There was a quiet sigh from his Sire. "Look quickly and see for yourself."

Quinn did.

He couldn't help it. This was not his Sire's bedroom, but rather his healer's workroom, a detail that worried him even more than the thought of his Sire's impending displeasure.

In the center of the room, a large black rock was smoothly carved out to be a natural table.

Bharin lay calmly on the oiled surface, expertly bound with strong rope, his athletic body coaxed and held into position. Potion filled acupuncture needles bobbed faintly in the candlelight, the slender shadows dancing over the dark skin as Bharin's controlled breathing caused them to quiver. Standing opposite of him, Patrick stood, shirtless, his upper body coated in a fine sheen of sweat, a handful of the slender needles held in one gloved hand.

Piercing blue eyes stared straight into teal ones, until Quinn had to look away. His Sire looked the same as he always had. Trim, well-muscled, with a long, blond braid draped over one shoulder and those vivid blue eyes.

"Finish your exercise." His Sire scolded, mildly. "I am almost through with Bharin, then I'll be with you in a moment."

By the time Quinn had managed to occlude his thoughts and strengthen his mental barriers, the flames had finally burned white. They were closer to the colored flames they should be, but he was too agitated to think on it. He was sure his Sire would not take anything out on Bharin for his foolishness, but then again Bharin had intervened on his behalf on more than several occasions.
Not that Quinn had escaped those situations unscathed, for Bharin was strict, if not stricter, than his parents when it came to certain points, such as his health, safety and proper use of his magic. Still, it made him worry and worry made him antsy and that in turn, made him restless.

"Enough, Quinn." There was a touch of exasperation in Patrick's voice as he spoke at last. "If you intend to sit over there and mentally torture yourself, then kindly come and make yourself useful. Bharin is fine."

Quinn was on his feet and trotting over to the black stone table within a handful of seconds. His worried teal gaze raked carefully over his mentor, taking in the size of the ropes, the current position of the Gheyo's body and the cup of used needles hovering off to the side. Bharin's dark eyes were heavy lidded and his body was quite relaxed, though covered with the same fine, sheen of sweat as Patrick's had.

"See? I told you." Patrick said, quietly. "Do not disturb him." He waved the cup of needles towards Quinn. "Dispose of those." He then began to work the knots currently holding his patient in position.

"I know that! I wouldn't disturb him if he looked like that... I was just... he sounded... and I haven't seen you for a very long time. I guess you're very angry though, because you haven't said a word, really. Quinn frowned, though more to himself as he hurried away to do as asked and return. He was back in time to see his Sire tugging the ropes free, having stripped off his gloves. A routine health check followed to verify that Bharin was fine and ready for the rest of his treatment.

"Bharin?" Patrick murmured. "How are you? Ready to be stretched out?"

An answering hum was the necessary confirmation.

"Good fellow." Patrick praised. He cupped a hand briefly around one tanned cheek and smiled when the Gheyo leaned faintly into the touch. "I'll have the cuffs on you in a minute and then we'll see what we'll see. Do you mind if Quinn is here?"

A quiver was the only answer.

"Very well. I'll send him on a run."

Quinn looked as if he were about to protest, only to find those blue eyes drilling into him again. He looked away, feeling warmth flood his cheeks. He'd stay until ordered to leave, then!

Patrick melted into the shadows on the far end of the room and returned a moment later, with four, thick cuffs, lined with softness on the inside. He fastened them in turn to the appropriate wrists and ankles, before coaxing the relaxed Gheyo up to a sitting position. Once Bharin was balancing tentatively on his own, Patrick drew out a length of silk cord and deftly tied back the thick dreadlocks. He summoned a glass of water and blood-spiked it, having Bharin drink half, before setting it aside.

"Quinn, running." Patrick slid an arm around the Gheyo's shoulders, helping him slide off the table. "Do not make me tell you twice. A half-hour is fine."

Quinn scowled, but before he could protest, Bharin's head turned enough for those dark, unfathomable eyes to rest on him. The younger dragel squirmed inside, then cast a look back to his candles.

"I'll handle those. Let me tie Bharin first." Patrick led his Bonded over to the far wall and summoned restraints that fell from the ceiling. He fastened them to the cuffs in turn, working until
he had Bharin kneeling on the floor, his arms extended, upward at the sides. He pressed a light
kiss to one sweaty shoulder and two fingers to the Gheyo's neck.

Satisfied, he withdrew and strode to Quinn's makeshift meditation area. He checked the candles,
noting that they had begun to take on the palest hues of their respective colors. He could recognize
the reason for it straightaway. "You were Soul Casting today?"

The unsure half-glower that fixed on him made the blond's lips twitch. "Quinn—you do realize
that I do not mind if you speak?"

Quinn blinked. He opened his mouth, then shut it, uncertainly.

Patrick looked him over for a moment, then sighed. "Quinten." He reached over and folded his son
into a warm, comforting hug. "I should not have waited so long to return." He said, half to himself.
He squeezed the young man a little tighter, then rubbed his chin over the messy blond hair. There
were times when he wished that his son would grow his hair out as he did, but knew that the short
style was an expression of individuality that he would never wish to take away.

It took longer than it ever had before, until Quinn's stiff posture finally relaxed and he all but
melted into his Sire's arms, hugging back just as tightly.

"Quinn." Patrick murmured, kissing the side of his son's temple.

….Papa?

There we go. Took you long enough. I've missed you, son.

….you never…the connection…Papa. Quinn buried his face in his Sire's neck, breathing in the
familiar scent he hadn't enjoyed in nearly two years. He'd grown used to the fact that his father,
Hiram, did not keep the same mental connection as his mother and Bharin did. Of course, his
family was very private and a mental connection would definitely cut into that privacy. His Sire
though, had never thought twice about accepting the link and it was always reestablished within
minutes of their reunion. He'd been worried when there'd been a delay in the link's connection—
but so very glad to know it was still there. I missed you too. Why didn't you come back sooner?

Unfortunately, taking a leave of absence is not as easy as it once was. Patrick returned,
smoothly. We'll talk of it later—among other things. Can you manage your run? You look
exhausted. What have they been making you do?

I am and I don't have a choice. I refuse to bear a mark against my credentials simply because I've
had a long day. I'm fine, it was simply—is simply—a rather difficult case.

You've had difficult cases before.

This one's different, I ah, it was tricky.

You are attached? Patrick arched a blond eyebrow in question. That was quite rare. Quinn was
kind-hearted and compassionate, but very professional. He rarely formed any attachments to any of
his patients, if ever.

No! I just, it's difficult to explain. Quinn squirmed inwardly at the knowing look in his Sire's eyes.
He knew that look and it made him want to groan. They would certainly have quite a bit to talk
about, it seemed.
I have all the time in the world.

*Bharin doesn't!*

And I wouldn’t leave him there. Take your time on your run and think of what you'd really like to tell me.

*I don't-!*

Stubborn as always. Very well then. Enjoy it—don't resent it. A run is good for clearing the mind and even the heart. I'll keep the waxes for you to study later.

*But I didn't finish the-!*

You've done well enough and over the required time. It's only your perfectionist streak demanding perfection.

*They didn't change color the way they'd usually do.*

And they usually would, even after you've been performing your Soul Casts?

*Yes!*

And after a hard-day's work?

*Yes!*

And after a near-death experience?

*...Bharin told you?*

Your mother, actually. Why do you suppose I am here?

*Because you missed me and really wanted to see me?*

Nice try, brat. We'll discuss it later. You have a run to take and I have a Gheyo to take down for the night.

*...is he...is he alright?*

He's fine. But he's a Gheyo and they have certain needs that certain people are not quite suited to fulfilling. Patrick smiled. *Off with you, now.*

*...Take good care of him?*

*Don't I always?*

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: It's another Monster chapter! yay! LOL. Yes. 16k worth of dragel-ficlet. *sigh*
That took a very long time to hammer out. I have small bios for Bahn's Circle that I'll post later in the week so you can keep who's who sorted. It's not terribly important to remember, but it will help to cut down on confusion. The votes won out for a Quinn snippet, which took place the evening/night when Harry and Co. completed the Bond. It turned out longer than I expected, so it'll be a two-parter, so the next snippet is more Quinn. :) Patrick is skilled in several specific branches of obscure healing, as well as basic acupuncture and his skill in Rope Bondage and Bloodplay. Bharin, as a Gheyo, requires a little more 'special attention' than other Bonded. Patrick is happy to provide that, Quinn is very protective of Bharin though and doesn't like it.

Thank you all for the kind reviews, suggestions and also the well wishes for my Aunty. She has successfully made it through one surgery. We're hoping she can continue through to the next one.

Shameless plug for my Christmas ficlet, which is a "What if" sidestory on if Harry had found all of his Bonded in time for Christmas. It has some Quinn and the Twins to tide you over a bit. It's titled "TBDH : Christmas with Quinn and Co." and it's very OOC, considering that I wrote it in 2 hrs sitting in the hospital waiting room, so just read it with a grain of salt. ;)
Meeting Bahn's Side of Things 2

Chapter Summary

Harry and Co. spend their day on the beach with Bahn and his bonded. But drama just can't seem to leave them alone...

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Lots of things happen in this chapter. Read slowly. There may be a few mentioned triggers for depression, etc.

RECAP: Bahn Deveraine sends Harry a brunch invitation for a beach party with his original circle Bonded and his children. Harry accepts. When Bahn's Circle arrive, everyone has fun exchanging greetings and getting to know each other. Bahn is happy to share some dragel information with Harry. In the meantime, Quinn is working up the nerves to face his Sire, Patrick (Kalzik Beta) for his recent actions at the clinic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEVARAH : ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE : DEVERAINE PROPERTY : BEACHSIDE

Shouts came from the far end of the beach and both Harry and Theo looked up in time to see Charlie be tackled to the ground by an enthusiastic Takar. The Betas rolled around in the sand for a moment, playfully wrestling to draw the moment out.

"Our win!" Bu crowed, waving the squishy object in the air. It had been thrown up in the air by Charlie's surprised hands and she had run to catch it. "Three points to us!" She gave a little wiggle, her own version of a victory dance. "We're winning!" She twirled. "Go us!"

"You cheated!" Edora growled, hunching her shoulders up. She looked away from her chirpy circle mate to her fellow team member. "Nara, you were supposed to be paying attention!"

"I was paying attention, it's not my fault we're two hands down." Nara grinned widely. She clapped her hands to gain the wrestling duo's attention, throwing a wink at Charlie. The redhead was nicely planted in the ground with Takar's weight carefully settled over him. The sight the two Betas presented was definitely worth looking at. She'd never lay a hand on the handsome guest, but there was certainly no harm in looking and admiring. If anything, it would make Takar a little hot and bothered and that was always good. "That was a nice bit of lovely, handsome."

Takar snorted, rolling off of the dragon tamer and offering him a hand up. He gave a friendly nod to Charlie, before stalking back to their side of the traced game court. His dark brown eyes had easily seen where his Advisor's eyes had been looking. "And where exactly are your eyes wandering?" He retorted, giving Narah a nudge as he passed.

"Aww, jealous, loveling?" Nara blew him a kiss, mischief in her pretty pale grey eyes. "Don't worry, when you lose I'll be sure to have a consolation prize for you."
"As if we'll lose." Bu threw back. "Tak, quit flirting and march yourself over here." She cracked her knuckles. "My team never loses."

"Our team." Takar corrected, smoothly. He accepted the kiss of reward for scoring a point.

"Exactly what are we trying to win?" Charlie asked, accepting Edora's efficient hands at dusting the sand from his body. The petite Gheyo finished with a hard slap to his back that prompted a choked warble.


Charlie coughed. "What?"

"Well, you could play for something else, but we mostly play for Takar." She shrugged. "If they win, they have Bahn. If we win, we have Tak."

"...and what exactly are we...doing with them?" Charlie had to ask. Amusement colored his features. "Slave for a day?"

Edora's hazel eyes warmed considerably. "More like babysitter for an entire week." She smirked. "Slave wouldn't even begin to cover it."

"As if I'd lose." Takar shot back. He drew Bu back to him for a half-hug and dropped a kiss on her head. "Not when I have her on my side."

"Cheater." Edora's earlier glower returned. Bu was more like an entire team in one. It was usually why she had to play an entire half of the field herself, she couldn't play with too many in close quarters. Her reflexes were deadly and her accuracy was spot-on. "You're the one that's-"

"Time!" Sueh called out, taking up her position at the head of the triangle, the little white squishy thing in hand. It was something of a ball with a cloth wrapped around it, making it seem like a stuffed toy ghost. She tossed it back from hand to hand, her blue eyes snapping merrily. "We'll play another two rounds and call it from there, good?"

"Two rounds?" Charlie grimaced. He looked down at his stomach. It rumbled faintly. A look of dismay settled on his young face.

Nara burst into laughter. She leaned over and patted his tanned stomach, gently. "Go swap out with that little Alpha of yours and tell your Harry to feed you."

"Has Callis arrived with the food yet?" Bu titled her head to the side, tugging the golden ribbon free and holding it out to Takar. He calmly gathered the golden braids into a careful ponytail and tied them securely with the proffered ribbon. "I think I've worked up an appetite myself." She shook her head, settling the braids. "Thanks, Tak." She leaned into him for a moment and then turned, shading her eyes to see further up the beach.

He thumped her head, gently in response. "I don't think so. If he arrived, we'd know. He loves his dramatic entrances."

"I don't know what they saw in him." Sueh inspected her fingernails, but there was a faint smile hovering at the corners of her mouth. She loved to tease this particular Bonded and he was sweet enough to never complain. "Alright then, game off until later?"

"Truce." Nara agreed. She turned to Charlie. "That fine with you?"
Charlie nodded. His stomach rumbled again. He sighed. He'd never worked up an appetite like this before—not in a few mere hours—then again, he'd always been eating something on the reserve and his fellow tamers always had something on hand. He'd actually become quite used to walking around with a little pouch of trail mix and dried jerky strips. It was convenient and easy. He'd forgotten that little note since the entire Dragel thing as Theo had a good memory for ordering takeout and blood was more filling than he'd ever realized. It was a thought that made him blush—faintly—and then wondering whether it would be best to check the kitchen for a temporary snack.

Nara leaned over and slung an arm around the redhead's shoulders. She urged him forward, shifting to lock her arm more around his neck than his shoulders, to compensate for the height difference—she was still taller. She liked the young Beta even more now and thought that he was lucky to be in such a new, interesting triad—and then to be a friend of Bahn's. She'd make sure to encourage Bahn to bring their Circles together again in the future.

"Who won?" Bahn called out as the weary circle members approached, most of them happy and flushed, a few looking sweaty and tired. A calm, relaxed aura had settled all around them and even the children were following their parents back to the unofficial center. The square of carefully arranged beach towels provided a nice, sand-free resting place for any interested parties. He had urged Harry to join the others and have some fun, but the younger dragel had declined, opting to stay with him and lounge lazily in the sun. Bahn hadn't complained, the company was welcome and the conversation had been interesting.

Harry now cracked an eye open and looked up from beneath a hand, shading his eyes to adjust to the light. He smiled in welcome, rousing himself to greet the gamecomers. "Charlie!" He grinned at seeing his Beta in a half-headlock by the tall woman—Nara, the advisor.

"We called a truce." Nara released her hold on the redhead and gave him a push towards Harry. She dropped onto the towel beside Bahn and scooted up to pillow her head on his available thigh. She smiled when he handed over Camalis, resting him on her bare stomach. "Charlie's hungry. I think Tak is too. Sueh voted for a break. They must be running on a different frequency than the rest of us, though now that I think of it. I'm sure the little ones will start whining for a snack as soon as they hear the word." She paused. "Speaking of food, where's that drama queen—er—king, of ours?"

"Callis takes his own sweet time in doing absolutely everything." Bahn tapped her nose lightly. "You know that, and you also know that he has ears like a hound, do not let him hear you calling him that." His lips pursed, twitching as if to hide a smile at her accurate words. "It's well past the hour—I expect he would arrive sometime soon." He turned to Harry. "I stocked your kitchen with the basics, but even I know that's hardly anything for our lot. I stocked it for you three, not for us. I wasn't sure what you would like. Though I don't suppose there is anything in there to spare, is there?"

"I made eggs and toast this morning." Harry began to shift as if to stand. Charlie had come to stand beside him and he'd rolled up to a sitting position, gladly using his Beta's shins for a back brace.

Charlie had nudged him, with a chuckle, but hadn't protested. He was hot and sweaty—and hungry, but seeing an adorable, half-awake Harry certainly helped to take the edge off of things.

Harry hummed, in thought. Charlie's large fingers were tangling in his hair and it felt very nice. He tilted his head back, enjoying the gentle caress. He could feel Charlie's contentment through the shared bond. That was good. His mind now flickered back to Bahn and the present issue at hand—lunch. He had already begun thinking along the same lines, wondering what he had that could be fashioned into a presentable snack. He was sure there were biscuits and such that the children
would enjoy, at least. "Anything you have in mind?" He asked Bahn. His repertoire of kid-friendly recipes was a little sparse.

"We won't need anything fancy." Bahn assured him. "Probably some fruit juices or nectars for the children and something for the others to nibble on." He hummed to himself. "I'm not exactly sure what, I know I put some biscuits in there and there was some cheese spread and possibly something with sugar…" Bahn trailed off, thinking quickly.

"I'm sure there's something we can-" Harry stopped. A sudden, violent wave of emotion hurtled through him and he physically recoiled, mind whirling to decipher where it had come from. The following pulse of magical energy settled him somewhat as he realized that a portal and had opened and two newcomers had arrived—with a host of angry, fighting energy. He took one look at the approaching women and immediately scooted backwards and out of their warpath, half-hugging, scrabbling at Charlie's tanned legs. For a moment, it looked as if Bahn would be eaten alive and Harry did not want to be an appetizer—at least, that's what his dragel instincts screamed at him. He worried for his pale friend only to see Bahn's expression brightening somewhat as his gaze landed on the duo.

"Ah. They made it." He said, cheerfully. "Never mind the snacks then. Alma was bringing groceries with her. I'm sure we can find something in there. You might want to plug your ears though, Harry. They're going to yell." He said, matter-of-factly.

"Bahn." Nara scolded. She twisted turning to see and immediately rolled onto her side. She was on her feet and backing away, Camalis expertly cradled in her arms as she took in her approaching Bonded. There was apparently more to her than the mere title of Advisor if her grace and fluidity was anything to note. "On second thought, you might want a silencing charm and something else to amuse you for a few minutes. I think they'll do more than merely yell, loveling."

"Mmmhmm." Bahn hummed in answer. "You'd best let me hold, Camalis, hmm? She might not want him in your arms at the moment." He held his arms out for the baby. Alma was prickly over certain things and her son was one of them. Nara was an exception and he was a necessity. Alma would not throttle him for holding his own son—at least not just yet.

Nara made a strangled noise in her throat instead and handed him over, before skipping backwards a few feet. The duo was covering ground rather quickly. She gave a funny little quirk of her head, a hint to Harry and Charlie to move out of the way.

"Bahn!" The first approaching woman glowered at him, her gaze deadly, her aura fairly radiating the promise of pain and possible death. Magic seemed to be sparking off of her as the tension in the air grew tangible at her approach. "If you ever try and leave me alone in the Marketplace again, I swear by all that is beneath this realm and within it, that I will rip your head off and feed it to a tank full of bloodthirsty, yellow-bellied-!"

The second woman, a lighter-haired brunette came trotting up behind her, worry and exasperation painted on her lovely face. "Threats will not help." She chided. "Alma, please, calm down, love! The children are right here and I'm sure that you-"

"I know the children are right here, I can see them! I can actually see them. Do you think I'm blind?" Alma snapped. Magic, of a faintly black-grey color, swirled around her clenched fists and a smattering of small blackness rippled over her shoulder caps, then faded back into her natural color. For a moment, the anger seemed to recede by a few degrees and her eyes glistened.

The other woman sighed, squeezing her eyes shut as if to keep from saying anything to set off the situation. "No. I know you are not and I can see that. I also know that this is not the right way to
"Just stop it!" Alma half-screamed. She was a tall, slender brunette, roughly about the same height as the statuesque Nara. She was also the visible opposite of everything else in Bahn's circle. Instead of white, black seemed to be her signature color. Her outfit was a well-detailed, cutout swimming suit, with a loosely tied wrap forming a makeshift skirt for her lower body. Her skin was whiter and paler than any of the other elves and there was the barest hint of a shimmer to it in some places.

Harry found himself twitching as he sorted through the sudden rush of magic and emotion that seemed to be radiating from her. He could easily discern that the recent flood of changes had nothing to do with himself or his Bonded. Theo and Charlie were both content and mildly hungry, not furious and desperate as the chief emotions channeling back to him were. This Alma was on the verge of a breakdown, it seemed and completely overwhelmed with whatever had happened at the Marketplace where Bahn had left her.

At that, Harry was annoyed at his fellow Submissive, wondering in Merlin's name had prompted Bahn to do something that seemed to have such an upsetting outcome, when he caught sight of the elfin-dragel's face. The earlier hint of amusement was completely erased, replaced by something that was a mixture of worry, concern and barely concealed anger.

Harry blinked. Anger? He tried and failed to comprehend that, but tentatively send another careful check through his own bonds to be sure that it wasn't from his own Bonded. He didn't think it was, but he wanted to be sure. Theo's reassurance and Charlie's own sliver of worry came rushing back to him and he quickly scanned the gaggle of dragels to see where they were. Theo was working his way carefully through the others towards him, while Charlie had taken up a position that somewhat shielded him. He'd left Harry and Bahn to listen to little Bruen's happy chatter and gone off to be shown a handful of pretty seashells. He'd immediately begun to make his way back to Harry and the others the moment the portal had opened.

A blossom of warmth bloomed inside of him and Harry tentatively relaxed. From all that he'd seen and known of Bahn so far, hinted that the blond was quite capable of handling his own Circle, no matter the problem. His playful nature seemed to be something that all of his Bonded took quite seriously, but they had interacted honestly with him, showing no duplicity or other worrisome things.

Harry frowned.

Alma had switched to Elvish and was currently still telling him off about whatever had happened, fairly trembling with suppressed magic and emotion as she did so. Two mesh sacks had been in hand before she dropped them on the beach towels to try and combat her own temper. Various food items were contained within and they rested at her bare, bejeweled feet. Her thick, long hair was pulled into a braided bun, with the excess length hanging down to her waist. Another contrast of differences was the fact that it was pure black and most certainly not the pale blond hue of every other Bonded in the Deveraine Circle. She finally paused for a breath, with something of an audible hiccup.

Bahn gave a resigned sigh, slowly rising to his feet. He hadn't stood at all, sitting calmly while she'd raged at him without saying a single word. Now he rose to his full height, nearly level with her chest. "Alma." He greeted, simply.

"Give me my son!" The woman snapped.

Bahn handed over the sleeping bundle, the necessary silencing charms already cast by Nara. He watched as she checked them, then checked the babe and then immediately thrust said bundle into
her Alpha's arms, as Delani came up behind her.

"Do you have any idea what you did?" She hissed. Her fingers uncurled from their fists and twitched as if she'd like to slap him, but didn't. "You were right behind me one minute and when I turn around, you've vanished. You didn't even leave a single note-!" She screamed in frustration, the sound seeming more melodic than it should have as her hands came upward to scrabble at her head. It echoed through the empty shores.

"Alma!" Delani said, sharply. She swayed the sleeping baby in her arms, carefully for a moment, her sharp grey eyes seeing more than was presented to her. "Calm down. Do not make me force you." She frowned before moving to stand somewhat between the two. "Thank you," this was directed to Alma as her attention now shifted to her Submissive. "Bahn, you owe her an apology. I have no idea what possessed you to be so careless, but it will not happen again—so help me, if I have to remind you. Your weekend is not shaping up the way you promised me it would." She frowned, quite displeased. "Alma, there is no need to be screaming yourself hoarse. I would much rather prefer to hear your side of things as calmly as you could manage it. I have no idea what really happened back there. Can you elaborate-?"

"He left me." The words were forced through teeth and fangs. "In the middle of a—do you have any idea what I almost did-?"

Delani immediately settled the baby into the Pareya's flailing arms.

Harry sucked in a breath. He didn't think that was a very smart move at all. In fact, instinctively, the only thought in his mind was to be as far away from the current situation as possible—somewhere that he wouldn't be caught in the crossfire, baby and all. He didn't know anything about babies and dragels, except for it appeared that Delani did, because the moment she'd transferred Camalis—Alma calmed.

The effect was immediate.

Alma instinctively clutched her child to her breast, the wild magic rushing about her dimming to a tolerable murmur. Her stance changed at once, from defensive to protective. She took several careful breaths and then buried her face in the babe's blankets. Her eyes fluxed grey and then back to the customary black. "Lani, he-!" She started off again, her fingers clenching and unclenching in the soft blanket.

"Shush. I know. He did. That was wrong and you know I'll make him pay for it." Delani soothed. "However, there are gaps in this particular story and I am sure you both have reasons for what happened. Reasons that I would dearly love to know. Now take Camalis over there and calm down." She drew the smaller woman towards her, placing a kiss on the side of her temple, one finger caressing a mark half-hidden on her lower back, visible above the waistband of her sarong. "Besides, you're making a terrible first impression."

Dark eyes blinked and then locked onto to Harry and Theo. Her eyes glittered again, with unshed tears and she turned away abruptly, her arms automatically rocking the babe in the familiar swaying motions.

Bahn frowned, looking from her to Delani. He winced when the Alpha made a fist out of one hand and thumped him on the head. "Ow?" He suggested, uncertainly. His earlier chipper mood had melted away to something worried and vaguely uncertain.

"Save it." She sighed. "Takar?"
Their Beta approached, taking the cue to comfort Alma. He wrapped a sturdy arm around her shoulder and guided her to the side with a whispered murmur in her ear. He was careful to stand in such a way that he shielded her from the others, while placing himself between her and Bahn.

"Must you torment her so?" Delani scrubbed a hand through her hair. Unlike the other blondes of their respective circle, she had a lovely dark blonde tint to her own locks, though nothing on Alma's pitch black tresses.

Bahn's frown deepened. "I told her I was leaving, Lani. She was fine. You know I wouldn't have left her otherwise—I am not that cruel."

"But you can be especially when you are not thinking." His Alpha scolded. "Do not 'Lani' me. Exactly how fine was she? Do you know where I found her? Correction, do you know how I found her?"

Pale brows knitted together. "I left her chatting with Orreson's Pareya by the vegetable stalls. She was fine. They haven't had a chance to visit in a few years—not since we haven't graced the Hunts—they were very happy to catch up. I spoke to two of them—we had a lovely conversation—and then I remembered that I needed to see to the children before coming over here, so I excused myself. They were fine with it. They said they were finishing the same stalls as I was and I counted it as luck. I figured Alma could stay and finish things up, I knew she'd be fine with them. They like her. She likes them." His shoulders twitched. "I left a message with the tall one whose name I still cannot pronounce."

By now, Theo had reached Harry and Charlie. He was not oblivious to the renewed tension settling thickly in the air. He was careful to take up a protective—not defensive—stance beside his Submissive and Beta. Something had happened, though it appeared that the main people who ought to know what—didn't—and those who needed to be speaking—weren't.

"Theo?" Harry scratched one arm, absently. Charlie's warmth still seared into him, as if branding and marking his skin, even though it wasn't anywhere near as uncomfortable as his mind screamed it ought to be. Harry could feel his magic literally crawling under his skin as if it were about to burst out any minute, Charlie's heat was distracting enough for him to ignore the itch. He bit his lip, wondering what exactly was being transmuted through the bond between them, when Theo's hand settled on his shoulder, directly over the tattooed mark.

"Harry." The young Alpha's voice was soft and familiar. "It's fine. It's an inner circle matter. We only need to allow them a moment to sort it out."

"It feels like something bigger." Harry reached up to hook his fingers with Theo's, relaxing by a fraction when the command filtered through the mark, requesting him to remain calm. That was a welcome cue and he was grateful for Theo's silent, strong support.

"If we're worked up, then they'll be more on edge." Theo whispered, cat-quiet. "We're fine." He locked eyes with Charlie, relieved to see that their Beta kept his distance, carefully positioning himself in a place where he'd be at an advantage. Theo did notice Edora shifting uncomfortably, positioning herself at a point where she could keep all three of them in line. He smiled, grimly, realizing that their Gheyo had read the situation in the same way as he had.

"Something came up then." Delani rubbed her face. "They left. Alma never received any message. In fact, she was accosted by a certain charming fellow by the name of Lael Guantrell, who took notice of the fact that she was very much alone. She nearly ripped his head off." Delani frowned. "Now, I don't exactly know what this means in particular to you or her, but I can't imagine anything that—Bahn?"
The elfin-dragel had gone rather still all of a sudden. The pale eyes darkened to a more decided
grey and when Delani reached for him, his head jerked around, fangs snapping with an audible
click where her fingers had been moments before.

"Bahn-!" She yanked her hand back, staring at him in complete disbelief, worry etching across her
face.

He ignored her, starting forward after Alma. Scales began to ripple and surface, showing along the
edges of his face, the features morphing to something vaguely reptilian.

Delani's eyes narrowed. "Oh no, you don't." She lunged for him, succeeding in grabbing one arm.
She easily wrestled him to her side, leaning her head back to keep from bumping her chin on his
head. "Bahn. Bahn, calm down, love. Please. Don't make me force you. Please. Who exactly is he
and what did he do that—she's fine. Bahn, Alma's fine. I am fine. Nothing happened to us. I need
you to tell me if-"

Bahn struggled against her embrace anyway, a continuous low growl slipping out of his throat.

Theo immediately pulled Harry back, flush against him, careful to put more than a few steps of
distance between them and the agitated pair.

A grunt came out as Harry wriggled, though not to escape, but rather to soothe the uncomfortable
itch that now seemed to be spread over him. He felt the familiar pang of worry as he took in his
fellow Submissive's obvious distress. He could now see how some of the secrets in the Deveraine
Circle could have survived for so many years. The longer he knew Bahn, the more it seemed as if
he didn't really know anything about him at all. He'd seen Bahn fight Ilsa the night before, had
seen Bahn's playful interaction with Takar, but he hadn't expected anything like the Alpha-
Submissive Dynamic playing out before him.

"Shhh. It's fine. We're fine." Theo paused. His golden eyes roved quickly over Harry's twitching
form. "You're…twitching. Are you alright?"

"Think…so." Harry twisted again, not finding the friction that he wanted and feeling an unbearable
heat beginning to build in him. "Magic." He growled out to Theo, clenching his jaw as the hairs
along his arm began to stand on edge. "Feels like there's something inside of me."

"Hey, hey, shh." Theo soothed, instantly locking an arm around his neck and digging those talented
fingers into the mating mark between them. He fairly pushed the command of 'calm' through the
bond, worrying at Harry's near vibrating form. "Don't think about it. Do not think about what
you're seeing. Listen to me. Listen to my voice. Close your eyes if you have to. Do not let yourself
be worked up over this, alright? I know it looks—dodgy, at best—but trust me. Remembering that
little chat we had in the shower this morning? The one about your dragel gift being Nameless and
possibly empathic?" He locked his other arm around Harry's waist, pinning the slender arms to the
sides. "You are reacting right now. I can feel it and I'm sure you can too, if you're searching for it.
Stop searching. I know that's easier said than done, but close your eyes, that will help some."

Harry bit his lip, feeling a distinct coolness from Theo combating the flaring heat between them.
He closed his eyes without a second thought. If there was anything dangerous around him, Theo
and Charlie would handle it. He should trust them. No, he could trust them and he would.

"Thank you." Theo's lips brushed against the outer shell of his ear, his arms tightening a touch
more. "It'll blow over in a minute, I think. Right now—you don't want to be between them."

Harry bit his lip, worrying it between his teeth, forcing himself to focus on the sensation instead of
the scene he'd just seen—Delani wrestling Bahn into an armlock. From the very obvious signs between them, he didn't see the need to use his magic to confirm what his eyes could already declare. His mind clicked over to the usual train of thought he followed when wanting to help another, he pounced on the single piece of useful information that had registered before Bahn's reaction. "Who is Lael Guantrell?"

Bahn's head jerked around to glare at Harry. "Don't say his name." The words came out as a hiss.

"Eyes." Theo murmured, quickly. "Don't open your eyes." His own golden gaze met Bahn's greyed orbs steadily.

Before anything else could happen along that line, Delani's light orange eyes began to turn colorless. She tightened her grip on Bahn, careful of his baby bump, before knocking his head to the side and sinking her fangs into his neck. He keened softly, when the pain registered and after a few weak protests, grew limp in her arms. Only when assured of his compliance, did the Alpha gently retract her fangs, pressing a kiss to the puncture wounds. Her magic was a warmer hue to Bahn's golden-white flickers and it swirled easily around the pair, forcefully projecting a deliberate calm.

A pink blush immediately stained his cheeks and Bahn turned his face to hide it in her neck. The brunette gave a sad smile, cradling his head to her. She rubbed a careful line up and down the mating marks on his exposed arm, further relaxing her distraught Submissive.

Several tense minutes passed and then Bahn straightened, leaning away from her arms again. Delani sighed. "Bahn, would you like to tell me what is wrong or should I start guessing?" Her fingers gently tapped along his exposed upper half. "I know something's wrong and I know there are only two things in this realm that could ever put you in this sort of a state. I'd rather you told me instead of guessing."

Harry shifted, uncertainly, turning closed eyes towards Theo. Their cheeks brushed and after a moment, Theo nudged him gently, a silent cue. Emerald eyes carefully slid open a second later, taking in the altered scene. Harry was relieved to find that the crawling, burning itch had abated enough to a tolerable level and he found himself fixed on Bahn's troubled face.

The blond stubbornly pressed his lips together and he threw his weight forward, to break the embrace. He obviously wasn't about to speak just yet. Delani frowned but released him, watching as he immediately headed towards the irate Alma, pacing up and down a marked path in the sand, having freed herself from Takar's arms. When Bahn reached her, she turned her back to him at once.

Only to be pulled around and have Camalis pried from her arms to be handed off to Nara. The advisor had immediately drew near to monitor the situation and she quickly took the baby without a single word. Before the Alma could complain, Bahn grabbed her in a hug and forcefully threw his magic out over her, urging it to seek for injury heal any that was found. Nara immediately scooted backwards, accepting the protective stance Edora took up in front of her.

Surprise radiated from the Alma as she froze, feeling the protective magic twining around her. Bahn rarely did this—ever. He trusted them all to take care and look after their own selves. Their inherent nature as Battle Elves meant that they were accustomed to it—to show this side of him meant that something was wrong. She squashed the inner tendril of panic and forced herself to project a calm that she did not quite feel. "Bahn?" Her voice was careful, tentative.

Bahn simply hugged her harder.
Alma bit her lip, fangs peeking out over the edges. She looked over Bahn's head towards the approaching Delani and mouthed a question. The Alpha's shrug was not the least bit helpful. "...Bahn? I'm fine. Really. Nothing happened, it's just that—if you were there—ow. Alright. I should mention that I am not a stuffed toy and squeezing me to death will probably be frowned upon." The grip slackened fractionally. Alma huffed. "Nice. Alright." She stood with her arms by her side for a moment, before her lower lip quivered and suddenly, she was hugging him back with equal force.

Delani came to a stop a few feet away, wary of interfering. By now, the rest of the Circle had gathered, instinctively grasping that something was troubling one of their own on a deeper level. The children were kept by Nara and Soula, with Edora keeping watch in front of them, while the others came forward.

"Bahn?" Takar circled around to watch from the opposite of Delani. "Is everything alright? Alma?"

"They appear to be fine." Sueh's magic, pale blue like her eyes, whispered over the hugging duo. Her wings had emerged, flaring out protectively and curving towards the two Bonded. "What happened? I haven't seen him like this since—" She swallowed back the word. "Lani?"

Delani sighed. "We need to talk." She said, firmly. "I shall call the others in. Come and sit down, all of you. This will be sorted before it grows out of hand. Nara?" She called out. "Soula? Bring the children." She scanned the beach line. "Didn't you bring the pavilion?"

"Bahn said Greta would bring it." Bu supplied. "Which means that if she wasn't released from the pits, Ilsa should bring it, if she ever manages to make it here from wherever she went in the first place. Edora tore the last one down, remember?"

"Hey!" Edora scowled in her direction.

The petite Pareya merely shrugged in answer. "Tis the truth, isn't it?"

"Wings then," Delani said, decisively. She turned back, stopping when she caught sight of Theo and the other two. "And one of you smells familiar, though I can't imagine why—Theodore?" She stopped and stared at the golden-eyed brunet incredulously. "My word, you've grown." The last vestige of her defensive posture melted away as instinct dictated that she was with family that would not attack. "It's been years…"

"He's more than grown." Takar said, gently. "Did you not read anything that Bahn wrote to you last night? This is Theo and his circle, they are currently a triad. His Beta, Charlie—the redhead and their Submissive, Harry, the one with the green eyes. You did read the letter Bahn sent, didn't you?"

"I did." Delani's left eye twitched. "and I might have been half-asleep when I did."

"Ah." Takar hummed. "Did you at least read what he had to say about Ilsa?"

"That was probably the part where I fainted from sheer disbelief." Delani retorted, the sarcasm lacing her tone. "I read the letter, Takar. I simply haven't had the chance to properly process it." She inclined her head towards the younger Alpha. "My apologies, it appears I am distracted."

Harry frowned. He wouldn't call Bahn's distress a distraction, but he was aware that the formal phrasing probably meant more on what wasn't said than what was. "Will Bahn be alright?" He asked, bluntly.

Delani's eyes grew even paler. "He will be, if I have anything to say of it." She said, softly. "Wings,
everyone." She looked at Theo, hard for a moment. "You may join us, if you can keep your silence."

Theo looked down at Harry. Emerald eyes pleaded silently with him. Theo drew in a breath and nodded, he beckoned Charlie to join them.

They managed to guide Bahn and Alma to the towels, where the children were brought and clustered around them. Nara, holding Camalis, sat back-to-back with Alma, while the Pareya stretched their wings out, forming a shadowed cocoon. The youngest of the children were spelled to sleep and the oldest—Soula, was allowed to stay awake. She hovered on the edge of the group with something of a worried pout.

For Harry's comfort, Charlie extended his wings instead, providing some shade for his own circle from the afternoon sun. They were carefully situated with an out allowed for comfort on both sides, should either circle feel threatened. Theo was mildly impressed and chose to keep close to Harry, while Charlie settled behind them both with his wings extended.

After several long minutes of whispering, Delani finally pried Alma and Bahn apart, gathering Bahn up and into her lap, while Takar did the same for Alma, being careful to allow the woman to keep a clear line of sight to Nara and her son. Delani whispered some more before Bahn's face scrunched up into an odd expression and then he reached up and tugged her head down so their foreheads to touch.

Harry frowned, wondering what it was for when seconds later, the lady Alpha started, violently, her wings shredding the fabric of her white blouse and a loud growl cutting through the air.

"Lani?" Takar's voice was measured and careful. He tensed, arms around Alma as if to feel.

Delani licked her lips and tucked Bahn's head beneath her chin. He shifted, restlessly again and was quickly presented with her slashed wrist. There was no hesitation before he sank his fangs into the offering. "Remember that circle a few years back…after Ilsa?"

Takar frowned. "Which one?"

"The one with…the…the one who said that Bu was a pretty little thing fit only for-?"

Edora clapped a hand over the Alpha's mouth, being the only one close enough to the irate pair to do so. Her hazel eyes glittered with suppressed anger. "I do." She said, stiffly. "Don't remind me. I should have killed the bastards!"

"…apparently, they've changed names. The Circle expanded. Lael Guantrell was…well informed."

Edora leapt to her feet and stalked away from the group. Her hands clenched at her sides and then her thick, plated wings made an appearance. Then she threw her head back and literally screamed a whirlwind across the rippling waves.

Harry felt a sense of growing dread ripple over him as he watched the entire circle start and tense at the new revelation. He didn't need to know exactly who was who to fill in the blanks on this one. Someone had insulted Bu and apparently been warned off—yet had still made another pass—this time, at Alma. The pretty Pareya had been alone and while certainly not defenseless, if her temper was anything to measure it by. But the encounter had not been welcome for more reasons that were being publicly shared.

On the other hand, Harry was mildly impressed at Edora's little display of temper. He hadn't seen
an Air type in any sort of 'action' and while he didn't like the reason for such a display—it was lovely—and a muted warning. In spite of her small, feminine frame, there was a significant amount of magic contained within. He found himself wondering if he could possibly be lucky enough to find Bonded from every possible element. It was certainly an enticing thought.

Takar swore in Elvish and all the women simultaneously reinforced the muffling spells around the children almost as if it were habit.

"Takar." Alma scolded. She poked him in the chest with one finger, but made no move to break his protective embrace. Her lower lip trembled, faintly.

"What did you see?" Takar demanded. He leaned to the side and winced, catching sight of Edora carving up the sandy beach between the cracks of two overlapping wings.

Delani sighed. It appeared she was the only one able to speak clearly and coherently for the moment. "I felt her magic spike and I saw her backed up into a pillar, with this… idiot leaning over her. She had her arms full with bags and the place was crowded and busy. You know how it is. He said something. She said something else. He grabbed her by the neck and that's when I finally reached them." Delani's fingers fluxed to claws and she breathed deeply through her nose, willing them to morph back. She could not afford to lose control—not yet, anyway.

Theo found himself scowling along with them, noting Harry's grim reaction to the news. The upper crust of dragel society was just like any other—a feeding frenzy where only the richest and most influential could keep their footing. Ilsa had been careful to keep him out of it and when she couldn't—well, that was one of the many reasons she'd gifted him her surname. With the Gorgens name attached to his own, it would keep the lesser irritants from interfering and allow him to keep the privacy he'd grown fond of. It was a detail he was now thankful for, knowing that Harry disliked the spotlight as much as he did. He'd have to make sure he registered a Circle name for them soon. He'd omitted that particular detail when he'd registered both Submissive and Beta.

"Tell me you at least bruised him and filed charges?" Nara scowled, darkly. "He deserved it. You said his name was Lael? I've never heard of him and I won't forget him either. I know most of the High Noble families. I can't believe I've missed a bloody name change!

"Mmhm." Delani frowned. "You probably didn't. You might have heard it and it didn't register right away. He's from the same circle, according to Bahn. But I've never seen nor heard of him before either. I did hit him—broke his nose, not that it lasted long, but now I wish I'd killed him. The three on patrol said they'd write it up. I left a brief report. There were witnesses."

Bahn released her wrist to bite down in a new patch of skin—hard.

"Bahn!" She flicked him lightly with her free hand. "If you need to bite, then-"

He wrinkled his nose, but opened his mouth and carefully tended to the matching wounds. "Killing him wouldn't have solved anything." He said, quiet and composed once more. "It would have only caused you more trouble and brought a bigger headache to all of us." He sent an apologetic look to Alma, who offered a wan smile in return. "I shouldn't have left you alone, I thought you were safe with the others, I didn't realize—I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, "Alma began.

Bahn immediately held up a hand to silence her. He shook his head, then blew out a frustrated breath. "No. It is. I was too—excited—there was so much happening and so many things I wanted to do, especially since I…well, since I felt Ilsa enter Nevarah. I wasn't thinking straight." He turned
to face Delani. "And I do know that you specifically requested that I be shadowed at all times and I willfully disobeyed you by deliberately losing her." His hands folded in his lap. "I realize that feeling stifled or excessively energetic are both situations that I should bring to your attention and that it is your responsibility to help me adjust and adapt. This wouldn't have happened if I wasn't feeling—stubborn—I fully understand and accept that this is my fault."

Harry felt his skin begin to prickle and crawl once more. He could practically taste the guilt wafting off of Bahn and it burned through him like Charlie's scalding flames that never singed. He leaned back into Theo, not sure whether he should speak, but feeling still as if he should do something. The last thing he wanted to do was somehow put his foot in his mouth at such a delicate point. Delani's earlier words to be silent reminded him to hold his tongue.

Theo squeezed his shoulders, reassuringly, his arms having fallen back from the earlier restraint. He wished that Ilsa was here, if only for the fact that her presence had always brought him some measure of reassurance. He wondered what was keeping her and then refocused his attention on Harry, careful to be channeling calmness through the bonds both to him and Charlie. He didn't dare make a sound at this moment. It was still too sensitive.

"We are not pointing fingers." Delani said, firmly. "We do not know if this would have been averted entirely had your presence been there or not. There-

"It would have." Bahn interrupted, calmly. "You know me better than anyone else, Lani. When I am present everyone knows it. They know who I am and where I come from. They know to keep a wide berth, it is also why I prefer to shop with Sueh—she is very good haggler and no one ever dares look at her in the wrong way. This could have been prevented, if I had…behaved."

At that, Harry's emerald eyes immediately darted towards the named Pareya. He was wondering what was different in her from the others, when those sharp, blue eyes locked onto his. He sucked in a breath and dared himself not to look away. Sueh was the only one amongst them with blue eyes—a blue so rich and startlingly vivid, that he knew there had to be more to her than a simple Air element—just like her Submissive, something lurked beneath the surface.

"...I agreed to Alma today, because I knew it would be easy to lose her." Bahn hesitated. "I was in a hurry, I wanted things to be moving quickly and I didn't want to stop and deal with...a shadow. And that was wrong and solely my own fault. If I had done exactly as you asked, this would not have happened. I should have made my feelings clear on the matter and asked for a suitable compromise. I had options." He met his Alpha's gaze, steadily. "I accept whatever punishment you deem worthy and I apologize to all of you. I am truly sorry. I never meant for this to come about."

He swallowed.

Delani stared him down for a moment and then turned away. She sighed. Bahn shifted in her lap, reaching up to nuzzle her neck and then to rub his cheek against hers. She let him, waiting for a long moment. The expression on her face was far from happy, but it was settled enough. She no longer appeared as furious as she'd been several minutes before. When his nudges became more insistent, her hand reached up to tangle in his hair and hold him steady. She held his head pulled back, so she could accept the apology, licking and kissing the soft throat, before she nipped it, lightly with her fangs. A reddened mark appeared. "We will discuss this later." She informed him. "It will be sorted and Alma deserves her own apology."

Bahn nodded, quickly, nervously. "I-I am sorry, Delani."

His Alpha hugged him tight, rubbing firmly up and down his slender arms. "I know you are." She
said, softly. "I know you are."

Eventually the tension settled to an acceptable level and Theo reluctantly sat down again, with Harry cuddled into his side. Charlie, of course, took up Harry's other side, pressing his warmth closer to them. The trio was careful not to speak, unless spoken to. Whatever had happened seemed to be something of grave importance and all were loath to interfere in such a seemingly delicate matter.

Bahn finally sighed, his pale eyes searching the group before settling on Harry, he pulled away from Delani to stretch a hand towards his fellow Submissive. "...I suppose I owe you an apology as well." He mused, waiting.

Theo nudged Harry forward, reassuring.

"Not really," Harry scooted forward, reaching for the hand and twitching in surprise when a jolt of magic sparked between them. Both Submissives stared at each other for a moment and then Bahn smiled. "You didn't tell me you were an Empath."

Shock made its course quickly around the various dragels.

And the faintest of a smile touched Delani's face. "I wondered how you were so calm." She said, softly. "There are very few who can keep their senses when I am losing mine." She smiled warmly, albeit sadly, at Harry. "Bahn, love, I think I'd best take a walk."

He twisted to look at her and ducked his head, lightly, as she trailed her fingers over his neat plaits. "...if you must."

"I must. I suppose it is my turn to carve up the beachside. It will only take a minute. Sit and talk to Harry, you two fit together quite well. Do excuse me."

"Er," Harry said, intelligently.

Bahn squeezed the hand carefully in his own. He didn't watch as Delani excused herself from everyone to take her own turn at expressing her emotions across the pristine beachside. Apparently, the Gauntrell Circle was a very sore topic for all of them. "My apologies, Harry. I hoped you could have a relaxing, restful afternoon, but it seems as if I am a walking entourage of drama." He hesitated. "And I'm also sorry about naming your talent, I didn't mean to blurt it out if t'was a secret." He turned, throwing a warning glance to his circle, who understood the unspoken command. He took a shaky breath. It could be a conversation for later—much later. "Though, if I could make a suggestion, if you ever run into the Guantrell Circle, do your best to avoid them. They are arrogant pricks with absolutely no self-control, zero morals and despicable magic. The intent brands into your skin like filth that can never be removed."

Theo frowned, shifting forward to settle himself behind Harry. "If you don't mind my asking...how so?" He was careful to convey nothing beyond simple interest, acknowledging that they were still on good terms, in spite of the little scene.

Bahn sighed and shifted away from where he'd been sitting to half-curl into Harry, seeking the skin on skin contact from a fellow Submissive. He rested his head on Harry's shoulder and toyed with the ends of one of his many, shiny braids. "Lael is a new Bonded to the Guantrell Circle. Twelve years ago, my daughter Kandra was attacked by one of their Bonded." The elfin-dragel slowly clenched his hands into fists. "A rather nasty bit of...business." He exhaled softly. "However, due to inner politics and Kandra's wishes, the matter was never properly...handled."
"What he's trying to say," Bu fluidly folded herself into a blank spot besides Bahn and immediately scooped him up into her lap, then reached for Harry and pulled him as close to them as she could, with an apologetic look to Theo. Her own instincts were riding close to the surface and she knew the young man would understand—Theo was an Alpha, after all. She let Bahn curl up for a moment, hands still stretched towards Harry, who didn't mind taking and holding them as he instinctively leaned closer to both of them, not the least bit bothered by Bu's arm draped around him. "Is that Kandra was never avenged. Because the crime—and make no mistake that it was one—was never marked on their Circle by an official, they've continued to grow and have brought themselves up in society. They currently have a ranking that makes it, well, suffice it to say that there is very little we can do about it at the moment. Not without causing some significant problems." She sighed. "Ithycar was furious when he found out and Delani wasn't much better, but it's after the fact and that's a bit of an issue."

Bahn made a noise of discontent. "There were things we could have done," He tried to explain. "But everything was a mess back then, Ilsa had just left, Greta was in the dueling pits, Callis wasn't settling in, Edora wasn't Edor and our Circle was fractured all around." He squeezed Harry's hands. "A Circle fractured is a house divided and a house divided will never stand in times of despair. It was... very bad."

Harry felt a chill ripple over him as his mind connected the dots between all that wasn't outright explained. "Is," he licked his lips. "Is Kandra...? Alive, he wanted to say, but couldn't bring himself to voice it. "Alright?"

Bu stilled her Submissive with a reassuring grip on his shoulder. A pained look settled on her face. "That would depend on your definition of alright. Kandra was a...Submissive. The fight turned her into a Gheyo. There was nothing that could be done about it. She now trains with a special Military Circle on the outskirts of the Fire Borders, where the Fire Dragels reside. It changed her—they changed her—and it never should have happened."

Harry's brow furrowed into a knot. Bahn tugged on his fingers, lightly, an inquisitive look at Harry's puzzled expression. "How can she... change?" Harry asked. He had to know. It didn't make any sense to him at all. A saddened look settled over all of the dragels present and Harry almost wished that he hadn't spoken at all.

"Do you know how Gheyos come about?" This was from Edora who now stood over them, her sweat-slick body gleaming in the afternoon light. She had a towel slung around her neck and she pushed her sweaty bangs up and off of her forehead. She'd apparently finished carving up the beachside and using up her destructive anger in a more suitable outlet, now sufficiently calmed to mingle once more. Her generous bosom heaved with her slowing breaths as she swabbed about her face with the clean spot on the towel. "It's actually quite simple really."

Harry shook his head. "They are either born to Gheyo parents or they are made." The blonde eyed him. "I take it you don't understand that, either?" She tugged on the ends of the towel. "For any individual to turn into a Gheyo apart from inheriting the gene, something horrifically traumatic must happen. It must almost kill them and it must make them wish to live beyond it. If it is not to kill them, then someone dear and near to them, someone that would prompt the sacrifice they give as a life debt—to survive, a Submissive's life debt often translates into the Submissive turning into a Gheyo. This is noted when the Submissive is feral and, well, you'd see the wings change."

The sudden chill intensified and Harry shivered, in spite of the warmth in the air.

Edora's own expression shifted to one of regret. "When this happens, instead of dying, the
individual's magic forcibly rewrites them. They gain the traits of Gheyo-kind and well, their magic is everything that it never was. Vicious, powerful and tormented." Her smile was more of a grimace. "We may laugh about it at times, but there is very little to laugh about. Think of Ilsa, for example. There is a reason she is so short. She was not born to Gheyo parents."

Bahn made another strangled sound in his throat and shifted, faintly. Bu pressed a kiss to one bare shoulder. Bahn shuddered, relaxing minutely. "Show him, Edor." He said, softly. "Please?"

Harry found himself staring in morbid fascination as the feminine figure of Edora began to twist and shrink somewhat. The bikini top went flat against a lightly muscled chest and the cute, cropped bottoms were suddenly a little fuller than they were before. The thick, long, blond hair was now shorter and in a single braid down the back, the smaller braids morphing into one. The face became sharper and more angular as Edor now stared back. His shoulders twitched and the wings that burst out were nothing like the ones Harry had seen up close as yet.

These wings were thicker, heavier and when Edor curved one forward, Harry gasped. Whereas the other dragels he'd seen so far had lovely, colorful, shiny scales, Edor had dull, thick plates of what had to be armor, with bony points and tips over the surface. The colors were bland and flat and there didn't seem to be a single way to pry out a single armored scale. The top of the middle wing spines had a smaller, slightly deformed claw that was clenched tight. Edor's smile was tight and strained. The stark contrast of fierceness seemed out of place on the small, waif-like Gheyo.

"Fold it back," Bu murmured, softly. She arm around Harry's shoulder retreated as she stretched out the hand to trail down Edor's shoulder. She watched carefully as he folded the wings back and bunched up the ruined bikini top and tucked it under one thigh. "Kandra was being courted by three potential Alphas and two Betas," She continued. "She had just come of age. It happened when Delani was out of town and when Ithycar was tied up. There was precious little we could do, but Bahn took charge." She smiled, faintly. "And he was very good at it. He warned them off and made a deal that allowed Kandra to be accepted outside of the Central City, so she could have a life of her own."

"And what neither of them are telling you," Edor growled, his shoulders twitching violently. "Is that they tricked Kandra into thinking that if she wasn't quiet about it, that they'd take it out on her mother. Her mothers are Bu and Salani. Bahn is not her carrier."

Harry frowned. That name was new and unfamiliar and he wondered, briefly, why Bahn hadn't carried Kandra. He supposed it was easier for the women though and dismissed the thought. It was none of his business anyway.

Bu growled, faintly, her body quivering. She met Harry's horrified gaze, squarely. "We are not a perfect society, loveling. Where there is light, there is sure to be darkness of some kind." She squeezed Bahn gently. "Sometimes it means the rest of us have to shine brighter to make up for it. It does not mean that it is fair."

"Salani," Bahn said, softly. "Is one of Bhindi's Pareya. It was one of the main reasons our Circles merged." He reached up and gently pressed his hands against Bu's trembling lips. He turned to press a kiss to the side of her throat. There was nothing more to be said.

"I'm calling in the others." Delani said, abruptly. She'd finished her angry pacing up and down the beachside, surprisingly without any of the physical destruction on nature as Edor had. Now, she stood with her arms crossed over her chest, an angry frown on her face. "And I will be in touch with Ithy, Bahn. If there is absolutely anything at all that you need to say, then by Arielle's virgin blood, say it now." She paused. "Not to my face, if you do not want to, but speak."
Bahn had finally ended up half-cuddled, half-sprawled between Bu and Harry, now, he cracked one eyelid open, peering up at Delani's serious countenance. He huffed a sigh and carefully sat up. "He's already on his way."

The Alpha blinked. "...Pardon?" She inquired, uncertainly.

"Of all the questions you've asked me today," Bahn carefully eased himself upward and gingerly shifted to his feet. He passed a faintly glowing hand over his baby bump and seemed pleased at the result. "You didn't ask about Aracle." He reminded her of their active Rheyo—the chosen Beta among them. There was a faint air of authority around him.

"He's with Bhindi, isn't he?" Edor snorted. "That's the only reason he's never around and probably the only reason you would have managed to bring Ilsa here—of whom, I have yet to see." He grumbled.

"She'll be here." Bahn murmured. "She'll definitely be here. Aracle was with my sister, but I have no idea if they are still together at the moment. I know she said she had something to do..."

"...were you going to mention it at all?" Delani found her voice. There was a faint twitch at the corner of her jaw. "Verbal answer, please."

Bahn pursed his lips in thought, head cocked to the side. If any of them had the power to call Ithycar, the Head Alpha, apart from Bhindi and Bahn, it was Aracle. Bahn had sent the message at the earliest possible moment, through Aracle to be sure that it could not be refused. "Probably not." He allowed. "I am not asking him to come and fix things or to step on your toes, Lani. I simply want him to take care of what belongs to him." He yawned. There were more in those words than he would elaborate upon. "Besides Bhindi's been miserable and she's taking it out on everyone because of it. Now, I'm hungry and I'm fairly certain quite a few of you are too." He snuck a sideways glance at them. "We're being terrible hosts. We can discuss this later."

"Your idea of later is never." The lady dragel retorted. "And if that's the way you want to play this, then go right ahead, but we will speak of this later, if only if it happens to be my idea of a lecture. It will happen."

"I know. Just not now." Bahn's grey eyes lightened back to their natural hue. "Whatever you have to say, I will listen, however you wish to say it. I have already given my consent." He clasped his hands together and cracked his fingers. A mischievous look flickered across his innocent features. "By the way, you might want to make sure everyone stays on the square." He nodded towards the blanketed area where nearly everyone remained gathered. "This is Ilsa we're talking about."

Nara snorted. "Arielle help us, should she actually decide to appear normally." She sighed. "Fine. Will the children sleep through it?"

"Most likely. I'll lift the spell in a bit, if it doesn't wear off. It wasn't a deep one."

Delani rubbed her face. "I knew I should have stayed in bed this morning." She threw a look at her Submissive.

He winked and clapped his hands together. The wards for cooling and protection expanded to include them all.

"Incoming!" Edor's amplified voice rumbled through the air. "Hit the ground!"

"What?" Nara clutched the baby to her chest, rolling up to a sitting position. Her jaw dropped and
her eyes grew wide. "Oh by Arielle's-!" She began, breaking off abruptly. "Down! Everyone down! Bu?"

"On it!" Came the short Pareya's reply. "Sueh?"

"They're covered." Sueh reassured. Her wings had remained out and fanned protectively over them all. "Heads down!" The Pareya snapped, when a few of her Circle Bonded attempted to peek out. "Unless you want to be blind, Bahn, the wards?"

"She's already opened them." Bahn's lips twitched. "And that was very fast. Lovely."

"I'm hardly surprised." Delani said, dryly. "What exactly did you tell her to have the poor thing 'port in so quickly?"

Takar snorted. "You probably don't want to know." He held a squirming teenage Soula in his arms and when she made a sound of protest, he bared his fangs, a half-growl-turned-hiss coming out.

The dark-haired beauty scowled and gave another deliberate wriggle, before settling down with a huff and crossed arms, refusing to look him in the face. "It's only her." She scowled. "It's nothing to be all excited about and-"

Bahn's rose to his feet, reaching over with one hand. He snapped his fingers and Soula's body immediately went limp. Takar shot him a grateful look. "It's only your mother, my dear." He said, cheerfully. "And now that she is, she can deal with your horrible temper."

The swiftly darkening sky had absolutely nothing on the crackling, violet-energy covered figure that came hurtling out from the clouds. From the bright flashes against the grey-black background, it did not take a genius to figure out that a battle took place within the skies.

"Do I even want to know?" Edora grumbled, scowling up at the brewing storm. "I hope they remember that we're down here."

"Ilse will remember—even if Greta doesn't." Bahn said, calmly. He cast a warm glance towards his on guard Pareya. "They have Dahlia up there, so they won't really let loose with each other."

Harry tried to relax, based on the blasé air the entire Deveraine Circle had taken on. Bahn didn't appear to be the least bit worried and his somewhat calm exterior projected an aura that was easy for Harry to read off of. He had watched with interest as Bahn had summoned Ilse and Greta, while Delani had called in Callis. It worried him, faintly to see Bahn acting as if nothing had happened, but he could read the thread of anxiousness beneath the cheerful air and knew that his friend simply did not wish to deal with the drama just then. He didn't blame him.

For that count, Harry chose to follow his cue and had taken the change in subject as easily as he could. Now he could see that Bahn had been right in his earlier declaration. The moment he'd called for Ilse—legitimately called—he was answering. There was no delay at all.

One shimmering violet-hued Gheyo came streaking down from the sky. She was curled into a ball and smacked into the sandy beach with a fierce spray of sand, her armor rattling with the sheer force behind her landing. She uncurled almost at once, rising to her full height, neck rolling and shoulders settling back. There was an ornately handled whip in one hand and when she flicked her wrist, a crackle of white-purple energy rippled off of her body and over the long length. She swirled it overhead in the air and then cracked it. Her armor melted away to show a well-tailored bikini that hid absolutely nothing of her ample curves and tanned skin. Like Alma, this new Gheyo had rich, dark hair that was cropped to just above her shoulders.
Harry felt himself subconsciously gathering his magic, feeling defensive at the open display of power in a setting with too many possibilities. She was pretty to look at as well, but lovely in a way that screamed danger, if he looked too long. Theo's calming hand on his shoulder allowed him to pull back long enough to realize that his dragel instincts were riding closer to the surface than he'd expected. He thought he'd been calming down. "Theo?" He tested, carefully.

"It's Oretta." Theo's golden eyes flickered, faintly, searching the sky for something that Harry couldn't see. "It's nothing to worry about. I have forgotten that she does love a touch of theatrics when the situation is appropriate."

"Appropriate?" Harry repeated, thinking of the stern woman and finding himself unable to reconcile that with the playful, but equally dangerous Lady Gheyo currently occupying the beach. "Are you sure that-?"

"That's not Ilsa-" Charlie began, his own defenses beginning to shift. His blue eyes darkening faintly. His wings had folded back a little while ago and now his shoulders twitched, the rich tattoos swirled elegantly over his tanned skin.

"That's Greta." Bahn supplied, helpfully. His pale eyes sparkled. "And she's in top form too." He stood on tip-toe and waved energetically. "Ilsa's most likely right behind her. They always travel together, unless something's come up somewhere. Greta!" He called. "We're over here, love. Could you please try not to-" He winced.

A powerful gust of wind blew outward from the magic cast as a wave of Greta's storm elemental attack flew upwards into the clouds. The winds didn't touch them, but rather hit the shield barrier that the Pareya had cast earlier. The sand swirled angrily around them for a moment, before blowing onward, the obstacle ignored.

Scant seconds later, a bolt of golden light struck the beach, several feet away from Greta's little mini-crater. The light faded to show a taller, more muscular version of the Lady Ilsa striding towards them, her broad, plated wings stretched out behind her, a familiar young man perched on one broad, armored shoulder. She carried several short, covered buckets in hand and there was an indescribable look on her face. She wore a more modest outfit in comparison to her fellow Gheyos and she was barefoot.

Greta stared up at the sky and then held up an arm for something. "Duck, loveling." She called out.

Ilsa promptly let the young man slip from her shoulder to stand on his own two feet. Her figure shifted, subtly shrinking back to her natural height, nearly shorter than the young man she'd been carrying. She reached over and pressed him down to the sand, dropping to her knees as a long, cylindrical object hurtled down from the sky.

It was caught by Greta's magic and hefted easily in one hand, crosswise. The missing pavilion, neatly rolled up.

"Greta!" Ilsa barked.

"Sorry." Came the unrepentant reply.

Ilsa snorted. "Liar." She handed off a few of the buckets to the sandy-haired young man and rolled up to her feet. "Take it to Bahn." She instructed, shading her eyes with her other hand. "Dahlia? Do not spend all day up there. Come quietly."
Greta stifled an audible snort.

Ilsa ignored her.

Three more flashes of light announced the arrival of three more Gheyos, younger, smaller figures. Harry recognized them at once, Dahlia, from the clinic, with Mimei and Wikhn trailing behind her. He certainly hadn't thought that his guess had been right, but it appeared that his luck occasionally extended towards good things. This was a very pleasant surprise in more ways than one. He remembered Dahlia as being friendly and kind, Wikhn as being interesting and Mimei as being somewhere in the middle.

They'd streaked down in flashes of golden-purple for Dahlia, pink-blue for Mimei and blood-red-white for Wikhn. They all walked with their wings extended, fluttering and stretching in the wind, with glistening sword sheaths, knives and various assorted weaponry that disappeared as they walked, until each figure was appropriately attired in beachwear instead of custom armor. They were playfully pushing and shoving each other, netted bags of produce in hand.

Dahlia's swimming costume was reminiscent of the other Deveraine females, her trademark scar showing plainly on her tanned skin. Mimei’s costume was slightly more revealing, but there were only two identically shaped scars on her left thigh. Wikhn wore the expected black swimming trunks, with a fine line of burgundy running down the sides. Like the others, he was barefoot, but like his fellow Gheyos, his pale form was adorned with various scars across his entire body.

Harry swallowed, hard. The scars were almost a warning sign, screaming to him that these were dangerous creatures with powerful magic within them. His eyes strayed to each of them in turn and then back, before his attention was diverted elsewhere. A lingering feeling of respect and interest settled inside of him as he understood just a little bit more of what it meant to really have a Gheyo as yours.

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**CHARACTER SNIPPET : QUINN KALZIK : KALZIK FAMILY HOME**

When Quinn returned home, he was hot and sweaty, his jogging clothes clinging to sweat-slicked skin. He hunched over in the entry way of his Sire's workroom, catching his breath. Bharin had already left and the room was cleaned and cleared, a fresh crisp scent lingering in the air.

"Did you have a good run?" Patrick came over to inspect him, running one large-fingered hand through the golden waves of sweat-dampened hair. "It looks like it."

Quinn bobbed his head, leaning up to enjoy the feel of the fingers carding through his hair. It felt nice. His lips twitched in an approximation of a smile. He was not looking forward to the lecture that was sure to come, but he was glad to see his Sire once more. He had definitely missed him.

"Strip." Patrick guided him into the room and waved a hand to lock it. "Throw them in the hamper in the corner. There's fresh things over there." He gestured. "Water or juice?"

*Juice, I think. With ice. Something with electrolytes and such.* Came the quick reply.

"Fruit punch?" Patrick suggested. He now stood in front of the tall cupboard in the corner, where cooling and preservation charms held shelves of vitamin water and nutritional drinks.

*Pink or red?*
"Red."

Mm. That's good. Quinn shucked off his sweaty, dirty clothes in a few hurried motions. He chucked them towards the laundry hamper at one barely lit corner of the room and selected a fresh pair of pants while his Sire was otherwise occupied. Happy with the clean, light feeling, he then trotted over to hike himself up on the wide, flat rock table. He knew better than to avoid it. His Sire would have him stretched out on it before the night was over. Resisting would only bring them both a headache.

Patrick glided over, a bottle of the red liquid in hand. He threw it lightly. "Only a few sips," he cautioned. "I want to stretch you out. You look and you felt tense. That's not good."

I know. Thank you. Quinn caught the bottle and unscrewed the top. He took several small sips, swishing it around in his mouth and enjoying the fruity flavor. I ache all over… He grumbled.

Patrick chuckled. "Then you needed that run, I'd expect." He took the bottle back and set it on a small cart nearby. "How is your magic?"

Fine, I think. Quinn scowled, subconsciously hunching his shoulders forward. His Sire had Aurasight, it was one of the inherited gifts he'd gained. You can already see for yourself.

"True, but I much rather you told me yourself." Patrick lightly slapped one shoulder. "Lie down and relax. I'll wash you off first." He waved a hand in the air and a bowl, with fresh towels materialized on the small cart.

Quinn wrinkled his nose, but eased his tired, sticky body down on the cool, smooth rock. The temperature was a mild shock, but welcome. He felt warm and hot in alternate moments. He wriggled for a moment, unable to settle down. It was hard to find a comfortable position to lie down on a rock of all things.

But it was black, volcanic rock, hewed by healing flames and carved with the kind of air elemental magic that wrought a special kind of effect on the one in contact with it. The table was special and one of his Sire's prized possessions as it allowed him to use his talents to the fullest.

Quinn huffed a sigh.

"Settle down." Patrick chided, dipping a towel in the bowl of tepid water and squeezing it lightly. "I will not strangle you nor eat you alive. I happen to like having your annoying presence around." His lips twitched faintly as he spoke. The dripping towel was settled on one of Quinn's arms and he began to rub briskly, a variation of a sponge bath.

His silent son relaxed even more as the towel scrubbed over him in careful motions. …feels nice. Thank you.

"You're quite welcome." Patrick chuckled. "But don't thank me until after I'm through with you."

He set the towels aside when he'd finished and then poured the remainder of the herbed water over Quinn's aching feet. He then rubbed and massaged them, checking the muscles and tendons with flickers of his magic and hints of his special talent, Aurasight.

…is Bharin alright?

"He's fine." Patrick answered, quietly. He did not answer anything more.

Quinn squirmed for a moment. ...I wasn't gone long enough…is he-?
"Your father is handling his aftercare."

A pink tinge blossomed over the pale body. Quinn looked to the side, staring into the faint light, trying to make out the shapes of the different shadows. He was glad for the warming glow of the sunstone that hovered over the rock table. It warmed his skin enough for him to adjust to the changing temperatures. Thank you.

"I seem to be receiving a great deal of your thanks today," Patrick said, dryly. "Is there anything in particular I should know about?"

Quinn blushed. No.

"Hmm." Patrick hummed. He didn't press the issue. He finished with Quinn's feet, then held up one up in hand, gently rotating and stretching it. "Relax, Quinn." He admonished, a moment later. "We will discuss it later."

Ow...ow, ow, ow-! Quinn's silent protests were punctuated with a grimace.

Patrick frowned, gently easing the elbow back to the rock table. He'd been helping his son stretch out the sore, tired muscles, but from what he could see, Quinn definitely hadn't been taking care of himself as of late. "Ow indeed." The blond man scolded. "Quinn, really! You're tense all over and your hands—you've been channeling far too much of your magic through them, haven't you?" He sighed. "Then again, you've been Soul Casting and I know what that takes, but in all honesty child, you know fully well you can't simply use that kind of magic without the proper aftercare."

Quinn's lips briefly formed something of a pout, before he looked away, embarrassed.

"Ah, ah!" Patrick paused in his movements to catch his son's chin with one long finger. He gently turned the head back towards him until teal eyes met blue. "You know better." He said, firmly. "You honestly know better. I can see Bharin's work here, he's tried and he's done a decent job, but nowhere near as much good as it could have been, if you'd been keeping up with your routine." He sighed. "Are you sure there is nothing you have to tell me?"

Quinn bit his lip. Apart from the last case at the clinic, no Papa...I am sorry for being a disappointment.

Patrick released the pale chin and lightly tapped the pointed nose. "You are not a disappointment." He murmured. "I may be disappointed in your handling of recent things, but that is only because I know that you know better. Please remember that." He then shifted, circling the room to break back one of the magical restoration oils. "I'll have to work on your shoulders for a bit, sit up, if you can."

Quinn tested his limbs in turn and then wearily raised himself into a comfortable sitting position. He tugged his legs closer, settling into a cross-legged pose as his head lolled forward and he worked on relaxing his aching arms.

His Sire warmed the oil with a nonverbal, wandless spell and then dipped his fingers in the golden substance. He drizzled it liberally over Quinn's twitching shoulders and began to knead the taut muscles with expert hands. Gently coaxing his own magic into his son, Patrick set the work with single-minded concentration.

"...I see." Patrick said, after a time. "That is disturbing and I can understand why you reacted in such a way, but Quinn, really. You have a brilliant mind and you failed to think beyond a few"
complications?"

It wasn't a few complications! It was—it was-!

"So you've said, but still you cannot give me a clearer answer than that." Patrick sighed. "Surely that is a hint to your own self that there is something else at play in the situation?"

Like what?

"Do not take that tone with me. I was merely making a suggestion. Any sixteen year old could figure it out. You've a few years over that, make use of them." He lightly slapped Quinn's sides with his oily fingers. "I'm almost finished with the bowl. Be ready."

…I know what you mean, Papa, it's just that—it's not that simple!

"Then make me understand it."

I can't!

"Can't or won't?"

…I didn't think that...you saw it, I showed you the memory, what would you have done?

"Brought him home. Asked the entire family to lend a hand." Patrick said, simply. "And you had the same option to do so, you simply didn't think that far ahead." He banished the empty bowl and circled around to face his son. "You could have died, Quinten. I don't know to put it any plainer. You could have died and lost your life completely—not even a caspered existence!"

…I wouldn't want to be a casper.

"Enough!" Patrick frowned. "That isn't what we're discussing here." His angry blue eyes drilled into Quinn's shimmering teal ones. "Your mother is not ready to lose her youngest son." He drew himself up. "And I am not ready to lose my only child. Do you think either of us would have taken your loss any differently?"

Quinn shrank back. I wasn't...it wasn't on purpose!

"I didn't say it was on purpose, I simply said that it didn't have to happen. Bharin's Death Seal, Quinn? His Death Seal? Do you even know where he was and what he was doing when you called that in?"

Quinn blinked. What?

Patrick pinched the bridged of his nose and turned away for a moment. "Did you know where he was when he 'ported in?" His voice was deceptively light and calm.

The blond shook his head, slowly. I didn't feel anything different from him and-

"I also wish to inform you that I have released him from whatever bans you may have pressed on him." Patrick's frown deepened. "He is a Gheyo, Quinten. They live to fight, you cannot forbid him from it. He'll listen to you, because as his mentored child, you are his world, but you are killing him inside by demanding that he doesn't fight. He can't help it. Fighting is in his blood!"

Quinn bristled. If it is, then he's not very good at it! He comes back covered in blood and reeking of death magic and so exhausted that he can't even stand on his own two feet and-!
"-and that's his choice." Patrick interrupted. He caught Quinn's chin once more, holding his son's face steady, so their eyes would meet. "That is entirely his choice. We've had this conversation before. I thought you had learned after the last time. Bharin is a Gheyo. He was on the fighting circuit before he stumbled across you. Fighting was and is still, his livelihood. If the blood bothers you that much, then remember your cleaning charms. It doesn't bother him."

Quinn jerked against the hand holding his head steady. *You don't understand, he-*!

"I understand just fine." Patrick said, firmly. "And I'm not saying this as just your Sire, Quinn. I'm saying it as a Beta looking out for his Gheyo. Do you have any idea what you are putting him through?"

*If it's that troublesome then he should have said something!*

"You are not troublesome to him so he will never say anything." Patrick countered. "Answer me this, did you know where he was?"

*No…*

"Tone, young man." Patrick warned. "I know you better than you remember. Bharin was with your mother when you called."

Quinn paled. Horror painted itself across his face and for a brief moment, those teal eyes shimmered and then his hands clenched into fists. His mouth opened and shut, a reflex that he still couldn't quite fight even after the years of silence to his name. *I…he…they…I didn't…*

"Shh. You didn't know." Patrick said, softly. "I know."

*Papa, I-*! Quinn shivered, violently. Memories, unbidden floated to the forefront of his mind. Times of dark days and tortured moments where death had seemed like a better option than being mute. Better than being the outcast, ugly healer in his family. Before his mother had discovered how tormented he'd been. Before Father had become involved. Before his Sire had come in a panic. Before Bharin had caught up to him and Kyle by the beachside.

Before everything.

His mouth opened and shut and the tears welled up straight away.

"Shh." Patrick dropped his hand and instead tangled it in Quinn's hair, tugging him forward to allow him the moment of privacy and comfort. "Easy, little one." He hummed, softly. It hadn't been his intention to have his son reliving old, painful memories, but perhaps they were not as old as he'd thought, if his only son reacted to them so powerfully.

The mute healer immediately buried his head in the available neck and shuddered. His fisted hands rose up to push, weakly against the strong, broad chest. *Papa…* The mental plea was filled with anguish, shame and a touch of fear. *…I didn't…I reacted…there wasn't…I had to help him!*

*Shush. I know.* The mental caress whispered through his son's head as Patrick carded a hand through those tangled waves. He was starting to piece together a better mental image of the situation his son had been sharing. A situation involving an interesting little dragel with dark hair and very green eyes and more seals than years of life, almost. A young dragel submissive with the power of the Earth clan's name behind him. Patrick filed the information away for later perusal. He'd have to speak to Surajini about it—and probably Hiram too. Quinn was the strongest among their own when it came to mental strengths and powers, his own rare talents were made even rarer by the fact that he held not one or two, but *three* individual talents for healing.
Quinn rarely formed any attachments to his patients and yet this one young dragel—a wizard-raised one, apparently—had managed to draw out such fierce compassion and protectiveness from his son, that he’d been willing to let himself fall-back on the shared death seal gifted to him by Bharin. Patrick was not happy. He remembered all-too-clearly the past years when his only child had lost his voice in that wretched fight. The Accident had brought about so many changes for their Circle, the least of them being Bharin's induction.

The earlier years had not been kind. Quinn had fallen into a depression that wasn’t easily shaken and there was nothing that would draw him out of it, save for Kyle and Bharin. His little boy had struggled with thoughts of suicide and darkness before, somehow, he’d fully accepted the Healer's path and forsworn his Alpha's rank.

It had to have been the most painful thing Patrick had ever known Quinn could do. To recant a rank was not an easy thing. Though there were members of their Circle and extended family who had done so, it was not a thing to do lightly. Patrick sighed. He pressed a kiss to the side of his son's temple. This was half of the reason he always hated it when disciplinary matters fell to his shoulders.

Hiram hated to do anything to upset Surajini, who was always too upset to ever trust herself as far as punishment for Quinn was concerned and Bharin, while able to shoulder the role, shouldn't have had to do it. All in all, the duty would default to him. Patrick ran a firm hand up and down that quivering back. He would never tell them what he did that would always end in a thoroughly repentant and entirely subdued Quinn. It was their secret.

Of all of the children, only Quinn could suffer worse from a mere scolding, than anything else.

And scolding, well, with a Circle as large as theirs, Patrick was very good at it.

It was much later when a dressing-gown clad Quinn cuddled into his Sire's side as they sat on the large balcony overlooking the woods of their private estate, that Patrick finally scolded him. A miserable Quinn was safely wrapped up in a thick, warm dressing robe and together, they sat, with warmed blankets around them, staring up at the starry, night sky.

Quinn had wriggled once, to find a good position, then settled, when his Sire's arm draped around his shoulders. He was dreading the talk that was coming up, but knew he deserved what was coming anyway. He much more preferred his Sire's method of handling things—not that they were any less painless than Hiram's punishments.

"Comfortable?" Patrick recast the warming charms on the blankets, setting an acceptable temperature. The nights on Nevarah could be cold, the closer you were to the Merrow Waters or the Dark Forests.

*Comfortable enough....* Quinn allowed. *Now, who's stalling?*

His Sire's lips quirked into a sad smile. "Your mother thought you were regressing."

Quinn winced. *Definitely not stalling...* He fidgeted. *I wasn't. I didn't. I-!

Patrick ignored it. "She panicked and since she's been working with the twins, her magic was not prepared for what it took to stabilize a Death Seal—not one of Bharin's depth and casting."

Quinn froze.

"...so she called in your Father. He was not happy to be disturbed, but then again, he rarely ever is
and this time, he found himself caught up in supporting the manipulation of a Death Seal."

Quinn swallowed.

"He recalled the entire Circle and they controlled and fed the energy back to Bharin, which in turn channeled into you." Patrick took a breath. "I don't suppose you would care to tell me what happened next?"

_Bharin picked me up… and brought me home. I was…I don't really remember what happened. I-I was out of it._

"And?"

_And I was—oh Arielle, mother did that, didn't she?

"The ritual and the candles?" Patrick quirked a brow. "Yes, that was her."

_I-I don't know what to say.

"There isn't anything you can say." His Sire frowned. "Quinten, when we agreed to allow you to work at the clinic, you made certain promises according to a certain set of rules, yes?"

…you won't make me quit, will you? Papa, I can't. There are people there who need me. I have—this was an accident! It was a long day, I was more drained than I usually was and I shouldn't have-

"You're right, you shouldn't have. And if you'd been following the Healer's Code, son, then you wouldn't have. If you are not in good health, sound mind and body, it is your duty to step aside and allow another to work in your stead or suspend your patient until you can properly attend to them."

_This was an emergency!

"All the more reason for you to have stepped aside. You know how volatile our natural talents are, it is part of what comes with being a Kalzik. The moment you continued in this self-destructive vein, you not only endangered the life of your patient but your own health as well. What we do, Quinn, is not something to take lightly. You released a _Blood Seal_. A casting of malicious and dangerous magic that you unraveled while at your lowest point, under duress at the expense of your own existence."

Quinn shivered. He could literally feel his Sire's disapproval rolling off of him in tangible waves of angry, disappointed magic. It made him focus on his hands clenched in the thick duvet, instead of the face he knew would say so much more than those simple, precise words. _I didn't plan for it to turn out that way, Papa._

"No one ever plans to die, Quinn." Patrick shot back. "No one plans to find their own selves hanging by the last thread of their lives. They expect to survive on ingenuity and raw power. They forget that the only way such circumstances ever resolve themselves is through sheer, dumb luck."

The silent healer slipped forward, his head now resting in his Sire's lap. He didn't react when his father's hands found their way to his neck and shoulder. The hand around his neck squeezed gently, a warning that his Sire knew what he was doing. …_I wasn't trying to die. Everything just happened much quicker than I'd anticipated._

Patrick squeezed lightly, again, his fingers stroking along the corded neck muscles. "And the reason you didn't use Kyle as your catalyst?"
...I ordered everyone out of the room.

"So I heard, but that's not the excuse I want to hear."

That wasn't an excuse!

"I was under the impression that you were on friendly terms with your assigned Gheyo. Why not have them escort the rest out of the examination room and keep Kyle with you the way you're supposed to?"

...I needed to concentrate. Kyle would have been a distraction. It was better that he was outside.

"Kyle is one of the main reasons you're allowed to practice at that clinic, Quinn." The fingers around his son's neck, tightened involuntarily. "He is more than simply your voice and a convenient interpreter. If you cannot rely on him, then who else can you depend on? Do you know how he felt to see you like that?"

...he's seen me worse before.

"Don't you dare speak of that!" Patrick snapped. His hand released Quinn's neck and caught his ear, twisting gently in mild reprimand. He ignored his son's squirming, holding the appendage firmly until Quinn reluctantly stilled. "Kyle is all but your brother in blood, he did not deserve that. You are always championing him and his presence in our family and yet you treat him the same way you claim that we do. He's been beside himself ever since!"

He seemed fine to me!

"Ah, I see and you know this because you obviously sat down with him and had some measure of uninterrupted conversation in which you were both able to speak and share your hearts in equal parts?"

Quinn flinched.

"I thought so." Patrick smoothed his hand overly the slightly pinkened ear. "You owe him an apology and Bharin one as well, a formal one. I will not even attempt to explain to you what you did to him, that is between you and Bharin alone. But I will have you know that if you continue to push him like this, then the trust that he has in you will fade over time. A Gheyo's loyalty as a mentor, is for life, Quinn. It's a rare and precious thing to be treasured. If your promise to your mother was so easily broken, then at least consider myself or Bharin. Surely we mean something?"

You do mean something! Quinn protested. I didn't do this on purpose for-!

"I am not saying you did anything on purpose." Patrick tapped his cheek, gently, knowing the action would disrupt his son's mental puzzling. He wanted Quinn to be focused and listening to him. "I am saying there were other choices and you chose not to take them. Am I wrong?"

There was silence both physical and mental for several long minutes.

Patrick tipped his head back and stared up at the inky sky with its pale dots of stars. He began to rub a hand up and down Quinn's slumped shoulder.

...Mother's really upset, isn't she?

"Upset would be putting it mildly." Patrick chuckled. "If your father wasn't here to wear her out, I
Quinn grimaced. *I did not need that mental image!*

"I had no idea your mind was particularly inclined in that direction." Patrick retorted. "Your mother has been sparking raw energy since she revived Bharin when you pulled your little stunt. Then of course, you did it again today."

…he was fine today!

"And here is where I repeat, do you have any idea where he was?"

…with you?

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

*If he wasn't with you, then where was he? He said he was practicing.*

"Oh he was practicing. But not in the traditional sense. He was in the middle of a cage match, they slapped three penalties on him and allowed him to 'port out. Your mother nearly had their heads for it, because she knew he needed a fight and she'd arranged for it. She also thought you were home."

Quinn swallowed. *Kyle called.*

"Hmm." Patrick sighed. "While an admirable reason, it is still something of an excuse."

*He called me! I would never leave, Kyle with-!*

"Last month you had an altercation with a certain patient that ended in a lawsuit being filed against our house." Patrick said, mildly. "The month before that,"

*Alejandro looked into that for me. They were at fault! We'll win.*

"That is the least of my concerns." Patrick frowned. "I'm more concerned with your records in the past few months. You have several complaints filed against you by the clinic head, a Matron Olivia."

*She's a witch.* Quinn mentally snapped. He hunched his shoulders up. *And she was picking on Dahlia...it wasn't her fault.*

"Before that, there was a-"

*Alright, alright! I understand.*

"Do you?"

*I've been...under the weather and it's showing. I'm sorry. I'll swear a reaffirmation of my Oaths and I'll submit to the board for whatever repercussions I've earned. It won't happen again.*

"You're missing the point."

*There isn't a point to be missed!* Quinn sat up abruptly, teal eyes blazing. *I understand. I did wrong, I recognize what went wrong. I know better. I should have reacted differently. It won't happen again. I will do better in the future.* There was a tinge of desperation in his voice as the pale brows knitted themselves together. *What else do you want from me?*
Vivid blue eyes glowed eerily in the darkened moonlight as Patrick stared back at his only son. "I don't want anything from you, Quinn. Except to see you alive and well and happy. To see you succeed, to find a Circle of your own, to have a legacy to your own name. Beyond that, I want nothing from you. Only what a father wishes for his child."

*Then why are-!*

Two fingers pressed against those thin lips, a physical halting of the mental flow of words. Quinn's gaze dropped to the hand hovering at his face. "I don't think you fully understand why I'm here." Patrick drew himself up, slowly. "So I will make it very, very clear in the next few minutes. Listen. Do not interrupt."

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Tears.

Tears upon tears.

Quinn's silent sobs were absorbed by the thick fabric of his Sire's dressing gown. He cried—manly tears, of course—into his Sire's chest in the wake of the worst verbal lashing he'd ever recalled in his entire twenty-four years. He almost wished his Papa had taken him to one of the training rooms and beaten the snot out of him like a disappointed Bharin would have.

The Kalzik family Beta had a knack for words and gift for using them. There was nothing worse than to be on the other side of that sharp tongue, a weapon almost, honed through years of verbal spars. A useful trait he'd brought with him when the Kalzik triad had first formed.

There was plenty that was left unsaid and Quinn knew that he had his mother to thank for it. Surajini probably had requested the right to punish him directly as his Sire offered nothing else on those specifics, but firm redirection towards the only conversation he'd never wanted to have.

Strong, gentle arms held Quinn comfortingly close as Patrick's open, arched wings, curved around them, offering an extra layer of warmth and a touch of shadow, lending privacy to the moment beneath the starred sky.

...*I'm sorry.*

**I know you are.** Patrick dropped a kiss to that messy head of hair. **You are forgiven.**

*I'm so sorry, Papa. I swear, I'll never-*

**Apology already accepted. I expect you to accept your additional reprimands with humility and grace.**

*I know. I will. I won't disappoint you again.*

**I shall hold you to that, little one.**

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Aaaannnnnd, it's yet another Monster chapter! Whew. I hope no one is mad at poor Bahn. The Guantrells are a really horrible family a currently a "Nevarah Villain" for the moment, so kindly direct all rotten tomatoes and pointy objects at them. LOL.
Apologies for how ridiculously long this chapter took to hammer out. UGH. University is keeping me unbelievably busy! Thank you all for the kind reviews, suggestions and also the well wishes for my Aunty. She is currently in an in between place again, neither doing any better or worse. I'm hoping it's better in the coming days.

I'm a little worried about the Patrick and Quinn interactions, I hope it lived up to expectations. *gulp* Let me know if it didn't...the Hunting Chapter probably won't happen until around 75-ish, but y'all know how horrible my chapter estimates are, so don't quote me on that. I have plenty of romance and action slated to come, once I get these nuts and bolts bits out of the way. It's a-comin'! Thanks for your patience and continued support, this fic is truly a community effort! :}
RECAP: Bahn Deveraine and his Circle spend the day at the beach outside of the guesthouse, befriending Harry, Charlie and Theo. All is well until Bahn's Alpha, Delani teleports into the beach with some troubling news. Harry's empathic gifts show themselves for the first time and he struggles to control them until things die down a bit. The Gheyos, Ilsa, Greta, etc, 'port in at the end of the afternoon. In the meantime, Quinn has survived a scolding from his his Sire, Patrick (Kalzik Beta) for his recent actions at the clinic.

NEVARAH : ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE : DEVERAINE PROPERTY : BEACHSIDE

The young man who had ridden in on Ilsa's shoulder was now familiar as well to both Charlie and Harry. They recognized him as the young man from the Clinic accident who had come running in, bearing the warning for little Meg's approach. Up close, there was a cheerful expression on his face and a warmth in the magic that flickered visibly around him.

Ariki.

He was obviously very happy to be in the company of his mother if there was anything to be said about the fond smiles exchanged as Ilsa send him off with a smack to the shoulder that he half-heartedly dodged. A wide grin was plastered on his face as he trotted towards the towel square on the sand.

"Dera!" Ariki called out. He threaded his arm through the bucket handles and met an approaching Bahn with a one-armed hug and a kiss to the upturned cheek of the Deveraine Submissive. He finished the rest of the greeting in Elvish and ducked his head to nuzzle his Dera's neck.

"Ari!" Bahn greeted. He hugged his son and reached a hand up to ruffle the honey-blond curls. His fingers curled through the clean hair and held the young man's face to his neck a moment longer than needed, knowing that his scent would further relax any lingering tension of returning home after the long week. "You are well?" He released his grip on the soft curls and returned the kiss to the cheek, rubbing gently along the back of Ariki's neck. "Today you will eat, sleep and play." He instructed. "You've had a horrible week and I fully intend to spoil you to make up for it."

There was a contented hum in answer and Ariki released a soft sigh. "I would like that, Dera." He murmured, softly. "It was a very long week." He smiled. "Greta's been spoiling me the entire way. I've missed her. Missed Mum. I'm glad they're back."

Bahn's smile softened. "Good." He patted one muscled shoulder. "I think we'll all be glad they're back, once we readjust to them." He then turned an interested glance to the cold buckets. "I see your mother was successful."

Ariki snickered. "She whined about it the whole way." He stage-whispered. "Your ears will bleed when she finally unleashes her temper. She's been holding back the entire morning."
"Shut your mouth, you ridiculous brat." Ilsa grumbled. Irritation was written all over her, but she flicked her fingers and presented a tower of the small buckets, condensation dripping from them. "Your cravings, your highness." She said, sarcastically. "I sincerely hope you did not summon me here directly because you were tired of waiting, because the realm does not appear to be ending at this precise moment." She sniffed. "Do enjoy, because it will not happen again. The next time I have to stand in line for nearly three and a half-hours for one of your ridiculous-"

Bahn flashed a dazzling smile that shut them all up for a moment as he half-tackled the fuming Gheyo into an awkward hug. It ended with Ilsa sitting on the ground, her arms curved protectively around him, while he wriggled comfortably on her lap. She blinked up at his earnest face in complete surprise. "I still want it. I really like it. Thank you." He kissed her cheek before he smiled up at the tower of little buckets. "I am very happy," He kissed her again, this time on the lips with a little more force behind it, apparently enjoying her look of surprise. His brow furrowed. "Do I have to share?"

"I certainly hope so." Alma stared at him, incredulously. Her earlier distress apparently temporarily forgotten at the prospect of a sugary treat. She did not give Ilsa a chance to answer. "You couldn't possibly eat all of that, someone tell him!"

"Could too." Bahn snorted. "I have a craving. Cravings are meant to be indulged." He informed them, primly. "This is hardly enough for one. You lot are not allowed to have ideas."

"Someone smack him." Takar rolled his eyes as he eased Soula to an empty spot amongst the still spell-sleeping children. "I want some too, there is more than enough for everyone to have seconds and thirds. You have to share, Bahn." The Beta's words were a near plea. "Did you bring toppings, Ilsa? It's been years since I had that and toppings."

"Greedy." Bahn informed them, but he was teasing, the weariness in his eyes framed by the temporary happiness. "And what toppings? You shouldn't ruin something this good by putting things on it."

"There's nothing wrong with fudge sauce." Takar defended. "It enhances the flavor."

"The flavor of what?" Bahn threw back. "It's perfect on its own. Toppings detract from a singularly exquisite culinary experience."

Ilsa perked a brow, easily ignoring the rest of the banter. "Do I want to know why my daughter has been spelled to sleep?" Her sharp golden eyes had tracked Takar's every movement as he eased Soula down onto the soft beach towels. Ilsa subtly brushed her golden threads of magic against Bahn, automatically channeling a touch towards the pregnant swell of his stomach.

"I was not." Dahlia protested. She drew near with one end of the Pavilion balanced on her shoulder and the other end on Greta's. "I'm wide awake! Put it here, Mum?"

"Anywhere you like," Greta's reply floated over. "Bahn, my dearest heart, where do you want it?"

"Most likely not." Alma answered, she looked down at the short Gheyo for a moment. "She was being a brat." The two women stared at each other and then Alma gave a stiff nod as Ilsa lowered her gaze. "Bowls then?"

"And a scoop and spoons. I'll serve it." Bahn reminded. "Ever had it, Harry?" He gestured towards the little bucket tower. "It's fruit sorbet. You'll like it. It's quite tasty. Hits the spot perfectly on a day like today."
"A very rare fruit sorbet." Ilsa griped. "One that requires the kind of humiliation that I will never ever subject myself to again under pain of-"

"Oh hush." Bahn held a hand out, accepting Ariki’s hand up, before turning to offer one to Ilsa in turn. "Was it really so horrible to use your name for a good cause?"

"Because I didn't want to stand in line like a normal-?" Ilsa began.

"Because you are kind and generous and wonderful and do not wish to see me suffer unduly from a raging sweet tooth?" Bahn said, innocently. His hand remained in hers, their fingers intertwined.

Golden eyes narrowed to half-points. "I will skin you alive and feed you to-"

"Lies." He sniffed, imperiously. "All lies. I know fully well that you've already fed that monster of yours. It won't be hungry until next week. You can feed me to it then." He turned with a flip of his hair. "As long as the teeth are well sharpened, though on second thought, you can feed Soula to it instead, she's been snapping at heads all day. I spelled her to sleep. She's all yours when she wakes. Now, be nice and say hello to our guests and Lani."

"I'm always nice." Ilsa grumbled. "If I wasn't being nice I wouldn't be here. They all know who I am, why do I have to-"

Bahn threw a warning glance over his shoulder. "Nice, Ilsa." He said, meaningfully. "Callistair will be here in a moment and I will not have you two at each other's throats."

Ilsa opened her mouth.

Bahn squeezed her hand, deliberately.

Her mouth snapped shut with an audible click. She scowled.

Bahn smiled, serenely, even as his Pareya seemed to finally relax, the last of the tension bleeding out into nothing. Whatever Ilsa might have done had been effectively diffused by her Submissive's intervention. If he asked, it was obvious that she would not refuse him after whatever had transpired between them. She turned away with something of a near pout on her face.

Harry stared at them all for a good long moment, having given up on understanding who was saying what and for what purpose. He was relieved to see the strained threads of normality as the formerly shaken dragels pulled themselves together with an ease that spoke of the years between them all. The relief that coursed through him was heady and potent, drawing a half-smile to the surface as he let Theo guide him forward to say hello to the newcomers.

"Bahn, dearest, light of my life and love of my heart." Greta's teasing voice rang out over the beach. She'd changed her swimming costume into a pair of baggy capris and a cropped tank when her eyes had landed on Theo and company. She greeted her Submissive with a very deliberate kiss, involving a significant amount of tongue and magic, before beaming down at him, when he stared up at her too dazed to react at first.

"You-you, Greta!" Bahn sputtered a moment later. His pale cheeks colored a beautiful red as he shoved ineffectually at her tight embrace, holding him close to her well-endowed bosom. "I-"

"You haven't seen me in ten years." Greta easily snuck in another, lighter, chaste kiss, her grip loosening, even as Bahn's tightened. "Surely you've missed me."
"I haven't missed your-" Bahn began, but stopped when his fingers brushed against her short cropped hair. "You cut your hair." His voice was soft and mildly questioning.

"It'd be suicide to have it long in there, you know that." Greta's embrace loosened and her arms fell to her sides in turn. She kissed his forehead and ran a hand over his head. "Might grow it back later if I feel like it. But just charm it to grow, if you need, I've grown used to it."

Bahn simply caught her face between his hands and held it steady so they could look at each other for a long, private moment. He then stood on tip-toe and stretched up. Greta half-smiled and bent down. Their foreheads touched and there was a pale shimmer of magic, before both dragels sighed.

This time, Bahn was the one to initiate the kiss and it was soft and tender, everything that needed to be said.

"Bahn?" Takar cleared his throat. "Not that I'm sure most of us don't mind the view, but-

"Greta?" Nara appeared, cradling Camalis in her arms. "Oh, loveling." The endearment fell easily from her lips as her pale grey eyes roved over Greta's lean, toned frame. "You have new scars. Ach. Why do you have to collect so many of them?"

The Gheyo laughed, a rich, full sound. "I always have new scars, you idiot." She said, fondly. "And I do like them, it's proof that I am brilliant at what I do. Besides, I'm hoping the new ones look better than the last set. It was a bloody pain in the arse to have them heal up without leaving ridges."

"You look well and I am glad." Nara retorted. The two women half-embraced, careful not to squish Camalis between them. A light kiss to the cheek was exchanged and then Greta studied the white bundle in interest.

"Not yours, I take it?" She inquired. "Smells like Alma."

"It's Alma's." Bahn smiled. "His name is Camalis. He's seven months old. Looks just like her, doesn't he?"

Greta's soft violet eyes shimmered. "I'm happy." Her head snapped up, scanning the length of the beach. "though I worry at the fact that I do not see her here."

"Ten years?" Alma's voice was soft and pitched low. She stood behind Bu who had come to say hello as well. Her dark eyes bored directly into Greta's. Her hands quivered at her sides, fingers twitching.

Greta immediately jerked around at the sound of her voice. For a moment, no one dared to speak. Then Greta held her hands out, palm up. "Ita Etoyis, Sister." She greeted.

Alma grasped her hands, a smile trembling at her lips. "Itae Etoyis, Sister." She returned.

They hugged each other fiercely, with no small amount of protective magic spiraling over them in quick, staccato bursts, checking to see how the other had been in the past decade. It was a hug that lasted far longer than a mere minute.

When they finally pulled apart, Alma was the first to speak. "I am glad you look well." She stroked a hand down one bared shoulder, showing off the collection of mating marks.

"I am glad to be well." Greta smiled. "And I see you've been busy." She gave a jerk of her head towards Nara and Camalis.
Alma snorted. "Not like you would've passed up the chance or the night." She snapped. A hint of pink colored her pale face. "Nara!" The Advisor wore a bemused smile as she handed over the babe to his mother.

Greta accepted the bundle thrust into her arms and allowed Alma to position her just so, in order to hold the youngest Deveraine. She didn't need to say anything. "He's adorable." Greta's violet eyes shimmered with mischief. "Just like you."

Alma sputtered for a moment, then snatched Baby Camalis back and kicked a spray of sand at her Bonded.

Greta laughed.

"Harry." Ilsa's warm voice spilled over him like liquid relief. He found himself hugged tight and kissed on the cheek in short order, the hug tight enough to squeeze the air out from him. He was too surprised and happy to react to that, because he certainly hadn't expected it in a million years. To top it all off, it felt so nice that he couldn't help half-hugging her back, before it was all over and his face warmed as the rest of him caught up to the action. "I am glad you are well. It is good to see you under better circumstances than usual." She released him, with another, gentle squeeze, before reaching for Theo.

"Oof." Theo grunted. "I don't think you're squeezing tight enough, Oretta." He said, mildly. "I can still speak." He winced when the embrace tightened a fraction more, but his lips were curving into something of a smile. He hugged her back with nearly equal force, happy to see her. "You took your time. We've been having quite a lot of fun without you."

"I'm allowed." The grumpy Gheyo muttered. "And it's far too hot to be having fun. A nap is fun. Running around and prancing in the sand is not."

"I don't prance!" Theo protested, more out of habit than actually realizing what he was protesting.

Ilsa perked a brow.

A faint pink flush colored Theo's pale cheeks. He looked away as she released him. "We were just playing a game of sorts. Or at least, I was." He shrugged. "Snack break?"

Ilsa hummed in answer, eyeing Charlie for a moment, before the redhead quirked a smile and stepped forward to be subjected to the same treatment.

Charlie relaxed into the fierce embrace, feeling the last bit of his worry melting away. He'd been a touch on edge since the drama with Bahn and Alma, but knowing that Ilsa was here now and firmly on their side, helped to ease his instinctual worries. Whatever would happen or could, Ilsa was Theo's and she would look after them all—even among her own Circle. He found himself hoping and wondering if he'd ever find himself with a mentor who would do the same for him. He looked over at Theo for a moment, unable to keep the longing from showing in his face. He was surprised to see Theo blush in answer and offer a half-smile, much like the ones he would often give to Harry.

Ilsa released him with a light butt of her head to his chin. "It took you long enough." She tapped the bonded necklace, lightly. Her golden eyes skittered over the scales, noting that Charlie had two—but that they were both Harry's.

Her eyes narrowed faintly and shifted to drill into Theo. He studiously avoided her visual reprimand and fussed over Harry, his cheeks sporting a pale pink flush. She silently made a note to
rectify it before the night was over, if only for Harry's sake. The young man didn't need to be starting his Circle on nervous tip-toeing around each other and with the amount of magic shared between them, they'd suffer if it wasn't handled soon. She'd hammer it out of all of them, if need be. "If your stomachs can wait for a bit, may I introduce my children?" She switched subjects easily, clicking her fingers together.

The sound had the effect of both of her awake children immediately turning to face her. They made their way over, their hands now empty from whatever they'd been carrying.

"Mum." Ariki moved in to brace against her side.

"Mother." Dahlia came around Ilza's other side.

Both young dragels looked at her expectantly.

"Theo, this is my son, Ariki. My second oldest. Ariki, this is my apprentice, Theodore." She inclined her head, formally. "His Submissive Harry and their Beta, Charlie. Say hello."

"Charlie?" Ariki tested the name, stepping forward. "And Theo." He bowed formally, hand at the waist, arm at his side. There was a spark of interest in his warm brown eyes. "You were at the clinic that day, weren't you?" He straightened with a smile. "Ariki Deveraine, I am quite pleased to make your acquaintance. Mum has spoken much of you. I am glad to put a name to the face." His gaze settled on Harry. "And Harry," he murmured. "It is a pleasure."

"Indeed." Theo immediately sketched the answering bow, stepping forward before Charlie and Harry. It was both his duty and his right to complete the formal introductions. He knew what his Oretta was doing and was grateful for the connection. "I have heard very little of you, I am afraid, so please excuse my ignorance."

"There is nothing to be excused," Ariki said, cheerfully. "I am glad you are joining us this afternoon." He looked to Charlie again. "I'm told you helped little Meg—thank you for that. She is a charming little girl and did not deserve any of that."

Charlie felt himself warming up at once to the cheerful young Beta. Like with Takar, he found himself relaxed and curious in the same breath, wondering internally if it was a Beta-thing. He'd have to ask someone sometime, maybe Theo, later, if he could. "It wasn't anything." He said, modestly.

"On the contrary. I was one of her flight instructors at the ranges." He rubbed the back of his head. "She's a fun little thing. I work with her on a weekly basis. I didn't know what to do when the possession took place." He smiled. "It was so unexpected and it could have ended quite horribly for her. I'm glad it didn't. Very glad you were there to help. I feel as if I owe you somehow because she is like a little sister." He thought for a moment. "On second thought, I can actually fix that. Do stop by the ranges sometime—all of you. It would be very nice."

"Ranges?" Harry perked up.

"Mmhm." Ariki's eyes sparkled. "Anytime you like after lunch, that's when my shift is in play. Ask for me and we'll have some fun. I have clearance for all heights." He grinned. "And it's a lovely view up there. Consider it my thanks." He waved a hand, dismissively, when it seemed like the redhead might protest. "I am more than happy to, honestly. I'll expect to see you, so please do come."

"Ariki-!" Bahn's voice floated over. "I need you to help with the Pavilion, please. Greta, love,
could you wait until he's here? It'd be easier to do it with more than two pairs of hands and a…"

"Coming, Dera." Ariki turned away, he flashed a smile. "It was nice to meet you."

"And this is my oldest, Dahlia." Ilsa nudged her daughter forward. She would have to introduce her missing one, Soula, later. Much later, if the fact that said daughter had been spelled to sleep had anything to do with anything. "Dahlia, say hello."

The pretty young Gheyo stepped forward at the prompt. "Harry?" Dahlia stared at him in disbelief. "My word," She murmured. "It is you, isn't it? I didn't think it was. By Arielle's fangs, how are you? Are you alright? If you don't mind my asking, I didn't realize you were the Harry that Dera was talking about. I am very glad to see you in such good health." She gestured towards his faintly flushed appearance under the warmth of the sun and the present light in his clear, emerald eyes. He looked much better on the beachside than he had in the clinic, so long ago.

"Dahlia, right?" Theo checked, extending a hand. "I had no idea you were Oretta's." He was quick to offer a hand instead of a formal bow. It was her, for sure, the long, angry scar that slashed from face to hip was now in full, plain view.

The Gheyo laughed in answer, shaking the hand warmly. "Yes, you did. I noticed your scent check, there must be something of Mother on me or in me, because you relaxed when I asked you to leave the room. Most Alphas decide they want to behead me at that point. That was a rather impressive moment of self-control. I am glad to meet you under less stressful circumstances." She smiled. "There is something of Mother on you, because I did not really want to fight you."

"Thank Arielle for instincts, then." Theo returned, all smooth pureblood and well-bred wizard. "The feeling was mutual. Are you alright? You were absent yesterday, if I am not ah, prying. Do forgive me." The last phrase was all Alpha-dragel.

Harry felt a rush of warm wash over him as he witnessed the exchange. An inexplicable feeling of pride welled over at the thought that his Alpha was so very well put together.

"Hmm? Oh." Dahlia blushed, faintly. "No, that's quite fine. I am alright. It was an inner circle matter. Nothing to worry over. Wik said he looked after you for the appointment. I trust he was satisfactory?" She threw a glance over one shoulder, noting that her mother had wandered off, apparently satisfied with their interaction.

"He did." Charlie chimed in. "and yes, he was very helpful."

"Very." Harry heard himself adding. He thought of the dark, nearly silent Gheyo and found his thoughts turning in decidedly more interesting channels that brought a blush to his face. His mind caught up to instinct and Harry immediately squelched that train of thought. He was not interested in hunting for more Bonded at the moment. His conscience prickled, remembering Bahn's earlier vehemence on the subject and the reality of last night. He frowned inwardly. He was adjusting to Charlie and Theo already, for Merlin's sake, he didn't want to deal with a whole 'nother slew of drama.

The realistic addition of another Bonded would bring about another adjustment period for all of them and Harry had just begun to settle down from Charlie fitting into the mix. Not that it had been such a hard stretch for Harry, but he remembered the fight at the Burrow, Ilsa unsealing Charlie and then the mock-fight. Yes, that had certainly shaken the foundations of his new Circle. But even as he argued with himself, Harry felt the new, empty space within, aching softly to be filled. His wizard mind was most likely the culprit, lurking in the background and trying to remind him of the
old way of thinking. His inner dragel was curious and interested at the thought of having another Bonded to care for and be cared for by. He bit his lip. He wouldn't be able to ignore it. He'd just have to trust his instincts.

Theo shifted closer, his hand reaching out to catch Harry's, tangling their fingers together. He squeezed softly as if understanding what was coursing through his head. "Wikhn was very kind." He said, calmly. "I believe he helped me considerably, due to my own foolishness." His lips twitched in a smile.

Harry felt a trickle of relief run through him. Theo knew him well. He was grateful for the physical reassurance, something that came through when Charlie leaned over to brace an arm on his shoulder, a nearly teasing glint in his blue eyes. Harry leaned against him in retaliation, but found himself smiling. The thought of adding another Bonded to the little trio ached somewhat less when he thought of it in terms of another talented dragel to love and share amongst them. Perhaps it was the same for Theo and Charlie as well. He'd have to ask, soon. He would never think to bring in another Bonded without their consent. His inner dragel stretched and purred at that, settling down and taking the instinctual itch with it.

"So he said." Dahlia smiled, a genuine expression of warmth and understanding. "And we all have our moments. Arielle, knows I certainly have. On that note, I am glad you are doing better as well." She turned. "Wikhn, Mimei!" She called over her shoulder. "Come and say hello!"

Harry perked up at that, wondering how they would react. Dahlia's reaction had been mild and she'd obviously welcomed them warmly, startled, but pleased to know that her mother was Theo's mentor. He was glad for that. "Just Wikhn and Mimei?" He asked, softly. He thought of Kyle and Quinn, wondering if it was normal for Healer teams to be separated.

Dahlia chuckled. "I don't actually belong at the clinic." She explained, guessing correctly at his puzzlement. "My circle head is upset with me, so I am on punishment detail, which actually entails working at a clinic or inner city dispatch to handle domestic issues between other creatures. I've only been working with Kyle and Quinn for a few weeks. I am hoping the ban will be lifted soon. I miss regular patrols and it really wasn't fair of me to drag them along for the ride." She waved towards the approaching duo. "Wikhn is my King and Mimei is my Queen. We operate as a military triad inside of the military circle of Lady Paielda. They are my right and left hands, respectively. I am Ace."

The two younger Gheyos came towards them within seconds, taking up flanking positions beside their Ace, Dahlia. Wikhn's pale pink eyes flickered over them interestedly and Mimei affected her usual look of perpetual boredom. They both braced on Dahlia with one arm propped up on her shoulders, as they were all roughly the same height. Wikhn on the right, Mimei on the left.

"What's it?" The blonde tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She seemed more relaxed now and surprisingly was not chewing her usual gob of gum or jerky. There was a look of boredom in her face, but she didn't seem to be really irritated.

"What is it?" Wikhn corrected quietly, beneath his breath.

Harry's emerald eyes flickered towards him at the whispered words.

"Theo, Charlie and Harry, from the clinic. You remember them, yes?" Dahlia shrugged out from the bracing arms. "I am not a doorpost." She groused. "Keep your elbows to yourself. Be polite and say hello."

"Hello to Theo, Charlie and Harry." Mimei rattled off in her trademark bored voice. She affected
something that could have been a curtsy. "Fine. I'll keep my elbows, thank you very much. Now that I've been properly shown off, can I go now?"

"May I?" Wikhn corrected with a roll of his eyes. "There's hardly anything to be shown off of you." He dodged the slap that Mimei aimed at him for correcting her grammar.

"Wanker." The blonde made a face, snapping one hand out in a punch with significant force. "You're hardly one to talk."

Wikhn merely grunted, absorbing the impact as if it were an everyday occurrence. From the expression on his face, it seemed quite likely. "And my eyes change color." The dark fae sniped. "Yours stay the same, just like a certain-!"

"Don't you dare!" Mimei shrieked. Her lethargy melted away as her entire being became animated, a faint flicker of magic swirled around her at the draw of heightened emotions. "That was once. Once. I had no control over-!"

"What are you, five?" Dahlia snapped back. Her tone shifted at once, belying her authority as Gheyo Ace among the two. "Behave!" Her brow furrowed. "Both of you!" She added, quickly, when they appeared as if they were about to point fingers.

Mimei rolled her eyes and looked away, deliberately turning her back to the dark fae.

In turn, Wikhn ignored her right back, his Ace included, as he focused on the trio of Harry and company. He bowed his head, lightly in greeting. He knew just how far he could push Dahlia and most of the time, he didn't really need to, unless of course, he was bored. The beach party seemed as if it would be fun, as long as he could find something interesting to do. "Good afternoon to you and yours. Theo, Charlie and Harry." He recited obediently.

Mimei rolled her eyes and Dahlia smacked a hand at her forehead.

Wikhn ignored the theatrics, instead turning to Dahlia, expectant. "Can we play? Are we playing? I want to. It looks like fun."

Dahlia perked up. She had been looking forward to an evening of relaxation and stimulation, but her mother had seemed worried when Bahn had sent summons. So far, she'd yet to see anything amiss, but perhaps she'd missed it somewhere. Games would be welcome in helping to burn off excess energy and provide a suitable distraction for her fellow subordinates. "Fun?" She repeated.

"Please and thank you with promises to behave for the rest of the week?" Wikhn asked, hopefully. He did want this, if only for the fact that Dahlia was reluctant to grant it.

His Ace snorted. "Are you insane?" But her lips twitched as if to smile. The promise could be accepted and she would hold him to it, if need be. An Ace's duty was to look out for those under their command, including, but not limited to, their dietary needs, physical exercise and magical training. She'd had Wikhn and Mimei for a good three years. They were nearly her shadows now.

"No. Maybe. Perhaps just a little." Wikhn amended. "Your Mums are going to play. They're playing over there," he jerked a thumb. "I think there's two teams. Could we? I want to be on your team. Yours and your Mums'. It really does look like fun."

"You're horrible, both of you." Dahlia chided, but there was amusement behind her words. She shook her head, turning to Theo and company. "Please ignore their atrocious manners, I assure you I have imparted them with far superior skills for first impressions. They've simply been indoors for far too long."
"You're just showing us off now because you can. We already did a first impression." Mimei wrinkled her pert nose. "At the Clinic, that counts, didn't it?"

"Doesn't it." Wikhn muttered again, as if he couldn't help correcting the last word.

"If I want to show you off, that's my prerogative." Dahlia scolded, lightly. "Present." She snapped, faintly annoyed at the challenge to her authority, no matter how inconsequential.

Mimei straightened at once, heels clicking together, arms at her side, chin and chest lifted. Wikhn perked a brow, but straightened obligingly. His posture shifted from lightly on guard to formal and at attention. His pink eyes darkened faintly, but his lips pressed together tightly as he locked his hands behind his back and stood with his feet apart. The positions were different for them in respect.

Dahlia's sharp violet eyes sparked faintly. She ignored Theo and the others for a moment, turning to focus her full attention on the pair. After a long, silent moment. She inclined her head, feeling she'd made her point. "At ease."

Mimei huffed, relaxing at once. She rolled one shoulder back and elbowed Wikhn.

He dodged away from the jab and wrinkled his nose, the earlier thread of mischief coming up again. "Play, Dahlia?" He wheedled, the moment of seriousness already passed. "I really want to. Don't we, Mei?"

"We?" Mimei perked up, she looked to Dahlia, apparently realizing that the 'we' included all three of them. Their triad had been a bit out of sorts lately, since shifting to the clinic and consequently being set to work individually. She'd missed her Ace as much, if not more, than Wikhn had. Desk duty was a lonely and troublesome job. She nodded, quickly at Wikhn's prompting. She'd been hoping there would be something fun and interesting apart from babysitting or eating a picnic lunch, as they often ended up doing.

Wikhn grinned, the smile transforming his grim face. "They're choosing teams and I don't want to be on the one that doesn't have your-"

"Oh fine." The brunette rolled her eyes. "We'll play. We'll all play. Go choose a team." Dahlia waved them off with a look of fond exasperation. "Really, you two!"

Wikhn gave a little bounce and hugged her from behind, bending his head to nuzzle playfully along her bared shoulders. Dahlia thunked her head backwards to thump him, their dark hair mingling easily. His faintly red-tinted eyes lightened to a very pale pink as he threw a quick-fingered wave at Harry and the others, before bolting off across the sandy beach with Mimei at his heels. The blonde gave a short nod, before charging after her friend and fellow Gheyo.

"I swear by Arielle's soul, that I have trained them better than that." Dahlia said, affectionately. She watched them run off with a shake of her head. "Don't mind them, they're really quite nice especially when we're off duty. Rest assured that what happens at the Clinic, stays there. Will you join us for the game? It's loads of fun and with Mum here, it's bound to be wonderful!"

Theo looked at Harry, then Charlie. His Beta was alight with curiosity and his Submissive was cautiously interested. He grinned. "Why not? Your team?"

Harry found himself smiling and almost laughing as he let Theo pull him along the beach with Charlie jogging after them. Both his Alpha and Beta were sharing looks of mischief and fondness between them. It was hard to be anything other than charmed when they turned those eyes and lips
on him. Harry sniggered. It was time to have some fun!

"Soula?" Ilsa woke her daughter with the touch of a spell. She was prepared inside and out for anything other than the way her youngest daughter all but flew into her arms.

"Mum!" Came the nearly muffled, clearly plaintive wail. Hands opened and closed, trying but failing to grasp something to hold onto. Dark eyes had filled with tears almost at once, the earlier attitude having melted away.

"Hey, hey, shhh." Ilsa soothed, automatically. She hugged her baby girl close and settled down on her knees, knowing, instinctively that she would be needed for a little while. "What happened, loveling?"

Soula sniffled in answer and simply clung to her. She didn't want to talk about it right now. Maybe later, but not now. Now, she wanted a hug and a cuddle and feel loved, not necessarily in that order.

Ilsa didn't complain. She simply tightened her embrace and buried her face in the straight, sweet-smelling head of hair. Whatever it was, Soula would tell her, if given the chance. She could wait until then, no matter what it was. The only time her youngest was ever this distraught was when it had something to do with her father, Bhindi, Ithycar or her best friend, Shayla Imaldis. Ilsa would just have to wait it out and see which it was.

She was sure to be treated to a spectacular temper tantrum at one point too, if the current half-hysterics were anything to judge by. Soula only ever worked herself up to this particular state when she was too frustrated to process her feelings and emotions in relation to something specific. Ilsa could make an educated guess that the Hunting Season was a prime factor, but why, was a different story.

No matter. She would wait. She certainly had nowhere else to be.

Callistair turned out to be a distinguished older man with salt-and-pepper hair, and a fine, thin nose. He had two braids that were shoulder length and the rest of his hair was neatly cropped short. He was not dressed for the beach, but rather in dressy, silver robes that were charmed to keep the sand and other dirt off. He walked with ceremony and his eyes were a familiar shade of blue-grey. In his hand were several unshrunken bags bearing meats, dishes and cooking utensils. He handed them over to a handy Alma, who immediately found him a spot to sit and a fresh bowl of the sorbet.

In light of his arrival, the game was promptly postponed in the second half, to be continued until after the meal.

Harry had found the game to be quite fun and definitely something of a bonding experience. Theo knew the rules and the game. Charlie was learning just like him. But together, on Ilsa and Greta's team, with her children and Dahlia's friends, they managed to play a decent half. It was the most fun he'd had in ages. It vaguely reminded him of the adrenaline high that would come from playing Quidditch.

This game required them to jump, leap and twist, aided by their magic. As half of them were air or earth elementals, it meant temporary pillars of sand boosting them up into the sky or gusts of wind carrying them high enough to keep five different colored discs swirling through the air.
Harry had played and enjoyed himself. He'd only been distracted when his stomach had growled and Ilsa had heard. She'd immediately called the game to a halt and cited Harry for the reason. He'd been embarrassed to find himself the object of everyone's eyes, until he realized the reason behind it. He was a perfectly acceptable reason for the game to be put on hold. A Submissive's needs came before anything else in a Circle, even among strangers. The rest of Bahn's bonded hadn't even protested, in fact, they'd all stifled knowing smiles, a few ruffling his hair as they passed, or nudging his shoulder as they herded everyone back towards the blanketed square.

Theo had sniggered into his hand, but walked Harry up, along with the others, happy for the meal break himself. He'd also gifted the adorable green-eyed wizard a kiss to make up for the temporary embarrassment. They met Callistair in time for a sorbet break and the game was immediately postponed at the prospect of a full meal.

Dessert came first, as it had been the original reason for taking a break in the first place. The cold, sweet treat was definitely more appreciated now and having pleasantly gorged himself, Bahn was more inclined to share. There were toppings included as well, having been found in one of Callistair's shopping bags.

The Pareyas chattered amongst themselves as to what to make for the afternoon meal and how to be about it. Everyone settled down in happy, exhausted sprawls on the blanketed square of beach.

As for Callistair, the glowering mage didn't say much at all. Instead, he fixed his glower on Ilsa, only to be interrupted by Bahn depositing himself in the older man's lap and smiling sweetly. "Callis, behave." He said, warningly. His hands reached out to play with two slender braids that were draped over each shoulder. He tugged on them, meaningfully, ignoring the man's barely there wince. "There will be none of that here. We have guests and we will behave like civilized people." He gently bumped his head against the man's chin. "I'd like you to meet our guests, Harry and his Circle. Theo, the Alpha, Charlie the Beta. Charlie is the fire type, obviously. Harry is Harry."

The Mage turned, following the pointed spoon and cast a cursory glance over Harry his respective Bonded. His eyes narrowed faintly, but he inclined his head, politely, sticking a spoonful of sorbet in his mouth so he wouldn't have to speak. Bahn elbowed him in the stomach for it, but then proceeded to keep up some of the chatter as conversation picked right up again.

Harry found himself somewhat relieved that he didn't have to react to that. He turned instead and snuck an extra bite out of Theo's bowl, pleased when his Alpha merely shifted to a better angle to share the bowl. He noticed Charlie was sitting on Theo's side rather than his, but dismissed the detail without a second thought when Theo finally handed over his bowl without complaint. Harry beamed.

The game started up again.

When Callis and Alma went to join in the game this time, Ilsa stayed back. Harry waved off his Bonded as well, staying back himself. He'd let his food digest a bit more before jumping around. Besides, Bahn was in a pleasant mood once more and happy to have his arms full of a sleeping Camalis.

Harry was glad to see that his friend was at least close to his original exuberant self after the wave of worrisome news. It didn't feel right to have Bahn as anything other than cheerful and mischievous.
Delani had been roped into the fun once more and a sulking Soula now sat at one end of the newly erected pavilion. Dahlia, Ariki and the others had all gone to join in the game and Soula was left behind, due to her mother’s sharp tongue and the following punishment in relation to her earlier attitude. The sulking teen had then opted to sit in the shade of the pavilion, even though she clearly would rather have been anywhere else.

Harry found it easier to ignore her, after a little while and soon he was chatting with Bahn once more. The expressive Submissive had a gift for drawing him out and keeping them engaged in light-hearted conversation. Now, he found himself the elfin-drage's ultimate source of amusement as his innocent comment gave way to hilarity. He hadn't realized until Bahn was laughing, what had happened.

"I didn't notice!" Harry waved his hands in protest, unable to help himself. "Really!"

"You're absolutely blind." Bahn informed him, laughter still spilling out. "They were all putting food on your plate. I suppose you look as if you could use it. Be glad this was a simple picnic, you probably wouldn't be able to move now, if it was a regular meal. Do expect to be under constant smothering as they grow used to you. We're rather protective of our own."

Harry blushed. He knew that was quite true, based on how things had went as the afternoon had progressed.

Callistair turned out to be quite a good storyteller and when the children had wakened for the afternoon meal, they were content to eat peacefully as long as the Mage told them a story. Harry had become entranced by the tale as well, mechanically eating with the occasional prompt from Theo and Charlie. He hadn't realized that he was eating more than he normally would—or that Bahn's Pareya had been sneaking extra food onto his plate in turns. Callistair had softened, apparently, after seeing that and had deliberately made sure to give Harry an extra piece of dessert.

Harry was aware of the fact that he had received more hugs in a single afternoon than perhaps he had in his entire lifetime. Bu had gifted him a kiss to the cheek and forehead at least twice and Greta had wrapped him in a memorable hug when she'd greeted Theo properly. Takar had given him a few hearty shoulder slaps and Sueh had linked arms with him to walk him over to where the food had been cooked. He found himself believing Bahn's words that they were definitely not strangers.

It was also a new experience on family love.

Goosebumps pricked up and down his arms. So this was what it felt like to be accepted and loved. He could live like this forever.

He hoped it never changed.

Camalis now slept in a makeshift hammock, being gently swung by an occasional twitch of the fingers by Bahn, directing the air currents to keep his baby drowsy and happy. Harry'd had the chance to see the entire Circle shift from the worry, the careful mask and then directly into parental mode when Dahlia and her friends were introduced and Soula wore off the sleep spell. He could sense Soula's magic as a fellow Submissive and it was quite strong.

She was also quite a brat—until she'd realized that Ilsa was actually there. In the following minutes, he'd understood the unspoken current of respect that the circle held for both Ilsa and Alma. Both women could quell a complaint with a single look that encompassed more than an entire lecture and when they were upset—their voices did not rise at all. In fact, they simply became quieter and very serious. Ilsa had taken Soula aside, resulting in the pouting teenager that
now sat morosely at the far end of the pavilion, tracing shapes in the sand, her knees drawn up to her chest.

Harry didn't want to know who had said what to finally settle the argument that Bahn had been careful to avoid involvement with. On that side, he was privy to a handful more of secrets as he watched the circle's interactions with each other.

There was yet another surprise before the evening had ended. He'd seen something unusual. Camalis turned out to be an adorable little baby boy with tiny, black feathered wings that Alma was careful to stimulate and massage, before swaddling him once more with careful hands after a magicked nappy change. She balanced her son on one hand, fed two toddlers with the other and called out instructions to her fellow Pareya without missing a beat. She was very good at it.

Harry admired her from a distance, wondering if he'd find a Pareya of his own that could handle his future children with the same ease. It made him blush when he realized that his dragel self had happily included the idea of children without a single hitch. Harry shook his head to clear it and directed his thoughts elsewhere. He wondered about the feathered wings, sure that he'd seen something wrong there, because Dragels were supposed to have scaled wings and certainly not showing until they were of age. But he'd also noticed Bahn's careful eye on him and realized there was more to the story that simply wasn't being told. He resolved to leave it, knowing that if his friend wanted him to know, that the blond was far too blunt to keep it silent otherwise.

In spite of Bahn's apologies and the earlier hiccup, he was enjoying himself. It was easier to relax a bit, knowing there were more dragels around him that did not wish him harm in anyway. It was easier to accept the gestures of affection and caring, when he realized that there were no ulterior motives behind them. Bahn's Circle simply included him and his as some of their own.

The thought of his own future giving way to something like this, made him smile.

Ilsa snorted from her position stretched out at the side of the pavilion facing the marked off game arena. "...anything you want to share, Bahn?" She'd waited, biding her time until she could ask him without any potential repercussion.

Harry swallowed, amazed to see the flicker of surprise, warmth and respect that passed over Bahn's face, so quickly that if he'd been staring anywhere else, he would have missed it. He watched as the blond affected a bored expression and settled into his own hammock. "Such as?" He prompted, folding his arms over his chest. "Sure you don't want a hammock, Harry?"

"You're changing the subject and Harry is fine. If he wants a hammock, he'd say so. You called me as if there was something desperately wrong and you've all been on pins and needles since I've arrived. I am nowhere near vain enough to think that it is on my account. I am not helping by being here, but I wasn't the cause of it."

Bahn hummed in answer.

Ilsa sighed. She turned and pursed her lips in a whistle that carried out across the beach.

Harry was surprised to see Theo's head turn and no one else's, before his Alpha came trotting across the sandy expanse, an expression of concern on his sunscreen slathered face. Charlie's redhead turned when Theo broke away from the group, but he returned to the game, after seeing the direction of Theo's footsteps.

"Oretta?"
"Theo." Golden eyes flickered lazily up to the shadowed form that stood respectfully to the side. "Take our Harry and amuse him however you like." Her eyes gave a quick flick, the movement punctuating the lazy statement for the request that it was.

"Is it safe to leave you with Bahn?" Theo teased in turn, beckoning to Harry. He hardly needed an excuse to spend more time with Harry. Especially if it involved anything with kisses, cuddles and generally feeling up his lovely Submissive. He was already quite looking forward to the night or the morning, whichever had a higher probability of ended in sweaty, tangled sheets and blissfully sated bodies.

"I'd think it would be the other way around." His mentor muttered. "Just take yours and be gone."

"He already has you fetching him expensive and difficult-to-acquire treats, I worry that he shall exhaust you." Theo retorted. He extended a hand towards Harry.

"…wash your mouth out with sand." Ilsa grumbled. "Shoo!" The golden eyes became heavy-lidded, but her lips twitched, accepting the humor for what it was.

Theo smirked, turning to curl an arm around Harry, guiding the smaller brunet into his arms. He kissed him, softly, unhurriedly, then rested on hand possessively on his waist. "Wikhn will be excited to have another player. He says we need you, because you move so fast. Apparently this half of the game is quite serious for the…"

"…I see." Ilsa's voice was deceptively light and calm. Soula had left the pavilion long before this serious conversation had taken place. Ilsa had sent her out for a run, knowing the exercise would do her some good as well as calm her explosive temper. The alone time between her and Bahn had thus been uninterrupted. She was not happy to hear of the Marketplace incident.

Bahn's slender fingers stroked along her collarbone, his face nestled in her chest. "I somehow expected something more." He murmured, still speaking in Elvish. He was comfortably snuggled up, half on and half off of the short Gheyo who lay on the beach towel, shaded by the edge of the pavilion.

"Next time, do mention something else in addition to your summons." She stroked up and down his side, fingers skimming the edge of his baby bump as their magic twined peacefully about each other.

"They weren't clear enough?" He inquired, innocently.

"They were too clear, you idiot." Ilsa retorted, a hint of affection in her voice as she thumped him lightly on the head, but kissed the tip of his nose to soften the intent. "I almost 'ported in here with my killing aura. That would have caused quite a disturbance, I would think. They are too distracted today to be truly angry with me. Don't think I didn't notice that you did it on purpose."

"…We've all missed you, Ilsa. It was a long time and I wouldn't have minded how you arrived, so as long as you were here."

"Perhaps not, but everyone else would have, I should think." She sniggered. "And you know fully well that Greta would have followed me and if she did, then Dahlia definitely would have done the same and it would've been nothing short of pure chaos in here. You're horrible!"

"Mm. I know." Bahn licked the available patch of skin and skimmed his fangs over it. Ilsa twitched, faintly. "Don't you dare leave another mark. Based on your ridiculous riddles, I know
that I'm wearing my dress armor tomorrow, so behave." Her Submissive gave a faint whine, but he nearly purred when her hand fist ed in his hair to ensure that her wishes were respected. He smirked into her chest and kissed the mating mark on that full, barely-covered breast.

They played for a long time. Harry joined in until he felt his legs protest for the last time as they buckled beneath him. He was caught by two strong arms, one from Callistair and one from Wikhn, as both fighters dodged to the center to catch him. "Exhausted?" Callistair's warm voice washed over him. "Call a truce." He snapped at the younger Gheyo and immediately swung Harry up into his arms.

Wikhn's pink eyes darkened faintly, but he shrugged and straightened up to bounce on his feet. He waved his arms quickly and called out a truce, in which the game immediately came to a halt.

Harry felt a wave of dizziness wash over him and he struggled, briefly. "Down." The word was harder to say when his tongue suddenly felt thicker and drier in his mouth than it ought to have been. "No."

"Harry? What's the matter, loveling?" Bu appeared at his left and immediately felt his forehead, then his neck for a pulse. "You're a bit warm, no, quite a bit warm. Hmm." She frowned. "Put him down, Callis. I don't want him to strain himself trying to be—thank you. Harry, love? It's Bu, are you alright? Sueh?" She called over her shoulder.

The blue-eyed Pareya came over at once, concern showing on her pretty face. "The heat?" She suggested. "We're all air types and earth or even fire like that one, but you're a Nameless, aren't you?" She cooed over Harry for a moment, casting diagnostic spells and checking the readouts. She frowned at them. "How are you feeling?" She shook her hands out and then ran them lightly over Harry's exposed upper torso. The cooling charm applied to it made him twitch and whine, trying to pull away from them.

"Sick." Harry answered, before he could help himself. The cool was a shock, but a welcome one, even as he felt his energy beginning to drain. He wondered what being a Nameless had to do with anything. He'd spent lots of time out in the sun before and it had never affected him at all. "M'fine though."

Nearly every dragel standing around him shot him a look of disbelief. "Fine, he says." Takar bit out, looking quite annoyed at the answer. "You do not look very fine. Was he like this for long, Callis?"

"I wasn't paying attention," the older man said, apologetically. "I was keeping an eye on Soula and Mimei at the water's edge. I only dodged back to the center, because I was tracking the discs."

"He's been slowing down for the past half hour." Wikhn said, quietly. His dark pink eyes had lightened a few shades. "I told him to take a water break. He did. Said he was fine." There was a slightly defensive air to his tone and a flicker of worry on his pale face.

"He doesn't look fine." Bu snorted. "And I won't have him passing out on us either." She patted Harry's head, her own hands charmed cool as Sueh's had been. She carded the soothing fingers through his sweat-dampened hair. "Why don't you take a nap for a bit, hmm? Under the pavilion is probably best. There's shade and a bit of wind, I'm sure. I can't see anything really wrong with you, then again, you can't always trust a spell reading. Instinct is far more reliable." She sighed. "Where's Theo? Callis, Tak, one of you carry him if Theo isn't—"

Harry balked. Ilsa had specifically sent for Theo to take him out from there. She'd wanted time
with Bahn. There was no way he was about to trample on over there and stick himself where he was not wanted. "I'm fine." He ducked away from her patting hands, even though the movement was sluggish and he really didn't want to avoid the nice, cool touches. "Really. Just...dizzy...and hot. Nothing a dip in the water won't fix." He tried to smile, even as his body began to grow heavier.

"I don't think that's a very good idea, love." Sueh nibbled on her lip. "and my spells are usually fairly accurate, Bu and you know it. It's a mild heatstroke, probably. I haven't taken a reading on a Nameless in a while, I can't be sure, but I do know what happens when you've been out in the heat for too long. I'd have to be blind not to." She looked down at Harry. "You'll be fine with a rest, some water and the shade. You've played a good couple of games and I'm sure you had fun. You can sit out the rest, there's nothing wrong with doing that."

"I don't need to sit anything out." Harry swallowed, trying to keep the edge from his voice. He really hated it when people started making decisions for him without giving him any chance to explain or provide another alternative. Maybe he was a teensy bit tired and maybe he really did feel like he'd been trampled by hippogriffs and maybe it had just happened all of a sudden, but that didn't mean-!

"Call Theo." Takar said, abruptly. His dark brown eyes narrowed faintly as if seeing the stubborn thread Harry had adopted. "Charlie?" He called over his shoulder. "Need you for a moment."

"What? No!" Harry protested. He understood that tactic much quicker than the rest. If Charlie came, he'd call Theo and that would be the end of it. They'd have Theo come, because Theo could make him do what they said. He shuddered, sluggishly. No way was he going to let that happen. "No. I'm fine. I don't need Theo, I just need to stand up." He tried to will his feet to move, but instead, his body seemed intent on proving what a useless lump it could be at the worst possible time.

"He's with Alma. They're coming." Nara trotted over to them, the interest in her face easily replaced by concern when she saw the reason for their little team huddle. "Harry? Are you alright, you're...red." She frowned. "Didn't anyone cast charms on him?"

"Bahn's sunburn charm was on him." Sueh offered. She cracked her knuckles and spun a soft blue bauble of light on her fingertips. "I could add a few of my own, but I'd need permissions." She frowned. "Bu and I've kept our hands cool, but I don't think it's working fast enough. Where's Ilsa?"

"With Bahn, under the pavilion." Edor stretched his arms out. "Harry?" He whistled lowly. "Now that was not what I was expecting when Wik yelled truce." He shook his head. "I'll take a dip while you lot sort it out." He turned away, unconcerned. "Dahlia! Fancy a swim?" He effectively headed off the younger players towards the cool waters, keeping them occupied while the others remained gathered around Theo.

Harry shrank back from the pale blue ball of magic, feeling himself growing defensive whether from habit or instinct, he wasn't sure. He was now aware of the fact that he felt quite dizzy indeed. The shadows of the dragels standing over him didn't afford that much protection from the sun that was now much hotter than it seemed to have been a moment ago.

"Harry?" Theo appeared from the far end of their team, having broken into a light run as he'd skirted around the scoring net. Worry was etched on his handsome face and his magic tingled as he drew near "Are you alright? I didn't feel anything-"

"Tired?" Charlie's knowing voice came from behind. He bent and easily scooped up Harry into his arms before he could be further smothered by the others, no matter how well-meaning. "He's fine, Theo. Just tired, I think."
"Might want to pull your wings out." Takar suggested. His hands were on his hips and there was an
irked expression his face. "I think the heat's reached him. Didn't think anything of it before. Has he
ever…?"

"Not that I know of." Theo answered. "Charlie? Wings?"

"One moment. Ah. That's nice." Charlie's shoulders quivered and within a moment, his wings were
out yet again and stretched luxuriously in the warm afternoon sun. He relaxed almost at once, as
his natural element took hold of him. The natural warmth felt like the equivalent of a lovely,
soothing stroke up and down his spine.

Harry tried to speak and a yawn came out instead. He grimaced, fighting the urge to scowl or pout.
He wasn't some baby to need a nap in the middle of the afternoon and—ow! Theo had thwacked
him lightly on the head. Emerald eyes blinked suspiciously at his golden-eyed Alpha. "What?"

"Whatever you're thinking in that head of yours did not need to be thought." Theo scolded. "I can
see it on your face. If you're tired, then you can rest. We've been playing for a while and the sun
has been rather hot, even with the water, cooling charms and whatnot." Theo's eyes narrowed as the
shade provided by Charlie's lovely wings stretched forward to include him as well. "Not to mention
all that you've been through at the clinic this past week and," his voice dropped. "Last night."

Harry felt himself beginning to blush and he was suddenly glad that the others had moved away to
allow them some privacy. "But Charlie was at the clinic too and-"

"And Charlie didn't have seals being stripped off of him one after the other." The redhead chided,
softly. He squeezed Harry just a bit, transferring a touch of calm and a hint of authority. "Theo's
right, Harry. Besides, you've had some fun and I know no one would mind if you were going to
take a little nap. The sun is hot."

"It's not bothering you."

"That's because he's a fire type." Theo rolled his eyes. "All fire types like the sun. They bask in it,
really. Would sunbathe every waking moment if they could manage it. Sunrise and sunset are
some of their favorite lounging times."

"Really?" Charlie perked up, interested.

"Yes, really." Theo said, dryly. "You may try it tomorrow on the roof, if you wish to catch the
rising sun." His lips twitched. "I'm told it's the best time for it anyway, if you want to enjoy it. The
midday sun might darken your wings unless you want the color to change. The setting sun is even
better than the rising one, because it happens in reverse. I should have mentioned it earlier, my
apologies. I hadn't thought of it really."

Harry shook his head even before Charlie could answer. He liked the redhead's rich navy wings.
He didn't want them any darker at all. He liked them just the shade they were. If they were too
dark, then they'd start to look black and he didn't like that.

"Apparently not." Charlie stifled a chuckle. He hadn't expected Harry to say anything, but it hadn't
been an unwelcome surprise. While he'd grown more accustomed to the fact of actually having
wings, than attached to what color they actually were, he didn't see any reason to darken them if
Harry liked them the way they were. It certainly didn't bother him or Theo, it appeared, at least.

Harry woke to find himself surrounded by Bahn, Soula and another, pretty female Submissive he
couldn't place. She was cuddled up by Soula, who had curled towards him, while Bahn's warm
presence was at his back. Feelings of warmth, security and calm rippled over him in steady, powerful waves. Pure magic, Harry recognized. It was the same kind of feeling he'd had when Fawkes would sometimes sing. It brought a slew of memories to the surface that he instantly tamped down. He could not handle those now. Not now.

Harry swallowed as instinct and habit caught up to him. It was rare that he'd wake without knowing his surroundings or how he'd ended up there in the first place. He reached out through his bonds at once, searching for Theo and then Charlie. Reassurance channeled strongly back through both, along with Theo's expected projection of calmness. Harry relaxed by a fractional margin.

"Harry?" Bahn's voice was rough from sleep and he draped a sleep-warmed arm over Harry's shoulder. "You're fine." He yawned. "We're all fine. You're among friends. We're on the beach. The sun was bothering you or something." The rest of the sentence trailed off into a slur of Elvish mutterings.

There was a pause before Harry gently reached out to the new bonds stretched between him, feeling for Theo and then for Charlie. He could sense their answers almost at once. They were fine. They were happy he was awake. Everything was alright. That was good. He relaxed inwardly, at that.

Harry was still for a few seconds, then he squirmed and roused himself enough to sit up. It was late evening and he could see that several of the younger children were all cuddled up around each other, sleeping on the extra soft blankets spread in their corner under the pavilion. He could hear murmuring voices and he looked out across the beach to see the dragels sitting in a wide circle, apparently playing a game amidst their muted conversations.

For a moment, a pang of longing washed over him, immediately replaced by a touch confusion and interest. Instinctively, he'd known the second young woman was a fellow Submissive, but he could swear that he'd never seen her before. Compared to Soula's dark-haired, medium-build beauty, this new Submissive was platinum blonde like Bahn and as slender and waif-like as possible. She was not attired in beachwear, but rather in a flowy, flowery skirt and a long pink camisole. Her hair was free and wavy and there wasn't a hint of jewelry upon her person.

Luna.

The thought rattled through his head and Harry immediately squelched the thought when one large, grey eye popped open and the other immediately followed. Luna always wore her radish earrings or her butterbeer cap necklace and her eyes had a silvery-grey tint that could shift in an instance from projecting dottiness to aged wisdom.

They stared at each other for a long moment, then the girl slowly, carefully stretched and shifted to sit up. She poked Soula with one long, manicured finger, the nails painted a bright, vivid coral pink. "Soula." Her voice was strong, but whisper-soft. "If you don't wake up, I will pinch you."

Soula mumbled something sleepily in reply and rolled over to rest on her stomach.

Harry looked from her to the blonde and waited.

The girl merely pantomimed two fingers pinching, before she reached towards Soula's bared midriff. Soula was attired far more modestly now in a long, zippered, swimsuit cover-up draped over her controversial suit and several beaded anklets adorning her left leg. She snapped upright into a sitting position before those sharp fingernails could actually follow through on the promise.

"Don't you dare, Shay." Dark eyes glowered at her, balefully. "Ugh. You're supposed to be here to
"Harry's awake." Shay smiled, patiently. "You promised you'd introduce me."

Soula glared at her a moment longer, for good measure, then she looked down at the soft, terry cover-up she hugged to her chest. She yawned, then clicked her fingers. The cover-up was instantly fitted around her with the wisp of magic. "Harry." She nodded toward him. "Have a nice nap?"

Shay rolled her eyes. "Hi. I came while you were...resting. Shayla Imaldis. Submissive, unbonded." She stuck out a hand, expectant.

"Say hi." Soula's dark eyes snapped to Harry and narrowed, meaningfully. "This is Shayla. She's a good friend of mine." The girl paused as if she wanted to say more, but wasn't sure how it would be received. She bit her lip instead and waited.

"Hi." Harry shook the proffered hand, quickly.

Soula huffed. "His name is Harry and he belongs to Mum's Theo." She gave a slight jerk of her head. "Those two I showed you from before, remember?"

"I do. Go back to sleep." Shayla gave her a light shove. "Your brain is clearly on vacation."

"Shut up already. Did you say hi to Dahlia?" Soula shifted to sit on her knees and began to stretch her arms.

Shayla snorted. "That was a lost cause before it even began." She nodded towards Harry. "What's your name? I'd rather hear it from you than Soula."

"...Harry."

"Harry what? If you haven't taken a name, what's the Circle?"

"Harry Potter of the Nott Circle." The name rolled off of his tongue and Harry found himself smiling at that introduction. He liked it. And in an instant, his good humors were replaced. The underlying thread of curiosity had begun to tingle and Harry could now identify it as his empathy coming into play. There was an equal air of friendliness and curiosity radiating from the newcomer, as opposed to Soula's tentative hopefulness and mild uncertainty. Harry found himself inwardly "It's nice to meet you."

"Shayla Imaldis of the Air Clans. My father is the Head Chieftain. I am the primary heiress of our legacy." She smiled, a wide smile that spread over her pretty, face. "Soula said you're new to the circuit, no mentor and all that."

Harry opened and shut his mouth.

Shayla waved a hand. "Please don't hold it against her, she can't help herself sometimes." She dodged to the side as Soula made to pinch her in retaliation. "And you probably should go bite something." She wrinkled her nose. "You're sparking all over the place."

"Am not!"

"Should I call your mother?"

Soula snorted. "Which one? Da's not here."

"He still didn't show?" Shayla frowned. "And I meant your Mum, not the witch."
"I'll pretend I didn't hear that." Bahn's sleepy voice cut through the chatter. "Soula?" He accepted her hand to sit up and sat to her right, leaning forward to rest his head on her shoulder.

Her scowl softened almost at once and she leaned her head to the side. "M'sorry I was a brat earlier."

He smiled into her shoulder and slipped a hand between them to pat her knee. "You were already forgiven. Just behave now."

Dark eyes gave a spectacular roll. "I am! I even called Shay out here to-"

"To annoy your sister. I know." He sighed. "Go take a run."

"What? No. I didn't-"

"Down the length, at least twice." Bahn straightened.

"But Dera-!"

"Shh. I know." He cut her off. "And when you're through, go find your mother and ask for a bite, alright?" Soula made a sound of protest, but started forward, when he bared his fanged, eyes slightly narrowed.

Shayla immediately averted her eyes and stared down at her hands neatly folded in her lap. Harry found himself subconsciously mimicking her, before he raised his head in confusion.

Bahn didn't answer until Soula had exited the pavilion and broken out into a light run. "Submissive hierarchy." He said, softly. "Don't fight it next time. It isn't anything wrong. It helps to establish a semblance of order." He inclined his head. "Shayla."

The other girl straightened with a smile. "You know, she-"

"I know. But I don't want her to be influenced by things that were out of her control. She's never seen anything different, the same as you." He patted her head. "Besides, Bhindi is no more of a witch than other unnamed individuals." He sighed. "She simply has a single-minded focus and Ilsa happened to be that focus." He sighed. "Time changes many things." He looked to Harry. "How are you feeling? Any better? Your Theo and Charlie came to check on you twice."

Harry relaxed as threads of concern filtered down to him. He smiled. "Much better actually."

"Good. They'll likely smother you, you know."

The brunet grimaced. "I'd rather they didn't."

"You should keep a firm hand on them." Shayla pursed her lips. "If you're not strong in the early stages, they'll walk all over you."

"You speak with experience you don't have." Bahn commented, fondly. "But she is right." He smiled. "Are you Hunting this season?"

"I don't have a choice." The blonde flipped her hair. "But thanks for having me over tonight. It was a very welcome break. I thought I was about to lose my mind."

"Thank Soula. Don't mention it."

"Good. I won't then." She flashed a smile at the elfin-dragel and Harry in turn. "Evening, Lady
"Evening, Lady Shayla." Came the expected reply. Ilsa approached them, her jaw set in the usual half-annoyed expression that seemed to occupy her face for most of the time. "Harry. You're awake. Lovely." She made a shooing motion with her hand, waiting as Shayla scooted back to give her a space on the soft blankets. "How are you feeling?" She held up a hand. "Please think for a moment before you answer."

Harry did. He tested his bonds once more and then poked at his magic, relieved to find it intact and not the least bit diminished, but rather sluggish and restless instead. "I feel…fine." He waited for another moment and then his eyes widened at the sudden, underlying surge of magic twining through him, his magic was regenerating on a rather large scale. He swallowed hard. "I feel…better than fine."

"Congratulations." Ilsa drawled. "My guess was accurate."

"W-what happened to me?"

"I signed off on the acceleration of your Resting Period, remember? The sleep cycles?" She inclined her head. "Magic sped it up so that you wouldn't have to deal with it at an inopportune time, but your body still had to process it." She shrugged. "That, combined with the heat and the raw magic that's been expended on this beach all afternoon, each of those were likely triggers that led to your little episode when you couldn't handle it anymore. Your Theo and Charlie dancing around each other probably didn't help things much either."

"Theo and Charlie?" Harry frowned. "What do you mean?" He twisted, slowly and winced. His body felt stiff and uncoordinated.

Ilsa sighed, with a half-roll of her eyes. "Come here."

Harry eyed her warily.

She extended her hands, wiggling the fingers.

After a moment, Harry inched closer.

The Gheyo huffed and simply reached over, dragging him into her lap.

"Wha-hey!" Harry protested, but he stopped squirming when her arms wrapped around him and a soothing pulse of magic stretched over him. "Oh. That's nice." He relaxed, his body becoming boneless. "Why?"

Ilsa's chuckle rumbled softly from her chest. "Gheyos know different magic than the rest of you. This is a spell to relax muscles and tired bodies." She patted his knee. "I'll let you up in a minute, just relax."

"What did you mean about Theo and Charlie?" Harry rolled his neck back. Feelings of contentment and security twined around him and he felt akin to a cat, being cuddled and stroked by a wise owner who knew all the right places to scratch.

Shayla's teasing smile was tempered by the look of understanding her grey eyes as she reached for one of Harry's hands and began to channel wisps of her own magic into him. Harry felt himself grow speechless at the pure, sincere intent contained within. He stared at her, uncomprehendingly, even as the understanding in her eyes faded to a depth of sorrow that he couldn't even begin to understand.
"Not too much, Shayla." Ilsa warned. "Slowly, very slowly."

Shayla bobbed her head, quickly. The wisps of magic slowed down to a tiny trickle.

Harry bit his lip for a moment. He was confused and conflicted all at once.

"Stop thinking so hard, you'll give me a headache and Arielle knows I don't need one." Ilsa grumbled. "When you're passing through a resting period, you need all of your Bonded with you. Since your Theo and Charlie aren't properly bonded yet, you rejected them on the basis that you couldn't trust their magic to sustain you." She paused, as her words sank in.

A feeling of dread crept over him.

Shayla tugged his hand, turning it over to run her fingers over the open palm. "Harry? It's alright. We don't mean any harm." She gently pushed her magic at him again, molding it around the sudden wall of resistance that had sprung to life.

"Harry? Shayla is right, there's nothing to worry about. Please don't start blocking us now. Your magic is rewriting and reinvigorating itself, you're also consciously feeding off of any acceptable sources of magic and comfort." Ilsa's gentle hands held him close, her cheek resting atop his messy head of hair. "Trust your instincts. You know we mean you no harm."

"Theo..." The name came out as a plea. Harry shifted, but did not try to push away. The tiny flicker of resistance faded and he felt Shayla's calming magic wash over him again. "What happened? Charlie?" He tried. The words were coming out in the wrong order and he didn't know what to do about it.

"Because they've been skirting around the issue of the Alpha-Beta bonds, they've been closed off to you for most of this afternoon." Ilsa explained. "There's nothing wrong with you or them, it's simply instinct and necessity. You'll all return to your natural order of exchange and authority after my blockheaded apprentice finds it in himself to gift your Charlie one of his scales."

Harry felt his stomach clench in undisguised horror as he recalled Ilsa's words from the day they'd been in the Snape's quarters and the first stirrings of a dominance fight had begun. "Is it," he licked his lips, nervously. "Is it my fault?"

"I would ask, where in Arielle's name, that came from, but quite frankly, I don't want to know." Ilsa's voice took on a faintly scolding tone. "It isn't anyone's fault, you ridiculous brat. If anything, you can blame this on Theo, though it's not necessarily his fault either, as he's instincts and inclinations have been just as conflicted as he has been. Your Charlie, being sealed for nearly too long is half to blame as well. With all of that aside, they'll both be fine as soon as they have a moment with each other."

"You—her?" Harry tried to articulate and inwardly berated himself when he couldn't make the words come out any clearer.

"You're halfway in and out of it." Ilsa answered, as if it was no trouble at all to decipher what he meant to say from what he actually had. "Since you forcefully repelled Theo and Charlie, then Takar and Bahn, Soula suggested Shayla and for some reason, you thought I was safe. I would wager you allowed us because we happen to be the most powerful stores of energy in the immediate area." She might have shrugged, had her arms been empty, as it was, she simply squeezed him for a moment.

Surprisingly, the action made him relax more than anything else and after a moment, he felt things
inside being set to rights and a new sense of awareness settling over him. "Oh." He heard himself say. "That's, oh." He blinked. Ilsa's magic had replaced Theo's and Shayla's calming presence had filled the spot that Charlie's usually did. He found himself able to differentiate between the two and was content with the results.

Ilsa eased him out of her lap and helped him kneel in front of her. She began to rub his shoulders and neck, working out the last lingering bits of stiffness. "You should probably take it easy for the rest of the day." She feathered a hand along the base of his neck, tugging lightly on the ends of his hair. "How does your head feel? Any pain? Nausea? Unexpected clarity?"

Harry tipped his head back, accepting the magicked jumper that materialized on him. It was soft and well-worn, but smelled fresh from the outdoors as if it had just come off the clothing line. "Thank you."

"You're quite welcome. Feel up to moving yet?"

"Sorry for the trouble."

"No trouble at all." She patted his head. "You're surprisingly calm about this. That's good."

Harry almost shrugged in answer. It didn't seem to be worth the effort of working himself up into a fit. He'd had an odd episode, but it had occurred among friends, for the most part. He'd been cared for, comforted and currently being fussed over. There wasn't much to complain about. He'd long since given up on trying to understand some of the finer points of dragel family systems when experiencing them first-hand. He looked between Ilsa and Shayla, questioningly.

"Lady Shayla," Ilsa inclined her head. "As mentioned, is heiress to the Air Clan. She has the entirety of their elemental gifts at her disposal. She's quite dangerous, you should not be fooled by anything she does." The Gheyo sighed. "I am also the heiress to the Earth clan. I have elemental gifts and Ergen, himself, at my call, should I request it of him. Out of the small group here, we were the two best suited for the situation."

Harry felt his cheeks warm, but he found himself smiling anyway. "Thanks." He nodded towards them both. He sat up straight, wondering if he could test the strength of his feet now. He was starting to feel unbearably restless.

"You should probably walk that off." Ilsa eyed him critically. "Shayla?"

"I can walk with him." The pretty blonde rolled up to her feet, smoothing out her flowing floral skirt. "You should tell them he's awake now."

"Mmm." Ilsa murmured, noncommittally.

"Did you send them back to the house?" Harry asked, interested. He could not see Theo or Charlie in the circle of dragels currently still engaged in whatever complicated game they had.

"Yes. If you pull at them, you should know whether they're ready for you or not." Ilsa rolled her eyes. "Forgive me for saying so, but they're so bloody stubborn it might take a while." She snorted. "Longer than it should, at any rate."

Shayla smiled, serenely. "They're playing Decmar over there," She gave a jerk of her head. "But I'd rather go for a walk in the water. Want to come?"

Harry couldn't think of a single reason not to.
Shayla, Harry learned, was a fun and talented Submissive dragel. She reminded him of Luna in so many ways, that he didn't know what to make of it. He was tempted to ask of they were twins, except for the very obvious differences and the fact that he was sure his Hogwarts friend was definitely not a dragel. He did, however, very much like the calming waves that occasionally exploded out of her. It made his empathic gift coo and purr, before settling down instead of causing him another headache of sorts.

As for Shayla, she most definitely was and she was pure Air as far as her element was concerned. It showed in everything that she did. She moved with a light, inherent grace that seemed to Bahn and his to shame. Her wavy locks were loose and waist length, floating about her as she moved. Every single movement seemed to be curled with or around a wisp of air. Her pale grey eyes were alight with the same kind of passionate fire that burned in Soula's darkened eyes.

"It's because we're unclaimed." Shayla smiled. She fell into step beside him and waved at Soula who was running backwards away from them. Apparently she liked running and didn't really see a reason to stop, at the moment. "You have it, but it's altered now, because you've formed your triad." She smiled, the expression now sad. "You're quite lucky, you know. That's the most difficult part of starting a Circle, you know." She paused. "Soula asked me to come for your sake, so I did. She means well, you know."

"I don't, actually." Harry looked at her, still trying to piece together some of the gaps. He was somewhat better with the whole fainting for a few hours and waking up to find the world around him to be horribly shifted, but it did not mean that he had to like it. He rather liked knowing what had happened and why it had. He was also somewhat frustrated by an irritated nagging feeling that niggled in the back of his head, refusing to be pushed away until later. He tried to make himself focus on Shayla and the words she was saying. "What do you mean?"

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?" She chuckled. "We're both Hunting, but there's no guarantee for either of us. You're Hunting too, but you already have the necessary Alpha and Beta. Any particulars that you're looking for will be more receptive to you, because they like the stability. For the rest of us, well, we have to impress them before they'll consider us." She sighed. "The first Hunt is the hardest, especially if you're like me." She stopped walking and looked down at the sandy beach.

Harry stopped as well, but remained silent. He didn't know what to say. Her calmness had suddenly cracked and the emotions rolling off of her were a mess, so he waited instead.

Shayla sighed. She spun something on her fingers and then turned to him. "Want to sit on the docks?"

"Docks?" Harry turned to look out at the water. He couldn't see anything there.

"I have to show it to you." She reached for his arm and looped hers around it. "It's a ward thing. They've allowed you into the beach, but some of the things like the dock and such, if someone who hasn't been personally inducted into it, magic and all that, you can't see it. Come. We can wait for Soula there."

Harry found himself standing at the edge of a rather impressive, wooden dock. The water was a perfect, blue crystal clear, reflecting the fading twilight sky as it darkened into the edge of night. A shimmer of white showed the moon's appearance.

Shayla smoothed her skirt and calmly perched on the edge of the smooth, worn wood, her feet dangling over the edge. "Sit. It's just a bit of water and I can keep it away from you." She wiggled her fingers and showed how a tiny swirl of wind kept the waves from actually reaching her bare
feet. "They said you almost had a heatstroke today." She patted the space beside her. "Sit. I don't bite."

"Er," Harry said, intelligently. After a moment, he sat. He felt the jumble of emotions freeze and then sort themselves out, before retreating to a neat muteness that no longer stretched out to him. The strong, blissful calm he'd come to appreciate began to hum steadily as it radiated from her once more. He found himself staring at her for a second and nearly started when she reached out to touch his arm.

"Harry?" Her pale grey eyes seemed to darken in the night. "Sorry, if I'm unsettling you. I have that effect on people sometimes." She tucked a strand of wavy moonlight behind one ear. "I forget, sometimes, that not everyone is used to me. If you're wondering why I came, Soula said there was an empathic Submissive that was having a rough day. I thought she was joking." The blonde shrugged. "I'm glad she wasn't."

The understanding dawned a half-second later. "The magic—that was you?"

"Guilty as charged." Shayla graced him with another small, sad smile. "There are perks to being the heiress daughter of the Air Clan. It's almost like being a royal, with only half of the duties." She sighed. "How are you feeling now? I've been channeling for a few hours, so I'm afraid I'm a bit shaky on it now."

"It's—you're fine." Harry felt the last of the tension leave him. He actually did feel fine. He could now actively feel her magic reaching and twining out towards him as it had done before. It was filled with good intent and fragments of bittersweet emotion, the kind that came with old memories and new experiences. It reminded him of Charlie and his steady calmness, it reminded him of Theo and his silent strength.

It was just the sort of thing he needed without having his Bonded there, because he didn't feel particularly happy towards them at the moment. He was recalling several innocent moments throughout the day, smiles from Theo that had been for Charlie and looks from Charlie that had clearly been meant for Theo. Now that he could understand what had happened, he was annoyed enough to be pleased at the fact that Ilsa had sent them off so they couldn't smother him, but rather, would be forced to confront and solve their own issues before trying to pick apart his.

Water splashed up before them and Shayla slowly leaned back, easing herself down onto the worn dock. She stared up at the sky and laced her fingers behind her head. There was nothing to be said. After a moment, Harry did the same.

"Bahn?" Bahn shuffled to the end of the dock, sleepy if his yawns were any indicator. He cradled Camalis in the crook of his arm and Alma padded softly behind him, her dark eyes sweeping the waters continuously as if expecting something to leap from their wavy depths.

"Bahn?" Harry roused himself, he turned to the side and blinked. Shayla wasn't there. She'd left. He hadn't even noticed.

"'Shayla went with Soula." Bahn filled in. He waved towards the beach where only a few of the adults remained. The children had already been carted off with the other Pareya. "She said you were looking so peaceful, she didn't want to interrupt." He smiled, softly. "How are you feeling?"

Harry rolled to sit up and shrugged. He shifted to stand a moment later. "Are you leaving?"

"It's late and I'm tired." Bahn answered. "Will you be joining them?" His eyes flicked to the side,
towards the guesthouse with all of the lights off, save for the soft glow of the torches along the perimeter of the bottomhouse.

Harry thought about it for a second, then slowly shook his head. He could feel the bond between Charlie and Theo being tentatively fused together, but he could also feel that his inner dragel was still quite miffed. "Not yet."

"Ah. I see." Bahn looked away for a moment, clearly torn between two unspoken options.

"Don't even think of it," Alma frowned. "You're dead tired and you're pregnant. Do not make me sic Ilsa on you." She offered a stiff nod to Harry. "Say your goodbyes. I won't have you exhausted over something that can be prevented." She looked to Harry. "Please stay out of the water. The beach is safe, the dock is mostly safe, though I'd prefer that you weren't on it. But stay close to the house or at least within a decent running distance of it, if you don't want to chance your wings." She sighed. "You know how to call, should you require any additional assistance?"

"Expecto patronus?" Harry quipped.

Bahn blinked at him for a moment, then the corners of his mouth twitched into a smile. "That's a wizard spell." He said, pleased to catch the reference. "And no, you can simply call on the alliance we have between us. The House of Deveraine from the House of Nott and address it to me or Ilsa, if you prefer. Say you're sending a message and then speak it. Cast it with whatever magic you can spare. There is no right or wrong way to send one."

"That's good to know." Harry allowed. "Thank you for today," he gestured towards the beach. The pavilion was being dismantled and he could see the others like Dahlia and Wikhn dancing in a little group off to the corner. They were all packing away for the night. "It was very…nice."

"We can do it again tomorrow, then." Alma gave a stiff nod. "Bahn?" Her shoulders twitched and two large, black feathered wings burst from her shoulder blades. She rolled her neck back, settling them behind her with the ease of one who is used to doing so. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Harry stared as she simply bent and swooped Bahn up in her arms without a second thought. Her wings stretched, fluttered and then beat powerfully before she was airborne, angling further up the beach from where they'd originally come. He watched them until he couldn't make out the flecks of white and black in the night sky.

"A dramatic exit as always," Delani's dry voice drew his attention next. She approached, with Takar shadowing her, hands in the pockets of his swim trunks, head bent, mind clearly elsewhere. "It was lovely to meet you, Harry. I look forward to sharing a Hunting day with you tomorrow. Bahn tells me that he's invited you to join us for our introduction."

"Yes, he did." Harry offered a small smile. He hoped that was fine.

"It will be quite fun, I'm sure." The lady Alpha assured him. "In case no one has mentioned it though, dress in your absolute finest. The more showy and impractical it may seem, the better it probably is. There are spells for mobility and such. Let Theo dress you, I suppose, is what I mean. You and your Charlie. He's had some experience with the higher echelons of dragel society." Her smile was warm. "See you tomorrow. Take care of yourself."

Takar had called out his wings while Delani was busy talking. He now extended a hand to her, hovering a few feet above the dock. He gave a quick salute to Harry. "T'was a pleasure."

Harry found himself smiling and nodding. He watched them fly into the distance.
In the end, it was only Ilsa that lingered the longest, remaining last.

She'd sent off Greta and the others, before approaching him at his position on the dock. "If you're going to stay out here all night, then I would suggest not standing on the dock." She advised.

Harry was forcibly pulled into a tight, memorable hug, before the short Gheyo released him, with a warning look in her rich golden eyes. "Your two are still at it, I can feel the wards on the house." She sighed. "Feel free to knock some sense into them when you have the chance. I can even hold them down for you, if you like." Her lips twitched.

There was a beat, then Harry sniggered. "Thanks." He managed, after a moment.

Her smile softened. "Did Bahn tell you how to send a message?"

"Yes."

"Good. Don't hesitate to call if you need anything at all." She reached out and ruffled his hair.

He leaned into the touch, before he could stop himself.

"If you're curious," She looked him from head to toe for a long moment. "Then the reason you're fine with them being so far away and currently out of reach, is because you've already sensed something about a potential Bonded. An Intended, if you would." She half-shrugged. "I couldn't begin to tell you what it could be, but I can say that you're open and receptive to whatever it is, so if something happens tomorrow, be prepared for it."

Harry felt his jaw drop. His mouth worked for a moment. "How do you-?"

"Experience. Years of experience." She looked at him, steadily. "You also strike me as the type that would be completely blindsided at finding out that you're the object of another's affections. I'm only attempting to prepare you for the inevitable." Something whistled in the distance and her head snapped around to scan the sky. "Ha. Greta's growing rather impatient. Do excuse me." She flexed her shoulders back and her wings emerged soundlessly and without ceremony. "Goodnight."

"...night." Harry watched her lift off from the dock and hover in the air for a moment. He stared, waiting, until he realized what she wanted. He bit the inside of his cheek and trotted away from the edge of the dock and back onto the beach. She hovered a few seconds longer, then streaked upwards into the sky.

There was a loud crack and then a visible shockwave of golden energy lit up the night sky.

Harry felt his lips twitch into a smile and he stared up into the darkness long after the light had faded.

The night brought some measure of coolness with it, but Harry hardly noticed. The conjured jumper was warm and comfortable and he needed little else. He'd charmed the swimming trunks into trousers, having freed his wand from the hidden waist holster. His magic responded eagerly and happily.

Harry had then amused himself by drawing pictures in the sand and generally being silly for the greater part of an hour. At one point, the restlessness had come over him again and he'd run until his lungs were burning and he couldn't bear to stagger another step. It felt deliriously wonderful.

He wondered, briefly where the energy had come from and why he'd done it, before a touch of
impatience had registered and he'd shoved all irritating thought away. He was glad to alive, awake and feeling better than he had in weeks. It reminded him of the first time he'd had a resting period, at the Dursley's house on Privet 4 drive. Then of after that weekend with Theo and then in the clinic when he'd really wanted to jump both of his Bonded for nothing more than prolonged romp among the sheets.

Logically, he was sure he was acting horribly out of character, but there was really no one to call him out on it but himself. Theo didn't know him all that well and neither did Charlie. They were both trying their best to coax him back to a version of normal that he was fairly sure didn't exist anymore.

He'd have to make a new version of normal.

That thought was inherently satisfying and Harry slowly roused himself from where he'd flopped back on the chilled sand and cast a warming charm over himself again. He shook himself out all over as he angled towards the water and moved until he could run along the edge of the surf with his feet being teased by the cold water.

For a moment, he felt painfully alive and decidedly frisky.

*Hmph.*

Pity Theo and Charlie weren't there to reap the benefits, Harry mused. He continued on his shuffling half-trot across the beach, taking his time on the return trip. He could still feel the incomplete bond between Alpha and Beta and he itched with the urge to bang their heads together.

It might not accomplish the necessary course of action, but it would make him feel better. He had time to himself and time to think and so he thought as much as he could. Sure, the initial train of thought could be rather morbid at times, but Harry had already grown accustomed to it after Sirius' death and the whole mess with Cedric.

For a moment, his thoughts stuttered together as he remembered a snippet of conversation with Quinn. The talented Healer had mentioned that if his missing mentor was dead, he'd split the necromancy fee to revive said mentor to acquire the proper answer. Harry turned that over in his mind for a few minutes, slowing down his jog to a sloppy walk.

Would a Necromancer be able to bring back Sirius? What about Cedric? What would it be like? Would they be dead and decayed, like inferi? Would they be a shade? Harry shook his head, he didn't want to think of that right now. He had more important things to muse over, such as why Dumbledore would cast an apparently illegal spell to call out the creature natures in students attending Hogwarts.

The public was sure to be outraged and he certainly didn't see the Ministry reacting favorably to it. Not if a certain pink-favored toad-witch had anything to do with it anyway. Harry frowned. He put that thought aside for later and wondered how things would be when they returned. When, not if, because as interesting as Nevarah was for the time being, he could not, in good conscience, simply leave the Wizarding world as it was without issue. Not to mention that while Hermione was here, along with Snape and Draco, there were others like Luna, the Weasley twins, George and Fred—and the mention of those two made his heart hurt, it seemed—not to mention Neville, Ron and a few others.

Harry's thoughts were abruptly jerked to a halt when his mind finally caught up to what he was seeing.
The dock was now in clear view and standing at the end of it was a beautiful, glowing creature of vivid blue and white. Strong, powerful magic that pulsed as if alive, surrounding the figure who stared upward, head craned back as a massive creature broke the surface of the mostly calm waters.

Harry felt the air in his lungs abruptly leave him as he processed the fact that a giant, translucent serpent had emerged from the water and was currently throwing its head side to side, mouth open in what had to be a roar. The fact that he couldn't hear said roar, didn't exactly calm Harry in any way. Instead of thinking towards hallucinations, his first inclination was that the figure must be quite powerful to manage such a strong silencing charm.

The second thought was that he'd never seen anything like it. The serpent was almost more of a water-dragon. There was a long, glowing body, a flared head, whisker-like strands that shook as it tossed its head back and forth, followed by wicked looking fangs.

Harry stared as the creature thrashed and roared, before diving dangerously close to the dock, throwing up a terrific spray in its wake. Awe and alarm warred inside of Harry as he witnessed the display of power and unnatural primal instinct. He was abruptly forced out of his amazed trance when the creature suddenly rose up and bore down on the tiny, glowing figure on the dock.

The figure began to struggle, fighting as the creature tilted its head back, swallowing with exaggerated motions.

Blue and white magic flared in angry bursts as the figure was swallowed.

Harry stared for a split-second longer, before his body blurred into motion. He broke into a dead run, mentally flipping through his spell library, hoping he could think of a suitable one to use. The was mildly glad that the serpent was mostly translucent, save for the glowing lines of pale blue that outlined it, before he realized that the figure had stopped fighting and now lay limply in suspension somewhere in the middle of that great throat.

This is a bad idea… a tiny voice warned him in the back of his head. All of the warnings from earlier had conveniently fled his mind in the heat of the moment as adrenaline coursed through his veins. He could no more stand here and watch, than he could to delay by even a fraction of a second.

He could die. Harry shot back, grimly. He tore off the jumper as he reached the docks and realized that the creature was much larger up close than it had been at a distance. He was probably the equivalent of its eye.

That realization was of little consequence as Harry pointed his wand and mouthed the first words that came to mind. A bolt of golden light flashed out from his wand and slammed into the massive underbelly of the towering water creature. He'd faced a basilisk at scarcely twelve years of age, this was absolutely nothing.

Close up, he could see that the creature seemed to be made of the water itself, even though the look in those glowing blue eyes was definitely quite sentient. Harry fired off another spell, before a deluge of water poured over him as the great mouth expelled an enormous quantity of seawater upon him. The sheer force of it left him half-sprawled on the unforgiving wooden dock.

The creature dove beneath the water, the glowing figure still suspended in its throat, the giant waves knocking Harry back to the dock as he tried to stand up. His grip on his wand loosened and he frantically scrabbled after it, realizing too late, that he was closer to the edge than he should have been.
Without any preparation, he toppled into the chilly, choppy waves.

Harry bobbed to the surface in time to cast a Bubblehead charm—albeit sloppily—before something snagged his leg and began to drag him downwards. He gripped his wand tightly, remembering that spells cast underwater did not have quite the same effect as they did on dry land. He couldn't see what was pulling him down, even as his vision rapidly tried to adjust.

The glowing of the creature and the floating figure inside of its' throat had dimmed in the depths of the water. A sharp brush against his leg brought Harry eye to eye with the creature. He was now aware of the fact that in spite of the watery appearance, this creature was intelligent and dangerous.

Whatever had brushed against him had been cold and scaly.

Sharp, cold and scaly.

His leg throbbed and burned for a moment, but Harry pushed the discomfort away from the front of his mind. His sole focus was the floating form of the sprawled figure that had now begun to dim. Panic surged through him and when words filled his head, Harry blurted out the spell without a second thought.

In the same instance that the spell impacted the creature, the blue figure jerked and twisted upright. For a brief second, relief coursed through Harry, before the creature reared back and swallowed him whole.

The Bubblehead charm distorted and vanished, icy water filling his ears and nostrils before a heavy weight slammed into him. Harry coughed out the mouthful of air in a stream of bubbles before spots swam at the corners of his eyes and he felt his wand slipping from his hand as blackness claimed him.

"Quinn?" Surajini's soft voice carried through the night air. She stepped into the room and followed the scent of her Beta out onto the wide, wraparound porch, before she found the pair of father and son, curled up at the side, beneath the moonlight. She bit back a fond smile and settled for folding her arms over her chest. She'd give Patrick a moment. Her Beta always knew when she was near.

Sure enough, a handful of seconds later, the blond, ponytailed head turned towards her, a sad smile etched over his near angelic features. "Jini," he greeted, extending a hand. "Did something happen?"

"Bharin is fine, but he might appreciate you a little more than me, at the moment." She pushed back the sleeves of her dressing gown from bangle-less arms and settled comfortably, cross-legged on the floor beside him. She smiled when he twitched his fingers so that the soft blanket they rested on, magically expanded to include her as well.

"Ah, I thought he might, but I had hoped that Hiram wouldn't have a problem with that."

"He doesn't. Not really. But I had him first...for longer than I probably should have." Her lips twitched faintly. "Besides, we've all missed you. I think it's more of an experimental excuse to see if you've missed us as well."
"Mmm. I think I have." Patrick reached out with one hand to cup her cheek and smooth his thumb beneath her eye.

She leaned into the caress with trust, so pure and simple. "Was it horrible?" Her eyes closed. Her shoulders quivered.

Patrick's touch gentled even more. He shifted, so the hand moved from her cheek to slip into her hair, so that he cradled the back of her head. The new leverage allowed him to pull her forward enough so he could kiss her, softly and meaningfully.

Surajini sighed into the kiss, turning her face to kiss the inside of his arm. She scooted forward to cuddle into his side, when invited by the rise of his arm. They sat, together, quietly. Patrick staring up at the moon, while Quinn's quiet, even breathing filled her ears. She gave them both another minute, then regretfully turned and pressed her lips to Patrick's ear. "We decided."

"Will I hate it?" He leaned into her small hands that slipped inside his collar and gently rubbed at his neck.

"No. I do not think you will mind." She half-smiled. "Hiram has agreed. He was very…upset to see me so…distraught. He is still quite furious with me. I feel quite foolish."

Patrick's response was immediate and deliberate. He reached for her with both arms and pulled her flush against his chest. "You were rightfully worried." He kissed her soundly. Dark brown-black eyes blinked up at him in a mixture of dazed surprise. "There is nothing to feel foolish about. Hiram is likely upset at himself for not noticing that you were under such strain. You know how he is."

Surajini licked her lips, slowly. "Not—quite—"

Patrick smirked. He kissed her nose instead. "Quinn didn't mean it."

"I know." She sighed into his neck and reluctantly redirected her attention towards the main reason she was here in the first place. It was a tad more difficult than it should have been, but she rarely saw Patrick these days and it was hard not to want to jump him, tease him and smother him all at once, when they were together again. "We've decided that he will shadow Kyle for the next six months, instead of being the other way around."

Patrick winced. Quinn's natural Alpha tendencies often led to his need to be in charge or in the leadership role. Kyle, as a natural Beta, had no issues whatsoever following his adoptive brother wherever their adventures took them. He was also, however, able to switch from a complacent role to a more dominant one. It would be the perfect punishment, subtle and ingenious in one. "That's quite devious, my queen."

"It needs to be." She fist a hand in his dressing gown. "He's growing up, Patrick, but he's still the same. I couldn't bear it if I lost him. I honestly don't think I would survive."

"Hush. You would. You are stronger than you think. You would survive, even if only for the rest of us." He soothed. But he understood just the same. "I am sure this will help him to think ahead in the future. Arielle knows that Kyle is quite adept at doing so. Besides, it will give them some time together. From what Bharin tells me, I believe they need it."

"Mm. They do." Surajini slowly relaxed. "Are you staying long?"

The smirk reappeared. "I am, actually."
Surajini brightened at once, a tentative hope blossoming in her expressive eyes.

For a moment, Patrick felt a twinge of regret that his presence was so desperately craved, yet considered unattainable. He hadn’t meant for his work to have dragged him so far away or for it to last as long as it had. Things had become even more complicated when Hiram's business partners had begun to request him instead. Time had flown and then he’d realized, belatedly, that he'd been regulated to a long-distance life at the expense of his Circle. He'd pulled rank and social hierarchy on this one, along with the added excuse that his only son required him in addition to his Submissive. The clients had no choice but to agree and he’d made it quite clear that he intended to take the entire Hunting Season off.

"Patrick?" The hope in her eyes was now replaced by worry.

"Sh. Sorry." He cuddled her close. "I am staying for the Hunting Season." Her breath caught in her throat and she froze. "The entire Hunting Season. I told them my family needed me. They could not refuse."

"Won't it cause trouble for you?" She whispered.

"Nothing that Hiram and I cannot handle." He smiled into her thick, silky hair. "We have more than enough to provide for all of us as it is, so there is nothing to worry about if things turn sour."

There was silence for a moment, then an audible purr filled the night.

Patrick stared down at her for a moment, but her dark eyes shone in happiness. He stifled a laugh and rubbed his cheek against hers.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This was 17k before I realized that I forgot the character snippet and then I didn't want to leave the Water bit out for the next one and arggh, it made it to 20k. *tugs on hair*. I hope you, my dearest, wonderful, charming readers, do appreciate it. LOL. I apologize for the scene jumping, I think I took out MORE than I actually put in. Oh well. Feel free to yell if it does not make sense.

I really appreciate the kind response to the last chapter, especially the bit with Patrick and Quinn, that was quite hard to write. This chapter shows a bit of Surajini, Quinn's Mother, so enjoy getting to see her as well. Not to mention that horrible cliffhanger with Harry being stuck under water with a weird, translucent swimming sea snake. Ahem. Yes, I actually did do that cliffhanger on purpose, because the next scene is quite. I could have simply ended it with Ilisa on the docks, but then that would've been boring, right?

Alright, alright. Don't throw stuff at me. *sniff* Apologies for how long this chapter took. It's longer to make up for the fact that I have midterms coming up by the end of next week. Thank you all for the kind reviews, suggestions and also the well wishes for my Aunty. She had an infection in her stomach this week and was rushed back into the ICU. I'm going to see her tomorrow. I hope it's good news. :( 
RECAP: Bahn Deveraine and his Circle spend the day at the beach outside of the guesthouse, with Harry, Charlie and Theo. Everyone has fun, in spite of the recent drama. Harry gets to spend more time with Wikhn, Dahlia and the others. He also meets another fellow Submissive, a high-ranking society Submissive, Air Dragel Shayla Imaldis, who helps him along with Ilsa, after his Resting cycle catches up to him. Theo and Charlie's Alpha-Beta bond is suffering from the lack of proper completion until Ilsa banishes them to the guesthouse to sort it out. In the meantime, Harry decides to spend his evening playing and running along the beach after Bahn and the others have left. Harry is surprised to see a strange, glowing person being eaten by an equally strange water-snake creature and he rushes to the rescue only to become trapped himself!

NEVARAH: ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE: DEVERAINE PROPERTY: BEACHSIDE


Harry shivered violently as something smooth and warm settled over him. He felt sharp fingernails digging into his throat and the sides of his jaw, prying his mouth open before jerking his head to the side. He felt slow and soggy, water-logged, if he had to be honest, which at present, his body was not yet inclined to be so. Liquid ice—nearly frozen water—was forcibly expelled through his numb lips.

Magic, foreign magic, swirled around him in strong, powerful threads. It slithered through his veins and coaxed his body to continue the routine, necessary functions that kept him alive. He felt a heavy presence on his chest, pumping in short, measured motions. More water spilled out of him and he was aware that somehow, the water was coming from inside. He didn't even recall swallowing it.

He could only remember diving into the dark water, hoping to reach that glowing figure in time, realizing too late the absence of a properly formulated backup plan.

An angry voice ranted above, a pleasing, musical voice in tone, even if the words spewing from the speaker's lips were anything but flattering. In fact, if Harry willed himself to concentrate he could begin to make out the words at last.

"...you clueless, idiotic, simple-minded landwalker! How thick are you? You could have died! Your brains have apparently leaked out through your ears, seeing as you threw yourself into the kind of waters in which no sane creature ought to be floundering about." The voice sounded faintly worried and definitely anxious.

Another painful press of his chest brought more liquid heaving out of his chest, through his mouth before leaking out onto the sandy beach. Harry rasped a cough and shuddered, as the night wind whispered over him. He was now violently aware of the fact that it was much colder now than before, the warm weight situated on his thighs and chest suddenly retreated.
"You're awake. Good." The voice snapped, relief seeming to quickly give way to anger. "You'd best not just lie there or I might be tempted to hex you, merely because I feel like it!"

Weary emerald eyes struggled to open wider than a mere slit. After another achy moment, they reluctantly slid open and stayed that way. Harry mentally congratulated himself on the achievement as he began to run through the usual inventory of limbs and necessary bits. It had almost become a habit with the amount of danger he often found himself in. He was relieved to find that nearly everything seemed to be as it ought to, with the exception of more aches and pains as such adventures often left him.

Theo would have something to say, he was sure. Harry bit back a sigh. His gums and jaw ached with the sudden need to feed, the memory of the taste of Theo's blood firmly planting itself in the center of his mind. He was roughly yanked back to the present situation when the scolding voice from before continued on.

"Well?" The voice demanded irritably. "What did you think you were doing? Fancy a death wish, did you? A pretty one? Thought it would be terribly romantic to die at the hands of a Merrow? Are you daft?"

Harry blinked, once, then twice, waiting for his vision to adjust. He was fairly certain he was seeing things, as the ranting being before him, couldn't possibly have been real in any way shape or form.

A head of shiny, silken, perfectly straight hair framed an elfin face with a strong, pointed chin. The bowl-shaped haircut wasn't anything out of the ordinary, thick, blunt bangs aside, unless one took into account the fact that the unnaturally immaculate hair was an equally unnatural shade of bright teal-blue. Delicately fluted, webbed ears flared out from the sides like a butterfly's wing, shimmering in a soft blue-purple beneath the moonlight to complete the look. They flicked back, flat against the speaker's head as rich blue eyes studied Harry with something akin to complete, utter disdain.

For a second, Harry felt what little air inside of him, freeze along with all rational thought as he could have sworn he'd seen a pale golden glow flicker around the shimmery outline, before fading away. He'd certainly never seen a dragel like this before nor any merfolk with that level of near human-esque likeness, most looked more animal than human.

Merrow. It's a Merrow... the thought floated through his head and Harry found himself staring as he recalled Calida's words from the Snape's sitting room. The Spanish beauty certainly had know what she'd been talking about, because the young man standing at his feet, towering over him, was every inch pure liquid seduction—including the scowl painted across said handsome features—and Harry wondered what he looked like when he smiled.

"Hi." Harry croaked once the speechlessness had lifted. He didn't know what else to say, but the silence was growing between them and he felt as if he ought to say something.

The Merrow stared at him a moment longer. "Hi?" The greeting was repeated. "Hi, he says. Almost died, he did. But hi, he says, calm as you please." There was an audible snort and the Merrow turned, allowing the moonlight to glance off another angle of the handsome face. "And they wonder why we can't stand landwalkers. Why does it always happen to me? Couldn't the realms find someone else to plague between nightmares?"

High cheekbones, a pert nose, thick, full lips and perfectly manicured eyebrows made up the symphony of features that completed the ethereal creature that now stood a few feet away, in plain view of Harry's bedraggled form. The Merrow had stepped back from leaning over Harry. He was
clad in what seemed like a skin-tight muggle diving suit of pure black, with stripes of bright, shimmering blue along the sides and limbs. It was short-sleeved, showing off a well-toned physique and muscle structure, with bared forearms showing rows of visible tiny scales in every shade of blue possible from the sheen of moonlight bathing him from head to toe. A slender golden necklace with a trident pendant dangled mid-chest level and his feet were bare. A respectable bulge in the lower half below the waist and the absence of a bosom denoted the figure as male.

Those lovely features were easily androgynous, Harry mused, finally understanding Hermione’s fascination with the phenomenon. If he hadn't seen it himself, he wasn't likely to believe it at all. Harry ran through his mental inventory once more, feeling well enough to try moving. He was relieved and happy to know that this lovely Merrow-creature was quite alive and unharmed from the weird serpent creature from before. It was too pretty to die and he found himself feeling even happier at the thought that it had rescued him in turn.

"You're alright?" He found that it didn't hurt too much to smile, even as his face protested the movements. He couldn't help it and Ilsa's words from a little while before filtered through his head. Harry swallowed. "No, no, no, no!" He would not think of that now. Surely this creature couldn't be his Intended.

The lovely fellow surely wasn't worthy of someone like him. Harry hesitated, no, even if he was, he didn't know anything about Merrows, Water Dragels or why on earth they had so many bloody terms for them! He couldn't fall for someone he knew nothing about and a sudden resolve flared to life in his chest. If for some strange reason this Merrow should be attracted to him, Harry promised himself that it would not be anything serious until he knew enough about them, should things even think of progressing in that direction.

He was reasonably sure that wouldn't happen, after all he was Harry freaking Potter and sometimes that realization alone made the fates conspire against him. As it was, he’d taken time to know Theo before that fateful day when he’d run out of Madam Pomfrey's hospital wing. He'd known Charlie through the Weasley’s for a few years and he'd chosen Charlie, not Bill—though Bill had Fleur—and not the twins or—Merlin forbid!—Ron and Percy. He'd chosen Charlie.

A slight movement threw off his tangled thoughts and Harry bit back a painful groan. He felt as if he’d been run over by a herd of Hippogriffs and dearly wished he had a pain-relieving potion on or near his person. He couldn't think of any charms that would help at the moment and didn't really feel up to casting them either.

For one ridiculously pitiful moment, he felt cross and whiny at the thought that Theo and Charlie were not nearby to help. He mentally reached out to them, frowning when he encountered the same barrier that had been present for the past few hours.

"Ridiculous stubborn prats!" He thought irritably. Perhaps he would knock their heads together if only because he felt like it. Then again, it would serve them right to be busy settling Alpha and Beta things while he had the chance to meet a Merrow. A nice, good-looking Merrow.

And said Merrow was talking. Harry blinked, tearing his gaze away from the lovely form to focus on the words streaming out of those lovely lips.

"...of course, I'm alright! Why wouldn't I be? I was in the water. A Merrow. In the water. How could I be anything else but alright?" The fellow seemed quite offended at the thought that he could possibly be anything else other than perfectly fine. The delicately fluted ears twitched and flared, darkening in the moonlight. "I am not the topic of conversation, however, you are! Are you even listening to me? The only unanswered question is as to what you thought you were doing by throwing yourself straight in the-"
"Thank, Merlin." Harry felt his leg cramp with the familiar feeling of pins and needles, before settling into a faint numbness. He winced. The fading adrenaline left nothing else numbed and the effort to sit up had not helped him in anyway. He gritted his teeth and with a sudden surge of strength sat upwards enough to cough and shudder. Spasms rippled through him and Harry gasped for breath. A sudden bereft feeling registered and his right hand clenched instinctively but helplessly. "My wand-!" The words came out, hoarsely.

"I take it back. All landwalkers are bloody insufferable idiots. You are not listening to me. Do you think I'm talking because I like the sound of my voice? Oh by Kesmar, it's beside your head, you blockheaded twit! Can you focus now? You almost died, you know. If you die in these waters your decomposing body would ruin the ecosystem!"

Harry turned as much as he could and spied the familiar length of wood just out of reach beside him. For a moment, pure relief made all his aches and pains fade.

Then the Merrow's words registered.

"Excuse me?" He turned, feeling his temper beginning to shift somewhere beneath the surface. He'd only been trying to help. This was not the kind of reaction he'd been expecting. The final words registered and Harry scowled. "Ecosystem?" He heard himself repeat. Of all the thoughtless, insensitive and rude things to say, he hadn't expected that.

The Merrow rolled his eyes. "Naturally." His voice dripped pure ice. "Surely you wouldn't expect one of us to fish you out to bury you on land. That would be a waste of energy." There was a snort. "Next time, stay out of the water. There's a reason you're a landwalker. You and your kind don't belong in the waves."

Harry bristled. "Excuse me for caring!" He shot back, feeling the relief twisting itself into energy to fuel his rising temper. For the moment, he wished his wand was close enough so he could use it to cast a few charms. A drying charm and a heating charm for starters. And then so he could hex the rude bastard.

Silence lasted for a mere minute before the sky-blue skinned figure glowered at him once more. "I didn't ask you to care! I don't even know you and that's entirely beside the point. Did you have a death wish? You nearly drowned and I can hardly be bothered to save every wretched landwalker that decides to throw themselves off the ends of random piers."

"I didn't ask you to save me!" Harry threw back. "What are you so upset about?"

"Me? I'm upset? You're mad! Absolutely mad! You know, I would expect some dregs of panic to be surfacing soon if only to prove that you're perfectly sane and within your right mind." Blue eyes narrowed. "You were in the way with that little stunt of yours. Diving off a pier and cursing my trainee. If you hadn't almost died, I'd kill you myself. Your luck is extraordinary. You should have died, if only to save me the trouble of dragging your sorry carcass to shore and having this perfectly pointless conversation." The figure shuddered and skipped back a few steps to stand in the surf.

At that movement, Harry realized that he had been brought to land, but only pulled up as far as necessary to keep his feet out of reach of the rolling surf. The rest of his temper sparked to life as the haughty words fully caught up to his exhausted brain. "Excuse me? You were the one drowning and I was only trying to-"

"I wasn't drowning! How by the Royals did you come to that ridiculous conclusion? I was perfectly fine until you came along and ruined everything with your happy little wand hand and flashy little-
"The snake." Harry squinted out over the dark waves, a feeling of unease washing over him at the reminder of the creature. His curse had harmlessly bounced off of it. "It swallowed you and-

"Well, of course it did. I told it to." The Merrow huffed, arms crossed over his chest. "If it hadn't, I would have had something to say about it."

"You have a lot to say without it." Harry growled back. "And you're acting like a stuck-up prat! Next time you want to be swallowed, do it when I'm not around."

The blue figure stared at him for one moment, jaw dropped in shock. "I-you-!" He sputtered for a moment, then those deep blue eyes narrowed to mere slits, anger easily overtaking the smooth, scaled features. "Are you strong enough for a memory charm, now? I have other things that require my attention tonight and you're not one of them. I couldn't cast it before because it likely would have killed you and I didn't feel like upping my kill count tonight."

Harry's hand scrabbled in the sand, calling his wand to him as the sentence registered. This Merrow might be easy on the eyes, but the loveliness was most certainly skin deep. The earlier sense of foreboding settled over him again. His wand thwapped into his hand with a solid smack. He felt the sting of the force of blow, but ignored it in favor of checking his magical reserved. Physically, he felt exhausted, but magically, he'd been practically brimming over after waking up beside Bahn and the others.

The Merrow snorted at the pointed wand. "Don't be ridiculous. Merrow magic is one of the oldest and purest forms of magic, it overrides all else." He sniffed, delicately. "You're a landwalker, even if you are dragel and that won't help you, I'm afraid." He inspected his fingernails, the anger melting into iron control.

"I didn't ask for your help," Harry snapped. "And I'm so sorry you didn't want mine. If I'd known I'd insult you by trying to be a decent and-

"Oh, I'm insulted?" The Merrow interrupted. "Kesmar, you are thick. Believe what you like. You're simply an annoyance right now and you're not helping."

"I was trying to help you."

"I was trying to help you." Harry repeated. His fingers tightened around his wand. His magic flared and simmered. "Guess I somehow mixed things up. A bitter edge lined his voice. "And since it seems like we won't be able to agree on this, I think you should leave. I'd thank you for pulling me out, but I don't think it matters. If you think I'll sit still for a memory charm, you're the one that's a few knuts short of a sickle!"

There was another huff. "Wonderful. You're a wizarding landwalker. Now we really can't avoid it. I couldn't possibly allow you to run around with-

"You don't have a choice." Harry sucked in a strengthening breath. "I'm not giving you one."

"Excuse me?" The blue eyes flickered, angrily. "How dare you presume to have the authority to speak to me like that?" The Merrow took a step further back into the water. "Then again, you wretched landwalkers have always been the same."

The anger that exploded inside of Harry gave him the burst of adrenaline that helped to override the pain and give him strength to find his feet. "That's your opinion and you can keep it." He snapped. "I don't even know you and I already don't like you." Harry mentally flipped through the list of jinxes and hexes at his disposal. He would not throw the first spell, but he would be ready
for whatever came his way. Luck was occasionally on his side—the last time someone had dared cast a memory charm—well, Gilderoy Lockhart was still in the St. Mungo's ward for mysterious maladies.

"Consider it mutual." The Merrow eyed his wand, the first flicker of unease shimmering in those blue eyes.

He shifted uneasily, backing another few feet into the water, Harry noted with grim satisfaction. That was good. He didn't really feel like having a duel out on the beach at this time of night. That was good.

"Goonter?" He called over his shoulder, eyes never leaving Harry's poised form.

The great, roaring head broke the water several lengths away. Gleaming scales, the color of midnight blue shone in the moonlight and wicked, white fangs glittered ominously in that cavernous mouth. It was the mystery serpent from before, except for this time there was nothing translucent about it.

For a second, Harry nearly faltered, before he backed up one step and kept his wand trained on them both. Maybe it was another one of his weird magic moments. He could think about it later, for now, he simply had to make sure that he wasn't in danger.

The creature tossed its head side to side agitatedly, an odd crooning noise bubbling out of its long throat. Giant drops of water pelted the dry beachside.

Harry stared them both down, determinedly. He'd faced more when younger. This was nothing new. A spell was on his lips when the creatures sneezed, spraying him from head to toe with slimy water. The brunet grimaced and cast a cleaning charm almost at once.

The creature groaned loudly, the equivalent of an animalistic whine.

The Merrow turned around at once, concern overtaking anger in a heartbeat. "Goonter? What's the matter?" It moaned in answer. "You silly, stupid serpent!" Toned arms waved about in the air before the hands attached to said arms came to rest on those slender hips. "I told you not to eat him! It's your own fault you're feeling so miserable. I've told you to never eat landwalkers because you don't know what they're carrying!" He huffed. "Suppose it's contagious?"

The serpent—sea dragon—moaned, pathetically in answer.

"Well, how should I know? Landwalkers can contract all kinds of things, they aren't anywhere near as resistant as our kind. Now, stop doing that and come down here so I can see you properly, you wretched thing!"

Harry felt his jaw dropped. He stared as the ferocious serpent quailed beneath the masterful glare of the temperamental Merrow.

With great reluctance, the mighty head lowered, shying back a few hands when the Merrow started forward. He placed a hand at the center of the giant, pointed snout and timed something with the pulse at the base of his neck. "You'll live." He informed it. "But no more daredevil stunts for you or I'll see to it that you're back on a diet of watercress and krill."

Goonter cringed.

"Don't give me that. You damn well deserve it and you know it! You deserve worse, in fact, but I'm in a brilliant mood tonight, so I won't tie your whiskers up for it."
Goonter whuffled a soft breath in answer. This time the groan seemed almost more of a croon as it tilted that great head just enough to lean into the Merrow.

"Good boy." The Merrow soothed. "That's a good boy. You'll be fine by morning. I'm sure. It's nothing a good night's rest can't cure, don't you think? Maybe some moon bathing? I could let you try that, see if it helps." He patted the thick, dark scales and began to slog through the water, moving away from the snout and towards the head. Goonter growled lowly and the Merrow turned back. Anger, frustration and then exasperation now showed clearly on his moonlit face. "What are you doing?" He scowled adorably at Harry. "Are you still pointing that at me?" He asked, incredulously. "Put it down before you hurt yourself!"

"This is a private beach." Harry returned, speaking far more calmly than he felt he could safely manage. He took note of the fact that the water had now begun to shift restlessly in short, choppy waves. He was suddenly reminded that a Merrow was a Water Dragel and that it couldn't possibly be a good thing in their given situation. He'd seen Theo with his Earth element and Charlie with his Fire one. Yes. Most definitely not good.

Perhaps he should have retreated while they were occupied with each other. There wasn't anything wrong in running if you didn't have to fight or rather, saving the fight for another day. He certainly didn't feel up to a full-fledged duel. "You shouldn't be here." Harry silently reached out through the familiar bonds for his Alpha and Beta, stifling another wave of frustration when he felt them still closed off. He definitely would have something to say to them.

"You dare suggest I am trespassing? I'm Merrow, we are Aqua-kin'e." The Merrow tossed his head. "All water belongs to us. We need neither permissions nor allowances to go where we please, when we please, however we please." He reached a hand out to steady himself as the water swirled furiously around him. "This private beach, as you say, is on loan to you landwalkers during the day. We have full use of it during the night." He pointed up to the bright, clear sky. "A simpleton could tell the time of day or rather, in this case, the hour of night? Honestly. You are terribly annoying. I have more important things to do than stand here and debate useless things with an idiot."

Harry bristled once more. He dearly wished he could hex the smart-mouthed idiot for having such a smart mouth. A whisper of wind wafted through again and Harry grimaced. Drying and heating charms, right. He'd forgotten those when he'd cast the cleaning charm. His magic churned restlessly through him. Harry lowered his wand, cautiously. He certainly didn't trust the Merrow or the serpent, even if the strange water-creatures were not inclined to actively seek his demise at the present, given moment. But his pride stung from the repeated insults and he'd never liked bullies or supercilious idiots. "Only an insecure prat would continually lord status and common information in a normal conversation to make themselves look better." He snapped.

There was another snort and something that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. "That's funny." The Merrow informed him, blue eyes now showing the faintest spark of interest as he began to wade a few steps back towards the shore. "I've been called many things but never insecure, which I am not. I have no reason to be. Try again. An encore maybe?"

"Of what, your sparkling wit? I'll live without it."

The Merrow laughed again. "Oh that is funny. Suit yourself. I thought we were managing rather wonderfully, considering."

"Thought? You actually considered what you said? Ha. I didn't think you were capable of it."

"What's the matter, never seen a Merrow before?"
"As a matter of fact, I haven't!" Harry tapped his wand to his clothes and muttered the spells for dryness and warmth. "Glad to see I didn't miss anything."

The third laugh was a deliciously melodical sound that warmed the air and eased the tension all at once. "Poeira's torrid veins—you are a funny one." He laughed again, leaning against Goonter for support. "You're so innocent and prickly, it's adorable."

Harry opened and shut his mouth, feeling a blush already beginning to rise. He tried and failed to see how things had suddenly flip-flopped so horribly wrong. This was not familiar ground at all. Anger, he could do, nice, he could not. He was not innocent—definitely hadn't been since Theo had come along and since before that, even, if his miserable childhood was supposed to have been a time of wonder and curiosity. Prickly—most certainly not, annoyed, for sure. "Whatever you're trying to trick me into-"

"No trick." The Merrow said cheerfully. "If I wanted to trick you, I would have done so already. Don't you agree, Goonter?" The sea serpent rumbled in reply. "He agrees. Now then, if you want to hex me and simply get it out of your system, I'm not going to complain. It really won't register at all."

Harry glared at him for a moment, and then the temptation won over his patience. He was itching to hex the smirk off of the bastard's face.

He would later blame his temper for the mostly harmless burst of magic, but the Merrow was right in saying that the magic would have no effect. It simply bounced harmlessly off of Goonter's thick, scaled hide, when the creature dodged in front of his caregiver.

"Feel better?" The Merrow grinned, a row of sharp, white sparkly teeth gleaming in the dark.

"Hardly!" Harry threw out another hex before he could stop himself. He didn't care that Goonter absorbed it again. He was feeling frustrated, tired and neglected.

"Perhaps you'd better have a sit-down." The Merrow wrinkled his nose. The earlier smidgen of concern seemed to be surfacing again. "I didn't rescue you to die, you know. You really would ruin the ecosystem if you decided to drown here. You look rather grey though. As if you're about to keel over. I think you really should sit down."

"No thanks to you," Harry said, faintly. His eyes rolled up in the back of his head and he face-planted into the sand. He was vaguely aware of a string of possible curses in a mishmash of languages he'd never heard before. Then surprisingly gentle hands rolled him over and brushed the sand from his face. He was settled into a comfortable position and then, a jolt of magic stabbed through his chest, forcing him to breathe.

He coughed, wetly and struggled in the unfamiliar hold. This was not Theo. It was not Charlie. Definitely wasn't Ilsa. He didn't like that. It wasn't safe, couldn't be safe. Instinctively, he fought again. Suddenly aware that he was out, alone, in the night, with creatures he knew nothing about, while no one knew where he was and what he was up to. It registered like a diver's stone about his neck, pulling him to his fated death.

A moan turned into a whimper and Harry shivered again, hating the fact that he was showing any weakness to this cruel rescuer who seemed bent on torturing him in some ridiculous-

"Oi, don't you dare die on me now. You're not all that bad off." The Merrow's scolding tone had taken on a measure of worry once more. "In fact, you're mostly rather fine, if we overlook the water and eating sand-"
Harry felt his body convulse and jerk, flailing about wildly. His fist connected with something silky smooth and unbearably warm and soft, before he was twitching into the sand again.

"Magic sensitive." The voice above him pronounced. "Lovely. Don't tell me you're an empath or something. Merlin, Arielle and the Reefs of Kesmar! Could my life possibly become any more complicated?"

"Hello? Hello in there, you empty-headed oh—you're awake. Finally." Bright blue eyes peered curiously down into emerald orbs. "What is your name, anyway? Not that it matters, but I'd rather not dream up specific insults for you as it's rather troublesome to waste my brilliance on such pointless drivel."

Harry felt a trickle of wetness prickling at the corner of his eyes and he was suddenly aware that he was drenched from head to toe once more. He shivered, violently.

"What now? Oh bloody-!" The rest of the sentence trailed off in the mixture of foreign babble once more.

Harry coughed and choked when a wall of warm water slammed into him from overhead. He gasped and gurgled, fighting weakly against the firm hands that pulled his head to the side and supported him as he expelled the unexpected mouthful.

"Better, ne?" The Merrow braced him against his side and rubbed a soothing line along his bared back.

Harry flinched before he could help himself.

The gentle hand froze at once and Harry found himself unceremoniously dumped back on the sand. "Well, it seems my good deed for the night is complete. Do keep out of the water during the nights, yes? Once the Hunting Season is over, we won't surface until the next one and I haven't the patience to deal with reckless idiots such as yourself."

Powerful magic shimmered in the air and an audible crackle echoed down the beachside.

A loud, slurping sound came from beneath him and Harry felt a frisson of fear before he realized that every drop of moisture was being forcibly retracted from his body as an overwhelming thirst struck him. He clawed at dry, cracked lips in time to feel his strength return to him even as his skin grew dry and itchy. The young wizard rolled over in horror to stare at the impassive, blue-skinned Merrow standing an arm's length away, one elegantly fingered hand held up as if in a plea. Harry stared as he watched the liquid scramble to retreat to the water's edge at the Merrow's call. He tried to speak, but his tongue was thick, swollen and dry. The fear registered on the second round. No human being could survive without water for longer than—Harry gagged.

"Too much?" The Merrow asked, casually. Apparently he'd flip-flopped from polite and amused to high-handed and angry once more. "Sorry. I do tend to forget those sorts of things. Most of the time it's easier to kill a landwalker than to save them." He clicked his fingers and this time, Harry saw it coming.

A thin, shimmering wall of water that simply rose up, out of the waves and floated forward until it was right in front of him. It draped itself over his parched figure and then collapsed in its natural form. Relief literally flooded him as his body sucked in the life-giving moisture at his magic's urging.

Harry was left drenched and gasping on the wet sand.
By the time he'd recovered, Harry turned in time to see the Merrow strolling down the dock and standing at the edge where he'd been before the trouble had started. He stared as a whistle was issued and Goonter rose up, following the gestures and signals like a well-trained pet. Harry could only stare, dumbstruck, when the Merrow cast some form of magic and three glowing, swirling, gorgeous rings of pale purple light burned into existence, hovering above the night-black water in a horizontal line.

He understood the reason for it a second later when Goonter rose up from the water and in fluid, graceful motion, effortlessly lunged through the hoops in a series of twists, leaps and arcs, ending with a splashless flourish of his tapered tail. They were training, Harry realized as the hoops were eventually set aside and the Merrow seemed to be patiently working with the sea dragon to explain the next trick.

Harry didn't interrupt. He couldn't think of anything he could say that would make a difference anyway and suddenly, all he wanted was to be home and in bed, sandwiched between Theo and Charlie. They'd have to settle their differences in a hurry and if they hadn't settled their ranks by now, he'd hex them both and then crawl into bed. The dull ache in his chest throbbed, as if his headache had migrated. He shivered, remembering his earlier reason for casting charms. He fumbled for his wand that had been thoughtfully replaced in the holster beneath his untransfigured trousers that had returned to their original form as a pair of swimming trunks.

A touch of wandless magic before he'd hit the water, he figured. He had just slid the wand free, about to cast another warming charm, when the voice reached his ears once more.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you. Not with an episode like you had a bit ago. It'd be stupid. Not that you landwalkers are known for your intelligence, but I would assume you were in possession of a functioning brain and therefore able to discern the fact that when you've survived a magically sensitive experience, you wouldn't use magic until the following day, a full twenty-four hour period is best, twelve hours, if you couldn't stand to stomach a full day." There was a pause. "Especially if you're an empath, telepath or anything else with vaguely psychic connotations."

Harry felt himself beginning to bristle once more, before a sudden realization shot through him. It was pointless, draining and tiring to be defending himself against whatever the water dragel held against him. As far as he could tell, he'd really done nothing wrong, so there was no reason to defend himself.

Prejudice against land-dwelling creatures was not something Calida had thought to mention when she'd spoken of Merrow in the Snape's sitting room. He could easily see what she'd meant about a single look being a heartstopper, because the creature was beautiful, even if it was rather blue-grey under the nighttime sky. Insults and culturally confusing phrases aside, the blue-skinned fellow hadn't really been that terrible. For all of his posturing and sharp tongue, he'd taken great pains to be sure that Harry was alive and in relatively decent health, before he'd returned to his earlier task. Even the last barb held a snippet of information that he'd never known.

It left him feeling mildly irritated that everyone seemed to know about empaths and what a rare and important thing it was, yet, he, himself, had absolutely no idea nor concept of it. Harry huffed. He'd have to ask Theo that in addition to the entire deluge of questions brimming over in his mind. He would have to find a teacher of some sort, mentor or not. This was ridiculous to be stuck in a place he didn't know, with powers he could barely control around people that seemed bent on holding him responsible for things he didn't know.

A neatly folded bundle off to the Merrow's right caught Harry's eye and he started forward to the docks. He'd almost reached there, halfway, before the Merrow shifted, to keep him in a line of
Harry stopped. The movement, while subtle, immediately reminded him of Moody's 'Constant Vigilance!' mantra and reminded him that this Merrow, temperamental as it was, was certainly quite dangerous. He backed up a few steps, even as his gaze flickered longingly towards the jumper. He didn't know a thing about being magically sensitive, he'd figured that it meant his empathic gift was running wild once more. He was cold. He wanted it. But he didn't want to start yet another ridiculous episode with his antagonistic rescuer either.

A faint surge of warmth rippled through him and Harry breathed an audible sigh of relief as he felt Theo and Charlie's links turn on and click into place. He sent a full dose of his present irritation and annoyance their way, a long-distance scolding for taking so long to do something so necessary.

"If you want that, you can't have it." The Merrow sniffed, seemingly reading his train of thought and intent. "You didn't really expect me to heal you for free, did you? A Merrow healing is expensive and a rare privilege you know. You're lucky twice in the same night."

Surprise showed plainly on his face and Harry shook his head. He wondered what the Merrow would do with it, as it seemed beneath the creature to have anything to do with something from a landwalker. "Oh. I see. Thanks, then."

The Merrow snorted. "There is nothing to be thankful about. Go annoy something else."

"...Harry." The young wizard said, quietly. He didn't even know why he was offering his name now. It certainly wouldn't make any difference. He hugged his arms to himself. "My name is Harry. Thank you...for whatever you did."

"I didn't ask your name." The Merrow turned his back, deliberately. He clicked his fingers and whistled again, directing the giant sea serpent through another routine. "I asked you to leave, lest you are deaf and dumb to add to things."

"You did, earlier. I couldn't answer." Harry ignored the insult. Perhaps Merrow couldn't speak to landwalkers without being required to insult them in some way or form. He made a mental note to ask Calida, in case Theo didn't know.

"Go away."

"I really did think you'd been eaten." He continued, lightly. "I didn't mean to interrupt your—thing. I thought you needed help. What else was I supposed to think?" He frowned, one particular detail coming to the forefront of his mind. "I thought your Goonter was transparent. What'd you do to him?"

The Merrow froze. He turned and stared at Harry for a good, long moment, dark eyes sweeping over the shivering frame from head to toe. Something indescribable glittered in his dark blue eyes. For a moment, he didn't speak, then he turned away, stiffly. "Harry is a terribly boring name. You should ask your parents to change it. It's too ordinary. You should rest. You need it. Good night."

Harry stared at the rigid back for a long, silent moment. Then he sighed and turned away, his eyes scanning the shoreline for the shadowed guesthouse. Theo and Charlie would be up. He could scold them if he wished and then demand to be spoiled and cuddled afterwards. He was entitled to it. The day had been long and exhausting. He doubted his Bonded would refuse him either. Theo had been attentive for the entire day and Charlie had showed interest in his own ways. He was almost off the dock when he heard the Merrow speak very quietly.
"I answer to Alec."

Harry didn't stop. Stupid boy. Stupid Merrow. Stupid almost drowning. Theo would probably scold until his ears fell off.

*If he found out.* Harry mused. *Ilsa too…stupid dock.*

*Alec…* He thought, tiredly, feet already carrying him across the cool sand. That was an equally boring name in its own way. This had to be the most ridiculous conversation and experience he'd had yet.

### Chapter End Notes

A/N: YAY! It's a normal sized chapter! LOL. I figured y'all had spent enough time with the cliffhanger-naw, just kidding. I'm on Spring Break for this coming week, now that midterms are over and I have just barely survived, I thought I'd see how many updates I could get out, so expect a few more chapters, but probably of a more reasonable length, instead of 20,000 word monsters sometime this week. Whew.

Anyhow I don't expect anyone to like Alec, he's a bit of annoying jerk, isn't he? But he is near and dear to my heart, so don't judge him yet, there's plenty more of him to come in the future. There's no Character snippet for this chapter, maybe in the next one. I think y'all will live without it for the time being. :D Also, Thank you all for the kind reviews, suggestions and also the well wishes for my Aunty. She passed her swallow test as I mentioned earlier in the forums and is being moved back to rehab/physical therapy with her recent improvements. This is WONDERFUL news. :D

The Term "Merrow" is kind of like the word "sheep" there is no plural form for/of it, one sheep is a sheep, two sheep are sheep. One Merrow is a Merrow, two Merrow are Merrow. Water Dragels, identified as Merrow refer to themselves as Aqua-Kin'e, pronounced phonetically as "Ah-kwa-Kin-Nee".
RECAP: After Bahn and the others have returned home for the evening, Harry waits to feel evidence of Theo and Charlie's bonds being completed. He decides to spend his evening playing and running along the beach. Harry is surprised to see a strange, glowing person being eaten by an equally strange water-snake creature and he rushes to the rescue only to end up being rescued himself. He meets a smart-mouthed, sarcastic Water-Dragel, (a Merrow) known as Alec, and his trained water serpent, named Goonter. After an exasperating conversation and another blackout episode, Harry decides to return home after sensing that Theo and Charlie have sorted themselves out.

NEVARAH : ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE : MASTER BEDROOM : DEVERAINE PROPERTY :

"This will hurt, won't it?" Charlie stood on one side of the bed, surveying his Alpha with a weary air. Ilsa had all but thrown them together into the bedroom before strongly warding the door. He didn't need to try testing the lock to know that it wouldn't open. The short Gheyo knew her magic and he'd felt some of it the night before when she'd been with Bahn as well as up close and personal when she'd purged him of the tainted, black blood that had repressed his dragel side.

She'd ordered them to sort things out before the night was over, scolding them on how their dancing around each other was affecting Harry. Charlie couldn't stop the guilt that had blossomed at once, remembering the wonderfully bittersweet moments the night before, when all three of them had been in harmony. He'd noticed it fading in and out through the course of the day, but he hadn't thought much of it. He didn't know what to expect, no one had ever told him.

But Ilsa.

Ilsa was furious and all but spitting fire, apparently having figured out one very obvious detail that Charlie had missed. He didn't want to be Theo, for he could read the look in her eyes as the same one his mother would have, right before she took the twins to task for one prank or another.

When they'd exchanged scales in the clinic, Theo had simply gifted him two of Harry's, instead of one of his own and one of Harry's. He hadn't noticed. He hadn't really had the time to be wondering and worrying about it. He'd really only been wearing them for about a day or so. Then his wings had been such a pain that he hadn't even thought to think of anything else. But Ilsa had spotted it straightaway and from Theo's averted gaze, Charlie felt his chest squeeze and tighten in dismay.

Theo had known. He had known, but he'd done it on purpose.

Something that felt like betrayal had danced over him and now, here they were, locked together in a room, to fix things that should have been already put together.

Ilsa hadn't given them a choice. But Theo hadn't dared cross her and Charlie hadn't either. The woman was a caged wildcat with her famous temper held in check only by Greta's teasing words and Bahn's drawling promises. Her idea of forced isolation was good.
It had worked brilliantly. Neither he nor Theo had put up any resistance after that.

It wasn't worth the promise of pain if they'd protested. Which was how they found themselves in their current situation, standing opposite of each other with the giant bed between them. The same place they'd been the night before, when things had been simple, beautiful and magical.

Now, it seemed to be anything but. Theo was the picture of agitation, twitchy and nervous, sharp golden eyes flickering over every corner of the room.

Charlie affected a look of boredom, knowing that he couldn't pull off the emotionless mask that his Alpha had already donned. He'd already given himself over the night before. Too much of himself over, it seemed. He waited, wearily, to hear the answer to the question that maybe, he shouldn't have asked, but somehow felt that he had to know.

"It couldn't possibly be painless," Theo snapped. He should have gifted the redhead a scale last night, he should have, but in spite of everything, he hadn't been able to make himself react. His dragel still wanted proof. A true glimpse of whether he could trust everything to this young man that was bigger, taller and seemingly more experienced than him. He needed to know for sure. There was far more in this than mere pride at stake. He could no more explain this in words than he could interpret the complicated expression on the older wizard's face.

It didn't help that Harry's heartfelt plea in the Snape's quarters still run in his ears. His Submissive had begged him not to fight with the redhead. He hadn't even said "Theo" he said "dominant" a title of utmost respect and one detail that now made Theo feel like even more of a berk. If he'd only been able to ignore that, then it would have been a simple little scrabble, a bit of fangs, claws and blood—of course—and then it would've been over.

He sighed. Stupid bloody feelings! He thought sourly. He had never imagined his Bonded Circle turning into this sort of a mess. He'd always assumed that it would progress according to instinct and expected norm, with the occasional spats here and there. Then again, he'd never even considered that he would have a Submissive like Harry.

Oh Harry… Theo swallowed back a growl. If I had my claws in you now, I'd make sure you understood just what you asked of me. He bit back another sigh. It wasn't really Harry's fault and he knew that Harry hadn't really known what was involved, but he was ticked off and Harry wasn't there—thankfully—so he could use it for the mental distraction that it provided. His acceptance of Charlie last night would only make this night more difficult for them both. His Beta would be fighting two battles—one within and one without—he would second-guess himself and the memorable bonding night they'd shared. And Charlie…Merlin save me from my own stupidity…you deserve better than this. Better than having to deal with my unsorted instincts…I will try to make it painless…since you asked. I can't promise it though.

He would have to fight Charlie now. There was no way around it. Perhaps he simply wouldn't mention it to Harry. After all, he had done his best, but some things were instinctive and even though he had agreed at the time, he'd done so with a certain stipulation. He would not physically attack Charlie—not unless his new Beta physically challenged him first. Then, and only then, it would be in self-defense, never mind what instinct came to the forefront afterward.

Personally, he didn't really want to fight Charlie. He did trust that part of their bond. There was no reason not to. His Beta was strong, lean and handsome. He carried himself with a subtle air and confidence that spoke of experience and pure skill. Evidence of such was proved by the various scars that littered that tanned, toned body. Scars on a dragel that wasn't ranked Gheyo could mean lots of things, but Theo knew just what to read from these.
He was particularly loathe to add any scars of his own making to that already marked skin. Charlie wore them well, almost as a badge of honor, but Theo disliked the thought of injuring his Bonded deeply and purposefully enough to leave a visible, marked scar. He had absolutely no illusions that Charlie would escape unscathed. He could try to make it painless, after all, his own skills were nothing to scoff at. He was Ilsa's Apprentice after all and Merlin knew the woman took no prisoners.

She could be vicious and downright dirty in a fight of sheer power. She'd also never lost a single match. He hoped to do the same. She'd never let him fight in an official capacity. Only when it wouldn't be counted.

He could now hear bits and pieces of advice floating through his head in his mentor's trademark sarcastic style.

Theo banished his clothes with a single, twitch of his wand. He laid it atop the neatly folded pile and settled it in a corner of the room where he assumed it would come to the least amount of damage. One of the first rules in a simple fight between Bonded was to minimize the damage, no matter what it could be. He knew the room would be a mess by the time they finished. Hopefully, he could spare the clothes. It was nothing he couldn't replace, but one did not acquire wealth by throwing it away.

He rolled his neck to the sides, stretched his arms and began to call out his preferred Halfling form. Rich, dark brown scales began to ripple and surface on his pale, creamy skin. Golden eyes darkened to a honeyed hue as his fingers lengthened, then curled into deadly, wicked claws. He hadn't used this form in a little while. He'd called out his Halfling-wizard form last night. This halfling form was every inch dragel. His pale skin faded away to the same dark, cocoa-colored scales as his trademark wings. They would offer him some semblance of protection.

"Good idea," Charlie murmured, faintly. He banished his own clothes, deliberately turning away to stash them in his own corner. If Theo attacked him from behind, he'd judge his Alpha on that. As long as this fight had to happen, he'd make the most of it. He didn't fancy doing it again, so he would make sure there was absolutely no possible option for this to do anything else, but satisfy the requirements. Charlie took his time in choosing a spot for his neatly spell-folded clothes. He set it down and reluctantly relinquished his wand as well, he was still not used to being without it, no matter how much more magic now hummed beneath his skin.

Theo barely managed to keep a hiss to himself as he saw the patterned scars that decorated Charlie's back. They were swiftly becoming a turn-on for him every time his Beta dared to be shirtless. His perfectly decent intentions to keep the fight painless, already wavered. Instinctively, he'd be hard-pressed not to react with a little more passion and fire.

As much as he disliked the fact that the scars had been gifted by strangers or dragons, he didn't wish to have his hand in them. Then again, Theo had a feeling that he'd be equally hard-pressed to keep his hands off of the tanned, warm skin, much as he had when it came to Harry. If he had to leave a mark, perhaps he could make it a pretty one.

Some Gheyos were noted for only submitting to an Alpha after a fairly brutal fight, however, those fights would often be postponed if the Alpha would agree to let the Gheyo mark them in another method beside a bonding tattoo. Proof could be something like the small, spiral-shaped scar that both Aracle and Greta wore after 'taming' their dear Ilsa. Theo had once sat still long enough to hear the tale. It had been one reason he was loathe to even consider marking Charlie.

But now…as he stood, watching Charlie, he could understand how it had happened.
He tamped down another bored sigh. Best to simply charge forward and square things away.

Dark navy blue tattoos rippled and shimmered along Charlie's tanned, broad back as he turned, his own Halfling form slowly meandering to the surface. He didn't have Theo's experience in doing so, but his instincts had instantly come to the forefront when Alpha pheromones had begun to fill the room. His dragel nature had instinctively come forward and he realized that he was settling in for a good fight.

He had asked, in the brief near shouting match they'd had before Ilsa had forcibly removed them from the beach, what he'd meant by letting things progress as they had. Theo had given him some excuse about Harry's wish that they not fight, but he while he could understand his Submissive's distress and his Alpha's reluctance, he felt rather slighted.

Hadn't they thought to give him any consideration at all? He didn't mind a fight. In fact, his skin crawled at the thought of finally having a chance to test his Alpha and prove his own worth.

He was a good Beta, he could be a good Beta, if they'd let him. Why would they deny him the chance to prove it? Surely he was worthy of a true test, no matter how small it might be. He'd accepted the claim to his person and magic, but he wanted more than confirmation. The bonding night, both fierce and meaningful, had been missing on key point.

He needed more.

Validation and true acceptance would be satisfactory, if his Alpha was truly deserving of his title and had the nerve to do so.

A low growl met his ears and Charlie turned, a lofty smirk etching its way onto his face. He couldn't temper the contempt that rose up in him or the faint flickers of shame and insecurity. He might not have known anything about Dragels and their world a few weeks ago, but he was a fast learner and he'd done the best that he could, since they'd all come together. Surely that warranted some form of acknowledgement, but instead, his Alpha had skipped the one thing that would truly cement them together. Charlie hadn't missed that part when Ilsa had been ranting at the smaller Slytherin.

It had made his heart ache. He didn't know how to process that. He'd been able to shake off countless things before, but this—this was something he had no real control over. It burned inside of him like the flames that now danced around his shoulders as his hair ignited and faded into smoldering, blue flickers.

Sharp blue eyes drilled into hazel-hued ones.

"If you didn't want me," Charlie spoke with more steadiness than he felt. "You shouldn't have carried on last night."

There was a sharp snort and Theo tossed his head, agitated. "Last night had nothing to do with now." He blinked, as if the convoluted sentence made no sense to him the second he'd spoken.

"Strange. You only had to-"

"Slytherin habits never die." Theo interrupted. He tracked his Beta's movements as Charlie circled to the other side of the room. Ilsa's warding had included some of the basic things, but he was sure that the magic was only as strong as the intent. Ilsa had warded them out of habit, it could be broken by intense emotion and powerful magic, he was sure. There was definitely enough of that in the room. He'd just have to make sure to avoid any pointy edges.
"So we've been reduced to house status?" Charlie inquired, mildly.

"No, rather, I wanted you to know that I couldn't fully trust you until I had a real reason to do so." Theo's eyes darkened even further. "Your inherent nature and your instincts will dictate your behavior unless something significant provokes you otherwise. I need to know just how far I can trust you. I can see your honesty, I have felt your loyalty, but I have no reason to respect you—no significant reason."

Charlie smiled, all gleaming fangs and sharp edges. "Then consider this significant." He lunged across the room in a blur, claws extended. He felt hard scales, smoothness and then warm, sticky liquid as the armored skin gave way to his sharp claws. He tackled Theo the ground, hard enough to bruise.

They were a bloody, gasping mess, when it was all over.

The fight had taken well over two hours, neither wanting to be the one to stand back first. Of course, Charlie would have judged Theo, if he'd called a halt to their match an hour into it. Theo, of course, would have judged Charlie in turn if the Beta had dared suggest they finish things up.

It had been raw, primal and absolutely necessary.

Now, it was over. The Alpha-Beta bond had snapped fully into place, the moment Theo had pulled heavily on his earthen element to bring the fight to an acceptable close. Charlie hadn't been able to call his fire to react to it. He had—but it hadn't been anywhere near enough to counter Theo's expertise.

Dragel healing had yet to catch up with dragel marks though and some of the larger slashes remained angry and red, against pale and tanned skin in turn. Charlie lay, plastered to the floor, chest heaving even as the restraints binding him to the floor began to ease at last. A few shiny burn marks decorated Theo's once-perfect skin, the edges slowly healing, even as singed hair curled around his ears.

That had been a frightening moment, Charlie could admit. He'd been fine with everything in their emotionally charged, tension-filled fight, until in the heat of the moment, pure instinct and raw power had prompted the rush of flame that had set Theo ablaze. The very human scream that had filled the room had shocked him out of any further confrontations. He later wondered if it had been a scream of pain—or fury. He didn't know Theo well enough to judge which it had been.

Theo hadn't been discouraged by a touch of fire, however, and they'd finished their fight to the tune of snarls, growls and whines. Theo's lithe figure and smaller stature had granted him the advantage once the fight had moved to wrestling. Charlie's efforts had been calmly circumvented when Theo had finally used his own element.

The moment Charlie had been finally wrestled to the floor, the fight was over. Theo's element allowed him every advantage necessary, including moving fast enough to avoid Charlie's dangerous flames. He'd been weighted to the ground, then forcibly restrained by calm, sure hands that had maneuvered him into a fairly vulnerable position.

He coughed wetly, soaked in blood and sweat, feeling still as if the weight of a world rested on his chest.

"Shhh," his Alpha's voice, strong and firm, from above, soothed. Dangerous clawed hands combed gently through the sweat-damped locks, the blue flame having burned red before it faded.
altogether. "You did very well, my dragonheart. You are definitely more than worthy of the rank and position that belongs to you."

Charlie stared upwards at that solemn, dark face. He stared as those great, shimmering wings curved forward, trying to ignore the slightly painful weight of Theo perched on his midsection as that other clawed hand dug into his midsection with unerring precision. He watched, silently, as his Alpha lifted the bloodied claw to his lips and sensually licked the crimson liquid, dark eyes lightening to a familiar golden hue.

For a moment, Charlie couldn't breathe when Theo freed one of warm hands from the invisible bonds to draw it up and calmly carved bloody streaks across his pale torso. His claws tingled at the warmth and magic contained in his Alpha's blood, even as his hand was guided to his mouth. Charlie balked.

Theo didn't. The crimson-coated claws remained hovering just before Charlie's still-healing lips.

Theo gave an encouraging rumble.

Tentatively, Charlie's tongue poked out to taste the powerful offering.

Magic crackled and sparked visibly in the air around them.

Matching streaks faded away into newly healed skin.

Charlie breathed easier when Theo's lips twitched into a fanged smile, the sudden weight lightening considerably.

It had only taken a flicker of power for Theo to alter his weight to allow his Beta to lie comfortably beneath him. The rest of the restraints, formed from the wooden floors, slowly disintegrated as Theo's wings arched forward and brushed gently in the sudden silence in the bedroom. Curving his right wing forward, he hummed encouragingly when Charlie's fingers twitched uncertainly on the floor at his side.

"Because you have won, it is your right to take them." Theo's wings stilled, held at just the right angle for Charlie's fingers to reach up and take what was needed. "If you prefer the lighter ones…" the left wing angled sharply inward.

Charlie licked his lips, a minute shake of his head. He didn't care about the color. He'd take whichever one was loose. He understood what was being offered and knew that the action was what mattered—not following through on it. His right hand was released from the invisible weighted restraints still pinning him to the floor. He skimmed his shaking fingers over the smooth, warm wing scales.

Blue eyes flickered uncertainly to meet shimmering golden ones. His fingers calmed, carefully stroking over the proffered expanse, watching as those golden eyes rolled back in pleasure, growing heavy-lidded with the welcome ministrations. He felt along the smooth scales until his fingers caught on a rough patch.

When he pried the desired scale loose, Theo didn't make a sound.

Charlie lay still, after he handed it over, watching as Theo switched it for Harry's extra scale. He held out his hand for the extra and waited. After a moment's pause, Theo handed it over.

With a burst of flame and magic, he dissolved it into nothing.
Silence twined between them. Magic hung in the air. Time passed.

Those rich golden eyes finally returned to their natural, golden hue, a new vibrance shimmering behind them. Something different, something deeper, something unspoken.

A challenge almost.

"Is that all?" Charlie licked his lips.

"Hardly." Theo whispered. He stretched forward and claimed those newly healed lips.

It was an intimate dance of dominance, one that Theo won, of course. Charlie finally gave into it, once he'd made his point and now, they sat together, with nothing needing to be said.

Theo's elegant, long-fingered hands stroked over the myriad of scars that littered that tanned chest, before golden eyes finally settled on those steady blue orbs. "Should you ever have need of me and I cannot reach you, use this as a last resort." Theo murmured. "This is how Harry brought you back. I've changed it just a bit though, so I won't quite...die, if you use it."

Charlie felt his breath hitch, slightly.

"The words are...Orbis Terraro Ken. It should only be as an absolute last resort, it will transfer all of my reserves to you, using you as the primary channel. I hope you need never use it. Nod if you understand."

The dragon tamer swallowed. After a moment, he nodded. They sat in continued silence and then Charlie hesitated. "...would I ever...?"

"As soon as we find you a mentor, as soon as they teach you the depth of your element, then yes. It is the final test you must pass." Theo rested his hands on Charlie's broad shoulders, fingers playing with the untied locks. "It is one of the most difficult things you will ever do."

"What happens to you?"

Theo's lips twitched. "Nothing too serious. Might be out of it for a few weeks."

Charlie snorted. But he understood all that wasn't said and mentally tucked away the spell in back of his mind.

The last part of the ritual was just as bloody as the first half, Charlie mused. But there was magic in that blood and he understood as much, surprised to find that his earlier aversion to such things had finally melted away. Then again, he was sure he could blame it on watching Harry feed from Theo.

Harry's expressions could be illegal from the look of orgasmic bliss on his pale features every time their Alpha allowed that bit of necessary intimacy. The jealousy he'd felt from that was tempered by the fact that now, Charlie was Theo's sole focus. He was allowed to sit up and kissed in reward for his obedience.

Theo's kisses were thorough and drugging and Charlie couldn't complain. There wasn't any reason to.

In the shadowy, ruined bedroom, they sat across from each other, experience warring with necessity and newly awakened instincts reminding them of their shared Submissive. Charlie knew
logically that things were complete now, but there was one final tug in the back of his mind that did not quite settle down as he wanted.

Theo's steady gaze would be unnerving at any other time, but the silence that stretched between them was companionable enough that Charlie understood his Alpha was waiting for him to speak.

"...is it good enough this time?" The words were a mere whisper. His face flared with heat, a touch of guilt, shame and defiance all rolled into one. He'd thought he'd given everything last night. But everything hadn't even been enough, had it?

"Do you still give me everything?" Theo asked, head tilted to the side.

"If you have to ask, then I've managed to bungle it again." Charlie couldn't keep the rawness from his voice.

"Shall we swear to never make this mistake again?" Theo's voice, soft like velvet, held an equally pained edge. His actions could only have translated as hurtful and he'd continued, deliberately. Now, he would have to give more of himself and if accepted, it would be the first step in offering an apology for the unnecessary pain he'd caused.

"Could we?" Charlie threw back. "I thought-

"Blood is enough. Magic is enough." Theo murmured. "But together…"

And suddenly, Charlie knew. "Yes."

"Repeat after me," Theo murmured, extending a hand. "Change to the opposite, when you know which is yours." They sat together, Charlie braced with his back against the wall, Theo perched on his strong thighs, an awkward, but doable position, for the moment. They were at just the right height for what would eventually come of this extra ritual.

They clasped hands, one tan, one pale. Blue eyes met Gold. Fire met Earth. Threads of soft, golden magic knitted together with the warm, red strands that licked along the joined hands.

"To a wandering soul, a friend is life." Theo's grip tightened faintly.

Charlie responded in kind. "To a wandering soul, a friend is life."

"To a shadow, the sun is death."

"To a shadow, the sun is death." Charlie repeated.

"In strength and adversity, by loyalty through honesty, I do so solemnly swear."

The dragon tamer's lips twitched into the softest, faintest tease of a smile. "In strength and adversity, by loyalty through honesty, I do so solemnly swear."

"To the four elements that reign within and without and the two that stand beside them." Theo's own near smirk met the look of understanding leveled at him. This was permanent—this was forever.

"To the four elements that reign within and without and the two that stand beside them." Charlie's deep voice intoned.

Theo leaned forward, lips barely touching one tanned ear, warm breath sending shivers through his
living pillow. "I take this obligation freely and I accept my responsibility."

Charlie swallowed, hard. "I take this obligation freely and I accept my responsibility."

"As I am Alpha, I accept you, Beta." Theo gifted the ear a gentle bite, catching on the earring with his fangs. "May that which is between us, be never torn apart." A hot, open-mouthed kiss was pressed over Charlie's bared neck. Theo sucked once, lightly, then sank his fully aroused fangs into the skin, directly over the claiming mark from the night before.

A muffled cry came from Charlie's lips as the magic invoked literally bled into his veins from the point of Theo's bite. His head thunked back against the wall, a groan escaping as he felt those lips move and his blood being drawn deliciously slow, bordering on torturous, but remaining exquisitely pleasurable.

When those wicked fangs finally withdrew, Theo's bloody lips slanted directly over Charlie's parted ones, seeking, devouring and dominating. The Alpha took all that was there and gave freely, all there was to give. He finished, by guiding Charlie's head to rest in the unblemished crook of his neck, with final whispered words of possession. "You are mine."

"...yes." Charlie answered, a beat later.

Theo's hands skimmed comfortingly up and down his sides. Reassuring and firm in their steady strokes.

"...As I am Beta, I accept you, Alpha." Charlie's whisper was strong and steady. "May that which is between us, be never torn apart." His aching fangs surged up through his gums, and he hovered, selecting a spot. "I am yours." He bit down.

Rich, thick blood flooded his mouth at once, soothing and arousing him on a level he'd never even thought possible. He felt Theo's body tense and shudder in his arms, as the shared pleasure washed over them both, amplified by the renewed bond between them and enhanced by the second one they'd just cast.

Their joined hands burned a moment later, new magic twining over in the shared, meshed strands.

Charlie stifled a hiss even as Theo gritted his teeth.

They watched, together, as new tattoos were formed out of nothing, scrolling across pale and tanned skin, in matching stripes of their respective burgundy and navy hues. When their hands fell apart, the matching scrolls faded away.

After a moment, Charlie smiled. This was far more than 'enough'. He almost didn't know what to say. "...thank you."

"Always."

Of course, blood sharing was a lovely precursor to more enjoyable things and Charlie was hardly about to protest when Theo guided them down that particular line of interest. He did protest at being taken on the floor, but Theo had swallowed those breathy words and done something with his fingers that had Charlie's cries echoing through the room.

By the time the cushioning charm registered, Charlie was too content to quibble over it. Not that it mattered, there was something primal and satisfying at knowing that he'd provoked his perpetually calm Alpha into such a single-minded concentration. Being the recipient of such affections was an
added bonus.

"...the room's a mess." Charlie ventured to speak, after a while. "What time is it?"

"Late." Theo mumbled, vaguely. He was enjoying his Beta-pillow, soaking up Charlie's elemental warmth and enjoying the last of their pleasant haze. "Magic."

Charlie bit back a snigger at that. Theo's expression was borderline grumpy at the very thought of having to move at all. He didn't blame him, the day had been long and he was fairly exhausted himself. But, he was beginning to wonder about the time, the others and Harry. He hoped that Harry had settled down and relaxed.

The moment on the beach when he'd thrown both him and Theo halfway down the sandy strip had really helped to hammer the reality home. He hadn't realized an incomplete bond could cause so much trouble. He hadn't even known it was incomplete. Thankfully, Ilsa had been there and knew the signs. She stepped in as a substitute along with another young woman of considerable power. Together, the two of them had been able to approach Harry, and then Bahn and Soula had joined as well. Eventually, they'd managed to come to some sort of agreement and Harry had finally fallen asleep. Ilsa explained that he likely wouldn't remember the confrontation at all and warned them not to mention it if Harry didn't.

Theo suddenly frowned, sitting up. He rose a moment later, stepping away from Charlie's splayed form.

"Theo?"

"Harry." Came the immediate answer. "Something's...off."

"Off like how?"

"Haven't you been feeling things?"

"The entire time we've been here, yes." Charlie hesitated. "...was that Harry?"

"We have no other shared Bonded between us." Theo retorted, dryly. A moment later, he winced. "Yes. That was Harry."

"I don't—ow." Charlie mirrored the wince.

Harry was up and awake, for sure—and very, very irritated at both of them.

"Maybe we should fix the room before," he began.

Theo's response was to chuck a pair of fresh pyjamas at him. "Dress first. Fix later. We've cast quite a bit of magic tonight." He paused. "And even though we both took about the same from each other, I would think a blood replenisher wouldn't be amiss."

Charlie grimaced, but nodded. He hated the taste of those things. He sat up from the floor, wondering where his original clothes and wand had been. The room truly was a trashed wreck. Harry might chew their heads off for it—in addition to whatever else he had in mind if the transmitted annoyance was anything to judge things by.

"I'll spike it for you." Theo offered, quietly. Catching and easily interpreting the look of distaste that had flickered across his Beta's face. He mentally reached out through the guesthouse, checking
and setting the wards, altering them to admit Harry, as he felt their Submissive approach.

"...thanks."

Theo hummed in answer and fished out his wand from beneath a pile of rubble. He sighed. The wardrobe might not be fixable after all.

An exhausted, irritated and wholly annoyed Harry dragged himself up the stairs. He made a mental note to remind himself to research alternate methods of transportation, remembering that Theo was two years ahead of his sixteen. He wondered if his Alpha could apparate and if he’d already earned his apparition license.

He wondered if being Bonded counted as marriage in the eyes of the law and thus would have him emancipated and able to handle his own affairs and necessities. It would be nice if it was. He’d have to ask Theo.

At the top of the stairs, Harry was suddenly aware of how quiet the guesthouse was. He listened, hearing nothing, but picking up the slightly worried and apprehensive trickles flowing down his triad bond. Theo and Charlie had apparently settled their differences and quite enjoyably too, if the musky scent of sex in the air was to be believed.

Harry's scowl darkened. He'd jumped off a pier, nearly died of dehydration, encountered one of the most infuriating beings he'd ever laid eyes on and his two idiotic Bonded had been-!

With narrowed eyes, Harry all but threw the door open.

His dramatic entrance was muted by the fact that there was something on the other side of the door preventing it from opening all the way. The anger was immediately replaced by concern and after a moment, Harry was able to wedge it open enough to step through the section and into the bedroom.

Or rather, what was left of the bedroom.

Emerald eyes stared at the mass destruction in sheer belief. A moment later, his hand went to his face, as the scent of sex was not the only scent lingering in the air. There'd been blood and plenty of it. Harry swallowed hard, manfully shoving down all instincts to hurl and react to the fear nesting in his gut.

He turned to survey his Bonded and inwardly stifled a smirk.

Charlie wore his pyjama jacket buttoned one button off and the cuffs open, his pyjama bottoms draped over one shoulder as he'd been the process of beginning to redo his buttons. A sheepish look danced across the tanned face and then, a worried one settled as Charlie scrubbed a hand through his messy red hair and then started forward.

Theo stood beside the jumbled wreck of what had been their bed, clad in a pair of pyjama bottoms slung low about his hips, advertising the fact that he was not wearing pants underneath them. Golden eyes flickered quickly and methodically over Harry before the slightly tense posture relaxed. He held his pyjama jacket in hand dark brows furrowed into a question as he started over after Charlie.

"Harry? Are you alright?"

Harry drew in a breath to speak, only to find his teeth chattering. Embarrassed, he clamped his mouth shut, even as his cheeks began to color in his customary blush. The bedroom was charmed
to be warmer than anywhere else in the house and Harry hadn't realized just how cold he was, until now. He trembled, reaching out for Charlie.

"Harry!" Theo was beside him at once.

Charlie yelped at the freezing arms that tentatively locked around his waist. He immediately snatched Harry directly to him when the brunet flinched and retreated, as if expecting to be turned away. "Sh. It's alright, Harry." He murmured, rubbing his large hands over the expanse of goosepimples skin. "You're freezing! What happened?"

"Here, let me spell this on him." Theo moved around the hugging duo and with a twitch of his fingers, spelled the pyjama jacket onto Harry's smaller frame. "I'll set the room to rights, Charlie, warm him up as best as you can." He frowned. "Perhaps a hot shower?"

Harry cringed, burrowing deeper into Charlie's scorching embrace. "No. No shower." He muttered, fingers scrabbling to hold on to Charlie's pyjama jacket. He scowled, tugging at it, wishing it was off.

Theo snorted from behind them and Harry understood a moment later, when Charlie was newly naked. He blinked and stared up, seeing the minute flush and the quirk of Charlie's lips that hinted at any temporary embarrassment. Harry didn't have time to process that, because Charlie drew out his wings, curving them forward and drawing on enough of his gift to bathe Harry in true warmth.

Both watched with interest as a yawning Theo picked his way through the rubble and then stretched, languidly, head rolling to the side.

"Terran reparo askeo." The words were spoken with conviction and a hint of authority.

Harry stared.

He watched as the entire room leapt together, every single fiber, splinter and dust, returning to its original state. A still rather disgruntled Theo scowled at the result. He clicked his fingers at the neatly fixed bed and watched as the duvet turned itself down. He then turned back and gave a slight jerk of his head towards his two Bonded.

"In the bed. It'll be warmer." He twitched his fingers, casting a wandless heating charm.

Charlie didn't need any further prodding. He simply picked Harry up and carried him to the bed.

Harry made a soft sound when he was gently dumped on the soft, warm duvet and allowed to claim the center of the bed. He watched, with interested eyes as Charlie went in search of his pyjama bottoms and Theo, taking pity on him, summoned them both to the bed.

After a few minutes, some awkward and some not, they were all settled beneath the covers, Theo on Harry's right and Charlie on the left. Silence reigned and then, Harry turned over, snuggling into Charlie's side, with one hand reaching back to tug Theo closer to him as well.

Without comment, both Alpha and Beta turned inward, sandwiching their chilled Submissive between them.

"Harry…?" Theo began.

"…tomorrow." Harry pressed his cheek to Charlie's warm chest. He squeezed Theo's hand wrapped around his waist. "Tomorrow, please?"
"Tomorrow it is." Charlie answered for them both. He kissed that cool forehead and rested his chin atop Harry's head. The Alpha-Beta bonds thrumming through him shared Theo's worry and muted concern. Something kept the Slytherin from pressing Harry, but Charlie was sure it was the same reasons as his own.

Harry was exhausted and still cold to the touch. Charlie sighed. He reached a little deeper into himself, tugging on his elemental gift and pushing that warmth out to dance along his skin. He was rewarded by Harry cuddling closer with a contented hum, cold nose buried at the base of his neck.

Theo's elegant, long fingers curled through his uncombed hair and Charlie smiled at the touch. Tomorrow would be interesting, for sure.
NEVARAH : ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE : MASTER BEDROOM : DEVERAINE PROPERTY :

Harry was the second to wake up the next morning, the first being Charlie who had wakened to nature's call and left to take care of such necessary business. His warmth leaving the bed had been gradually missed by a sensitive Harry who woke within minutes after noticing that his personal heater was missing from his immediate side.

That was not the way he wanted to wake up and his temper from the previous night spilled over with a fine trickle of annoyance. Harry poked Theo a few times, not bothering to stroke the tattoo that would let him up just yet. He was upset thinking of the blur the past afternoon had been and the possibility that he could have enjoyed it more if his two idiots had simply been smarter about the whole bonding thing.

Harry scowled. This time, he shifted around to bite the mark with blunt teeth instead of a mere brush of the fingers.

Theo woke at once, half-sitting up in bed, yanking Harry close to his chest, gold eyes bright and wide-awake. "Harry?" Theo's sleep slurred voice matched the weary slump of his shoulders as the young Alpha eased his tight grip on his Submissive. "What's wrong?" His dragel senses did not scream of danger in the immediate vicinity and Theo's sleep-fogged mind was not yet inclined to puzzle out why he'd been wakened in a new way. He began to ease himself back down to the blankets.

Narrowed emerald eyes turned to mere slits, the cat-eyed pupils shimmering. "No, you don't!" Harry made a fist with one hand and thumped Theo quite generously on the head. "What were you thinking?" He hissed, awake and angry. "Do you have any idea what you could have done?"

Theo blinked up at him, adorably confused with his innocent expression and wide gold eyes, framed by messy chocolate brown curls. "H-harry?" His voice was tentative, one hand already reaching up to his head.

Harry responded by thumping him again. "Don't 'Harry' me!" He growled. "You. Charlie. Last night. What was that? Huh? You two couldn't settle things without having to-"

"Hey!" The protest came out almost slightly whined as Theo sat up and leaned back, just slightly out of reach of Harry's fists. "It was—that was instinct. Pure instinct."
"So?" Harry demanded. "It took you dancing around each other all afternoon to handle…pure instinct? Both of you?"

"Well…Charlie didn't know, it really wasn't-

"Then you should have told him." Harry snapped. "You're the Alpha!"

A faint tinge of pink dusted Theo's pale cheeks and he looked away for a moment. "Harry, look… I'm sorry. It was…more complicated than that."

"Complicated?" Harry repeated, calmly. Too calmly. "Exactly how complicated was it that neither of you could be there when I needed you most. When I actually needed you! For everything you've been sharing and telling me and agreeing with things like bonding and Bahn and the picnic and then, sleeping and the—everything!" Harry threw up his hands. "The whole—I can't even remember the afternoon. I remember having fun. I remember being ordered to rest, even though I didn't feel the least bit tired and-

Theo's golden eyes flashed. "You were dead on your feet, do not give me that." His eyes narrowed. "You needed to rest and it had been a long day."

"Fine then." Harry inclined his head. "Fine. Then how come I woke up surrounded by Bahn, Soula—who I barely even talked to—sleeping right next to me along with another nice girl, Shayla, whom I never even met and then Ilsa of all people shows up to explain to me that you two are being—"

"Harry?" Charlie's uncertain voice cut through the tirade. He had just stepped out from the water closet and now stood at the foot of the bed, looking sleep rumpled and sexy with a pair of plaid blue pants and his fiery red, golden-tipped hair half-twisted into a loose braid. "Morning." He nodded to Theo, looking between his Alpha and Submissive.

"You." Harry turned on Charlie at once. "Once you figured it out, what took you so long?" His hands began to flux into claws. "It was just a matter of bonding!"

"It wasn't just a matter!" Theo snapped.

Harry jerked around to look at him. "Really? Explain then. Explain how I thought everything was fine. We were fine and then I wake up to find out that it's not. Explain that, Theo. Explain it."

Theo opened and shut his mouth. He did not speak for a moment and then he rubbed his face with a muffled groan. "You said not to fight, remember?"

Harry's expression darkened even further. "All of this happened, because I said not to fight him?"

"Well," Theo began.

"Don't." Harry held up a hand. "Just…don't. Even if I said that—you could have mentioned it. You could have talked to me, Theo." He frowned. "You too, Charlie. This is—this is serious. We're all in this together, at least, I liked to think so." His glower darkened. "This is important. I could have—if I'd known—I wouldn't have, you know that—ugh!" Harry threw up his hands, unable to say another word. He was too upset and there was just enough worry inside of him that warned him of taking things too far, speaking in a temper was one thing, making his temper known was another, but allowing said temper to run away with him—Harry shrank inwardly on himself. He didn't dare do that. No one would put up with that, he was sure, not even Theo, who had shown incredible patience so far. Not even Charlie, Harry was sure, who knew more about his back story than Theo did.
"Would you have preferred if we fought without telling you?" Theo snapped. He was finding himself to be slightly cranky now that he'd been startled out of his sleep for a danger that did not exist and then immediately confronted by his irate Submissive.

"Yes!" Harry snapped. "At least then you could have explained it later, if you had to and then things would've been alright."

"Alright like how?" Charlie eased himself onto the foot of the bed, grasping that the conversation had taken less than pleasant turns from the moment his Bonded had wakened.

"Alright like being there for me." Harry pursed his lips, thinking. His mind swirled with images of a certain, prickly Merrow by the name of Alec. His dreams had been filled with the conversation from the night before and left him with an endless montage of moonlight snapshots of the Merrow floating through his mind. He also recalled a very rude conversation, a mystery water snake, nearly drowning and not being able to reach his Bonded. A low growl left his lips.

"I think we're missing something too," Charlie tried. "Is there anything you want to tell us?"

"Me?" Harry sputtered. "Do you really want to start this, Charlie? You both left me out there, alone, in the middle of the night, on a beach that I haven't even walked the full length in daytime, without any way to contact either of you and you want to know if there's anything I want to tell you?"

"Well," Charlie began.

"Please excuse me, while I do." Harry cut in. Emerald eyes gleamed. "Since you're both listening. I have a lot to stay. Don't you dare interrupt!"

It was a thoroughly repentant Theo and Charlie that were finally sitting on the bed, braced up against the headboard, both of them sharing expressions of shock and uncertainty. Harry certainly had an explosive temper on him, having already demolished a few items with the sheer passion transmuted through his magic as he'd raged, ranted and calmly presented his reasons for such a spectacular show of temper.

He did not turn any of it into physical violence on their persons, but his disappointment, disdain and obvious displeasure at their behavior was completely laid out before them, without any buffers in between. He'd taken them both to task, remembering Bahn, Shayla and Ilsa's words on taking a stand for himself and reminding his Bonded that a Circle was formed on mutual trust, honesty and communication.

Theo's head remained partially bowed and Charlie had stopped fidgeting after the second round. Neither of them dared to interrupt until Harry was through.

Their Submissive was not happy.

By the time he'd finished, neither Alpha nor Beta had anything they could say to counter the arguments that had resulted in awkward, uncomfortable feelings all around, before Harry had finally wound down, climbing up to perch on the edge of the bed, arms folded across his chest, scowling adorably.

After he'd extracted apologies from both of them, Harry finally allowed them to draw close enough to touch him. He did thump Charlie twice, for good measure, as he'd done the same to Theo and it didn't seem fair to let Charlie off when he was equally to blame in his own right.
Afterwards, he'd crawled into Charlie's lap, craving his Beta's warmth and the security that came with knowing his Beta was strong and steady enough for him to depend on. Theo summoned a dressing gown from the hook near the bathroom sink and set about repairing the damage Harry had done to the room.

When their Alpha finally joined them on the bed, Harry turned to look at him from the safe vantage point of Charlie's broad, tanned arms. "Theo?" He ventured, cautiously. His Alpha had listened without a word, save for the apologies given and now, Harry could feel the guilt and sorrow wafting off of the tightly wound feelings. Harry inwardly strengthened his resolve. He would not apologize for this—it was high time he'd spoken up for himself and there was absolutely nothing wrong with doing so. This could only work if they were all willing to contribute and be open and honest about everything.

He'd even mentioned that little bit of information from Ilsa, about a certain password that might have had less than pleasant consequences. Theo had merely gritted his teeth and remained silent, not offering anything in regards to that particular snippet. Charlie had looked vaguely horrified. Harry didn't bother to process that. It nearly gave him a headache trying not to read the emotions swirling through the room and what they could possibly mean. It was hard to read Theo as a matter of course, his Alpha was Slytherin, after all, but Charlie was older and experience came with age, his own expression had been rather inscrutable.

"Theo…I won't apologize for that." Harry heard himself say before he could check the words. He winced inwardly. That was not what he was intending to say, but apparently, his brain had not yet caught up to his mouth. He had no regrets about speaking his mind for once and felt relieved and gratified when he'd finally said all that he'd been meaning to. He had no desire to undermine himself by apologizing in any way at all. "It needed to be said." He continued, firmly.

"I know." The young Alpha sighed, offering a wan smile, before he scrubbed his face with one dressing gown-clad arm. "And…about the password, Harry. I…didn't think you would need to use it so soon. I intended to change the bindings before you ever had a chance to do so."

"You didn't think I'd need to use it soon or you didn't think I would use it?" Harry countered. There was a distinct difference.

"I didn't think you'd need to use it." Theo countered, readily. "I was speaking to Oretta, when you called on it—we were," He hesitated. "Making arrangements to change them. It requires time, magic and significant effort on both of our parts."

"Would you ever had told me?" Harry had to ask.

Theo's near smile faded. "No." He said, quietly. "I would have changed it and left it at that."

Harry swallowed. "…why?"

"Because the sentiment is true and I meant it when I gave it to you."

Emerald eyes squeezed shut and Harry felt his hands curling into fists once more. He felt like saying things that probably shouldn't be said. "…You should have asked."

"It was my right."

"Hang your rights!" Harry growled. "I care about you, Theo. Hopefully as much as you care about me and Charlie. How do you think I'd manage if you were—Merlin forbid—dead?"
"I would hope that you would find strength and courage in each other to continue living." Theo said, calmly. "Harry, this has nothing to do with instinct or whether I love you or not and please, do not ever doubt that I do. I love you to the point that it hurts to breathe, at times. Something this beautiful—could break—and leave us all shattered. But this, Harry, this is my element. I have changed the bindings, not because my feelings have changed, but my perspective on them, has. I would still give myself entirely, if it meant that you and Charlie and any other Bonded we have in the future, would live. That is not duty, responsibility or instinct. It is simply who I am and I will never change that."

Harry sucked in a breath and carefully blew it out. He could feel the conflicted emotions that roiled between all three of them, Charlie quivering faintly as he processed Theo's passionate speech. He could feel the central thread of Theo's conviction and it was ironclad.

That hurt, to think of it, before Harry realized exactly what his Alpha had said. He felt a pang in his own chest, shared through their bond, as he realized that for all of his own protests, possible and unspoken, that he would do the same. In a heartbeat, he would give up himself, if only to see that his friends, family and Bonded were all alive, safe and well—even if he could not be there with them.

Tears pricked and stung at the back of his eyes and he turned his face to Charlie's chest, feeling distinctly inadequate of the complete devotion and utter loyalty reflected in Theo's shimmering golden eyes.

How could he deserve that?

"Charlie—Theo," Harry whispered their names, even as he tried and failed to comprehend the depth of emotion and magic that bound them all together. Merlin, he didn't deserve them, but he'd sure try to be worthy of them.

"You are precious, my treasure." Theo whispered, softly, in his ear, drawing close, the moment Harry had turned away.

Harry shuddered in those warm, strong arms, even as Charlie rumbled comfortingly above him.

"As are you, my dragonheart." Theo pressed a kiss to the base of Charlie's throat and caressed Harry's ear with one long, slender finger. "And you mean the world to me. The new password, Harry, is *Orbis Terraro Ken.* He tucked a brunet curl around that pale ear. "and, before you ask, should you invoke it, I would be rendered unconscious for several weeks, before returning to my original state. It will not kill me, but the magic is no less potent regardless of the changed intent." He stroked that finger down Harry's pale cheek and then down his neck.

They remained together, half-curled around each other for some time, before Theo finally spoke once more. "It didn't escape my notice," he began, softly. "That you didn't answer Charlie's question when he asked what went wrong."

Harry blanched. *Oh. Right. That.* He hadn't even broached the topic of water, midnight—past midnight, he was sure—and mysterious water serpents, Merrows and almost drowning. He gulped. Right. The almost drowning part probably couldn't be broken gently. He'd covered nearly everything else, but he'd avoided a few points, purely out of self-preservation and especially after sensing the depth of emotion contained in the room.

"Is there anything you'd like to share?" The lightness in Theo's voice was betrayed by the sudden resolve in the emotions around him that stilled and combined into a single point of concern.
Harry bit his lip. There really wasn't an easy way to start into it.

Theo sighed, almost resignedly. "Alright, what happened?"

"It's actually—I—well—it sort've—I might have—there was a—it was cold!" Harry shivered, violently. He remembered the water being absolutely freezing and then warm hands drawing him close and carrying him to air and safety. He could still feel the imprints of Alec's hands, holding him near, rubbing up and down his back as he coughed onto the sand. He swallowed hard, feeling a touch of warmth dusting over his cheeks. He most certainly would not be telling Theo and Charlie that.

"Start at the beginning?" Charlie suggested, cuddling him tighter and automatically drawing on his fire to project said warmth. It was practically habit by now. "And slower, maybe?"

"I don't know how!" Harry protested, helplessly. "I just, I had some—I couldn't sit still." He tried to explain. "So I was running, you know, up and down the beach and then I saw—mphghf." Harry blinked. He had not meant to garble the last of that sentence.

Theo and Charlie stared at him for a moment, equally confused by the sudden lack of coherence.

Harry blinked again, nearly cross-eyed when he tried to look at his mouth. It was almost as if he hadn't been speaking on his own.

"I saw a—garphf." He ground out instead. Emerald eyes grew wide and a flicker of fear was swiftly overridden by annoyance.


"At the pier!" Harry burst out. "I saw—something—at the pier." He breathed a short sigh of relief. That was...strange. "And I saw—berphs." The rest of the sentence came out in a jumble of syllables. And Harry screeched in frustration.

Thoe and Charlie winced in tandem and then exchanged a look. "Er, Harry," Charlie began. "If you really—"

"It was a buphskd—and I saw—mgulfd—then I fell of the pier and I was eaten by—sougph—and then a—ratsug—rescued me and I was—argh!" Harry shoved ineffectually at Charlie's strong embrace. "What's wrong with me?" He wailed.

"Shh." Theo shushed. "Calm down, Harry. Please!" His own unease was reflected in Harry's not-quite-a-panic-mode.

"I can't!" Harry couldn't keep the low whine from escaping his throat. He was stressed, frustrated, exasperated and now it felt as if there was yet another weird thing to add to the always weird things that happened only to him and no one else.

"You can't speak of it or you can't remember?" Theo interjected calmly. He'd caught a few things out of the garbled sentences that Harry had managed and he didn't like any of it.

"I can't speak of it!" Harry snapped. "Of course, I remember it! If I didn't remember it, I wouldn't have known that it was that idiot—smrufhg." Harry nearly howled.

"Bite him." Theo looked to Charlie. "Over the mark, use your fangs."

"What? Wait!" Harry started to protest a half-second too late. Not that he really minded.
Charlie had already come to the same conclusion on his own and hardly needed any urging to bury his aching fangs in Harry's supple neck. He didn't drink, though the customary mouthful of blood came through. He simply held his fangs in check, until he felt Harry's shared emotions calm and ebb to a reasonable measure.

When Harry finally half-whined again, Charlie gently sucked on the bite and fed for a few mouthfuls. Harry's blood was delicious, first thing in the morning and it tasted richer and sweeter than he'd ever known it. A feeling of puzzlement rippled over him and he disengaged his fangs a moment later, sucking and licking at the bite, until it healed over completely. He usually had a fairly good memory for things, but there was definitely something different about Harry's blood this time around. His sensitivity, magic-wise, was already off the scale from Harry's magical outburst a little bit before, but it didn't show any signs of settling down any time soon. Perhaps it was the Resting Period…

"Harry?" Theo's voice was perfectly calm and composed.

Charlie had to give him credit for it, considering how Harry had neatly put them both in their places not so long ago. He pushed his feelings of confusion, interest and curiosity through their new bond, knowing that Theo was smart enough to figure out where it was coming from and what it might mean.

Miserable green eyes shimmered brightly at Theo, before Harry simply met his gaze and waited. Charlie's fangs had been more than welcome. It helped to center him, drawing his world and point of focus to the lovely fangs notched in his neck and the deliciously slow draw of his blood that had his body relaxing instinctively.

"You met someone?" Theo inquired.

Harry blushed, then scowled. He wouldn't classify Alec as meeting someone, more like, he'd been an inconvenience to the blue-haired creature at a time that had been—Harry stopped his thoughts there, he really didn't want to think about the Merrow, in fact, if he did, the chances were that he'd hex the bastard the next time he saw him—preferably without Goonter there. He didn't care about the lovely dreams that had been anything but innocent.

"I'll take that as a yes," Theo said, carefully. "Can you tell us who it was?"

"It was a—murbglo named shgifm." Harry squeezed his eyes shut. That was definitely bad.

"Alright then, I suppose it's safe to say that whoever you met, spelled you so that you couldn't speak of the encounter." Theo hesitated. "Perhaps you could write about it? Pensieve, perhaps?"

Harry brightened at once, nodding.

A little while later, the trio conceded defeat and Harry miserably plopped down on the kitchen table, while Charlie and Theo studied the scraps of parchment. He couldn't write it down, he couldn't speak it, their bond showed nothing off it and he couldn't even draw the memory out of his head.

"Well, whoever it was—is." Theo corrected himself. "They're quite powerful and very skilled. I've never seen magic like this before. Then again, this is Nevarah, this dozens of types of old and ancient magic that we'll likely never even see or experience in our lifetimes. I just wish that—I really haven't ever seen anything like it before."

"Neither have I." Charlie frowned at the parchments. "Ingenious, though I wish I wasn't seeing it
because." He smiled ruefully.

Theo scowled. "Perhaps." He said, grudgingly. "As far as I'm concerned, I'd just as soon not have strangers casting spells on our Harry." He frowned. "Though there are a few things you said that did worry me."

Harry turned to him, expectant.

"Something about falling off the pier, being eaten and then rescued?" He perked a brow. "May I make a guess that you ventured out on to the pier in the pitch black dark of night and then fell into the water?"

"Er," Harry said, intelligently.

"Water that might be freezing this time of season, with a deserted beach and a lack of direct communication?" Theo frowned. "That's what you were irritated about, wasn't it?"

"What?"

"Last night, you were upset at something and."

"Yes. You two!"

"No, you were—the whole second half. I felt, I could feel you—you were there, just very, very muted—and at one point, you nearly panicked, then you were muffled for a bit and then, you were tired, upset and irritated."

Harry snorted. "I had good reason to be."

"That's not the point." Theo frowned. "What part of all of that I said a moment ago, made it a good idea to fall off a pier? I'm fairly certain I told you at some point not to be walking around there alone and if I didn't, then I'm sure Ilsa or one of Bahn's would have said something." He frowned. "Common sense on its own, Harry, should have been deterrent enough. You're not a child and I have no desire to treat you as such, when you have a fully functioning mind at your disposal. I know you're brilliant, but sometimes, I do wonder."

Harry nibbled on his lower lip. "It wasn't a lack of common sense," he protested, at last. "It was just. I couldn't help it!"

"Harry!" Theo's golden eyes darkened faintly. "You could have drowned and died! What part of that isn't registering right now?"

"You were eaten?" Charlie was still processing some of the conversation and suddenly, his blue eyes were sharp and bright. "Harry, did you say you were eaten?"

Harry swallowed. "Oops?" He offered, nervously.

By the time Theo and Charlie finished with Harry, he was suitably scolded in turn and sent upstairs to shower, while Charlie poked at a quick breakfast and Theo went to check the beachside. Charlie had been nearly ordered into the kitchen, when he took one look at Theo's sparkling golden eyes and decided it was best to choose it on his own.

The slightly fuming Alpha stormed outside to investigate the beachside and the pier. He found, nothing, of course, but he was able to send a message to Ilsa and mention that they would be over
as soon as possible for an important matter of discussion. Theo had then returned to the kitchen to help Charlie carry the food upstairs.

Harry emerged from the water closet, toweling his hair dry, another towel wrapped around his hips in true muggle fashion.

"Harry, you do have a dressing gown." Theo sighed, but he was already moving forward to take the towel from Harry's hands. "And don't use a towel on your hair. No wonder it sticks up all the time."

"I don't like drying spells." Harry ducked away from the well-meaning fingers. From Theo's changed demeanor, he knew that he was mostly forgiven for falling off the pier. "They make my head itch."

"Then you're not casting them right." Charlie buttered a crispy slice of toast and held it up for Harry to take a bite and then Theo. "If you use more of a flick of the wrist than a twist of the hand, it works softer. It's rather like scourgify. It takes the intent you cast it with and the more force you put behind it."

"But I don't put force behind it!" Harry made another bite for the toast.

Charlie chuckled, directing it back to him. "You can have it, you know." His smile turned fond. "And you're a powerful wizard, Harry. I'd imagine that simple spells require you to be careful to keep your magic from it rather than putting it in. I had that problem when I came into my magical majority. It took me weeks to stop blowing things up with a simple lumos."

"Really?" Harry cast a longing glance towards the steaming cups of tea on the breakfast tray. This was a new thing for him, but he was sure he could grow used to eating and dressing at the same time.

"Really." Charlie handed him the half-eaten slice of toast and began to liberally apply butter to another. "But, maybe this would help. Think of it like a waterfall, the really small ones that trace back to the streams, rivers and then to a large body of water, the sea or the ocean. The largest body of water—the ocean—is your magic, the way you use it, the intents you cast it with, are dependent on the spells you using, it becomes a river, a stream, and then a tiny trickle of a waterfall somewhere."

"What he's trying to say is that you always have control." Theo summarized. "Have you never heard of it put that way before?"

Harry shook his head, finally standing still so Theo could spell his hair dry. "Never."

Theo frowned. "I would have thought that someone would at least have said something," he mumbled, half to himself. "Sit on the bed and eat properly. Your dress robes won't arrive for another five minutes."

"Dress robes?" Harry blinked. "But I already have a set from the-"

"Then ones I purchased for you are nowhere near elaborate enough for Hunting Season." Theo interrupted. "I've ordered new ones for everyone, myself included, the moment we left Quinn's." He sighed. "They were rushed. I made sure of it, so we'd have them in time to wear. Now, we're supposed to meet Bahn and the others within the hour, Charlie, shower. Now. Late is not an option."

The redhead held his hands up in gesture meant to pacify. He gulped down his steaming tea and crammed a half-folded slice of toast into his mouth, trotting off towards the water closet for his
turn, with a wave thrown over his shoulder.

Theo rolled his eyes and reached for the breakfast tray. He'd allow Harry some time to eat before he tried his hand at taming that wild hair.

HOME OF REGULUS AND JUN BLACK : ENTRYWAY

George landed in an awkward heap on the floor as Regulus and Jun flickered into existence before them. He could see magic visibly sparking off of the redheaded drage and she stomped off through the nearest available doorway with a hissed screech at Regulus.

The Torvak hybrid merely smiled in answer and bent down to help the redheaded twin to his feet. "Sorry about the rough 'portal. Jun wasn't handling it very well, I could only keep it stable, not comfortable." He flashed a warm, genuine smile. "Are you alright?"

"Er, I think so." George rubbed his neck and side for a moment. "Where are we?"

"Home, actually, for the moment. You're free to look around, so as long as you don't fall out of any second story windows before you've learned to use your wings." Regulus paused. "Actually, you might have to save that for later." He frowned. "Jun? How are you-?"

There was another screech, a muffled explosion and a shrieked barrage of something in a foreign language. Regulus winced. "Right, on that note, we'd best lock ourselves in for a bit." He started off to the left, leading down a faintly lit passageway. "Come on."

George found himself following.

The house was a lovely, two-story affair, George learned. It was richly furnished and impeccably well-kept. There were the common, standard expectations of a master suite, guest rooms, an entertainment room, a library and a large kitchen, as well as two sitting rooms.

There was also a sturdy, double-walled, spell-protected vault-room in the center of the second story, with a complicated code that Regulus bypassed by way of pricking his thumb and pressing a spot of blood onto the lighted runes. "Watch your step." Regulus warned, gesturing first. "Jun might be awhile."

George cautiously stepped in, surprised to find that he wasn't as nervous or apprehensive as he'd expected. He was slightly unnerved to see Regulus step in after him and lock and bolt the door with a sudden speed. "Er?" He began.

"Jun is an Empath." Regulus explained. "A very, very powerful one. This is to protect us. She's likely going to wreck the house." He grimaced. "And I just cleaned it up last weekend." He sighed. "Never mind, take a look around, if you like, I'll order us some sandwiches and butterbeer, eh?"

"That's fine." George murmured. He looked around the room, surprised to find it done in rich hues of burgundy, brown and shimmers of gold and silver.

There were tapestries covering every single inch of the walls, thick carpets and rugs on the floors, an ornate wooden dining table at the far end, two tall, windows with window seats, a gigantic fireplace and a few sleeping portraits hanging over by the small cluster of bookshelves. It was put together as something of a cozy study, with armchairs that matched the window curtains and a single pot of ivy that seemed to be alive, with the way it had grown up and over a section of the wall, sprawling across the tops of the bookshelves.
"Like it?" Regulus half-smiled. "It's rather my own little haven, for when she's in one of her fits."

"It's very—nice." George admitted. He could see quite easily that the Blacks were rather well off. Far more well off than he'd thought when he'd realized that he would likely leave with them, if given the chance. "Does she do that often?"

"Hm? Jun? Oh Merlin, no. She's simply upset about this afternoon." He hesitated, then clapped his hands. An old house elf appeared, a familiar scowl on it's face.

"Kreacher!" George exclaimed.

Both house elf and Regulus turned to him in surprise. "You know each other?" Regulus stared. "Kreacher?"

"Kreacher only be doing what Master Regulus wants and nothing else." The house elf groveled.

Regulus sighed. He gently patted that wrinkled head with one half-feathered hand. "Thank you, Kreacher. Could you fetch some sandwiches and something to drink? Butterbeer, perhaps?"

"Whatever good Master Regulus requires." The sour house elf popped away.

George was still staring at the floor. "I don't-!" He sputtered and stopped. "He's-!"

"He stays at Grimmauld place, unless I call for him." Regulus smiled, wanly. "it would have been too obvious I was alive, if I'd taken my favorite house elf with me when I was supposed to be dead."

"Speaking of which," George eyed him. "I'd actually like to know a little bit more."

"About what?"

"Everything."

"Ask away."

And George did.

"Sounds like she's finished." Regulus observed, after the crackling magic in the air had finally died down to a tolerable level. "I don't believe she'd been this wound up in a while."

"Is it really that bad to be sealed?"

Regulus' dark eyes pierced him at once. "More than you could possibly know." He said, softly. "The Black family, we practice this as a rite of passage, every child is sealed at birth. Done in such a way that our magical majority manifests and comes forth, but the creature side is locked away." He smiled, bitterly. "It's a cruel practice. That's why it's so easy to lose your mind. Hard to stay sane when there's two halves to your person and their busy screaming bloody murder at each other inside of you the whole time."

"So the Blacks are…dragels?" George hesitated. His mind flickered back to one Sirius Black and then to a certain Narcissa Malfoy, nee Black and one crazed Bellatrix LeStrange, nee Black. He shuddered.

"For the most part, yes." Regulus shrugged.
"Then you—how?"

"It was too late to call it out." Regulus half-smiled. "Jun saved my life in more ways than one. I was very lucky that it was she who found me."

"She's a healer too, then?"

"Mm? Oh no. Never. She's a Rune Mistress and that alone is something formidable. She's a strong and vibrant woman. She's also an Alpha dragel."

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"Mm? Oh no. Never. She's a Rune Mistress and that alone is something formidable. She's a strong and vibrant woman. She's also an Alpha dragel." He winked at George. "She found me after I tried to double cross the Dark Lord." His face twisted into a grimace at the address that he'd never been able to grow out of, even after Jun's potion had removed the dark mark from his arm. "I was actually on an island—with inferi." Regulus took a careful breath. "To this day, I don't know what Jun was doing there, though she swears that as an empath, she was investigating the effects of emotions in a controlled environment in relation to the undead. She 'ported in—after I'd drunk something I shouldn't have—and caught me before the inferi did. I should have died, by all rights and accounts. I should have. She couldn't call out my dragel side, because it'd been suppressed for so long, it was—too late." His smile was sad. "She called out all the magic that she could spare and it had to be enough."

"Enough?" George settled himself back in an armchair again, his hands refilled, a sandwich in one, a bottle of butterbeer in the other. "How so?"

"Dragels use blood magic. She bled for me. She spiked several potions and her magic altered the nature of them. She could not twist it to be this," he gestured at himself. "But rather, she asked it to save me in any way that it could. This was the result."

"Blood magic or potions?" George had to know.

"Both." Regulus swirled the small glass of firewhiskey in hand. He'd had Kreacher pour him a tot before the house elf had popped back to where it lived. "I am very lucky to be alive, Merlin knows I should be dead." He gripped the glass, knuckles turning white, black feathers quivering. "That monster!" He growled lowly. "I wasn't myself for some time, but when I finally regained my senses, I told her about it—Jun."

"About…?"

"Tell me about the wizarding world," Regulus said, softly. "Tell me how it fares now."

So George did. He talked about how the ministry had tried to prove that Voldemort hadn't returned and how they'd sent Undersecretary Umbridge and how he'd quit school with Fred, but allowed his mother to talk him into returning, worried about Ron and Ginny, knowing that they'd look out for their younger siblings, even if it killed them to return to Hogwarts. He talked about the sudden changes in the wizarding populace, of Grey Magic funneling through Hogwarts, of the Burrow, being attacked by Death Eaters, of the fight between his parents and then, lastly, of Harry.

"You have a wonderful memory." Regulus complimented him. He surveyed the young dragel for a moment. He could already tell the inclinations of this one, George would be a Pareya. There was no doubt about it.

The redhead lifted his butterbeer bottle in a salute. "That's about it." He half-shrugged.

"This Harry, you've talked about, Harry Potter. Potter as in, who?"

"Harry Potter, son of James Potter and Lily Evans." George explained. "You didn't know then, did you?"
Regulus shook his head. "There were some things I did not keep up with and I've been with Jun since—since that incident." He moved a feathered arm to make his point. "There's a lot I've missed, it seems." He frowned. "Though he is right."

"Harry?" George frowned. "Of course he's right, if he says that-"

"No, not that." Regulus dismissed. "He's right if he says that he's back. There's more than one way for him to come to life, so it's only logical that he is back, though I suppose the time in between was probably a welcome reprieve."

"What do you mean?"

"Dumbledore—you said he hasn't done anything, really, beyond this Order of the Phoenix business? No actual war against this madman?"

"Well—technically, I'm not supposed to be aware of what's well—no." George faltered. Those dark eyes held something behind them that he wasn't sure he was quite ready to know just yet. "…why?"

Regulus was quiet for a moment. "Will you be staying with us?" He inquired, calmly. "For good?"

George blinked. "What does-?" He started, then stopped. He thought of his father, of his mother, of his brothers, of—Fred. Then he thought of Harry and the fact that he could see scales dancing along the sides of his hands and fingers. He sighed. He'd already made his choice when he'd agreed to come with them—and he was old enough. "Yes."

"Then I suppose I can tell you, but first, I do think that Jun is through." He turned to face the locked door and blinked, twice, in rapid succession.

The locks and bolts began to turn and tumble out of order, before the great, heavy door swung open. A very disgruntled, distinctly rumpled Jun, entered their private, cozy little lair. She sniffed, eyeing the platter of sandwiches as she shuffled over to study them for a moment.

And then she sighed and seated herself on the arm of Regulus's chair, before tipping off to slide down into his lap. She folded her arms and tilted her head back to rest on the opposite arm of the chair and scowled up at the ceiling.

"Sorted yourself out?" Regulus inquired. He stroked a hand up and down her bared arm. She grunted in answer, but the magic tension in the room faded even more, dimming to a pleasing hum. "George has been telling me all sorts of interesting things."

"That's very nice." Jun sighed. "Care to share?"

"You need to feed." Regulus said, abruptly. He took in the half-black hue of her rich green eyes and knew at once, how close she'd come to losing real control. "Do you mind an audience?"

"Your wrist is fine." Was the immediate reply.

Regulus presented his wrist, stroking the feathers away from the glimpse of pale skin beneath. Jun yawned, stretching her jaw as her fangs grew out. She twisted his wrist to a suitable angle, then licked the skin, before biting down. Her paleness warmed, showing a rosy, pink flush once more before the last bit of tension left her hunched shoulders.

After several long minutes, she released his wrist and licked it to urge her magic into the wound and heal it quickly. "Thank you, love." She kissed his cheek when he bent down to allow it.
They talked some more and then dinner was served right there—Regulus called Kreacher back. The grumpy house elf didn't care much for anything, but his precious Master Regulus, until Jun turned to ask him a question of her own.

"That's enough sniveling out of you," She half growled. "What I'd like to know is if you can 'port into Neverah, or shall I have to see about purchasing a charm for you?"

Kreacher blinked up at her, his mouth twisting into phrases that he didn't speak, before he bowed his head. "Mistress Black is a fine mistress for Master Regulus. She thinks of how poor old Kreacher can-"

"Yes or no." Her voice was cold as ice.

Kreacher dithered for a moment, then grimaced. "Kreacher is bound to Master Regulus, will go wherever Master Regulus wishes."

"Good house elf." Jun crooned. "We'll be leaving in a bit, so expect that we'll be there, within now and the next time we call for you."

"Kreacher thanks Mistress Black for the warning." The house elf popped out.

Regulus stared at her. She held a wineglass in hand, swirling the crimson liquid, staring pensively at the table for a moment. "Jun?" He ventured after a moment.

She sighed and set the glass down. "George," her green eyes drilled into him. "I have a very special proposition for you and I have given it some thought. Since you're of age and you're reasonably well-behaved, I don't think there's much I would have to do, but still, it is a significant effort on my part." She took a breath. She'd been explaining some of dragel politics and circles and other things to the redhead. He'd listened with rapt attention for some time.

"What is it?"

"Would you accept me as your mentor?"

Regulus dropped his fork. George was speechless. Both understood exactly what was being offered and by an adult, Alpha dragel, no less.

"I—I—yes!" George stammered. He shook his head, lightly, to clear it. "I would be honored. I can't even—I thank you." He smiled, feeling the expression settle on his face. He'd been wondering about that, especially with how Jun had spoken of it and now, it felt as if a weight had suddenly left him. "Would you have me?" He countered. "I'm not, well, I am what I am." He offered a cheeky grin, though with a hint of a shadow.

"I would." She emptied the wineglass and held it up in a salute. "Shall we make it official?"

George inclined his head. "Then we'll be off to this, Nevarah?"

"Mmhm." Jun flashed a wicked grin. "I've decided that I miss my Circle and I'm tired of spying." Her smirk grew. "So I've decided to return home. I have news to share and reports to turn in, so I doubt they will send me away." She checked her fingernails. "Not to mention that it is Hunting Season and this Harry, you speak of, might be there."
"Harry? In Nevarah?" George snorted. "I don't think that's likely."

Jun fixed him with a look. "And what would you say that?"

"How would he travel there? I mean, I know he said he bonded with this Nott fellow, but."

"Nott." Jun frowned. "That sounds so familiar, but I can't put my finger on it. It's like I've heard it in passing." She mused. "Ach. Never mind, we'll be leaving by tomorrow. You should probably have a good night's rest here." She looked at Regulus. "And you will likely want to pack every single thing you own, so please, remember what whatever you don't take, will be left here indefinitely. I can't speak for how it will be should we ever return."

"What if he's not there, Harry?" George stretched, carefully, rolling his neck to the side. A thought struck him and he almost didn't voice it but then again, he'd earned his reputation, right along with Fred. They never shied away from boldness. "W-would we be able to visit my Mum's family? If they're there?"

"Depends." Jun wrinkled her nose. "What was the family name?"

"Prewitt. Molly Prewitt."

"Molly, hm?" Jun cocked her head to the side. "I don't recall a Molly, but I have heard of the Prewitts. They are a strong and old family. I'm agreeable to searching them out, if you so desire." She stifled a yawn. "And I'm tired, it's been a day of heavy casting, so do excuse me if I'm not the best of company right now." She rose from the table, all fluid, elegant grace. "I'll finalize our mentor-mentee bond in the morning, if that's alright."

George hesitated. "It's fine."

There was an audible snort from the other end of the table. George looked up in time to see Jun blur to his end of the table, her strong hands closing around his neck. He was pinned up against a bookcase in short order, fighting at the hand, by the time his wits caught up to him.

"It is obviously not fine." Jun said, calmly. "Stop squirming. I'm not hurting you."

"You're choking me!" George retorted, still tugging at her hand, feet dangling. She wasn't, really, but he was aware of just how much he wasn't in direct control of the situation. He didn't like it very much. For a moment, he felt pure fear.

Green eyes gave a spectacular roll and then Jun removed his hand. He was still dangling in the air, unable to move. "Sticking charm," she explained, when it seemed as if his mind was too slow to connect the dots.

George blushed. Fred was usually the one who thought quickly on the fly like that. A pang ached in his chest and he forcefully pushed it away. He needed to focus here and now and to make a mental note of what he'd said so he wouldn't tick her off again in the future.

"What do you know about empaths?" Jun asked, calmly.

George frowned. "If you let me down, I'll tell." He bargained.

Her eyes sparkled merrily. "Oh this will be fun." She exclaimed. "On second thought, I think I can spare the effort and the magic for our little bonding ritual, feel up to it?"

The charm released him and he pitched forward into her open arms. He gripped them, drawing
strength from it and realizing what she'd done. She'd read his answer as he'd meant it, not as he'd said it. He swallowed. Only his mother had ever done that for him.

"Yes." He nodded for good measure. "Yes, I feel up to it."

She hugged him, gently, the embrace soothing and reassuring. "Good. Regulus can be our witness."

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the lag in updating over here, vs. FF. Thank you also, to the support from everyone these past few months. Yesterday, I got "the call" that Aunty passed away. She had small stroke on Friday and a massive stroke the following night. It was too much for her. Thank you for all the messages/prayers/encouragement for Aunty and her family. Everything is a mess right now. Family assembling and whatnot. Thank you for your support and patience, I really and truly appreciate it.

Scion
Preparing for the Hunt

Chapter Summary

The Hunt is about to begin!

Glimpses of the Deveraine Circle and Harry and Co. as they prepare for the big day.

Chapter Notes

RECAP: After Harry scolds Theo and Charlie for taking so long to complete their bond and leaving him to fend for himself, they scold him in turn for falling off the pier and winding up with a speech curse that neither Theo nor Charlie can break. Theo promises to ask Ilsa and orders his Bonded to get ready for the big day. In the meantime, George goes home with Jun and Regulus and accepts Jun's surprise offer to be his mentor. They plan to travel to Nevarah and hope to arrive during the Hunting Season.

NEVARAH : THE DEVERAINE ESTATE : SHARED BEDROOM FOR ILSA/ARACLE/GRETA

Ilsa stirred, faintly, when the time-triggered spell chimed softly in her ear. She'd set an alarm, knowing that if she didn't wake at a relatively decent hour, the rest of her Circle tended to need a fire started under them to start moving and readying themselves to be on time for a given appointment. Normally, this would be Bahn and Bhindi's usual 'job' after all, a Circle's pace and overall behavior was often cued off of the Submissive, which was mirrored and reflected by the Alpha and Beta.

Typically, Bhindi would wake and Bahn would follow, but Ilsa had done her best to avoid the female half of their elfin Submissives and she'd succeeded, though she had some help in doing so. The Circle, as a whole, had taken it upon themselves to keep them from meeting, and she wasn't about to push that luck.

At present, she knew she was being tolerated for the time being. Things would not settle until either Ithycar or Delani confronted her on her absence and her Gheyo instincts always rode closer to the surface when she knew her Bonded were on edge. She could feel Bahn through their bond and he was grumpy, fretful, tired and of course, repentant. Ilsa burrowed deeper under the covers. Delani would have had her talk with him and it never left him in a good mood.

She did not want to be the first one up and about in the house, though she knew that he would cheer up once the excitement of the day registered. He could never hold a grudge for long. Perhaps that was why he'd been able to forgive her.

Another sigh escaped and Ilsa bit back a groan. She did not want to be thinking of those sorts of things, but she could already read the bonded connections of her children and they were tentatively poking her to see if she was up.
"Ils?" Greta squirmed and stretched at her right. "Something the matter, babe?"

"Mmm." Ilsa turned to accept the sleepy good morning kiss. "We're about to be invaded." She mumbled, snuggling into her lover's unexpected embrace. "Make sure you're decent."

"Decent?" Greta hummed. A ripple of white-violet hued magic handled the problem, spelling necessary nightwear on to the respective dragels. "Are all of them up?"

"The brats are up already?" Aracle yawned. He shifted closer to hug them both, sandwiching Ilsa in the middle. "How many of them?" He nuzzled her neck.

Ilsa snorted, giving a wriggle to settle herself comfortably between them. "Why are you asking me?"

"Because you always know better than the rest of us?" Aracle kissed the side of her ear. "Morning, lovelings."

"Mmm." Ilsa turned enough to nuzzle along the available side of his neck. "Morning to you both."

"The hot springs, actually. Will probably take the girls." Ilsa yawned. "No sense dealing with it twice."

"Only you would see a shower as an annoyance." Greta sniggered. "Alright then, up and moving, my dearest." Her fingers twitched again, calling out her magic and casting the usual freshening and cleaning charms that all Gheyos were accustomed to using between matches.

"Too late for that," Ilsa mumbled, wrinkling her nose at the minty taste in her mouth.

"Mum?" Dahlia's head poked around the corner of the bedroom door. She had knocked—once. "We're asleep." Greta called out, laughing. "Try again, when your charming mother is in the land of the—eep! Don't you dare, Ilsa! I swear, I will—Aracle, do something!"

"Morning!" Dahlia grinned, bounding into the room with her siblings close at her heels. She clutched a squishy orange pillow to her chest and a long nightshirt, with polka-dot knee socks. Her hair was kept back in the traditional warrior's braid and she launched herself onto the giant bed without a single warning.

"Ow. My feet. They're broken." Ilsa proclaimed. But her lips twitched, a warm, welcome light surfacing in her rich golden eyes. Aracle laughed along with her, having pulled his feet out of the way in time—just as she had.

"Morning to you three." He grinned. "Come to annoy your, Mum? She needs convincing that—"

"Speak and I shall push you off of this bed and onto the cold, hard, very far away floor?" Ilsa
warned. "Besides, it's late enough already, you lout. Why don't you grace the shower first thing in the morning?"

Soula giggled, making sure to jump on her father's side of the bed. She scrambled up over the covers to receive her morning hug and settled between her parents, watching them bicker and banter with the ease that spoke of years of friendship and love between them.

"...alright, alright! I give." Aracle held up his hands in surrender. "Arielle's fangs, woman! I swear I shall be as silent as the grave."

Soula snorted into her recently manicured hands. "Daddy, if you give up already, then you should've stopped talking. Otherwise she'll say that you're talking a lot for a corpse."

Aracle blinked at her and then sent a look of long-suffering to the silently laughing Greta on the other side of the bed. "Uh-huh, and I wonder where you managed to pick that up from, hmm? Ils, what've you been teaching these kids?"

"Nothing they wouldn't have learned on their own," Ilsa blinked, innocently. "Mostly."

Greta was forced to muffle her laughter in Dahlia's orange pillow. She tugged her own daughter down for a morning hug and extended a hand to an unsure Ariki. "C'mon in, kiddo." She smiled warmly. "Aracle, the bed's too small. Go take your shower. Make room for Ari."

"Is that all I am? A bed-warmer for you two sneaky little-"

"Yes!" Both women chorused.

The Rhyeo grinned. "I knew, it, I just knew it." He winked at the teens and pulled the covers over his head. "Greta, you can be first, love. I don't mind."

Ilsa stared for a moment, mouth open. Then her golden eyes narrowed. "You have fifteen seconds to be out of this bed and in that shower before I take it upon myself to lend a hand and when I do so, loveling, even your penchant for turning time won't be able to save you from-

Aracle tumbled out of the bed and scrambled for the bathroom door. "I'm going, I'm going!" He called over his shoulder. "Arielle..."

Soula giggled into the blankets, and rolled over, making room for her brother. Ilsa rolled her eyes at the dramatics, but beckoned her only son forward. He tentatively slipped between Greta and Ilsa, as Dahlia had Greta's side and Soula had Ilsa's. Both women immediately bestowed him with the same head-pats and hair-ruffles as the other two. He managed a silly smile and basked in the warmth surrounding him of his mother being home and all right within his world. They'd all missed having Ilsa home.

"Mum?" Soula ventured. She picked at the threads on the soft duvet, concern overtaking her features.

"Mmm." Ilsa grunted.

"...w-would you mind if I found someone this season?"

Golden eyes fixed on her Submissive daughter, before Ilsa answered. "The choice is yours, you are of age." She said simply.
"But would you mind?"

"Maybe a little. You're still my baby girl." Ilsa snaked a hand out from beneath the covers to draw her youngest close in a loose headlock. "You'll always be my baby." She feathered a hand through soft, dark hair. "But I'd be happy for you. So happy, as long as you were happy and well taken care of."

"What if it's someone older?"

"Older?"

"Someone... really old."

"As I said, you're of age, loveling." Ilsa's brow slowly furrowed together. "As long as they were genuine with their interest and you were willing, the choice is yours." She frowned. "I would object if you happen to be more than few centuries or so, though. Our family line is long, but you're young enough. It's your first hunt. There's plenty of life ahead of you—a lot of life ahead of you."

Soula half-smiled. "I know. The chances of meeting someone during a first hunt is pretty rare too, I guess I just—then what if it's someone young?"

"Young? As in your own age or less?"

"Er, well..."

"Your own age is fine, though I'll warn you to draw the courtship out and not to bond straightaway. You know how I feel about that, at that age, neither of you know much of anything, much less each other. You both deserve time enough to make up your mind. As for younger than that, well, the only way that would happen is if you soulcried or soulscreamed and I don't see you putting yourself in a position for either of those to be called forth and even so, you know the rules for that."

"True." Soula shivered. "But just thinking about it makes me... scared." She bit her lip. "I know SoulBonded are special—like you and Greta and Bu and Salani, but... it hurts, doesn't it?"

"Then you shouldn't even think in that direction." Ilsa soothed. "Besides, there is nothing that says you must be hunting, even if it is your first season." She hesitated. "And yes, it does hurt. It feels like you can't breathe and everything is breaking apart,"

"And then it comes together and you wonder how you even managed before." Greta finished. She shared a secret smile with her lover. "Soula, if you're that worried about it, the chances are that it won't happen. Soul Bonded are hard to come by and if you aren't ready, it doesn't happen."

"I-I know, but it's kind of... it's hard not to when... I don't want to be... I don't even know if I want to be hunting, Mum!"

"Shh. I know. You don't want to be the only one not, when your friends are all hunting and you don't want to hunt because you don't think you're ready, which is a bit off in this case."

"Huh?"

"You're ready." Ilsa said, calmly. "I'd be worried to some degree if you weren't mine, but the fact that you don't think you're ready means that you've actually given it some thought. You've considered another's feelings, you've thought about bondings, your triad, Intendeds and you're aware of all that it entails. You won't be wildly swept off your feet and surprised by a half-dozen propositions or sudden friendships and escorts over a mere seven weeks, seeing as the first has
already passed and you've remained miraculously sane, compared to some. The very fact that you aren't brimming with overconfidence is because you're ready."

Soula snorted. "I don't feel ready—and I don't see the point. I mean, I understand, alright? I do want to be bonded—someday. Who doesn't? It's just that, lately, that seems to be all everyone ever talks about. I'm so tired of it and—now it's today and I don't feel anywhere near ready for this. Any of it."

"It's just pressure and they're all idiots." Dahlia drawled. "Honestly, I could tell you that, Zo." She flashed a warm smile at her younger sister.

"I don't want you to tell me-!" Soula sputtered.

"Hush, child." Ilsa murmured. She twisted enough to look at her daughter straight in the eyes. "You need never feel pressure to do what the rest of the realms feel free to drown themselves in." She regarded her silently for a moment. "You know you are my daughter, yes? What do you think I would do?"

"...you'd tell them to sod off and mind their own business and that you'd bond when you're good and ready." Soula said, promptly.

Ilsa's eyebrows arched upwards to her hairline. "Perhaps you have learned something after all." She murmured, with a hint of admiration in her voice.

"Ilsa!" Greta's laughing protest wasn't really much of a protest at all. "Soula, love, it's probably best if you don't tell them in such plain terms as some of them might be sensitive enough that such language offends their delicate high-born sensibilities. However, if you must resort to such bluntness, then by all means, do so. You'd be surprised though, how far a little bit of manners could take you."

"Really?" Dahlia rolled over to lie on her stomach, propping up her chin with one hand and bracing with the other. "How so?"

"Most young dragels are trying so hard to prove themselves, especially as it would be their first Hunt, that they forget to be polite and responsible. They forget that they might meet potential interest in later years and that time will continue on. Someone who was awkward, loud or shy in their younger years, can mature into someone handsome, confident and restrained in their future years. True, it doesn't always mean it works out that way, but most of the time it does. We are all young and foolish once."

"Were you ever young and foolish, then?" Ariki cannot help but ask. He bit his lip, even after he'd spoken. Somehow, it seemed like too heavy a question for their light-hearted morning conversation.

"Many times," Greta hummed. "Far too many."

"Like what?" But Ariki looked to his mother this time, wanting to hear an answer from her.

The gold-eyed gheyo scowled. "Like the fact that I am Gheyo, Ariki." Ilsa sighed, the sound softer than her usual huff. "Like the fact that I am Gheyo." She began to shift, pushing at the covers and gently rearranging her children to slide out from under them, wearing Aracle's nightshirt. "Like the way that Dahlia wears that long scar of hers that she didn't really need to fight for. Like Soula will never go walking after midnight after that scare, no matter what," She looked at him, hard. "Like how you'll always have your father's temperament, after seeing what my temper can do.
"Those are times when we are young and foolish, but it shapes our future." She leaned forward enough to press a kiss to his forehead. "Now, what is it you wanted to ask?"

"What?"

"Don't give me that." She tweaked his nose, a smile twitching at the corners of her lips. "Soula came because she was worried and her nerves are just like her father's. Dahlia won't say a word until she knows that you've said your piece, because she's a good big sister, so speak."

Ariki hesitated. "D-do you think I might find someone like Harry?"

All eyes turned to stare at him. Greta and Ilsa exchanged a glance. "How like Harry?" Ilsa prompted.

"He's different. I mean,…someone that needs me. I know he already has a Beta and an Alpha and I am definitely not interested in playing Rheyo or second Beta, so," he shrugged. "But,"

"What is it about him that draws you to him?" Greta hummed. "There's plenty to like, he's an adorable little thing."

Ilsa snorted. "Don't let him hear you say that. If you think I have a temper, I'd wager his is about equal to mine or fairly close in the running."

"He's—kind." Ariki was quiet for a moment. "I suppose I meant, someone who wasn't used to Nevarah."

"Oh?" Ilsa brightened, a look of comprehension dawning. "I see. You want to be his firsts." She ruffled her son's hair. "Maybe. You might be lucky. There are a few rare submissives that do enter Nevarah during Hunting Season, looking for Intendeds." She paused. "But they would likely already have formed a triad and if you're not willing to play Rheyo."

Ariki shuddered. "I can't, I just—can't." He bowed his head. "I mean, I-"

"Shush. I didn't say that you had to or that it was your only choice. I was being realistic."

"And your realism can be incredibly pessimistic, darling." Greta interjected. "Ariki, if there isn't anything you're interested in, then don't mess around with any of it." She paused. "And be sure that's what you really want. Otherwise, you might find yourself a nice, inexperienced Gheyo and have a little fun there." She winked. "I promise you that our kind don't mind. Sometimes we forget other things."

Ariki blushed. "Greta!"

"Greta!" Ilsa echoed behind him. "Honestly! And you say I'm horrible." She tossed her head. "Really!" She took note of the blush on her son's cheeks and saw that he'd found the answer he'd been looking for. "I'd suggest something, but I wouldn't want to-"

"There's a new Gheyo that came over with Harry and the others." Dahlia spoke, calmly. "In fact, he was rather good-looking, if you're so inclined."

Ariki turned to her. "As in?"

"As in slender, lightly muscled build, nice indigo eyes, completely clueless over his rank, no sense of fighting style and entirely aflounder for being in Nevarah." Dahlia's violet eyes sparkled with mischief. "I accepted and inducted him on the day that Lady Pai decided to scold me for coming
home after curfew. His name is Blaise." She smirked. "Blaise Zabini. Italian, if you must know, and wizard-born and raised. He turned up with a Nytura riding on his shoulders."

Ariki's eyes grew wide and his jaw dropped. "You're serious?"

"Completely." His sister proclaimed, smugly. "And I'm sure if you wanted to be nice about something, well," she shrugged. "I have Dyshoka and it's definitely something I can vouch for."

"Is it?" Ariki's brow furrowed. "I mean, I don't want to sound like--"

"You sound fine." Dahlia interrupted. "And 'sides, you're outnumbered in room full of Gheyos. We can't help ourselves." She smirked. "And I mean by vouch for it, that if Dy ever found herself a Sub and an Alpha, before I ever did, then I'd likely go with her. She's amazing."

Ariki smiled at that. "Thanks, sis."

"Don't mention it." Dahlia flashed him a grin and looked to her mother. "I'm starving." She announced, apropos of nothing.

"Why thank you for telling me, my precious, adorable little brat." Ilsa deadpanned. "Isn't someone up and cooking yet?"

"I don't think so. We all had a late night." Greta yawned and stretched. "Usually it's only Bu or Salani that cook. Alma did, until Camalis came along and it stresses her, so she hasn't been."

Ilsa groaned. "You're lucky I'm hungry too then." She sighed. "Alright, what do you brats feel like eating for breakfast? I might be convinced to cook something if you're hungry enough."

"Oooh, we're hungry." Soula immediately sat up straight, snatching away Dahlia's pillow to cuddle it in her lap. "We're very hungry, aren't we guys?"

"I already said, starving." Dahlia drawled. She winked at her brother, waving at him with one hand. It was his turn to ask for something.

Ariki's lips twitched into a smile and he huffed. "Oh alright. Mum, you haven't made parfaits with strawberry crepes on the side in years."

"I took you out for them on your thirteenth birthday." Ilsa's voice was muffled as she stuck her head inside of the large, shared closet. "Try again."

"I haven't had your crepes in ages and with that fruit sauce you make on the side—Mmm." Greta hummed.

"Mummy, please?" Soula blatantly added a touch of whine to her voice, dark eyes sparkling with mischief. She wasn't the least bit embarrassed to play the 'Mummy' card, if it worked. "You make the very best crepes and fruit sauce in the whole wide--"

"Don't hurt yourself searching for flattery," came the grumbled reply. "I could make toast. French toast. Don't you like French toast?"

"I love French toast, but I like crepes too!" Greta protested. " Doesn't my vote count?"

"Absolutely not." Ilsa backed out of the closet with a definite scowl on her face. "I don't suppose any of you could tell me why Aracle's clothes have taken over my third of the closet?"

Identical looks of bland blankness immediately slotted over every face present.
Ilsa perked a brow.

There was a quiet knock on the bedroom door and five heads turned to see who it was.

A young woman, with honey-brown hair and soft blue eyes peeked around the corner, already dressed for the day, balancing a sleeping toddler on her hip. "Um, good morning. Is Papa up?" The sharp blue eyes quickly skimmed the room's interior, zeroing in on the closed door of the loo. "Ah, in the shower already?" She sighed.

Ilsa was silent for a moment, studying her, before the features and the name registered. She tempered her look of grumpiness into something that was hopefully marginally welcoming. "Yes, he just went in. Lorelei, wasn't it?" She said, after a moment. "You look well. Coming in or staying out?"

Blue eyes met gold and then Lorelei's chin lifted a few degrees. "Don't mind if I do." She stepped inside and moved to sit on the edge of the bed where Soula made room for her. The sleeping toddler was carefully cradled in her arms.

At the new addition, Greta slipped out from beneath the covers, dressed in Ilsa's nightshirt and scrubbing a hand through her messy hair. She yawned and moved to stand behind Ilsa, resting her chin on the shorter Gheyo's shoulders. "Which armor are you looking for? The titled one for your cage name? Do you have to dress from now? It'll be heavy."

"I'm not dressing later, if that's what you mean and of course I'll put it all on now. When else would I do it?"

"Mmm, good point. Are you wearing the legacy armor or your title armor? And it's Aracle, you know him, he would've only moved one thing and then another and then everything, without even realizing it. Pulverize him later."

"Legacy is good, but I'll have to defend my title, which means I'll have to wear them both." Ilsa huffed. "Dahlia, love, what are you wearing? Lady Pai's colors or our own?"

"...I'm not sure, really."

Both of her mothers turned to look. Dahlia had scooted back up along the bed, braced against the bed's headboard. She twined her hands in her lap, a slight frown on her face.

"Care to elaborate?" Greta ventured, after it was clear that no one else would speak. She knew that now that Soula and Ariki had spoken their mind that Dahlia would find a way to ask her own questions.

Dahlia sighed. "I don't know if I really want to...hunt."

Her siblings gasped and even Lorelei looked mildly shocked. "B-but, you're perfect!" Soula burst out. "Why wouldn't you?"

"Are you that worried about it?" Ilsa said, calmly.

"Sort of. I mean, not really, but—well fine, yes. Yes, I am! Is that what you want to hear?"

"No, not really. I'd rather hear which side you're more inclined to."

"I don't know!" Dahlia threw up her hands, looking a bit lost. "I really don't. I guess that's why, I mean, I could be, but I don't want to fight them, Mum. I don't want to fight Lady Pai. I don't think I
could do it and at the same time, if I was just Dahlia, if I was just Ace, I don't think I could stand having to prove myself for the sake of someone else's vanity! I've earned my rank and you damn well know it!"

"Ah." Her mothers both smiled, knowingly and then Greta nudged Ils. "She's your daughter alright, only you would have that sort of self-crisis."

"Hypocrite." Came the immediate retort and Ils elbowed her lover in the stomach before she turned to face the bed. "Dahlia, it's really up to you, you know that. Whatever you feel most comfortable being, the choice is entirely yours. Don't worry about the other factors, once you decide for sure, the rest of things will fall into place and you can take it in stride. Handle it all one thing at a time. You know we'll be beside you."

The young gheyo bit her lip. "That's just it, see?" She hesitated. "I love being Ace, I really and truly do. I don't think that I could stand to be anything else."

"But if you were accepted into a circle, you'd have to fight and hold it and likely wouldn't be allowed to fight for it, yes?" Greta guessed.

Dahlia nodded, miserably. "And I would…I think I would at least take Mei and Wik. I mean, I hope I would, if they want to come. I couldn't possibly, well-"

"You could choose them both if you chose otherwise." Ils said, softly.

Miserable purple eyes fixed on wise golden ones. "But if I was to choose Alpha, if I was to really go and take on the whole, searching for a Beta and a Submissive and then all of that, it'd be a real circle. A military circle, just like Lady Pai, but I'd have to—I don't want to fight her, Mum."

"Then don't." Ils said, quietly. "Challenge for a single stroke match. One move, both of you, a single outcome, socially acceptable by all. If you don't really want to fight her love, the chances are that if she knows you well enough, she won't want to fight you either. She knows full well that's the only way for you to break rank and transform, she can't hold it against you. If she does, then she's…not worth it and you know it."

"I-I know." Dahlia toyed with the sheets for a moment, twisting them in her hands. "I guess…I mean, the chances of actually really choosing that is pretty slim. I can't say there's a Submissive I really would…care about that way. Enough to challenge Lady Pai, anyhow. I love Dy, I really think I do, there's just something about her that I can't seem to help myself when she's around, but, I-"

"Don't make any definite choices." Greta smiled, softly. "Just take it as it comes and you'll be fine. Honestly."

"What about Shayla?" Soula frowned at her sister.

Dahlia shrugged. "What about her?"

"I thought you liked her."

"I like her—as much as the next girl." Dahlia shrugged. "She's a brat."

"No she's not. She's nice, funny and different. She's not stuck up like other Subs can be. What are you two arguing about anyway?"

"None of your business." Dahlia moved to climb off the bed. She ignored the look that her siblings
shot her way.

"It's my business when she's my best friend and asks whether it's alright to come over and visit, because you'll be around." Soula scowled. "What did you do to her?"

"I didn't do anything."

"Then let me rephrase, since I have noticed that she hasn't been over in a while." Lorelei interrupted, a slight frown on her face. She knew her sister's friends, as they all did. Dahlia and hers tended to keep to their own, but that was due to their Gheyic nature and the need to keep establishing and reinforcing their ranks. "What did she do to you?"

Dahlia stiffened. "If you must be so pushy about it, she managed to stick her nose where it wasn't wanted and I had to stick my neck out for her without so much as a hint of why or even a word of thanks."

Ariki winced. "Ouch." He thought of the friendly, blonde Submissive and then of the way that Dahlia always kept near her sister. They'd grown close after the incident with Kandra.

"Indeed." Dahlia fixed him with a withering glare. "I told her if she was willing to accept responsibility for what she did, I would be waiting for an apology, until then, as far as I am concerned, she does not exist."

Soula's jaw dropped. "B-but you don't even have a claim on her! You can't just order her around like she's…like she's one of your little-"

"She refused then?" Lorelei said, blandly.

Violet eyes gave a spectacular roll. "What do you think?" Dahlia retorted.

Lorelei's eye's narrowed. "I think she's a smart girl. No sense in tying herself down and if you're so uptight about it, I can't blame her for-"

A low growl tore free from Dahlia's lips and she bared her fangs with an accompanied hiss. "Don't you dare speak of what you don't know!" With another growl, the young Gheyo stalked from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Greta and Ilsa looked at the door and then at each other.

"Five or nothing calls it by the end of the season." Greta held out her hand.

Ilsa eyed it. "Would you really bet on our daughter?"

Greta waggled her eyebrows.

Ilsa snorted. "Of course you would." She slapped the hand away. "Called it and I say deeper than you'd expect."

"Mmm. I like it." Greta grinned. "Should I hurry after her or would you prefer to do the honors?"

"I'd best. She's likely to tear something up and you're likely to let her."

Her lover winked in answer. "Better here in her home than out there in public, wouldn't you think? Call out your armor before you leave, I don't want to hear you whining about how heavy it is when mine's likely heavier."
"It is not and I don't whine." Ilsa scowled. "Besides, it's being retrieved from the vault and I'll likely have to 'port over and sign releases for it and all that rot. Hurry everyone up, we can't take the entire day to be ready." She frowned. "And don't you start taking today of all days to be forever primping in there. Harry and the others are coming over. We'll all be 'porting over together."

"Really? Are they up? I didn't think they'd be up. It's early, isn't it? I'd have thought that they'd have exhausted themselves under the-"

"You have a perfectly filthy mind." Ilsa snapped. "Behave! There are children in the room."

"Behaving just for you, my dearest."

"Greta!"

"Legacy or title armor?"

"Both! And Theo said Harry's been spelled by something, so take a look if I can't, alright?"

"Mmm. Go make breakfast."

"I'm going!"

"You're lovely when you're all domestic and-" Greta yelped and bolted for the shower, ignoring the teens laughter and Aracle's indignant yelps. "ILSA!"

"Are we ready?" Aracle stood in the kitchen, accepting a bite of rolled, strawberry soaked crepes from Greta's hand and a mouthful of yogurt from Ilsa as both of his lovers bustled around him. He knew if he sat at the table, he would likely end up feeding the children more so than himself. His two, lovely Gheyos often made sure that he was eating, in spite of his rank requiring him to be everywhere and helping everyone—all at the same time. "How much more do we need? Is Bahn even up?"

"Think so, not sure." Alma whirled into the kitchen, her skirts swirling, her stunning robes accenting every feature of her loveliness effortlessly. "Tak's with him. Delani's taking her time looking for something."

"Are the others up?" Aracle waited to be fed another two mismatched bites. He gave them a moment to consider, referring to the other half of the Deveraine Circle—namely, Bhindi's side.

"Salani is," Bu entered the kitchen, balancing Bruen on her hip and with two little ones trailing behind her. "Seats at the table, loves." She directed. "I'll have plates for you in a moment." She set Bruen down. "Sit between them, lovey." She began to click her fingers, directing magic to retrieve the children's personalized plates and fill them with the appropriate portions for the morning meal. "And I think Okahn is. I'm not sure."

"Ah, so Bhindi did come home, then?" Aracle half-smiled. He'd known she would. That was why he'd stayed with her for so long the evening before.

"She's home. That doesn't mean she's awake." The pretty Pareya countered. "Stop doing that and sit down and eat." She scolded, directing a look to the smirking Gheyos in turn. "And you two, stop encouraging him! This is why he has bad habits. Sit down and eat as well, unless you have some strange reasons for not-"

"We'll be paraded." Ilsa snorted. "If you think I will even consider flips on a full stomach, you
honestly do not know a single thing about me. I refuse to eat on the grounds that I may be-

"I don't mind the flips," Greta stuck her crepe towards Ilsa's protesting mouth, neatly shutting her up. "It's the twists that bother me." She stifled a shudder. "Where's the rest of our ranks? Are they even up?"

"If they aren't, I'll bite them." Ilsa grumbled, checking her fingernails. "Someone keep an ear out for Theo and his lot, they should be over here in a minute."

"What was wrong with them?" Aracle accepted a plate of food from Bu's insistent hands.

Golden-eyes immediately narrowed to a practiced glare. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with my Theo." She snapped.

Both Aracle and Bu winced. Greta sniggered. "I could have told you that," she said, cheerfully, even as Alma scowled. "Whatever trouble he's in, I hope you can help. French Toast?" She fluttered her eyelashes in exaggeration. "Please?"

"I hate you," came the predictable groan of sarcasm as Ilsa's fingers twitched in the familiar threads of golden magic that began to summon ingredients out of the cellar for just that. Her mind was more towards Theo and his cryptic message.

Greta's smile softened. She leaned forward enough to press a kiss to the back of Ilsa's neck, directly over the Alpha's claiming mark that was now visible on the surface. "I love you too."

"Mmm."

**NEVARAH : ILSA'S GUEST HOUSE : MASTER BEDROOM : DEVERAINE PROPERTY**

"I feel like a…goose." Harry tugged at the collar of his new dress robes. He was vaguely reminded of a certain Draco Malfoy-er-Snape, before he realized that even this level of finery had never graced the blond's figure. "How'd you even find these?"

"Stop tugging at it." Theo lightly swatted Harry's nervous hands down to his sides. "It's not tight." He slipped two fingers beneath the collar. "See? If it's more than two fingers, it will look sloppy and we can't have that." He straightened the collar, then flicked his fingers as if brushing away invisible dust from the shoulders. "Stand straight." He added a second later and then rewarded Harry's response with a kiss to the cheek.

"Why am I wearing green? Why couldn't I wear-"

"Because it brings out your eyes and you look very dignified in it." Theo interrupted. "The same for Charlie in his stunning Navy-hues and hopefully the same for myself in these delightful earthy tones. They were color-matched for complexion and simplicity, Harry. Your eyes are green, Charlie's are blue and mine are gold. It was easier this way."

Harry sniffed, but did not answer. He probably did not really mind that much, he mused, the more he thought of it, after all, the robes were comfortable and very tasteful, as far as extravagance went. He tugged at his wrist cuffs and then made a face when Theo snatched his wandering hands and rapped them lightly with the side of his wand to spell matching cufflinks to them. It did not escape his notice, however, that the robes were somewhat plain. There was no fancy embroidery or crests visible anywhere, but Harry did not know whether he ought to mention it or not. He didn't want to be late, so he reluctantly held still as he watched Theo turn his fussing attentions to Charlie.
"Is Bahn 'porting us all there?" Charlie resisted the urge to tug at his own collar as Theo spelled his own cufflinks on. He wasn't exactly a fan of dressing up to this degree of finery and rarely ever did so, but Theo seemed quite insistent on it and he wasn't about to argue. He could read the underlying thread of unease hovering around his Alpha and understood that Theo was only worrying. He could stomach walking about in ridiculous extravagance if that was what it required.

"I hope so." Harry nibbled on his lip, an attempt to stop himself from stopping Theo's fussing. It was kind of nice and frustrating, in a way. "No portkeys." His emerald eyes flickered to Theo's steady golden ones.

His Alpha accepted that declaration with nothing more than a single blink.

"I believe either Bahn or Ilsa will do it." Theo finally stepped back, satisfied. "Bahn, because he will have the extra magic to burn, so to speak or Ilsa, because she can channel for him, if it is too physically stressful."

"Should he even-?" Harry ventured. They'd talked some, but he still didn't know that much about dragel pregnancies and whatnot. He'd be taking his cues from Bahn, no matter how skewed they might end up being.

Theo snorted. "Do not even think of hinting at that in his presence." He said, fondly. "From what I recall, Bahn is quite a prickly, picky and whiny Submissive, when he is with child. He may curb those tendencies while in the public view or private company, but he does gift new meaning to the words hormonal and temperamental." Theo's lips twitched. "Which is why I want you to stick as close to him as you can, if at all."

Harry frowned. He could not quite reconcile Theo's matter-of-fact description to what he'd seen and learned of Bahn yesterday. If the blond really was that—complicated—then Harry liked to think that the elven-dragel had due cause to do so. "Why?"

"Because as a pregnant Submissive, he will have more leeway, socially and otherwise. If you are in his company, you can feel free to insult anyone you like and not suffer for it."

Harry blinked. His brow furrowed a moment later when the insult registered and he scowled adorably at Theo. "Theo!"

His Alpha's lips twitched faintly. "You're wizard-born and raised," he explained, carefully. He gently tugged on Charlie's mental bond, a nudge for him to pay attention as well. "This means that there are some who might not take to you and may actually manage to step out of their way to point it out. I only mean for you to be prepared and I am fairly certain Bahn has your entire Hunting Season all but planned out for you. Let him. He knows what he is doing and he has good connections. Watch and learn."

"Is that all it's about then?" Harry sighed. "Connections and who is who and-"

"No. Shush," Theo leaned forward to kiss him chastely. "It is also fun, vibrant and inspiring. I cannot even begin to explain to you. Either of you," he included Charlie in his warm, golden-eyed gaze. "Now come on. I believe I have sufficiently terrified you both and that was most definitely not my intention." He straightened his robes. "I've also mentioned your—predicament—to Oretta. I've asked her to take a look and see if she can remove the spell, do you mind?"

Harry shook his head at once, slightly relieved. "No, not at all." He almost smiled. He didn't mind Theo telling Ilsa and if there was anyone who he probably would trust to examine him, apart from Quinn, perhaps, it would be Ilsa. He couldn't quite explain why, but Theo didn't seem to need him
"Good. Now, Charlie, stand behind him, Harry face me. This is a standard teleportation for where we are headed. You both will need to practice, but until you can and until we have time to practice, pay attention." Theo draped one arm around Harry's shoulders and the other around Charlie's waist to make up for the height difference. "We are traveling by Ergen, because it is my element. I cannot teach you any others, because I do not know them, save for Alloras, which is used by pregnant individuals and Carriers only, you must never invoke it unless you yourself are with child or you are traveling with someone who is." Theo sucked in a breath. Magic tingled at his fingertips as a faint glow enveloped the trio. "Temptrificus Ergen!"

NEVARAH : THE DEVERAINE ESTATE : FRONT COURTYARD

They arrived outside of a rather large, old-fashioned manor with soft-brown-stone walls and trailing ivy vines. There were several tall windows, beautifully manicured shrubs and Harry found himself realizing that the manor was more of a castle. He gulped. The Deveraines were apparently quite wealthy. Even his glimpse at the Malfoy Manor through the society pages of The Prophet didn't have anything on this, much less what the rest of the wizarding nobility lived in.

"It's...a nice house." Harry managed, at last.

Theo was frowning at the afterglow of the golden transportation medallion and only looked up at Harry's declaration. "Hmm? Oh. Yes. I suppose." He gave a quick shake of his head. "This is their summer home. They generally live more on the outside of the city limits, closer towards the Elven realms. Instinct, I think, or so Oretta has told me." He straightened, following Harry's line of sight and then Charlie's. His expression softened, faintly and he moved to stand between them. "There's quite a lot of them," he warned, quietly. "Be prepared to be swamped."

As if on cue, the door opened and the Deveraine Circle began to file out in slightly muted chaos. The Pareya dutifully herded the children into neat, orderly lines and the Gheyos separated to take up residence beside Greta, while the rest of the members finally congregated into something of a circle.

"Where's Bahn?" Delani's voice could be heard over the chatter and the rest of her Bonded obligingly quieted down. "For that matter, where's Ilsa?" The female Alpha grumbled, faintly. "Greta?"

"She went to fetch Bahn." The storm Gheyo replied. "And Ilsa is Ilsa, you know that. I'm sure they'll both be here in a moment. Did you retrieve the jewelry from the vault? The first thing he's likely to do is come whining about his earrings."

Delani winced. "As if I would forget them..." She fished in her pockets to produce the bit of lovely.

"Bhindii?" Takar inquired, scooping up Bruen and swinging him gently through the air, prompting a series of delightful shrieks. "I tried to talk to her, but," he shrugged.

Aracle smiled in turn. "She's coming, but I don't think she's quite inclined to join us for the entry ceremony."

"If she's absent, wouldn't that cause more—talk?" Sueh frowned. She gave a stern look to the quivering children standing in front of her, excitement and curiosity fairly pouring off of them. "You two, behave. I won't have you running about like wildmen."
"But I'm a girl, Mummy!" The little lass in pink protested. "Couldn't I be a wild woman?"

Warm, rich laughter spilled out from a tall, elegant woman with dark, cocoa colored skin. She glided to a rest beside Bu, with her arm around Ariki. The young Beta was explaining something or the other to her and he broke off, abruptly as his eyes landed on Harry and the others.

"Harry!" He exclaimed, happily. "You're here. Oh, you're early. Dera will pitch a fit, I don't think anyone's half ready. Morning." He trotted over, pulling the lovely woman with him. "This is Salani, she's Bu's other half." He grinned, the smile infectious. "She's an African Weather Witch." His eyes danced merrily. "It's very rare. She wanted to come yesterday, but something came up. She helps me on the flight ranges sometimes, so if you do stop by, you're likely to see one of us."

"Not that rare, dearest." Salani murmured, her voice like velvet, deep and dark, as her light brown eyes lit with interest. "You must be Harry, I have had heard quite a bit about you since our Circle's outing yesterday." She extended a hand. "I hope to see more of you around here in the future, neither of my Bonded have stopped talking about you since yesterday."

Harry swallowed. Good things, he hoped. "Thank you?" He said, faintly. He didn't know if this was another one of those important official greetings that would require something or the other, before they could be on friendly terms. In the back of his mind, he could still see Terius and the DADA classroom.

Theo took her hand at once, accurately reading Harry's hesitation, as he pressed his lips briefly to the back and inclined his head, politely, providing an accurate and visible example for his Bonded to emulate. "Salani. Theodore, I belong to Ilsa. This is my Submissive, Harry and our Beta, Charlie." He nodded at each of them in turn. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Please, no need to be so formal. Bu hasn't stopped talking about either of you since last night." Salani's smile grew wider as she leaned forward and enveloped Theo in a warm hug, before doing the same to Harry and Charlie. "She can be quite convincing."

"African Weather Witch?" Charlie asked, accepting the embrace and returning it in kind. She was tall and willowy in a way that none of the other elves were. He supposed, perhaps, because she did not seem very elfin at all.

The soft brown eyes danced merrily. "I am not quite a storm element," she explained. "And I am most certainly not an elf, but I can play with the weather every now and again." She turned as a new commotion seemed to start up behind them, followed by a decidedly annoyed voice and a low growl.

"...and that's final, Bhindi! You started it, you can fix it, I am not cleaning up your mess this time around. If you really wanted something else, then you should have said something earlier. I'm not ordering anyone to go or stay. If they want to come, then they can. It's your own fault for letting things reach here." Bahn stalked out of the house, a scowl painted on his face, his dressing gown flapping impressively behind him, showing off silken pyjamas. He stopped, abruptly at seeing the mismatched gaggle of his Bonded and children. His expression shifted from annoyed to something of comical horror as he took in their dresswear. "What in Arielle's name are you wearing—get in a line. All of you!"

To Harry's complete surprise, nearly everyone—save for Edor and Greta—scrambled into the neatest presentation and resemblance of a military lineup in time for Bahn to inspect them. His scowl remained as he moved forward and a shimmer of golden-white magic rippled over him, dressing him appropriately for the day.
Harry watched as his pyjamas melted away to show a floor-length, high-waisted, draping gown of white with golden trim. He stared even as the rest of the outfit came into realization as Bahn continued forward. His midsection was glamoured to hide his baby bump, the gown was sleeveless showing of lightly muscled, pale arms, with matching golden armbands on each side and golden bracelets. He wore a circlet of gold around his head and his lovely, pale white-blond hair fell clear to his knees. Intricate golden sandals were laced up to his knees and a fat, shimmering golden pendant hung in the deep-V of the gown's neckline. Spots of color and traces of black flickered onto Bahn's face and when it was over, sultry grey-white eyes were rimmed with smoky, dark liner and sculpted cheekbones perfectly accented with a hint of bronzer.

For Harry, he suddenly understood what Theo had meant when he'd mentioned Elves and vanity. Bahn was wearing a lot of white and a lot of gold and when he studied that very obvious pendant, he realized that it was not a random symbol, but rather something of a house crest, the Deveraine crest, most likely.

The next surprise came as Bahn immediately directed his full attention to each Bonded and child in turn. Takar held still with something of a pained grimace, as Bahn's magic wrapped around him and squeezed gently. His outfit was altered to something trimmer, whiter and again—with matching gold accents. In very much the same vein, Bahn moved quickly down the line, altering the appearance of his children and Bonded until they suited his tastes. He finally stopped at Delani, who perked a brow and held up two dangling earrings.

A near pout graced the elfin-dragel's face. "So that's where they were. You didn't have to hide them you know. I wouldn't have—have—well, maybe." He admitted.

"I did not hide-" Delani began and then muttered something beneath her breath that sounded suspiciously like 'Arielle, help me' and she calmly spun him around and pulled him into a half-hug from behind. Bahn automatically gathered up his hair, showing off his ears and standing patiently while she threaded them into the appropriate piercings, arranging the extra chains to rest from the delicately pointed cap of his ear, trailing down to his neck. "You are braiding your hair, at least in a topknot." She informed him, gifting a kiss to the base of his neck, nipping gently at the pale skin.

Bahn twitched, faintly, but he clicked his fingers as he let his hair down and automatically the silken strands began to separate and braid themselves together. Delani watched him for a moment, then reached out and tugged a few strands and braids until there were elegant loops, twists and knots crafted into a respectable style atop his head. He held out two fingers to her and she kissed the tips as her own hair leapt to recreate a complimentary style.

"Where's Ilsa?" Bahn stood on tip-toe, craning his head to the side. "Harry!" His entire face lit up at once and he all but flew to the trio, snatching Harry in a bone-crushing hug. "You're right on time," he informed the brunet. "And you look…" his brow furrowed and for a moment, he nibbled his lower lip as if searching for the right words.

Harry matched the raised eyebrow expression and waited, somewhat nervously for the verdict. Theo's fussing was quite mild compared to the elaborate and rich finery Bahn and his Circle had chosen. He resisted the urge to twist his fingers, as he caught a close-up glimpse of Bahn's made-up face. On the elfin-dragel, make-up seemed almost natural, lending a rather ethereal look to the pale features. Harry gulped.

"…plain." Bahn finished at last. He inspected his white-lacquered fingernails and sighed. "Honestly, Theodore. Until Harry has decided on a specific theme of dresswear, it is your responsibility to present yourself and your Circle with some degree of splendor."

"I was hoping Oretta would be here." Theo's lips twitched. "I need her to approve our coat of arms."
There will be gold trim." He gave the blond a pointed look. "Gold will work well with this," he gestured to himself and slung an arm around Harry's waist, drawing him closer, with a slight tilt of his head towards Charlie. "and it will also match you and yours. Now stop worrying."

"He always worries." Takar chuckled, moving over to come and say hello as well. "He honestly can't help himself." He air-kissed one pale cheek, smiling appreciatively at Bahn's final result. "I think Ilsa's 'porting over in a second. I can feel her energy gathering over there," he gave a slight jerk of his head. "You might want to introduce Harry to the other half, before we leave. We're likely to run into each other or remain in each other's company for the greater part of today. It might be nice to start things out from your point-of-view?" The not-so-subtle hint was immediately caught and Bahn brightened up at once.

"Of course, this way Harry!" The blond happily linked arms with the brunet, gently tugging him forward. "I can't introduce you to all of Bhindi's, because most of them are still in the process of making themselves publicly presentable." There was a hint of laughter in his voice. "But the Soulmated ones are here, you know, Bu and Sueh's other halves." He quickened his step. "Come!"

"….ergen!" Ilsa's strong voice echoed in the slightly empty courtyard. She materialized at the edge of their loosely assembled group, in gleaming, fitted golden armor. Her dark-two-toned hair was neatly stuck in her trademark spikes, and her dress armor consisted of a modest bustier, plated skirt, leg-braces, heeled shoes, arm guards, shoulder guards, wrist braces and an ornate jewelry collar. Her face was set in something of a scowl and she held a white bundle tucked under one arm. "I'm late." She grumbled. "How wonderful.

"Oretta!" Theo came over at once, with Charlie and Harry trailing behind. "I was wondering."

"Keep right on wondering," his mentor grumbled. "Where's Bahn? I'm supposed to give him these…" She frowned, golden eyes lighting on Harry straightaway. "Harry." She passed the bundle to Charlie and immediately focused her attention on the green-eyed brunet. "Hello, love. You look alright. Theo says you've managed to find yourself a spot of trouble. How are you feeling? Anything unusual, abnormal, out of the ordinary? Hot flashes, cold sweats, upset stomach, hives?" She caught Harry's chin with one hand and tipped it up, so she could stare into his eyes.

"Hi." Harry managed. He blinked once, then twice, mentally sifting through the series of questions she'd directed to him. "I feel…alright." He thought about it a moment longer. "Not dizzy or anything." He shrugged.

"Hmmm." Ilsa hummed, turning his head from side to side, before finally releasing his chin. "I see. Could you demonstrate, please?"

"Demonstrate what-?" Harry began and then the knut dropped. "Oh. Right." He took a breath and began to speak. "A sldkf named fubuguph is the one who…"

"That's enough." She held up a hand, dark brows knitting together across her forehead. "I have a fairly good idea of what happened." The golden eyes darkened a few shades. "You went into the water last night, didn't you?"

Harry swallowed.

"After we all left?"

Theo made a sound from behind him and moved forward, one hand resting reassuringly on Harry's shoulder. "Oretta, I have already-"
"You have. I have not." She interrupted him, the darkening gold shifting to a deliberate hazel hue. "I even waited be sure that you were off the docks." One eyebrow twitched. "Exactly what part of that was too difficult to comprehend?"

"I didn't do it on purpose!" Harry felt his temper flare. "There was a goigdm who was drowning! I was trying to save ddfkf!"

"Whoever it was," she paused. "And I am inclined to believe it was likely a Merrow and a male one, at that—their women never surface to walk on land—he was apparently fine enough to curse you for your efforts. I would not call that an accident. You would have had to do something significant that required him to silence you." The eyebrow twitched again. "Something that likely wouldn't have occurred if you hadn't gone out there in the first place."

"I didn't know that would happen. No told me that."

"I assumed you were fully capable of making the connection that a warning is usually for a very necessary reason."

Harry's hands clenched and unclenched. He took a breath to calm himself when he felt Theo lightly squeeze his shoulder and Charlie shuffling closer.

"You could have been killed." The sharpness of Ilsa's tone was almost muted, compared to the concern beneath it. "There would have been no trace of you, no word, no hint of where you had gone and what had happened to you. The Merrow are no laughing matter." She reached for him, brushing off Theo's hand and resting her own, one on each of his shoulders. "Even if we had our suspicions, we would have no proof, Harry. You might have lived for a little—if he felt so inclined—or you would be dead."

Harry bristled. "I am not some helpless-!"

"You fell into the water, yes?"

"…and he was eaten." Charlie frowned. "I still don't understand the eaten part." The frown deepened. "I'm not sure I want to understand the eaten part."

Ilsa paled almost at once, her brown eyes now focused on Theo, who swallowed. He had not seen it fit to pass on that particular detail in his morning rant. "You did not mention that, Theodore."

Her use of his full name was not missed. Theo winced. "I was more worried about the fact that he couldn't speak a-"

Ilsa dismissed him with a wave, her head snapping back to focus on Harry. "Have you ever been to Mount Valeraine?" She said, abruptly. One hand dropped and she drew Harry closer to her side, turning to look into the distance.

Harry blinked. "…no?"

"It's a lovely place. In fact, because your Charlie is a fire-type, I would wager he might enjoy a daytrip of poking about through the lava caves and sleeping under the black trees, the ash would be good for his lungs too, though the rest of you might need a few air-purification charms." She squeezed his shoulders gently, a one-armed hug. "Every fire type should visit there at least once. In fact, if you stand right about here," she nudged him forward and pointed with her free hand. "You can actually see the top of it. Squint, if you have to. Your eyes will adjust."

Harry hesitated, he could feel a few tendrils of regret, worry and then a healthy dose of anger all
mixed together. Much in the same way that he’d felt Theo’s reaction when he’d finally explained his half of things, almost the exact same series of feelings he’d read from Charlie, when his Beta had finally managed to understand the ‘eaten’ part of his story.

It warmed him inside, just a touch, to know that these were people genuinely worried for him and his wellbeing—simply because he was important to them. Not because they needed to make use of him or they needed anything from him, just because they cared. It was an old feeling that hadn’t surfaced in a long time—not since the first time he’d met the Weasleys, anyway and then Sirius. Harry swallowed, pushing those thoughts away for later, he followed her pointing arm, searching in the distance for the mountain range. He was pleasantly surprised to find that squinting really did help and that he could make out a fairly decent representation of a blue-purple mountain with wisps of silvery-grey smoke rising from the tips. He found himself with the urge to smile as he pictured a hiking day spent with Theo’s calming presence and Charlie—preferably shirtless—and of course a good lunch and-OW!

Harry yipped when a sudden stinging warmth blossomed in his bum. He flinched forward, only to be steadied by one of Ilsa’s iron arms. The reality registered a moment later and his cheeks flamed red, ears warming considerably as he tried to pull away.

"Don’t." Ilsa's voice was dark velvet and whispered in his ear. "I'm letting you off easy for this." She hugged him tight, from behind. "Quite easy. I do not simply say or do things because I feel like it. I always have a reason or a purpose behind it." Her chin touched the side of his head as she straightened. "You are important to us. In the future, please pay attention. I do not spout out rules because they are amusing, alright?"

Halfway mortified at being swatted like a child, Harry mutely nodded.

"Verbal answer, loveling." Ilsa's voice softened, her golden eyes lightening once more.

A strangled "yes" came from Harry a moment later.

"Good." She released him with a quick nudge into Theo’s ready arms. "I cannot remove your curse, but I do know which one it is. I will see if I can request an audience with my father and from there, perhaps arrange something with the visiting Merrow. Likely, do not expect anything to happen today. The Merrow aren't being introduced until tonight or tomorrow morning, depending and it is highly unlikely that they will consider a request for curse removal before they've had a public entrance." She snorted. "They are quite vain, but I should be able to secure the services of one of them at some point or smoke and when I do so, I may simply 'port you directly to my side, if you are near Theo," Her lips twitched. "Today is a fun day, with plenty of new things, strange people and ridiculous customs." The golden eyes lightened to their original hue. "Enjoy it—all of you!" She clicked her fingers at Charlie, accepting the white, cloth-wrapped bundle. "Thank you."

Charlie nodded in answer, blue eyes darting to Harry. They softened, considerably and he stretched out one hand to ruffle the perpetually messy hair. He said nothing and Theo remained silent as well.

Ilsa’s golden eyes rested on them a moment longer and then she turned on her heel and stuck two fingers in her mouth to produce a shrill whistle. Her Bonded turned as one to see the source of the noise and faces brightened, chatter picking up once more as Bahn was shuffled to the front to answer her unofficial summon.

"Ilsa!" Bahn trotted over, curious. "We were waiting for you, everyone's ready and oh—is that what I think it is?" He stopped, and looked at her with imploring pale eyes. "You spoil me." He
said, happily. "I completely forgot about those, since we don't wear them all the time."

The short Gheyo handed over the bundle without a word and Bahn's speedy fingers made quick work of the soft cloth. He gave a rather undignified whoop a moment later when the cloth fell away to show a series of intricately crafted, golden Bonding bracelets. His sharp eyes immediately flickered to Ilsa's right wrist, where her own was prominently displayed, before he turned on his heel and held them out to his Bonded, a pleased expression fixed on his angelic face.

They came forward in something of a line and fished through the pile of gold to find their own individual bracelet. Harry watched, interestingly as each Bonded seemed to know exactly which one was theirs, even when he couldn't tell anything different in them. He could see the Deveraine crest in the center of it, where the coat of arms then broke off in the neat, scrolling design that managed to look wonderful, regardless of the wearer's gender.

The last three were taken by Delani. She slipped Bahn's own on for him and he returned the favor in kind, adding a kiss to the inside of her wrist.

Delani's lips curved into a fond smile and she tugged lightly on one of his stray braids. "Are we almost ready?"

"Almost." Bahn looped his arms around her waist, seeking a cuddle and any attention his Alpha was willing to direct to him at this particular moment. He was happy and content and it showed.

"Sickening. Absolutely sickening." Bhindi's irritated voice carried easily through the morning air, drawing the attention of all as she glided down the stairs, clad in a matching outfit, looking exactly as Bahn himself—with the exception of her small bosom, blushed cheeks and pale pink lipstick. "Did you even remember to-"

Bahn shifted, twisting in the embrace to take the third band from Delani's hand and throw it to his twin. "They're all in the same spot in the vault. It's not like yours would be left behind." The smile had disappeared from his face and a faintly weary look edged into his eyes.

She snatched it out of the air and twisted it over her own hand with a grimace, settling it on her right wrist. "Are you really attending under a glamour?" Her pale eyes raked over his form with obvious disapproval. "That really is not the wisest thing to do."

"It's none of your business if I do or don't." Bahn returned, calmly. "Decided to join us after all? We should be ever so lucky."

"You aren't exactly giving me a choice." Bhindi bit the words off, a scowl marring her pretty face. "Then again, that was probably all your doing in the first place, wasn't it?"

Bahn's insincere smile fitted his face perfectly. "Of course not. Arielle, forbid."

Bhindi's pale-grey eyes swept through the gaggle of their shared Bonded and she pressed her lips together, obviously struggling to keep her sharp tongue in check, until her gaze landed on Harry and company. She remembered them quite well from that disastrous breakfast with Aracle in the home of that stuffy Councilman. "What are they doing there?"

"They happen to be my guests." Bahn silently dared her to contradict, a hint of steel showing in his face. "And I invited them." His eyes narrowed. "We have no quarrel with them."

"You have no-" Bhindi began.

Bahn gave a low rumble in his throat, pale eyes darkening. "The House of Deveraine." He hissed.
"Has no quarrel with them, a House, that I must remind you, includes us both. Do not dare to disgrace it without sufficient reason. I would suggest you rethink yourself before Ithycar returns, because I grow more inclined to speak badly in your favor, the longer you keep this up."

The pretty blonde snorted. "Do you? And what do you suppose he'd have to say about your little bits of fun while he's been out of touch and far away from the-"

"Delani has already covered that." Bahn nearly growled. "And it's none of your business."

"Covered it?" A wicked gleam flashed in Bhindi's eyes. "Thoroughly? In your condition? You're walking. That's hardly saying much at all."

"I'd be happy to try it out on your condition as well." Delani's quiet voice cut through the argument before anything could spiral out of hand. "If you intend to accompany us, then you will be on your best behavior." She warned. "I will not have any of this." Her sharp glare flickered to Bahn. "Which includes you as well," she said, pointedly. "Do not make me repeat a lesson that neither of us care to remember."

"Of course not." Bhindi's voice was syrupy sweet as she sauntered down the curved stone steps, her heeled sandals clacking ominously on the stone. "Why should you grow a backbone now? It would only cause-"

A loud shriek sounded from within the house and whatever would have happened next, didn't. Soula came streaking through the door, with Ariki beside her and an unfamiliar woman chasing both of them with a shiny black slipper in hand.

"I'll kill you both!" The dark-haired beauty shrieked. "I swear I will, you brats! What are you, five years old? I don't have time for this. We'll be late and just look at what you've done!"

Of course, her screams immediately attracted the attention of everyone present and they turned to watch the drama unfold.

"It was a joke, Koury!" Soula dodged around Bhindi, twirled between Callistar and Okahn, before making a beeline towards her father. "Just a joke, we didn't mean anything by it really-!"

"It wasn't my idea!" Ariki protested, he dodged behind Bhindi, grabbing her gently about the shoulders for something of a shield, ignoring her squeaked protest as she was whirled about to meet her furious Bonded. "I was the messenger. Don't shoot the messenger."

"There were no messengers involved." Koury, one of Bhindi's Pareya, stood in the doorway, a glower on her face, her skin glowing purple and her hair now a pitch black shade, trailing on the ground behind her in fat, oversized ringlets. She grabbed a handful of hair and shook it, furiously. "This is not funny. Not the least bit funny. Am I laughing? No. I'm not. Ha ha. Not funny. Messenger, my foot! Seeing as you've volunteered, I'm sure I could make an exception. You will have the rest of your life to regret the fact that I have." She started down the steps, pausing to hack at the long, ridiculous carpet of hair that followed her.

Ariki gulped. "It was just a joke." He ducked behind Bhindi's shoulder. "Really it was. Mera?" He pleaded. "It'll wear off in a few."

The blonde rolled her eyes skyward, turning to frown at the teenage boy. "You should know better." She elbowed him sharply. Her lips twitched, fighting laughter at the sight of her Bonded suffering from an everlasting hair extension charm, coupled with a forever curls spell and a skin-glowing hex.
A quiet 'oof' came from the young, honey-blond Beta as he immediately hugged his Mera from behind, affecting an innocent expression. "It really was Soula's idea, Mera. Completely hers. You know I couldn't cast a hair-curling charm to save my life." But he fought a smile, even as he protested, suggesting that perhaps it hadn't really been his baby sister's idea in the first place.

"Hey!" His youngest sister protested. "Blame it all on me, why don't you?" She sputtered. "You're horrible! You were just as invested as the rest of—ow, Daddy!" The teen yelped when her father caught her neatly, with one arm around the waist, before he landed a hefty smack on her pert behind. "It was a joke!" She pouted.

Aracle's dark eyes hid barely-concealed amusement, as he hugged Soula closer to him, offering a half-hug in answer. He knew just how her jokes could play out, especially when coupled with Ariki's little pranks. Soula was closest for the moment, so Ariki would have to wait. "Jokes are not to be played on Koury especially on days like today where we are all waiting on-"

"She bloody well deserved it." Soula scowled. "It's not like I just-"

"Language, young lady." Came the expected scold, Aracle sighed. But he could see the faint trace of worry in her young face and knew that he had her to thank for diffusing the situation before anything could happen. Her favorite charms had likely been her only means of a distraction and Ariki, well, the Rheyo knew that the young man would gladly lend a hand if it was for a good cause. He squeezed her shoulder, gently.

"Enough, Koury." Bhindi silenced her with a look and two-words. "Stand still." She wrought the same type of magic that Bahn had, to produce a similar outfit of white and gold, with the charms and hexes removed, as if it were nothing. The result was a pretty woman, with small, fine features and vibrant, rainbow-colored hair that fell to her waist in perfectly straight strands. "Better?"

The Pareya affected a sulky look in response, checking her outfit and hair before giving a grudging nod in answer. "You always side with those-"

"They are children." Bhindi interrupted. "What would you have me do?" But even as she spoke, she'd managed to grab ahold of Ariki's arm and spin him around to sit at her feet, one hand tangled in his hair as warning. She did not argue with Koury often, because the vibrant Pareya was often the one starting the pranks. This was about as normal as a—well, Bhindi wasn't quite sure, but she did have no intention of allowing a childish prank war to break out before they were all presented to the dragel public at the most prestigious event in Nevarah.

"You always side with him!" Koury shot back. "Because he's half Ithy's." She snorted. "But never mind me, it's only Koury. Empty-headed, too-many-colors, Koury. Why should I even matter?" She sniffed.

"Oh no, you don't!" Bhindi's attention immediately refocused on her. "There will absolutely none of that. You know fairly well why." She frowned.

Koury opened her mouth, then shut it abruptly as the necessary memory came to mind. Her cheeks colored and she looked away with a mumbled apology.

Bhindi merely turned away without answer.

"Oretta?" Theo had moved over to stand by Ilsa once more, now that Harry was calm—as in not blushing furiously—and safely ensconced in Charlie's scorching arms, he had a moment to broach the second issue he'd meant to take up with her.
"What?" The spiky head of hair swiveled to look at him.

"This, I wanted to add something to our robes before we left, but," Theo tipped his head to the side.
"I wasn't quite sure, as this does use the background and brackets in yours." He showed her now, a
design he'd been working on in his head. A finished coat of arms for the House of Nott. Socially,
they would always identify under his name, unless a new Bonded had a name of higher standing.
For the moment, Theo's name was the only one recognizable in Nevarah and only due to Ilsa.
Charlie and Harry were unknown with their present names and newborn status.

"It's lovely." Ilsa poked at the misty, projected image hovering over her hand. "Why don't you add
a little more ivy here?" She trailed a finger along the edge of the shield's border. "Run or twine it
around the gold, then make the crest a little bigger and the banner a bit curvier…"

A few minutes of fiddling produced an acceptable likeness to both parties and Ilsa's proud smile
was all that Theo needed as he excused himself to return to Charlie and Harry, now that they were
all shuffling into circles to prepare for the group transportation.

It was almost time to leave. The atmosphere had taken on a tinge of excitement as the children,
who had been kept in a corner by Bu and Sueh, were now happily chattering and shrieking as they
were herded into the center of the circle. Some waved at their parents and made faces at their
siblings, obediently allowing themselves to be moved and positioned just so.

The sudden blur of activity caught the attention of a certain brunet. Harry found himself watching
with a hint of interest and admiration at their behavior, there were no temper tantrums or little spats
and he could already see some resemblance to some of the other Bonded in the Deveraine circle.
Charlie hovered behind him, chatting with Takar about one of Bhindi's Gheyos, a fire type by the
name of Loren, whose spiky, cropped hair held the same three-toned hues as Charlie's own long
locks.

Harry started, faintly, when he felt a trickle of Theo's magic wash over him. Turning with a
question on the tip of his tongue, he bit back to the words when the warmth enveloped him
thoroughly, before finishing its work. He stared down at his plain green robes that were now
brilliantly edged and trimmed with a rich, glittering gold. There were delicate scrolls and runic
symbols forming a lovely, three-inch border at the open front, the cuffs and hem. A quick glance
at Charlie, showed that his Beta had noticed the change and now took a moment to admire his own
rich, navy robes that now bore the same elegant scrolling in the same lovely gold that
complemented his tanned complexion.

Curious now, Harry twisted around, searching for Theo, only to feel those familiar, elegant fingers
slipping into his hands. "Theo!" He turned in time to see Theo raising his hand to his lips. Soft,
smooth, cool lips pressed lightly to the tips of Harry's fingers. His blush resurfaced with surprising
ferocity.

"You look absolutely stunning, my treasure." Theo hummed. "Do you like it?"

And Harry did. He could not quite think of a way to express his thanks at the loveliest set of dress
robes he'd ever worn yet. He settled for a light kiss to Theo's cheek and a hum of appreciation.

Theo chuckled into his ear and patted his shoulder, before scooting Harry forward and to the side.
"Go ask Bahn what the order of entrance is." He gave a slight tug on his Beta's bonds and waited
for Charlie to finish his conversation before turning to him.

"Nice work." Takar commented, inclining his head as he excused himself from the duo and strode
forward to Delani and Bahn.
Theo perked a brow.

Charlie's lips twitched. "It's nice." He allowed.

Golden eyes danced mischievously. "Nice?"

"Quite."

Theo suppressed a chuckle. "They suit you quite well." He complimented. "Should I expect you to be with Takar for today?"

The redhead hesitated. "Maybe."

"That's fine. I only wondered. I will likely be busy and absent for most of today, if Oretta has her way. There are many I have not seen in some time and it will do our Circle well to have the connections reforged."

Charlie caught the meaning beneath it at once. The bond hummed between them and he moved forward, his hand brushing faintly against his Alpha's. "I'll keep an eye on Harry."

"Is everyone in position?" Bahn's clear voice finally silenced them all. There was a bit of shuffling and not too much more, before a low murmur of agreement rippled back to him. "Good. Now, Ilsa, dearest, you said you would handle this?" He perked a brow in her direction.

Bhindi made a sound of displeasure, but it was immediately silenced by her Beta, Okahn, a serious, golden-blond elf, who automatically shifted his hand from around her waist to cover her mouth. When she made as if to protest, Aracle cleared his throat and she settled with a glower.

"Thank you." Bahn said, calmly. "Now then, the order of entrance will be traditional, because we are introducing Harry and his. Gheyos first, do whatever you like, Pareyas second, you have the same and the rest of you know where your ranks fall." His pale eyes flickered to Harry, noting the light in those emerald depths. "We, the Submissives, traditionally enter last, unless we are in a hurry or bored with pomp and circumstance and then we would enter first. Is that agreeable?"

Harry nodded, quickly. "That's fine." He found himself smiling, before he could help it.

"Good, now then, are we ready? Ilsa? Lani? On the count of three, one-"

"One moment!" Ilsa's bored tone interrupted. "Soula, I expect you to be within range of someone familiar at all times today. If you must be traipsing around on your own, do it with Harry." Golden eyes drilled directly into her youngest daughter before shifting meaningfully to Harry. He tried not to squirm beneath that strict, knowing gaze.

"If you require my protection or Delani's, please seek it at once. As you have expressed a desire to hunt, I have refrained from automatically casting it for you, but the option is still there, should you desire it." She paused. "This is a wonderful and entirely enjoyable occasion for everyone, however, there are still reasons for caution and I expect you to use, show and demonstrate common sense. If you cannot trust your judgment at any given moment, then you should not be in the situation that you find yourself. Excuse yourself from the matter and find any one of us." She inclined her head to the side, indicating the Betas, Delani and Aracle. "Bahn, so that there are witnesses—do not, I repeat, do not, pick a fight with anyone or anything today—if you could? There will likely be a number of challenges due to my return and I do not wish to drag anyone else into them, yourselves included. Please, by Arielle's virtue, consider this seriously?" She sighed. "Now, on the count of
"Thank you, Ilsa." Bahn flashed her grin. "I had almost forgotten that." His pale eyes hardened, faintly. "I expect you to consider that carefully, Soula." He skimmed the serious faces of his Bonded and then gave a short nod to Ilsa. "and Harry, I will likely drag you along with me half the time and the other half, you'll most likely end up with either your Bonded or Soula. Happy Hunting."

There was a faint pop at the outside of the circle and Dahlia came to a gasping halt at the edge of the transportation hub, where her family parted to allow her to step through. "Mum." She greeted, with a faint wave. "Sorry. Lady Pai had something of a fit this morning. Apparently the Royals have something planned for the afternoon." She grimaced. "Which I am not supposed to be speaking about, so ignore that." She turned. "Wik? Mei?"

Her favored Gheyo companions immediately fell into flanking positions behind her. The dark fae's brooding gaze was mesmerizing with his vivid, fuchsia-colored eyes and Mei, turned out to be a changeling—just like Edora—as a slender, willowy young man, with no bubblegum or pink lipstick. Both were armed and clothed in their dress armor and hints of excitement could be seen, even as Dahlia ordered them into position.

"Lovely of you to join us." Ilsa drawled. "Now are we ready?"

Bahn stifled a chuckle. "Anytime now." He straightened his circlet. "Oh and I need not remind you all to remember to clear the 'portation medallion within the first five minutes of landing, yes? Good."

Golden eyes gave a spectacular roll and Ilsa rolled her neck as she shouted up to the sky. "Temptrificus Ergen!" A flare of brilliant golden light spiraled out from her feet, streaking across the ground and forming a beautiful, glowing medallion on the courtyard stones. It spread out until it encompassed the entire Circle and then some, before it solidified into a perfect circle and began to swirl and spin, locking onto the location coordinates provided and drawing on Ilsa's magic to complete the request.

Delani's slender arms shot out, circling Bahn as she glowed a faint pale-orange hue, "Temptrificus Alloras!" She called, tagging her transport on to Ilsa's, allowing her pregnant Submissive a stress-free relocation. A smaller, discrete medallion of soft orange energy flared about her feet, covering only herself and Bahn as magic flared and energy crackled in the air.

Harry felt Theo snatch one hand and Charlie the other. He squeezed both, impulsively, feeling a sense of expectation that he'd never quite known before. This would be so much fun!
Welcome To The Hunt

Chapter Summary

It's time for the Hunt to begin. The Kalzik family begins to settle its ranks in preparation for the upcoming introductions while Harry and the Deveraines prepare for the big day as they pass through the first-time inspection.

NOTE: The Kalzik family is Indian and there are several cultural references throughout their snippet. Please read this short glossary to keep track of things (and so you'll know exactly how handsome Quinn looks in his outfit!).

TERMS TO KNOW

*Sherwani—a traditional Indian garment for men. It looks like a long double-breasted suit-jacket (Think of it like a tunic, there are no lapels) with a mandarin-style collar and fitted sleeves. It generally falls slightly below the knee and there are either baggy or skinny pants worn underneath it, with an accenting color. The fancier the embroidery is, the higher social standing the wearer has. Curled or pointed toe slippers tend to be worn with it.

*Dupatta—a traditional Indian scarf for either gender. For women, it is often the color of their sari, lengha or accent color for the outfit and while it can be a solid color and fabric, it is often multi-colored and sometimes with see-through fabric. Sometimes it is used to cover the head, shoulders or draped around the upper-torso and tucked into the skirt. For men, it is a solid color (usually red, blue, green or gold) and is draped across the shoulders.

*Sari—a traditional Indian garment for women. It is often worn mostly by married women, as it covers more and was the first fashion 'trend' in Indian culture. It is generally a long, brilliantly colored piece of fabric that is expertly folded to create a skirt, with the end being draped around the upper body like a shawl and tucked into a cropped bodice or fitted shirt.

*Lehenga Choli—a traditional Indian garment for women. This is different from a sari in the way that it is two articles of clothing, not counting the dupatta(scarf). It consists of a bustier and a full bodied skirt, showing off the torso and ankles. Depending on the wearer's preference, it can be as modest as a fitted cropped top, showing only a strip of skin above the waist or as daring as a tube bikini top. It is traditionally tied in the back and there are no buttons or zippers involved.

*Puri—a traditional thin flatbread that is fried in oil until it is soft and puffed up. It can be used in place of naan.

*Naan—a rustic Indian flatbread that looks like cooked pizza dough with herbs scattered on top. It is thicker than puri, has a tough texture and is baked, not fried.

*Raita—a yogurt side dish that helps to soothe the palate after spicy foods and aid digestion.

*Jiji—is a loose translation for the title "Sister-in-law" it is used to show respect.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN : Welcome to the Hunt
Quinn shuffled out of the bedroom, scrubbing a hand across his face in a belated attempt to better rouse himself into the land of the wakened. He was tired, still, and couldn't recall how he'd managed to make it to his room, much less his bed and he didn't really care, now that he'd managed to stub his toe on the bathroom threshold.

Full lips quirked into something of a pout as Quinn blinked several times in succession and then stifled a yawn. He really was tired. He'd forgotten just how draining Soul Casting could be and knew he'd be feeling the effects for some time. It was a good thing he hadn't gone through with casting for Harry and Charlie.

Harry's cast was sure to be worrisome and Charlie's, well, the redhead would doubtlessly be even more intertwined with Harry than Theo and that was sure to be just as troublesome on its own. Quinn clicked his teeth together and finally shuffled all the way into the loo. He went through the motions of his morning routine, taking his time with the necessary basics of a shower, brushing his teeth and spelling his hair into order.

By the time he made it back to his bedroom, it seemed as if the entire house had come alive. Quinn listened with interest as he heard the Pareya ordering his siblings about and his father's voice occasionally sounding out over theirs. He just knew the place would be a madhouse by the time he finished dressing.

His mother had visited his room during his absence and laid out a lovely, traditional outfit of Sherwani, a long, silken, elaborately decorated long-sleeve overshirt. The second half were baggy pants, a variation of the traditional lungi, that would allow him to partially strip if the weather grew too warm. They were in coordinating colors, of course, with fancy embroidery in gold and blue adorning the front of the Sherwani, with a matching dupatta in the same vibrant colors as his famous, multi-colored wings.

Colors of bright aqua, rich navy, nearly neon green and a hint of shimmery golden-yellow all meshed together, perfectly dyed in something of a harmonic rainbow that was pleasing to the eyes. There was golden foil-like trim all along the edges and he knew that was a hint as to what the rest of his family would be wearing.

He was somewhat glad. The last Hunting Season, he'd attended it in silver and navy blue tones. His hands trembled for a moment, the memories resurfacing, unbidden. Teal eyes squeezed tightly shut and Quinn began to mutter a meditation chant beneath his breath, a habit that was now practically reflex. He calmed significantly in the next few minutes and finally his eyes opened once more.

Quinn swallowed hard. He stroked his fingers through the cool, silky material and then sighed, tugging at the belt of his dressing gown. Shrugging out of it, he tossed it on the bed and concentrated to remember where he'd last left his warming lotions and oils. He often shared them with Bharin, mostly because he could spike them for the Gheyo without having to trouble his parents. His mother might not mind having Gheyos in their circle, but she never could stand the required fights.

He twitched his fingers in an odd shape, a wandless spell that would summon his favorite body oil and one to bring a standard healing balm as well. When both containers popped into existence, he let them fall to the bed, where he unscrewed the tops and sniffed both containers just to be sure. He scooped a dollop of healing balm into the body lotion and stirred it with one finger. The mixture was then liberally applied to his skin, along with a spray-application of sunblock, before he finally reached for his favorite cologne, a muted sandalwood musk.
Once finished, he then took his time dressing in the traditional garb, fingers automatically knowing what to tie, clasp and pleat accordingly, even if he had only worn Healer's robes for the majority of his time since the last Hunting Season. There hadn't been much of a reason to bother with dressing up.

Now, he stood before the mirror, feeling distinctly off-kilter as he studied his reflection. He was glad his mother had chosen the expected, traditional high collar and also allowed him a dupatta as well. It would hide his scars, if he wrapped it right. He started for the door and then stopped, curling his bare toes against the floor. It hadn't escaped his notice that there hadn't been any shoes in sight.

He thought of wearing his dressy sandals, but changed his mind after taking another look at the perfectly coordinated outfit. It wouldn't hurt to run barefoot for a day and they'd likely have to perform as the Kalzik family often did and footwear would only be in the way then. He could simply cast a few charms and enjoy the feel of the ground beneath his feet.

His mother would likely have something in mind, given her attention to detail already. Quinn gave a soundless sigh, gathering up his medical kit and shrinking it to fit in his pockets. He freed the colorful bracelets to dangle in a cluster from his wrist, happy to see that the cords held strong.

It was tradition to wear them until they fell off, the longer they stayed on, the better relationship you were to have with that particular sibling. He smiled, seeing Dyshoka's colorful strip wrapped twice around his wrist. She had made sure that hers would last. A few others were hastily tied and he knew he'd lose them before the day was over, but the sentiment behind them was still appreciated.

She was always special to him. She always would be.

A faint pang of guilt registered and Quinn mentally shoved it away. He had other things to deal with this Hunting Season and he would not let himself be haunted by a single, foolish mistake. A mistake that had cost him, his voice.

Quinn twisted away from that depressing line of thought and found himself wondering how he would approach the issue of time off with a certain, stubborn, dictatorial Matron Olivia. She was sure to protest and likely pile on extra work, even if he agreed to her ridiculous demands. Work that he would do for free, anyway, if he were in the best of health. His contract made allowances for things like his rare healing talents, but sometimes his employer seemed to take a decidedly sadistic pleasure in making his life miserable.

He would quit—if it wouldn't mean that she would have won—but he'd grown attached to his patients and loved how his name did not scare away those who truly needed help when visiting the Clinic. They were always shocked afterwards, but they never refused his help and he'd gathered a considerable following.

If he were to leave the Clinic, he was sure that his most loyal patients would track him down. Whenever he could not pick up his own slack, it would fall to Kyle's shoulders, as evidenced by the little fiasco this past week. Quinn scowled. It wasn't fair to his adopted brother and it definitely wasn't fair to folks like Dahlia, Mimei and Wikhn, who worked under his authority as a healer unit and were subjected to the same administrative issues that often trickled down his way.

He really did owe them some form of repayment. They'd been invaluable in more ways than one since a certain Harry Potter belonging to Theodore Nott, had come stumbling into his life. Something about the green-eyed brunet had jerked his protective Alpha instincts to the forefront and Quinn had struggled against the urges until common sense had won out. He'd then liberally
dosed himself with calming draughts and a feeding, courtesy of Bharin, surprised to find that his instincts had dulled significantly after he'd worked with Theodore.

The young Alpha had been surprisingly resilient and startlingly fierce. Quinn had absolutely no doubts that Harry was in good hands, especially not after he'd been able to help their Beta as well, the redheaded Charlie, a tall, respectable fellow with twitchy wings.

Quinn wondered how they would fare. He'd deliberately let them out because it was standard healer practice to rest between major castings and advanced healing sessions, but he'd done so with the hope that they would attend the Hunt. It was a social time for Dragels and accepted creatures in Nevarah. He knew that there would be plenty of fun, family and friendships everywhere and with Theodore Nott as the apprenticed student of the famous Lady Ilsa, meant that Harry would be in a good hands and should enjoy an exciting first Hunt.

Teal eyes sparkled briefly at the thought of Harry wandering through Nevarah and enjoying what the realm had to offer. A faint spark of jealousy registered at the notion of Harry actually Hunting, but as quickly as that spark had come, Quinn dismissed it. They were patient and healer and nothing more.

It was entirely unfair to even think in that direction, especially in terms of Harry. The wary, reliable submissive certainly deserved better than a mute healer for a Bonded. Quinn rolled his eyes and perked up at something outside in the hallway.

The sounds of running feet, drums and the faintest strains of music was enough of a prod to move him from his slight brooding to paying attention to the day. His stomach rumbled hopefully and he inwardly laughed at himself, patting said stomach. Kyle had probably already wakened, dressed and parked himself at the table.

Bharin too, Quinn mused. He remembered his mentor's cheerful account of speaking to the famed Lady Ilsa, apparently the short, stern Gheyo had made quite an impression with her efficient, brisk handling of things and Bharin was sufficiently smitten. Quinn sighed. He could already see where that was headed, but—he frowned in thought.

There was still the option of the Alpha's rights that Theodore had signed over to him, perhaps he could simply pass it on to Bharin. Of course, he would give him free rein to do as he liked and that could be absolutely anything from torture to permanently scarring. As a healer, his options for dishing out revenge were only checked by his sworn oath not to kill.

He would certainly never break that oath, though there were ways around it. He would only ever seek to work around it if an event that was horrifying, gut-wrenching enough to warrant it and only with absolute proof that he had the right perpetrator. Quinn nibbled on his lower lip, his mind's eye clearly seeing the imprint of a scrawled line on the back of Harry's ivory wrist.

Fingers twitched, faintly, as renewed anger coursed through him. One reason that most Healers kept close to their respective Gheyos in a healing unit, was to help in moments like this. There were many devious things he would wish to work on the wicked individual that had dared mar a dragel Subssmive—nay—a young, innocent child. But, he could settle for Bharin. As much as he disliked seeing the scars and blood from things that Bharin dearly enjoyed, he could acknowledge that his mentor was always careful and very good at what he did.

Yes, he would be sure to speak to Bharin. He would also mention that Bharin could take whomever he liked with him on settling the score. Then he would be sure to mention the outcome to Theodore the next time they met and Harry was otherwise occupied. A faint smirk touched his face and Quinn opened the door.
He flinched backwards, barely in time as he was quite nearly tackled to the ground as his younger sisters came bustling past in their trademark helter-skelter run. He perked a brow, stepping back into his room and out of the way as the last set of twins, Karnati and Farnati came running past, giggling and conversing in a mishmash of their native tongue and a hint of dragel rasp.

With a fond shake of his head, he stepped into the now empty hallway and trotted after them, ears alert to see if he could pick up anything. He guessed that his Papa had carried him to bed last night, though he barely even remembered falling asleep. He was emotionally exhausted atop of the physical repercussions of using his Soul Casting abilities, but he knew it was nothing that a bit of time, sleep, and blood or sugar couldn't fix.

"Quinten?" his mother's voice floated around the corner.

He turned towards the sound at once, slightly apprehensive, but desperately wishing that he could turn straight to her and ask for a hug. His Papa had informed him of exactly how his behavior in the past week had scared his mother to the point where she'd frantically sent for him. He owed her an apology at the very least and complete submission to whatever punishment she should dream up.

The sight of her face, that second time he'd tried to take his own life had etched itself so deeply and permanently in his mind that he'd known, the moment he'd survived that he would never do such a thing again. Seeking death had seemed like the best and most painless option—until he'd see the expression of absolute anguish on a face that had cried blood tears for him.

Pursing his lips, Quinn gave a short, flickering whistle.

"Ah. There you are." Surajini rounded the corner, bearing a silver tray with several assorted cups and a lighted clay lamp. A pleased look settled on her face as she took in his formal attire. "And you look lovely in that." She approached him, pausing only to turn and snap something out over her shoulder about running in the hallway and shrieking like a madwoman.

For a moment, they simply stared at each other.

Then his mother arched a single, kohl-lined eyebrow.

Quinn swallowed, then reached up to lightly tug on his earlobes, mouthing sorry, with the best expression of penitence he could muster.

Ruby-tinted lips curved into the faintest approximation of a smile and after another moment, his mother tipped her head in acceptance. The smile blossomed fully then, an expression of fondness, mixed with relief. "You scared me something awful, you know." She scolded, lightly. "But you look rested. I am glad."

…Mama… He poked lightly at the mental connection between them, pleased when a hum of approval came rippling back to him. Quinn's lips twitched into something of a smile and he moved forward, coming to a stop before her.

She circled the tray around his face three times and then allowed him to hold it, while she selected three, fine-tipped brushes from a mustard-yellow resting cloth. "Hold your head up high." She instructed. The brushes were dipped into bright pots of black, green and navy blue dye. In a matter of minutes, she had effectively sketched a scrolling design of vines and the runes for longevity and prosperity.

A smile graced her features as she stood back to admire her work. "Lovely." She pronounced,
picking up a golden bindi, she murmured the words for a sticking charm and touched it to the center of the delicate, painted design, before he could straighten fully. She then tore off a strip of thin, sweet bread and dipped it in one sauce, repeating the action until he had eaten three different pieces altogether.

Her hands hovered over the flickering flame on the small lamp and then she curled her hands up and around, before pressing them to the side of her head in a gesture that spoke of pride.

She took the tray back and held it at eye level so he could hold his hands over the flame and swirl them in the wisps of smoke curling up from the sticks of incense.

He pressed his palms together and offered a short bow of respect.

The tray was then lowered to a comfortable carrying height and Surajini looked him over again. "We're almost ready for breakfast, I was starting to worry" Her tone was light, her steps chiming as she walked, anklets and bangles singing with her every movement. She turned in a swirl of gilded, multicolored skirts and waited for him to walk in front, so she could see his hands if he signed. "Which also brings me to another matter."

Quinn stopped, he turned to her expectantly.

His mother gave a slightly rueful smile. "I may have inadvertently accidentally managed to fire you."

Teal eyes blinked comically. *Mama...?*

"I called that 'Matron Olivia' of yours on Kyle's behalf—he has Emily staying over, by the way, so please beware that we have guests, your Auntie Rohajini is coming too, along with her entire Circle, so there will be lots of people around." She frowned. "Will you be alright with that?"

*It's fine. Our kind of crowds don't usually bother me. Quinn frowned. How exactly did calling in for Kyle end with losing my job?*

Surajini winced. "She said something about how if he wasn't available, then you would have to be and I told her that you'd been Soul Casting and there should be a mention in your contract about it, therefore you would be unavailable and unable to properly and safely carry out your healer duties and as such you wouldn't be coming in today." The petite Indian Submissive suddenly scowled. "And she had the nerve to tell me that if I couldn't produce either of you, then it was my duty to see that-"

The picture frames along the wall rattled and Quinn's eyes grew wide with alarm. *Mama, calm down. Please. Really. It's fine. I didn't mean to—I would have-

"Shush. I know you hated working there, but you liked the work you did." She took a breath. "I would have rather you left on speaking terms or at least, with a decent standing. I am well aware that you are capable of speaking for yourself, I suppose I am simply a bit short-tempered at the moment and it translated in a less than pleasant way."

Quinn's lips twitched. He understood everything his mother wasn't saying outright and quite frankly, he would have loved to be in the shadows to hear what she'd told Matron Olivia. It certainly would have been a memorable conversation. His mother's temper was almost as famous as their family name, for in spite of her sometimes meek appearance, she was definitely not a doormat. *It's fine, Mama. He assured her, wondering if he asked nicely, whether she would tell him what exactly she'd said.*
"Er, yes. Well. I'm glad then. I was hoping you wouldn't take it too badly. However, you can't kept up a full certification without practicing in some way or another and I know you haven't the time to be seeking employment, so I have already made a few inquiries. I've spoken to your Auntie about having you professionally certified. If you wish to work independently after you acquire your independent license, and not under our house and name, you may do so."

…really? But before, you said that I would never be able to hold a…?

"You were not ready for it when you asked, in the past." Brilliant green eyes stared him down. "You know you weren't and I know that you weren't. Now you are and I would be the last person in this realm to ever stand in front of you and your future goals and happiness, my son." She half-smiled. "You are my baby boy, after all."

Mama! Quinn felt his cheeks warm considerably and he immediately looked elsewhere before that blush could dredge up any potentially embarrassing spots of emotion. He'd had enough crazy emotions last night, he did not want them to carry over into a fresh day.

Surajini's lips twitched, faintly into more of a smile than before. "Do understand that I did not intend for her to fire you, but unfortunately-"

It's…it's fine, Mama. It really is. I wouldn't have been able to do that myself. I don't…well, perhaps on my own, one day when I was too fed up to really handle any of it, I might have reacted. But this? This is perfect timing, I mean, I'm not happy about leaving the patients and everyone, but I am glad. So glad.

"In that case, I am glad too. Especially since we all know just how horrible your reactions are." She balanced the tray on one hand to give him a swat on the shoulder. "March, young man. You need to eat. I can hear your stomach complaining from here." She fell into step beside him. "Though just because you've left doesn't mean that you are free from your responsibilities, I want to make it absolutely clear that you will be keeping up with things."

Of course, Mama. Quinn found himself smiling as he inched a little closer to her. Their arms brushed lightly and their smiles mirrored each other.

The dining room was bustling merrily with Dragels dashing to and fro, some slipping into their chairs to help themselves, while Pareya continued to bring steaming dishes in from the kitchen. The scent of spicy curries and stews, mingled with wafts of fried breads, vegetables and meats.

Patrick had taken the lone chair at one end of the table, leaving the other end open for either Hiram or Surajini, whichever one of his triad Bonded arrived first. The children and other Bonded seated themselves randomly along the sides, everyone chattering a mixture of several languages with the occasional hiss or growl.

Food was passed everywhere, dishes being handed over and under, no-spill charms keeping messes to a minimum, while boundary spells kept the respective serving utensils in their specific serving dishes. The warm, spicy smells of curries, stews and herbed flatbreads filled the air.

Quinn felt his stomach rumble happily as his mother prodded him into the dining room and all but sat him down in an empty chair. Her hands rested on his shoulders, holding him down in the chair for a second longer, to make her point. He touched her hand on his shoulder, briefly, smiling at the cheerful red nail polish she had on. He had no objections to sitting down and eating his fill.

"Help yourself and eat well." She admonished. "If we present today, no one is eating until
dinnertime, because there won't be any breaks in between, so make sure you eat enough to keep
your blood sugar steady and that you've taken your potions on a full stomach."

Potions? Quinn gave the closest approximation of a whine that he could. *Mama, I feel fine!*

"I'm sure." His mother returned, dryly. "But that does not excuse you from them. Sit. Stay." She
patted his head with one hand, gliding off with the tray still balanced in hand.

Quinn nearly pouted, but his stomach drew his attention and he held out his hand, knowing that a
plate would appear.

A Pareya, Lachman, two chairs down, stretched over to hand him a plate with a healthy helping of
curried spinach and garlic naan, his two favorite foods.

He smiled and accepted it, leaning forward to nod his thanks, as he did not have a mental
connection with this particular parent and they did not know sign language.

A nod and a smile was sent his way. "Make sure you take some Raita. Farnati, pass the dish,
please."

Quinn's teal eyes narrowed faintly when he caught sight of the small silver dish and he held up two
fingers to stall his younger sister. The dragel froze, the small bowl resting on the flat of her palm as
she waited for Quinn's mental fingers to take hold.

Seconds later, it floated off her hand and through the air, dodging the crossing hands and passing
dishes to drop into Quinn's waiting hands. He smiled in self-satisfaction, spooning a healthy dollop
onto the side of his plate in preparation for the spicy dishes ahead of him.

Setting the dish aside, he didn't bother to return it, knowing that whoever needed it next would
likely simply call for it and someone else would pass it along. He pressed his hands together, palm
to palm and mouthed the words for the traditional blessing, ending with the mental whisper
of *Shokesaneh*.

Someone passed a napkin over and he tucked it carefully on his lap, before reaching for the food.
He tore little strips off of the naan and carefully folded it around bite-sized helpings of the curried
spinach. His tastebuds sang contentedly as the familiar flavors relaxed and comforted him.

He was halfway through his meal when a familiar mental presence nudged at the corners of his
mind and he felt two strong arms wrapping around him from behind, half-sandwiching him to his
chair.

"Quinten." Hiram's deep voice rumbled, the accent barely noticeable as he squeezed, gently. "You
scared us, son."

*Father...* Quinn ducked his head, feeling the blush starting up again. He hadn't meant to worry
them. In all honesty, the only thing that had been in his head at that moment, had been helping
Harry. Death was the very last thing he'd had in mind.

But then again, he'd also given his word.

And if his own parents couldn't take his word for what it was worth, then how could he expect
anyone else to do the same? Accident or no, the outcome rested on his shoulders alone. It was his
responsibility. He would be the one to live with whatever choices he made, unless they resulted in
death—and even then, he was fairly certain his mother would bring him back—just to scold him.
"I hope you've spoken to your mother." Hiram's strong magic hummed strongly around him, washing over Quinn in soothing, steady waves.

Quinn relaxed into the impromptu embrace, soaking up the care and concern that filtered through. *I did. I'm sorry I worried everyone, it was—it, well. Quinn hesitated. I told Papa, he thought, at last. Did he?*

"He did, actually." The Kalzik family Alpha stretched downward to survey the food Quinn had on his plate. "I suppose I can excuse you this once, though I hope this will serve as a warning to you. In the future, there will not be a second chance, you do realize if you had been taking proper care of yourself, that you never would have reached such a point in the first place?"

Yes, Father.

"Good." Hiram tugged on one pale ear, tipping Quinn's head to the side, he nipped the opposite ear with his fangs, drawing blood. "A Healer who cannot heal himself has no business healing others, understood?"

Yes sir. The sharp flash of pain dimmed and began to fade as the wound slowly healed over. Quinn bowed his head in submission, realizing just how lightly his father let him off. He was lucky. Between his father and his papa, he'd been spared the brunt of his mother's temper and likely any further punishment.

"I also feel that I should warn you that your mother intends for you to hunt this season, so do not even think of telling her otherwise." Hiram released his hold on the blond and reached across the table to pick up a vegetable dish. He scooped a generous portion onto Quinn's half-empty plate. "She will also be asking Healer Traufon over to look at your throat," his voice dropped lower. *I should warn you to beware of using that speech spell of yours, at least until we have a final verdict. I know you understand the risks of it, but just because you have resigned yourself to silence does not mean that you have to. There is still a chance you may speak again—if—you do not stress your vocal cords too much.*

Quinn bit his lip, resisting the urge to reach up and rub his ear. *I didn't mean to use it so close together, he admitted. It was something of an emergency.*

*I am not telling you to give it up, just to be more careful when using it. I am sure that Kyle was present and available both times you did use it—and yet, you did not use him.*

*He's not a thing to be used.*

*No, but he has sworn to be your voice, Quinn. How do you think he feels when you ignore or overlook him? He considers it a duty.*

…I know.

Hiram rested his hands on his son's slightly drooping shoulders. He gave a firm squeeze. *Just don't forget. We all like being useful.* He paused. *And Quinn? Two times within the same week? That was risky, even for you.*

Quinn winced again. *Does Mama...?*

*I did not tell her, if that is what you are asking, Bharin told Patrick, who told me last night. I think you have been through enough. Now eat your breakfast before it turns cold and eat enough. Did you take your potions?*
Yuck!

Quinten Auwren Kalzik!

They taste yucky! Quinn's teal eyes sparkled with mischief. I might be too full to take them.

Hiram snorted. "Patrick, tell your son to take his medicine."

The blond beta merely paused between bites with a pointed look at his only son.

Quinn squirmed, redirecting his attention to his plate.

Hiram thwapped Quinn's head, lightly and turned towards Surajini as she came bustling into the room. "Hello Princess," He greeted as he stepped to the side and bent down to accept her kiss to his cheek. "Everything tasted wonderful, as usual." He returned the kiss to her upturned cheek. "I've roused everyone and sent them off where they ought to be. The ones who haven't eaten yet will turn up here sometime within the next hour. I haven't seen hide nor hair of Dyshoka, so I have no idea where she's been, if she is here, then she has no wish to be found."

A flicker of worry danced across her face. "Perhaps she—but." She hesitated. "You don't think she stayed over with that Gheyo of hers, do you?" Surajini pursed her lips. "She should have—she would have said something if she was, don't you think?"

"She is not obligated to, but I am sure she would have." Hiram soothed. "Especially if she is that serious about them." He frowned. "Is she? I'm afraid I'm a bit behind."

"Ask Kishore." Surajini sighed. "I swear I don't know what runs through that girl's head."

"Nothing but air." Laxmi sniffed. The fourth eldest Kalzik daughter floated into the room, with her twin trailing absently behind her. "Morning, Mama. Papa." She greeted each parent with a hug. "And if she came in last night, I most certainly did not see her."

"Just because you didn't see her, doesn't mean that she isn't there." Another sister reproved. "Honestly, Laxmi. It's not as if you're any better with that Pareya you've had your eye on. I'm surprised you didn't stay over at his place."

Laxmi bristled at once. "How dare you! I'm not some cheap—"

"That's enough you two," Patrick's stern voice stopped the argument before it could start. "You are sisters and you will show each other the same respect you desire. Behave. This is a happy occasion and I will not have pointless arguments over petty things upsetting the day for the rest of us. Come sit down and eat." His blue eyes flashed, briefly. "Now."

The older twins exchanged a glance then with put-upon sighs, found seats at the table and joined in the mealtime fray.

Patrick watched them both for a moment longer, then turned to Surajini as she approached him with a handful of potions. "Have they been like that since I've been away?"

The Kalzik Submissive offered a sad smile. "Not all of the time, but then again, Dyshoka has hardly been home, save for when Quinn is." She set the potions on the edge of the table. "They're quite attuned you know."

"I do. Which is why I'm surprised." Patrick murmured. He cast a scent charm over his personal space and slashed his wrist as Surajini held up Quinn's potions. He spiked them appropriately and
they conversed privately for a few moments longer, before he kissed her cheek and sent her off.

The girl in question appeared several minutes later. In a flurry of sweetly spiced musk, tinkling bangles and anklets, the only un-twined daughter of the Kalzik family came whirling through the doorway.

Dyshoka half danced across the remaining few feet of the dining room to end in an assisted twirl before Hiram. She kissed his cheek noisily and with a wide smile that lit her entire face. "Father! You're back. Does that mean we'll be presenting formally?" She hugged him in happiness. "Oh I've missed you, it's so nice to see you back."

"Yes." Surajini answered. She shot a look towards her Alpha. "Definitely.

Hiram's left eyebrow twitched. "Apparently so." He obediently twirled his older daughter out and around him. His sharp green-gold eyes caught sight of her pair of rich, thick, golden bangles. Proposal bangles. He couldn't keep the proud smile from showing on his face. "You look lovely."

"Mmm. Don't I?" She twirled away from him and over to stand behind Quinn's chair. "Morning, brother mine." She half-sang. She reached over his shoulder and snitched a piece of naan off of his plate, nibbling on it with a contented purr. "Glad to see you're in one piece."

Hey! Quinn protested. I wouldn't be in pieces!

His indignant expression said more than his mental protests ever could. Dyshoka stifled a giggle. "I know, I know. I'm only teasing." She pressed her cheek to the side of his head. "Did you take your potions yet?"

Why is everyone focused on stuffing me full of potions?

"Since you have a habit of forgetting to look after yourself to the point of expiration?" Dyshoka's voice took on a faint edge of steel. She caught his unbitten ear and pinched it between two fingers. OW! Quinn supplied, helpfully. He leaned half-heartedly away from the reprimand, knowing that if Dyshoka didn't let go, he would simply have to stay put until she did. Whatever it is, I didn't do it.

"Don't ow, me." She retorted. "Really, you didn't? I told you to."

Er, what exactly?

"If I have to tell you then," she gave his ear a little twist. "Nevermind it. I'll tell Mother and she'll fix it. Where is everyone? We're only half here and the opening ceremony is only a few hours away."

"Some of us have already eaten." Laxmi said, primly. "Not everyone has the luxury of staying in bed until the late hours of the morning."

Dyshoka blinked pretty brown-gold eyes at her older sister. She bent her head to accept the mouthful when Quinn held it up for her. She bumped the side of his head with her chin in thanks. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"Didn't see you last night." Patrick hummed. "You came home late?" He frowned at Quinn. Do not keep giving away your food unless you intend to refill your plate. Lachman filled it with enough to compensate for the potions you're supposed to be taking.

Papa! Came the predictable protest and Quinn obediently spooned another helping of curried
spinach into his plate. He was already tearing off another strip of puri to offer to his favorite sister.

"Depends." Dyshoka's head snapped around to survey the blond with a practiced eye. "Am I in trouble?"

"That depends, do you need to be in trouble?" Surajini gave her a light smack as she bustled past. "Stop stealing Quinn's food and take your own plate. It's supposed to be portioned."

"I'm not stealing it!" Her daughter protested. "He's sharing! He's being nice and it's very sweet of him."

"I can be nice too." Alejandro's grumpy voice cut through the table chatter.

Dyshoka's eyebrows waggled. "Really?" She accepted another tasty mouthful from Quinn's elegant fingers. "What are you eating?" She slipped away from Quinn's table to wander over by Alejandro.

"Your second favorite." Her disgruntled brother muttered. But he held up a mouthful for her anyway, waiting patiently until she'd finished chewing.

She accepted it with the same appreciative bump to the head as she'd done with Quinn. "You're a sweetheart." She turned towards the next older brother, an innocent expression fixed on her lovely face.

Her older brother suppressed a grin and gave a faint tilt of his head. "Food thief." He scolded, fondly. He tore off a strip of fried puri and scooped up a mouthful of spicy vegetable curry, dipping the edge in her favorite mint chutney before holding it up.

"Thank you." Dyshoka sang, accepting the morsel with a hug to one of her favorite brothers. "Where's Jiji?" She asked after her sister-in-law.

"She's with the children." He tipped his head back in response, indicating the hallway behind the dining room, where the married siblings resided within the family grounds. "If you wanted to borrow anything from her, she's probably still in our rooms. I already took a tray down for her. The little one was fussing and she didn't want to upset him this early in the morning."

"Oh goody. Thank you. I didn't have time to think through mine." Dyshoka hummed happily when he offered her another mouthful. "Is he just fussing or is it something else?"

"He's just fussing." Her brother smiled. "More?" He bit back a smile at the pleading look on her face.

"Are you actually going to eat?" The next brother leaned forward to smirk. "Or should I save a few scraps for you as well?"

"Meanie." Dyshoka retorted. "I'll go back to Quinn." But she was already skipping forward to hug him from behind and hang her head over his shoulder for the expected mouthful. "Don't dip it in that, I don't like it." She wrinkled her nose at the red peppersauce. "Too spicy."

"Picky." Came the immediate reply. "Do you want me to fix you a plate?"

"She probably ate already." Laxmi sniped. She spooned a helping of Raitia onto her plate. "I'm sure her hosts wouldn't have sent her off on an empty stomach."

Dark eyes narrowed faintly and Dyshoka's smile melted away to a look of bland indifference. "I would take offense at what you're insinuating," she said, calmly. "But then that would bring me
down to your level. What's the matter? Your lover boy wouldn't let you stay the night?"

Laxmi's tanned face flushed a very visible red. "That's none of your business!" She half-hissed. "You're hardly one to talk when you're cavorting around with a mere girl."

"A girl that is more of a woman than you'll ever be." Dyshoka said, frostily. She straightened with a wave of powerful magic that rippled through the room, pushing everyone back into their seats. "At least I know that I could have stayed with her if I wanted to." The temperature in the room dropped several degrees. "Though just so we're all the same page and no one has any dirty thoughts, there was a dinner beach party to introduce a new member of the family and I was invited. We were up quite late and I didn't make a fuss when I came back. Didn't want to disturb anyone."

Laxmi snorted. "Of course not. How considerate of you."

Dyshoka bristled and then turned on her heel and headed for the door. "If you require my presence for the dance, summon me when you've reached the stadium." Her hands clenched and unclenched. "I intend to spend my day with the Gheyo daughter of the Deveraine clan. Her name is Dahlia, she holds an ACE rank and she has trained under Lady Paielda." Green-gold eyes flashed. "We have been exclusive for five years. Should our paths cross, I will be sure to introduce her."

Pure shock was visible on several faces around the table, including that of Quinn, the newly arrived Kyle and his werewolf girlfriend, Emily.

"Exclusive five years as of this year?" Emily inquired, bobbing her head in greeting to the Kalzik triad. "You've never said. You're always so quiet about it. Congratulations, love. That's impressive. I can only claim this lout for the past three." She gave Kyle's shoulder an affectionate nudge. "Morning."

"Because it is no one's business but my own." Dyshoka said, wearily. "Morning to you both." She gave a short nod to Patrick and swept from the room without another word.

Emily blinked and stared after her. A pair of furry, pointed, russet-hued ears popped up at the sides of her head. They twitched in the direction of the doorway before flicking back to where Kyle held a chair out for her at the table. "Did I miss something?" She asked, puzzled.

"Hardly." Kyle's expression shuttered. "Just someone who can't keep their own issues to themselves."

Laxmi's jaw dropped. "I can't believe you-!" She began and then stopped when the three older brothers sent her identical looks of disapproval. "What?"

Quinn stood up abruptly, his chair rocking backwards, but not falling when his mental reach steadied it. He fixed his older sister with a pointed, glare from his flashing teal eyes before he turned and stalked out of the room in silent protest.

Laxmi huffed.

"That was rude, even for you." Kyle snapped. He popped up from his chair, apparently about to follow after Quinn, when Emily snagged his wrist and tugged him back down. He turned to her with an expression of long-suffering and Emily shook her head faintly, signing something with her fingers. The green-haired fae brightened and settled back down.

"Laxmi, that was uncalled for." Hiram's firm voice kept the argument from starting up in a new vein. "You owe your sister an apology and I won't have you bringing this up again. You wouldn't
appreciate it if she returned the favor with that rude young man that you insist on spending your time with." His green-gold eyes flickered with a hint of tangible magic. "Taking your frustrations and temper out on your siblings isn't something I should have to speak to you about. You are old enough to know what is right and what is not."

"The Deveraine's daughter?" Surajini was lost in thought, her arms crossed over her chest. "Weren't they the ones with that horrible accident a season passed? The one with that daughter, what was her name—started with a K or something?" She frowned. "Kyle." Brilliant green eyes zeroed in on her adopted son. "Isn't she one of the Gheyos that works with you at the clinics?"

The fae nodded, slowly.

"What is she like? She's never come over here, has she?"

Kyle shook his head. "She is Gheyo. We usually don't mix."

"Mmm." Surajini murmured. "You know her?"

"She is fair and kind, if that is what you mean." Kyle sat back, allowing Emily to fill his plate along with hers.

"You took a liking to one of her underlings, didn't you?" Alejandro furrowed his brow. "I've seen him, a pale, pink-eyed thing." He waved a piece of flatbread at Kyle. "One of your kind."

Emily growled, her ears flattening against her head.

Alejandro immediately held up both hands. "Only an observation, you should know me by now, wolf."

The werewolf girl huffed an answer instead.

Bharin stuck his head through the doorway, looking years refreshed than he had for the past few weeks. "Jini," he flashed a smile. "You called?"

"Quinn forgot his potions." Surajini eyed him critically. "You're looking better."

"I had a good night." He stepped into the room and bent to kiss her forehead. "Did he skip them again?"

"No, his temper got the better of him." She sighed, reaching up to feather a hand across his broad, bared shoulders. "Must you really keep these scars."

He smiled, fondly. "At least for this season, would be nice. You can heal them when it's over, if you really must."

"They don't bother you?" Hiram leaned over to take a look. His eyebrows perked in interest. "Surface scarring?"

The dreadlocked head bobbed in answer. "Doesn't affect anything. Just looks good."

"Good is a relative opinion." Surajini half-scolded. "Patrick spiked his potions and he took two, go and find him, please? You ate already, yes?"

"You know I never eat on a presentation morning." Bharin grimaced. "Hard to do flips on a full stomach."
"Do you need any blood?" Patrick stood up from the table, coming over to perform a quick health check. "And are you presenting with a group or our Circle?"

"Whichever you wish." Bharin's dark eyes flickered to Hiram and back.

"We might not present formally until tomorrow." The Kalzik Alpha murmured, thinking carefully. "You are welcome to occupy yourself or join your fellow Gheyos in an open introduction, if that is agreeable."

Bharin was silent for a moment, then he nodded. "Shall I take the rest of them with me?"

"Only those that want to go. They're in their own wing." Patrick clapped him on the shoulder. "Which reminds me, I had something I wanted to speak to you about…"

"Quinn?" Bharin knocked softly on the young man's bedroom door.

Bharin!

Quinn's happy mental chirp sounded before the blond in question appeared. What's wrong —oh. I forgot. He made a face at the phials of potions in his mentor's hand.

"I know." The Jamaican said, dryly. "Your mother reminded me twice."

Quinn offered a smile of apology. Sorry. I'll take them, you can even witness if you have to.

The Gheyo chuckled. "I don't think she was quite that worried, but it probably wouldn't hurt." He handed the phials over, one at a time, watching as Quinn swallowed each with barely a grimace. "You look horrible."

I feel horrible. Quinn retorted. I can't believe she—did you hear what Laxmi said?

A faint smile touched "What happened?"

She started in on Dy like there was-

"Whoa. Calm down." Bharin held the last phial slightly out of reach. "Quinn, look at me." He waited until teal eyes met his own. "Do not make that your problem. It's Dy's. You know she doesn't want you fighting her battles."

But that was a low blow, you didn't hear what she said-!

"Dyshoka can take care of herself." Bharin said, firmly. "And she also has a habit of looking after you as well. Show her some respect."

Quinn sighed. I do, Bharin. You know I do.

"Indeed." The potion phial was handed over. "Now what is it you want to ask me?"

Teal eyes grew wide in near shock. How did you—never mind.

Bharin chuckled. "Your eyes say as much as your mouth would have." He banished the empty phials back to the sterilization room. "What is it you need?"

Remember Harry?

"Rather hard to forget." The tall man shook his head, settling his thick dreadlocks. "What about him?"
I accepted an exchange of Alpha's rights from his Theo.

Bharin blinked. "Did you?" He prompted, interested. "How did that come about?" He mentally tucked away the information of Quinn's address of the young Nott Alpha. 'his Theo' was a very interesting title to assign to one of Harry's bonded.

Semantics. Quinn waved a hand. I was wondering if you'd accept them on my behalf.

"…that depends. What are you expecting me to do about it?"

Whatever you like, I suppose. I won't be picky. In fact, if you don't have to tell me what you did, I'll just use my imagination and we can leave it at that.

"…the blood quill?" Bharin perked up, his dark eyes seemed to fade to pitch black.

Quinn nodded, sharply. Harry didn't deserve that and since I won't be returning to the clinic—did Mama tell you what happened?

"No, but I can make an educated guess." The Gheyo said, dryly. "Did she string you up by the toes?"

Quinn winced. Not quite. I have a feeling she just doesn't have the time to yell at me yet.

Bharin's lips twitched into a smile. "That is highly unlikely. I have never known your mother to keep from speaking her mind whenever she felt like it. You're probably safe for now."

Thanks...I think. Never mind. Will you do this for me? I want to file the acceptance claim as completed when I stop by to pick up my equipment.

"Have them ship it. I don't think you should stop there again."

Quinn blinked. Teal eyes narrowed. …Bharin, is there anything I should know?

"Nothing that would keep you from continuing on as you have been." Bharin didn't blink an eye. "When you visit, I expect to be behind you." There was a hint of warning in his tone.

Yes, sir. Quinn tipped his head in agreement. There was no reason for him to protest. Will you do this for me? For Harry?

"Am I allowed to take company?"

Who did you have in mind?

"No one, really. I was just thinking if I found someone."

Quinn frowned in thought for a moment, then he shrugged. I trust your judgment. Do whatever you think is best. His hands clenched into fists. And Bharin?

"Yes?"

Make sure the bitch pays.

The dark smile that settled on the Gheyo's face would have made the strongest Healer quiver in their standard-issue shoes. "I'll be thorough." He murmured. "You can expect that."
The portal deposited them in the center of a bustling transportation hub. Noise immediately filled the air, people talking and laughing with each other, the familiar hum of magic thrumming through the air. It was a bustling, vibrant sea of dragels, creatures and magical individuals moving towards a giant, golden archway carved into a high wall of black stone.

Ilsa's impressive Ergen portal continued to swirl for a full minute, as her Bonded reoriented themselves with the feeling of standing on solid ground. Smooth brown stone lined the road, with silver-stone sidewalks and decorative planters holding flowering plants and creeping ivy. It presented a lovely, picturesque view leading up to a massive stadium in the distance.

"Impressive, Ils." Greta trotted over, her arm linked through Edora's. The Gheyos had kept together before the portal and now they had spread out to protectively circle their own. "I didn't know you'd managed to smooth out all the kinks in your 'ports. That's the smoothest I've ever known you to cast."

Ilsa snorted. "Practice." She informed her soulbonded. "More practice than you would care to ever accumulate. Are we all settled?"

Greta huffed, but bumped shoulders, obligingly as she moved past to lend a hand in herding the children off the transportation module. Edora tugged her arm free and went to help her lead them into the safety of the crowds, so the floor could be cleared for the next group.

They were all bumped, jostled and half-shoved into the pressing flow of people as new arrivals clamored to reach the registration gates. Everyone avoided the glowing white transportation modules, the crowds seamlessly flowing around it and continuing on. It was a section of the street marked by pretty white stones in a circular formation with softly glowing runes denoting it as a magically dense area, suitable for boosting all methods of transport.

"A corner, over there!" Takar's clear voice directed them to a quieter spot in the swarm of dragels. They managed to make their way over to the designated area just as the newly vacated space hummed to life with another incoming 'port.

"Harry?" Theo's grip on his Bonded tightened accordingly. "Charlie."

Charlie wore a grin on his tanned face and his blue eyes were alight with interest as he stared at the crowds, trying to pick out faces and voices in the loud mess. He gave a nod to show that he'd heard Theo's call.

"Is it always like this?" Harry gratefully took Bahn's hand when his fellow Submissive happily trotted up beside him.

"What? Oh yes. Isn't it fabulous?" Bahn exclaimed, pale eyes snapping with excitement. "I do believe I've actually missed this." He sighed. "Circle up!" He called out.

The order was obeyed in the way that the children and Harry were herded into the center of the group and gently pressed up towards a wall, while the rest of the Bonded formed a half-circle around them, protecting them from the bustling crowd.

"Alright, once we've registered, we can-"

"Shayla's here!" Soula whooped. "I wanna see her."
"Wik and Mei just arrived." Dahlia pressed a finger to the left side of her temple. It glowed a faint purple-white, then faded, an external boost for her mental abilities. "The rest of mine are arriving."

"Your entire training circle?" Ilsa had to double-check. "All of them?"

"They'd best, at least for the first day." Dahlia grinned. "I'll bring them around to say hello, if we're nearby and if you like."

"Whatever works for you. I am only too curious for my own good."

"I like it when you're curious." Dahlia's smile softened. "It means you care when you're involved in the details of my life." She hesitated. "And I've really missed you, Mum."

There was a pause, then Ilsa nudged her as she walked past. "Missed you too, brat." Dahlia smiled and ducked her head to hide the brief expression of happiness.

"Oooh. I have friends." Greta's violet eyes shimmered. "Nice friends." She winked at Ilsa. "Are you coming with me today? You'd best say yes or I won't forgive you."

"Oi, hey, enough!" Delani elbowed Ilsa, frowning at her Bonded who were all about to run off without any concrete plans. "Whistle, would you?"

Ilsa obligingly fitted two fingers in her mouth and whistled sharply. Bonded and children immediately fell silent. "Thank Arielle." The grumpy Gheyo muttered. "Could you lot not keep quiet for a few minutes? This is important."

"Thank you, Ilsa." Delani cut in smoothly. "Now then, I understand you all have friends and places that you are eager to visit. I expect to hear a rough itinerary of where you're headed and how long you think you'll be there."

Koury's hand shot up. "What if you don't know?"

"Guess." Okahn thumped her on the head, his serious expression never wavering. "Make an educated guess." The Beta sighed. "I'll be wandering about on the Beta floors." He frowned. "For at least the entire day, until Ithycar arrives sometime before then. If he does, then expect me to be wherever he is after I've found him."

"That's acceptable." Delani nodded. "Let me know if you do find him. I imagine he'll be somewhere in this mess at least by the end of the day." Bahn and Takar nodded along with Okahn. "Who's next?"

"I will be with Bu," Salani spoke up, her arm around the pretty Pareya. "I'll help her take the children to the fun courts and then I'll trade off with whoever wants around lunchtime. I wanted to spend the evening soaking in the Hot Springs."

"I was heading for the Hot Springs this afternoon too." Ilsa added. "I figured I'd take the girls with me." She nodded towards Dahlia and Soula. Lorelei immediately sidled closer as if to include herself as well.

"Gheyo pits." Greta and Loren's hands went up in tandem. They exchanged a glance then reshuffled themselves to stand side by side.

"I suppose I can join them." Edora fidgeted.

"That's fine." Delani allowed. Her pale eyes narrowed. "Which form are you taking for today?"
The thin Gheyo hesitated, then sighed. "The other." She rubbed her arm, the smooth, unscarred one as if trying to ward off an old memory. "As if I'd pass up the opportunity."

"Then why are you still-" Bhindi began.

"Leave him alone." Bahn snapped. "You'll change for registration?" An affirmative nod was all that the elfin dragel needed, before he looked to Delani again. "I wanted to take Harry to see the markets and the Submissive floors. We would probably visit the spa if that's where half of you will end up by the evening's end."

"When is the introduction?" Sueh wanted to know. "I know we're somewhere in the mix of the High Nobles, but where exactly does it put us?"

"Somewhere in mid-morning or noon." Aracle counted on his fingers. "Can everyone stay occupied and somewhere semi-appropriate for immediate transport until noon?"

A few nods and murmurs came from the eager circle of dragels. "Good." Delani gave a quick nod. "Takar, if you've traveling with Okahn, then please take Charlie with you." She nodded towards the redhead. "Charlie, you'll be in good hands, don't worry of it. Theo, if you'd like to stay with me. I'll be visiting the Alpha floors to mix and mingle."

"That sounds fine." Theo had finally released Charlie and Harry's hands, but he'd stayed close to the redhead and tugged Harry in front of him with a well-timed grab to those expensive robes. "What about Harry?"

"Dibs on Harry!" Soula's hand shot up in the air. "He can stay with Shayla and me if Dera isn't taking him straight up to the floors."

A barely disguised flicker of relief showed on Bhindi's face. "Thank Arielle." She muttered. She dodged the elbow her twin aimed at her stomach.

"And where will you be?" Delani fixed her knowing look on the feminine half of the twin Submissives."

"I will have to make introductions on our Circle's behalf." Bhindi snapped. "Where do you think I'll be?"

The Circle winced as a collective whole and even the children avoided her fiery gaze.

Delani grimaced. "Right. Are you fine alone?"

"As if I'd take any of you." Bhindi scowled. "That would be terribly-"

"I'll be with her." Bahn interrupted. "We'll be together," he finished, quietly. He moved to stand beside her, a mite closer than before.

Bhindi rolled her eyes. "How comforting. Now I'm worried."

"It's necessary," Bahn returned, smoothly. "We can't have you hexing anyone that dares to suggest the wrong thing."

"If their brains were in a properly functioning order," Bhindi began. "Then they wouldn't even dream of thinking to ask such vulgar, despicable things!"

Bahn simply nudged her, a silent gesture meant to quiet. "Is that good enough, Lani?" He looked to
his Alpha expectantly. "We'll mostly be where we normally would and on our respective floors. You can 'port me in anytime, if you have need of me." He looked to Harry. "And I suppose after my charming daughters are through with you," he winked. "You're all welcome to find me on the Submissive floors and we can have fun there."

Delani cast a look around them all. "Good?" She checked. "Alright then, best behavior, everyone."

"Name, rank, element, Circle and Social." The young Gheyo at the registration booth rattled off the categories without looking up from her record books where several quick quotes quills busily scribbled away. "Please stand on the blue square at your preferred halfing form for measuring."

There was an audible snort and then Ilsa moved to the head of the group. "Ilsa Gorgens, Gheyo Ace, Earth, Deveraine, Clan Chief's heiress for the Earthen element."

The young woman's head snapped up at once. Twin spots of pink generously covered her cheeks as she swallowed nervously. "Er, Lady Gorgens. I ah, sorry." She scrambled to wave the quills to order and quickly stood up. "If you could step over to the," her voice faltered in the face of Ilsa's angry glare. "Er, right." She ducked her head, fighting the urge to bare her neck.

Ilsa stepped onto the square and took a deep breath. She rolled her shoulders back and her neck to the side before hunching forward into a crouch and calling out her wings with a primal screech.

A smattering of applause, whistles and cheers came from around them and even the young woman couldn't keep the smile off of her face as she stared up at the gorgeous expanse of strongly plated wings. "They look lovely, Lady Ilsa." She murmured. The quick quotes quills scribbled away furiously on the record books as a charmed measuring tap whisked around her taking the necessary measurements of height and wingspan.

A sharp gasp came from Greta's corner and the Deveraine Circle turned to her, watching as the experienced Gheyo seemed to be struggling to hold her temper. "Anything you feel like telling me, Ilsa?" Greta's voice was not happy. She took in the new layer of heavy, scaled plating—and the formation of two new crippled claws, one on the middle at the top spine of each wing. Those were new. She did not like what their presence meant.

"Absolutely not," came the irritated reply.

"Did it hurt?" Greta sniped. "I rather hope it did."

"It was fifteen years ago," Ilsa snapped. "You don't really think I spent it eating sweets and lazing about?"

"Well, one never really knows-" Callistair began.

"I'm sure that's not what she meant." Loren interrupted. His own blue eyes tracked the fluttering movements of the strong wings. "But I am with Greta there, I didn't think you'd be one to take it that far."

"And whatever gave you that idea?" Ilsa shot back. Her glower had begun to darken in response to the personal questions that she had no desire to answer in public company. "Are you quite finished yet?"

"One moment." The young woman tried to smile, looking anywhere but at those stormy eyes. "Any other changes I should document?"
"None." Ilsa growled.

"Thank you kindly, my lady." The young gheyo bowed formally. "You may proceed through the gates." She turned, hand waving the next one forward.

"Greta Deveraine, Gheyo King, Storm, Deveraine and Private ranking."

"Private-?" The young woman frowned. "I-oh." She brightened, seeing the notation that appeared in the book in hand when Greta stepped onto the blue square. "Of course, my apologies Lady Deveraine." She watched as Greta stepped up and shook herself all over, before half-crouching to call out her halving form in much the same manner as Ilsa had.

Harry watched the process repeat itself as the members of the Deveraine Circle filed by one by one. He wondered what he'd be answering when it came his turn. He elbowed Theo, relieved to find that his Alpha hovered close by—just as he always did.

"What is it, treasure?" Theo's warm voice ghosted over his ear.

"I'm Harry Potter, Submissive, Nameless and Nott and what?" He tried to fill in the blanks. Theo surely had some social standing, at least if he was claimed under Ilsa's guardianship. He suddenly wished he knew more about the inherited seals Quinn had spoken of. Something about the Evanson and Perevell families. He made a mental note to speak to Theo about it. Perhaps there was a way to do research, even if half of the archives and the central city were shut down for the Hunting Season.

Theo smirked. "Harry Potter, Submissive, Nameless, Nott, High Noble." He explained. "I belong to Ilsa and she identifies as a Clan heiress, which would make students below her that are not blood family, at least, high noble." He looked to Charlie, a silent prompt.

"Charlie Weasley-" The redhead stopped. According to Ilsa, his mother had been the dragel in the family, which meant that his father was not. She'd explained at one point, the intricacies of dragel family lineage and suggested he decide on which name he wanted to use. His mother's name, Prewitt—wasn't a name that was common in the wizarding world. In fact, he could hardly remember hearing anything about them, save for his famous uncles, Gideon and Fabian.

"You can use whichever you like," Theo said, quietly, as if sensing the internal debate. "What's wrong with it?"

The redhead half-frowned. "Would there—would there be others here?" He nodded towards the Deveraines. The possibility of meeting family members he'd never even known of was both thrilling and worrisome in the same instance. He wouldn't mind meeting dragel family, but in the same breath, he didn't want to think of what that meant. His life had changed quite significantly in a matter of days since he'd run into Theo and Harry. It definitely wouldn't return to what it was before.

"Of your family?" Theo hesitated. "Probably, the chances of you actually running into each other are fairly low. There's enough folks here that you likely won't see them the entire season unless you're searching."

Charlie hesitated and then nodded. "Weasley, then." He said, after a moment. Until he knew more of his extended family and whether they were still alive and present in Nevarah, he would use his father's name. "Charlie Weasley, Beta, Fire, Nott and High Noble?"

"That's just fine." Theo smiled.
"What about you?" Harry poked him in the side, finding himself relaxing in spite of the loud crowd and the current setting. There was an air of hope and excitement sparking in the air and his empathy was happily feeding off of the good vibes. It was hard to be anything but excited when literally brimming over with curiosity and interest.


Harry grinned, impishly. "Needs a few more titles." He teased, hearing Bahn rattling off his own stats as his turn was called. He wiggled his fingers in Theo's light grip. "It's fun." He tugged the hand up and touched the tip of Theo's nose. "You make faces when I do."

Theo's elegant eyebrows arched upwards in a mixture of surprise and amusement. "Really?" He made a playful bite for the finger and held the hand steady enough to suck it in his mouth.

Emerald eyes grew wide, darkening at once with an interested purr rumbling in the back of his throat.

Charlie rolled his eyes and thumped them both on the head. "Save it for later." He mock-growled. "And pay attention!" He caught Harry in headlock and held him snug against his side, batting away Theo's teasing fingers.

Their Alpha gave a fond smile, nudging Charlie before turning his attention back to the cataloguing happening in front of them. It was now Bahn's turn and his entire Circle had passed through, save for Delani and Aracle, who stood to the side directing who would be next.

"...Bahn Deveraine, Submissive, Lyte Submissive, Air Elemental, belonging to the House of Deveraine, Former Crown Royal for the Asylonth Elves of the North..."

Harry wriggled ineffectively against Charlie's strong grip. He tried not to scowl when he realized that there didn't seem to be a specific way to get free of the hold without resorting to magic. Brute strength was certainly not helping matters any and from the easily unaffected air about the redhead, Harry suddenly realized just how the dragon tamer must've handled his mischief-prone twin siblings.

"Charlie-!" He huffed, pushing at the elbow locked beneath his chin. It wasn't that uncomfortable, just a bit of an annoyance.

"Calm down," came the steady reply. Charlie patted his head, affectionately tugging the wayward strands. "You're fine."

Harry twisted again, because he could. He was fine, but it didn't mean he couldn't complain about it.

"Harry Potter, Submissive, Nameless, Nott, High Noble." Harry recited, obediently, when the Gheyo looked to him for the necessary information.

She gave a nod of approval, tilting her head towards the newly vacated space on the floor. Okahn had just passed through and now, Aracle, Delani, Theo and Charlie were left as Harry moved forward.

He stepped up to the glowing blue floor circle and waited. It almost felt like the floor was alive with a gentle pulse of magic radiating from within. Harry smiled inwardly as he tugged on his
magic now that he was better attuned to it. Theo's explanation on calling out his wings was fairly simple. He was not used to calling them out on demand, simply whenever instinct had come forward, he'd responded in a way that made them extend. This would be the first official time he'd be bringing them out on his own—apart from when he'd first come into his inheritance.

"Breathe in, don't think about it." The young woman advised. The smile on her face was friendly and cheerful. "First season?"

Harry offered what he hoped was a smile. It was hard to think of manners when he really just wanted to stare at everything in slack-jawed amazement. His very life, it seemed, was an exercise in contradictions and unbelievable adventures. He'd moved from depressing, dark and dangerous, to strangely safe, colorful and amazing. "Is it that obvious?" He tried to stand still, feeling the familiar itchy feeling rippling over him—the sensation of having too much power singing beneath his skin. He tried to rein in it, even though the effort gave him a touch of a headache.

He could feel the happy emotions of everyone present and it drowned him over and over again in a cheerful rhythm of sensations. He half-shrugged, feeling the weight of his wings settle and the relief that came with settling into his Halfling form. This sensation was familiar and he knew it to be the incentive he needed to draw his wings out. He could see the smattering of silver and peach colored scales covering the back of his hands as they remained, fingered, but with sharper angles.

An experimental flex produced wicked looking claws from the tips and Harry grinned, unable to help himself. It was painless now, than when he last remembered it. Perhaps he was finally adjusting to everything after all.

"Only to me." She winked. "You're adorable—most Submissives are, anyway." She ignored his blush, quill hovering over her record book. "Just bring your wings out whenever you're ready and we'll be on with it, hm?"

Harry sucked in a breath and blew it out, hard. In the same way as he'd seen Theo do before, his own silvery-peach tinted wings unfurled with a leathery snap and a very satisfying pull. He realized, belatedly, that he hadn't thought anything of his robes, but apparently Theo had thought of that for him as the wings simply passed through the fabric without ripping, tearing or stretching. A complicated charm, Harry was sure. He stood still as the charmed measuring tape bustled around him and slithered between his feet, under his arms and over his wings.

The ticklish feeling made him giggle and twitch, before it snapped across his nose and blew what could have been a raspberry before it skittered off to hover by the young lady.

"And all done!" She smiled, warmly. "You did very well. A copy of your first records are available for purchase once the Hunting Season is over, you may find it at the Central City archives within a week of the last feast."

"Thank you." Harry found himself smiling back at her. He peered up at his wings that hung comfortably over him, almost glowing, it seemed, in the bright morning light.

"They're beautiful." She commented, turning to wave Charlie forward as Theo stepped back. "You'll probably have quite a few offers if you keep them out. Not me though, I'm already spoken for." She winked. "Now then, handsome?" She turned to Charlie as Harry scooted off of the glowing circle on the floor.

"That was fun!" Harry curved one wing forward, stroking it lightly with his fingers. He didn't really want to pull them back in, but he didn't want all the offers that were supposedly to come either. Ilsa's prediction the night before had been troublesome enough, when he'd thought of it and
then there was the whole business of Alec, that had set him in a less-than-agreeable mood and realistically speaking, Harry knew he came with quite a bit of baggage. It wouldn't be fair to dump that on a new Bonded.

He would hunt, after all, Bahn had made sure to extract that promise from him, but in the same vein, he wanted to take it slow. He would take his time to know them before diving into entire business of courting and bonding and—Theo's warm chuckle caught his ears.

Harry turned in time to see the expression of pure amusement on Theo's face. "What?"

"Your wings are lovely," his Alpha complimented. "And they are also drawing attention."

A pale pink flush crept up Harry's neck as he realized that there were quite a few appreciative stares coming his way. Without a second thought, his wings folded and receded, melting back into his body before he'd even consciously thought of it. "Right. Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about." Charlie grimaced as he folded his own back, but didn't quite recall them. Theo shifted closer and when his hand rested on one tanned arm, Charlie's navy wings shrank and disappeared beneath his rich robes. He gave a half-smile in thanks.

"Now, where to?" Theo looked around, taking in the busy hustle and bustle. They had moved through from outside into the outer circle of a giant stadium. It could be seen in the distance with colored flags sectioning off certain portions of it. Before the stadium, the wide open grounds were roped off into what appeared to be various themed sections with tents and booths set up along the sides and center.

Harry was reminded of the Quidditch World Cup with the massive stadium in the distance. The hype of shrieking children combined with more than a thousand chattering voices and the steady thrum of vibrant magic sparking in the air, was somehow the same and different as he felt Charlie's hand rest on his shoulder.

Taking comfort in the gesture, Harry threw a smile over his shoulder. He'd just take the day as it came and however it came. He would have fun.

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CHARACTER SNIPPET : AIDEN (Hellhound) : ARYTHMOOR ESTATE

"She's where?" Aiden paused in his signing, quill poised over the impressive stack of parchment. He frowned at Melacor. "When did she arrive and why was I not told?" He hadn't been able to excuse himself from legalities long enough to fetch a certain human witch.

Now, his aide, the young Melacor stood submissively before the great ornate desk, repeating his news with care. "...and they said that the Immortals were waking, with careful notation of Nikolandria, belonging to the Necromancer, Tavit."

"That bloody-!" Aiden broke off, abruptly. He shoved the chair back from his desk, leaping to his feet and pacing the room with sudden fierceness. He ignored Melacor's barely noticeable flinch. The young hound-child was still exhausted and stressed—a single night of good sleep would not have cured everything. "Are the rooms ready?"

"Yes, Lord Aiden."

"How ready? That's rather...fast. Even for you."
"I saw it myself, Lord Aiden." Came the immediate reply.

"...that's very well done, then." Aiden inclined his head, pausing in his warpath long enough to scowl fiercely across the room. "I shall have to fetch her." He growled. His eyes flickered a deeper, darker red. "If only to keep Niko off of the streets. How did she—never mind, I know how she did it, what I'd like to know is why—what was she doing at a health clinic of all places?"

"She did not say, milord and I did not instruct them to ask her anything beyond that."

"That is fine. You did well. It would not have been their place to ask anything else. She would only ever answer to another Immortal or that infuriating master of hers, Tavit." He rubbed his forehead, tugging at the pitch black strands. "I will be busy for the day, Melacor. You may handle everything as I-" he stopped, eying the boy speculatively. "Come here."

"Milord?" The bowed head finally lifted a few inches, tilting to the side to allow those light red eyes to rest on the impressive figure of the Alpha Hellhound.

A slender, grey finger beckoned in silent command.

Melacor straightened and hurried over, bowing once out of respect and then immediately dropping to his knees, hands on his thighs, head bent.

"You are a credit to us all," Aiden murmured. He patted the head of smooth, silky hair. "I think I shall take you for a walk, pup, and perhaps some exercise. Is that agreeable?"

There was a hitch and then Melacor's shoulders quivered ever so slightly as he resumed breathing. "I would be—that is," he cleared his throat. "Woof."

Aiden's smile was fanged and proud.

Melacor shook himself out, all over, blurring from a young boy to a menacing black hound with blood red eyes. He sat obediently at his lord's feet, tail curled around his sturdy paws and ears twitching attentively. He licked the proffered hand when Aiden held it out, and allowed his lord to curl his fingers around the thick, bejeweled collar 'round his neck for immediate transportation.

It'd been ages since he'd been allowed out of the manor. He stretched as best as he could without tugging against his lord's strong grip. A low whine sounded in his throat.

Aiden chuckled, darkly. "Patience, pup." He chided. "Patience. You are not to kill, unless I give you leave."

The hellhound puppy barked in answer.

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**SNAPE'S QUARTERS : NEVARAH**

"Calida?" Terius stuck his head around the bedroom door, searching for their resident Carrier. The young Spanish beauty seemed to have vanished without so much as a hint of where she'd been headed. "Draco?" He tried again and sighed, absently rubbing his stomach.

He'd had a mild fit of temper when his Bonded had managed to wear out his last nerve as he'd been working on the backlog of paperwork that required his approval for the Hunting Season festivities. One of the greatest chores of being an active Councilman was signing his name on documents that required him to actually read them. He'd been cross-eyed, heavy-headed and short-tempered when Draco had finally poured some ridiculous prank potion into his tea, resulting in the bright pink
feather-covered arm hanging limply at his side.

Terius sighed again, leaning against the doorjamb. He hadn't really meant to snap at his Submissive, especially not with such sharp words and in full-view of Severus, who had, understandably, become rather upset. They'd argued then and Calida had finally stepped in, complaining that their voices were interrupting one of her necessary naps.

Of course, he'd started in on her, too stressed to really care beyond that.

Severus had then ordered Draco and Calida out of the room, to allow him a chance to 'talk' to Terius.

The weary Pareya gingerly fingered the swollen bite mark on the right side of his neck. They hadn't exactly talked. At least, not in the way that required words. He swallowed and turned away from the empty room, reaching out again through his bonds to find where his Bonded had wandered off to.

It was starting to look as if Severus had taken them out for a walk and granted him the privacy and quiet he'd been ranting about. A faint twinge of guilt settled in his stomach as Terius moved from the sleeping quarters, back to the kitchen to prepare a cup of tea. It seemed as if all they'd done since entering Nevarah, was to snap and snark at each other.

He dearly wished that Draco was in a hunting mood, because he didn't know how much longer he could handle playing a role that felt so awkward and foreign to him. He was old enough to understand that they were subconsciously shuffling him into the role of Beta, even though his rank and inherent dragel nature was Pareya.

Calida understood and tried to help, but the stress wasn't good for her or the baby and she was first and foremost, a Carrier. His Pareya instincts demanded that he protect and shelter her in similar fashion to Draco.

Draco. Terius heated a cup of water to steam and waved his hand over the clear liquid, magically preparing his favored tea blend. He would have to apologize to both Severus and Calida, but Draco's apology would have to be even more spectacular. His fierce little Submissive could hold a grudge like no other and had an extraordinary amount of patience when it came to their mismatched little Circle. Draco didn't deserve the harsh scolding for wanting a little more attention and something to amuse himself.

Terius gave a rueful smile at the pink-feathered arm. He hoped the feathers would wear off soon. It still felt quite strange and he had already tried and failed to call his scales out. Of course, he hadn't really been trying his hardest—Pareya instinct would let him call forth an absolute power—but he hadn't felt like using it for something as trivial as a prank.

He did deserve it somewhat, even if it did leave him feeling somewhat vulnerable. The paperwork had piled up in the time he'd spent at Severus's side teaching at Hogwarts and dodging back and forth between realms to smooth out legal things with Draco. He was seriously beginning to think that he would have to fire his secretary after all, because the witch was far too empty-headed and useless to be of any real help.

His previous secretary had taken off for maternity leave and her recommended replacement had taken off to attend to her new bonding—courtesy of a flash-formed Soul-screamed Circle. So he'd had to find a third replacement on his own and so far, she'd been nothing but a headache. The resulting paperwork from the backlog and missed meetings, hearings and council sessions had earned him two formal reprimands, fifteen ridiculous fines and an ordered official appearance.
Terius curled his un-feathered hand around the delicate china cup and made his way from the kitchen to the sitting room where the muggleborn witch, Hermione Granger, lay. He seated himself on the sofa across the room from her and lifted the cup to his lips, inhaling the fragrant jasmine-green-tea blend.

Taking a long, slow draw, he swallowed the burning mouthful and made a pleased sound in the back of his throat. He missed the times like this, when things were quiet and his Bonded were not clamoring around him for something or the other. He knew Draco needed more attention—namely, more fussing. He knew Severus needed a sounding board—and less experimental potions. He knew Calida needed a familiar face—to at least speak with him, as she was entirely new to Severus and Draco.

He knew it all, but couldn't bring himself to step up and fill shoes that felt far too big.

*Stress.* The word echoed in his mind and Terius drained the cup in another three gulps. He tugged on his magic to refill it when he waved the feathered hand over the empty cup. A moment later, he simply held the steaming cup in his hands and stared at Hermione's pale, well-blanketed form.

They hadn't had much excitement after Harry and his Bonded had left. Whatever strangeness had happened when they were there, had vanished when they had left. A lingering feeling of unease remained, and Terius had tucked it away for later thought, but of course, he'd been too busy to pay attention to any of it.

Now, as he sat there thinking, a faint flicker of shadow caught his eye. He shifted on the sofa, lifting the cup to his lips once more. When he looked again, there was nothing there. Self-consciously, he drew his wings out, rising from the sofa and deliberately not looking behind him as his Pareyic instincts began to emerge.

Something was not right here and he could feel it in the same way that he could breathe.

He didn't dare react.
In Dahlia's Company

Chapter Summary

When Ilsa's Gheyo daughter, Dahlia, offers to let her younger siblings and Harry tag-along for the morning half of things, Harry find himself in an unexpected position with unexpected results.

Chapter Notes

RECAP: Harry and Co arrive at the public stadium to be registered and admitted, along with the Deveraine circle, for his first official Hunt. They all decide to split up, once they are inside, pairing off according to rank to see to their political and recreational duties. Harry is separated from Theo and Charlie, to be enjoying himself with fellow Submissive Soula Deveraine (Ilsa's youngest daughter), and Dahlia and the others. In the meantime, Terius(Snape Pareya) finds himself at odds with his circle, because they are unbalanced without a Beta and Aiden(the hellhound) discovers that Niko has been messing around in Hermione's head.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry watched as Bahn, Bhindi, Theo and Delani disappeared into the crowd. The Deveraine Alpha hadn't wasted a moment's time in whisking Theo away, with warnings to her fellow bondmates to be on guard, the entire Circle dispersed. Bahn and Bhindi linked hands and vanished rather quickly. The Pareya were next to scatter, taking the children with them, until only those of Hunting age remained, along with the Gheyos and Betas.

"Dahlia!"

A new voice caught Harry's attention and he turned in time to see a pretty Indian young woman half-lift and twirl Dahlia around in a hug that was definitely more than friendly. He was surprised to see Dahlia's face brighten considerably as she let herself be whirled around without protest, laughing honestly for the first time since that morning.

"Dy!" Laughter spilled out as Dahlia swirled to a stop. "Dyshoka, put me down, silly! You'll reintroduce my breakfast to the morning air and I highly doubt that anyone here would appreciate it." Her dark eyes sparkled merrily as her feet touched the ground once more. "I certainly wouldn't. Though I will say that it's good to see you too." She hugged her lover-friend back and impulsively smacked a light kiss to the corner of that slanted jaw. "And I only saw you a few hours ago, to what do I owe such a welcome?"

"Aren't I allowed to spoil you?" The dark-haired beauty retorted. She was taller than Dahlia by at least a head and her height suddenly made the Gheyo appear rather short. "That isn't fair at all." Dyshoka stepped back from the embrace and flung her thick, black braid of hair over one shoulder. The golden chains and chimes threaded through it tinkled gaily as she tucked a few strands of hair behind her heavily jeweled ears. "You look lovely."
"You may spoil me all you like," Dahlia retorted. "And you look quite nice yourself. I'd forgotten how gorgeous you look in your full regalia. Impressive. I didn't know it was possible to move quite so easily wearing so much gold." She ducked away from the half-hearted smack. "Are you presenting today or tomorrow? I don't remember the order of the names, too much trouble to keep all of the letters straight. You must be so excited." Her smile dimmed when Dyshoka's smile wavered. "Dy? What happened?"

"Hmph?" The smile became forced, the warmth suddenly fading into a bland blankness. "It's nothing to worry about. It's fine."

"It's fine?"

"I'm fine," she corrected.

"Don't give me that, who said what?" Dahlia bristled, protectively. Her dark brows furrowed together and a faint flicker of her warrior's aura flared to life with a ripple of white-purple magic giving off the softest of glows.

Harry sucked in a breath when he found himself actually seeing and watching the aura flare to life, before it faded from his sight. For a moment, he thought he had been seeing things, but realizing how unusual and strange everything had been since their arrival in Nevarah, he knew it was likely real and probably meant something that he would figure out later on. The name sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it just yet. His brow furrowed in confusion.

"Nothing to worry over, lovey." Dyshoka twisted away from Dahlia's questing hands and hugged her from behind, effectively redirecting the conversation away from her person. "Ah, you've brought friends and the whole clan?" She gave a light-fingered wave, the forced smile relaxing by a few degrees as her interested eyes flickered over the group. "Hello, everyone. Good to see you all again."

"Dyshoka," Greta murmured with an inclination of her head. She smiled at the closeness between the two girls. "Are you here alone?" Her violet eyes swept appreciatively over the well-dressed figure. "allow me to echo my daughter's compliments, you look quite stunning."

Dyshoka was clad in a brightly colored, short-sleeved cropped top, with a full, embroidered skirt, showing off a well-toned torso and dainty, dancer's feet. Gold was her accent of choice, with a navel ring, a belly chain, anklets and a collection of equally colorful bangles on both arms. The traditional collar necklace matched the pink and purple colors of the traditional outfit, best known as Lehenga choli. She managed a more genuine smile at the compliment and lightly rocked forward on her heels to make the jewelry tinkle.

"Doesn't matter if you are." Ilsa picked up. She flashed a rare smile. "You look lovely." The sentiment was echoed as the older Gheyo looked past the fancy clothes to take note of the famous Kalzik symbols and runes expertly hidden beneath the traditional mehendi—dark tattoos that covered her hands up to her wrists and her feet up to her ankles—a sign of great power within and without. "I had no idea this was your—mark."

Dyshoka's smile grew wide and slightly knowing as she realized what the older women were reading from her very obvious outfit. For once, she was showing off something that she often kept very-well hidden. "Thank you kindly, your ladyships. It is not something I tend to advertise. I see no reason to do so."

"Indeed." Ilsa hummed.
"None of that title business, please." Greta rolled her eyes. "I don't think I'll ever live it down, being a lady and all that. Have fun today—take Dahlia somewhere and wipe that frown off of her face. She's been grumpy since she woke and we all know how irritating that can be. You have my full permission, whether you need it or not."

"Mother!" Dahlia blushed the faintest hues of pink, but she didn't move away from the complicated embrace of her lover.

Dyshoka snickered softly.

"Greta." Ilsa scolded, lightly. "You're being difficult. You've held your title the same amount of time as I have—since birth. Now, come on. The crowds are making me twitch and I'm sure the younger ones are too polite to tell us to amuse ourselves elsewhere. I want to visit the circuits before they start drawing for cage matches."

"I'm being difficult?" The taller woman snorted. "Oh well now that's just rich." Greta stalked after the shorter Gheyo and they disappeared into the crowd. "You're not taking any cage matches, if I have anything to say about it. You left a lot out of that conversation of fifteen years ago and you have some nerve waltzing off and—are you listening to me? Twitching doesn't even begin to cover your—"

Dyshoka blinked at their departure, before slipping one hand down to rest on Dahlia's bared waist. "Am I missing something?"

"If you are, then I missed it too." Dahlia chuckled. "They'll probably work it out once they've had a chance to spar with each other. I don't think they have, not since Mum arrived anyway. It's our way of handling things and I think they're both fairly upset. A few hours of hacking and slashing will likely fix everything."

Aracle winced. "Which means they'll be satisfied but in terrible tempers. I can't wait." The sarcasm was too obvious to ignore as he fished a mint out of somewhere and popped it in his mouth. A second later, he automatically produced a handful of them and held it out in silent invitation.

As if by habit, nearly everyone took one.

Harry found himself smiling as he accepted the treat for what it was. He unwrapped the sweet and popped it into his mouth, sucking on the round minty ball. It fizzed briefly in his mouth and then gave out an intense, cooling sensation that sent a delightful shiver through his body and seemed to sharpen his senses in the same instant. He stared at the wrapper in amazement, then at his fingers, coated in the faintest dusting of powdered sugar. He definitely couldn't quite recall the last one doing that. He turned questioning eyes to the Rheyo who merely winked in answer to the silent question and gave a tilt of his head toward Charlie.

"Coming, flamehead? We don't have all day, time to cut a few lines, eh?"

Charlie shrugged, moving to join him as the Gheyos began to pair off. Takar and Okahn were hovering, impatient, but waiting for him anyway. "Flamehead?" He questioned, accepting the hearty slap on the back as Takar half-nudged him forward. He turned back halfway to twitch his fingers in a wave before the older Betas pulled him away.

Harry's attention was redirected from Theo and Charlie's departure to Dahlia and Dyshoka. He now realized just how insignificant one could feel in a giant crowd, as he realized that all familiar faces had left. Well, familiar by way of those he knew from outside of Nevarah, that is.
"Relax," Ariki's warm voice was friendly and light, as he passed Harry another candy. "For later," he said, quickly. "It'll be a fun day. Don't stress over it."

"Who's stressing?" Soula wanted to know. She stood on tip-toe, trying to see over the heads of the crowd.

Harry took the extra sweet, tucking it into his pocket. Seeing Soula's strange dance, he took a quick check of his surroundings and realized there was one distinct advantage to being a Submissive. A dragel Submissive, at least. Next to Soula, they were definitely the shortest ones in the group. Standing on tip-toe did little to alleviate the problem.

Taking stock of his surroundings was a habit that Harry tried not to think of, the moment that all familiar faces were out of view. He didn't want to remember why this was a good habit to have, because the reason he did so now, was definitely not a good one. The quick security check was helpful though.

There was Ariki, Soula, Dahlia and Dyshoka, along with a dark-haired girl who Soula had pointed out as another sister sharing the same father, named Lorelei. His furrow of confusion turned to one of concentration. He was certain he'd heard Dahlia say something about Wikhn and Mimei and then Soula had spoken of the pretty Air elemental, Shayla, the girl who could've been Luna's twin. He remembered her with something of a smile, hoping that he would have a chance to know her a little better today.

"Ariki, I can't see a thing. Can you check for me?" Soula turned her best smile on her older brother, rocking forward on her tip-toes again. "Please?"

"If she's coming, then she'll be here." Ariki sighed. But even as he spoke, he stretched up to scan the crowds.

"Would you even be able to see her?" Lorelei snorted. "She's an heiress isn't she? I doubt she'll just waltz through the crowds to come see someone like you. Personally, I'd rather not put up with two shrieking submissives on their first hunt." The brunette inspected her fingernails. "I'd invite my own friends, but they're all busy being introduced for the morning show, so I'll be tagging around until one of them calls in, alright?"

"Hey!" Soula protested. "That's so unfair. We don't shriek and it's your first hunt too."

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"What are we, leftovers?" Ariki blinked at her. "Be nice, Lei."

"I'm not trying to be fair," Lorelei snapped her fingers in the air, casting a wandless tempus. "Or nice. I hate first days. They always feel so weird and strange and awkward. I wish I could stay home. How long are we waiting here and who are we waiting for anyway?"

"I hope you wouldn't leave without me, cupcake." Mimei's voice turned heads before her stunning figure came into view. She was a vision of perfectly coiffed blonde hair and strawberry pink, with a fat bubblegum bubble growing from her pursed lips.

Walking beside her, a vision of brooding darkness, Wikhn's pink-eyed gaze only seemed to compliment her as he pantomimed popping said sticky bubble with one pointed fingernail. They walked in stride, dressed to the hilt in shiny, plated armor with dangerous looking knives, swords with various weapons fastened upon their person.

"Oi, don't even think about it," Mimei's dancing eyes flashed him a look as she snapped her gum and gave a cheery nod to all of them. "Hey Chief," She sketched a bow to Dahlia, head dipping
low, hair swinging over her shoulders. "Ace." The respectful title was immediately following, her tone serious.

"My Ace," Wikhn echoed. He clicked his heels together, eyes remaining locked with Dahlia's dark ones as he completed the formal show of respect.

"Wik, Mei." Dahlia's smile softened at once and she gave a salute to acknowledge the respect paid to her. "You look dressed to kill."

Mimei wrinkled her nose. "Please don't remind me. I just want to be laid before this day is over. Multiple times, preferably."

Wikhn elbowed her as Lorelei and Harry choked in unison. "There are virgin ears present, you twit." He rapped her sharply on the head, dancing out of reach of her jab. "Show some respect." His gaze flickered over the crowd and rested a second longer on Harry, lips quirking into the tiniest semblance of a smile. "Are we waiting on the rest of the crew?"

"I don't know," Dahlia frowned. "I didn't exactly order you all to assemble, though I did make sure you knew when I crossed the gate." She nodded towards the grand entrance. "We can all catch up later, I suppose."

"We're not leaving without Shayla." Soula folded her arms across her chest. "I mean it, Dahlia. Whatever issues you have with her, I don't and I want her here."

Dahlia's eyes narrowed faintly and she perked a brow. "Suit yourself."

Before the tension could stretch, Dyshoka intervened. She hugged Dahlia from behind once more, resting her head atop Dahlia's braided bun. "I'm bored, babe. Take me dancing?" She offered a winning smile, her dark eyes pleading. "I'm sure it'd be good for all the firsties too. They couldn't possibly have a problem with dancing."

"Isn't it a little early for that?" Dahlia ignored the innocent expression, her own dark eyes narrowing faintly. "And you never volunteer for dancing first thing in the day unless you're really stressed. What happened? Was it those idiot sisters of yours again?"

"They aren't all idiots." Dyshoka defended. "Some of them are quite nice." Her stomach growled faintly and she looked heaven-ward. "Alright, I take it back. I skipped breakfast for reasons that I refuse to divulge, and if you wish me to remain in good humors then you will remedy that at your first opportunity."

"Oh I will, will I?" Dahlia frowned. "You're not supposed to skip meals. What were you thinking?"

"Feed me first, then dancing and then we can decide just how stressed I am, hm?" Dyshoka tapped her feet, causing the thick anklets to tingle enticingly. "It shouldn't affect my healer status as long as I have something to eat within the next hour, so hurry it up. Haven't all day to waste standing around doing nothing."

"Bossy little thing, aren't you?" Dahlia retorted. She reached up to pry the bejeweled arms out from around her neck and turned around to face her lover. "Alright, already. Food we can do and hour—I'll make it happen." She announced, after a moment. Her gaze flickered to Harry and her siblings, including her Gheyos. "Then again, that might not be enough time. Am I in charge of the rest of you lot? I wasn't exactly planning on it."

Soula immediately adopted a pleading expression. "Please? Please, please, please? I swear I'll be quiet and I'll behave and I won't do anything to-"
"Do make promises you can't keep, Zo." Dahlia's lips twitched. She'd heard that argument before. "I'll babysit you all for a few hours, but after that I want some time to myself, me and my girl." She drew Dyshoka close with an arm around her waist. Her eyes flickered briefly to Wikhn and Mimei. "and I don't want to be interrupted, so be aware of that. This is serious. If you can't abide by my rules, you need to speak up now and I'll make other arrangements."

"What kind of arrangements?" Ariki frowned. "We're capable of exploring on our own, you know."

"Capable, but actually doing so safely remains to be seen," Dahlia said. She lifted her chin at the sudden look of defiance on her brother's face. "And I don't mean anything by that nor am I trying to pull a rank that I do not have, but if you do want me to-"

"That sounds good to me. In fact, I happen to know that there's cake at that café in the corner of the fourth section in the outdoor plaza and I want a piece. So food?" She looked to Dahlia. "You can feed them too. I know you can afford it," Dyshoka teased. "We can figure out the mechanics of who wants to be where later and we can bring the boys too, right?" She nodded towards Ariki and Harry.

"Is that your stomach talking or your brain?" came the immediate answer as Dahlia's irritation faded into exasperation. "I'm serious. Ariki, I know you're a Beta, but you're also unattached and Soula, well, you know what I would say. I am only asking, because you know I won't be keeping to the traditional lines. You'd be wandering into Gheyo territory and you would have to listen to what I say. If either of you are coming with me, and I do include each of you in this warning, then I want you to understand exactly what that means. If there is even a hint of a doubt in your mind that you can't abide by that, I need to know. All joking and warm-fuzzies aside, I do need to know."

"Wait a second," Soula held up a hand. "Shayla's almost here, I can practically feel her. Wait so you don't have to repeat your warning. I wouldn't remember to tell her, 'cause it's always too long." She checked her fingernails. "And I do know what you're going to say, because you're always saying. I'm fine, Dahlia. Really. I'm not going to—wander off—like Kandra did."

"Soula!" Dahlia stared at her for a moment, then turned to her brother for support. "It is not that long, Ariki, say something! I am not talking because I like the sound of my own voice. It's important. Do you even know the kinds of places you'll be walking into? This is not like simply showing up for a match or stopping to wish me luck in a locker room with Mum standing behind you."

"It is kind of long," Ariki said, sheepishly. "I mean, we both know not to lose our heads, but you tend to exaggerate sometimes and really, it's hard to take you seriously when there really isn't-"

Dahlia's face darkened considerably and her lips pressed together in a thin line. Wikhn and Mimei exchanged a glance and shuffled uncomfortably when Dahlia's eagle-eyed gaze zeroed in on them. Out of all present at the moment, they would know just how true their Ace's words were.

Harry shared the sudden feeling of unease, reminded of the moment in the healer's clinic when Dahlia had stepped in to have Theo and Charlie removed from the examination room. He remembered thinking that the huge scar was a warning and was now reminded of just how significant a warning it was. He made a mental note to listen to everything the older girl said, if only to take something from the experience she was willing to share. At the very least, he trusted her enough for the moment.

"This time is a bit more serious, I'd think." Dyshoka said, sensibly. She draped an arm over Dahlia's shoulder, long fingers gently massaging the base of her lover's neck in an attempt to ease some of the visible tension. "This is very different from a cage match, I'm surprised your parents
did not mention anything."

"Our parents worry and beyond that, they worry some more." Ariki scrubbed a hand through his hair. "We've been warned so many times, I think it's wearing off."

"I see." Dyshoka sighed. "Well then, even if you have heard her or your parents say it a million times, I'd think she'd have something extra to add to it. Dahlia doesn't just spout out warnings for the fun of it. They are very real as are her warnings. They are meant to be taken seriously. Have either of you ever seen her in full Gheyo dress and form? I wouldn't think so, because I have known her since she accepted her mantle and I've been present to every formal duel since. You honestly wouldn't know what's really involved."

"Our mother is a Gheyo," Soula rolled her eyes. "One of the most influential for this century. She holds a blood title. I think we're informed, thank you very much."

"Right." Dyshoka frowned, finally giving up. "You'll simply have to learn on your own. This is your first Hunt after all, isn't it?"

"And it isn't yours?" Lorelei sniped. "We're not children." She gave a jerk of her head at Harry. "He's bonded and I expect that the rest of us will-"

"It's my second, actually." Dyshoka said, smoothly. Her smile took on a faintly feral edge. "Due to personal reasons, I chose not to pursue my Intended at the end of the last hunt. Things have changed since then and I understand and respect that. Believe me when I say that I know what I am talking about. If you do not wish to have my advice then I will not be forcing it upon you. Suffice it to say that you're very lucky that Dahlia has such far-reaching reputation. I am sure there is very little that she wouldn't be able to wrangle for either of you, should you ask."

"Reputation?" Lorelei snorted. She had always been at odds with her Gheyo sister. "I'll believe that when I-"

"Enough." Dahlia said, sharply. Her soft-brown eyes flickered a light hint of purple before she frowned at her sister and then at Dyshoka. "Both of you." She turned back to Soula just as the crowd parted to allow a serene Shayla to approach them.

The Air Clan's heiress was indeed walking through the masses, alone and without interference. The crowd kept well away from her as she walked, clad in floating, shimmering wisps of scarves and glittery, gauzy material, leading credibility to her ethereal look, a faint white glow surrounding her. Her eyes, pale and grey, seemed lifeless and dull as she came to a stop just outside of their little huddle.

"Shayla!" Soula chirped. She flung her arms around her friend's neck, hugging tight and bouncing on her toes. "You look so amazing. I love your hair and are you glowing? You're glowing! That's so pretty. I didn't know you could do that. I wish I could do that."

"Thanks, I think." Shayla grimaced. "It's an air thing. Breathing, Soula?" She twitched, faintly, her arms fluttering by her sides as if she was not sure whether she ought to hug her best friend back. The hug immediately released her and Soula blushed. "Whoops. Sorry. I forget my own strength sometimes. Hey, are you alright? You look a bit—peaky."

"Thanks, I think." Shayla grimaced. "It's an air thing. Breathing, Soula?" She twitched, faintly, her arms fluttering by her sides as if she was not sure whether she ought to hug her best friend back.

The hug immediately released her and Soula blushed. "Whoops. Sorry. I forget my own strength sometimes. Hey, are you alright? You look a bit—peaky."

"Really? I hadn't noticed. You look quite stunning yourself, I didn't think your Mum would let you out of the house in that," Shayla's smile finally surfaced, a hint of mischief reflected on her pretty, pale face. "Hello, everyone. Ariki. Lorelei, oh Harry!" She pulled away from Soula to grab Harry
Harry sucked in a breath, feeling the faint tremor in her limbs as she hugged him hard enough to hurt, then pulled back to smile, the expression somehow holding sadness instead of cheer. "I didn't think I would see you today. You look adorable! You're hunting, aren't you? Oh do say you are. Those are hunting robes if I ever saw any and I'm sure there are plenty of lucky candidates that would be honored to have you for their very own. It's good to see you again, so soon. How are you feeling?" She paused for a breath and immediately slapped a hand to his forehead, feeling it for a temperature.

Dahlia exhaled sharply and turned on her heel. She muttered something to which Dyshoka's lips quirked into a smile and she turned back to the little group. "I think we should go, before our chief escort decides she isn't in the mood. I'm actually hungry, and I need to eat a mostly balanced meal for the day to keep my healer status where I like it to be, so," She half-shrugged. "Second breakfast, anyone?"

"That sounds brilliant," Soula chirped. She linked arms with Harry and Shayla, charging after her big sister.

The outdoor plaza was a nice, open place, the flooring a section of natural, smooth, flat rock with a cloth canopy overhead that rippled in the sunny breeze that blew through the place. There were some screens set up in a few corners, to form dining booths that would allow for some semblance of privacy. The tables were spelled to the floor, along with the tablecloths and items such as condiments, had a returning charm administered so that they could not be knocked off the floor.

It was a lovely little café and it was barely half-full at most, with plenty of good tables with an excellent view. Dahlia stood back and let her younger sisters squabble over the perfect one, before she cast a warding of her own around the selected space. With much shuffling and grumbling, they all situated themselves satisfactorily for a casual dining experience.

At least, Dahlia next to Dyshoka and Mimei, with her siblings scattered just within reach. Harry found himself sandwiched between the friendly Ariki and the slightly brooding Wikhn. They were seated at a wide round table with circular bench seating and only one 'exit.' It bothered him, faintly, but he dismissed it after some thought, realizing that while he would probably have to climb over laps to reach said exit, he had no real wish to leave alone. Dahlia's grumbling about safety in pairs had him taking her advice to heart, especially when he'd seen the shadows that had touched their faces when they'd mentioned Kandra.

He would definitely make sure he stayed close today, even if he had to call Theo and Charlie. A warm, fresh breeze wafted over him and Harry almost smiled. The section screens were decorated with pretty, gold and white paper, bearing scroll-like vine designs along the center of each panel. The view that Lorelei and Soula had finally decided on, showed a vast expanse of rolling, green hills with the occasional bright butterfly glittering in the distance. He could see mountains, hissing and spitting fire—the same ones Ilsa had pointed out earlier—and if he looked upward, as far as the canopy's edge would allow, he could see the thick, white clouds that separated the air elemental's from the rest of Nevarah.

Chattering conversation brought him back down to the present and Harry made himself focus so he could pay attention. He could gawk at his surroundings later and he was sure that the novelty would wear off soon. It was simply the first time he could remember being literally surrounded by beautiful, amazing things in the company of people that did not seem as if they were trying to use him for some purpose or another.
Dahlia was fairly good at keeping order, at least in keeping voices down without having to raise her own and Harry was glad to see her taking charge. He liked having some semblance of order and direction and she was very good at providing that.

"Alright, we're ordering as soon as possible, because I know you lot are going to take forever to finish whatever you order, so please know what you want, by the time I reach you." Dahlia whistled for a waiter and folded up her menu.

Harry's grip on the leather-bound, plastic-paged menu tightened to whitened knuckles. He was lucky that he could understand the basic dragel script within it, but he had absolutely no idea what any of the items were or how they would taste to his decidedly wizarding world-raised palate. He wished it was simpler, just fruit and meats without sauces and spices and side dishes.

"Hey Wik, want to split something?" Ariki leaned back to speak behind Harry's hunched form. "The sauced ribs with-"

"Sauced, no!" Wikhn shuddered. "I want some ghardan meat, rare and bloody if at all possible."

"For you, they'll bend over backwards," Mimei snarked. She studiously hid her face behind the propped up menu to avoid the dark fae's withering glare. "I'm only stating the facts."

"State them where your neck is safely out of reach of my hands," Wikhn half-growled. But he keep his pink-eyed glare fixed on his own menu, the weight of Dahlia's pointed stare, keeping him easily under control.

"Rare? I don't know, I mean-" Ariki frowned. He was well used to the interplay between Gheyo King and Queen to the point that he didn't bother to pay attention anymore. If anything was wrong, he knew his sister would speak and both of hers would listen. "I didn't see that in the menu. Is there anything you can eat here?" He knew enough of dark fae that sometimes they required unusual foods and drinks to keep their body at optimum function.

"It wouldn't be there. Not for you, for me. They'll have it if I ask." Wikhn folded the menu and set it aside. "We can split appetizers." He turned to Harry, sharp-gaze zeroing in on the clenched fingers. "I can split with you too, Harry, if you like." He did not flinch when two bright emerald eyes fixed on him, swimming with confusion, misery and frustration. "Is something the matter?" Wikhn blinked in surprise when in the same instant, all emotion in those eyes dulled as the gaze became purposefully blank. His brow furrowed.

Ariki stared at the two of them for a moment and then brightened. "Is this your first time eating out?" He gestured to the private café. "In Nevarah, I mean, not for-" a faint blush tickled his cheeks.

Wikhn rolled his eyes and reached over, plucking the menu from Harry's hands with enough force that the brunet had to relinquish it. "You can order one of everything so you can try it, that way you'll always know what everything is."

"We can do that?" Ariki looked from the menu, to Harry and then across the table to his sister. "Can we?"

"She can afford it," Wikhn muttered, flipping to the back end of the menu. "We can start here. Obviously we can't order everything, you probably couldn't stomach it all at once and even if you could, I wouldn't recommend it." He wrinkled his nose, pink eyes flaring briefly a darker shade of color. "You can order something different for every meal today, at least, if you're traveling 'round with us. I won't complain." He ran his finger down the three column listing in the menu. "Any food
"Allergies?" He waved a hand at Ariki. "Besides your dislike of kemphar and inability to digest curried quinoa?"

"Hey!" Ariki protested. But this time, his blush stayed. "If you don't know," he eyed Harry contemplatively. "Then you probably should avoid some of the spicier dishes or at least take something else with it."

"Yogurt." Dyshoka's soft voice drew their attention. The trio looked up to find the Indian beauty watching them, her lips pursed as if to suppress laughter. "There is a dish in my culture, Raita. It would help with whatever it is you are thinking of not eating." Green-gold eyes glittered in the soft glow of the café lighting. "I would be willing to offer up my stomach for the sake of a good cause. Order whatever you'd like. I will find something in all of it."

Harry found himself staring at her smile, surprised to discover that it was almost exactly like Quinn's. That was odd. Harry blinked, feeling as if he'd missed a connection somewhere. He had first wondered if he ought to say something about the way they'd simply arranged themselves around him, but then figured that it didn't matter, because the protests that he wasn't worth the disruption of their routine was drowned in the reality that they didn't actually mind.

Not a single one of them.

They'd comfortably situated themselves around him and now made sure that even his first public outing was something memorable and not a frightening new experience. His hands clenched and unclenched in his dress robes beneath the table, hidden from view.

He was equal parts pleased, surprised, confused and hopeful. His emotions swirled wildly around him, until he mentally drew them near, tightening his grip on the expressive magic and keeping it close, should he have need of it. All the readings he could puzzle out from those around him were curious, helpful and friendly.

It was enough, for now.

Harry let himself smile as Ariki slapped his shoulder and Wikhn nudged him, the tension bleeding away and elsewhere. He could enjoy this. He definitely could.

By the time Ariki and Wikhn managed to order enough food for all of them, leading to a myriad of new and unusual dishes, with colorful commentary from the girls, Harry was enjoying himself, even if he could only following a few snippets of their conversations. Everyone was talking over everyone else and even though they were a fairly small group, it was enough to make your head spin, unless you were simply enjoying the experience.

For Harry, he'd found it to be something he hadn't even known he was missing.

"You had best be eating all of this," Dahlia grumbled, swiping the bill before anyone else could see it. Her eyebrows arched clear up to her hairline and she slapped it face down on the table, the expression on her face quite comical.

Dyshoka sniggered into her napkin and then leaned over to elbow her lightly. "Oh come now, it can't be that bad. I happen to know exactly how much you have in that mysterious expense account of yours and I know you have this covered and-"

Dahlia snatched up a cream puff and popped it in the Beta's unsuspecting mouth. "Not another word out of you," She warned. "We are even now."
"We are?" Dyshoka chewed carefully and swallowed. "Are we?" Her green-gold eyes shimmered with mischief. "But Dahlia, you started it, love. I never would have—ow!" she trailed off with an abrupt squeak, jerking away from Dahlia with a look of pure shock on her face. "Dahlia?"

Mimei burst into laughter. "Ouch?" She supplied, with a wink. "I don't want to know and neither do the rest of us, hey, Harry, try this one." She pushed another full dish around the moving serving circle that rotated all the available dishes. "Ariki, make sure he tries this one."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, only for Wikhn to helpfully stuff it with a bite of something that vaguely tasted of potatoes and pepper. He chewed and coughed, waving a hand, grateful for Ariki's quick hand with a glass of chilled fruit juice. "I'm full!" He protested, even as he felt himself smiling.

This brand of friendship was strangely wonderful. Wikhn and Ariki had taken it upon themselves to order the most popular and common dishes of Nevarah, forgoing their favorites, so that Harry would know what to expect in the future. Even Lorelei and Mimei had joined in, once they realized just how little Harry actually knew of Nevarean cuisine.

He found himself comfortably stuffed and laughing hard enough for tears to form at the corners of his eyes. This was good. It was special and it was needed. The new tendrils of friendship and camaraderie felt like a balm on the recent stab wounds of from his friendships between Hermione and Ron. While they certainly would never replace each other, Harry was finally able to relax, realizing that they meant him no harm and genuinely sought to include him in their fun. If he'd needed proof, it was certainly here now.

There was just one little thing that niggled in the back of his mind and he was reminded of it in everything that Dyshoka did that reminded him of a certain, teal-eyed, blond, mute healer. He tried not to make it obvious that he was watching her, but there was a hint of knowing in her green-gold gaze and he knew that even if everyone else was fooled, she was not. She had also yet to call him out on it, so he continued to watch until he wasn't sure if he could keep his mouth shut anymore.

"Why do you keep staring at her?" Lorelei asked, a moment later, tipping her head towards Dahlia. "You act like you've never seen her-"

"You were sleeping when she came over, weren't you?" Soula interrupted. She ignored the look her sister sent her way. "I just realized that. Wow. Alright. Um, I guess we're all just so used to each other that we didn't think anything of it and that's just really weird, isn't it?" She nudged a quiet Shayla who hadn't said any more than a handful of words, since they'd sat down. "Hey, Dahlia!"

Dahlia turned faintly, an inclination that she'd heard, without missing a beat of her conversation with the server who had just come for the bill. "What is it?"

"Harry doesn't know her," Soula nodded at the tall Beta. "How come you didn't introduce her?"

Dahlia blinked, comprehension dawning. "Apologies, how rude of me." She turned to Dyshoka, who simply offered a warm smile.

"I was distracting you. On purpose." She flashed a grin. "I suppose it is late for these, but Harry, was it?" Dyshoka's green-gold eyes fixed on Harry with renewed intensity. Her smile for him was gleaming fangs and curious undisguised interest. "You were sleeping by the time I came over last night."

"Say hi, nicely." Dahlia chuckled. "Harry, this is my dearest friend and steady lover, Dyshoka Kalzik. She is a Beta." The ranking was added as an afterthought. "We've been together for a little
over five years, give or take some."

"Kalzik?" Harry repeated, latching on to the name. His mental puzzle clicked together, neatly solved. Now it made sense and suddenly, he had to speak. "You know...Quinn?" He frowned. The tanned beauty was nothing like Quinn's creamy pale skin and wavy blond tresses. Beyond her smile, he couldn't begin to see the relation, but then realized that it was completely illogical to think of it in such terms with Ilsa's children sitting right beside him. They were just as visually different as anyone else and yet they all claimed the same mother.

"He is my darling idiot of a baby brother." Dyshoka's eyes shimmered with mischief. "I taught him how to curl his hair. We are close. You know him from where?"

"Er, the clinic." Harry swallowed, digesting that extra bit of information. The casual way in which it was spoken had him picturing Quinn and his trademark blond waves. The way Dyshoka had so easily said 'idiot' left Harry wondering, because he couldn't think of Quinn as being anything but nice and compassionate with the occasional bout of seriousness thrown in. "When I first arrived, he helped me. Quite a bit. Is he—how is he?" His last memory of the helpful healer had left him somewhat worried, even though Quinn had sent them off with instructions to rest and enjoy a long weekend.

"Did he now?" Dyshoka untangled herself from Dahlia leaning forward to rest her elbows on the table, her eyes seeing something that apparently no one else did. "He has helped many, especially during Hunting pre-season. We do not speak of our work at home. Healer-patient privilege." She surveyed him for a moment. "But I do thank you for asking of him. He's had quite a rough week, but he will be fine. We always are. Healing is in our blood."

"Something happened to him?" The words tumbled out before Harry could check them.

Dyshoka blinked. Something that could have been a smirk curled across her lips. "You could say that," she murmured. "but it might be best not to. Allow me to say that the Kalziks are a family of Healers." She tipped her head forward. "It is our clan legacy. We are all healer-born and influenced. We do not escape it. Quinn is quite talented as are the rest of us. We are all unique in our own way." She paused. "Do forgive me for prattling on of such boring things." She turned to Dahlia. "Take me dancing? Somewhere fun so I can work off all of these horrible calories?"

"What calories?" The Gheyo deadpanned. "You only had three pieces of cake." But even as she spoke, Dahlia polished off the fourth slice of cake from where it had been, half-eaten.

"Yes, three utterly deliciously sinful pieces of decadence that will do horrible things to my shapely bum." Dyshoka sighed as she unfolded her tall frame with surprising grace and slid out from their semi-private booth. "Up. Dancing. Me. You. Sometime in the next half an hour, hm?"

"Your bum looks fine to me." Dahlia grumbled, sliding out of the booth and taking the proffered hand. "In fact, I'd say that it's more than-"

"Virgin ears!" Lorelei snapped, pushing past the two. "Honestly, do you have to rub it in?" She grimaced, rubbing her hands over her ears. "I'm not even interested and you're really making me very-"

"Sorry. Can't help it." Dyshoka smirked. "Years will do that to us, I suppose. Dancing?"

Dahlia sighed. "Fine. Which floor?"

"You mean I'm allowed to choose?"
"Floor?" Harry looked to Ariki and Wikhn in question. Ariki slid out from the booth next and held out a hand. Harry took it quickly and then turned to Wikhn. "What floor?"

"The Gheyos have their own places, away from—everyone else." The Dark Fae answered, carefully. He was showing more care than Harry had expected, since he'd taken Ariki's cue on ordering the food. "We also have clubs. The kinds of clubs that take names and ranks and connections to even think about wrangling an invitation. The higher the floor, the more exclusive. Dahlia's reputation, well, she's the Gheyo daughter of a heiress holding a blood title." He shrugged. "We've had some wonderful times."

Harry blinked, "clubs?"

"Dancing." Wikhn reminded. "We like to dance."

"We?" Harry looked at himself and then at the other young dragels. He had a sinking feeling he was missing something here.

"Dragels in general." Ariki clarified. "We are fun-loving creatures. We like to throw parties, share stories and more and we, well, we like to dance. Music is part of our culture. A very significant part." He shrugged as if it were perfectly normal.

"I don't dance." Harry swallowed. He really didn't.

Ariki and Wikhn exchanged a look. "You'll be fine," they said, in unison. "Don't worry about it."

Harry gulped. "Now I'm worried," he muttered, allowing them to nudge him forward so they could catch up with the girls. He would have to make sure he could find a nice quiet corner to wait it out.

"Excuse me, miss?" A chubby-faced little boy held up a flower and a note to Dyshoka. His bright blue eyes sparkled with childish innocence and he was barely standing still long enough for her to take the note.

"Thank you, little one." Dyshoka produced an after-meal mint as payment, her fingers curling briefly through the child's soft blond locks. "How is your mother?"

"She's fine." The lad immediately stuffed the candy in his mouth, sucking enthusiastically. "She's over 'dere." He pointed with one flailing arm. "Going now."

Dyshoka's smile softened as she watched him dart off into the crowds and then looked down at the courting favor in her hand, a slight frown forming on her face.

"What is it?" Soula came forward, having left Harry and Shayla together. She'd given up on trying to persuade her sister to take them to an exotic floor. Dahlia could be as stubborn as her mothers when she wanted to be.

"I'm not quite sure," Dyshoka frowned. "Don't touch it!" She immediately held it up high, out of reach of Soula's curious fingers. Her expression shifted from fond exasperation to worry. "Please don't," she amended, a moment later when the younger woman shot her a puzzled look.

"What's wrong with it?"

"More like what couldn't be wrong with it." Dyshoka sighed. She held the flower in her hand it suddenly burst into flame, leaving behind a few ashes, before the wind whisked them away. She folded the accompanying card into a small square and then reached up to unwind her scarf from
around her neck. She draped it modestly over her upper half and caught the ends to hold in one hand, bracelets jangling. "I'll be back in a moment," she murmured, a hint of steel in her tone and gaze. "You may leave without me if I am not through by the time they have decided."

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Soula frowned, staring as the young woman expertly blended into the passing crowd and disappeared from view. "That can't be good." She muttered, a growing sense of worry registering as Harry came up to stand beside her, Shayla in tow. "Did they decide yet?"

"No." Harry shifted his itchy shoulders, recognizing the urge as his wings wanting to stretch out for some air. "Ariki doesn't think we should be anywhere near-

"And let me guess, Dahlia doesn't want us anywhere that she might not have the right kind of jurisdiction." Soula rolled her eyes. "I can't believe they argue over this every single time." She sniffed. "Give them a few minutes. She'll argue him around." Her furrowed brow did not ease as she continued to stare in the spot where her sister's lover had disappeared. "Hey Harry?"

The brunet looked at her, expectantly.

"You are Hunting, correct?"

Harry licked his lips. "Yes."

"Were there any special instructions?"

"Special—what?"

"You know. Things you should or shouldn't do or do they really not mind however you chose to handle things?"

"...what kind of things?" Harry asked, cautiously.

"How to handle favors?"

Harry looked to Shayla. He knew without speaking that the girl would automatically say what he wanted to know without having to verbalize it. He had absolutely no idea what Soula was talking about, but he'd come to realize that Shayla was the best sort of translator for Ilsa's youngest daughter. It was easy to see how the two girls could be best friends, even though they were visually as different as could be. Almost like the way he knew Hermione and Luna to be. He shook the thought from his head, waiting, patiently for the answer to his unasked question.

"Favors can come in all shapes and sizes." Shayla shuffled closer to Harry, her cheer muted as it had been from the time she had first joined them. "Sometimes they are tokens of affection or pretty things, you know, a flower, a trinket, a pet." Her brow furrowed. "They are always accompanied by a card, so you know who has sent it and why, if they chose to say why, but it is usually quite obvious that they are courting you and wish for it to be made known. Some Alpha's give their Submissives specific instructions on how to handle them so it doesn't result in political issues for either party. Other ranks are free to handle it however they chose, unless otherwise instructed."

"The four stages?" Harry recalled, thinking back to his first, serious conversation with the Snape Pareya. Terius had patiently explained it to him and now, he was finally beginning to understand the reason behind it. "Part of courting?" His mind vaguely remembered a few tidbits from Binn's dry and boring history lessons. Before he'd been bored by the goblin wars and whatever else, he had actually skimmed through the textbook and there had been some interesting points, talk of the old ways of the wizards and witches—including courting.
"Yeah, something like that." Soula grinned. "I'm allowed to accept, if I'm really interested." She half-scowled. "Daddy is surprisingly more overprotective than Mum."

Shayla gave a snort. "You should be glad," her voice was soft and wispy. "Glad that they at least give you some freedom and not what mine are giving." She smiled, sadly at Harry. "You are lucky to be Bonded already."

Harry opened his mouth to refute that, only to realize that he did think it true. He was quite lucky to have found Theo and Charlie and he liked that. "I suppose." He allowed, after a moment. "If-if you don't mind," he followed Shayla's listless gaze to where Dahlia and Ariki were engaged in a lively conversation over their next destination. "What happened with…?"

"It's complicated, at least, to her." Shayla sighed. She turned back to him, the smile slightly forced. "And I wouldn't really mind your asking, except for the fact that I don't even know what really happened. I was just—I suppose sometimes I forget that my status cannot protect me from everything and sometimes my mouth speaks when it shouldn't."

An angry half-growl, half-shriek effectively quieted the chattering noise of those present, when the crowds shuffled, parting to show an angry Dyshoka pulling away from a slender man, with a pinched face, draped in gold and official robes.

"I said unhand me, you brute!" Dyshoka snarled, her eyes flashing more gold than green as her lips bared fully grown fangs, her words ending in a hiss. "There is precious little your status could hope to do, if you persist in this."

The rest of the argument dissolved into hisses and growls, the crowds around them, quickly backing away to make room. A few had stepped forward, then back, at a look or gesture from either party.

Harry felt a sudden spike of ice welling up in his gut as he turned in time to meet Dahlia's furious gaze, with Wikhn and Mimei holding onto her arms, bracing as if to keep her from launching herself forward in an untimely manner. "Soula?" He whispered.

"Stay back and look invisible." His fellow submissive hissed. "Do not draw attention to yourself in anyway. This is between them, whatever it is." Her hand fumbled, grabbing one of Harry's and squeezing hard. "You can fly, right? Because if we need to move quickly, I'd suggest flying."

"Haven't tried yet," Harry said, weakly. He tried and failed to loosen her death grip on his hand. "This is bad?"

"...Dahlia!" Dyshoka's voice rang out clearly, as she gave another fruitless jerk against the man's grip on her wrist.

Harry turned in time to see Mimei and Wikhn release their Ace, and watch as scales of black and purple rippled over Dahlia's tanned skin, settling into a very obvious Halfling form as she streaked forward. She came to an abrupt halt, before the arguing pair and her eyes shifted from their natural soft brown hue to a very bright violet—reminiscent of Greta's own look.

"I can't hear." Shayla scowled, leaning forward, only to have Harry grab her backwards. "Hey!" Her protest died at the sharp look that Harry sent her way.

"Shh!" Soula snapped. "Are you insane?" She grabbed onto her friend as well. "We don't want to be anywhere near that."
"They're not interested in us, just in her," Shayla stood on tip-toe, still straining forward. "And I just want to hear what's being said..."

"I call you as witness," Dyshoka growled. Her golden eyes flickered to Dahlia and then to the pompous high noble in front of her. She had never welcomed the wretch's advances and it seemed that he'd decided to take offense in the most public of ways and also by creating a situation that she could not extract herself from, unless he physically continued his advances. Her Healer's Oaths could be both a curse and a blessing at times. She gave a silent prayer that Dahlia had been so close at hand. She hadn't seen this idiot since the last hunting season.

"Lord Belden." Dahlia inclined her head in a formal bow, the movements stiff. "Kindly unhand Healer Kalzik." She'd read the situation exactly as it was and was now squaring her stance in preparation for things to turn ugly.

"You should know better than to involve yourself in a matter between your betters, Gheyo." The man snarled, his shoulders shuddering as his wings rippled just beneath the surface of his skin. "Leave us!"

"I see nothing that must be left alone," Dahlia shot back, her dominant hand rested on the hilt of her dress sword. She could summon her true blade in a heartbeat, if needed. "And I will not ask you again."

"Forced to content yourself with a little girl?" The Lord sighed, his grip on that dark, bejeweled wrist was just tight enough that he would not release her, yet light enough that she could not claim it was an attack. A glint of satisfaction showed in his blue eyes as he watched as Dyshoka gave another useless pull. "I would think that a woman of your caliber would recognize quality before her when it was within reach, but you have lowered your standards, I see."

"Not low enough to invite the scum like you!" Dyshoka hissed. "Even if you crawled on your belly in the pits of hell, it would not be high enough to reach my lowest! Release my hand at once!"

Lord Belden laughed, the sound echoing hollowly in the tentative silence as their fellow dragels had immediately cleared an appropriate space around them, no one daring to interfere. No one, that is, except for the pesky young brat that had dared put up a suit towards the woman he'd already decided was his own. "Come now, Dyshoka. I am a reasonable man and I assure you that I will not hold your dalliance against you for long-"

"If you cut his hand while my eyes are closed, I am not obligated to restore it to its original position and proper working function," Dhysoka said, icily. Her words were directed to Dahlia and no sooner had she spoken, then her eyes had squeezed shut.

"As you wish it," Dahlia stepped aside. "Wikhn?"

The dark fae strode forward, all shadows and terrible cruelty as he drew his wicked looking sword from the sheath on his back. The black and blood-red blade shimmered in the outdoor light as he came within striking distance and fell into stance without further prompting.
Lord Balden released his grip the moment his blue eyes met Wikhn's pale pink ones, just in time to
feel the whistle of the blade carving through the air where his hand had been seconds before. "Why
you-!" He began.

Dyshoka had fallen back, caught by Dahlia's capable, strong arm, before the agitated Gheyo
forcibly pushed her lover behind her, acting as a living shield. "Don't." She said, simply. "Lest I
find myself of a mind to tell my King that he missed his mark." Her violet eyes flashed brightly.
"Wikhn doesn't miss."

"How dare you!" Lord Balden hissed in return. "I am not some-"

"I am Dahlia, from the house and training of Lady Paielda, beneath the rank of Captain Garrow, of
her royal highness, Princess Dawne. I hail from the legacy of the house of Deveraine, bearing the
heiress to the Earthen element, Lady Ilsa Gorgens, who is also my birth mother. I do not make this
threat idly, Lord Balden. I do so with full understanding and recognition of what has just occurred.
You would do well to excuse yourself and never come between or near us again. I will not repeat
myself."

"Dyshoka is a grown woman more than capable of-"

"That is Healer Kalzik to you," Dahlia snapped back. She yanked at the short-sleeve on the left
side of her armor and it folded back to show a simple tattoo of two lines and seven small x's in
between, contained by a perfect circle. "If you cannot respect her as she is, then kindly do so for
what is between us." She reached out with hand and yanked at the dupatta that Dyshoka had looped
around her shoulders and bare torso. The gauzy fabric slid away, revealing perfect, tanned skin, as
Dahlia caught hold of the scoop-neck collar and gave it a short tug with two fingers.

Dyshoka huffed and pulled away to show off the mark herself. An identical replica of Dahlia's
tattoo just above her left breast. It was a courting mark for Intendeds, declaring the two present to
be a Gheyo-Beta bonded pair.

Lord Balden paled dramatically, a glimmer of rage lurking beneath the surface. "What—when—
how?" He demanded, quivering, hands clenched at his side.

"It has been ten years since I saw you last." Dyshoka calmly fixed her appearance and returned her
dupatta to the original way she'd worn it. "And I like you no better now than I did then. Ten years
is a long time, Lord Belden." The same was spat with disgust. "I found something better between
our last encounter and now. I liked it enough to keep it."

A ripple of murmurs passed through the crowd and after a moment, Lord Belden began to back
away, even though the revulsion and irritation was plainly displayed on his face. "You-!" The word
was thrown with loathing and distaste.

Dahlia bared her teeth in a loud growl, a possessive arm curled around Dyshoka at her side.

Wikhn calmly sheathed his sword and flexed his fingers, the pleasant smile on his face never
reaching his eyes. "Leave before I am asked to escort you and perhaps you will retain what little
dignity you believe is yours."

With a baleful glare, Lord Balden hastened away, plowing through the crowd to put some distance
between them. He would not transport himself magically and leave a signature that would hint to
where he had gone. His stiff posture was abandoned in favor of quick movement, the moment he
was out of striking range.
"Did he give you something?" Dahlia released her lover and held out a hand, expectantly. "Give it to me, now."

"I've already burned the flower." Dyshoka said, mildly. But she produced the card and handed it over without further protest, watching curiously as Dahlia inspected it with care. "There is nothing to be-"

"...Lady...Deveraine." A youth with a sour face moved forward from the crowd, a portfolio in hand, a golden house signet clearly pinned on his lapel. "In light of the very public confrontation that you have just engaged in with the esteemed Lord Belden, I must ask you to-"

"I wish to press formal charges of harassment," Dahlia held the card up to the young man's eyes. It burst into purple flames and she dropped it before the fire could touch her fingers. "And a restraining order, if you could manage that as well?"

There was a blink of discomfort and then the young man lifted his chin. "A-as you wish."

"I wish." Dahlia rolled her neck to the side. It cracked, audibly.

"Did you burn your fingers?" Dyshoka drew near. "Let me see your hand." She inspected the hand that was absently presented to her and watched, relaxing as Dahlia detailed the situation to the noble scribe. "Not this one, the other one." The other hand was exchanged without comment and the Indian girl smirked. She unsnapped one of the fat, golden proposal bangles from one bejeweled wrist and calmly fastened it on Dahlia's own.

Dahlia continued securing her formal complaint until the young man finally snapped something at her and stalked off in the crowds, ostensibly in search of Lord Belden. The spectators had already begun to depart as things returned to normal. "He shouldn't give you any more trouble." Dahlia scrubbed a hand through her hair. "You should have filed formal charges against him before," she scowled. "And don't you have brothers? I thought you had at least a brute or two that could knock some sense into these entitled pigs!"

"I have too many," Dyshoka laughed. "And as you are aware, we are a family of Healers. There is not much that I could-"

"Don't give me that," Dahlia snapped. "Oath or not, I am not as dense as you would have me-" the hand she'd begun to wave at her lover was now nearly at eye-level and she found herself staring at the fat, golden bangle. Her expression shifted through several different shades, before settling on one of complete adoration and thinly veiled amusement. She'd staked her claim first—with the tattoos—years ago. Now it seemed that her lover was returning the gesture in a rather romantic way. "Are you serious?"

"I would hardly joke of such things," Dyshoka's eyes narrowed. Flecks of green had already begun to return to them and now, they lightened, dangerously. "Or do you believe that I am-"

"Even as I am?" Dahlia interrupted. "Exactly as I am?"

Dyshoka blinked. "You are—I prefer you exactly as you are." She repeated. "I see nothing wrong with it or you. I was only reminded of just how much I do care for you, perhaps I should have done this sooner if you think to doubt me for it."

Her Gheyo lover merely eyed her for a moment, then stepped forward and caught her in a twirl that ended with a breathless kiss and the murmured exclamation of "Arielle, I do love you."
That little public episode led to Dahlia whisking them out of the public's eye and into the darker, denser Gheyic-section of the hunt. She'd taken them all the way to a tall tower, in the opposite section of where they'd been at the outdoor plaza. In the tall tower of tinted windows and luscious carpet, Dahlia directed them to a guarded lift that would take them upstairs to a club where everything was elegance, shadows and pulsing, rhythmic beats.

Soula, Shayla and Lorelei were all in awe of it, when they realized just how exclusive it was. They in turn explained it to Harry as the fact that Dahlia's legacy and ranking was the sole reason they were allowed inside at all. The company there was polite, though somewhat unnerving when Harry realized that it was Gheyo territory for the very real reason that every individual was Gheyo.

He saw Gheyos of every kind in every shape, form and gender as they moved around each other easily and kept a bit of distance from their little mismatched group. He knew without a doubt that they were respecting Dahlia's wishes or rather, whatever she'd said before showing her proof of admittance to the bouncers at the door. Some of them were quite lovely and exotic, with tattoos and strange hair colors and jewelry dripping from pointed ears and well-toned bodies. Some of them had bright eyes, warm smiles and so many scars that Harry didn't know where to look.

He now understood what Dahlia had meant when she'd grumbled about keeping them safe and how her reputation worked. He could see proof of that in the way that she commanded the room. There were several Gheyos who came up to congratulate her and Dyshoka. There were others who came and spoke to Wikhn and Mimei. There were even more still that came and simply installed themselves around her and they, Ariki told him, were the rest of Dahlia's ranks beneath her command.

Harry didn't bother to remember the names or the faces or anything beyond keeping near to Ariki and sometimes staying near to Wikhn. They were both comfortable and at home in a new place where apparently all they had to do was talk and dance. He felt awkward near their graceful movements and easy camaraderie, when it was quite plain that gender didn't really matter when it came to dancing and that just about everyone knew to dance.

"...are you bored?" Wikhn's velvet voice in his ear made Harry startle.

He turned on the dark fae with the best glare he could muster, even as his nerves settled. He wasn't usually caught off guard, but at the moment, he'd been working on pulling his empathy close—because having it stretch out was giving him a headache—and testing the bonds between Theo and Charlie, to know how his Bonded fared.

Theo was fine, content and animated. Charlie was curious and overjoyed at something or the other. Harry was relieved that they were fine and he was glad to know it. He now found himself directing an elbow in Wikhn's direction, much in the same fashion that Ariki did, before he could catch himself.

Wikhn dodged it with an easy smile that held a hint of shadow and a touch of promise. "You aren't dancing." He circled around to stand in front of Harry, hands held out in apology. "I did not mean to startle you, but you did not appear to be that deep in thought."

"I don't dance." Harry retorted, ignoring the hands. He was only thinking of the few, disastrous times that he had. They were memories he rather wished he could forget. He rather thought that if Theo was asking, perhaps he'd chance it. Maybe. Probably not. His dancing was probably best suited to dim lights and only behind closed doors.

"It's good for you," Wikhn drew closer, wiggling his fingers invitation. "Promise I won't trample your delicate feet."
Harry snorted. "My feet are not-!" He turned away, arms crossed so that he did not have look at those pale hands that reminded him of Theo, yet were so completely different at the same time.

"Come," the word held promise and protection in the same instance.

Harry didn't protest when one of Wikhn's arms circled around his shoulders and drew him towards the dance floor. He didn't unfold his arms, even as he felt himself being gently hugged, Wikhn's pointed chin resting lightly atop his head. He found that his feet, while awkwardly shuffling at first, were now attempting to follow the aimless one-two step of the Gheyo.

Wikhn held him until the song changed over and then he drew back, prying Harry's folded arms open to lace their fingers together. He kept an easy smile on his shadowed face as he playfully 'danced' Harry about, eyes flickering to their feet every so often.

Harry followed the gaze down to their feet, finding it easier to mimic the steps as he did so. He took note of the fact that Wikhn was wearing shiny, high-heeled black boots and moving soundlessly—or at least carefully, Harry was sure—it was hard to tell over the beat of the music.

"Too loud?" Wikhn inquired, drawing him close then stepping back, repeating the step until Harry was able to copy it somewhat. "We can move to that quadrant." He tipped his head towards the far end of the room.

"Don't think it would help," Harry mumbled, tongue poking out between his teeth as he concentrated on stepping forward and stepping back in time to the beat and Wikhn's movements.

"The floor is divided into four, each quadrant has a different level of volume." Wikhn lifted their hands up and then paced back an extra step. "Twirl."

"What?"

"Twirl," the dark fae repeated, patiently. "Like this." He lifted Harry's hand high and twirled under it himself. "Have you really never danced before?"

Harry scowled.

"Dancing is almost like breathing to us," Wikhn murmured, a moment later. He moved them along the edge of the dancing crowd and then prompted Harry to twirl again.

"Why?"

"Ease of movement. Flexibility. Stress relief." Wikhn listed. "Most of our practice sets are set against a rhythm of sorts, it helps in large groups. In and out, twirl." He directed, moving easily around Harry. "Use your hips and shoulders. Stop thinking about it."

Harry squeezed his hands in protest, a little harder than necessary. "How should I stop thinking?"

There was an amused huff from above and then Wikhn twirled him in close, Harry's back to his chest, their arms overlapping. "Close your eyes and listen to the music."

Harry listened. He heard the unfamiliar tune, now growing on him, a steady beat, a secondary beat, a base rhythm that was easy to follow, if you were looking for it. He realized that the slow shuffle Wikhn was keeping them in, wasn't really out of sync with the other dancers on the floor and he was doubly grateful for the fact that the lack of lighting meant that any blushing wouldn't be visible.
Wikhn was all tall and lean muscle in a way that Charlie was not. There was definite strength in him and it was more than obvious in every single move he made. Harry could feel that broad chest, slender hips and talented legs as they moved together, the noises of everyone else, fading away.

The steady thump of Wikhn's heart added a second layer to Harry's shifting consciousness. He felt his empathy uncurling and stretching out to touch the dark fae, to seek out something, anything—Harry didn't know what. He felt himself respond by instinct and the sway of Wikhn's deliciously purposeful magic.

Wikhn shifted them, twirling him away and back, one arm resting snugly around Harry's waist, holding him close, both of them now chest to chest. Harry found his hands feeling their way up to rest atop Wikhn's shoulders, fisting in the give of the fabric there, not quite enough to hold, but enough to scrabble with. The Gheyo was just tall enough for him to embrace, comfortably, without having to stretch too far.

Harry felt his magic hum and ripple, stretching out and away from their private movement as Wikhn's second hand finally settled a little higher up, possessive, almost in the way that the Gheyo's scarred fingers curled at the nape of his neck. Harry stretched up on tip-toe, then settled down, leaning closer to breathe in the scent of metal and winter-wind, so he could commit it to memory.

Chapter End Notes

Chapters from here on are being betaed by the kind and talented brissygirl.
Sometimes I Need To Breathe

Chapter Notes

See first chapter for disclaimers/warnings/summaries. Link to TBDH Forum is on my profile. This chapter was betaed by the wonderful and talented brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own.

TISSUE WARNING! There are a lot of 'feels' in this chapter. You have been warned.

RECAP: Harry and Co have split up with the respective members of the Deveraine Circle and are exploring the Hunt together in small groups. Harry has been with Ilsa's children and Dahlia's Gheyo friends from Quinn's clinic, Wikhn and Mimei. They end up having an early lunch where Harry has the chance to see and try several native Nevarean dishes, while getting to know some of the younger dragels. He also finally meets Quinn's favorite sister, Dyshoka(Beta), who proposes a formal bonding to Dahlia(Gheyo), after a public incident ruffles some noble feathers. To celebrate the formal recognition of their bonding, Dahlia takes everyone to an exclusive club in a high-rise tower in Gheyo-territory. Harry swears he can't dance, but Wikhn is more than happy to teach him...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry didn't even know if or when the music changed. He was only hyper-aware and hypersensitive to every move and flex of Wikhn's body pressed against his. They moved in slow synchronization, two steps forward, one step back, a half-step to the side. The dark fae's hands were warm, firm and sure as they held Harry close with the utmost of care.

Something that might have been a sigh, escaped his lips as Harry finally let his head tilt forward to rest his forehead on the cool breastplate of Wikhn's flexible dress armor. It was chilled and smooth, smelling faintly of another scent that Harry could not quite place. He mentally wrote it off as some organic matter that he'd never known as yet, as it seemed quite plausible given Nevarah and its dragel occupants. Only a few necessary parts of the chest were covered with the shell-like material, the rest was done in a strong, leather-like material, that vaguely reminded him of dragon hide.

His magic stretched out again, brushing ever so lightly over the steady glow that Harry could identify as Wikhn. He trembled in the gentle embrace when he felt the Gheyo's magic respond in a calming, soothing pulse that definitely was not rejection. A shaky breath huffed across the shiny piece of shell beneath his cheek and Harry couldn't help himself, he looked up.

Up close, Wikhn's pink eyes were an exotic wonder on their own. The irises were definitely quite pink, but with such rich vibrance, that it could not be mistaken for the blood-red hue of a vampire. It had lightened to a near coral shade now, as Harry stared into the colored depths and the round pupils seemed to stretch into something of an oval-shape. Fringed by thick, dark lashes, accented by sharp, angular features, Wikhn's scars were very faint, but they were there just the same. A small crescent shaped line of white along the left side of his cheek, to his ear and a few tiny starbursts along his right temple, as if sparks had lingered too long and left their kiss on the dark fae's impossibly pale skin.
Harry licked his lips even as his own gaze was drawn to Wikhn's thin, delicate mouth, for in spite of the very obvious strength the Gheyo displayed, there was simply something about the young man that screamed of fragility beneath that brooding intensity. Up close, Wikhn gave off of the air of a warrior expertly trained and so giving in his nature that he would sacrifice himself in a heartbeat if it were for a cause he truly championed, even if it should cost everything he had to offer and more.

Emerald eyes blinked once, twice, attempting to digest all of that and forcing himself to break that hypnotic pink-eyed stare as he tried to sort through the sudden rush of information. He belatedly realized that his empathy gifts had stretched a little further and deeper than he'd intended and perhaps, when their magics had brushed together, they'd shared something between themselves.

Sneaking an upward glance, Harry felt his cheeks heat when he realized that Wikhn was calmly staring back with the faintest hint of amusement visible, if the quirk of his lips were anything to judge by. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't find any words worthy of breaking the moment.

Wikhn's faint smile did not waver as he continued to dance them around the room in slow, steady movements. Emboldened, Harry lifted his chin and returned the dancing stare with a look of his own. He watched those pink orbs darken from pale coral pink to something a little darker and brighter that made him want to squirm in ways that were entirely inappropriate for their given surroundings.

Something beside them drew his attention and Harry watched Wikhn turn away and say something in a language so fluent and musical, his jaw dropped. He was distantly reminded of Alec and the Merrow's haughty manner, coupled with unbridled, ethereal beauty. Wikhn was every ounce of that loveliness to look at, without a fraction of the sharp sarcasm. Something clicked, gently, softly, inside of him and Harry found himself starting to really relax.

He wondered if this was what Ilsa had meant when she'd warned him that he would find someone for certain, on this first hunt. He found that he couldn't really mind, after all, he'd spent time with Wikhn in his different roles—at the clinic, at the beach with Bahn and now, here, the entire morning. Granted, it wasn't that much time, but Harry couldn't shake the feeling that there was something familiar and right about it all.

If he could hold Wikhn with the same possessiveness that Dahlia openly displayed for Dyshoka and listen to that velvet voice speaking in that lovely, musical language, he was fairly certain he could die happy. Content, at least, if not happy.

So when Wikhn turned back to him, Harry stood on tip-toe, stretching up to close the gap of inches between them and pressed his moistened lips against Wikhn's cool, thin ones.

For a moment, it seemed as if everything stilled and Harry felt his heart hammering in his chest as the lips beneath his did not move in anyway at all. They did not accept nor reciprocate and when he rocked back on his heels, Harry's hurt was tempered not by the carefully blank look on Wikhn's face, but the confusion in those brilliant pink eyes.

Wikhn's hands tightened for a fraction around Harry's slim figure, before he took a careful breath and bent his head to touch his lips to Harry's ear. "This is not a good idea," he murmured, voice as velvet-smooth as ever.

Harry felt his face burn. Before he could clarify or protest or something, Mimei's voice interrupted them both.
"Wikhn, catch!"

Both young men turned in time to see the blonde and Dahlia twirling towards them. Wikhn released Harry in time to catch Dahlia with an arm about the waist and his shoulders angled in a perfect mirror of her undulating form. Harry froze, watching as the dark fae expertly wove his way around the fairly accomplished Dahlia, their movements perfectly coordinated, the dance seeming too perfect to the naked eye.

"Dark Fae have an allure, you know." Mimei's bored voice captured Harry's attention and he whirled to face her, willing his red face to cool and calm. "It can twist the mind into a terrible thing. You should be careful of it. You would cut out your own heart, burn it and drink the ash, gifting your empty mortal shell to their feet. You don't seem very aware of your surroundings, so do forgive me if I've misread something, but I didn't think you knew. Sometimes Wik doesn't know when he has it on."

Harry felt his hands ball into fists and he was about to speak, when the Gheyo gave a short jerk of her head towards the dance floor.

"I just thought you should be aware."

Her words only made sense when Harry followed her line of sight to where Gheyo Ace and Gheyo King continued to dance with each other, obviously a lot more into it than any of the other couples on the floor. Dahlia said something that made him laugh and the expression transformed his entire face. Pale features lit up with mischief and vitality as Wikhn bent his head to whisper something in her ear—just as he'd done for Harry.

But when white fangs gleamed into the murky, blue-purple light of the dance floor, Harry couldn't breathe as he processed the fact that Wikhn wasn't actually whispering but biting. To which Dahlia giggled, shrugging her shoulders up to her ears, but turning still to give him better access. Dyshoka laughed with them, saying something that prompted another round of smiles.

Harry started, feeling cold, small hands slipping into his own. He was startled to see that Mimei was calmly guiding him along the edge of the dance floor, her eyes unreadable, her expression fixed. "Why-?" He began.

"Because," she said simply. And her head tipped again.

Against his better judgment, Harry turned. He felt his breath catch in his throat as his mind caught up to what his eyes were seeing. Pressed up against Dyshoka, with her arms twined around his waist from behind, Wikhn's eyes were closed as he was pleasantly sandwiched between the two young women, their fangs neatly notched in his neck. His hands gripped Dahlia's elbows as she did the same to him and his own fangs were buried in her neck. For that instant, they were the perfect, trio and Harry felt something twist inside of him.

Allure? No, it couldn't have been. Harry could have sworn that the moment they'd shared was true and innocent. He had felt no artifice or trickery beneath those smooth, dry lips. Then, perhaps it wasn't something that could be told from a kiss. Harry put his hand to his mouth, vaguely fighting back the urge to bite them bloody. A kiss was one thing, but blood-sharing that was an entirely different brand of intimacy and Harry felt as if he'd been hit with a barrage of spells. His empathy suggested that the moment was mutual between them, because he couldn't sense anything otherwise when they'd danced together, but somehow, he’d managed to read something wrong there and now, he had a sinking feeling that Wikhn probably wouldn't even look at him again.

Probably.
If he could be ever so lucky…

Harry shook his head, inwardly chastising himself for the morbid train of thought. If Wikhn was already taken, that was fine. It had to be. He'd simply have to—to do whatever it was he would have done in the first place. And he'd have to stop thinking about the pink-eyed, dark fae.

"...Harry? Harry!" Mimei grabbed his shoulders and gave him a sharp shake. Her icy blue eyes narrowed and suddenly her body began to twist and shudder, her feminine shape giving way to rather masculine lines, the ample bosom disappearing into a smooth, flat chest and an excess of fabric. "Oh by Airelle's." The changeling broke off, abruptly. "Come with me. Now!" He dragged Harry off the dance floor and into a shadowed corner of the room. "I thought you were being rather dense, but I honestly thought you could tell—oh never mind."

For a moment, the sheer absurdity of everything made Harry's head spin. "You're a he?"

"I am me," Came the irritated reply. "Changelings such as myself do not bother with things as trivial as pronouns. It doesn't matter, though if it eases your mind, I answer to Mei when in this form." He huffed. "Why do you look like that? I, oh—I suppose a distraction is order. Oi! You there, the newbie with the pet." He pursed his lips enough to give a sharp whistle.

Someone turned in answer.

A rather familiar looking someone with dark hair, dark eyes and olive skin.

"Harry?" Blaise's voice was the very last thing Harry expected to hear.

He turned in time to receive a faceful of flying Nytura as Shadow attached itself to his face, warbling loudly in a series of clicks, hisses and little growls. He felt scaly paws scrabbling at his hair and cheeks for purchase and he reached up to pry the kitten-sized creature from his face. It had shrunk since he'd last seen it and he couldn't remember everything he'd read about it. In fact, he was really starting to dislike that pesky encyclopedia that really hadn't been much help to him at all.

"Shadow? Blaise?" He stared at the Slytherin and felt the twist in his stomach settle into a slow, agonizing burn. He licked his lips, hating the way his voice shook, ever so faintly. "He was with you?"

Blaise let him stare and returned the favor as well. He looked both different and the same, at a single glance. He wore what Harry was beginning to understand was standard Gheyo wear—simple black clothing and basic armor.

What surprised Harry was the fact that Blaise had a small, black whip coiled and tied to his waist, the handle overlaid with silver etching. He'd never expected to see the Slytherin with a weapon apart from his wand, perhaps, but it was unnerving just the same. Blaise himself, looked better than Harry could ever recall seeing him. His standard-wear included an armless tank top and slightly baggy pants worked into mid-calf length boots. It showed off smooth tanned arms and cut a rather impressive figure to any interested parties. A few, if the interested looks were to be believed, were taking notice.

The Slytherin had lost some of the stress from his face from the last time Harry had seen him. Instead, expansive indigo eyes were highlighted with a shimmer of silver and sultry black eyeliner, lending another hint of mystery to his exotic features. His hair was also thicker, curlier and longer as if the new growth had been spelled in. Overall, he was neat and clean, on the other hand, he was familiar and approachable in the way his lips held a familiar Slytherin-esque smirk.
"So it is yours. It talks a lot." Blaise threw a fond smile at the scrabbling Shadow that was now gnawing on the thick folded collar of Harry's dress robes. "Never ever shuts up or quiets down. Chews shoes. I guess you're—you're welcome to have it back." He faltered—just barely—but the smile remained. "It talks about you."

"It—he—Shadow." Harry finished, awkwardly.

"A simple yes would work." Blaise's smile wavered, once. "I figured it was yours. Didn't expect to see you here though. Aren't you a Submissive? You're looking a bit green around the edges, Potter."

"Nott." Harry heard himself say, faintly. "I prefer Nott." He could feel a sudden influx of new emotions and feelings that were most definitely not his and perhaps, maybe, even Mei's. It was hard to tell. Everything was all mashed up and tangled together and he could feel a headache coming on from trying to puzzle it out. Suddenly, all he wanted was fresh air and a moment to breathe.

Blaise blinked, then nodded, turning to scan the floor. "Theo here?"

"You two know each other?" Mei looked between them and then at the happy Nytura curled around Harry's neck. "That's yours? Wait, you have a Nytura?"

"Gryffindor." Blaise winked at Harry, then pointed to himself. "Slytherin."

Mei gave a quick shake of his head. "Never mind. I don't want to know." He'd hardly paid any attention to Lady Pai's newest recruit, mostly because it didn't require his notice, but he had heard some of the whispered talk and lately, several in the ranks had spoken of newcomers from the wizarding world. Blue eyes narrowed faintly. "Though I would like to know what you're doing here. You're not with any of the groups here and I know your rank isn't allowed anywhere near these floors, what's wrong?"

Blaise nearly shrugged, as it was, his shoulders twitched, faintly and his smile turned to a grimace. "I am supposed to tell your…Dahlia, that Lord Cunningham arrived and he brought an entourage. Lady Pai would like to know if Dahlia wants any sparring slots reserved."

Mei's jaw dropped. "For real? You saw him—them?" He corrected, excitement coloring his face.

There were rumors that the famous noble was the de facto royal for the unofficial Shadow ranks. Like the dragel Storm element, the dragel Shadow element was even less organized and less recognized. They operated in much the same way as their declared element, with significant mystery, mastery and subtlety.

Lord Cunningham had won the title after a series of bloody, brutal duels over a fifteen day period. His large Circle had then taken up the appropriate duties expected of an acting royal and clan chief. Together, he had single-handedly brought the Shadow Element into a respectful, if somewhat invisible, presence among the popular four elements. Rumor had it that he had taken on a masked bodyguard—a hired Gheyo—for his own protection during the hunt. The best rumors mentioned that the masked Gheyo answered to a stage name and held a blood title.

Blaise gave a careful nod. "Twelve in his Circle and three apprentice Gheyos and one sword for hire."

"Masked?" Mei had to know. "Tall, black, kind of brooding—with a mask? Shadow type?"

"Couldn't really tell about the shadow." Blaise frowned. "Yes to the rest of it. Why?"
"What kind of a mask?"

"…black. Gold scrolls. Scarlet border and plume on the right side. Why?"

Mei's entire face lit up. "Nothing for you to worry your little newbie head about, but it's the best news I've heard since this Hunt started. Stay and keep him company. I'll tell her."

Harry and Blaise watched him all but bounce off into the mass of moving, dancing bodies. They stood in silence, next to each other and then, finally, Harry shifted. He reached up with one hand to stroke Shadow's warm scales as the little thing rested its head in the crook of his neck. He frowned. There was one question that had bothered him literally every single time Shadow was mentioned. "Why is everyone always so impressed with Shadow? What's the big deal about a Nytura?"

Blaise turned to look at him and after a moment of silence, inclined his head. "Have you been to the library yet? Or the true archives in the library basement?"

"No. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Visit the library and you'll see."

"Why can't you just tell me? What is with all of the riddles and crazy customs and-"

"Whoa. Chill, Potter—I mean, Nott." Blaise scowled. "Whatever. I only meant that if you visit the library, you'll see some Nyturas and it'll put it in perspective for you. It's nothing to work yourself up over." He frowned. "They're just very smart creatures and they're much bigger than yours is, that's all." He paused. "Are you alright?"

Harry huffed a laugh. "It must be obvious, if you're asking." He muttered. "No, no, I'm not. You look—well." He stumbled over the word, not sure what else to say. The last thing he wanted to do was talk about himself and he barely knew Blaise well enough to keep a polite conversation between them.

"It's…fine." Blaise allowed. "I like it. Probably won't—return." He forced a quick smile. "Nothing to return to, anyway."

Harry jerked around to stare at him. "What do you mean?" A bitter taste began to settle in the back of his throat. "You came over the same as we did—"

"What? Oh. No. Nothing—new. Sort of. I don't have any reason to return," he held his hands out, palm up. "Mother is dead and if I stay here, where I am legal in the eyes of Nevarean law, I retain all of our possessions and the title of Zabini Heir. I am underage in the Wizarding World, so if I were to set foot outside once more, I would likely lose everything I own, at least, until I am able to completely secure it from this end of things."

"You'd stay here? For galleons?" Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing.

The Slytherin smirked. "Is that so difficult to believe? Lady Pai's house has graciously taken me in. I've learned all sorts of useful things and even if I should try to deny myself, the fact remains that I belong here. I am comfortable here." He reached back with one hand to scratch at his shoulders. Black and deep purple scales rippled along the surface, before fading back to well-tanned skin. "Probably find myself a Circle in a little bit, if not this season, probably the next."

"W-what about Voldemort?" Harry had to ask.

Blaise finally did shrug. "What about him? He can't touch me here and I have no real intention of
ever returning, so.” Indigo eyes narrowed. "You look—off. What happened? You look even worse than that time with the tri-wizard-?"

"Don't you dare mention that!" Harry growled. "I'm fine. I'm just—I'm fine." He turned his shoulder to the brunet, feeling stifled. He couldn't understand how everything had gone from being wonderful to terrible in the same breath and suddenly, all he wanted to do, was be anywhere else but here, in this strange place, with strange people and their strange rules.

"Harry? Hey, Harry?" Blaise tried.

Something blurred at the corner of his face and Harry found himself staring straight into familiar pink eyes, framed by those gorgeous wisps of pitch-black hair. Wikhn. He swallowed, hard.

"Harry? You look like you're being tortured to death." Wikhn's dark drawl made Harry shiver. "Or worse." He frowned at Blaise. "Where's Mei and what are you doing here? You don't have clearance for this floor."

"She—he—went over there," Blaise tipped his head in the opposite direction. "I was sent to bring the message of Lord Cunningham's arrival to Dahlia."

Wikhn's pink eyes darkened within a matter of seconds. "Oh?" Interest colored his voice. "The Lord Cunningham?"

"Exactly why is this so important, I'd like to know." Blaise huffed. "Yes, whatever that means. I'm only to tell her, wait for an answer and then I'll be on my way—stop looking at me like that."

"Like how?" Wikhn drawled, but the dark pink-almost-red brought a vaguely unsettling aura with it as the dark fae turned back to the dance floor, eyes tracking the dancers to pick out Mei in the crowd. He smirked, a moment later, when he witnessed the exchange of information between Dahlia and Mei, and saw their Ace give a happy leap into the air. With a chuckle, Wikhn turned back towards Blaise and Harry, the smirk melting away when he took in Harry's expression. "You really don't look that well," calloused fingers caressed Harry's damp brow. "Did you drink anything? No. I was with you the whole—most of the time—stay here. I'd best fetch Theo for you," the Gheyo turned away abruptly. "Make sure no one approaches him!" The last sentence was directed to Blaise.

He scowled, unsurprised to find Blaise doing the same beside him. He didn't need to be running to Theo for every single little thing under the sun—and the crowd parted with Theo moving through the newly cleared space with Wikhn drifting a few paces behind him.

Harry blinked. That was fast. Wikhn must have known where his Alpha had been, either that or portals worked much faster than he'd witnessed. "Theo-" he started and was instantly pulled into a hug that practically squeezed all the air out of him.

"Theo?" Blaise exclaimed. "That was—wait, where did you-?"

"Not now, Blaise." Theo hugged Harry hard for a moment and then turned slightly to speak over his shoulder. "Thank you, Wikhn. I do appreciate the favor, but if you'd be so kind as to excuse us?"

"There's a private hallway ahead and to your right," came the dark fae's answer and then the deliberate tread of footsteps, before the music grew louder once more and then nothing could be
"I-I'll see you around." Blaise's voice faded away as Theo guided them out from the soundproofed edges of the dance floor and out into the inner hallway off of the club.

The moment they were safely away from the dark room with pulsing rhythms, lights and magic, Theo studied Harry's face, his arm snug around his Submissive's shoulders. He understood what Wikhn meant when he discovered that the private hallway was a backstage entrance of sorts, to the club floor and there were a handful of alcoves build into the walls, quite obviously made for the purpose of a semi-private rendezvous.

Theo ignored the first three spaces that were occupied by snogging couples and immediately nudged Harry into the fourth small, empty space, taking up the guardian's stance outside with his back to the half-empty hallway. It was just big enough for Harry to be out of sight, with enough room to turn around and something of a ledge to brace on, if he wanted. Harry, however, was too agitated to notice such details, his hands were twisting together in a way that made Theo's brow furrow into a knot. He reached out and grabbed the snoozing Shadow from around Harry's neck and gave it a cursory pat, before lightly tossing it over his shoulder. "Keep watch," he instructed it, before turning back to face Harry. "Harry. Are you alright?" Golden eyes searched the pale face, before finally staring into those wide emerald eyes.

Harry gave his hands one final twist and then blew out a frustrated sigh. He'd wanted to have so much fun with this, but then everything was just starting to feel like too much, too soon. His empathy gifts were wreaking havoc with him, too many emotions, too many different kinds of magics and all kinds of creatures. He didn't want to interrupt anyone else's fun, because it seemed like everyone was having a jolly good time, except for him. He wasn't selfish enough to take that away from them, he really wasn't. He'd been on the sidelines, except for when Ariki and Wikhen had pulled him into things and then, then-!

Self-consciously, he hugged his arms to himself, trying to shove all the unfamiliar things out of his head so he could think clearly and give a proper answer. He hated feeling like he was falling apart at the seams—especially when Theo looked at him with such genuine concern and Harry knew it was alright to fall apart—because Theo would be there for him. Would always be there for him. Would never let him fall to pieces and pretend he didn't see it. Would always put him back together again. It made his heart hurt in a good kind of way. He'd never thought he would have something like this before.

"Hey, hey, shhh." Theo's voice was warm and soothing, the familiar chocolate-orange scent suddenly wafting through the air as the young Alpha stepped closer into the small space and reached for Harry, wrapping his arms tightly around the smaller male. "It's alright. Whatever it is, it is alright. Calm down." Theo muttered the words for a privacy bubble, tapping his wand hidden up his sleeve and relaxing minutely when he knew that it was fully formed. "Calm down, Harry. Please. It's alright. I promise you it is alright. Everything is alright, my treasure."

Harry resisted for all of a single minute, before he lost the hold on his tightly wound magic and felt the sparks explode inside of him. He shuddered, feeling it surge out of him in a wave of invisible energy that he could not even hope to control. His hands tangled in the front of Theo's robes and he braced himself, waiting for a backlash that somehow seemed inevitable. He was really starting to hate this.

To his complete surprise, he felt Theo's own magic rise up to meet him, gently pushing and nudging the destructive feelings away, soothing and caressing the raw edges in a way that only a magical soulmate could. One of Theo's long-fingered hands found their way up Harry's neck, to
tangle in the short, brunet curls. They didn't stroke, but instead, pulled firmly, keeping an even pressure, just enough to be grounding and not to hurt.

Eventually, his breathing slowed from short, quick huffs to faintly wavering, calm breaths and Harry tilted his head forward enough to rest his cheek against Theo's chest. A panic attack or close enough to mimic one, was his best guess. "I don't know what happened," He said, miserably. "I was fine, it was fun and all of a sudden, it just—it—everything." He trailed off in a mixture of a whine-turned-growl. "What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing that cannot be fixed." Theo answered at once. "And I personally don't think there's anything wrong with you. If there was, I'm sure we'd know by now and Quinn would have said something. You probably had a reaction to something, I'd think. What are you doing in the Gheyo section of things? I thought you would be with Soula and Shayla and if they're in there, then what in Arielle's name are they doing there?"

"It—happened." Harry twisted the fabric of Theo's robes in his hand, focusing on the shift of the cloth in his hand and the way his clenched fingers made lines in the smoothness of it. "It-I." He tried and stopped. He didn't know what he wanted to say and perhaps it was best that he didn't say anything at all, at least, that way he couldn't muck it up.

"Shh." Theo soothed. "You don't have to explain anything that doesn't need to be explained. So as long as you're alright. You had me worried for a moment there. Was it your empathy, maybe? I could feel that you were slipping, but Wikhn arrived before I could 'port in." The Slytherin's lips quirked into something of a smile. "I think he likes you."

"Doesn't matter," Harry managed. "He wouldn't deny that he had liked the idea of the dark Fae keeping a personal lookout for him and perhaps more. There was something deliciously dangerous about the dark Fae that had appealed to him on more than merely an instinctual and magical level. Wikhn was perhaps more perceptive that he'd given him credit for—maybe. Harry swallowed. He didn't want to think of Wikhn right now. Not Wikhn that belonged to Dahlia, who already had Dyshoka. Even if Wikhn didn't belong to them in that way, the look on his face had said otherwise. He'd clearly cared for them. Harry clawed at the fabric, barely feeling Theo's hands closing over his wrists. "I hate this. Feeling so useless and—just. I hate it." He shuddered again. "We don't even know what's happening over there and I'm here having a—a good time." He choked. "Even Blaise. He's not—he won't return. He doesn't care. Voldemort's probably having a party with-"

Theo cut him off with a warm kiss, drawing it out until he felt Harry stop resisting the token of affection and accept the soothing gesture it was meant to be. "That is not your responsibility." He said, firmly. Golden eyes drilled straight into vivid green ones, even as Harry opened his mouth to protest. "No, Harry. Listen to me. He is not your responsibility and never mind about Blaise. He's entitled to do whatever he likes—just as you are."

Harry made a sound of disagreement. He was fairly certain the twisted little history he'd made since his entrance into Hogwarts spoke otherwise for the fate of the wizarding world. Yes, he might be having a wonderful time in Nevarah, but he wasn't about to condemn an entire population to Voldemort's reign if it was within his power to stop it.

Theo sighed. "You know, it does worry me that you worry so much for others and so very little for yourself, are you even aware of it?"

Harry blinked at him, incomprehensibly.

"Harry, you're sixteen—not even a legally aged wizard—there's an entire country and even," he grimaced. "Dumbledore, the famed defeater of Grindelwald. I should think that between them all
and their special light-families-only group, that they could stand to hold off one mad dark lord for a few weeks while you put your head together."

"What if I can't put my head together?" Harry snapped. Theo perked a brow. Harry squirmed beneath his Alpha's sharp gaze. "Theo—Theodore, it's, I've always-

"There. That." Theo interrupted. "That right there. You've always." He shook his head. "Always. Why? Why you? I mean, beyond what you've said, what you have actually…shared. I am serious, Harry. There are grown wizards and witches, some with fairly impressive powers, inheritances, connections both political and otherwise, yet it seems as if everything always falls back to your shoulders and you pick it up and carry it without a single thought. Why?"

"...I don't understand." Harry's brow furrowed. "It's always—I mean, no one else-

Theo leaned forward, touching their foreheads together. "First year," he murmured. "There was some noise about a Cerberus, a stone and that ridiculous excuse of a professor. Squirrel, Quirrell, something like that, whatever his name was, I never bothered to remember because I was always too busy casting air freshening charms so I could breathe without dying from the stench of garlic. Rumors in the dungeon said that he tried to kill you—and was killed in turn for his efforts. What part of that sounds even vaguely alright, Harry?"

Harry sucked in a breath, feeling his heart begin to quicken. He had a sudden sinking feeling he knew where this conversation was headed and he did not like it one bit.

"Second year, was something to do with that cursed Chamber and that ridiculous excuse of a DADA professor, the whole mess with Slytherin's heir and your speaking parseltongue? A mysterious creature that came into the school petrifying students and yet, we all remain there, because there is no real cause for alarm?" Theo sighed. "And third year, I might count myself cursed if I were to end up in half of the adventures that have sought you before you were even of age." The hand that cradled the back of Harry's head, now slid down and forward, to cup Harry's cheek. "And then there was the tournament," and here, Theo shuddered. "That wretched tri-wizard tournament. What were they all thinking? So close to death, my treasure...and all by yourself. Why? I do not like the trend I am seeing here. I like it even less when you do not stop me to say that it is false."

Harry closed his eyes, unable to look into that steady, golden gaze that did not accuse, but instead held such warmth and strength that he could not bear it. "...stop." He whispered. "Please? Please—just—stop—I can't do this now, Theo."

"I am in no hurry to return you to a realm where others take advantage of you for what they deem as your birthright." Theo said, sternly. "I am in no position to judge anything that you have been through, especially when I do not know everything about it nor do I fully understand your reasons for doing so. However, I do reserve the right to protect you even from yourself." He sighed, softly. "You have been able to relax, just the tiniest bit since we have arrived here. Granted, it has been confusing, loud and frustrating, but no one has demanded that you risk your life alone nor have they actively tried to kill you." Something flashed a few shades darker in those golden eyes as Theo frowned. "Open your eyes, Harry. Look at me, I am serious."

Reluctantly, Harry did so. He was surprised and relieved to find nothing but care, concern and worry in those steadily darkening eyes as they shifted from golden to a hazel hue. "I-I," he faltered. Theo had rather quickly and efficiently squashed a good chunk of his present worries in a matter of minutes. Relief and pure want was left remaining, as he suppressed the urge to allow his body to betray him any further. He wanted to hold Theo and be held so tightly in turn that even if he fell apart, the pieces would have nowhere to scatter. "How did you-?" He tried, forcing himself to think
logically and push the emotions aside. Really, he was acting like such a girl these days!

"You were projecting." Theo said softly. He cupped one soft cheek, smoothing his thumb back and forth on the soft skin beneath Harry's eye. "Stop that. I can see you arguing with yourself and it'll only grant you a headache for your troubles. There's nothing wrong with having a moment every now and again. We all have them. No one is perfect. You're worried and I understand that. I respect and acknowledge that you have reason to be, but there is nothing so dire that we should rush to return to the wizarding world, before we are ready. Before you are ready."

Harry made a faint sound of distress, pushing himself forward so that he could touch more of Theo, drawing strength from the faint warmth of having his Alpha so close.

"I cannot begin to stress how important it is for us to be comfortable with and around each other before we leave here. You, myself and Charlie, this is important. This is more than just an auspicious time, Harry, this is when we reinforce whatever is between us, so that when we are apart or together in another realm, we know where we stand. It will not be easy to return to the Wizarding world and that has very little to do with whether a dark wizard decides to muck about while we're not there." Theo hummed, softly. "You do realize that even if we spent an entire month here, they would only miss us for a week? I hardly think that's anything to quibble over. Merlin and Arielle know you could use the time, to rest, if not study or train."

"But what if something happens?"

"Something like what?" Theo prompted, eyebrow arched.

Harry squirmed. Sometimes he really didn't like it when Theo had to make sense. "Something that only I could stop?"

The perked eyebrow said a mouthful more than Theo's calm, "and how would you know that?"

"...Dumbledore said-"

"Stop right there." Theo pressed a finger to those plump pink lips. "Any sentence beginning with 'Dumbledore said' ought to be revised, rethought and rephrased." The soft brown hue of his changing irises lightened a few shades, settling on a distinct honey-gold halfway color. He slipped a hand beneath the first folds of Harry's robe to pinch his side. "Think twice before you ever tell me that again, because it makes me want to do very terrible things."

Harry blinked. "Why?"

"I could start with a thousand and one reasons, the first being the way he favors you Gryffindors and the least being the way he has allowed us Slytherins to be considered the darkest of houses and little better than-" Theo coughed. "Never mind. I should not start on that."

"...You never said anything before." Harry said, softly.

"I have no desire to burden you and I have lived and witnessed it myself for some time. Do not worry about it. We are talking about you, right now." He paused. "Harry, is this about the prophecy again?" He hesitated. "I was about to ask Ilsa about meeting with the Kadel family, I know she would see what she can do on our behalf, so as long as I ask her. Realistically though, the timing is wonderful and horrible."

Harry frowned, adorably. "How?"

"Hunting Season means you will have numerous opportunities to increase our Circle in a myriad of
ways. It also means that you might find yourself at odd ends, because everything is out of sync for the Season." Theo twitched, faintly. "Remember how crowded the City Council was when I took you to register? Remember how frazzled the healers at the clinic were? Then think of the day we were out in the city—the morning in the park."

Harry, predictably, blushed. There had been quite a bit of things that happened in the park, some of them were more pleasurable than others.

Theo grinned, sharing the remembrance. "There were people of all kinds everywhere and we had just arrived running for our lives, not a day or so before that. Nevarah hosts plenty of others for the Hunt and it also means that there are less official things in play, because of it. Basically, the Gheyos keep the order—Military Circles are often the ones who will see that there is some semblance of order and organization. The Hunt is supposed to be fun and enjoyable for everyone." He waited for Harry to return the smile and brightened when he did. "Now, why don't you tell me what's really bothering you? Contrary to what it may seem, I am not a telepath."

Harry nearly laughed. It was just the right touch of humor to help bring him back to where he wanted to be. Merlin, he was lucky to have Theo. "I just—it feels like I'm not doing anything," he admitted, at last, shoulders slumped. "I feel—guilty."

Theo's brow furrowed at once. "Guilty? Harry, whatever for? Meeting new people, making new friends, learning a little more about yourself and the talents you have? Learning about dragels? There's still a million and one things we haven't even thought of doing here yet. Experiences that I can't wait to show you and all the things we'll do in the decades that we'll have together—even after we're through with this."

"But I haven't learned about them," Harry countered. "I've just been surprised with them. Everyone gives me these roundabout answers and I never really know what's happening or why. Maybe there's years, Theo, but right now—I'm living here—I'm living now. Here. Standing next to you and it feels like that moment isn't coming. I've been told I'm an empath and I have a vague idea of what it is and what it means, but I have no real idea of who they are, what they are and what they do. How am I supposed to act, to train or handle any of it? I feel things, Theo. I feel things and I can't do anything about it and I'm pretty sure the feelings are—off."

Theo gave him the eyebrow again.

Harry sighed and half-shrugged. "Off like, it doesn't work right. I can't explain. I-I had a reading—sort of—and I acted on it and it wasn't—right. It's, you know, off."

Theo gave a slow nod, not yet speaking, waiting for Harry to finish.

"And the rest of this, I mean, I know I haven't been—able, to do much of anything since we arrived, it feels like all I've done is sleep—everywhere and for no reason. But everyone—just about everyone feels stronger and more powerful than me. Blaise, Theo—Blaise looks like he belongs here, like he was born here and he's training and he's—and I can't even—I can't even fly with these wings!" His shoulders gave a violent twitch and Harry stilled when Theo's hands immediately clamped down on him.

"Do not extend those in here," Theo scolded, lightly. "You might not mean to, but if you bring them out right now, this is far too small of a space and you might break something." He sighed. "Apologies, I did not meant to interrupt. Please finish."

There was a short, awkward moment and then Harry gave a jerky nod. "I want—I want to know more. I want to train. I don't want to be chased around like some girl so I can," his hands fluttered
helplessly at his sides. He didn't know how to really explain any of this, it felt so strange to be able to speak up and not be shot down for it. "Everyone has a mentor and we still don't know what happened to mine. Where are they? Who are they? What was so wrong with me that they decided I wasn't worth the effort, huh?"

Theo made a strangled sound in his throat, but he did not stop Harry's torrent of words.

"And why can't I find a new one? Is there a list or something? I feel like—like—a prat for chasing around after—people—when I. You know, Quinn said something about family seals—I could have family here. Family, Theo and I don't even know how I would begin to contact them, to request an audience or whatever it is that I'm supposed to do—draggel etiquette is confusing—and I'm lost and it doesn't feel like it's easing up. I thought it was. I mean, sometimes, maybe? Kind of? I don't know. I feel—I don't know what I feel anymore!"

Theo's hands slipped from the top of Harry's shoulders and began to rub his arms in soothing motions. "You want space, training and answers," Theo summarized. "What else?"

"These seals," Harry hissed. "I want these bloody seals off and as nice as everything is here—I want to—Theo, I can't stay here. I can't stay. I don't care if you said it's a month and a week and whatever the time difference. I can't—I'm restless. I want to be useful. I want to help in any way that I can. What if something does happen? I still have friends over there. I know you have Blaise and Draco here and even Snap—Severus—but for me. I feel like—I'd feel like—it'd be worse than guilt. A lifetime of guilt. I'd never forgive myself if something happened and I never stepped forward to even try to stop it." He swallowed. "Then there's Hermione, we haven't even—we just left her. We left her, Theo, with the Snapes of all people, I mean, I know they are special to you or—it's your head of house and I guess Snape never really did try to kill me, he helped in his own twisted ways, but I—this. It's too much. Too soon and I don't know how to keep up with it." Harry blew out a breath in frustration. "I didn't even know until Bahn told me—that I had to worry about contraceptive spells!" He flushed a rosy red.

Theo's eyebrows arched upwards even higher. "You wouldn't really need them unless we were-" he stopped. "Unless we were serious, which neither of us know, because we haven't discussed it. Good point. Save that conversation for when Charlie is around, it'll be easier, believe me." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "What else?"

"There was—remember when I was with Quinn, that one time? The first time, the Blood Seal—the magic, the things he did, it made me remember things." Harry bit his lip. "Dumbledore—this," he gestured at himself. "This is the result of a spell. He wanted me or us or everyone, to be like this."

Theo's calm features shuttered at once, the expression growing cold. "What?"

"I-I remember it." Harry cleared his throat, squaring his shoulders. "I remember Dumbledore casting a spell. There's more students like me, even if they aren't dragel—he made their creature sides come out. Theo, I don't know why he did it and maybe I didn't even agree with my housemates, but no one deserves this." He thrust out a hand, showing his half-tattooed and dragel-scaled arm. "Maybe some of us need it or want it, but no one deserves to have it thrown at them like this. At least I had you, at least I have you now. I have you and Charlie and I'm lucky, so very lucky, but there's others, I'm sure of it—what if they have no one? Theo, the wizarding world—they aren't even accepting, really, of any magical creature apart from Veela and even so, that's just so they won't offend the French or something. They wouldn't be open to this sort of thing—would they?"

Theo's carefully blank look now wavered, showing one of grim realization. "They are not very publicly accepting of it," he allowed, at last. "Think of Werewolves and Vampires, for example, but
those two halves have long since fallen under the jurisdiction of their own. There is a Vampire Lord and a Vampire Royal family, as well as a council. They are all full of Elders—the original vampires. The Weres have a High Alpha and an Alpha pack and I know you know how they treat them there. The Fae and the Elves keep to themselves and I don't believe there are any elves still living in the wizarding world, but the Fae tend to flit in and out, they answer to a Fairy Queen and her court, just as the Elves answer to a Royal Court and by type." He sighed and released Harry to rub his own forehead and then cast a cursory look over his shoulder to check to be sure there weren't any lingering persons in the hallway.

He could 'port them to a more private place, but then again, they were amidst people who knew nothing of them and were more likely to offer to help than to eavesdrop, as the Hunting Season brought out the friendliest portions of nearly everyone. As it was, no one even paid them any attention, a few others were huddled in their own corners down the hallway, in respective alcoves, some of the couples still snogging or speaking in soft whispers. Theo could guess from some of the gestures which ones were being rewarded and which were being scolded for something or the other. He returned his attention to his own Submissive when Harry fidgeted, his gaze wary, as if expecting to be taken to task for speaking his mind. Inwardly, Theo felt his stomach twist, wondering how long it would take for Harry to understand just how much he cared. "Whatever it is you want to ask, you may as well ask." He prompted, giving Harry's stomach a light pat of encouragement.

"...you stopped, I mean, we stopped," Harry corrected, quickly. "Training, sort of. You were showing me before, how to use your element, but since we've come here and then with everything with Charlie and," he shrugged. "You haven't."

Theo blinked. "We've been busy." He said, matter-of-factly. "We haven't had the—oh." He stopped, taking in Harry's expression and defensive stance. "I'm sorry, Harry. I should be paying better attention, closer attention, at least. I just thought that you could use some more rest, not vigorous training after all of the healings we've been through these past few days. I didn't mean to imply that we've stopped. I still have things I need to teach you, especially if you'll be using my earth element."

"I could always read or write or watch," Harry countered. "I don't always have to be spar to learn. What about Charlie? I'm sure he's a brilliant duelist or at least very quick with his hands, being a dragon tamer and all that, but we're facing this together, aren't we? I'd like to know how to use his fire and this is a Circle thing, isn't it? He should be learning too, he probably knows even less than I do about everything." He hesitated. "And what about my empathy? What does that mean for the rest of you? There's too much to do, I can't afford to waste time, Theo, even if it is moving faster or slower or whatever. Maybe it's not my responsibility and maybe I am the only one who is seeing things this way, but I can't stand by and watch everything I've ever known burn down to the ground and pretend that I'm alright with it."

"Harry-"

"No, wait," Harry lifted his chin. "Please," he added. "This is important to me, I mean, there were some of us in class, some of us that had to have known that the transformations were happening, because I know something changed, even if I couldn't remember what it was. I felt the shift. I couldn't have been the only one. Fellow classmates, Slytherin and Gryffindor and everything. We were lucky that Terius showed up and-" Theo had a rather odd expression on his face that made Harry trail off in mid-sentence. "What?"

"Harry, Terius wasn't there because if the inheritances—he, ah," Theo hesitated. "He simply refused to leave Draco alone with Severus in the wizarding world, because Draco is pregnant.
Terius is a Pareya through and through. He's also a Councilman—and that translates into the fact that he is a Nevarean native. If it were up to him, he would have kept Severus and Draco in Nevarah until things were safer over there. He does hold residency over here, but Severus," he shrugged. "He is the Alpha and his word is law when the Submissive agrees. Terius showed up because he didn't have a choice and he wasn't about to leave his Bonded alone in a potentially dangerous situation."

Harry stared at him for a long moment, some pieces of his mental puzzle continuing to click into place, slowly showing a bigger picture. "Then why did he apply for—why was he teaching? I don't understand."

"He decided that since he was there, he should be useful." Theo said, carefully. "He didn't randomly appear." He scowled. "I want to return, as soon as we can." He held up a hand when Theo made a noise in the back of his throat. "Theo, my parents died trying to fight a madman that could probably be brought down if only a tenth of these people here thought to lend a hand. If they'd known what they were, I doubt that things would have turned out the way they did. They might still be alive. There are people out there that are dying, will die and have died, because of-"

"If you say because of you, I will bite you." Theo said, in perfect seriousness. "And it will hurt. Think very carefully before you finish that sentence. We can't control everything that happens, Harry, but if you feel this strongly about-"

"I do." Harry said, steadily. "I do. This, I do feel. I can't say that I haven't enjoyed it here, because I have and I—I don't know that there's anything really left for me, over there." He hesitated. "in the Wizarding world, but there are people," His mind flickered back to the Weasleys and then to friends like Luna, Neville and Remus. "And I can't leave them there. It isn't fair and it isn't right. Maybe you're right and we shouldn't take prophecies as they come, but if it's right and I'm the one that will make a difference, then I don't want to be the one that stood back and watched-" his voice cracked.

Theo reached for him, relieved to feel Harry's arms actually curving around him this time, inviting the embrace. "Time passes differently here," he reminded him, for the third time, gently rubbing one hand up and down Harry's back. "We have some time. I suppose that's why it might seem like I haven't been in such a hurry to return. I think it would be wise to take some time to train here, to secure whatever allies we might have, before returning to-"

Harry made a muffled noise of disagreement. "No one wants to help us with-"

"You do not know that." Theo pressed a kiss to the top of that messy head of hair. "Nevarah has survived for many, many centuries, Harry. They only step into conflicts in outside worlds or realms when one of their own is significantly threatened. The wizarding world was not kind to them so many years ago. The Torvaks took over, after exposing the use of blood as a necessary and magical medium, they filed them in the same category as Vampires. There are dragel skeletons, scales and claws on display in museums. People think of them as monsters from fairy tales now. They've worked very hard to form and maintain that reputation, so that no one will ever look deeper into things." He sighed. "That doesn't mean that if they don't have a good reason, they won't do something."

Theo simply tightened his arms, holding him close. "You already have Ilsa on your side, which is quite a feat, my treasure."

"She didn't like me at first." Harry sniffed. And she...whacked me.... His cheeks heated against his will.

"She doesn't like anyone at first," Theo stifled a chuckle. "That's just how she is. But she likes you now and that's what counts. She doesn't change her mind about things like this."

"She's mad about my falling off the pier." Harry gave up trying to pull away and settled back against Theo's warmth. He liked it there, more than he cared to admit.

"I am still mad about your falling off the pier," Theo retorted. "I can hardly blame her."

"I didn't fall on purpose," came the expected protest. "I was trying to help sdlfkj from drowning!"

"Drowning?" Amusement colored Theo's changing tone. "Harry, Merrows don't drown. They could dry out, but they would most certainly never, ever drown. In fact, it is said that the more sadistically inclined Merrows take pleasure in drowning nosy landwalkers. I would be more worried for your own sake than the Merrow's."

"How was I supposed to know that?" Harry countered. "I've read our encyclopedia and it doesn't have a thing about Merrows in there and what?" He stopped. Theo stared down at him with an expression of warmth and fondness that suddenly spoke volumes. Harry twisted in those safe arms, waiting. Theo's gaze did not waver, simply drinking in whatever sight was presented. "Well?" Harry prompted, after a moment. "Stop staring and kiss me already."

The wicked smirk on Theo's face was all the warning Harry had, before his head thunked against the back of the alcove and his mouth was sweetly claimed.

"Perhaps you could spend some time in the library or the archives in the library." Theo suggested. He stood with his back to Harry, studiously angling his head upwards to count the curves in the vaulted ceiling as his charming Submissive continued to colorfully ream him out for the rather enjoyable past fifteen minutes. Shadow was curled up in the crook of his elbow, shivering with little sounds that could have been laughter, if he was inclined to see it as such, with the occasional happy chirp. "and really, Harry-love, you didn't mind-"

"I wasn't in a position to mind!" Harry's furious whisper ended in a near hiss as he manually tucked in his dress shirt and fumbled with the belt for his dress trousers beneath the fancy robes. "In. Public. Theo! Public. You are...shameless."

"Why thank you, love. I am Slytherin." Theo retorted, calmly. "And what exactly did you expect after you said something like that? And with that kind of expression, no less?"

"I was expecting a kiss!" Harry sputtered. "Not a, not a-" his red face flamed an even darker shade of red as he remembered exactly what had just happened and where Theo's hands had been, even now as they innocently played with Shadow's happy, chirping self. He was most certainly not about to say it aloud. A sound like a muffled growl-squeak echoed in the tiny cove. "And what expression?"

"Breathe," Theo advised. "And your robes are fine. I can spell them back to what they-"
"No. I don't want to hear it!" Harry hissed, mortified. He frantically smoothed his robes, trying and failing to see if they were properly replaced where they ought to be. He could still feel the fading tingle of the gently cast cleaning charm and bit his lip against sensitive nipples rubbing along the smooth fabric. In hindsight, perhaps he shouldn't have made such a—demand. Next time, he'd be more careful. Maybe. It had been rather—good. "I can't believe you just—and now you're—where are you taking me? The library?" He shoved ineffectually at Theo's strong shoulders, mildly disgruntled when his Alpha didn't so much as budge. "Insatiable twit! No library. Somewhere outside—where I can breathe!"

Theo's wicked smirk was accented by laughing, golden eyes. "But Harry, don't you like it when I'm a-?"

A furiously blushing Harry yanked Theo around to shut him up with a kiss.

"I did speak to one of the Kadel Pareyas, they were friendly enough, but a bit closed off. I'm afraid they are quite adamant on remaining neutral this Hunting Season, by not engaging in any verifications or readings. At the moment, we don't have anywhere near enough of anything to sway or bribe them with, so we may have to wait until the Hunt is over."

"Until the Hunt is over?" Harry exclaimed, dismayed. "Theo! That's far too long." He sifted through the information in his head, pulling out the snippet that reminded him that the Hunting Season was a full eight weeks long. This was barely the end of the first week.

"I know. I'm sorry, treasure. I did try, but perhaps there is some other way around it."

"Why can't they just—is it really always so complicated?"

"Hmm? What is?"

"This, that." Harry flapped a hand in mid-air. "You have to have connections and bribes and things." He made a face at the word, bribes. Just because he knew the ways of the world, did not mean that he had to like them. He had always despised the way that others blackmailed each other into submission through humiliation or manipulation. Perhaps it was necessary in dire times when there were no other options, but he didn't like it and probably never would.

Theo offered a wry smile. "It is, though generally there is always another way."

"So what way would you have to use now?" Harry's eyes narrowed, faintly. "Theo..."

"Bahn." Theo winked. "It is nothing to make you scowl so." He leaned over to rub at the furrow in Harry's brow. "I said I would take care of it. Trust me to do so?"

"Mmm." Harry leaned ever so slightly into the touch. "What will Bahn do?"

"He doesn't have to do anything." Theo half-shrugged. "Just be himself when they are formally introduced and people will remember that his Circle has significant say in certain things of importance."

"So basically a very blatant show of power?" Harry snorted.

"Bahn planned his Circle quite well," Theo said, quietly.

Harry jerked around to look at him. "What do you mean?"
"Think about it. Even merging with Bhindi's Circle only brought things together even better for both of them, politically, if nothing else, though Ilsa assures me there were soulmates involved."

The frown returned to Harry's face. "Explain."

"Well, think about it. Delani, his Alpha, is the second oldest child of a respected High Noble family from the Air Clans, Takar, their Beta, is from a respected Elven line. They both have dragel and elven heritage to speak of. Aracle is known for his time-bending spells, a skill that is rare and commands great respect and Bahn himself, of Elven royalty and dragel genes." Theo shrugged. "That would be just the operating triad, I'm sure you saw plenty of things last night that made you think twice."

"Ilsa." Harry supplied. He reached over to twine his hand in Theo's as they continued their walk. He'd asked for some time away from everything and perhaps an empty spot to just be alone with his thoughts. Theo had 'ported them just outside of the protective barriers, within the official Hunting grounds of the stadium, behind all of the outdoor booths, visiting dragels and playing children, to the quiet, calm greenery touching the edge of the Merrow waters. "Greta." He bit his lip, remembering. "She didn't give a name."

"She's allowed to hide it, if she wishes." Theo squeezed his hand, lightly. "Gheyos have different rules, which reminds me." He paused and drew Harry to his arms, placing a kiss on each cheek, just because he could. "What were you doing in the Gheyo section?"

Harry sucked in his lower lip, the nibbling no longer enough, as he looked away.

Theo perked a brow at that response and reached out to gently tease that tortured lip from between Harry's pearly white teeth and half-visible fangs. He kissed him tenderly.

"Dahlia and Dyshoka…" Harry hesitated. "They're together?"

"Officially or otherwise?" Theo locked his arms around him and began to sway ever so slightly.

"Both? I guess? I don't know?" Harry reached over to loop his arms around Theo's neck. "She gave her a bracelet. Dyshoka—she's Quinn's sister. They were celebrating—we went—dancing." Harry stopped. He pulled away from Theo's grasp and hugged his arms to himself. "What should I do about favors? You never said."

Theo looked at his empty arms and then at Harry standing just out of reach. A slight frown passed over his face, but he simply moved closer and slung an arm around Harry's stiff shoulders. "It slipped my mind. My apologies. Have you received one?"

"No." Harry shook his head. "But what am I supposed to do if I do?"

"If you are interested, you accept it. If not, then simply tell the messenger you do not want it. They will return it to the sender. If you accept it, then you are obligated to gift the messenger—usually one of the children running about—either coin or a candy. Tokens can accompany favors and they can be almost anything. The favor will always bear a name at the top. If there is no name, then it will not be delivered by hand and if that is the case, then test it for jinxes and hexes, just as you would a missive from an unknown owl. If it is clear, then you can read it and accept it. If you refuse, then you must burn it, that way the sender knows it has been refused."


"It's actually not that complicated." Theo started walking, gently pulling Harry along, keeping his steps short. "It helps to salvage a lot of egos and bolster shy personalities. You can send something
to whoever you like and there are less hurt feelings when the rejection is not face to face. If it is accepted, then there is an air of mystery and romance to it." He rubbed Harry's shoulder. "I give you leave to accept or reject whatever you desire. If you encounter a suitor that is particularly rude or offensive, then you may reject it on my behalf with the disclaimer that I have strictly forbidden you from accepting it. At the present, since I do not have anything against your nonexistent suitors, I have no special instructions."

The slight frown on Harry's face began to settle in. "And if there was someone you didn't like?" He almost didn't want to ask, but he had to know.

"Then I would ask you to refuse it—within reason." Theo stopped and turned to face Harry. He gave his Submissive a minute, but when Harry stubbornly refused to meet his gaze, he reached over to tip up his chin. "I will not be unreasonable, I assure you there will be very good reason for requesting a refusal and you are welcome to ask me to revise my opinion at any time. I will gladly do so, if the situation warrants it. Are we clear?"

There was a long pause and then Harry gave a jerky nod. He could tell that Theo was sincere and even without his empathy, he just knew that Theo would never do anything to deliberately hurt him like that. Not Theo. He sighed and listed forward, allowing Theo to catch him and hold him for a minute. It was the closest he would come to asking outright for a hug.

Theo made no comment and simply held him tight and close, warm breath puffing over Harry's ear.

When fangs lightly nipped at the ear lobe, Harry didn't even flinch. He simply turned, touching his lips to Theo's neck.

"Are you hungry?" Theo stroked a hand up and down his back, subtly brushing his magic over his Submissive in calming waves. "You can feed, if you like."

Harry made a soft, keening sound in the hollow Theo's throat. He wasn't really hungry, at least not for blood, per se and he'd eaten at the café a few hours ago. But he was still seeing Wikhn in the club, surrounded by Dahlia and Dyshoka, and suddenly, all he wanted, was his own fangs in Theo's neck. His jaw ached and tingled as his fangs resurfaced and he lightly nipped what available skin was there.

Theo hummed in answer and reached up with one hand. A hastily murmured spell banished his robes and dress shirt to the grass at his feet, leaving the pale expanse of skin for Harry's perusal, still clad in his trousers and boots, as a privacy ward shimmered to life, along with scent wards and an additional notice-me-not charm.

Harry nosed at the familiarly scented skin of steel and oranges, before selecting a nice, smooth patch. He licked it once, twice and then sank his fangs into the offering with deliberate slowness. He felt Theo twitch faintly in his arms and slipped his own hands around the newly bared torso, fingers splaying out over the warm skin. He could feel the lean muscle beneath the pale skin and the thrum of concealed magic, Theo's earthen element.

One of Theo's hands stroked Harry's head, running through those brunet strands and offering a measure of comfort in the steady strokes. His other hand locked possessively around Harry's waist, while his Alpha senses were thrown out wide to take in the entire area and alert him the moment their private moment was no longer theirs.

A soft, melancholy chirr came from Harry and Theo frowned in turn. He rumbled back, a hint of a growl in his instinctive response, before shifting his hand from Harry's hair to rest at the back of
his neck like he'd done before. His fingers flexed, minutely, as he settled on a firm grip that made his Submissive relax almost at once.

Theo's frown deepened and he tilted his head to the side, just enough to touch Harry. He wouldn't say anything, not now. If Harry needed anything from him, then he'd ask—just as he was doing now.

"Are you sure you'd rather just stay here?" Theo wanted to know, as they stood atop the grassy hill. They'd walked a little further after Harry's feeding had ended and now, they stood together with a clear view of the blue waters down at the bottom and no other stray dragels or familiar faces present.

Harry had asked for somewhere for Shadow to play and then to practice his wing extensions in preparation for flight lessons. This new space was perfect for that. Harry's hand slackened and fell from Theo's grip as he took a few steps forward, curiosity overtaking him as he crested the hill to see the full view.

"...Wow." Harry stopped dead in his tracks gaping downward at the beautiful landscape before him, that stretched out in vibrant colors, subtly inviting. Shadow let out a happy trill of sound and streaked out of his slack grip to fly in an expert circle in the air in front of them.

"It seems that Shadow approves," Theo commented. He smiled fondly at the little thing. It had brought a few half-smiles to Harry's face and he was glad to see it was back again.

Harry found himself thinking of Luna once more and how she loved to be outdoors in the fresh air, with her white-blonde hair and steady grey eyes that always seemed to see past Harry Potter, to just Harry. "Luna would love it," he said, after a moment. "You didn't say when we'd see Herimone again."

"I sent a message to the Snapes," Theo reminded. "We are waiting for a reply, remember?" He gently nudged Harry forward. "Not that it's terribly busy, but if we keep standing here, we might attract a crowd and I know you'd rather have this little spot for yourself." He could sense a few wandering dragels just outside of his awareness and didn't feel like moving, now that it seemed as if Harry had found a place he liked.

"It's beautiful." Harry mumbled, turning in a circle, trusting Theo to keep him from accidently waltzing into anything potentially dangerous, even though there really wasn't anything for him to bump into. Well, except for the giant trees closer down to the water's edge, but he wasn't about to count those. "Why haven't we come here before?"

"I would answer that, but you'd probably hit me again." Theo said, dryly. His lips twitched again as Harry threw a look at him and half-heartedly shoved at his shoulder, too curious to be really upset, Theo noted. "Will you be alright here?"

"I'll be more than alright." Harry murmured, throwing his head back to breathe in the scent of clean, fresh air. It seemed to supercharge him, running hot and cold through his veins and chasing away his lethargy from the recent feeding. "I'll be fine. I'll just practice the wing thing, like you were telling me. Go do whatever it is you Alphas have to do."

Theo snorted. "You'll thank me later." He snuck a quick kiss. "Once we have a full Circle, you'll be expected to make some of the same visits as I am. You can laugh then. Will you be alright with my 'porting you in'?"
Harry hesitated. "Exactly how formal are the introductions? Like the registration at the gates?"

Theo stopped to consider that. "Well, no, actually it's a little more than that."

"More like how?"

"It's a chance to publicly show off to a specific audience." Theo paused. "You'll probably understand it better when you see it, but I'll put it this way. It's a circular coliseum and there are walkways stretching across it at various heights. The higher the walkway, the higher social rank of the Circle. Introductions last almost the entire Hunting Season, but the Royals will be introduced tonight, along with the heads for the Shadow and Storm elements. Basically, we'll walk across a very long walkway, a very long way from the ground, minimum of wings and claws present are required and depending on how Bahn wants to introduce you, we'll walk in formation or you'll walk with him and Bhindi. There will be applause, flying video—things—and giant screens, showing well, the basic information at registration as well as the mention that you are hunting."

Harry whirled to look at him in alarm. "I didn't tell her that!" He said, referring to the young Gheyo who had been friendly while measuring and registering his wings.

"You didn't tell her that you weren't." Theo corrected. "Which is then assumed that you are, because the only reason you wouldn't be, is if you explicitly stated otherwise."

Harry huffed. "I don't want—I-"

"You are hunting and that's the whole purpose of the Hunt." Theo reminded him. "It's nothing to be worried about. There'll be plenty of others there and in the same situation. You want to be noticed and believe me, when I say that you will. They won't be able to keep their eyes off of you."

A rich rosy blush spread across Harry's cheeks. He tried to ignore Shadow's whuffling along his left ear. "But-!"

"And that way, you can also see if there's anyone you like straightaway." Theo said, quickly.

Harry blinked. "Straightaway?"

"If there's anyone at all, someone that just—clicks. You can send a favor of your own. There's little stalls and shelves in the corners that have cards, trinkets and things to write with. Most spell their writing on. You can buy whatever you want and send whatever you like. There'll be competition, so now is not a time to really be shy, if you see someone you're interested in." He smiled at the look of dawning realization on Harry's face. "Enjoy yourself, then." Theo paused, remembering. "Oh, here, I almost forgot again."

"What?" Harry turned to look.

"Here." Theo handed over a corded leather bracelet with a wooden charm dangling from one end. "Give me your hand," he nodded at Harry's hand.

"What is it?" Harry eventually held out his wrist, watching as Theo carefully tied it on, snug but not tight.

"The equivalent of a Gringotts card." Theo said, wryly. "Or a muggle credit card, if you understand that better. This is the most efficient way of handling currency here. Just show it after you've ordered and the balance will be settled. Generally only you or I would have one, it will work anywhere for virtually anything. If you see something you like, feel free to indulge, at least for today."
"What about Charlie?"

"Charlie is fine." Theo looked puzzled.

"Does he have one?"

"He is with Takar and Okahn. I am sure they will look after him. Oh." Theo blinked. He'd completely forgotten about that. He hoped that neither of the other Betas had minded. He'd have to make it up to the redhead as soon as he could.

"Theo."

"At the moment, he does not, but if you wish for him to have one then I will see to it." Theo was already mentally calculating the available time from when Delani had left him to his own devices, to whether he could secure another payment card.

"I do." Harry said, firmly. "That's ridiculous for the-

"Generally speaking, Charlie will rarely be anywhere without one of us nearby. It is not a purposeful exclusion of any sort. It's more tradition than anything else." Theo inwardly frowned. He hadn't meant to forget, but sometimes his mind was too busy with other things.

Harry snorted. "He's not a babysitter, Theo and I'm sure he'd appreciate it. Tradition or not, he's probably had more independence in his life than both of us put together." He frowned. "You aren't being-?" He waved a hand in the air. "Or anything, are you?"

Theo's smile nearly turned into a smirk. "No, I am not being an 'anything', Harry. I simply did not remember and as he didn't know, he couldn't remind me. Which, actually, does remind me, I wanted to purchase his ring sometime today or tomorrow, if today is too busy, then we can pick another…"

Harry brightened almost at once, his gaze dropping to his simple silver ring with the colored slashes in it. "Really? Will it be blue?" He asked, referring to the colorful marks carved onto the front, gold for Theo and green for him.

"Would you like that?"

"Yes." Harry twisted the ring on his finger. "Maybe I could come with you…?"

Theo's smile softened. "If you like." He tapped the inside of his wrist, casting wandless tempus. "Maybe after the introductions? It doesn't have to be a surprise, because I don't know his ring measurement. We could take him with us."

"That would work." Harry agreed. "Now go mingle." He gave Theo a starting push away from the nice, green hill and back towards the noise and fuss of the Hunt. He now wanted to enjoy some time alone—preferably with his wings out—and before all the fuss started.

There was a snort of disbelief. "Thank you, Harry." Theo said, dryly. "I appreciate your enthusiasm."

Chapter End Notes
A/N: So um, all the Wikhn fans, please don't hate me? *ducks* My apologies for ruining the "big" moment with Harry and Wik, but neither of them are ready for each other at the moment, so yes...it couldn't happen. I really wanted to address some of Harry's issues about Nevarah, being away from the WW, the lack of training and explanations, etc. I hope that covered everything. Let me know if I missed a point somewhere...
Of Merrows, Spells and Tempers

Chapter Notes

See first chapter for disclaimers/warnings/summaries. Link to TBDH Forum is in my profile. This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own.

RECAP: Harry and Co have split up with the respective members of the Deveraine Circle and are exploring the Hunt together in small groups. Harry was last dancing with Wikhn in Gheyo territory to celebrate the formal recognition of Dahlia and Dyshoka's bonding. His empathy marks Wikhn as a suitable dragel Intended, however, when Harry kisses him, Wikhn is unable to return his feelings. Mimei is able to point out to Harry that Wikhn is taken for the moment. Harry meets Blaise and reclaims his Nytura, Shadow. His empathy gift threatens to overwhelm him, along with an upsetting conversation with Blaise. Wikhn brings Theo to help and Theo takes Harry outside to the hallway for a little chat. Away from the noise, the crowd and Wikhn, Harry and Theo are able to have a an important conversation about their future, present worries and Voldemort. Once the seriousness is over, Theo is happy to distract Harry until the introductions are about to begin, when Harry asks for some time to be alone. What could possibly happen next...?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With Theo safely sent off and Shadow busy pawing his way through the clean, green grass, Harry was free to do as he liked. He waited a half-second longer, until he was sure that he was alone, before he took off down the hill, heading straight for the water's edge. There were several large, wide-trunked trees, with low hanging branches close to the water's edge. There were unkempt shrubs and wild greenery near some, while one was nice and cleared underneath. There wasn't sand here, where the blueness met the green, but there was shade from the hot sun and Harry suddenly remembered that it had been some time since he'd actually washed his wings.

Maybe he would indulge himself in the water, just a bit, or maybe, he could just sun himself for a little. He could feel a renewed thrum of energy singing through his veins courtesy of Theo's feeding and he liked it very much. It made him feel alive and less inclined to dwell on the vaguely unhappy threads of empathy flickering through him. Shaking such thoughts from his head, Harry mentally pushed himself forward and took careful stock of his surroundings. It was always good to know where he was and what options—escape routes—were available.

It didn't seem likely that any Merrow would show up here, in what seemed to be a freshwater section of liquid, compared to the sandy beach and salty waters from the guesthouse, because Harry could smell that the water was different here. Still, he wasn't about to take chances, so he took a few careful whiffs, scenting for other dragels and animals. He couldn't pick up anything straightaway, so he toed off his shoes when he reached the giant tree on the small bank overlooking the blueness.

Carefully removing his robes, he folded them neatly and cast a spell Hermione had once taught him, to keep his clothes from being ruined by the outdoors. It had helped him to stretch his meager wardrobe and now, it was practically habit. Slipping out of his dress shirt next, Harry stood in just
his trousers, settling down cross-legged on a patch of warm grass, he turned to face the water.

Theo had warned him about privacy charms and pheromones, so now, Harry took a moment to cast a few with his wand. He tucked it back in his wrist holster, and then settled down to think and decide on his next course of action. The first thing he wanted to do, was have his wings out. He'd missed having them out from the second he'd called them out on his very own. If it hadn't been for the stares that he hadn't been ready to deal with, he probably would have left them out.

He'd seen plenty of colorful wings everywhere today and it had left him wishing that he had the nerve to leave his own out in the same fashion. Theo's playful teasing on how lovely they were hadn't really helped much either. He found himself wondering what kind of a reaction there would be when he was introduced with the Deveraines. He'd seen Soula and Shayla's trademark peach and silver wings, proof of their Submissive statuses and they hadn't looked any different than his.

Now, Harry took a deep breath and just like he'd done at the entry way, he tried to focus without thinking about it and found the familiar black and silver tattoos swirling to the surface of his skin. It made him smile to see the delicate scrolls that seemed so meaningful as they melted into existence, lending a touch of the exotic to his boring self.

When the itch in his shoulders swelled and burst out, Harry heard the familiar leathery snap that meant his wings had emerged, right before he felt the weight settle comfortably behind him. A curious thought scrolled through his head and when Shadow pounced onto his lap, Harry caught the happy Nytura with a chuckle.

"You know something, Shadow? I wonder what kind of a dragon I am."

Shadow cocked his head to the side, looking at him, curiously. How so? The Nytura projected his thoughts with ease, easily slipping back into the mental channel that Harry had subconsciously kept open for him.

Harry shrugged. "Real dragons, you know. I've seen a few Hungarian horntails, a Chinese fireball, a Hebridian black and," he waved his hand. "Others. I was just wondering what I was. I saw Ilsa transform—in the portal that we took for here, but I don't really know how she did it and it wasn't really obvious from her wings or anything, what kind of dragon she was. I still don't know."

Harry hummed, stretching his arms overhead and feeling muscles popping into place with ease. That, Quinn had told him, was perfectly normal and that he ought to stretch regularly to make sure that things were as they were supposed to be. Now, Harry found himself enjoying the movements as Shadow's scaly little paws dug into his bared torso, to make its way up to his shoulder. "Ow. Easy, Shadow." He scolded, catching him by the scruff and setting him where he seemed happiest. "Your claws are sharper than you think," he sighed. "I don't suppose you know how I could turn into a dragon?"

Something splashing in the distance drew his attention and Harry looked up to find himself staring at a familiar, watery hulk of a serpent. Goonter.

Harry froze.

He stared, watching, uncertainly, but interested as he realized that the water must be quite deep the moment it moved away from the shoreline. Goonter wasn't that far out, but he didn't seem to have noticed Harry on the grassy bank just yet.

He roared happily, tossing his great head from side to side and Harry gave an involuntary shudder as he caught sight of those giant, gleaming fangs. He swallowed carefully, reminding himself that
he was a decently trained wizard and had defended himself from worse in the past. One water
dragon-serpent-whatever, couldn't possibly best him twice, now that he knew what to expect.

In daylight, Goonter wasn't half as terrifying as he'd seemed the night before, the giant fangs aside.
Instead, if Harry had to be honest, Goonter was rather pretty and glittery in the daylight, all
shimmering iridescent water and innocent playfulness.

His mind caught up to the sight a moment later and Harry instinctively shifted into an awkward
crouch and shuffled backwards, aware that his notice-me-not charms might not protect him
completely, as it seemed that Merrow magic was quite different from every other type of magic
he'd encountered up to then. He wondered what it would mean to have a Merrow as one of his
Bonded. It would certainly be a headache, he was sure, but perhaps Merrow had redeeming
qualities hidden deep inside, enough to make the headache worth it.

Harry hummed, allowing the train of thought to twirl around him. If nothing, Alec had certainly
been nice to look at and insults aside, he was powerful and direct. His blunt manner of speech had
contrasted sharply with the gentleness of his hands. And here, Harry smiled, remembering the few
minutes when Alec's hands had been on him. They were distinctly different from Theo's steady,
elegant ones and Charlie's large warm ones. Alec's fingers had been cold and lightly textured, with
definite points instead of curved fingernails.


Harry was rudely jerked back from his mental musings as one important fact registered beyond
Alec's sharp fingernails—or claws, perhaps—and his weirdly blue hair. The past few minutes had
begun to create a feeling of déjà vu. Harry distinctly remembered seeing Goonter first and Alec
next and so far, he'd just seen Goonter and was now fantasizing—NO—thinking, about Alec.

Harry swallowed, lips half curling into a snarl as his inner dragel protested his common sense. Alec
might be nice to look at with nice, cool hands, but he was also an unfeeling, loudmouthed prat.
Harry wasn't sure he wanted to see that idiot Merrow again. Not after that sarcastic, biting banter
and the stupid spell that wouldn't let him speak properly. If they happened to meet, he knew that he
had quite a bit he wanted to say.

A ripple of anger flowed over him and Harry heard Shadow's questioning chirp from his shoulder
and he reached up to scratch the Nytura's chin. Thankfully, the giant tree would hide him from
view, sort of, even if the privacy charms failed. He was grateful for that, because if he did see Alec
first, he would have the option of either surprising the Merrow or ignoring him altogether.

Both options were quite fine.

After several long minutes though, Harry realized that Goonter seemed to be on his own and he
seemed to be—playing. The great water serpent did flips, roars and tosses of its great head, with the
occasional playful volley of water. There was no trace of Alec, much less any Merrow, present.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, even as his anger faded to a tolerable prickle beneath his skin.

Harry had just settled in, comfortably, when he heard approaching footsteps and angry mutterings.
He scrambled to his feet and halfway behind the tree, willing his wings to retreat and wincing,
when they did not, but instead awkwardly tangled with a few of the lower branches of greenery.

Ow. His mind supplied, helpfully. Hurts. Shadow gave an urgent squawk of protest and Harry
shushed him with a hand, tucking the Nytura close under his chin.
"...stupid idiot landwalkers. They think they have a right to-inferior bastard species of a-!" The rest of the insult trailed off in a heated string of Merrowspeak and within a half-second, Alec strode into view.

At least, Harry was fairly certain it was Alec. It was hard to directly scent him, as he couldn't quite recall what the Merrow had smelled like from the night before. Everything had just been blurry, then painful and then wet. Very, very wet.

To top it all off, Harry realized that he'd never seen another Merrow before and for all he knew, they looked exactly alike. He didn't want to embarrass himself in anyway, but at the moment, the Merrow in front of him looked and sounded very much like Alec. From the shimmery blue skin and bright, teal-colored hair, to the fluted ears poking out from behind those neon tresses, the tone, though slightly higher-pitched than the night before, led Harry to think that this was definitely Alec.

Wearing the same wetsuit-like getup as Alec had the night before, the Merrow stomped and grumbled all the way to the water's edge where he peeled off the upperhalf of said wetsuit and threw it carelessly to the ground. He wore oversized sandals and those were quickly kicked off in favor of bare—webbed—feet.

Harry held his breath as his mind translated what his eyes were seeing. He didn't remember Alec's hands as having any kind of webbing, but then again, he hadn't been in the best of conditions to notice. His own hand ghosted over his chest, chasing the memory of those phantom touches.

"Oi, Goonter!" The Merrow bellowed. "If you wish to eat before the introductions, heave your sorry carcass over here, before I have to do it and you won't like the way I'll-"

A giant wave of lukewarm water came rushing to the grassy shoreline, thoroughly drenching the agitated Merrow, Harry and Shadow.

Shadow, unfortunately, did not like that. It released a flurry of squeals, shrieks and hisses of outrage that drew the attention of both Goonter and the Merrow, that Harry was now absolutely sure was Alec. He had a feeling that Goonter wouldn't react to another person, given the dynamic he'd seen between Merrow and creature the night before.

"Who dares exist here?" Alec's haughty voice rang out, a hint of authority betraying his casual tone. "Show yourself, lest I do it for you." Alec flinched backwards and dodged expertly to the side when a spitting, hissing Shadow came streaking out from the safety of Harry's arms to dive-bomb him. In a blur of lilac motion, he plucked the little creature from midair and gave it a good shake.

"What by—oh by Kesmar, it's you." Disdain dripped from every syllable as sharp blue eyes zeroed in on Harry's emerging figure. "I should have known. I could never be so lucky as this."

"Don't hurt Shadow!" Harry stalked out from his hiding place, temper flaring right back up to where it had been minutes before. "Give him back!"

"This?" Alec held it up at eyelevel. "And if I don't? I'm sure Goonter wouldn't mind a snack."

Harry felt the twitch of anger amplify the itchy feeling beneath his skin, his magic responding to his agitation as his hands curled into fists. "It would probably give him indigestion, seeing as Shadow's kind of a landwalker's pet," his eyes narrowed faintly. "Indigestion will be the least of your problems if something happens to him."

Alec scoffed. "Really? Charming. We've skipped the greetings entirely and started with direct threats." A glimmer of amusement flickered through his impassive expression. "That's rather bold
Harry simply took another step forward, his gaze never wavering. He would not play word games when there was something important at stake.

Shadow wrinkled its nose as if it were about to sneeze when Alec's dark blue eyes narrowed meaningfully. "Don't even consider it, you disgusting little thing-!"

The Nytura blew a raspberry and promptly sneezed in Alec's face.

Alec released it at once with a muffled screech of outrage, before he made a swirling motion with his hand and immediately dripped from head to toe from the impromptu shower of another crashing wave. Shadow gave a startled shriek of his own as he retreated from the sudden influx of water, scampering over to Harry to be held and protected.

"It's a Nytura." Harry snapped, scooping up his scaled friend and cuddling the shivering Nytura to his chest. "Most people know what he is and he's not disgusting!"

Alec sniffed. "I am not most people." He said, matter-of-factly. "Your landwalking pets are of no significance to me. Take it and your threats elsewhere. Go annoy some other poor soul. Spare me your pathetic attempts at conversation—pardon, me, I meant, intimidation." He turned his back to Harry and made another swirling motion with his hand to reveal a large sack of glittering, gritty powder, along with a basket of very smelly fish.

Harry gagged and took a step backwards as Alec calmly reached into the basket, drew out a fish, flopped it around in the powdery mixture and then hooked his fingers in the gills and cocked his arm as if to throw it. A second later, he did throw it—right into Goonter's open, waiting mouth.

The serpent had made its way closer to the bank and now it had settled down, waiting to be fed, begging as only a well-trained familiar could.

"Mouthful of water, you dimwit." Alec called out to the creature. There was the barest hint of fondness in his voice. "Before and after, or else you really will have indigestion and you know I won't like it, if you do. Stop begging for a meal. This is only a snack. You're supposed to be performing in a few hours and you can't do that on a full stomach. This is more than enough to hold you out until then."

Goonter gave a groaning rumble of a sound in answer, part happy, part-whine.

Harry made a sound in his throat and didn't protest when Shadow climbed up his shoulder to curl around his neck. After the mixed up morning he'd had, he wasn't quite inclined to let that one little detail be. "You cast a spell on me," he started forward, rubbing at his nose in a vain attempt to ignore the stench of rotting fish. He'd never smelled something so disgusting, besides the sealed Chamber of Secrets. That had been equally disturbing.

"Did I?" Alec said, blandly.

"Yes. You shouldn't have. I want it off. Now."

"What spell?"

"You know what spell. Take it off." Harry growled. "You've had your fun and now it's over."

Alec turned to roll his eyes at him. "You landwalkers are so melodramatic. What enjoyment could I possibly gain from wasting valuable magic on a landwalker? Tch. You're not worth the hassle."
He paused, "I also dislike repeating myself. What spell? I thought I told you to leave. Why are you still here? What part of that was too complicated for your miniscule brain to comprehend?"

"The part where I said you have a spell on me and I want it off and you decided to act like you couldn't hear me." Harry glowered at him. "Though it is funny to see that I am apparently worth the hassle, because you're the only Merrow I've met and the spell was cast with Merrow magic. Excuse my miniscule brain for actually thinking, but you're the only one who could have cast it. It's not funny. I want it off."

"If I was trying to be funny, you would be laughing. I am being quite serious. I do not know that which you speak of and I do not want nor need you here—or anywhere near me, actually, if I must be specific. Honestly, you are thick. Would you kindly amuse yourself elsewhere? I am busy, if your eyes are not in their proper working function to tell you so."

There was a moment of awkward, heavy silence while Harry processed that bit of insult. His clawed hands opened and folded back into careful fists. "I-I was here first!" Harry sputtered, indignantly. "If anyone should be moving, it should be you! I'm talking about the spell that you cast so that I can't even mention your name."

"Goonter chose the spot and he was probably here long before you ever were." Alec sniffed. "Your protest is noted and invalid. Go. Anytime now. I won't stop you."

"I'm not leaving until you take your bloody spell off!" Harry half-growled. "This isn't funny, Alec!"

"Ah, but you can say my name, Harry. So what exactly are you trying to say?"

Harry's eyes darkened from an emerald to a forest green. "I said," he began, his voice dropping lower and vaguely darker. "That you put a spell on me so I couldn't say anything about last night. It has caused me some degree of trouble and I have traced the problem back to you." A low growl rumbled in his throat.

"I'm sorry I seem to be missing something here." Alec gestured between them "Whatever it is, I accept your apology and you are more than welcome to be on your way whenever you like."

"Alec!" Harry hissed. He didn't bother to temper his instincts any more, even as he acknowledged a subtle hint of his feral nature surfaced beyond the pointed claws making his hands itch and twitch.

Alec tossed his head, not the least bit perturbed. "What?"

Flecks of gold began to bleed into the dark green irises as Harry grew rather still. "This is your fault," his voice was sharp. "Your doing. I don't know what you were trying to do, but you should take responsibility. Do you have any idea what happened when I returned to-"

"I beg your pardon? You're the one that came ranting out here in the open blathering on about how I put a spell on you!" Alec gestured between them. "Come here."

Harry blinked. Then frowned. He shook his head, backing up a step.

Alec rolled his eyes again, the gesture somehow seeming less flippant coming from those vivid, blue eyes. "You are impossible." He informed Harry, calmly. "And it is terribly impolite of me to bring it to your immediate attention," he beckoned with one finger for Harry to come closer—again. When Harry didn't move, Alec calmly closed the distance between them to flick him on the forehead. "However, it seems that my subtle hints are being wasted. Get. Lost. Preferably in that corner over there and continuing on further away from me."
Harry jerked back, reaching up to swipe at his forehead and grimacing at the slimy fingerprint that was there. He felt his stomach heave and he gagged, hands going to his mouth, as he hunched forward.

Alec thwapped him again—and a spark of freezing energy leapt from his fingers into Harry—via the point of touch, the back of Harry's head. "You have a very weak stomach." The Merrow observed. "Tch. Honestly."

A yelp came from the brunet and a displeased hiss from Shadow, who snapped, belatedly at the Merrow's fingers that were now successfully out of reach. Harry didn't answer right away. He felt as if someone had just poured a bucket of ice water over him. He jerked upright, unsteadily, just in time to realize that his stomach—while still roiling—was not quite on the verge of emptying itself onto the green grass. *Alec*. Harry blinked, as the second realization registered—he couldn't smell a single thing. "Hey!" He waved his arms, turning to Alec, who was calmly rolling another fish around in the sack of powder. "What'd you do to me?"

The Merrow arched a single eyebrow in a look that said more than necessary. "I have no intention of cleaning up your vomit, should you feel encouraged to empty your stomach on this lovely stretch of shoreline. I also have no intention of moving. So if you do wish for me to move, I'm afraid you'll have to do something better than that."

"What?" Harry gaped at him. "I wasn't—I didn't—why do you have to be so difficult? Your fish stink!" He snapped, face red.

Alec gifted him with another eye roll, this one punctuated by a dramatic sigh. "That's why they invented scent charms, you empty-headed-salamander and of course the fish stink. Goonter is a Harron's Sea Dragon, they don't eat live things—mostly. If it isn't dead or worse, he'll never touch it."

Harry winced. That explained why he hadn't been digested straightaway. It also explained something that he didn't want to think about, as an image of a young Tom Riddle flashed through his mind's eye. The Chamber of Secrets had been a disturbing, distressing thing all the way around. For a moment, he almost wondered whether Goonter would answer to parseltongue, before he realized that he didn't really want to be remembering that year and what had happened with the Basilisk and Ginny and the diary and—he shuddered—unsure of whether it was from the past memories or the new information the Merrow had just shared. He settled on speaking, "that's… disgusting."

"Says the landwalker with a Nytura for a pet." Alec sniffed. "That's a very small one, you know. Very small. It's probably the runt of the litter. You should have chosen a bigger one. Then again, it would probably eat you out of house and home. You know they like to eat spirits, don't you?" He sniffed. "Grazing in graveyards and all that."

"What?" Harry shook his head, the information clashing with the paragraphs he'd read in Theo's Encyclopedia. He didn't want to deal with that right now and there was no way he could verify whether it was true or not. At least, not at the moment. "Stop it. You're trying to distract me."

"Is it working? I'd say it's working. Congratulations to me. I am brilliant." Alec flashed a smile that was all fang and a touch of dark mischief. "If you must keep on with this, then do enlighten me. You keep talking about a spell. What spell? When was it cast? How was it cast?"

"The—oh." Harry shut his mouth, fangs and teeth clicking together. There was another moment of silence and then he sighed. "You did something, last night. I don't know what. You probably cast it anytime when we were there. I wouldn't know. You keep reminding me that Merrow magic is
different. I probably wouldn't have noticed when you cast it or how you cast it and now, you're trying to make me think that it never happened."

"Hmm. That's quite an accusation. Do continue. What exactly does this spell do?"

Harry snorted. "It keeps me from saying your name and explaining how I fell off of the pier in the middle of the night because I was busy saving your sorry-"

"I do not know what you want me to say," Alec said at last. He sniffed and returned to the task of feeding Goonter the strangely 'breaded' fish. "But whatever it is, I cannot say it. I also have no wish to further discuss this and I cannot help you. Kindly go away."

"I'm not leaving until-"

"Shouldn't you be out courting or something?"

Harry opened his mouth to protest and Alec gave him a look.

After a moment, Harry shut his mouth and turned away, arms folded over his chest. He had no intention of leaving without having the spell lifted and if Alec's snark was the worst part of staying there, well, he'd heard worse before, hadn't he?

They stood in silence until Alec had finished feeding Goonter all the stinky fish and had only used up about a quarter of the strange glittery powder. The sea dragon had come closer to the shoreline, as much as it could manage, and it hummed and warbled happily as Alec bade it to take a more physical form of visible scales and ridged bumps, before he went about stroking and smoothing everything he could reach.

Goonter groaned in ecstasy as he was quite obviously pampered by the well-aimed arcs of water that Alec directed at him. In spite of the tense atmosphere, Alec continued about his duties as creature wrangler, relaxed and confident in his role to work with Goonter.

Harry found it somewhat difficult to be upset at the creature, when it blew a warm spray of water on him and gave the equivalent of a toothy grin, wriggling its head closer to be patted. Alec glowered at him as he did so, but Harry ignored the glower. Goonter didn't seem to mind his tentative pats and the sea dragon's magic was a steady flow of cheerful calmness.

"Can you take the spell off—please?" Harry tried again. It probably couldn't hurt to use a touch of good manners.

Blue eyes blinked at him in honest surprise and then Alec's brow slowly furrowed into a knot as he considered the request and decided on how to respond. A second later, he then snapped at Harry for the next five minutes in a string of completely unintelligible words in his native tongue. He finished with a toss of his head and crossing his arms.

"I would guess that is a no," Harry observed. Mentally, he couldn't help comparing Alec's melodial tirade to Wikhn's musical words. He felt something inside, click, yet again. This time he stubbornly pushed it away and leveled a glare at the scowling Merrow. "How about this time, in English?"

"It is not my fault if you cannot understand Merrowspeak." Alec said, haughtily. "I dislike repeating myself, so it is your loss." He wrinkled his pert nose and turned, angling his face toward the sun in a movement that made his entire body positively glow, as Goonter splashed them both. "What are you doing here anyway? Most sensible and sane folk are up there," he waved his fingers over one shoulder. "and I know you are Bonded, you don't smell as innocent as your status
proclaims, so why aren't you off pestering them?"

Harry sighed. He could wait this out, if he had to, it seemed like that was what it would take. It seemed as if this Merrow was fully incapable of speaking without including some form of insult in his address. "None of your business," he tried, borrowing a non-answer that was as old as time.

Alec stifled a laugh. "Work on the delivery," he teased, the earlier amusement now surfacing and turning genuine, it seemed. "Make it sound more like it is when it really isn't, while really meaning that it isn't."

"What?"

Alec laughed in answer and Harry was momentarily transfixed by the sound that was different from anything he'd ever heard from the Merrow before.

When Alec laughed, everything irritating about him faded away into the background. The short, strange teal hair flipped in synchronized motion falling just right against those pale blue cheeks. Rich blue eyes were brighter and more brilliant than any sapphire, while those delectable lips flushed the faintest touch of lilac. His fluted ears flicked forward, glimmering with iridescence in the noon sun.

A moment later, the laugh tapered off when blue eyes met green and for a moment, neither said anything.

Harry took a slow breath, waiting, when Alec's ears flicked forward and his eyes narrowed.

Without warning, he lurched forward and grabbed Harry's wrists, forcibly yanking him to the side and then shoving him backwards, behind him, with a strong pulse of magic. Shadow uncurled from Harry's neck with a feral hiss, only to see Alec's own, wickedly fanged face hissing back at him.

"Don't move! Stay down. Keep quiet, if you want to live." He rasped. His entire demeanor had changed in the space of a split-second.

Harry glared at him, just as the magic caught up to the threat. He felt his winged body stretch, burn and then shrink as his surroundings changed dramatically in the space of a handful of seconds. He stared down in horror to find his clawed hands turning into literal dragon claws and the same for his feet, before he managed to catch himself on all fours, as a sudden burst of pain in his backside, provided a hefty, spiked tail that lashed about behind him. Anything he was about to say, turned into a guttural growl of displeasure as Harry realized he'd been forced into a full-on dragon form that he hadn't even known he could manage. Shadow squirmed out from under him at the same time his newly sharpened ears caught the sound of an approaching, purposeful stride.

"Don't move!" Alec hissed in his direction, a thread of barely concealed panic present in his voice. "Whatever you do, don't move. Please. And act like a dragon." He jerked around to drop to his knees before the bag of glittery powder and pretended to be fiddling with the bag, as if to tie it up.

In a loud voice, Alec directed his next words to Goonter. "Aim more to the left, you thick-scaled imbecile. I am not your personal target. You're supposed to be practicing! You'll disappoint his majesty with such a lackluster performance."

Goonter gave a groaning bellow of happiness, not the least bit fazed by the harsh words. He gave a circular flip, slapping his broad, finned tail along the surface of the water in a sound that made the Merrow wince. He'd been practicing, lazily, according to Alec's commands and now, was simply swimming in complicated patterns because he could.
The bushes to the left rustled loudly from behind the second large tree and a moment later, a tall, regal looking man came striding forward as the bushes parted to show a hidden pathway. "Alec!" He scowled. "What are you doing?"


"Don't give me that, you impertinent wretch." The man growled. He was taller than Alec, at least by a good head and shoulders. He had several lavender-hued scrolling tattoos about his sky-blue face and his hair was long and shiny, falling past his waist as if it were a length of silk. His broad lips were pulled into a haughty twist and his pointed nose already angled upward as if he smelled something distasteful. His robes were all blue and gold and silver, with a few hints of red and black. Jewelry practically dripped off of him in everything from hair jewels to a fat signet ring on one forefinger.

"Advisor Kieran," Alec bowed his head, eyes averted. "My apologies."

Kieran stopped short in front of the bag of glittery powder. His bright blue eyes darkened considerably. "Apologies are of no use to me. Where were you last night? I searched everywhere."

"Apparently not everywhere," Alec shrugged. He turned and put two fingers into his mouth to whistle for Goonter to come to attention.

Kieran's hands clenched into fists. "You could have been seen. It is forbidden to be parading about before his majesty has been publicly presented. Unless you truly crave the public humiliation that would reward such insolence."

"I was only training his majesty's familiar for the upcoming presentation. If you would rather do it yourself, then by all means, do so." Alec tucked a strand of teal hair behind one fluted ear. "I'm sure it can be arranged and I would not complain of having a break."

"What is that?" Kieran's sharp eyes zeroed in on Harry's dragon figure and the squirming thing beneath his front claws. From his point of view, it looked like a young, white dragon that had just caught its first prey. A dragon that should not have been anywhere near a Merrow or a water serpent. He'd seen strange things before, but this was stranger still. "Alec, have you anything you wish to tell me?"

"Me? Why no, Advisor Kieran. That would be terribly forward of me."

"Charming." Kieran said, dryly. "It has never stopped you before. You missed the morning proceedings—why? And do think carefully before you lie again, Alec. I am not in a particularly forgiving mood."

"Are you ever?" Alec snarked. "I was nowhere, doing nothing. I am here and I am—ah!" The words were interrupted with a hiss of pain, when Kieran's hand shot out and grabbed a handful of bright teal hair, jerking the young man to his side.

"As I said, not in a particularly forgiving mood." Kieran said, calmly. "Now, would you care to repeat that? Honestly?"

"I was practicing!"

"With Goonter?"

"Yes!"
"And would that beast verify it, if I asked?"

"Yes!"

"Ha. Of course it would. It is loyal to-

"His majesty, as it should be. I am nothing more than its keeper. I know that today's demonstration is to be an impressive display of power and beauty, I only wanted to be sure that everything would run smoothly."

"So you slipped out in the middle of the night, to practice, unsupervised in broad moonlight? Are you mad?"

"I practiced in a safe environment and away from prying eyes." Alec tried to move and gave a low whine when the hand fisted in his hair did not release him. "I swear it!"

"And would you swear it on your mother's grave?" Kieran snorted when Alec did not answer. "I thought not." His sharp gaze flickered around the clearing and returned to Harry in dragon form. "What exactly is that?"

"What is-"

"That." Kieran jerked him around to face the transformed Harry. "I warned you about practicing your illusions in daylight. You know it is dangerous."

Alec's lips curved into something of a smirk. "I was only testing the light's refraction. I wanted to be sure of-ah!" He stilled, once more. "It is my magic, I swear. Test it, if you do not believe me."

Kieran glowered at him for a moment, but did not make any attempt to approach the decidedly real-looking dragon. "I am curious as to where you happened to see this."

"Milord?"

"It looks like a White Russian Dragon. Or maybe even a rare White Silverwing? One of those unknown types that hasn't been seen for some time. I believe they are quite rare. I've never seen one before and I have seen many things in my centuries. I've also known you for every year you've been alive and I know you haven't been anywhere near where you could have possibly seen such a creature. Books do not do them justice."

"Tis the Hunting Season. Strangeness abounds everywhere."

"So you have been slipping around when you shouldn't!" Kieran gave him a little shake. "You will be the death of me. What if you were seen?"

"Seen? I haven't been anywhere that I could've been seen, Kieran. Unlike you, I don't have to be arrest!

"One of these days, your mouth will demand a price that your body cannot handle."

"I have no use for your riddles. Tell me what you wish of me and leave me be." Alec said, dismissively. "I have things to prepare for. The presentation is within the hour."

"Come now, Alec. You're slipping."

Alec did not answer.
"Very well then, allow me to gift you a warning. Once," Kieran eyed the shimmering dragon figure just out of reach and then frowned down at the younger Merrow. "Persist in your foolishness and I shall hand you over the discipline master without any remorse."

"Can't stand to do it yourself?" Alec spat. "Or afraid you'll leave a mark?"

"I would gladly mark you myself, but it would be a pity." He laughed, humorlessly. "You are hardly worthy of the effort it would require."

"Of course. How presumptuous of me."

"Do not mistake my indulgence for lenience, Alec. If you cannot curb your tongue, I will cut it out for you." The warning came through with a hint of steel in Kieran's voice as he frowned at Alec. "Impertinence will gain you no favors." His hand tightened in Alec's hair and he pulled, harshly, drawing another whine. Alec's hands finally reached up, but Kieran swatted them away. "Hands on your thighs." He snapped. "Don't even think about it."

A long pause stretched out until Alec's next whine trailed off into a hitched breath and he relaxed into the punishing grip holding him hostage. His superior attitude had faded almost entirely, body slowly growing slack against his tormentor.

The moment he had given in, without hesitation, the hand in his hair slackened and released him almost at once, smoothing and petting the ruffled strands, lightly tracing the edges of his fluted ears. "There now, that wasn't so difficult, was it?"

Alec merely turned his face into the fancy robe, pressing his cheek against Kieran's side. He did not answer.

Kieran's smirk softened into something that might have been a smile, before his slender fingers melded together, becoming a webbed hand. He rested it atop Alec's head, water trickling down from his palm and drenching the younger Merrow. The rest of the conversation was finished in sharp sentences of Merrowspeak, ending with a warning tap to Alec's head, before Kieran turned at the sound of a bell tolling in the distance. "Within the hour," he reminded Alec. "Make sure you are properly dressed before you enter the courts. Leave enough time for it."

Harry nearly choked in his forced disguise-turned-new-form. He wasn't sure what to think about being a small, pint-sized dragon, though, clearly, that was what he was. He realized that he had some size and bulk, but instead of a large, massive form like Ilsa, he felt rather the size of a tiger. He caught Shadow beneath his front claws, trying awkwardly to shush the small Ny turbra when every single empathy thread in his magic literally blazed to life, screaming of danger.

His sharp new hearing had given him a quick warning for the newcomer, an Advisor Kieran, but it hadn't warned him for the strange interaction he'd seen between the two Merrow. He stared in fascinated horror as the proud, haughty Alec was quite literally brought to his knees in the course of the strangest conversation he'd ever overheard.

When the glowering Advisor Kieran had finally left, Harry found himself frozen to the spot where Alec had spelled him, too afraid to move. The calculating, coldness of the Merrow advisor had left him with vaguely unsettling remembrance for some of the visions he'd had of Voldemort. Of a lord with self-proclaimed power that he did not hesitate to use to subjugate the ones beneath him for little more than a whim.

His mouth felt dry inside and Harry felt himself grow slack with relief now that the dangerous man
was well away from him. He didn't like him, advisor or not and he had a very faint hunch that maybe, he'd been quite lucky to escape without enduring a forced introduction of sorts. It seemed that Alec was a study in contrast as his actions always said more than what his words did.

Harry whuffled softly, the breath puffing out from his dragon lungs as he shook himself carefully, trying to reconcile the uncomfortable itch slithering through his body. He was trying to make sense of the strange conversation and as far as he could gather, it seemed that Alec wasn't supposed to be outside last night either. Much less helping him or even being seen now, at the water's edge.

Worried, Harry looked to where Alec remained kneeling beside the large sack of glittery powder.

*Are you alright? What was that? Did he hurt you?* Harry tried to say, but the words of course, were trapped in his dragon-form and only a few huffs and outraged screeches were audible.

The Merrow had his hands fisted in the thick material, before he stood and violently threw it into the water, spanning an impressive distance. Alec ignored the rush of noise, apparently unable to translate Harry's dragon-speak to actual words. When he turned back to face Harry, there was a dark glower on his face. "Well?" He inquired, mockingly. "Anything else you'd care to add to my miserable day? Still think you know everything?"

Harry blinked. He'd never even said that he knew everything nor insinuated anything of the sort. He'd just hoped that Alec would take responsibility for something that was clearly his own doing. For the moment, he did feel a bit sorry for the Merrow who apparently had to deal with such an insensitive supervisor of sorts, but beyond that, he knew there was little he could say or do. Alec would not take pity very well and Harry most certainly would not insult him by offering it. He did wish that Alec wasn't wearing that angry expression though. His teal-hued skin was best presented when his smooth features were halfway to smiling and not looking like he was about to kill something.

Harry snorted. Making actual expressions in his dragon form didn't seem like they would translate properly and he couldn't speak yet, so he'd have to let things be for the moment. He managed to find his feet and stand, with Shadow finally climbing out from under him and perching atop his head, much like he would when in his human form. He tried to speak again, but only a cacophony of dragon noises emitted and he shrank back when Alec winced and doused them both with a strong wave.

"I can't understand a word you're saying. Change back and leave, if you know what's good for you." Alec hugged his arms to himself for a moment, then sighed and skipped back a few steps from the water and began to dance on his tip-toes.

Harry watched him, curiously, before the words registered with a hint of panic. He couldn't change back—he didn't know how! A frustrated groan rumbled out of his throat and Harry snapped his jaws in the Merrow's direction. He'd been spelled yet again—and barely within a matter of hours between the first time.

This couldn't possibly end well.

When Alec gave a running leap-turned-dive, from the grassy shores, a frantic Harry went floundering in after him.

"Oi, you stupid dragon. You're not a sea dragon!" Alec coughed and sputtered, his arms looped around Harry's slender dragon-neck, as he kicked furiously to keep them above the surface and
moving back towards land. "What were you thinking?" He squeezed a little harder than necessary and leaned away from Harry's ill-tempered snarl. "Rhetorical question, you brute. I don't really want to know, because I don't really care." His eyes flared bright blue once more and with the help of his elemental water gift, Alec washed them up on shore. "You're just as dense in this form as you are in your other. Why am I not surprised?"

A panting, heaving dragon-Harry promptly draped himself over Alec's drenched form and gave a long, low whine, before thumping his head on Alec's chest. Shadow came streaking out in mid-air, circling them both with a flurry of frantic shrieks and trills.

The Merrow winced, glowering up at it. "He's fine, you stupid thing. Keep that up and we'll both be deaf." He shoved ineffectually at Harry's scaled head, that had moved from resting on his chest to pillowed in his lap. "Oi. Move, you hulk!"

Harry merely shifted, one bright green eye swiveling to look at him. It blinked, once, twice, impassive, before turning away with the equivalent of a dragon-huff. "I can't change back, you idiot!" Harry practically screamed, throwing out his magic with the message in mind. He knew it had worked when the Merrow's eyes grew wide and round. Harry felt a glimmer of satisfaction when Alec's jaw dropped and he muffled his scream with his own hands.

After a long moment—most of which was punctuated by Alec's unflattering commentary in Merrowspeak—and Harry could feel the heat in those scorching words as the Merrow immediately set to work on figuring out how to fix the matter. It made him wonder if Alec had really cast the spell or if there had been someone else watching.

"I would ask how you couldn't possibly know how to switch between forms, but then I would have to explain myself in small words and that is not happening any time within this century." The Merrow grumbled. He'd been trying to change Harry back for the past fifteen minutes and so far, nearly every spell had fizzled out against Harry's surprisingly durable white-silver scaled hide.

Harry swished his tail, agitatedly and Alec ducked.

"Quit that." He slapped the nearest flank and circled around Harry once more, sharp eyes searching for something that he would not stop long enough to explain.

The slap didn't really register beyond a light tap and Harry twisted around enough to blow a puff of air at the distracted Merrow. He wasn't surprised when Alec's hand snapped up, a thin barrier of water forming out of nothing to keep the 'dragon-breath' from reaching him.

"What are you, a child? You'll make me late." Alec informed him, sourly. "Stop distracting me, unless you'd like to stay like this until I have the time to spare again." But his hands were surprisingly gentle in contrast to his irritated manner as he checked over Harry's dragon-form, searching for potential injury and running his fingers briskly over the smooth scales.

A humming rumble of a purr came from deep in Harry's belly as he felt those strong, firm hands mapping out every single scale on his dragon body. He couldn't explain why he felt so at ease, but apart from the verbal insults and apparently, the spell gone awry, Alec hadn't really tried to hurt him. Instead, he'd roundly insulted himself for a good five minutes, after he'd discovered that the standard changing spell was useless on Harry.

"Oh for Arielle's-!" Alec snorted. "Really?" But the hands that had found a patch of loose scales behind Harry's left foreleg, began to scratch at it in earnest. "Ugh. Have you ever considered deodorant?" He leaned away, theatrically. "And you had the nerve to complain about Goonter's fish." Alec stepped back, a soft stream of water leaving his hands as he sprayed Harry down,
warming the water when the small dragon shivered from the impromptu bath.

Within seconds, Harry was turning his face towards the warm spray, stretching his wings out and fanning them with a happy screech. Alec ducked, avoiding the surprisingly large wings as they arced over his head, changing the angle of the water spray.

Another string of unflattering Merrowspeak was Harry's reward for the trouble and the water tapered off as a newly drenched Alec moved out from under the shadow of those lovely wings. Upon seeing the shimmering, shiny appendages, Harry began to twist and chirr, craning his neck to see more of himself.

"Well, aren't you a vain little thing." Alec grumbled. "Alright already, stand still and hold your breath." He reared back as Harry's ridged head swung dangerously close overhead. "Hey, pay attention!" He reached up, grabbing the scaled snout and fixing it with his best glare.

Harry blinked, innocently, as best as he could. He tried and failed to lick the cool hands cradling his face.

"When you change back, you will leave." Dark blue eyes narrowed. "Understand?"

Harry whuffled, nosing him enough to make the Merrow take a half-step backward, before he braced himself.

"I'll take that as a yes. Now. Look at me and repeat in your head, Sumeriandis Althacar Enoyea." Blue eyes met green and air grew hot and humid as Alec's eyes burned bright and a sudden, powerful flare of magic traveled up from his core and through his hands, liberally pouring itself into Harry's dragon form.

Harry felt the magic course through him as cold, icy stabs that poked and prodded him back to a human-shaped size, before his bones creaked ominously and he felt his skeleton rearranging itself. When he came back to himself, Harry gasped, leaning into the icy cold fingers cupping his face and clutching at the warm, slippery skin in front of him for purchase, as his legs gave way beneath him.

The icy hands shifted, holding him even though it hurt to be held like that—held as if he were something precious and dear. Harry felt his hands touch fabric and he latched onto that, trying to keep his balance. He was vaguely aware that his own chilled skin was being warmed by the heat of his rescuer as his blurry eyes tried to focus.

It took a moment before Harry was fully in control and with some semblance of coherence before he realized that he was actively holding Alec's hands to his face and was leaning forward, one leg having moved forward, as if to floor the Merrow. Harry felt his face warm as he dropped Alec's hands and immediately retreated as if he'd been scorched.

In that moment, Harry had time to see the look of curiosity and amusement on Alec's face shift to annoyance and then blankness as he composed himself, elegantly skipping back a back a few steps himself. "Back to yourself, it seems. Wonderful. Have a perfectly horrible-"

"I'm sorry!" Harry blurted out, unable to look at those newly emotionless blue eyes.

There was a pause and Alec froze halfway to the water's edge. "…excuse me?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you—I mean." Harry flapped a hand, cheeks still a rosy red. This was the second time he'd completely relied on the Merrow to heal or help him without payment of some sort. "That. I didn't mean to take advan-" In the back of his mind, something argued
indignantly that the events of the near hour or so hadn't been anywhere near his fault, but in the same vein he hadn't meant to be holding a stranger's hands to his face. He wouldn't blame Alec for reacting to that.

"That?" Alec echoed. Genuine puzzlement showed in his face. "Pray tell, do elaborate, if your eloquence fails you, compose a better answer should our paths have the misfortune of crossing once again."

"I didn't mean to-" Harry threw up his hands and turned around to face the Merrow who was all but pouting at him, arms crossed over his chest, brow furrowed as if he didn't know what to make of Harry.

They stared at each other for a good minute, when Harry felt a wave of familiar magic wash over him, followed by a soothing burst of warmth.

Alec blinked and backed up a few steps, uncrossing his arms, tensed as if to fight or flee, whichever was the most profitable.

Harry looked down to see a golden-white medallion flare to life beneath his feet and he realized, belatedly what it was and what it meant. "Shadow!" He held out a hand as the Nytura rocketed over to bodyslam into his shoulder. "Ow. Shadow." This time, a little more scolding than worrying. He saw the glowing circular medallion take on a familiar sight—much like the mating mark tattoo on his shoulder—Theo was summoning him. "I uh, have to leave." He licked his lips, looking to Alec who now wore an unreadable expression on his face. "I guess I'll see you sometime again? And this spell thing we can-"

*Immediate portal for Harry James Potter of the Nott Circle, by order of Alpha.* A female voice droned. *Portal now commencing.*

There was a flash of white light and then nothing.

Harry barely caught a glimpse of Alec throwing himself backwards into the water, just as Goonter surfaced from below to swallow him whole once more. Anything else he could have said was cut short as Harry realized that he was topless seconds before the portal whisked him away.

*Oh Merlin-*

**THE BETA'S HUNTING ADVENTURES...**

Okahn, Aracle and Takar had proved to be quite enjoyable company for the greater part of the morning. Eventually, Charlie had found himself accepted enough to relax and smile at some of their good-natured ribbing, even when Okahn tended to be a bit sharper than the other two.

The redhead dragon tamer eventually put it down to the fact that the uptight Okahn was definitely Bhindi's Beta while the other, more-relaxed dragels showed obvious signs of Bahn's laid-back personality. Eventually, they settled on a working peace between them, without the need of insults or other displays to establish temporary hierarchy.

Well, sort of. The moment Takar and Okahn had started to hint in that direction, Aracle had calmly reached over and slung an arm around Charlie's shoulders, with a simple sentence said in elven that made both Betas stiffen, then grimace and settle down.

Now, they prowled the marketplace floor in the outdoor levels outside the coliseum, investigating the food stalls and drink bars. Charlie had quickly discovered that Aracle was paying for him
within the first three stops and when he made to speak about it, the Rheyo had merely smiled and shook his head, saying "Your Alpha was too distracted to think this far, but it is nothing of consequence. Please, you are in the company of friends."

With that, Charlie had let it be.

They'd had fun, or at least, he had. Takar was well known for his archery skills and so they had visited the sporting fields and engaged in the age-old pastime of gambling, using clear, colored coins specifically crafted for that purpose. Charlie had been able to win some currency of his own, when his trained eye called a few challenges that the others hadn't seen.

He was feeling quite pleased with himself by the time they decided to visit the private baths. The famous hot springs that were said to be heated by the everlasting fire rocks found in the fire pits of Mount Valeraine. They’d exchanged their fancy dress robes for light bathrobes and towels and were admitted into a well-steamed, private enclosure among sculpted rocks and a few patches of greenery.

The moment, they had entered, the door was pushed open and Edor, Bahn's changeling Gheyo came stomping through, a scowl on his face. The Betas had looked at him in tandem, then Takar and Okahn had grabbed one arm each and hauled him off to a corner, where the steam hid them from Charlie's sight. He didn't bother to think about it, when Aracle directed him to a smaller, private pool and offered him another one of his customary mints, before heading straight for the water.

By the time Aracle had settled himself comfortably in the water, Charlie wasn't far behind and he couldn't contain the moan that slipped past his lips at the heavenly heated liquid.

Aracle chuckled. "I had a feeling you'd enjoy this," he teased, lightly. "You fire types always do. Brace yourself on a rock, so you don't drown yourself from sheer bliss."

Charlie made a muted sound of complaint, but when he didn't move, the Rheyo moved over to physically rearrange him on the small column of rock that kept him from pitching face-first into the steaming water. He relaxed, boneless, feeling the warmth from the fire rocks seeping into his body on a level he hadn't even thought possible.

It soothed and calmed him, sending pleasurable spikes of magic swirling over him as he simply lay in the water, soaking up all that it had to offer.

There was another, faint disturbance, when a young attendant, a cheerful little boy, led a sulking Loren—Bhindi's Fire Gheyo—over to join them and accepted two mints from Aracle, as payment. Charlie roused himself enough to take in the sight of his fellow fire dragel and was surprised to see the Gheyo growing somewhat agitated.

When Aracle made as if to invite him in, Loren gave a sharp jerk of his head, 'no'. His gaze bypassed Takar, fixing solely on Okahn and after a tense moment, the Beta sighed and pushed away from the rock where he'd been bracing. He left Takar and Edor to come and stand before the pool's edge. He turned a calm stare up at Loren's scowl.

"Don't look him in the eye," Aracle's murmured words were just in time.

Charlie shifted his gaze elsewhere, settling on watching the jerky reflection in the water, of a blushing Loren, who accepted Okahn's helping hands to ease himself into the hot water. Charlie bit his lip, hard enough to draw blood when the moment Loren stepped into the water, everything sizzled.
The temperature rose so quickly, there was no time to react. By the time he realized that there was precious little he could have done in his current state, Charlie was surprised to find that the sudden temperature difference didn't really affect him at all. He felt a frown forming, but didn't look up as Loren and Okahn passed him by to sit on the far end of the pool. The nearly scalding heat wasn't the least bit unwelcome, but rather much appreciated, though Charlie had the distinct impression that Loren had only done so as a show of power and a very obvious warning.

"Fire types are territorial," Aracle hummed, quietly. He made his way over to Charlie's corner and calmly settled himself on one of the low, stone benches. His height served him well here as the water came up to his chin and he stretched a hand out to Charlie. "I'll brace you, if you like."

Charlie perked a brow, half in question and half in interest.

Aracle gave a slight nod towards the far end of the pool.

The redhead turned and blushed at the sight of a very relaxed Loren, draped over Okahn, short, stubby 'indoor wing's protruding from his back, his messy red-blond hair on fire, and his body entirely covered in scales of varying reds and oranges. It wouldn't have really been a blush-worthy scene, except for the fact that the uptight Okahn was quite calmly occupied due to a heated snog with an obscene amount of tongue and fangs.

"Don't think about it," Aracle advised, reading the reaction correctly. "And don't worry, they do realize that you're still here. They'll be polite." He caught Charlie's arm and gently guided the younger man over to sit by his side, checking to be sure the water level was just right. Where the redhead's upper torso had been mostly exposed, now, Charlie quivered in sudden sensory overload as the unexpected heat nearly swallowed him whole. "You can hold your breath, if you like," Aracle's eyes were warm and understanding. "I'll count for a minute, if you like and I won't let go."

Charlie fairly trembled before he sucked in a quick breath and ducked underwater.

Bliss.

Pure, unadulterated bliss erupted inside of him.

The heat, the natural magic and the sensation of being entirely surrounded by water, nearly undid him right there.

When Aracle forced him to surface, Charlie found himself gasping for breath, his face tucked into the side of the Rheyo's neck, one calloused hand, gently rubbing across his shoulders. "Breathe, little one." Aracle murmured. "In, out, in, out, that's it. Good lad."

Charlie shivered, trying to squirm away enough to lower himself back into the water. He was only faintly embarrassed to see that he'd clung to the older dragel like a lifeline of sorts.

Aracle simply readjusted them both, refusing to let him move on his own just yet. "Easy." He soothed. "I take it that was your first water experience, wasn't it?" He smiled at Charlie's stiff nod. "Must be careful of it in the future. Never, ever venture into water without one of your Bonded near, especially seeing as you are a fire elemental."

Blue eyes blinked blearily up at him and Charlie stopped trying to resist the urge to melt into the water.

"Fire and water types have never quite managed to coexist. They do so, grudgingly and sometimes it shows. The hot springs here are carefully monitored and you will find that anywhere else, without the magic dampeners present here, will feel quite different. I'm afraid you will find most
Merrows or Aqua-kin'e, as they call themselves, to be quite prejudiced against you, solely for the sake of your element. Take care not to insult them in any way as they are easily offended. There are magic dampeners for Merrow magic present all around this section, specifically for fire types, so they can enjoy a good soak. Otherwise, you would find the natural magic to be quite unforgiving."

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut, trying to reconcile the perfect experience to the words coming out of Aracle's mouth. He didn't really want to think about it, but he felt his chest tighten, understanding the truth of instinct and realizing that prejudice might not be that far behind it.

"Why?"

"There's actually a rather long, boring folktale about it." Aracle sniggered. "I shall spare you the trouble of it, unless the conversation grows boring. Suffice it to say that fire and water are rather like oil and water. They don't quite mix. Personally, I would suggest that you seek out a mentor as soon as possible to help with some of the cultural differences you're sure to encounter."

"How exactly would I do that?"

"You visit City Hall and formally request one. If I understand correctly, Ilisa broke a suppression seal on you, meaning that your appointed mentor was likely reassigned after a year of waiting. When you did not file a claim after reaching eighteen years of age, your second choice of mentor was also reassigned. Once you've passed all of that, you must physically present yourself and formally request a third choice. Until you find one, simply remember that if you find yourself in a situation where one is required, simply bow, place two fingers over your heart and say 'my mentor has not yet found it necessary to teach me' and do not look them in the eye, until they acknowledge the phrase. They should say, 'then allow me to take your education into my own hands' and that means that they forgive or excuse you, for whatever has transpired. Do expect a lecture though."

"Why can't you...?" Charlie trailed off. He wasn't sure if he could ask, but wanted to anyway. The older dragel had been quite kind to him and he'd appreciated it.

Aracle's gave a rumbling laugh. "I cannot be your mentor, because I am not a fire elemental. It is very important that a mentor's gift or element, matches that of their student and most times, a mentor is not of the same rank, but either of a higher or a lower rank, so as to challenge their mentee. Namely meaning, they are either a Pareya or a Submissive." He half-shrugged. "Not another Beta or a Rheyo, such as myself. It causes too much ranking conflict as you grow into your first century and only the Pareya or the Submissive can actually find it within themselves to take on another individual in the capacity of a child, without treating them as a Bonded or Intended." He blinked, then frowned. "Please do not take that in the wrong way," his gaze flicked meaningfully to the half-embrace they currently shared.


"I'll count," Aracle said. He smiled. "A whole minute or more?"

The lazy grin settled on Charlie's tanned face. "Grab me before it's too late."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: YAY! and we have some more of Alec again and it seems like Harry is a rare white dragon of some sort. Hmm. I hope Alec and Harry was was fun this time around.
Alec's deliberately getting off on the wrong foot with Harry, but of course, our Harry can hold his own ;) Goonter and Shadow had fun too. As well as Charlie having a little cameo of his own. Anyway, NEXT: Introductions are coming up, where Harry's introduced to the public at large, then the Royal's entrance ceremonies will be following it right away. Lots of fun stuff, some details and some fun new things for Harry! Stay tuned.
THE BETA'S HUNTING ADVENTURES (CHARLIE AND THEO)

By the time Loren and Okahn decided to be more serious than they already were, Charlie was excused when the messenger boy came back with a message, requesting his presence for Theo. Apparently, his Alpha had tried to summon him and received the message that he was currently indisposed and come searching for him, personally.

Charlie had quickly excused himself then, glad for the interruption and purposefully ignoring Aracle's knowing smirk. He'd gathered his things, dressing quickly and hurried out to the exit to meet his Alpha, lounging outside in the front waiting room.

"Theo."

The brunet turned, gold eyes warming considerably at the sight of Charlie and his still-damp hair. "Charlie, I'm sorry for the interruption. I could have left this at the desk, but I figured it would be of more use if I made sure to tell you what it was." He held up a small plaque of wood, hanging from a leather-like cord, with familiar symbol on it—the Nott Circle crest.

"It's fine—oh." Charlie accepted the token, turning it over in his hand. He'd seen Aracle with one, this was what the Rhyeo had used to pay for everything.

"It slipped my mind earlier, I honestly didn't think about it, until after I gave Harry his own." Theo held out his hand.
Charlie handed it back, then held his wrist out, waiting while Theo quickly tied it on. He was pleasantly surprised to see the plaque shrink even smaller, the bracelet becoming more discrete and subtle. He had been wondering just how currency was handled in this realm and it was a detail he hadn't felt comfortable asking anyone else as yet. Theo would most likely gift him the appropriate explanation if asked and Charlie made a mental note to do so—when they were away from public view. "It's fine. Aracle has been taking care of things."

"Has he? I owe him then, do remind me to repay him for it." Theo smiled, warmly. The Deveraines were friends as far as their social status was concerned, but he was a pureblood and he was definitely Slytherin and Slytherins did not like being indebted for any sort of reason, no matter the relationship. His golden gaze flickered back to where Charlie had come from and his look softened at once. "It looks like you spent a lovely morning in a lovely place. Were the hot springs nice?"

"Very," Charlie allowed, starting towards the exit. "We arrived some time back. I was there for a little while. It's very nice. Never had the opportunity before."

"You haven't tried sunbathing yet," Theo teased. "You'll likely enjoy it almost as much."

Charlie half-smiled. "Probably. It was very nice. I think Harry would like it."

"I'm glad. I'm sure we can bring Harry here at some point or another," Theo fell into step beside him as if it were perfectly natural, their strides adjusting accordingly for their different heights. "If he isn't interested, then I'd be more than happy to accompany you any time that you'd like, if you wish to enjoy them on your own."

The redhead blinked. He hadn't been expecting that at all. A happy feeling bubbled up inside of him. "You know about the…?" He tried to say, unsure of how to phrase Aracle's mention of the animosity between the water and fire elements.

Theo's golden eyes lightened. "Earth element." He said, quietly. "The earth element is powerful and it is always close to the fire element. It is something of the natural order of things. The water and air elements are together. Storm belongs to the water and air and the shadow element rests between the fire and earth." He shrugged. "It's not as complicated as it sounds, but it might take some figuring to understand all the reasons for it."

"It fits," Charlie said, after a moment. "Water and air together, that would make a storm, wouldn't it? And fire and earth, there'd be shadows and smoke and all that."

Theo winked. "Precisely."

Charlie smiled, pleased with himself for figuring that out. "Are they neutral then? The Storm and Shadow or are they like the others?"

Theo chuckled. "The Merrow—the water types—are the only ones that are vocal about their displeasure of a disliked element, in your case, the fire element. The other elements play well together. The Shadow element has some stigma surrounding it, as legend suggests that it holds a close second to death magic, but a shadow is a shadow, there is very little spirit involved, or so I have been told."

"and the Storm?" Charlie had to double-check. He was thinking of Ilsa and Greta.

"The Storm element is picky only in the fact that they prefer to choose, they don't like to be chosen," Theo explained. "In the example of my charming mentor, Greta chose Ilsa. It wasn't the other way around. Storms are notoriously difficult to court because of that. Earth types are the
easiest, we're calm and open, we'll give you the benefit of doubt."

"And fire is difficult because we may or may not be short-tempered?" Charlie guessed. "Or we—why?" He gave up on guessing and looked to Theo, expectantly. This was too important to be guessing about.

Theo hummed in thought. "Well, the fire types do tend to be a little more temperamental, but mostly it's your sense of courage and vanity."

"Vanity?" Charlie blinked.

Theo's lips twitched. "Yes, vanity. Fire types are very vain, present company excluded of course," the lips twitched into a definite smirk. "The triple or quad-colored hair is usually a dead giveaway and it is almost always red, indicative of the type of flame they wield. As for the true vanity, it may not be the kind of you're thinking of, but allow me to put it this way. Of all the career choices in the world, you chose to be a dragon tamer."

Charlie opened his mouth to speak and then blushed. He was quiet for another moment, thinking it through, then shook his head. There was precious little he could say to that, there were plenty of other options he'd had laid out for him, but dragon taming had been his passion. "This is complicated, isn't it?"

"Only if you think it must be," Theo chuckled. "For what it's worth, I see you as more than your element."

"...thanks." Charlie stepped closer, his blue-eyed gaze flickering over some of the passersby. He'd noticed a few dismissive looks towards Theo, who tended to give off the impression of being small and quiet, in spite of his Alpha status. He wondered if something was off. His shoulders prickled slightly, but his wings felt perfectly fine so he ignored the first stirrings of unease. "What about the other types?"

"Hmmm, well, Air is proud," Theo said, after some thought. "They have very high standards of loyalty and justice. They have the ability to manipulate air—one of the very substances required for life—much like the Merrow and water, so they have a right to be proud about it, but they're also very independent. For Air types to settle into a Circle with other elements, it means there's something of great significance there for them. Air Circles tend to travel a great deal and only keep to their own element—especially since if there's more than one Air element in a Circle, they'd want to live up there." Theo gestured up to the sky. "On a clear day, you could see straight up in the Arieal City, it's very different from down here and you know without a doubt, that if you are not an Air element, things will be difficult."

Charlie nodded, thinking back to a certain dour Potions Master and their small Circle. Harry had mentioned that they were all Air types and he could sort of see how that would work with them. A frown registered for a moment. "So what about the water—the Merrow? They're just—what?" He'd been trying and failing to picture the elusive water elemental side of dragel culture and so far, his mind drew an absolute blank. He definitely wanted to know more, especially if it seemed that they were doomed to dislike each other on principle alone.

Theo chuckled. "Merrow are difficult." He allowed. "And they probably have all rights and reasons to be as they are. For all of the elements, they are all three, they are proud, vain and powerful. They are the only element to have a completely different society from the rest of us. Even the Air types, though they live aboveground, it's the same as the Fire types who prefer to reside in the volcanic regions and the Earth types who prefer to live in the hollows of the valleys. It's partially instinct and partially other things. One does not simply wake up one day and decide they hate the
rest of the world, yes?"

Charlie nodded, subtly baring his fangs when one unfriendly gaze lingered on Theo a little longer
than he liked. He frowned inwardly and shifted closer yet again, ignoring the fact that their hands
occasionally brushed as they walked. He hadn't noticed this before, either because Aracle had been
very skillful in keeping his attention focused elsewhere or perhaps, simply because it was Theo.
"Where are we headed?"

"Hmm? Oh. I was actually heading back towards the stadium. Bahn and the others have a special
box, because of their social status and they've included us in the seating arrangements and I have
had enough to walking about for the time being. Ilsa tells me that introductions are slated within
the hour, I thought I might—ah, sorry. That was rather presumptuous of me. Did you have
anywhere else you wanted to explore?"

Charlie frowned. That was too obvious to ignore. "I'm not sure. If I do?"

"Then expect to be summoned sometime soon," Theo didn't twitch when one of Charlie's large,
warm hands came to rest on his shoulder. "My portals are rather quick and decisive, so beware of
the fact that it will pull you through and bring you directly to my side with very little else. I'll likely
give you a ten second warning of sorts, but I can't manage anything beyond that. It has been some
time since I have had to cast so many portals in such close quarters in our present circumstance.
Normally, it wouldn't be a problem, but right now and shortly, there will be quite a few portals
opening and closing all over the place. I'll have to be quick about it to keep things from being
scrambled. An interrupted portal is not a good thing. It is dangerous on many levels, but it does
take an extraordinarily strong individual to break a 'portal, which sometimes helps to minimize the
destructive effects. If you are ever pulled into a portal, please for the love of Merlin, do not fight it.
Allow it to take you where you will and then fight when you emerge from it or prepare to 'port
yourself back to your original location."

"Ah," Charlie nodded in understanding. He gently squeezed the thin shoulder beneath his hand.
Theo was more lean muscle than trimmed bulk and he found himself worrying faintly for his
Alpha. They should probably find something to eat before things grew complicated. "Did you
explain this to Harry?"

Charlie knew that they'd been speaking between each other, with the occasional transfer of
knowledge for even the most trivial of things, but sometimes it was hard to tell when they were all
on the same page. Harry had a knack for finding trouble or rather, being found by trouble, which
usually led to a significant amount of chaos.

Theo paused. "...yes. He's in a clear place for a portal and Shadow is with him. Told me to ah,
what was it—yes, to go and mingle."

Charlie bit back a smile. He could see Harry saying that. He could also understand that Theo's mild
temper could most likely be a result of the conversation that had led up to that. "How is he? Having
fun?" He thought of the cute Nytura returning to Harry's side. Having something of a pet and a
guardian rolled into one had made Harry smile after that horrible dinner meeting with Dumbledore
where he'd discovered just how irresistible the brunet could be.

This time, Theo turned enough to give him a quick look, golden eyes flickering meaningfully over
the redhead. "He is not quite fine, but he should be alright. He asked for some time to himself."

"...you disagree?" Charlie prompted. This reminded him of conversations with his prickly sibling,
Percy. The most uptight member of their family had always been perfect Percy, but Charlie had
understood his younger brother's need for things to happen a certain way. Talking with Percy had
always required a great deal of patience and a healthy dose of verbal sparring, because Percy could
never quite speak his mind in the way that the rest of them did.

Theo snorted. "He is more than welcome to do as he pleases so as long as he is alright. I do not
intend to smother him."

"Smother?" Charlie tried to keep the incredulity from his voice. "I doubt you could, if you tried." Theo
seemed to take the greatest care in being sure that Harry was definitely independent. He
frowned. Something was missing from this conversation and he didn't like feeling so uninformed.
"Did something happen?"

"I am not entirely sure. He did not say." Theo half-scowled. "He had something of a panic attack.
Dahlia's King, the dark Fae, Wikhn? He 'ported me into the Gheyo section and took me up to a
nightclub where Harry was agitated enough to nearly bring his wings out—indoors. His full wings,
Charlie, not the ones from his Halfling form."

Charlie's frown deepened. "Do you think it's that spell?" He certainly hoped not. He didn't want to
start disliking Merrow simply on account of one bad encounter, but Weasley loyalty sometimes
demanded illogical things and he'd grown up knowing and understanding that.

"I don't know," Theo admitted. "I don't really know that much about Merrow spellwork. It's almost
as ancient and unknown as the Shadow element's magic. There can be all sorts of side effects."

"Then why exactly is Harry not here with us?" Charlie wanted to know. "That doesn't sound safe." He
now found himself wondering if there was any way to speed up the process of Harry's healing
and recovery. The mute Healer, Quinn, had explained a bit more of the seals during that meeting
and he'd also mentioned requesting a Spellweaver to see about unraveling some of Harry's trickier
seals. The sooner Harry was back in control of his magic and his body—directly tied to his magic
—the happier Charlie would be.

Theo wrinkled his nose. "The first day of your first Hunt is the most important," he said, quietly.
"Everything you do and how you react, is probably how the rest of the Hunt will be. I do not
e.xactly give any credit to superstition, but for a Submissive to have a successful Hunt, then it is
best if the Alpha and the Beta are as far away from them as possible."

"What?" Charlie stared at him, pulling Theo to a stop.

Theo twisted, faintly, beneath the hand resting on his shoulder. "Keep walking," he murmured, the
smile on his face somewhat static. "I said, that for-"

"I heard what you said," Charlie began to move again, aware now of the fact that there definitely
are people watching them. He's started to wonder what else is happening that he doesn't know
about. "I wasn't sure if you meant it. Did you tell Harry that?"

"Harry would never agree to that," Theo said, quietly. "He would spend ninety-five percent of his
time worrying whether we were alright, if we were having fun and feeling guilty as to whether he
should be with us instead of having fun with new friends in a new place for reasons he's never had
to consider before."

Charlie blinked. That was eerily accurate to some degree. Harry was a strong and independent
individual, but sometimes he could think himself into the most depressing situations possible. He'd
often heard tales from Hermione and Ron as well as the occasional conversation from his parents
about the famous Harry Potter. Theo was mostly right, Harry was always trying to be considerate
in some way or another—even at the expense of himself. He gave a small huff and dropped the
hand from Theo’s shoulder, squaring his own posture as he—Theo stopped dead in the middle of the path with something of an exasperated sigh leaving his lips.

"Would you kindly stop glaring at everyone? It is setting them on edge. I am quite fine, contrary to my outward appearance, I assure you. If I were not, you would most certainly be the first to know."

"Wha-what?" Charlie found himself being led aside from the open walkway and pulled into a small alcove where he was immediately pushed up against the wall, a hint of mischief visible in the clear golden eyes that focused solely on him. "I'm not—there's—" he tried to protest and stopped, because while Theo did have him pinned to the wall, he was also quite calm and composed.

"Yes, there are people looking at us, because neither of us are wearing our marks out loud, so to speak and they can't place our status or rank. This makes them uneasy because neither of us are also properly managing our auras, which does not really need to be stifled, but it is currently speaking for us. No, you are not imagining anything. Yes, I am not exactly being myself right now and no, there really isn't much you can do about it, but I thank you for acknowledging it." Theo stood before him, one slender hand splayed out on Charlie's broad chest.

There was a pause and Charlie waited a beat. Whatever else Theo wanted to say, he was sure to finish in a moment or two, if given the right opportunity.

"You probably are not aware of it, but when you feel protective towards any particular Bonded, as a fire type, you tend to be possessive and territorial. Namely, you noticed I was not feeling as—cheerful—as before, so you adopted a slightly more protective and aggressive stance. Your dragel senses heightened in response to subconscious cues and the appropriate action you decided on, was glaring." Theo patted his chest, lightly. "Better?"

Charlie took a slow breath and relaxed as the tension began to leave him. "You looked like—I mean, I wasn't trying to—"

"It is quite fine. You do not have to explain your natural instincts. You are what you are and I am what I am." Theo sighed, softly. He turned away from the small, slightly shadowed corner he'd taken to almost pin Charlie to the wall. He turned his back to his Beta, granting some degree of privacy, while his own sharp eyes surveyed the passersby. "I apologize if I worried you. That was not my intention in the least. I only meant to drop off the charm and see how you fared. About the portal, will that be enough time?"

"Ten seconds?" Charlie mused. He backtracked quickly through the conversation and made a quick mental check in his head. Yes, this definitely felt like a conversation with Percy. He shook his head, faintly, hoping Theo wasn't reading that as his answer. Now that he was dressed and out of the hot springs, it was unlikely that he'd be doing anything that he couldn't simply leave until later. He hadn't made any definite plans, but it would be no hardship to wander about on his own. For the most part, everyone he'd encountered so far had been friendly enough. "That should be fine. Sorry about that. I didn't—are you sure you're alright?"

"Quite fine," Theo murmured. "Thank you for your concern."

Charlie resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Theo was being a bit more formal than usual and he could pick up on the subtle hints that perhaps there were eyes and ears present in which Theo did not feel like being completely forthright with in his present state. He took pity on his Alpha and easily changed the subject. He'd have to ask about Harry a little bit later or maybe when they were walking again. "What should I expect in terms of a portal?"

Theo blinked. A small smile flashed briefly over his face. "A large golden light—much like the
"What kind of warning?"

"It depends on what's available when I cast the portal. Sometimes a public announcement involved, so that there aren't any hurt feelings if you disappear in the middle of a serious conversation." His lips twitched, faintly. "It says something to the effect of what kind of 'portal it is, who is requesting it and from which Circle. It's really nothing to worry over. Though if there were any other places you wanted to visit beforehand, now would be a wonderful time to do so."

Charlie gave a slight shrug. "I wasn't headed anywhere in particular. Aracle and the others will be—busy—for a little while." He mentally winced at the last glare that Loren had sent his way.

"Busy?" Theo's brow wrinkled into a knot and then his lips twitched as the hidden meaning clicked. "Ah. I see. Don't worry too much about that," he tipped his head forward, posture relaxed as he made to enter the flow of bustling folks once more. "The Hot Springs likely brought your natural instincts to the forefront, just be aware of your reactions to heat. Even the sun right now will likely make you feel a bit drowsy, since you have not been exposed to it for prolonged periods of time with your instincts riding so close to the surface." He frowned. "We should probably check again to see if there is any way to expedite the process of mentor reassignment for you and Harry."

"I'm sure you'll think of something," Charlie offered, falling into step beside Theo once more. He could read between the lines of Theo's wording and realized that his Alpha had probably exhausted all current legal options and currently sought a more immediate solution via Slytherin talents. He smiled to himself and relaxed.

They walked in near silence for a moment, Charlie content to follow Theo's halfway deliberate path through the crowds. After several minutes, he took note of Theo's newly tense shoulders and sharper gaze than before. Theo was quite aware of his surroundings and projecting an image of forced calm that matched his neutral expression. It made him edgy to be aware of it and unable to do anything to ease it but, Charlie made a conscious effort to keep his burgeoning protective instincts to himself. Now he could see why distance would help, at least on a first day of a hunt, while Aracle and the others had been helpful in distracting him, he'd been able to enjoy their company once he could determine that both Theo and Harry were fine, via the tangible bonds between them all.

Now, he could sense Theo's carefully masked agitation and Harry's frustration that turned into curiosity. Looking for something distracting made his stomach rumble and Charlie sniffed the air, tracing the heavenly scents of fried and baked goods to their origins. There were rows of street vendors along the left side of the walkway, conveniently placed to accommodate lines and the circular architecture.

His blue-eyed gaze settled on one dish that seemed interesting and simple to eat. It smelled delicious, once he singled out the scent, reminding him of some of the fried treats he'd shared with his dragon tamer friends on the reserve. He missed them, a little. On the reserve they were all family, the dragons included. The mix of their cultures and cuisines had been a strong influence on his present personality and willingness to try new things. He smiled to himself, realizing that his moment of instinct would likely have been a field day for some of their behavioral specialists on the reserve. On his own, he was fascinated just the same to realize that he'd been reacting with vaguely dragon-like instincts, as one would when noticing their preferred partner was under the weather.

Charlie pushed the interesting thoughts away to focus on the present moment. He could figure that
filling his stomach before the big entrance ceremony was probably a good thing. There didn't seem like there would be a designated mealtime at any point in the day and he didn't want to slow anyone down if the afternoon activities picked up. The other Betas had simply dived right into the fun aspects of the Hunt, with the occasional drink and probably a secret Pepper-Up stash, if he was honest. His stomach rumbled again. "Theo?" He waited for the faint thrum of acknowledgement between them. "Want to share one of those?" He pointed, stopping to join the line.

Theo paused a half-step ahead, turning back. Golden eyes flickered quickly over the line, over Charlie, then off into the distance, before he shuffled back and came to stand beside his Beta. He didn't say anything and they stood in silence as the line moved along. When their turn came to order, Theo tipped his head forward and Charlie bit back a smile.

"Two of those, please," he pointed to the sauce covered dumplings in round white ceramic plates. They looked appetizing enough, if the delicious smell was anything to judge it by.

"Anything to drink?" The vendor grabbed two cartons from the back of the stall and scooped out fresh portions. He dribbled a ladleful of sauce over each helping, then pushed it across to the receiving counter.

Charlie hesitated. He didn't see anything that looked vaguely familiar there and he didn't really want to chance a new drink on top of new food. He looked to Theo, invitingly.

Theo's lips twitched into a familiar smirk. "One lemon-ginger infusion and a bloodroot cocktail with orange spice."

The Vendor paused for a moment. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it when Theo held up his own wrist with the corded bracelet bearing the wooden plaque. A minute later, he slid two tall glass drinks across the counter and turned to the next one in line.

Theo paused long enough for the charm to be scanned for the necessary currency exchange, then grabbed the drinks and made his way out from the clustered crowd. Charlie followed behind, balancing the two plates of dumplings. He was surprised that they were actual dishes and not something disposable, but he guessed that magic was involved in some way or another and made a mental note to watch what Theo did with it.

They walked until Theo stopped at an open area where several large hunks of pitch black rock were scattered about under a cloth ceiling that provided a measure of shade. Stepping out from the shadow cast by the towering stadium, there was bright sun and warm wind to provide a pleasant atmosphere. A few couples were enjoying the space, seated on the rocks, feeding each other and laughing between themselves.

Charlie found himself perking up by the simple fact that he was outdoors and the natural warmth washing over him. A very quiet chirr of appreciation slipped past his lips before he remembered that there were others present. Theo didn't seem to notice, but Charlie was sure that he had. By mutual unspoken agreement, they situated themselves along a large chunk of volcanic rock and traded with each other. Charlie perched higher up, while Theo settled himself along a smooth ridge where his feet could rest on the floor.

"The lemon ginger compliments the Saijako," Theo murmured, gesturing towards the dumplings. "As does the bloodroot." He added, at Charlie's skeptical look. "Bloodroot is a fermented herbal brew that is spiked with a healer's pure blood. You customize it by a specific fruit essence that is usually ground and rolled into powdered spice balls. It is actually quite good." Theo held up his glass in explanation. "You have to be of age to drink it or Bonded."
Charlie looked from his pale, lemonade-like drink to Theo's vibrant red cocktail, growing steadily darker by the minute. He could make out a handful of tiny dark fizzing balls beneath the thick, white foam with a slice of orange resting atop it. "You can Bond if you're underage?" He took a cautious sip of his own drink. It made him smile, as the sweet and tangy flavors of lemon and ginger energized him at once.

"Good?" Theo checked.

The redhead nodded. "It's different," he looked at the plate of sauce covered dumplings and frowned. He hadn't seen any utensils and he wasn't exactly keen on eating with his hands and—Theo held up a pair of joined silver chopsticks. Charlie blinked. He reached for them and took hold of one side, when Theo shook his head at relinquishing both. He then pulled it aside and watched as they snapped apart. He then watched as Theo muttered "Shoksan" and stabbed the fancy serving of dumplings with the pointed end.

After two dumplings, Theo took a sip of his drink and leaned back against the rock. Some of the tension visibly left him when he glanced up and watched Charlie's first taste of Saijako. He held up his drink, one eyebrow raised in silent prompt.

Charlie shook his head. "It's-"

"Try it," Theo prompted. He turned the glass to the side. "You may have to drink it in the future and it is one of the nicer brews. It tastes like sweet cranberry sauce with a touch of orange. The foam is bitter. Take a small sip and swirl it in your mouth before you swallow. It burns then sours. Expect it."

Another moment passed and Charlie balanced his plate on one knee, before leaning forward to take an experimental sip from the proffered glass. He sat back, carefully, a second later, before vigorously stabbing two dumplings and stuffing his mouth. He'd much rather firewhiskey any day of the week than that devilish concoction.

A faint smirk danced over Theo's face before he settled back himself, turning to face his Beta. "It's not that bad, though it does come rather close to the boundaries of an acquired taste."

Charlie took a large swallow of his infused water and shook his head. "Do you need one this early in the day?" He threw back. Theo knew his drinks, it seemed, because his description was spot on.

Theo exhaled, loudly, then took a long swallow. "It helps to balance your humors, or so they tell you. It actually tempers an aura, for earth types. It might settle you, as you are a fire type, Air types should avoid it, Water types can choose for their own. They can generally drink anything and it won't affect them. I need this at the moment because I am trying not to deliberately offend anyone today, a wild aura might cause a negative reaction."

"I see," Charlie watched him for a moment, then popped another dumpling in his mouth. It was a nice thing with a taste he couldn't quite place as yet.

"Underage Bonded occurs when there is a soulscream," Theo said, quietly. "It literally pulls your Intended from wherever they are, regardless of realm, as long as they are compatible in magic, temperament and soul, directly to your side. Sometimes they are not of legal age—sixteen, but they are often of bonding age, as in over ten. This only occurs in pureblood dragels though. A ten year old dragel is considered more than able to independently decide for themselves and while they may Bond, they remain untouched until they are sixteen. This is usually rather rare though, most of the time they are either fourteen or fifteen and just settling into their rank when they come of age. But, for the sake of your sensibilities, allow me to remind you that a ten year old dragel is quite
different from a ten year old human. Do keep that in mind."

"That's…different." Charlie allowed, after a moment. "Is it-?"

"It's quite different from whatever it is you're thinking," Theo said, quietly. "You'll think of it in human and wizard terms, because that's how you were raised and it's all you've ever known. I should probably warn you that you might see some. It is consensual on both parties and the Circles of both the Intended and the courting are heavily involved until the Intended is of age. It's actually rather beautiful sometimes, because they grow up in a specific environment and while they are spared some things, they learn many others. They often have the strongest magic, sometimes even more so than the Submissive."

Charlie hummed thoughtfully and speared another dumpling. He wondered if Harry had met anyone as yet and then he had another thought. "You said Harry was in the Gheyo section? What was he doing there?"

Theo rolled his eyes. "Dahlia and Dyshoka have decided to publicly announce their Intended status."

Blue eyes grew wide. "Really? Isn't that a bit—different?" He'd met the female Beta during the dinner beach party at Bahn's. Dyshoka was calm, collected and pretty, with a decent sense of humor and a good height. They'd played well in the last game on the sandy beach. He had been surprised to see that she was introduced with Dahlia, but he hadn't thought anything of it.

"Different how?" Theo wanted to know. "They've been together for a while. It's actually quite common for a Gheyo to take a Beta or the other way around, until they are officially bonded. Their personalities complement each other."

"Betas and Gheyos?" Charlie repeated. He frowned. He wasn't sure of that. So far, he didn't really like any of the Gheyos he'd seen or met and they all seemed too standoffish and rough around the edges.

"You'd have to see them fight to understand, probably," Theo guessed, eyeing him. "It's different when you see them in motion. A Beta tends to have a milder personality than any other Bonded. An Alpha can't help holding some sort of authority, a Pareya would be too protective and the Submissive might be the same. A fellow Gheyo is only acceptable when they have a working dynamic between them and beyond that, well, it doesn't leave much, now does it?" Theo surveyed Charlie's half-empty plate of dumplings and passed his half-eaten plate over in silent invitation.

The redhead paused in mid-bite, then swallowed the remainder of the dumpling. "Thanks." He accepted the plate. "Harry, was it just a panic attack or something else?"

"His empathy," Theo cradled his drink closer to his chest. "I think that's what triggered it, but I cannot be sure. There's been more of them than I thought. So many people, Charlie, they've all tried to control him and contain him. They've used him and abused him even if it was only in the way they treated his honest intent and natural integrity. I do not want to take him back there."

"To wher—oh." Charlie sat in silence catching up to Theo's newest change in topic. He finished up his plate of dumplings and then stacked it under Theo's and started on those. He'd already come to terms with the fact that it might be quite some time before he would see the Wizarding World again, much less his parents and siblings. It did not sit well with him, but he understood what was involved and knew which things held a higher priority—Harry, for one. "Why?"

"Can you feel the power that's here?" Theo glanced at him, sideways. "Can you feel it, really feel
Charlie quivered. He could feel the weight in Theo's voice, an Alpha's authority that did not demand anything from him, but rather, expected it instead. He also knew exactly what Theo meant. Nevarah was a place filled with strong individuals, just a few of them would be invaluable in the fight against Voldemort. He'd also seen the loyalty within a Bonded circle, just watching Bahn and his own. In spite of their differences—no, despite their differences—they were strong and protective towards each other. They would always support and care for their own. "Would it help?"

"Depends on Harry," Theo said. "But it likely would. That kind of power would be invaluable. What the Wizarding World lacks is someone who can legitimately take charge and move forward with a set plan of action. Those in power abuse it and those intelligent enough to think through possible skirmishes are not interested in involving themselves in what appears to be a pointless fight. They see no reason to risk their life even if it is threatened." Theo smiled, faintly. It was the kind of predatory smile that somehow fit him perfectly.

A low growl rumbled through his throat and Charlie gave one dumpling a particularly vicious jab. "I don't like how it feels like we're pushing everything back to Harry. This is not something he should have pushed onto his shoulders because no one else had the courage to stand up for it."

"We're not," Theo said, firmly. "But he seems to think that it's the only option he has. If that is what he honestly wishes, then I will do my best to make sure he is well-surrounded and protected by those who would care for him. I will not stop him. This is first and foremost for his wellbeing before all else. A Submissive craves a full Circle and all that comes with it. You saw Harry relax just a bit since you joined us, yes?"

Charlie inclined his head. There was some sense in that. Harry was stubborn and his sense of justice and loyalty would make it too difficult for him to sit still or stand back if he knew that he could help. Suddenly, the idea of allowing Harry to hunt and grow their Circle before returning to the Wizarding World, made perfect sense. "How exactly does hunting work though? Can we help and if not, what exactly are we supposed to do in the meantime?"

"It depends," Theo allowed. "We can help to support him later on, the first stages of courting can only be done by Harry and the Intended. Later on, if he decides to formally introduce us, then we can take it as a sign that they are both serious. If we disagree, we can speak up about it. We have the right to reject any proposal that is harmful or obviously mismatched in a way that would be detrimental to our entire Circle. Harry will listen to us first, because the addition of new Bonded is always to improve the original Bonded. He will be extremely sensitive to whether we are receptive to his choices or not. Bahn mentioned something to Ilsa who spoke of it in passing. If it is what I think it is, then he should find himself drawn to certain people after a certain amount of time. Instinct and magic should take care of the rest. Remember what was said about the different types of initiation? Heartcry, soulcry and soulscream?"

Charlie nodded. He continued to munch contemplatively on the fried dumplings. "So basically, we have to wait?"

"Don't look like that," Theo chided. "You know why we aren't there, don't you? An Alpha hovering around a Submissive usually means that said Submissive is off-limits. The same for a Beta. Potential suitors would never approach a Submissive in the company of their Alpha or Beta, unless they'd be courting for some time. It is considered to be quite rude otherwise."

"What if-?" Charlie stabbed at another dumpling. *What if Harry picks the wrong one?* Is what he wanted to say, but he didn't finish that sentence, because he did have faith in Harry, even if he was worried for the green-eyed brunet. In spite of the innocent air that Harry drew around him, it
masked the reality of some of the darker truths, such as the war and pain he'd both witnessed and participated in.

"I prefer to think that Harry's excellent judge of character and surprising luck would protect him." Theo took a long swallow of his drink. "It worries me when I can see those that he's surrounded himself with and then how he distances himself from them. Then, I wish..."

"Then you wish you were nearer." Charlie guessed. Now the earlier mention of smothering made sense. He didn't really blame Theo.

Theo offered him a wry smile. "Something like that."

"Harry doesn't know that, does he?" Charlie could already picture the expression that would be on Harry's face if he knew. He had a feeling their moment where they'd all split off into different groups wouldn't have been so smooth, if that was the case.

"If he knew, he would never be able to relax." Theo said, quietly.

"Ah," Charlie polished off the last dumpling and reached out to set the empty plates on a flat spot on the rock. He'd been able to relax and enjoy some of his morning because he could read the shared bonds between them all that Harry was curious and happy, while Theo was amused and reserved.

"Trace the bottom." Theo interrupted, waving at the plate with one hand.

"What?"

"The plates, put these on top," Theo handed over his silver chopstick. "And then, trace a finger along the edge like so." He demonstrated. "And it will vanish itself right back to where it belongs."

Charlie did so and then smiled, a moment later when it was true. "So, if there's someone...?" He let the question trail off. It would probably help the Hunt if this could happen in pairs or something. While he wasn't one to simply chase after an interested party, he'd never had any trouble making his interest known. It would probably be faster with two anyway.

"You're more than welcome to befriend whoever you like," Theo said, quickly. "And if you think you've found someone that would be a good fit for us, then you would have to formally introduce them to Harry. If they are compatible, then well done, if not and you still desire more than their immediate company, then Harry might be convinced to make an exception, though it is rare that you would actually pursue someone if he was not receptive to them. The same would be true for him, he is not likely to pick someone we will dislike unless there is a significant reason and I doubt that he would ever do so willingly, if he knew we disapproved."

The redhead relaxed at that, understanding what wasn't spelled out for him. This was Harry's time to shine and their turn to trust him. He could manage that. In the meantime, they could enjoy themselves and, as Aracle had put it, see about increasing their Circle's overall social status by befriending friends in high places, if they were so inclined. He could show the right kind of interest without worrying about other things. It was one thing to be friendly and enjoy himself, while entirely another to seek out a potential companion for his Harry.

Charlie reclined on the warm rock, wriggling for a moment to be sure that the warmth from the heated rock could reach his shoulders, before the realization dawned. His eyes were halfway closed before he twisted to the side to look at Theo. His Alpha was now decidedly more relaxed than before, but still on guard. The bond between them pulsed with something that he could vaguely
identify as self-satisfaction. He huffed, as Theo changed seats, settling so that he could lean back and rest his head on Charlie's stomach.

_Slytherin._ The thought rolled around in Charlie's head and settled. As if on cue, Theo turned just enough to show a lazy smirk. _Very much a Slytherin._ He closed his eyes and decided to take a nap. Theo had managed to skillfully avoid speaking directly of whatever was on his mind while answering questions and sharing information that was useful to know as well as updating him on Harry. Perhaps he needed time to think things through. He'd worn an expression of deep concentration a few times throughout their conversation and Charlie knew the best remedy for a tumultuous mind was silence or as close to it as one could find.

For his part, he would give his Alpha that much. If Theo needed anything, he would speak up. For now, they were resting in companionable silence, with Theo still sipping his strange drink. Charlie felt himself growing somewhat lazy under the sun's warmth and he was comfortable enough, his shoulders weren't bothering him, so he allowed himself the moment of luxury.

He would nap.

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Charlie made a sound of disagreement when something poked him sharply in the side. He wanted it to stop when the jab was repeated before he'd even had a chance to recover from the second. He was vaguely aware of something that sounded suspiciously like a laugh from beside him, before the poke repeated itself for a third time, a little less viciously than the previous times. One blue eye opened, accompanied by a baleful glare only to receive an apologetic caress of Theo's fingers in his hair.

"I wouldn't have interrupted, but it would probably be best if you made your way to the stadium without me." Theo's voice, while perfectly calm and composed, had a new edge to it that woke Charlie up straightaway.

"Theo?" He moved from drowsy to perfectly alert in a matter of seconds.

"It's nothing to worry about. I'm sure you didn't want to sleep your entire day away. If you'd like to save me the headache of a portal, then make your way to the upper levels through that archway over there to the right, near the blue pillar. Ask one of the scheduling attendants for any of the Deveraines or Ilsa Gorgens. They should direct you to the appropriate area. I'll be right behind you."

Charlie slowly rolled upward to a sitting position. He stretched, hearing a few soft cracks and pops. A yawn was stifled behind one hand and then he swung his feet over the edge and slid off to stand. Theo's gaze had yet to settle, but Charlie recognized that tactic at once, the twins had used it whenever they spotted a new target for their pranks. It was a way of looking at something without directly staring at it.


Both Alpha and Beta turned as one to see a heavily ornamented young man scurrying across the stone walkway, hands outstretched. Theo was already standing and summoned a smile to his face that had Charlie taking an instinctive step backwards.

The moment the newcomer was close enough, he reached out to clasp Theo's elbows, curious eyes roving over Theo's form. "Oh it is you. I thought that was your scent." The young man flashed a smile, all charm and curiousness. "Don't you remember me?" He asked, as an afterthought, when the greeting was not immediately returned. "We had flight lessons together. I was the clumsy one.
We spent many afternoons together. Yanek Doursen, now Yanek Calamaris of the Calamaris Circle. It is a pleasure to see you again and in apparent good health.

Theo stared at him a moment longer, then brightened as he made the remembered connection. "Nose-dive Yanek?" He repeated the childhood nickname. "With the—the red?" He waved a hand behind him.

"I dyed it." Yanek grinned. "Too many blond jokes." A thick mane of curled blond hair bobbed around his shoulders. "So, what do you think?"

"You're a Submissive," Theo said, flatly. "I did not think—I mean, I did not expect that."

"I knew it would happen." Yanek waved a hand. "Same way I knew you'd be an Alpha. Saw that one coming miles and miles away. Oho, is that one of yours?" Yanek's interested gaze flickered deliberately over Charlie's tall figure. "He's quite good-looking."

"He is and I agree. That's just one of the reasons I keep him around," Theo subtly shifted forward, making no move to introduce his Beta. "Are you here alone?"

"What? Me? Of course not, I've come with my Pareya, they refuse to let me out of their sight," he pointed towards three older men approaching with various expressions on their faces. "Whoops. Probably shouldn't have run off that fast, but I had to be sure that it was you, I mean, I haven't see you in years."

"Indeed. It's been much too long." Theo allowed. He turned faintly, when Charlie rested a hand on his shoulder. "Hmm?"

"I think I'll grab something else to eat—catch up with you later?" Charlie suggested. He could clearly read the vibes rolling off of his Alpha and their shared bond hummed with worry and anxiety. Theo did not want to introduce him to the newcomer and Charlie had a feeling it might be best if he excused himself from whatever political dance was about to take place. He'd never cared for this sort of posturing anyway and Harry would probably appreciate a tasty treat from wherever Theo was sure to 'port him.

"That will work," Theo allowed.

A surge of gratefulness saturated the Alpha-Beta bond and Charlie bit back the smile that wanted to surface. "If you'll excuse me then," he inclined his head and backed away from the small group, turning swiftly on his heel and heading in the direction Theo had mentioned earlier. He'd buy something from the stalls once he was out of sight. Yanek left a disconcerting feeling that Charlie did not want to deal with. He'd learned to read intent years ago, all dragon tamers did and he did not like what it meant.

No wonder he drank that bloodroot. Charlie shook his head, amused. Theo was looking out for all of them, while still keeping himself together. He knew he'd run into them or maybe he was avoiding them earlier until he could—huh. Interesting. Charlie was caught up in his thoughts and completely distracted when he rounded the corner and smacked into something shorter, very warm and quite soft. There was a muffled grunt and then an accompanying thump as both he and the stranger were knocked off their feet and onto their rumps without ceremony.

"Ow." Came a girl's disgruntled voice. "That hurt. By Arielle's untidy mane—why don't you watch where you're going? I understand that it is the first day of the Hunt and all, but a little common courtesy never hurt anyone. Didn't your mother ever tell you to be careful when running about out of doors?" The little tirade was interrupted by the sounds of the young woman moving to stand on
her own feet and brushing off a silken bathrobe, with a huff.

Charlie scrambled to his feet, a blush starting up along the back of his neck when he caught sight of who he'd knocked over. "I'm terribly sorry, I was only-er-"

She was a whole head and shoulders shorter than him, probably even shorter than Theo, and her hair, thick and black, fell past her knees almost to her ankles. She was barefoot and dressed in a fitted, silken bathrobe, showing off generous curves and a petite waist, while fire-colored gems hung from ear lobes, with a matching necklace bearing a gemstone of the same hue. She reached up with one hand to toss her unbound hair over one shoulder and Charlie realized that her hair wasn't black, but rather, such a dark shade of red, that it appeared black unless the light caught it in movement. Her eyes, a bright, vivid orange, now fixed their gaze on him as she pantomimed shutting his mouth with one hand.

Vanity... Theo's earlier words echoed in his head.

Charlie stared at her for a moment, then shut his mouth, fangs and teeth clicking together, aware that he was staring rather rudely. He remembered, belatedly, what Aracle had said about insults, fire types and territories, as well as how to excuse his non-existent mentor if the situation called for it. He hoped the situation wouldn't call for it. There was something that screamed of power and authority around this short dragel and he did not want to test any of it.

He did not need to pull on his special talents to tell that this young lady had a fierce, wild taste to her magic that wasn't twined around her as most other wizarding folk, but rather woven through her, much as he'd been noticing about nearly every dragel since the arrival in Nevearah. While some were close to Harry's level—and that was Harry's level while he was sealed—the most notable ones had been Ilsa and Shayla.

"What is your name?" Her voice was stiff and formal.

"Charles Weasley," he heard himself say.

She leaned forward and took a faint sniff. "You are bonded? To whom?"

"The Nott Circle." Charlie swallowed. "I am very sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"Never heard of it. Who is your mentor?"

Charlie winced. Two fingers, Aracle had said, and now, he curled one hand into the necessary position, two fingers sticking out as he touched them to the left side of his chest. "My mentor has not yet found it necessary to teach me."

The orange eyes narrowed, meaningfully. "Really? Imagine that." She frowned. "You're not from here, are you?"

"...pardon?"

"You didn't bow." The young woman sighed, turning her attention to long, scarlet-lacquered fingernails. "Any Nevarean native, when giving that traditional line, would know to bow and they would likely adjust it according to my status." She frowned. "You didn't. Where are you from? Which realm? I promise I will not hold it against you—much."

Charlie hesitated. He tried not to flinch when those bright orange eyes rose to meet his own when he took a breath too long to answer. "The wizarding world, actually." He forced a smile, hoping it didn't appear quite as unhappy as he felt. He was not ashamed of where he'd come from, but he had
a feeling that this conversation was headed down the worst possible turn it could take.

Dark eyebrows arched upwards. "The wizarding world?" She repeated, incredulous. "That's rather—rather strange." She allowed, at last. "Very strange. I don't think we've had any from the wizarding world for quite some time. When did you arrive? It couldn't have been very long, you're too new."

"This past week?" Charlie frowned. "Not very long at all."

"...I see. No time to register for a new mentor then or are you waiting to be assigned?"

"I haven't registered yet."

"Curious. Very, very curious." She murmured, then made a spinning motion with one hand. "Turn."

"...pardon?"

"Turn around. I want to see you," she sighed. "Your hair, specifically. It's hard to tell when I can only see your face and you don't have any bangs. I just want to see your hair. Nothing else."

"Er," Charlie said, intelligently. He could honestly say this was the first time he'd ever received such a request. He hadn't been prepared for this at all, but he had experience with making decisions on the fly.

She sighed. "Allow me to assume that you have never been in the company of other fire types?"

"Briefly." Charlie admitted.

"It shows," she inspected her fingernails. "I mean you no harm nor will I behave in any manner that will tempt the boundaries of propriety." She made the twirling motion with her finger again. "It certainly won't be costing you anything. Hurry up, neither of us have all day to spend standing about."

Blue eyes narrowed faintly and Charlie resisted the urge to cross his arms. "Why?"

"Oho. So you aren't as dense as you look," the girl cocked her head to the side, then held out her hand, palm facing downward in a gesture reminiscent of Bhindi's highborn snobbery. "They call me Ebony. Sometimes I prefer Eby. Sometimes not. You?"

"...Charlie."

"Charles. Charlie. Fitting. Now we are no longer strangers," She waited until he took her hand and held it firmly, not shaking until after a huff, he lightly touched his lips to the tanned skin, before releasing it. Orange eyes glittered with amusement and she drew out an elaborate fan from the folds of her silken dressing gown. "Now that we are acquainted, I hope you can grant my request. There isn't anything out of the ordinary about it. I was asking, because I am currently free at the moment. I haven't taken a student for mentoring because I haven't had the time." Her expression turned serious. "I also have yet to discover someone who does not make me wish to immediately strangle them within five minutes of meeting." She sniffed. "My flames are a bit too fickle for most."

There was another pause between them, this one a little less awkward than before. After a moment, Charlie slowly turned in place. He squashed down the feelings of mild curiosity and self-consciousness. When he stopped, standing tall before her once more, her lips were pursed in thought and her brows were tightly knit together.
"How old are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, I don't mean to start this as such a mess, but this has been a very busy day and I haven't had the energy to keep everything straight," she sighed and snapped open her fan. It shielded the lower half of her face and bore a pretty image of a water garden with vivid blues, reds and greens, with a golden accents. The wood was lacquered in a shiny black, with a tasseled cord meant for her wrist. "Have you any previous prospects?"

"For what?"

"A mentor," she said, matter-of-factly, as if it ought to be obvious.

"You?" He exclaimed, unable to keep the surprise from showing. Surely she was too young-!

The delicate fan lowered to show her smirk. "You really are amusing," she murmured. "Yes. Me. You. I like your magic. It's different and your hair—which is usually reflective of the type of flame that our kind wields—is lovely. Quite lovely. I think there is much we could learn from each other and I would be open to proposing a mentorship, if you are agreeable to accepting my teaching."

Shock, surprise and then uncertainty registered for Charlie in rapid succession. Shock that he'd apparently quite literally stumbled over a prospective mentor, surprise that the one asking, was a rather petite young lady—definitely not Theo's Ilsa, if that was a mentored standard—and uncertainty as to whether that was all it took to secure a mentor. He honestly had not considered the possibly of a mentor beyond asking Theo to register him for one and assuming there was a screening process of some sort involved. "I—we don't really know each other and I would really like to make an informed decision—"

"Am I your first?" Her fan snapped shut and was quickly tucked inside her left sleeve. "Arielle, I am making a bungle of it then, aren't I?" She sighed as if the conversation had completely exhausted her. "There is no excuse I could possibly give for that, because such remains inexcusable, however, I suppose I should give you some time to think about it. Be warned that I will know if you are not deciding for yourself, but allowing someone else to decide for you. That is unacceptable. A mentorship is solely between the mentor and the mentee. It is your choice to accept, just as it is mine to offer. It is also your right to refuse as it is for me to withdraw my proposal. You may take some time to think about it. I shall find you after the official opening ceremony, so you need not worry of when we will meet again. You may decide then. I understand it is a significant decision, but I think you will find that we will make a good match. There is much I can teach you and I am open to the same from you. A mentorship is an exchange of mutual care, trust and knowledge between a mentor and their mentee." Her smile warmed, lighting up her face in a new way. "I should also mention that I am not as young as I might look and if you are wizard-born as well as wizard-raised, then you may be tempted to take me at face value." She bowed formally. "Please do not. That would be far too disappointing. Now then, I look forward to our paths crossing, Charles Weasley of the Nott Circle."

A bell chimed in the distance and Ebony sighed. "Ach. It seems I have less time than I originally thought. They are always calling for me, aren't they?" She wiggled her fingers in an approximation of a wave. "I will always have time for you, should you accept. Rest assured that you would be of high priority among my responsibilities, all of which I maintain with all earnestness. Take care and enjoy the entrance ceremonies. It's supposed to be quite fun this Hunt or so I am told."

Charlie didn't have a chance to answer, because she raised a hand above her head and ignited a blood red flame. "Temprificus Saurenth!" A bright medallion of yellow-orange-gold flared to life.
beneath their feet. Charlie scrambled backwards, even as the answering portal hummed into existence above Ebony's head. The two glimmering, floating medallions projected a blinding light, forming a literal pillar of flame, before it all vanished, taking her with it.

He stood, in disbelief, a few seconds longer, before the rest of him caught up to what had just happened. Charlie slowly tangled a hand in his hair and pulled hard enough to reassure himself that he hadn't imagined anything that had just happened. He found himself smiling as his feet began to move once more.

He'd never seen a fire transportation portal before. It was fiercer and showier than he'd expected. Theo's portals were simple and efficient, just like his element. The ground might rumble beneath your feet or something might make you sneeze, but that was it. He wondered, briefly, how difficult it was to cast his own. Theo had shown both him and Harry about casting portals, but he'd asked them to be careful not to try it on their own unless there was an emergency.

Apparently, like apparating, it took significant effort, time, focus and practice. Ilsa had seemed instrumental in Theo's upbringing and he could see that as the same sort of relationship he'd had with his mother. The charming Molly Weasley had always been the sort of friendly witch that every good mother wished to be.

Charlie hummed to himself, continuing on down the pathway he'd started. He was not in too much of a hurry to return to the Wizarding World, not when he'd heard Theo's concerns about Harry. He could definitely agree that there were powerful connections that could be made here, which would most certainly be invaluable if brought over into the Wizarding World. He just hoped that things could hold together long enough for that to happen.

On the bright side though, Charlie smiled, he might have just found himself a mentor.

Huh. Imagine that…

THE END
accompanied by one either. He was pretty sure he didn't like it. This was almost unbearable.

It felt like rough sandpaper skimming along his entire body and unable to take it, Harry lashed out, magic flowing out, tearing, shredding and ripping at the discomfort that threatened to swallow him whole. He was vaguely aware of Shadow's plaintive wails as he thrashed out, feeling a dull ache from the wounds in his shoulder.

The darkness around him began to crack, showing glowing golden lines, the color of Theo's elemental magic, before everything turned a dazzling glowy white-gold. Magic snapped back into him like a boomerang flung out with purpose and dutifully returning to its master. He realized, wearily, that it probably wasn't the best course of action when the now golden transportation tube disintegrated, leaving him freefalling in midair.

Shadow's final shriek was swallowed up in the rushing air as Harry felt tiny trails of fire slashed up his left side as the panicking Nytura slipped through his fingers, vanishing with the last tendrils of golden magic. "Shadow!" Harry tried to yell, but his voice was snatched from him as he continued to plummet.

The sheer height registered when Harry realized that he was falling faster than he'd ever been—without his trusty Firebolt anywhere at hand and apparently without any witnesses as far as he could tell. His arms and legs windmilled for a few moments, trying to slow his descent. There were puffs of white—clouds—liberally sprinkled around him and he was suddenly aware of how cold it was. Icy pinpricks stabbed at him all over and Harry's teeth chattered as he frantically reached out with his magic, searching desperately for something to grab.

Instinct told him to use his wings, but when he pulled on them, only one side emerged and it twisted horribly and painfully in the rushing wind. Harry grit his teeth, working to focus on pulling it back in as he tried to think of what he could cast. A hovering charm wouldn't work on him, he hadn't seen any brooms at all in Nevarah so far and he doubted a cushioning charm would be of much help.

He tried to cast the familiar magic anyway, summoning his energy and drawing it tightly around him like a cloak. There had to be someone who was close enough to help or at least something that he could use to slow his descent.

Why me? The irritated thought scrolled through his head as he yanked on the channels for his Bonded, forcing the mental screams through them. Theo! Charlie!

He felt panic return almost immediately from both of them and then a muted, forced calm from Theo, as his Alpha tried to reach out to him and a frantic thread of worry from Charlie's side. Harry sucked in another breath, preparing for another mental scream when a fading sound drew his attention.

A sharp whistle overhead, caught his ear and Harry turned in time to see someone falling straight for him. They were hurtling through the air, arms at their sides, clear eyes zeroed in on his form. Harry barely had a moment's notice to brace for the impact when arms and legs wrapped tightly around him, followed by the audible snap of leathery wings.

"Easy there, little one," a soothing, male voice crooned into his ear. The arms, while holding him close, were absolutely impersonal in spite of the fact that they grasped bare skin and impossibly gentle for a maneuver that seemed as if it should have hurt more. "Easy. I won't drop you, I swear it on my mother's name, you have my word."

Harry shivered, clutching at the soft fabric smooshed against his face. He could smell the barely-
there scent of steel—reminiscent of Theo—and something a little spicier, a little sharper, almost like aftershave. His rescuer radiated a very obvious thrum of magic that washed over him with strong feelings of protection and calm.

Wild, raw magic calmed in response, almost at once, greedily pulling in the feelings of deep contentment and safety, only serving to bewilder him as Harry slowed his short breaths into steadier ones. For a moment, he felt as if he'd been forced out of his body and then brought back in.

"You gave me quite a fright there," the fellow continued, sounding a little more relieved now, as he settled into a rocking rhythm, wings moving easily in tandem with his body. "Are you alright? Did you have a wing cramp? You shouldn't be flying alone if you're not an Air type you know. It's not good. The ground is closer than it appears and someone of your size wouldn't have a large enough wingspan for an emergency catchall."

"Accident," Harry managed. "Portal. I-I did not expect this to—it was an-" He couldn't suppress the tremors that rippled through him as he felt their descent slow even more. "Thank you."

"Portal?" Puzzlement was plain in the man's voice as he shifted his grip. "Touch down in two," he warned. Muscles along his broad shoulders rippled in time with the rhythmic, steady beats of his wings. A second later, Harry felt himself being eased down onto cool, solid ground.

It brought a fresh wave of relief as he recalled the sensation of the ground falling out from beneath his feet and forced back the urge to vomit. He was stronger than this, he had to be, he always had been-! The heaving in his stomach roiled about, but settled as if quelled almost by sheer will.

His hands, however, remained stubbornly fisted in his rescuer's shirt and Harry ignored the indulgent chuckle when the fellow didn't try to pry them loose, but rather knelt beside him to allow the contact and brought his wings forward to grant them some shadowed privacy.

"Hey, easy there, little one. You didn't answer me. Are you alright or should I call for a Healer?" One arm curved protectively around him, the other placed two fingers at the base of his neck to check for a pulse, after feathering across his forehead to check for a temperature. "You should be fine, very thoroughly terrified, but fine. Take slow breaths—or deep ones. I forget. Either should help though. Just don't panic. Do not panic. You are perfectly fine. Everything is alright. I had more than enough time to grab you and I definitely wasn't about to ignore you after that little scream." He patted Harry's head and after another moment passed, began to shift to sit comfortably on the stone floor. "What's your name? Is there someone I can call for you?"

"Harry," came the answer as Harry slowly came back to himself. He wondered if he had screamed or if his rescuer had heard his cry for Shadow. He leaned into the touch of those large soothing fingers patting his head in a distinctive rhythm. It was vaguely familiar and niggled at the back of his mind as if it were something he ought to remember straight away.

Harry bit his lip, mentally continuing the process of gathering himself together and working to be sure he could compose himself. He'd been through worse, this was nothing. It had to be nothing, he reminded himself. It was one thing to fall off his broom in midair and another to be knocked off because of a bludger. It was something else entirely to find himself freefalling from out of nowhere and knowing that no brooms were involved and close at hand and that no spells he knew would help in time. He shivered again.

"Shh. Easy, Harry." His rescuer soothed. "That's it. Good lad. Scared yourself pretty badly, didn't you? What do you mean by a—wait a moment, did you mean that you cracked a portal open? A real-live summoning portal? In mid-transit? Arielle-!" There was a mixture of shock, surprise and awe all rolled into the last words. "You hardly look as if you could…"
"Accident," Harry managed. His shoulders hurt like that time Dudley and his gang had caught him before he could escape the community playground. He'd never returned there after that horrible day. It felt as if something had been twisted in the wrong direction—again. Harry finally opened his eyes and all thoughts of pain were put on hold as he looked up to see a vaguely familiar face, minus the glasses. His mouth spoke before his mind could catch up to it. "...Dad?"

"Pardon?" His rescuer blinked. "Ah, no. Sorry. Lewis." He cracked a grin that was painfully familiar. "Lewis Perevell from the Noble house of Perevell and the respected High Nobles of the Air Clans." Someone whistled in the distance and Lewis cringed. "Oops. I wasn't supposed to break formation." He winked. "But I thought you could use the help. Hold on a moment," he leaned away from Harry and pursed his lips, giving a shrill set of whistles that carried easily through the air.

Harry winced at the sound, wondering if the fall had somehow jarred something lose in his head. He'd never encountered a real doppelganger before, at least not one that resembled either of his late parents. The shrill whistles made him want to cover his ears and he made a sound of distress in his throat, before he could successfully conquer the instinctive urge.

Lewis didn't seem to hear it, because he turned back to face him, a wide smile of warmth on his friendly face. "Sorry about that. Sometimes I forget to temper some of that for those of us who aren't air-types. It's terribly rude of me, but I hope you don't mind." Lewis said, cheerfully. "I was making sure it was alright to help you settle. Someone else will take my place. How are you feeling now? Will you be alright? Do you have anyone you can call or something—is that blood?" Disbelief colored his voice.

Harry blinked at him confusion and wariness. He did not know why that name sounded familiar as yet and Lewis didn't seem inclined to give him a moment to speak. The ache in his shoulder let him know that Shadow had much longer claws that he'd let on and that if it hurt that badly, he probably was bleeding.

Two whistles in the distance had Lewis rolling his eyes. He gently pulled Harry's hands free from his shirt and held them as he rose to his feet. He squinted up at the sky, seeing something that Harry couldn't, before he pursed his lips and whistled back up again. "I swear, my Mum has a voice that can raise the dead," he snarked. "Looks like a few scratches and some minor wounds, nothing too serious. You'll probably heal from it all before the afternoon is over."

Harry ignored that for the time being. He was used to dealing with pain and this was nothing to fret over. He subconsciously nudged his magic towards the physical discomfort, instinctively knowing that it would help in some way or another. "Where am I?" Harry let the supporting hands pull him all the way up. He found himself now standing in the middle of a tastefully decorated patio of sorts—floating in mid-air. His grip on Lewis tightened at once.

"My traveling apartment, my apologies." Lewis winced. "I generally do keep the garden better maintained than its current state, so please excuse it for the moment. I am currently traveling alone for the sake of my sanity and that of my Circle." He frowned when Harry remained silent, a hint of suspicion showing on his face, his tight grip growing even stronger. "Have you never seen one before?" Harry gave a jerk of his head. "Us Air folk miss our city too much when we venture down for the Hunt, so we bring little bits of floating rocks down to the lower altitudes and we build things on them." Lewis tugged one hand free to gesture around him. A note of concern crept into his voice as he looked at Harry, a slightly puzzled look on his face. "What did you say your name was?"

"Harry," came the quiet answer. "Harry Potter." Harry resisted the urge to mention the strong
resemblance. It was embarrassing enough to have called his rescuer 'dad' and Harry had no intention of adding to that. He was now cataloguing the differences as quickly as he could, noting that Lewis had much lighter hair and brighter eyes, with a friendly air, not the fondness he'd seen in the Mirror of Erised. A sharp pain lanced through his shoulder and Harry winced, doubling over, all other thoughts fleeing in the midst of instant pain.

"Harry?" Lewis's worried voice was accompanied by the warming brush of magic from before. "You're healing fast. That was much quicker than I was expecting for marks that deep. It probably took quite a bit from you. Maybe you'd better sit down and-" Lewis froze, his hand crackling with healing energy frozen when it hovered over Harry's healing shoulder, a look of complete horror on his face. "Forgive me for asking, but where exactly did you acquire that seal?"

"Seal?" Harry choked out. His magic could handle the small wounds and scratches, but he'd done something to his wings and they now flared out behind him in distinct agitation. "Ow. Wings. Ow." He bit his lip hard enough to draw blood.

"Easy, it's most likely a wing cramp of some sort. When you stress them like this, it'll hurt like hell, but it won't kill you." Lewis's voice was brisk and efficient. "You appear to have dislocated your shoulder. I can help if you like—hey, hey, easy! Harry. Please, Harry—Harry! Let me help you."

Harry grabbed his own arms, hugging himself as the searing pain in his shoulders translated to his wings. He gritted his teeth against the feeling and stubbornly pushed it away. He could still feel Theo's worry and Charlie's panic at the same time that he connected the dots for the man standing across from him and his first appointment with the handsome Healer Quinn.

"Harry," Lewis's voice was soft and gentle. "Listen to my voice. I am a trained Medic, I can help. Please let me help you. If you fight my magic, this will only hurt instead of help."

The sound of distress that leaves his lips is not the answer Harry wanted to give, but he is not actively fighting Lewis, not when it hurts so much.

A wash of familiar, cool magic sank into him, enveloping his aching figure from head to toe, leaving a distinct echo of heartache behind. Harry trembled. He remembered that touch, that feel—in the graveyard with Voldemort when his parents' spirits had come forth from the wand.

Magic that felt just like his Mum and Dad.

And then he remembered.

_The Noble House of Peverell…oh Merlin!_

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So Charlie and Theo get to talk about important stuff, Charlie has met a potential mentor, Harry was powerful enough to shatter a portal, Shadow is alright and Harry's mystery rescuer is someone a lot closer than he'd ever imagined. WHEW! What a busy read. ;) I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I'm posting early and STILL working on review replies, but almost caught up. Welcome to all the new readers and lurkers and thank you to all the familiar readers and reviewers. Your encouragement keeps me writing this delightfully epic tale.
STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie)

Charlie-(with Theo)

Harry-(rescued by new character, Lewis Peverell)

Deveraine Circle members-(Bahn, Bhindi, Delani, Okahn, Takar, etc. Busy socializing)

Deveraine Children: (Dahlia, with Dyshoka Kalzik), (Ariki with Blaise) (Soula with Shayla, air clan heiress) (Lorelei-on her own)

~Scion
New Clues and New Troubles

Chapter Notes

See first chapter for disclaimers/warnings/summaries. Link to TBDH Forum is in my profile. This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own.

Character list is mentioned at the bottom. Character headings are included.

!FANART IN THE FORUMS! Thanks to NirvanaElder (http://nirvanaelder.deviantart.com/gallery/) and Asfodelia, (http://asfodelium.deviantart.com/gallery/) there are some amazing works of art showing dragel Harry and his bonded. Stop by and show them some love.

RECAP: Harry and the Merrow, Alec, meet up for the second time and Harry learns a few disturbing things about the proud, vain water elemental. Alec casts a shape shapeshifting spell on Harry to protect him from a Merrow Official known as Advisor Kalen and then removes it moments before Theo activates the portal to bring Harry to the entrance for their formal introduction into the Hunt. The portal catches Harry unawares and having just been through a Merrow shapeshifting spell, his magic reacts violently and shatters the portal. Plummending through the air, Harry frantically tries to slow his descent and is rescued by an Air Elemental by the name of Lewis Peverell—could they possibly be related?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEVARAH : SOMEWHERE IN THE AIR (LEWIS & HARRY)

Harry felt as if he were watching one of those strange dramas on the telly that Petunia would sometimes indulge in while enjoying her afternoon tea. It was a disconcerting experience to find himself feeling so detached and clear-headed that a faint thrill of fear ran through him before his mind retrieved the appropriate memory he'd been searching for.

The Noble House of Peverell…oh Merlin!

Harry could see his first exam with Quinn on that fateful day where he'd learned of those wretched seals. He was remembering the moment where Quinn had listed them, ticking them off on his fingers and then frowning when he'd run out of fingers to count on. He remembered Quinn's barely concealed fury and his reluctance to let Harry leave even after he'd removed the Blood Seal.

They'd spoken of many things, some of them about the high noble houses and the parental seals that had been wrought on him since birth. According to Quinn, his parents wouldn't have known what they did, it would have seemed like a blessing or a baptism of sorts for a wizarding baby. They would have remembered it from their childhood and with their dragel sides suppressed, it wouldn't have affected them at all.

In fact, it probably showed in the way that James Potter had always been a quick flier and how Lily
Evans had a charismatic personality so alluring that everyone who met her, couldn't help but want to be near her. Quinn had asked him to define any vivid traits and those had been the ones that Harry could instantly call to mind. He wasn't even sure if they counted, after all, he only had memories, but Quinn had smiled and asked him questions in turn. He'd then explained that those very two things showed in Harry in nearly the same ways, his skill on a broomstick and his natural inclination to help anyone he could—and his ability to draw in people who wanted to protect him.

Then Harry had asked about removing them and Quinn had said something about proper social channels and arranging meetings with the heads of the noble houses to see about having them removed. In all of his sixteen years and the handful days of they'd been in Nevarah, Harry wasn't expecting to literally fly into a member of the noble house of Peverell.

Well, technically he hadn't flown, Harry mused. It was more like he'd fallen into them. Quinn's explanation on the seals had mentioned something about blood parameters and necessary formalities. Harry wondered if anything would turn out spectacularly horrible if he were to forgo the formalities he didn't even know existed.

Maybe they were related—like an uncle and a nephew. No, that couldn't be right. Charles Potter didn't have siblings, much in the same way his own father had been an only child. Harry frowned. Was that a thing? It made him wonder.

The tickling sensation of time speeding up washed over him again, pulling back the threads of fear along with it. Harry braced himself for the reality that awaited him.

It didn't disappoint.

Magic slammed into him with startling force and surprising viciousness. Harry half- jerked upwards into a sitting position with a heaving, choking gasp of breath. He shivered, feeling the chill in the air that subsided at a hastily cast heating charm and experience kicked in before instinct did. He recoiled from the safe cradle of arms, twisting away to roll to the side, his wand winking into existence, turning solid in his hand before he was half-way to his feet in an instinctive, adrenaline-fueled motion.

_Alec. Bad portal. Falling. Shadow. Lewis...Peverell...oh._ The series of events leading up to his current situation replay in fast-forward in Harry's head and he let himself puzzle over it for all of a half-second, before he processed that the threat was nothing to worry over.

The adrenaline faded almost as quickly as it had come and he slumped down to his knees, not protesting when Lewis slowly rose from his spot on the floor and approached him with caution, hands held out to show he meant no harm. "Harry?" He tested. "Are you back? Are you alright?"

Harry managed a grimace and then nodded, faintly.

Lewis brightened and closed the gap between them, sitting down cross-legged on the cool stone floor. "I'm glad." He reached over, hesitating briefly before smoothing a few strands of sweaty hair from the pale face before him. "Those were some wicked reflexes, by the way. Very impressive. For someone who can't fly, you move very well on your feet."

His fingers were cool to the touch and it made Harry's eyelids slide halfway-shut. He made a gurgling sound in his throat that might have voiced his appreciation for the gesture of tenderness or the compliment. He didn't know which. His shoulders ached something fierce, but he was aware that there were no longer any open wounds—or wings for that matter. For a moment, he wished he could just stay here for a very long time.
"Better?" Lewis smiled at the blinking emerald eyes as Harry leaned into the caress. "You gave me a bit of a scare there. Your wings are alright, I forced them back in—but that's not as bad as it sounds. Trained Medic, remember that. I folded them back the same way they came out. There's nothing wrong in sealing them in, temporarily, while you work to keep the rest of yourself together. Sometimes it can cause some confusion if they're out when you feel like you're about to hurl." He continued stroking the strangely vulnerable face, until his hands shifted to gently rub Harry's scalp, then neck and then down to his tense shoulders, before frowning. "You're a little hard to reach, if you don't mind?"

"What—L-lewis!" Harry tried to protest a few moments too late as he was pulled into man's lap and hugged tight from behind. The gentle pressure of those strong arms and the natural warmth radiating from the older dragel made him relax, instinctively. It felt just like it had with Ilsa on the beach. It felt even better, almost. Ilsa had been wearing flexible armor and her hold, while gentle, had been tentative as if afraid he would break. Lewis simply enveloped him and assumed he was sturdy enough. "I'm—I'm really—" Harry stopped. He didn't know how to stay that he didn't really need a hug, even when he felt he really had earned the right to one.

"Sit still please, I don't want to accidently channel too much into you." Lewis said, lightly. Harry froze.

Lewis sighed. "You're supposed to relax." He rested his chin atop Harry's head. "I can't imagine exactly how we're related, but we must be. This is actually very exciting, you know. The Perevell Seal only works if one has Perevell blood. It's the base of the entire ritual and it would never work otherwise. Technically it should have come off when you came into your inheritance or at least showed some signs of fraying. It looks perfectly intact to me though, which is a bit odd. I suppose your mentor must have been waiting on you to do something before helping it to come off."

"You can see them." Harry said. He'd never expected someone apart from Quinn to be able to look at him and see the troublesome seals. Then again, he'd seen the flicker of sadness in Ilsa's eyes sometimes when she stared at him and he was certain that Kyle could see them and if Lewis was a Medic as well, it made sense.

"Them?" Lewis echoed. "I only see one seal-" he stopped. "Forgive me if I am prying, but do you mean to suggest that you bear more than one? At your young age?" He hugged Harry a little tighter, the glow of strengthening, healing magic warming and pulsing stronger than before. "I suppose you could have two, one of your father's side and one from your mother's—this one's your father's, I can tell from the signature of it." There was a soft snort. "Your mother must be very powerful then, only powerful parents would ever seal their child to prevent potential disasters at a young age."

"My father?" Harry twisted, trying to see Lewis's face. "Did you know him? James?"

"James?" Lewis repeated. He slackened his grip to allow Harry to rearrange himself so he wouldn't be straining his neck. "I do not know a James, I did know a Charles though." A look of sadness passed over him. "My younger brother, Aldor, claimed solitary, because his Intended's family did not approve of him. To combat the social slight, our family rejected her in turn. He chose to Bond with her anyway and as a result, left Nevarah to avoid causing complications for either family." Lewis bowed his head. "There were many consequences for that particular choice though and in the end, he was forced to give up many things just to be with her. I always thought that he had—died." He frowned down at Harry, perplexed. "James is your father? Who was your grandfather?"

"Charles. My grandfather was Charles Potter. My dad was James. He married Lily Evans. A muggleborn witch." Harry spoke, slowly, puzzling through the mystery himself. "James Potter was
the only son of Charles Potter." Harry heard himself say. "I don't know any Aldor or Peverell. No one ever spoke of anyone but my mum and dad."

"...he might have changed his name to blend in, our dragel naming practices are not exactly subtle." Lewis frowned. "The Charles I knew was Aldor's son. I never met him in person, but Aldor spoke of him in the few letters we exchanged. He sent me his first lock of hair for safekeeping." Lewis smiled. "A magical child's earliest memories vanish with their first haircut. The first cut lock is almost like the superstition that humans keep in regards to the tooth fairy. I always regret that I never made an effort to see him before my graduation. I was free to move about until I earned my Medic's title."

"What do you mean by free?" Harry's eyes narrowed.

"Ah, it's nothing to worry over now." Lewis's smile turned sad. "My family was very—upset, when they learned of our communications. They forbid me to contact him again." He patted Harry's arm. "You must understand that familial bonds in dragel families are quite different from humans and any other magical creature. I love my family, no matter how pig-headed and stubborn they can be. I would kill for them, should anyone even dare to speak ill of us. It is a bit complicated. Aldor was lucky that he loved her more than he did us. That would have been the only solace in running away with her." He sighed. "He was always braver than I was."

The first tendrils of suspicion began to curl through Harry's mind. He was happy to think that he had family—real, blood family here in Nevarah, but he was in no hurry to stir up cauldron of trouble simply by existing. He'd caused enough trouble with that excuse before and it didn't seem fair to turn Lewis's world upside down all of a sudden. "And now?" He asked, carefully.

"Now, I am Bonded and the Peverell head of house has returned." Lewis smiled. "My father was not the original head, he was only acting in his place, while our family head spent some time in private seclusion with his Submissive. Our family line has an unfortunate history of complicated pregnancies. I suppose it makes us more overprotective and paranoid than others. My father became the de facto head during his absence and he was always a very—nervous man. The chance of losing Aldor was such a shock that he pushed him away and lost a son, while I lost my only brother." Lewis half-smiled. "He may regret it now, because family is everything to us. Though I highly doubt that he will never admit to such a thing. I do not blame him for it, for I have my own regrets as well." He sighed. "That may be more than you wished to know, but things are better now and I have my freedom back, for what that's worth."

"That's—sad." Harry allowed, he tried to sit up and was gently held down. "Lewis-!" The protest came out as a small whine, before he could temper the instinctive urge. It seemed like the dragel in him had recognized Lewis as someone trustworthy.

"Enough." Lewis said, firmly. "You really shouldn't be moving around just yet. You've just had quite a fright." He sighed. "You're magic sensitive you know."

Harry blinked up at him. Lewis was the second one to mention that. Alec had been the first. He couldn't recall ever hearing that term applied to anyone or anything else. "No, I didn't really." He admitted. "What does it mean?"

"It means that you're probably a Nameless—and do correct me if I'm wrong—and that your Nameless gift is probably untrained and untempered. You're sensitive to the minutest of changes and probably have an instinctive sense of what to avoid and what to encourage." Lewis hummed thoughtfully. "It means that you're very powerful. Only those who possess a tremendous amount of magical energy can feel the slightest of disturbances and be affected by it in a negative way."
"I don't understand," Harry said, bewildered. "So what does that mean?"

"Simply put, if you weren't as strong as you seem to be, it wouldn't bother you. It is no easy feat to wreck a transportation portal. Those are controlled by very old, very powerful and very special Caspers."

Harry stared at him. "...isn't that backwards?" The mention of being powerful wasn't quite as startling as it should have been, probably because he'd been hearing it from the moment the wizarding world had acknowledged him as the Boy-Who-Lived. To survive something as terrible as the killing curse, certainly meant that he was powerful, didn't it?

Lewis laughed. The sound was rich and warm and it sent another ripple of cheerfulness through the comforting, healing magic that continued to pulse around Harry. "Not really. It actually makes perfect sense. I take it you're wizard-born and wizard-raised? Your magic reeks of it, no offense."

"Is that bad?"

"No. Just slightly restrictive. There's a significant amount of potential just simmering in you. I can feel it. Dragel magic on its own is very expressive. We are extremely powerful beings and most of our training is an exercise in restraint. We learn to control the gifts that are given to us and when we have mastered it, we learn to use them to better the realm we reside in." The Medic shrugged. "It's actually rather simple. Now then, are you relaxed?"

"What?"

"I was trying to calm you down. Your magic sparks when you're agitated." Lewis flexed his wings, drawing in a slight breeze. "Do you think you can answer some questions now? I'd like to know your Circle name, your Alpha's name and where you were headed, if you could manage that."

Harry licked his lips. "The Nott Circle." He said, slowly. "Theo, I mean, Theodore Nott and he said he would 'port me in for introductions and oh no-!" Harry straightened up so quickly that he bumped his head on Lewis's chin. "Ow! That hurts. I'll be late. We're supposed to join the Deveraine Circle for the formal introductions and I'll make everyone late and-"

"Harry, Harry!" Lewis clapped a hand over Harry's mouth. "You were nearly killed. A fall from that height, in your condition, could have done serious harm with lasting injuries that very well may have killed you. I am sure they will excuse you." He frowned. "Did you say the Deveraine Circle?"

"Yes." Harry pried the hand away from his mouth, holding it at arms' length. "Yes, I did. Do you know them? And what condition? I'm fine and I feel fine!"

"Everyone knows them." Lewis corrected. "And you are not fine, but I'll save that topic for later. The Deveraines are famous for acquiring the Earth Clan's heiress, Lady Ilsa Gorgens." He frowned. "Clan heirs and heiresses usually hold a position almost like a Royal, just a few steps down, actually. For Lady Ilsa, even though the Deveraines were an established Air Circle, their Elven heritage allowed them to stay on the ground. It's actually rather unusual for an Earth type to take up with an Air-heavy Circle." He smiled. "Has their Alpha returned? He's been away for a while." He shifted to his feet, helping Harry to stand beside him. "How's that? Better? Can you stand on your own?"

"Yes." Harry thought back to the snippets on the beach. Bahn had mentioned something about their Alpha returning, but he hadn't said when. They had yet to meet, so Harry assumed that he hadn't arrived just yet. Knowing Bahn, he would have dragged Harry over to meet him straightaway. He
wobbled for a moment and winced at the phantom pain in his shoulder. He could see that it was fine and he could probably stand on his own, he reasoned a moment later. But it was nice to lean on Lewis, especially when the Medic's magic kept wrapping around him in a perpetual hug of comforting warmth. "I don't think he arrived. I haven't met him yet."

"He's a charming fellow, will likely surprise you. We've had drinks together before." Lewis draped an arm around Harry's shoulders, sharing a friendly smile. "You will probably like him. Take deep breaths and take your time, find your feet. There's no rush, but I would like to send a message to your Bonded, as you probably frightened them quite badly with the portal breaking like that. I almost didn't see you, but something made me look." He frowned. "Can you still feel them?"

"Er, right." Harry sighed. He could still sense them, but the feelings traveling through it were jumbled on top of each other and he didn't know how to sort it out. Lewis was probably right. Sending a message was the best option for the moment. "I know how to do this..." he muttered to himself. Theo had showed him yesterday afternoon. He just had to think about what to say that would actually make sense.

"Tell me and I'll do it." Lewis tapped him on the head. "Magic sensitive, remember? You probably shouldn't be using your own magic just yet. You could, but you might find it easier to let it rest until you really have to. You'll probably have the mother of all headaches by dinnertime."

Harry made a face. He could do without the headaches and the crazy pains and the feeling like an invalid when he'd managed just fine on his own with plain ol' wizard magic for his entire life up to now. "Can you give me a potion for it?" He stretched, gingerly, at first, then relaxing into the movements as he felt his body adjusting. "It's to Theo," Harry stopped, thinking. He recalled Theo's formal introduction at the entry gates and frowned. "Theodore Gorgens Nott," he corrected. "Just tell him that I'm fine and I'll be there as soon as I can." He turned to Lewis, hesitant. "You can take me there, right?"

"Headache potion? Maybe. I'll think about it. There are other ways to cure headaches." The Medic flashed a smile. "I would be more than happy to take you to your final destination." He said. "Anything else you'd like to say?"

"No, that's fine. If it's too complicated they'll stop listening and start worrying again." Harry reasoned. "Do you need some space?"

"If you don't mind," Lewis stepped away. He made a fist and touched it to his heart, giving a slight bow. "A message for the Alpha of the Nott Circle, Theodore Gorgens Nott on behalf of his Submissive, Harry, immediate vicinity. Harry is fine and he will be there as soon as he can. My name is Lewis Peverell and I am a trained Medic. He is currently in my care. I shall see you shortly. Please advise as to your immediate location. My thanks in advance."

Harry watched as the faint glow of white-gold magic flared up and then faded, the message safely sent. "Do you all have to do that?" He gestured vaguely. "The bow and the phrasing?"

"If I didn't, who knows where it could end up. The bow is important, because sometimes your first image appears as an echo before your message plays. It's a sign of respect and shows that your message is meant to be a polite exchange. You can skip it if you know the person you are addressing or if you are very upset." He chuckled. "When he answers, we can 'port in. So relax for a few more minutes." He waved a hand and two white, metal chairs wisped into existence with a small round patio table sprouting up between them. "Have a seat."

Harry smiled, heading for the nearest one. He sank gratefully into the chair and then turned curious eyes to the passing wisps of cloud. He was tempted to ask if they were really flying, but the
evidence was before him and he knew from experience that it had to be real.

"Have you been to see a Healer?" Lewis seated himself gracefully on the opposite chair. He waved a hand again, two more items shimmering into existence as if they'd literally been crafted out of the air itself. "Here, put this on." He handed over a grey silk shirt. "It's cooler up here than you would expect. It should resize to fit you."

Taking the shirt, Harry tightened his grip when the soft, flowy fabric spilled out of his hand. It was the softest, lightest thing he could ever remember holding. He held it up to view and then began to thread his arms through the respective sleeves. Lewis was right, because the moment he began to do up the buttons, the shirt buttoned itself and immediately resized to fit. Harry squirmed for a moment, feeling the silky fabric shrink to fit him like a glove. The top buttons were nonexistent, instead the collar fell open, showing off his pale neck and a hint of Theo's Claim mark on his collarbone.

"I can't speak for the color," Lewis poured tea into matching cups from a steaming tea set. "But it looks good on you. Milk and sugar?"

"I can fix it." Harry found himself blushing. He didn't know anything about colors, but he did like the way it felt. He'd never worn a shirt like this before. The shirt cuffs buttoned themselves when he reached over for the sugar bowl. "Thanks." He poured in a measure of milk and stirred it with a shiny silver spoon. For some reason, the very action seemed soothing and familiar. He set the spoon on the saucer and sat back, lifting the cup for a sip. "Theo took me to see a Healer on our first day here. I'm in between appointments."

"Oh?" Lewis sipped his own tea, then frowned. He leaned over and pushed the sugar bowl closer to Harry's side of the table. "Take some more. The extra sugar is good for you now. I'd offer blood, but your Alpha might not appreciate it." He sat back, watching as Harry added four more cubes and brightened at the sweet taste when he took another sip. "Might I ask who you are seeing? You do not have to answer if you do not wish to, but-"

"It's fine." Harry took another long sip of tea, smiling appreciatively. Lewis brewed a wicked pot of tea. "I don't mind. I'm seeing Healer Quinn Kalzik."

"Kalzik?" Lewis's eyebrows arched upwards in surprise. "You're seeing a Kalzik? That's wonderful. I don't have to worry then, I was starting to." He frowned. "Quinn? You mean Quinten? Wasn't he the one with the, ah-?" Lewis made a gesture around his neck. "The accident, the one who lost his voice because of that fight?"

Harry set his cup down. "I don't know about any fight, but he is mute and he is very good at what he does."

"Of course," Lewis said, hastily. "I didn't mean anything by that. It's just how we Medics know of him. Every Kalzik is extraordinarily talented, especially in the healing arts. Quinten is the only one who doesn't work under house jurisdiction."

"...I don't understand."

"All Kalziks work from their ancestral family home. They never lower themselves to mixing with the standard trained Healers and Medics. They charge well for their services, but it is perfectly in proportion to their talent. I'm told even her Royal Highness, Princess Dawne of our Air element, seeks their gifts when she is feeling under the weather. They are very well known and highly respected." He smiled. "The Peverells have no quarrel with them. I am glad you are in good hands."
"Ah." Harry knew that phrase. Bahn's friendship had been solidified with it and he understood the declaration for what it was. That was nice to know. He drained the last of his tea and began to pour himself another cup. He slowly stirred extra sugar into the brew before reaching for the small pitcher of creamer.

"How long have you been seeing him?"

"Since Tuesday?" Harry tried to count on his hands. His days were all mixed up since they'd arrived in Nevarah on that fateful Monday afternoon. "Today is Friday?"

"Today is Friday." Lewis agreed. "Tomorrow is Saturday. Do you want some biscuits or scones?"

"Ginger newts?" Harry asked, before he could stop himself.

Lewis smiled. He turned and pulled a bright red tin out of the air to his left and then set it down on the table. The cover vanished from the top to reappear a few inches away on the tabletop. Three biscuits levitated out of the can and arranged themselves on Harry's saucer.

"Thank you." He reached for one, savoring the familiar taste.

"So you've seen him for three days?" Lewis rubbed his chin. "That's not very long. How long have you been here, in Nevarah, I mean?"

Harry almost shrugged. He stopped himself in time, thinking. "We came here Monday night," he murmured. "And we're still here."

"You came from where?" Lewis had to know.

Harry bit into the second ginger newt, chewing slowly. "The wizarding world." He said, quietly.

"You came for the Hunt?"

"Not exactly." Harry frowned.

"I hope you weren't planning on hunting with seals on." Lewis looked appalled. "That's hiding your true potential. You might end up with Bonded who cannot handle your kind of power or your true personality."

Harry thought of Wikhn and slow dancing, then Alec and his Merrow spellwork. "I don't think that's very likely to happen." He said, after a moment. It rather felt the other way around, as if he was attracting powerful people that he didn't know how to handle yet. "And I don't have a-"

"This is Theodore Gorgens Nott for Medic Lewis Peverell, immediate vicinity." A hazy image of a perfectly composed Theo offered the traditional bow as the circle of nearly invisible magic shimmered like a soap bubble. "Thank you for assisting my Submissive. I am currently at the public entry way to the main stadium. We are a private section. If you could bring him with you, I would be eternally grateful. Harry, if you trust him, please accept the transportation portal. We can work something else out, otherwise. My thanks for your assistance."

"Ah. That would be your cue." Lewis set his cup and saucer down before he looked over at Harry. "Are you ready or would you like to finish your tea?"

"This is fine." Harry swallowed the last ginger newt and downed the final swallow of tea. "It's fine. I'd like to—go. I mean, thank you for everything."
"Thank me when we've arrived," Lewis chuckled. "I'm not about to let you out of my sight just yet. I'd also like to have a word with your Alpha. He's remarkably composed."

Harry half-smiled. "He's Theo. He's always like that. Charlie, my Beta, he's kind of like that too, but Theo is Theo."

"...really?"

"Yes. Very little actually surprises him." Harry found himself smiling fondly at the thought. Theo's unflappable nature made it easy for him to forget just how dependable the Slytherin could be. "Is it safe for me to use a portal again? I mean, if I'm magic sensitive and all that."

"It isn't." Lewis grinned. "Good of you ask. But I have no intention of 'porting you anywhere." He stretched his arms out to the side and his wings unfurled to their true length with an audible snap. "I never said I would use a portal to carry you there." His wings flapped experimentally. "Air element, remember? Trust me to get you there?"

"I already do." Harry circled around the table, feeling the thread of familiarity connecting them again. He wished he knew just how they were related. "Do I just...?"

"Arms around my neck and hold on tight." Lewis instructed. He bent down for Harry to reach him, then carefully swept the young man up in his arms. "Comfortable?" Harry nodded. "Good. Now, if you have trouble breathing at any time, just put your nose to my neck and breathe in the hollow there. Normally, I would put some charms on you to ease any potential discomfort, but with your current condition, I really don't want to stress your magic out any more than it is at present. You should be fine."

Harry leaned forward, taking an experimental whiff of the familiar scent of steel—Theo—and spice, like something he couldn't quite place, yet lingered in the back of his mind as if he ought to know it. "Can you take the seal off?" He asked, tightening his grip on Lewis's neck as he felt the older dragel tensing for take-off.

"Do you like flying?" Lewis countered, as if Harry hadn't spoken at all. "I rather think you would, but I'd just like to make sure. Do you?"

"...yes."

"Good. Take a deep breath." Lewis's warm breath ghosted over Harry's cheek as the older dragel tightened his grip. "On count of three, alright?"

"Alright."

"Three!" Lewis announced.

And then he jumped.

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**NEVARAH : STADIUM - LOWER LEVELS (CHARLIE)**

"Charlie?" Kyle's voice carried through the air. "Charlie Weasley? Is that you?"

Charlie turned at the sound of the Medic's voice and broke out in a wide grin when he saw the forest-green haired Fae approaching. "Kyle!" He waved cheerfully. "Hello. You look well."

"Rested is more like it," said the young woman beside him. She had lovely red-brown hair with
furry white-tipped ears sticking up from her head. "You'd be surprised what sleep could do for
him."

"Emily!" Kyle blushed. "Stop it." He didn't dodge the smack she aimed at him, but smiled up at
Charlie. "Are you having fun so far? I'm surprised to see you alone. Ah. Nevermind, Harry's
probably hunting, isn't he?" Kyle's grin grew wider. "Good for him."

"I'm Emily, his girlfriend." The girl stuck her hand out. "Pleased to meet you. I'm a Medic as well, I
work specifically with were creatures, as I'm a were myself."

Charlie shook her hand, firmly. She had a nice strong grip and her smile was just as open and
friendly as Kyle's. "Charlie, pleased to meet you."

"I don't suppose you've seen Quinn anywhere, have you?" Kyle shaded his eyes, squinting off into
the busy crowds. "I lost sight of him hours ago, but we're assembling for the introductions and if I
don't find him soon, Mum will have my head."

"You shouldn't have let him wander about on his own." Emily scolded. "Besides, you're supposed
to be near each other for the foreseeable future. What part of that sounds like freedom?"

"You weren't complaining when you were snog-" Kyle started, then he grunted when Emily kicked
his shin. "Em!" He looked at her reproachfully. "I wouldn't have said-"

"Don't 'Em' me!" She retorted. "You were the one that started that. I was perfectly fine with not
being-" she stopped, her face coloring a rather attractive shade of pink.

Kyle wiggled his eyebrows. "Mmhmm. You keep telling yourself that." He stood on tip-toe and
scowled. "I could have sworn I scented him here, did you do the same?"

Emily brightened, taking a few careful whiffs. "I did. I don't see him though and the scent's a bit
stale."

"Is something the matter with him?" Charlie followed their line of sight, scanning the crowds
himself for the familiar shock of wavy blond hair. He had thought he'd passed a few familiar
scents, but he hadn't seen anyone he knew. Now that he stopped to look at Kyle, he found himself
wondering if he would have recognized Quinn on sight.

The Earth Fae was decked out in forest-green and gold finery in a traditional style that he'd never
seen up close before. Emily wore shimmering dress robes, with a slit in the back for her bushy tail,
but it had nothing on Kyle. The Medic was stunning in the well-tailored Sherwani with a deep
forest-green dupatta that was nearly the shade of his unique hair and there were gold hoop earrings
in his ears, with golden cuffs on his wrists.

If Quinn was similarly attired, he would have passed him over.

"Nothing's really the matter, but after that stunt he pulled at the clinic, Mama and Father were very
upset." Kyle frowned. "Papa too. The current result of things have left him in my express care."
Kyle's frown deepened. "He's to be in my sight or by my side for this Hunting season."

Charlie nodded in understanding. "Where did you last see him?"

"We haven't seen him in a few hours," Emily took another whiff. "I think more this way, honey." She
shoulder-bumped Kyle. "He said that he didn't want to interrupt our couple time—never mind
that we weren't doing anything—so he walked off and he let him!" She poked Kyle.
"You didn't exactly stop me or complain." Kyle returned, mildly. "In fact, if I was going to— Charlie? Are you alright—Charlie!" he lurched forward, grabbing at the taller Beta, when he suddenly crumpled to his knees.

"Kyle?" Emily's worried voice came from Charlie's other side as she instantly hurried around to help support him. "Charlie? Talk to me, love. What's going on here?"

"...Harry." Charlie gave a choking gasp. His blue eyes were blown wide and a distant, faraway look had taken over him. "Oh Merlin no, Harry!"

"Move him, quick." Emily looped one of Charlie's tanned arms around her shoulder and caught the little bag of takeout he had been carrying. "We need to move him off the walkway."


"He's the Charlie you mentioned earlier, right?"

"Yes." Kyle held out his Medic's badge, clearing a way through the busy stream of dragels for them to reach the walls.

"Where's his Alpha then?"

"I don't know, but I'd sure like to." Kyle muttered.

Immediate portal for Charles Weasley of the Nott Circle, by order of the Alpha. Commencing in five, four, three, two, one-!

"Arielle," Kyle swore. He grabbed Emily's arm from Charlie's other side as he felt the portal suck them in together.

NEVARAH : UPPER STADIUM - WALKWAY ENTRANCE (THEO & DEVERAINES)

"Theo!" Bahn waved merrily from the far end of the queued line. There were several Circles ahead of them and the Deveraines were all assembled into something of a line, chattering amongst themselves. They looked up at Theo's approach and Bahn was the one to move out to greet the young Alpha. "There you are! I was starting to worry. Where's Harry and Charlie?" He frowned. "Specifically, where's Charlie? I know that the others would—Dahlia?" He stopped and stared over Theo's shoulder at an approaching Dahlia, with Dyshoka trailing behind her.

"Dera," Dahlia greeted, coming to a stop beside him. She pulled gently on Dyshoka's hand and held them up for inspection, showing off matching, golden proposal bangles. "It's official."

"...congratulations." Bahn said, after a moment. "Weren't you with the-?"

"We headed into Gheyo territory to celebrate." Dahlia smiled over her shoulder at Dyshoka's pleased expression. "The others decided to take off a long time ago."

Bahn's eyes narrowed. "And where exactly is Soula?"

"With Ariki and Lorelei," Dahlia answered, promptly. She looked around Theo and frowned. "Where's Harry?"

"Where's Harry?" Bahn echoed. "What do you mean, where's Harry?"
"He left with him," Dahlia pointed to Theo. "We left shortly after you did, because of news." She waved a hand. "Gheyo business. I had to take care of a few things. Wik and Mei took the others back to the atrium. They'll meet up with me here for the official presentation. Lady Pai plans to parade us."

"Harry wanted some time to himself, I'll port him through in a minute," Theo said, calmly. "Are we ready for him yet?"

"It might be best to bring him through early," Aracle stepped around Theo, clapping him lightly on the shoulder. "He might appreciate having some time to right himself after the portal. Had a good morning?"

"A busy one," Theo admitted. "Thank you for looking after Charlie, please send the expenses to our account."

"Think nothing of it." Aracle said, smoothly. "It was a pleasure. He's a charming fellow, you'd hardly think he just came into his true self."

"I'll consider that a compliment." Theo's smile widened, slightly. "and really, it is no imposition. Please do send it. I will look out for it."

"That's really not-" Aracle began.

"He'll send it." Takar thumped the Rheyo on the head as he passed by. "Don't quibble, Aracle. It's annoying." He sighed. "Did Okahn return yet? He said something about Ithycar's return, but then I didn't hear back from him and Loren for a few hours."

"Ithy?" Bhindi wound her way through the gaggle of her Bonded, coming out to stand in front, fussing with her long gown. "Was it confirmed?"

"I don't know. I was hoping to see him and ask in person." Takar bent down to kiss the top of her head, careful of her fancy hairstyle. "You were shopping, I see. Very pretty."

Bhindi hummed in answer, doing an impromptu twirl to show off her jeweled sash. "Aren't they? They're one of a kind. I was lucky to find them. Bahn's wearing the other set." She waved a hand at her twin. "Where's Soula?"

"We already answered that," Bahn said, allowing her to lean on him. "She's fine and she's with Lorelei. Where's Lani and why are we so disorganized? I thought we were keeping things together."

"We're keeping the children together, the rest of it is up in the air." Bhindi smirked. "You underestimate me though, brother of mine. I'll whip them into shape as long as you remember that you owe me for that little stunt this morning. Delani!" Bhindi turned away, calling for the Circle Alpha.

Bahn sighed. "It's always confusing before it straightens itself out." He said, matter-of-factly. "And I don't owe you anything," He mumbled to himself. "Theo, come on this way and we'll have you registered. You don't need Charlie and Harry for this part." He led Theo up to a counter where he signed the necessary forms releasing the rights to have them formally announced, along with their respective full names and ranks. "You can probably bring Harry in any time now." Bahn said, after a while. "We're two groups away and that's always just enough time to order everyone to where they ought to be. How are you planning on entering?"

"I thought you'd discussed it with Harry." Theo frowned. He'd almost been certain of it.
"I didn't want to burden him," Bahn yawned, rolling his neck to the side. He smiled when Bu came up behind him, reaching over with a hand to rub the back of his neck. "He doesn't need to worry himself over little details like this. There's more important things he can focus on. You're welcome to walk in rank with us or behind us with Harry, which would you prefer?"

"Does it matter?" Theo wanted to know.

"The ones that care, don't matter." Ilsa said, dryly. "And the ones that matter, probably won't care. You can take it either way. If you think Harry will be more comfortable walking with Bahn and Bhindi, then walking in rank will be fine. If you think it wouldn't, then you can be introduced behind us, with a tag on to my name." She inspected her fingernails and cast another cooling charm over her sun-warmed skin.

"Are we entering first?" Greta rolled her shoulders back, swinging her arms to loosen them up. "I mean you, loveling." She nodded to Ilsa.

"I think so. Traditional opening is what we're aiming for, yes?" Ilsa looked to Bahn.

He quirked his lips into a crooked smile. "Traditional is fine, yes."

"Traditional it is then," Ilsa decided. "Where is Delani?"

"She had to sign off on Dahlia." Alma appeared, bouncing a wide-awake Camalis in her arms. The chubby-faced baby screeched in delight, waving his arms happily. "You didn't tell me she was serious, Bahn."

"Serious about what? Dyshoka?" Bahn looked at her in puzzlement. "Of course she's serious, love. She's a Gheyo. They don't play around with things like this."

"Mm," Alma moaned. "That's what I was afraid of. Of course she'd be the first one of them to leave," a faint pout came to her lips. "She's so young."

"She's old enough," Ilsa said, firmly. "It's her choice. I would never take that from her."

"I'm not taking it from her, I'm just saying that she's hardly ever had a chance to just be herself." Alma sighed. She stopped bouncing the baby and cuddled him close in her arms. "I'll take the head for the Pareya ranks, will that be alright?"

"That's perfectly fine." Delani approached, unwrapping a mint. "Bahn." He turned to face her expectantly and blinked in surprise when she pushed the mint into his mouth. "That's to keep you from worrying the rest of us." She scolded, lightly. "The rest of you, fall in." She frowned at Theo. "Where's the rest of yours?"

"Summoning them now," Theo ducked his head, moving away from the group. He reached out through the thrumming bonds to sense Harry and Charlie, pleased to find tendrils of contentment and happiness radiating from them. That was good. Perhaps their first day wouldn't be quite a wash just yet. Concentrating and focusing his magic on Harry first, Theo began to cast the portal.

He stared down at his feet, while the golden-white medallion of energy flared to life on the walkway floor. He felt the transportation portal activate and directed it to a spot, a few feet away. The portal was nearly complete when he felt the magic suddenly waver and then snap, eliciting a gasp and sending a powerful backlash of energy that had him flying through the air.

"Oof." Theo crashed into a warm body and winced, slowly sitting up with the aid of the helping hands.
"What happened?" Edor hoisted him up by the arms and began to brush him off, a hint of worry showing through. "I've never seen a portal do that before."

Theo blinked once, twice, before the horror registered. "Harry!" The name left his lips and he frantically reached out with his magic, trying pull the connection back into place, searching for a way to reach the signature of his Submissive. Everything had been fine up until that waver, then it all had fallen to pieces.

"Theo?" Bahn was beside him in an instant, with Delani right next to him. "Theo, what's wrong?"

"The portal—I was bringing Harry." Theo swallowed. "He broke the portal."

Bahn's white face grew even paler. "He what?" But the words were nearly whispered.

"Sit." Delani snapped at him, urging her Submissive to kneel on the floor and then motioning for Edor to do the same with Theo. "What do you mean, he broke the portal?"

"Just that." Theo held up his hands in bewilderment. "He was right here, I could feel him. I was bringing him through and he just—vanished."

"You've 'ported him before?" Delani asked, briskly.

"Yes." Theo nodded. "Several times in fact, I was showing him how they worked this morning. When we 'ported to your home."

Delani frowned. "Can you still sense him?"

"I can't—ah!" Theo clutched his head, curling forward on himself. "Harry." The name was hissed through clenched teeth and his shoulder shook violently before his wings erupted out of his shoulders with startling force. His golden eyes immediately darkened to pitch black.

"Ilsa!" Delani barked, snatching up Bahn and moving him out of the way while Edor had ducked to avoid being hit by the agitated wings.

"Theo? Theodore!" Ilsa was beside him in a moment, reaching out to touch him, when a flare of golden magic dropped a screeching, wriggling Nyatura on Theo's head.

The young Alpha responded mostly by instinct, preparing to throw the offender away, before he understood what it was. "Shadow!" He rasped, clutching the small creature to his chest and looking it over for visible injuries. "Shadow, Harry!" He choked. "What happened? Why can't I reach—Charlie." Theo's magic snapped and crackled, before a powerful wave of magic swept through the preparation platform leading up to the introduction walkways.

In a flare of golden-white magic, Charlie appeared a few feet away, supported by a distraught Kyle and a worried Emily. "Er, hello?" Kyle offered, easing Charlie up to his feet. "Theo!" He bit his lip. "What's happening?"

"Harry broke a portal." Ilsa shot a glance to the Medic and frowned when she saw Charlie's near immobile state. "Depending on when he broke the portal will determine whether we're too late or not." She reached over, grabbing Theo's hand and then Charlie's, linking them together. "Use my magic. Find him. If you can't find, search where you last felt him and pull on whoever or whatever is nearest to help him."

A fine sheen of sweat broke out on Theo's forehead as he nodded, stiffly, then squeezed his eyes shut and pulled.
"How is he?" Bahn leaned back into Delani's embrace, looking worried to death. "I've never—I mean, I've heard of it, but I've never known anyone who actually did break a portal."

"Magic sensitive, I'd wager." Delani murmured. She stroked the side of his neck, channeling calm through her Claim mark to keep him from panicking. "He was receptive only to Ilsa and Shayla yesterday, remember?"

"Mmhm." Bahn sighed. "Maybe there was someone flying up there?"

"Maybe." Delani allowed. "It seems more like—oh."

"What?"

"A message."

"I don't see it."

"It's coming." Delani shushed him. "Just be quiet."

A few seconds later, a message materialized in midair beside Theo. It showed a distinguished man with a Medic's badge, before the short message relayed itself. Harry was fine, he'd been rescued by a Medic belonging to the noble house of Peverell and wanted to know their location.

Charlie sagged forward in relief, while Theo half-growled and scowled at the message. A moment later, he composed himself enough to send a message back, asking for Harry to trust the Medic if possible.

"Is he safe?" Kyle handed over Charlie's takeout bag. "Sounded like it."

"For the moment," Theo said, tightly. "Thank you for your—assistance."

Kyle offered a small smile. He could understand the pressure of magic, distance and instinct. "Not a problem at all," he said. "Are you presenting now?"

"We're fifth in the queue." Bahn spoke up, helpfully. "Might I ask who you are?"

"Of course, how rude of me." Kyle began.

"He's my adopted brother," Dyshoka appeared from behind, to rest her arm atop his head. She threw a smile at Emily and prompted the Fae to offer a bow. "Younger brother, if you have to be specific and definitely adopted." She frowned at him. "You were supposed to be with Quinn, but I don't see him anywhere here and I certainly don't sense him."

"Er," Kyle said, sheepishly. "About that…"

"He rather gave us the slip." Emily said, coming up on Kyle's other side. "We were looking for him when we ran into him," she pointed at Charlie. "Then he seemed to have some kind of an attack so when the portal called for him, we joined it." She bit her lip. "My apologies if we strained you." She bowed towards Theo.

The young Alpha merely glared in answer, looking supremely irritated as Ilsa finally allowed him to stand up. He said something to Charlie that made the redhead frown, but shrink the food packages and stow them in his pocket for later. They held a whispered conversation that made Charlie's expression mirror Theo's a moment later.
Kyle winced. "I don't even want to know," he murmured, leaning forward. "Can I stand up now?"

"No." Dyshoka said, sweetly. "But you can tell me where you last saw Quinn. Mama will have you locked in the basement for laundry duty if you're actually letting him skive off."

The wince turned into a grimace of distaste as Kyle shuddered. Laundry duty in a healer's clinic was one of the worst jobs. Like other certain chores, handling them with magic could interfere with the necessary spells needed for the patients at a later date. He most certainly did not want to spend any part of his Hunting Season toiling away in the basement, elbow deep in grimy bedsheets.

"...we'll be entering after you." Theo said, quietly. "If that's alright?" He smiled, politely at Bahn's careful nod. His composure had returned and though his wings were out, he kept them folded back. He'd ruined his robes and spelled them away with a wave of one hand.

After a moment's pause, Charlie shucked his own off as well, folding them over one arm. His broad, tanned shoulders showed off his muscles and the rich tapestry of scars from a life of wrestling dragons. Tattoos of burgundy and black swirled to the surface of his skin, moving and shifting as if they were alive as he let Theo take his robes and spell them elsewhere.

Harry nearly swallowed his tongue. The shriek that bubbled up in his throat was more from the sheer thrill of a freefall with the kind of speed he'd never experienced before.

Lewis was an expert flier.

The initial dive tapered off into a sharp turn and then they were streaking up through the air again, before everything evened out. Harry felt his breath hitch twice as he stared in awe at the majestic scenery, a view of Nevarah that he'd never seen before. They were very high up and it was cold.

But he was warm everywhere that Lewis touched and his own magic had begun to spread out, singing happily inside of him, as it acknowledged a side of his dragel nature he'd never known existed. When Lewis did a few twirls and loops, Harry found himself laughing in delight. "Lewis-!" His protest wasn't really a protest at all. "You're very good."

"I aim to please," Lewis winked. "And it's inherited. I'm sure you'd be a sharp streaker in your own right, once you adjust to your own wings. I take it you've never flown before?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I actually only came into my inheritance this summer. Flying wasn't exactly at the top of my—list."

"Understandable." Lewis chuckled. "Some don't even think of flying until they're almost a full century. I don't know how they can manage it, but to each their own." He relaxed his grip, somewhat. "We're headed to the stadium over there, it's the large silver oval that you can see on the left." He tipped his head, for lack of a free hand to point with.

Harry twisted carefully to see. He had to squint to make out the distinct shapes from their current height. It took a few seconds for his sight to adjust. "That?"

"Hold on, I drop down a bit." Lewis's smile turned into a smirk and he angled his wings with purpose in mind.

Harry's shriek made the older man wince, but they were both smiling, by the time he settled on a lower altitude, "Daredevil!" Harry accused, but his emerald eyes were fairly sparkling with admiration. "If you took my seal off, would I fly like this?"
Lewis hummed for a moment. "Probably. Your healer should have submitted a formal request to our house to have it removed. I haven't seen or heard talk of one arriving—it would be my duty to remove it—but it's more so a dampener of your air magic. I am not so much flying as I am also directing the air currents around us to make those maneuvers possible." He smiled. "It takes practice, but it's also very instinctive. Our kind lives for the air, the thrill, the heights. It's hard-wired into us. I'll check with your Alpha about the seal removal though. I would like to have it off as soon as possible, but it will take some time to prepare the necessary items for the required ritual."

"Quinn said it was something about blood and formalities." Harry supplied. "Is it really that complicated?"

"It has to be done on our land, using blood from our head of house and according to the wind currents. There's some things that have to be aligned and we can't skip those portions of the ritual and certain things have to be purchased in advance."

"Oh." Harry bit his lip. "It's expensive, isn't it?"

Lewis nudged him with his chin. "That's none of your concern. You certainly won't be paying for it and neither will your Circle." He gave a few powerful strokes of his wings. "Want another dive?"

Harry brightened. There was no harm in being honest. Merlin knew when he would ever be in a position like this again. "Go a little higher first." He tested his grip around Lewis's neck and made sure he could still feel his fingers. "Then faster."

Lewis laughed.

"Harry!" Charlie was the first one to spot him.

Shadow, perched on Theo's pale shoulders, reared up on his hind feet, screeching happily in the air, little wings flared out. "Easy," Theo calmed him with one hand, moving forward behind Charlie, angling towards Harry.

The emerald-eyed brunet in question had just arrived, cradled in the arms of a man who looked remarkably similar, with ruffled brunet curls and rich brown eyes. The man allowed Harry to stand up, before carefully releasing him. They were sharing smiles and he said something that made Harry giggle—right before Theo stalked up and snatched him away.

"Theo-!" Harry's exclamation turned into a squeak, when Theo grabbed him in a fierce hug, squeezing hard enough that he couldn't breathe. He blinked in surprise, trying to twist and turn, but finding no room to do so. "T-theo." He tried again, with a gasp.

The embrace loosened just enough for comfort, before he spoke. "Harry." Theo breathed.

"Harry." Charlie murmured, he sniffed the grey silk shirt and bit back a growl. He didn't like the fact that another scent other than his or Theo's was all over Harry and it made it difficult for him to tell if there was any injury. It took him a half-second before he shredded it with careful claws. Bright blue eyes took in the pale skin and sudden shiver from the rush of coolness. He sandwiched them both from the other side, his touch nearly searing. His own magic read the growing surge in Harry's powerful magic, twisting and writhing beneath the surface of his skin.

"Charlie." Harry twisted around to see his Beta, worry surfacing as he realized that both of his Bonded were shirtless as well. He opened his mouth to speak and froze, when Theo trembled. He swallowed hard and let his own arms come up around Theo, hugging back as best as he could.
"M'fine." He mumbled, leaning forward to rest his forehead on Theo's shoulder.

There was no answer.

Charlie made a soft, rumbling sound in his throat, one hand tangling in Theo's hair and the other, wrapped around Harry's neck. He breathed a sigh of relief, holding them both close. It had been the very worst feeling he'd ever experienced in his life, to feel that sudden, unexpected rush of fear, coupled with the realization that he was completely and utterly helpless to do anything other than experience the feelings that came rushing through their shared bond. It was different than coming out of the Burrow to realize that his entire family was under attack. It was different than bolting onto the field to corral a rampaging Ironbelly. This was Harry.

This was _Harry._

A warbling sound welled up in Harry's throat and he cooed softly, reassuringly, as Theo's arms gradually loosened around him. He froze again, when he heard Theo hiss and instinctively pressed himself closer to the warmed torso of his Alpha, seeking protection and comfort. For that to be Theo's reaction, he knew he didn't want to look at whatever it was.

Until his rational mind processed the sound and the direction in which it'd been sent. Lewis. _Merlin!_ Harry's head popped up and he wriggled, pushing at the tangle of arms wrapped around him to try and see the Medic. "Theo, Charlie." He huffed, when they didn't quite release him. He couldn't reach the claim marks to force them to release him and had to settle for an impromptu dance of sorts. "I'm alright. It's alright. Lewis saved me."

Theo growled lowly in answer.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Lewis is a Medic and he's from the noble house of Peverell." He waited a beat. Theo's arms flexed around him, fingers skimming lightly along his bared sides. "You know, the house that Quinn said I have a seal from?"

Charlie released him in surprise, stepping back to look between Harry and Lewis. "There is some resemblance," he muttered, half to himself, looking between the two brunets. He frowned, feeling Theo's unease being shared between them and Harry's uncertainty.

Theo bared his fangs in answer.

Lewis calmly stared back, not responding in any way other than the faint smile that hovered about his lips.

"Theo." Harry found himself starting to blush. This was not the way he'd envisioned things turning out. He'd been having a wonderful time in the air, right up until the moment when they'd touched down. "Lewis is a friend. He lent me a shirt and he flew me all the way here-"

"Why didn't you 'port?" Theo rasped.

"Harry is magic sensitive." Lewis said, smoothly. "Surely you didn't expect him to step into an actual transportation spell in his present condition?"

The rumbling growl that Theo gave next was punctuated by the way that he possessively held Harry to his side, slightly shielded from Lewis and tucked against a very willing Charlie. "He was fine when I left him." He snapped, mentally reviewing the conversation they'd had right up until his departure. Harry had been fine. "I was unaware that something had changed."

"Oh?" Lewis folded his hands in front of himself. "And you didn't think to ask? I hardly doubt that
was his first episode. As his Alpha, I would have expected you to show some care."

*Wait, what?* Harry tried and failed to understand the verbal sparring match taking place. He was certain that something had set Theo off, he wasn't sure if it was Lewis, but it seemed as if Lewis didn't particularly care whether Theo liked him or not. It made a funny feeling settle in his stomach. He had a feeling that if he didn't interrupt them right away, everything might turn pear-shaped before he could slip a word in edgewise. "Theo, stop it." Harry tugged gently on the bonds between them, placing his flat palms on Theo's bared chest for added contact. "Please. I'm alright and Lewis was just trying to help."

"Harry?" Bahn's quiet voice interrupted the staring contest. "You're back." He smiled, warmly, moving out from Delani's protective embrace to come over and inspect his younger friend. "You had us worried for a moment." He tipped up Harry's chin, leaning forward to peer into his eyes. "You look alright, a bit stressed, but alright and I can't feel anything out of the ordinary..." he slapped a hand on Harry's forehead, while feeling his own. "You're fine." He murmured, a second later. "Are you ready for the introductions?"

"You're introducing him now?" Lewis stared at him incredulously. "The formal introductions? Do you have any idea what he's just been through?"

"I would not have given you *this* location if we were watching from the stands," Theo snapped. He ran a hand through his chocolate curls and tugged on them in frustration. This was definitely not the way he'd envisioned their first day on the Hunt. Perhaps he should have set a few more contingency plans in place. Merlin knew they needed all the help they could recruit.

"Circle up!" Delani's strong voice rang out. "Attention. We've got two minutes to presentation, Circle up, now, please." The Deveraine Bonded began to shuffle into a clearer semblance of order and Bahn offered a bland smile to Lewis.

"Harry, do you feel up to it?" He asked, calmly, arranging his white-blond braids over one slender shoulder. "It really isn't difficult. You'll just be walking from this entrance, down to the other end and from there, we'll find our watchbox. If that is too much, you need only say so."

Harry found himself coloring under the sudden scrutiny of several pairs of penetrating eyes fixed on his person. He made himself focus on Bahn's friendly face and warm grey eyes. "It's fine. I can do it."

"Harry!" Lewis and Theo exclaimed in the same breath, only to stop and exchange glares again. Charlie merely sighed. "Are you sure?"

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Yes. I'm not traumatized or anything, it was just a fall and a-" he blushed as the image of Alec rose in his mind's eye, unbidden. "I've had worse," he finished, hastily. "Trust me. I'm fine." He looked down at his bare chest and made a face. He'd rather liked that shirt. "Charlie, did you have to shred it?"

Charlie gave him a look, just as his red hair ignited into a burning mass of flickering flame. The dragon tamer didn't even seem to notice as he exchanged a look with Theo and folded his arms over his chest.

Harry winced. Now he would owe Lewis for the cost of a shirt. Lovely. "Fine. You're paying for it." He scolded. "Theo, the portal didn't give much warning. Shadow wanted to play near the water and I needed my wings out. My clothes were left behind, I wasn't close to them. Do we have spares or can you summon them?"
"Clothes? Why?" Bahn looked him over, carefully with a critical eye. "You look fine and it seems like you're all shirtless. There's nothing wrong with just walking out there with your wings and your pride."

Harry coughed, face red as a rose. "My what?"

"Never mind it," Bahn said, helpfully. He slapped him lightly on the back. "Small breaths." He advised as he turned and made a clicking sound with his mouth that had all of his Bonded standing to attention. "Ilza starts us off, alright?"

"Bahn!" Harry hissed. "I can't just walk out there in—and even if I could—"

"Other Circles do it. There's nothing wrong it."

The blush deepened and Harry bit his lip as he glanced over at Theo's lean form and Charlie's tanned, muscled one. There was a near irrational spark of jealousy at the thought of anyone else other than him being able to witness their perfection.


Harry opened his mouth and shut it. He was shocked to see the Gheyos in question easily shedding their dresswear to show off well-muscled forms, with their swirling tattoos dancing across their shoulders. To him, they looked perfect. Looking down at himself, he felt rather out of place.

"Harry," Lewis hurried forward, hand half-way outstretched, before he snatched it back. "You really don't have to do this if you don't want to." He took a step backward when Theo stepped between them. "And excuse me, but I mean your Submissive no harm. He was in my company for some time and I did not cause him any unnecessary stress." He looked at the rest of the assembled Circle, dragel and elven heritage showing through as they adopted a haughty air in turn. "This can be rescheduled and—"

"Enough!" Bhindi's irritated voice had the intended effect of making everyone freeze. She stalked to the back of the crowd where Bahn grabbing her arm, made her pause, instead of flouncing up to Lewis. "You have no idea what it looks like to be rescheduling an introduction for a Circle of our standing." She hissed. "No idea at all. I won't be rescheduled. I refuse to be made a laughingstock for something as trivial as this." Her narrowed eyes flickered to Harry. "You can stand and walk, yes?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. He nodded, curtly.

"Perfect. Then there's no reason for us to stand here and debate it, yes?" She sucked in a quick breath as a soft chime rang out over head. "Ilza!"

"Yes, yes, I'm ready." Ilza yawned. "Don't get your knickers in a twist." She cracked her knuckles and started forward.

"…presenting, the esteemed heiress of the Earth Clan and high noble, Gheyo Ace of the Deveraine Circle, Lady Ilza Gorgens!" The announcement rang out clearly as the music switched tunes. The long walkway was almost like a runaway, sloping downward to the opposite end of the auditorium.

Decked out in shimmering, well-polished dress armor, Ilza strode forward from the shadowed
wings and into the light. She tossed her head, short hair giving a slight bounce as she reached the quarter-mark point and called her wings out with a primal roar.

A cheer rose from the audience below.

Ilsa continued on, pausing to give a single twirl, wings glittering in the sunlight. She waved and continued on.

"I can't do this, I can't do this, I don't want to do this." Greta moaned, biting her lip. "Why am I doing this?"

"You're fine. You'll be fine. You love doing this." Aracle leaned over her shoulder and nipped her ear. "Go on, that's your cue."

Greta gave a high-pitched whine, that turned into a squeak, when Aracle rolled his eyes and gave her a light smack to the bum, propelling her forward. She half-stumbled out into the light and froze. Then drew herself up, set her shoulders back and stretched her neck out, a smirk coming to rest on her face.

"…presenting, high noble, Gheyo King of the Deveraine Circle, hailing from the Storm element, Lady Greta!"

Greta sashayed halfway across the large walkway before she turned and blew a kiss to the crowd, amid roaring cheers. She offered a deeply exaggerated bow, then jumped backwards off the walkway and into the steep drop below.

Harry gasped, feeling his entire body freeze, before he lurched forward, only to be caught by Charlie's warm arms. "Easy, Harry. She's fine. Look."

As if on cue, with vibrant purple wings, Greta came shooting upwards from the shadowed depths with a playful screech.

"Show off," Edor scowled. He cracked his neck from side and side and stalked out. The cheers rose again.

"…presenting, high noble, Gheyo Prince of the Deveraine Circle, hailing from the Air element, fighter Edor of Alensworth!"

Harry watched them exit one by one, the Gheyos first, the Mages hanging back. It was like something out of a fantasy novel. Each dragel strutted out, showing off beautiful wings, massive displays of their elemental gifts or daring physical maneuvers.

The Pareyas went after the Gheyos, then the Betas and Rheyo, then finally Delani. Bahn and Bhindi were the last ones to leave and they paused to look at Theo and the others. Bhindi stood impatiently, waiting while Bahn patted Harry reassuringly on the arm. "You'll be fine. Just act like you own it."

"Bahn…" Harry said, weakly. "Not helping…"

"We'll be alright," Charlie said, calmly. "Thank you."

"Wait for your cue," Bahn reminded.
"Bahn!" Bhindi called, impatiently.

"Yes, yes, coming." Bahn winked, then flipped his hair over one shoulder and pulled on the same haughty Deveraine mask as the rest of his Circle. He held a hand out to Bhindi, who took it as he walked past and they exited the wings in perfect unison to the applause of the crowd below and the loud announcement declaring their rank and status.

"…presenting, the Royal twins, from the Northern Elves, the rock of their Circle and influential supporters of the esteemed Air element, Bhindi and Bahn Deveraine!"

"Esteemed air element?" Harry repeated. "What do that mean?"

"It means that they use their social status to help those with the air element, whenever they can." Emily smiled. "It's actually rather common among the high nobles and lower royals. It's practically expected."

Harry nodded, finding his eye drawn to the long drop off at the edge of the walkway. It was certainly wide enough for him and his triad to walk, shoulder to shoulder with excess room, but he didn't like it. "That's a long way down," Harry swallowed, nervously.

"The walkway's protected. You can't fall off of it, unless you deliberately throw yourself off." Lewis said, reassuringly. He was trying not to hover, but having a hard time keeping his natural Pareyic instincts at bay. "It's well-charmed. Don't worry about it. The Gheyos actually have to throw themselves off to do that fancy flying and when they touch down, it anchors them back. There's never been an accident, ever."

"Don't say that." Harry muttered. The last thing he needed was to know there was an impossible feat set out in front of him. He was Harry freaking Potter after all. What couldn't he do? His thoughts sorted themselves and he realized one specific detail. "What about you?" Harry whirled to look at him. "You aren't—are you?" He stumbled over the words. He didn't think it was proper protocol to have different Circles mixing in this introduction business, but he really wanted to keep talking with Lewis. There were still plenty of questions he wanted to ask. Hopefully there were other answers too.

"I'll meet you on the other end." Lewis said, calmly. "Do not worry about me. Think of yourself."

"I'm trying not to," Harry scratched absently at one arm. He was trying to ignore the itchy feeling that had started up the moment Lewis had set him down in the bustling entryway. It felt like there was something fighting and clawing inside to be let out.

"Harry?" Charlie leaned over to look at him, worry creasing his brow. "You look a bit red, are you-?"

"Harry?" Theo felt his neck, then his forehead. "You feel warm—whoa!"

Harry didn't have a chance to answer, he simply took the itchy, fussy feeling and shoved it out of himself, feeling it leave willingly. That was a relief. He felt a funny shiver ripple over him and looked down in time to see his hands turning into dainty, silver claws. The horror registered a few seconds too late, because when he tried to speak, a panicked screech came out instead.

He listed forward to fall on all fours as the rest of his dragon form came out for a walk. Harry mentally groaned to himself, tail twitching agitatedly behind him as he shredded his shoes in favor of lovely, clawed dragon feet. Today was certainly a comedy of errors. Oh Merlin-again? Why me?!
A/N: Hmm an exasperated Harry? Looks like it. :) It seems he'll have a chance to show off his dragon self, if he wants to. So Lewis and Harry are related. Charlie and Theo had the fright of their lives in the span of mere minutes. Harry had a shirt for all of five seconds and Quinn will be making an appearance soon, if Dyshoka has anything to say about it. The Deveraines have been introduced, Harry and his Circle are next, along with the Royal Introductions. :D

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry and Deveraines)
Charlie-(with Theo, Harry and Deveraines)
Harry-(with Lewis Peverell, Theo, Charlie and Deveraines)
Deveraine Circle members-(Bahn, Bhindi, Delani, Okahn, Takar, etc. Formal introductions in progress)
Deveraine Children: Introduction in progress (Dahlia, Ariki, Soula, Lorelei)
Kalzik: Kyle-with his girlfriend, Emily. Dyshoka, waiting for Dahlia on the other end of the walkway.

~Scion
A Very Harry Introduction

Chapter Notes

See first chapter for disclaimers/warnings/summaries. Link to TBDH Forum is in my profile. This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own.

RECAP: The portal catches Harry unawares and having just been through a Merrow shapeshifting spell, his magic reacts violently and shatters the portal. Plunging through the air, Harry frantically tries to slow his descent and is rescued by an Air Elemental by the name of Lewis Peverell, who turns out to be his great-great-uncle on the Potter side of the family. Lewis helps Harry return in time for the introduction when the sudden change in location and ambient magic triggers Harry's second dragon transformation for the day. Unfortunately, this occurs just as the Nott Circle is about to be formally introduced and the Deveraines don't seem to want to reschedule.

It wasn't as big of a surprise as it could have been, at least not for Harry. He'd already been in this form once already for the day and once the faint itchy aftereffects had faded, he was relieved to find that he was still in possession of his mental faculties, all his magic and muted empathy. The original sting of agitation faded enough for him to address the threads of restlessness that settled over him. He would much more prefer to be able to stretch out his wings, small as they were. At present, they felt rather stuck to his arched, ridged back, sluggish and heavy, not at all like when Alec had been massaging and rotating them. Like Theo and Quinn, Alec had magic hands. Harry frowned. He was quite conscious of the fact that the waiting wings up to the Introduction Walkway were far too small for him to comfortably stretch out without accidentally whacking someone in the face.

The actual transformation had happened so quickly, that he really didn't have time to process beyond the fact that Dragel-Harry was now Dragon-Harry. Now that his mind had caught up to that, Harry found himself wishing for hands instead of claws so he could slap his own head. He could practically hear the mantra in his head of how everything always happened to Harry-freaking-Potter and it made him want to bite something.

He curbed the urge to bite when one warm, tanned hand stroked firmly down his shoulder blades, applying just enough pressure to be steadying and comforting, without trying to manhandle him. Harry snorted, tossing his head lightly, but settling down when a second hand accompanied the first. He liked the sensations that came from that and they were soothing enough that he could work to keep his human awareness about him, even though his dragon instincts lurked quite insistently beneath his consciousness.

Harry's train of troubled thoughts were interrupted by the whispered conversation that exploded above him as everyone seemed to be speaking at once.

"You're a Silverwing," Lewis blurted out, shocked. "I don't believe—I've never, Arielle." He
breathed, sinking to his knees so he would be less threatening, even though Harry's dragon form wasn't that small. The compact dragon was colored in the most beautiful shades of silver, with faint peach undertones, the scales on his face and underbelly, taking on a metallic sheen, rather than the matte tones for the rest of his body scales. His claws, wickedly sharp, were a surprising shade of crisp black and he had two almost-horns stretching up out of his ridged head and slender snout. "Harry!" There was a note of admiration in his voice as Lewis simply stared. "This is amazing. There hasn't been a Silverwing on our side of the family in centuries. You are amazing."

"Harry?" Theo was in front of him, catching the scaled head in gentle, careful hands. He did not try to hold Harry's head steady, but rather, just to keep some sort of physical contact between them. He leaned to one side, to look at Harry in the eye. Worry was neatly etched on his face and tension lined the creases in his forehead just beneath that layer of worry. Harry in dragon form was good, but Harry mysteriously popping into said form without prior warning was not. His Alpha instincts surged to the surface, addressing the problem rather than expressing admiration for the lovely form—he would do that later. Lewis was already taking care of that, anyway. Theo twitched, faintly. "Harry, what just happen—are you alright? Nod if you are."

Dragon Harry nodded energetically, careful not to dislodge the welcome hands that were tentative running over him.

Theo released him at once, relief painting itself over him. "Lovely. I suppose something triggered this. I didn't know you knew your dragon form. I had to study for months before I could find mine. You really are amazing." His lips twitched as if they would like to smile. "I'm surprised you're taking it so well." He frowned, suddenly, remembering a certain conversation the previous night about a Merrow and walking of the pier. "Harry, is there something you need to tell me?"

"Maybe later," Charlie suggested. He continued to run a light hand over the glossy, smooth scales, a look of admiration showing on his face, even as expert fingers began to map the texture and temperature of the dragon in front of him. His dragon tamer nature would always come to the forefront in a situation like this and he'd automatically begun to calm Harry down the way he would with a young dragon, only rethinking his actions after the fact when it'd had the desired effect.

Harry nosed him, half-heartedly, eyes distant in thought.

"You're a gorgeous dragon, Har." Charlie murmured. He patted one lean flank and chuckled when Harry rubbed against his thigh. Gorgeous was an understatement for his charming Submissive, because as self-deprecating as Harry tended to be, Charlie was sure that he would be pleased to see the lovely dragon form he now held. He made a mental note to be sure that he could either pensieve the memory for later or describe it to Harry soon. "Are you sure you're fine?" He straightened up, looking for Kyle and Dyshoka. They were Healers and they would know what to do in such a situation.

Harry nodded again. He couldn't explain that switching forms brought on something of an attitude adjustment. Some of his earlier worries and anxiety had melted away to something that vaguely resembled self-satisfaction. It was as if everything was just as it needed to be and nothing more.

"Later?" Theo guessed, thinking of Charlie's last word. The nod came again. "Alright then, later it is." Theo frowned. He heard the chime sound and the announcer begin to speak, listing off the final members of the Deveraine Circle. They were sure to start on their introductions next and Theo had a dreadful feeling that everything was about to be turned on its head. He swallowed back that worry and settled on focusing on Harry. This would be entirely up to his Submissive. They would probably need a Healer to ease the stress of a return transformation. He wondered if it would be
possible for Kyle to find Quinn. So far, Harry had been most receptive to the mute Healer than any others, including Madam Pomfrey from all those years at Hogwarts. Theo most definitely had not missed that detail in the early stages of their bonding. He took note of it now. "Do you still want to walk out there, like this?" He couldn't help running his fingers over the smaller scales along Harry's face.

Dragon-Harry stretched his jaw, hearing it pop, then clicked his fangs together with an audible snap. He tossed his head, shaking off Theo's uncertain hands and Charlie's large, warm ones. He didn't really have to think too much for that. Of course he'd be walking out there, he had no idea how to change back. There was no way he'd be able to do so before their turn came up and it seemed as if their turn was about to start.

On one hand, he could decline, but would still likely have to 'port out from their current location to a private area—and he really didn't want to get back into any 'port any time soon, never mind what Lewis had said about magical sensitivity. Or, he would have to somehow walk back through the neatly ordered crowd behind them, waiting to be publicly announced.

Harry shook himself faintly. There was no way he would be walking back there in his dragon form. If he had to walk in front of people, then he'd do it on his own terms with his head held high and preferably away from the crowds. He could already hear the whispers starting up and his keen hearing didn't miss any syllables.

To his surprise though, the whispers weren't derogatory or demeaning. Sure, there were a few sarcastic snippets and the inevitable murmurs of envy, but most of the words filtering down to him were admiring or complimentary. It made him toss his head in the equivalent of what would've been ducking to hide the resulting blush.

"Whoa, easy, Harry!" One of Charlie's broad arms stretched up, circling halfway around Harry's slender neck in a near hug. He applied pressure, enough for Harry settle down, still twitching faintly. "Theo-!" He scolded, faintly disapproving. There was no need to try and demand an answer of Harry just yet.

A flurry of angry chattering and squawking drew their attention to Lewis, who awkwardly cradled a hissing and spitting Shadow, using gentle threads of magic to keep the Nytura from launching itself onto Harry's unaware form. Shadow had apparently taken refuge in Lewis when Harry's spontaneous transformation took place and now he desperately wanted back to Harry—who seemed to have done something strange for the second time that day.

"Easy, easy!" Lewis tried to soothe, grasping the smaller creature by the nape of the neck and holding it out of range so the sharp claws would not catch on his robes or his face. "Harry is fine."

"Let him go," Theo said, wearily. "He's just worried about Harry." He was then unceremoniously jostled to the side as the two Healers finally managed to make it over to their little corner. "You could say excuse me," he grumbled to himself, but he stepped aside just the same, watching with a careful eye.

"Harry!" Kyle's breathless voice drew everyone's attention as he threw a glare towards the shifting crowd behind them, a silent warning for all unnecessary eyes to return to minding their own business. His hands glowed faintly with magic and he dropped to his knees subtly nudging Lewis out of the way as well. "Harry? It's Kyle. Do I have your permission to heal you? I know you've unofficially given it over to Quinn, but I never asked. Nod, if you agree."

Harry whuffled at him for a second, blowing warm breath over the Earth Fae's forest-green locks. He nodded, rocking his head forward and back in the affirmative.
Relief stole over Kyle's expressive face. "Thank you. I'll see how quick we can manage this, alright? I bet you'd like to return to your usual self, hmm?" He held his hands out, palms facing up and waited until Harry rested his head on them, of his own accord. "This might feel like a tickle, I'll be creating a mental space where we can converse since I can't understand dragonspeak. Is that acceptable?"

Harry nodded again.

"Thank you," Kyle murmured. His soft brown eyes flared with the faintest tinge of green around the edges as he leaned forward and touched their foreheads together.

There was something of a mist that seemed to surround them. Harry blinked and tried to move his head, but felt it held firm in Kyle's gentle grip. He snorted his mild displeasure at that, but understood that it was not done deliberately to restrain him, but rather to better facilitate the mental connection the Medic had mentioned.

The surroundings and people had simply faded away until a thick white fog enveloped them both and Harry was aware only of Kyle being in front of him and the faint impression of hands along his reptilian jaw. There was concern and warmth in the Medic's eyes and he offered a wry smile when it seemed that the mental landscape was complete.

Kyle! Harry chirped.

_Hey Harry._

What just—are we in my-?

_Something like that. It's more of my mental parlor room than yours. It's a Healer thing. Now, I'm not trying to rush you, but speed is of some importance here, alright?_

That's fine. I don't know what happened though. One minute I was me and the next I wasn't.

_Hmm. That could be troublesome, but let's not borrow trouble just yet. I'll ask a series of questions and you just answer as instinctively as you can. Don't try to think too hard about it. I just need to know your impressions._

How will that help?

_Empath._

Harry huffed. 'You all keep saying that, but I don't know exactly what it means.'

_Didn't Quinn explain or—oh. Sorry. Ask me when we're through this side of things, alright? If you don't mind, I'll cast a spell to mute some of the empathetic reactions for the day—you've probably noticed it as your emotional center being so off-kilter you feel like a little girl. No offense to them, of course._

Harry almost smiled. 'Something like that. Alright. That's fine.'

_Thank you. Now, outside spell or your own doing?_

_Both—maybe?_

_Can you explain now or later? By now, I mean can you explain in a few sentences or will it take longer?_
Harry?

...Harry?

...probably later? Sorry...

I understand. No problem. I can sense something of a bit of foreign spellwork. Merrow Magic, though I can't for the life of me understand how you would have come into contact with one as no Merrows have surfaced yet—even his Royal Highness. Never mind that though, how do you feel? Any pain? Strain? Discomfort? How's your magic?

It doesn't hurt. I feel—stretchy and it's not exactly comfortable to feel your hands turning into dragon claws.

Point taken. I'm glad you're alright though. Now, do you want to walk out there?

Not really.

You don't have to then.

It would cause trouble if I didn't though, wouldn't it?

Do not allow your consideration for others to overrule your own comfort levels.

...I'm not.

Good. No, it wouldn't cause trouble. There are always interruptions at some point or another. Granted, there are not many of them, but there are no hard and fast rules here. Nevarah is a nevermore realm where everything and everyone residing within in learns to adapt. There will be no negative repercussions for declining to follow the Deveraines or being introduced on your own. The reason for a joint introduction is a matter of prestige and social influence.

I don't like that. Why should it matter? I'm sure they can't help it if-

Because that is what our inherent nature is. Probably the human-side of us. We are all selfish creatures at heart and we prefer to uphold and maintain a certain amount of status. It is only what we learn, who we know and what we do that makes us change for the better. Now, I cannot reverse this enchantment on my own. I'm not even entirely sure I could manage it with help, but I'll reserve that comment until I've tried it with Quinn.

If I walk, then what?

Then you may have more admirers than you know what to do with. Everything will be fine, either way. Will you?

...I'm not a coward.

Never said you were.

Charlie and Theo shifted in restless tandem, each of them watching Kyle and Harry's interaction with sharp eyes. Dyshoka appeared, moments later, simply melting out of the crowd and moving
up to join them, her lips pursed faintly.

"I'll stall them and I'll see if I can find that brilliant brother of mine," she said, abruptly. "Dahlia?"

Theo hesitated, then turned to ask what she meant in time to see the two young women whispering frantically between themselves, before agreeing to temporarily take Harry's place in the walking introduction. "Thank you," he managed, a moment later, when Dahlia looked up to offer a half-smile, not-quite-a-grimace.

"Think nothing of it," the young Gheyo replied. "Should I call the rest together?"

"You'll walk your Gheyos?" Dyshoka bit her lip. "Will that work?"

"I'm allowed to present them whenever I like and I did warn them. There isn't anything wrong with walking them after my family Circle has gone."

The taller girl nodded, stiffly. "Good. Do it." Her soft-brown-gold eyes narrowed faintly. "Quinten, dear brother of mine..." She muttered, turning away in a swirl of colorful skirts.

Dahlia winced. That would be one conversation between siblings she did not want to be anywhere near to witness.

"You are sure?" Theo rubbed at the furrows in his brow and exchanged a look with Charlie. He took some strength from the tanned redhead's steady gaze. A second later, he rubbed gently along the eye ridges of Harry's scaled face as if to alleviate some of the worry from him.

Harry butted him lightly in the chest, purring softly at the welcome fingers that were so careful around his sensitive face. Kyle had cast the muting spell as agreed and he'd felt as if some great weight had lifted from his shoulders for the time being. A cheerful, more optimistic air had slithered around him and settled into his spirit, replacing the apprehension and dread with curiosity and a healthy-dose of genuine interest.

Charlie half-smiled. "Then we're all in agreement?" He looked to Kyle and gave a sharp nod.

The Medic returned the nod and spoke to someone in the crowd.

"Harry..." Lewis hovered just on the edge, aware that his presence did not sit well with the young Alpha. He was mildly surprised, but somewhat relieved to note that the young Beta did not count him as a threat, but rather had reacted, assessed and chosen to remain neutral. He had absolutely no delusions that if the Alpha reacted negatively once more, the Beta would hesitate to back him up. He could already read that there was a strong bond between them, that was good. It meant Harry was in good hands. "I'll meet you on the other side?" He looked to the hovering Dyshoka, who was waiting for Dahlia's signal from the other end of the walkway.

Dyshoka threw her bejeweled braid over one shoulder, dark skin gleaming faintly in the stray rays of sunlight. "You're welcome to stop by, but you'll need an official invitation to stay. I am Dahlia's Intended, but that does not afford me any privileges in social regards as of yet."

"Thank you kindly," Lewis said, simply.

Harry made an inquiring sound in his throat.

Lewis spared him a fond smile. "I'll meet you on the other side." He would have liked to reach out a hand, but feeling Theo's eyes on him, thought better of it. "Be proud," he murmured.
Harry shifted, half-stamping his feet as he watched his great-uncle activate a portal with Dyshoka's instruction. He twitched and shuddered, faintly, an attempt to keep the itch between his shoulder-blades from spiraling out of control. He would not mind his dragon form if it had come in anywhere else at any other time than right now.

Dahlia did walk next.

So did her military training Circle, including Wikhn, Mimei and several other lovely Gheyo specimens that neither Harry nor the others had seen before. As the eldest daughter of the esteemed Ilsa Gorgens, her own introduction was something of considerable note.

When she reached the far end of the runaway, a white-robed aide motioned for Harry and the others to proceed down the walkway.

He balked at first, feeling familiar human-emotions washing over him, until he felt that warm, firm hand on one shoulder, grounding and calming him in the moment. Charlie. Then another hand, smaller, slender and gentle. Theo.

Harry stretched his neck and began to walk towards the opening, leading out to the walkway. He snorted at the slight fanfare that trumpeted out before them and then listened as names and titles were read.

"Presenting a new Circle, young in its conception, endorsed by the prestigious House of Ithycar Deveraine, I present the young Alpha and apprentice of her ladyship Ilsa Gorgens, Theodore Gorgens-Nott!"

A loud round of applause roared from the vast auditorium below as Harry, Theo and Charlie ventured forward. Harry was between them, his Bonded walking with one hand resting at the base of his neck, on either side of him. He tried to keep his steps from being too quick for their two-legged forms, but it required more concentration than he was willing to devote to it. Even though his now sharp eyes couldn't pick out individual faces in the sea of dragels filling the tiered seats, he could feel their gazes on him.

Thanks to Kyle's spell, he was not bombarded with a slew of emotional and magical readings. He was mildly concerned as to how Kyle's magic could work on him when Lewis had been so desperately worried about his being magic-sensitive and then he recalled that both Kyle and Lewis were trained Medics. Kyle also knew a good portion of Harry's medical history, something that must have worked to his advantage, Harry mused.

"Submissive of Theodore Gorgens-Nott, High Noble ranking, we present Harry James Potter, Submissive, Nameless element and High Noble. He is in his current dragon form, that of a rare Silverwing. Show your appreciation, my lords and ladies."

Another roar of cheers swelled up, this one even louder than Theo's had been.

If he could have blushed, Harry knew that he would have. He could clearly hear the enthusiastic cheers and whistles that came his way with nothing more than pure intentions behind them. He didn't know what to make of that. It was a foreign feeling.

"On the left side, I present the esteemed Beta, Charles Weasley, Fire element, High noble as well, to round out the operating triad. At this present time, the Nott Circle is hunting. Interested parties may find them under the protection of the Deveraine Circle, act accordingly and on your best behavior."
A final fanfare sounded out.

Harry trotted across the shiny walkway. He heard his claws clicking against the smooth surface and felt pleased that Theo and Charlie were able to keep up, as they lengthened their strides to match his gait. He paused at one point, feeling a familiar trickle of magic prickling along his spine.

"Harry?" Theo's voice was low in his ear.

Harry tossed his head and bellowed out a screeching, respectable roar for a dragon of his size. He blinked, embarrassed and strangely delighted with the answering roars and screeches that came sounding back. Tail twitching from side to side, he gave a little shake and continued on, nuzzling Charlie's broad, bare shoulder when he saw the swirling tattoos quivering there.

He could tell and smell, that there was something troubling his Beta or at least something that required him to think very, very deeply. Resolving to ask about it as soon as he could manage the task, Harry spied the end of the walkway—an identical arched doorway like the one they'd exited—and scampered for it.

"Harry!" Bahn's worried face was the first one to greet him, followed by a tentative step forward. He hung back at Charlie's sharp look and Theo's scowling face.

"Hey," Ilsa's firm voice stopped any disagreements before they could start. "The day is barely halfway through, can we manage it without heads rolling?" She rested a hand on Bahn's slender shoulder. "Bahn, please go take your potions."

"Don't want them," the pregnant Submissive squirmed under her grasp.

"I'll spike them for you." Ilsa said, in a tone that brooked no argument. "Now, which one of you invited that?" She jerked a thumb over one shoulder and pointed to Lewis standing off to the side, Shadow cradled in his arms.

Harry shook himself all over to shake of the feeling of transformation magic. When they'd walked through the archway at the opposite end of the walkway, they'd found themselves at the aisle beside a large, private box. It was simply furnished with seating for about thirty and a padded corner with protective charms for children to play.

The entryway was guarded by Loren and Edor, the two Gheyos were standing to a practiced attention, with Greta speaking quietly to Bhindi and the children who were already safely inside.

Theo snorted. "Harry, come this way." He gestured off ahead to the guarded door.

Harry stubbornly planted his feet and summoned a low growl. He didn't like the way any of them were treating Lewis. The man was clearly a relative of his, if magic had anything to say about it, and he'd been nice. Much nicer than any other relative that Harry had ever come into contact with —namely, the Dursleys.

"He's with us," Charlie said, calmly. "Lewis, was it?"

The worried expression smoothed out into something like relief and Lewis tipped his head forward in acknowledgement. "Yes, Lewis Peverell. I have a Medic's license as well and I would be honored to assist. I have already formally requested permission to treat Harry and he has granted me that. I would only be joining you in a helpful capacity, if that would be acceptable?"

Harry, don't do that. You'll trip someone." He kept his smile as he met Theo's silent glower and gave the tiniest shake of his head. If Theo trusted him at all, then now would be a good time to test that.

Blue eyes met gold ones and after a moment, the gold darkened to a rich hazel and Theo stepped aside, so that Harry could fit through the doorway. "Where is Kyle?"

"I sent him for Quinn," Dyshoka came over, with Dahlia trailing behind her. "Hey Harry," she held out a hand, waiting while he sniffed her fingers. "That tickles." She crooned, leaning forward to kiss his snout when he puffed a few breaths at her face and neck. "and you're adorable." She complimented.

Harry ducked his head.

She scratched him under the chin, amusement showing in her face. "Will you fit through the doorway?"

"The doorway's charmed," Greta said, coming up behind them, magic flickering out from her fingertips, a spell successfully cast. "And yes, he'll fit. He might want to stay in the play area though, until we can figure out the spellwork. Come in from the aisle. I don't know who is taking the other boxes," she gestured to the sitting area on the opposite side. "Or when they'll be coming through, but I do know they won't be happy if we're in the aisle."

"This way, Harry?" Dahlia beckoned, understanding in her own dark eyes.

After a moment's deliberate pause, Harry lifted his head and carefully stepped through the doorway. The private box was even nicer up close and he was glad to see that it was temperature controlled. He was surprised to see that they were backed right up against a wall, then separated by an aisle on either side, allowing some semblance of privacy, in spite of the public setting.

Unlike the Quidditch cup stadium seating, the cooling charms and such allowed them to control the level of noise and temperature around them, as well as air-filtering charms, because he could practically taste the freshness of the air that wasn't anything like what it had been out in the aisles.

"Perks for a pregnant Submissive," Bahn said, quietly. He stood off to the corner, watching Harry's careful analysis of his new surroundings. He looked somewhat sad by tell of his slumped shoulders and pale eyes. "You can sit—stand wherever you like. The children won't bother you." He looked down at little Bruen who had come up beside him, to take hold of his hand. Curious eyes were fixed on Harry and a cheerful smile was beamed in his direction.

Harry regarded him, silently for a moment, then bobbed his head. He would wait until he could speak again to address any worries between them. For now, he moved for the padded play area and carefully padded over to the soft surfaces. Curling up on the burgundy bedding, he folded his paws and rested his head atop them, curling his tail around his side.

"Adorable," Dyshoka chuckled again. She drew near, the warm smile on her face friendly and welcoming as always. "May I have your permission to heal you?" She requested, formally. "I've already sent for Quinn, Kyle had Emily fetch him. He'll be here as soon as she can manage it, but I have a few years of healing on him, if you'll have me in the meantime."

After a long moment, Harry nodded.

They fussed over him in equal turns.
Dyshoka had good ideas for running magical scans to test the level of transformative magic and any potential triggers. Kyle was freed to speak of Harry's medical history with her after Harry had accepted her formal request. Beneath a privacy bubble, Healer and Medic had worked in tandem, showing a remarkable level of teamwork that only could have come from years of practice together.

Lewis had joined them at one point and after careful consultation with Dyshoka, she had added him—within restriction—to the privacy bubble, explaining that his status as unverified family allowed him the option to be present as either a parental figure or a Medic.

Harry wanted to know why he couldn't be both, but Kyle had caught his eye and shook his head at that, so Harry had chalked it up to another one of those formal procedures that were too annoying to track. When Dyshoka and Lewis were occupied though, Kyle motioned him over. He gave a fond smile when Harry thunked his head in his lap, asking for a chin scratch and an explanation with a single arched expression.

"He needs to be one or the other," Kyle said, having accurately guessed the reason for the furrow in Harry's brow. "It's nothing personal, though I will say that as an Earth to Air bound Circle, the Deveraines are really picky when it comes to the Peverells. I don't think they can stand each other, unless they absolutely have to. Dy was just making sure that you have someone else to advocate for you. In the lack of a parental figure, when you're Bonded, the choice lies with your mentor. Seeing as you don't have one, she's offering that position to Lewis. He can either help as your great-uncle—was it?" Harry whuffled. Kyle grinned. "Or he can be a second Medic." He turned to look over his shoulder. "I don't understand what's keeping Quinn. He should be here. I told Emily to hurry." He turned back when Harry nibbled at his fingers. "What did you do to Theo? Scare him twice in quick succession?" He tilted his head towards where Theo and Charlie were speaking in low tones in a corner of the room.

Ilsa was occupied with blood-spiking Bahn's potions and Bhindi was commiserating with him about the miserableness of the entire potion-taking ordeal. The Gheyos had taken up a defensive position near the doorway and the others were lined up at the front of the box to watch the rest of the introductions.

Harry could hear the announcer's voice in muted tones and while he was curious, he didn't want to push anyone out of the way. Small dragon that he was, a dragon still took up more room than the average human. He gave a quiet rumble and nestled his head in the dressy, silken fabrics of Kyle's dress robes. His ears could pick up the muffled mumbles from where Theo had cast a privacy bubble around them, but Ilsa and the twins hadn't.

Closing his eyes afforded him the luxury to focus on one conversation at a time. He could feel through the bonds that Theo and Charlie were fine—probably arguing about Lewis, if he had to be honest. Harry inwardly groaned. He'd have to explain himself and Lewis before Theo's overprotective instincts dictated that he be wrapped in a cushioning charm for the foreseeable future. He was grateful for Charlie's intervention and invitation to Lewis, as it seemed none of the others would have offered it.

Listening now though, he could hear that Bhindi and Bahn held absolutely no regard for Lord Lewis Peverell and they were both antsy and on edge, wanting to know where Delani had gone. That made Harry wonder, as he recalled Lewis mentioning that he knew the Deveraine Alpha—then again, Lewis had spoken of Ithycar.

Harry shuffled through his thoughts until he recalled a vague conversation in the back of his head and pieced together the remembrance of Theo's words on a merged Circle. Ah. Ithycar would be
Bhindis Alpha then. He mentally snorted, wondering what kind of a pushover would be Alpha over a brat like Bhindi. He could see that she did care somewhat for her Circle and that she knew how to take care of her own children—and did so as if it were second nature—but he did not like her.

Bahn, on the other hand, seemed to be growing cranky and complained of achy feet and a headache. Ilsa had finally taken a seat and drawn him into her lap for a comfort feed. He sat, forlornly, refusing to bite and accepting his sister's token pats to his arm or leg, in comfort.

That tingly ripple of magic he'd felt on the walkway, reasserted itself when Kyle sat upright, apparently tuning in to a mental conversation from Quinn drawing into closer range. No sooner had he turned towards the doorway, expectantly, then Harry felt his body beginning to change and shift of its own accord once more.

Kyle turned back to him at once as Harry felt his grasp on the alternate form slipping, shrinking and rewriting itself into his human guise. He shuddered visibly, inside and out, coughing, hacking and spitting as scales merged into skin and bones folded into place. He was grateful for the spelled robe that Kyle immediately cast over him as his transformation petered out.

"Theodore!" Dyshoka's clipped tones drew the young Alpha's attention. "Are you good for the blood? He'll need some."

Theo dropped to his knees as Harry lifted his head, reaching out with one aching hand to pull the thick, forest green robe around his bared shoulders. "Harry," there was a note of anguish in his voice and then Theo was reaching for him and Harry knew things would be alright.

He relaxed into those familiar arms, relieved at the skin on skin contact afforded them thanks to Theo's lack of a shirt along with his own. There was warmth and emotional strength shared through this brand of intimacy and it solved the problem of fussy clothes being in the way of the blood that his body now craved. Harry leaned forward to rest his head in the familiar hollow of Theo's pale neck and stretched his jaw, feeling his fangs surging up and out of his gums.

"Drink," Dyshoka said, briskly. She bustled around him with Kyle's help, transfiguring the robe into pants, trousers and a shirt.

Harry was too close to instinct to care. He gave a single lick to the patch of skin above Theo's pulse point and bit down with relish, greedily gulping in the warm flow of rich blood.

"Charlie," Kyle waved the worried redhead over as well. "He might need some from you when he's done."

A hesitant nod was Charlie's answer, but the worry remained in the form of slightly clenched fists. "Is this—expected?"

"Magic sensitive," Dyshoka said, simply. "Meaning, the best way to have his body accept the help it needs is through the only medium that wouldn't scramble or effectively fight back—blood. She produced a phial out of thin air and cast a scent bubble. "Kyle, hold this."

"Are you sure?" The Medic scrambled over to hold it. "I could-"

"Dahlia doesn't mind. We're not that kind of exclusive and as a Healer, you know mine's purer than yours." Dyshoka slit her wrist with a murmured spell and carefully dribbled the result into the phial in Kyle's hand. "Make sure he drinks this before he takes from him," she nodded at Charlie, while healing the self-inflicted wound. "I'll see if I can find a few potions from our storehouse. He'll
likely need something for the aching muscles of a forced transformation and magic replenisher." Her lips twitched. "I also suppose a few blood replenishers wouldn't be amiss either. Something tells me that this isn't the first time he's given blood today," she nodded to Theo. "Don't let him drain you. Your Alpha physique can take more than other ranks, but it doesn't mean you should push your limits. Give your Beta a chance."

Dahlia appeared at Dyshoka's side, offering her lover a hand up. Dyshoka accepted it, standing to her full height and rearranging her dress robes. A second later, she leaned down for Dahlia to whisper in her ear and nodded quickly in agreement. "Yes, I can do that. In fact, I'll leave now. Page me if I'm too long."

Harry gently withdrew, licking the bite wounds shut and rubbing his face along Theo's collarbone. Theo was familiar and comforting, his hands rubbing slowly up and down his sides, a soft, quiet rumbling emanating from that tattooed chest. It made him feel happy and relieved, before his aching gums and burning throat reminded him that he needed more blood.

Theo eased Harry of his lap and into Charlie's arms as the dragon tamer took over, tossing his ponytail over one shoulder and tilting his head to the side. Harry managed an apologetic smile, before he draped his arms around Charlie's tanned shoulders and selected a good spot.

"Oi!" Kyle caught him by the chin. He followed up with a light warning tap to the nose when Harry bared his fangs innocently. "Dy said to take this first. Mouth open and bottoms up." He carefully held the phial and upended it into Harry's open mouth when the brunet turned to him. "Good job." Kyle praised, before nudging him back to Charlie.

A moment later, Harry licked his lips. He didn't have much of a chance to savor the taste of pure healer's blood, because Charlie was right there and he wanted to feel something between his fangs. He eyed the expanse of tanned skin, critically, before, picking a suitable spot. Seconds later, he happily fed, purring softly when Charlie began to stroke his wayward hair.

At that precise moment, Quinn appeared with a bedraggled Emily in tow, both of them looking as if they'd run all the way there. "Kyle!" Emily panted out, ducking around the Gheyos with murmured apologies and eyes only for her lover. She spoke in a string of dragelspeak and gestured back to the door.

The Gheyos immediately closed ranks and both Emily and Quinn winced at the resulting sound of an argument starting up outside the private box.

"I would ask who you insulted, but quite frankly, I don't want to know." Dahlia scolded, faintly. She gave a slight nod to the guarding Gheyos. Whatever it was, they would take care of it. The downside of having so many dragels present during the Hunting season, was the problem of short tempers and famous names who believed they had certain entitlements. "Dyshoka went to fetch some potions, she has his permission." She nodded at Harry. "Make yourself useful, if you would." Her violet eyes narrowed faintly. "You are in good health, yes?"

Quinn gave her a look of longsuffering.

Dahlia didn't break her stare, deliberately standing between him and Harry. They might not officially be working, but she knew went to step in and when to step back.

After a moment, the blond huffed and nodded. Dahlia stepped aside and he lurched forward, taking up the space where Kyle had been moments before.

One shimmering orb of healing energy spun to life on his fingertips and Quinn tentatively stretched
a hand towards the feeding Harry to establish a mental connection. He waited until Harry finally withdrew, licking crimson drops from his lips and cleaning the bite marks on Charlie's neck. It wasn't until they healed over, that Harry finally turned to face him. Looking from the orb to Quinn, he stretched on hand out and absorbed the pulse of magic.

When it didn't affect him, Harry couldn't keep back the relieved smile.

Harry? It's Quinn, how are you feeling? I've just heard the most remarkable tale from Emily about your afternoon. Quinn offered a wry smile and held out a hand over one shoulder to accept Dyshoka's diagnostics from Kyle. He knew the signs of magical sensitivity and had mentioned it in Harry's medical file. He was relieved to know that his sister had been on the scene, along with Kyle, even though it meant he'd probably hear the lecture of his life when she returned. She was protective like that.

"Better," Harry grimaced at his rough voice. "I don't know what started it. I was just—I didn't even feel the magic."

*Feel the magic?* Quinn perked a brow, a sudden gleam in his teal eyes. *Exactly how would you know about feeling for magic for an unexpected transformation?*

"Er—it just—I felt something when I was crossing the walkway." Harry avoided the eyes that seemed to know more than he wanted to tell while they were amongst others. Privacy bubble or not, he did not want to discuss this here.

*I see.* Quinn frowned.

"Better," Harry grimaced at his rough voice. "I don't know what started it. I was just—I didn't even feel the magic."

*I see.* Quinn frowned. *You felt a magical pulse twice?*

"Is that…bad?" Harry leaned against Charlie, soaking in the warmth that naturally poured off of his Beta. He supposed it had to do with Charlie's fire element and he was very grateful for it in the present moment.

*No, but it does give some cause for concern. Is this the first time you've felt it? Could you tell if it was the same magical signature?*

"Not really. I don't think," Harry bit his lip, thinking back. "I don't think there was any warning, at first. I just—it just happened. I only noticed something on the walk back."

*I see.* Quinn observed, skimming through the floating reports of Dyshoka's diagnostic results.

*I see.* Quinn frowned. *Kyle has cast a dampening spell for your empath nature. I didn't realize it would manifest so quickly. Quinn observed, skimming through the floating reports of Dyshoka's diagnostic results. My apologies, I would have cast something of the sort before releasing you last time, if I had known. How are you faring apart from the transformation and blood cravings? Did Dyshoka give you any blood?*

"Yes. Kyle—the phial." Harry straightened, ducking to avoid Charlie's chin as he turned to nod towards the furiously whispering Kyle and Emily. "Is something wrong with me?"

*You are too quick to assume that you are always the problem. No. This happens from time to time.* Quinn offered a smile. *Usually only in very powerful individuals though. We call it spontaneous transformations—the only reason this bothers me, is because in order for this transformation to crop up and fade on its own, it means that you have already assumed your true form before. His pale brows knitted together. Something that I do not understand as I am positive you did not know it from our last scan and it does not show anything on Dy's report.*

Harry felt his face growing warm and he resisted the urge to childishly hide in Charlie's neck. Quinn did not know of a certain tale that he was in no hurry to repeat. "That may not exactly be
true." He hedged.

*Care to elaborate?* Quinn folded his arms, waiting.

"Not really," Harry said, weakly. He jumped when Charlie pinched his side, gently. His Beta hid something of a smirk and Harry sighed. He knew from the others reactions that his tale of a midnight stroll of the end of a pier would not be well received, least of all by a full Healer.

"Last night he went for a walk," Theo said, silkily. "And it seems that he might have encountered a spot of trouble."

"It was an accident!" Harry protested. "I wasn't deliberately looking to drown myself. I was trying to save a smrighlf from drowning because sifh looked as if fihga was trying to commit suicide."

*Merrow.* Quinn said, flatly—or at least as flat as he could sound through a mental projection. *You had a forbidden encounter with a Merrow. Arielle save us all.*

"I didn't do it on purpose." Harry squirmed. "And I was honestly worried."

*Be that as it may, Merrow magic is tricky. Very tricky and in most cases, it can only be removed by a Merrow and usually only by the Merrow that has cast it or one of higher social bearing. Merrows haven't even surfaced yet. I hope you haven't mentioned this to anyone, it could land you in more trouble than you know what to do with. Merrow are extremely private and picky.* Quinn sighed.

"How did you know it was Merrow Magic?" Harry wanted to know.

*I am a Healer. A trained Healer. I deal with these sorts of things every now and again when the occasional landwalker and half-Merrow manage to find themselves at odds over some trivial thing. They have a habit of hexing their darling loves, nevermind how much they actually love them. They can be quite creative with their magic without actually doing any real harm to the person they've hexed. If it wasn't so annoying and vexing, I would almost be impressed. Quinn huffed. I should also add that it takes a very special person to be worthy of a Merrow's time, much less their earned ire. You are very special, Harry.* His lips twitched faintly, as if he were trying not to smile.

"Quinten Auwren Kalzik." Dyshoka's deadly voice made them all jump. "There you are."

Quinn gulped, audibly and froze.

"Harry needs these potions, kindly see that he takes them." Dyshoka said, sweetly. She clamped a hand down on her younger brother's shoulder, meaningfully. "And when you're through, we need to have a little talk. Theo, Charlie, I've brought blood replenishers for you as well and some of that Pepper-up that is used in the Wizarding World, I thought it might help."

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Potions were exchanged and drunk all the way around, until Harry and his Bonded were seated together and instructed to eat and drink a tray of afternoon tea. Dyshoka excused herself, Quinn and Kyle for a 'little talk' and asked the Pareyas to see that the Nott triad were well fed.

Harry silently congratulated her sneakiness, because he could have sworn he'd polished off the biscuits and sandwiches on his plate, yet there were two more small specimens already there. He was almost positive it was Sueh and Bu, tag-teaming him, but his stomach had growled and the food was welcome, so he didn't complain.

Lewis had excused himself to be introduced with his Circle and Shadow had consequently taken up
residence in Harry's new shirt. Theo and Charlie were gifted with new shirts as well, courtesy of Okahn and Takar who had slipped out to purchase some new things for them all. Harry had gladly accepted a switching spell for the newly familiar feel of silken fabric everywhere and shoes on his feet.

Now, he fed Shadow a few pieces of sandwich meat and fruit from his plate, every time the Nytrura chirped softly in his ear, the small scaled head peeking out from his shirt collar. Theo and Charlie took turns offering it a few tidbits as well, both of them trying not-so-subtly to keep from smothering him with their worry-turned-relief.

He bore their attentions with good grace, relieved as well to have the whole embarrassing ordeal behind him—for the most part, anyway. His life would never be simple, but perhaps the recovery time could be minimized. He could feel the potions working and his stomach felt pleasantly full.

Charlie reached over to rub the back of Harry's neck and Theo leaned forward to offer Shadow a small nugget of fruit. Harry smiled inwardly to himself, listening with half an ear to the muted introductions. He was grateful for the privacy charms that were cast over the viewing box that worked effectively like two-way muggle glass. He could see out, but it seemed that no one else could see in.

That realization brought even more relief with it and Harry was finally able to relax. He was vaguely aware that the members of the Deveraine Circle were seated in the upper section, two rows above them and it was just the Pareya that were moving about freely, tending to the children and checking up on everyone. He'd heard Delani step in and talk down both Bahn and Bhindi and convinced them to settle down and watch the remaining introductions. Harry had tuned her out from there, not wanting to know exactly what went on between them. They'd granted him and his own some privacy by pretending that everything was fine and he was glad for that.

Several minutes later, Emily came to join them, fighting a smile on her face the whole time.

"Shouldn't you be with them?" Charlie asked, jerking his head to where Dyshoka had her back to them and the duo of Quinn and Kyle standing at attention, eyes appropriately downcast. She was still lecturing, her bejeweled arms occasionally waving around in her careful display of temper.

"Not in the least," the female werewolf said, cheerfully. Her twin fluffy ears twitched faintly in their direction. "I tried to talk to them both. I warned them both. They can handle it. They're big boys." Her lips curved into a smile. "Don't worry, she'll let them out in time for the royal introductions." She settled down in the row of seats in front of them. "I'm sorry I missed your introduction, I hear it was lovely—you'll likely have some courtship offers by the end of the day—probably even the hour." She threw him a wink. "Lucky fellow."

Harry felt his face heat up again. He was thinking only of dancing with Wikhn, then the encounter with Alec and when the ache in his chest dulled, he pushed away thoughts of the others to think about Quinn's concerned teal eyes and his quick, efficient manner.

He almost smiled.

Lucky indeed.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: See the forum for updates on the next chapter of this fic and delays in posting/writing, and so on, in the CHATTERBOX thread. I appreciate each and every one of you who show respect, politeness and patience in your reviews. It makes writing this fic easier and happier. Welcome to all the new readers and lurkers and thank you to all the familiar readers and reviewers. I do remember you.

(Copied from chatterbox thread)I work full time. I am a student full time. I am also dealing with some family drama issues. This is my graduating semester at Uni, meaning I have a tremendous amount of work in addition with my usual course load. To give you an example, I will be writing no less than 20 full papers over the course of the semester. Some of those will be significant critical essays of 10 pages and upwards. It requires a tremendous amount of time, effort and research. That said, I am still writing fanfic in my nonexistent spare time, as evidenced by short updates to stories like the Snape Circle and The Price of Loyalty. I write short chapters for those and so it is easier for me to update them. TBDH requires more time. Thank you for your patience and my warmest thanks to those of you dear readers who messaged to ask if I was alright. You are the best! -Scion

If I were to ever abandon TBDH, I would write a final synopsis to give this story closure.

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry and Deveraines)

Charlie-(with Theo, Harry and Deveraines)

Harry-(with Lewis Peverell, Theo, Charlie and Deveraines)

Deveraine Circle members-(Bahn, Bhindi, Delani, Okahn, Takar, etc. in the private viewing box.)

Deveraine Children: Introductions over, with friends (Ariki, Soula, Lorelei)

Kalziks: Kyle-with his girlfriend, Emily. Dyshoka with Dahlia and Quinn in the private viewing box.

~Scion
"Lewis, you're back!" Harry greeted his weary relative with a welcoming smile. He was glad that Lewis had decided to stay, in spite of the Deveraine's frosty welcome. It warmed him inside to think that the man was willing to put up with it, for his sake. There were few people that would. Very few. Harry counted it as a positive thing. "What's wrong?"

"Long day. Short tempers." He said, simply. "You look better, how are you feeling?" He reached out to gently squeeze Harry's shoulder, allowing his hand to drop back to his side at a restless twitch from Theo. It was clear to see that the young Alpha still did not trust him for whatever reason and he had no intention of putting their newly formed triad through any more stress. They all looked quite exhausted. He wondered what they had been through, but resolved to ask Harry some other time.

"Feeling sick of hearing that question." Harry answered, honestly. He looked away, a moment later. "I didn't think you'd come back."

Lewis's eyebrows arched clear to his hairline. "Why not? I said I would. It's only a matter of formality that—oh." He rested a hand on Harry's shoulder and waited until the younger man looked at him. "I do not make idle promises," he said, quietly. "If I cannot make it, I will be sure to let you know ahead of time." He squeezed gently. "I can't stay long, because they'll have another round of introductions again, but I'll stay as long as I can."

Harry couldn't stop himself from smiling. He ignored Theo's mild scowl and Charlie elbowing Theo. Instead, he promptly pulled Lewis over to their corner of the Deveraine seating and took a seat beside them. He was definitely looking forward to knowing him better.

Maybe.

Maybe for dinner.

Maybe for breakfast.
Maybe just to visit.

Because maybe, Lewis might care.

Maybe.

Dyshoka's scolding did not last for much longer, but it was a very contrite Quinn and Kyle who returned to join Harry and his, mixing up the seating until Harry found himself with Quinn on his right and Kyle on his left. It displaced Lewis to the far end of the aisle, on the other side of Emily, who sat on Kyle's other side.

Neither Theo or Charlie objected and Harry bit back his own objections to that, as well as having a Healer on one side and a Medic on the other. Instead, he chose to think of the fact that Quinn sat in such a way that their arms touched—to maintain his mental connection, he'd said—and Kyle had managed to coax Shadow out of his shirt and now cuddled the little Nytura in his arms, scratching his chin just the way he liked it. He also breathed a sigh of thanks that no one had kicked Lewis out.

He'd seen Bhindi's scowl and the way she'd shielded Bahn from seeing the older dragel's return. The other Deveraines had simply pretended that the man did not exist. Delani had frowned, but seeing there was no outward confrontation, she'd simply placed herself in Harry's line of sight and kept an eye on them both.

Harry supposed he was lucky to be the near center of attention when it appeared that there were more people looking out for him than he could ever remember in his life up to now. People who currently hadn't screwed him over for something like the sake of the greater good and while they were trying to maintain whatever ridiculous social customs required of them, they were still willing to endorse him.

It was strangely relieving and satisfying in a twisted sort of way. He found that he didn't particularly care to complain.

"...and it's time for the royal introductions!"

A loud fanfare blared through the air and Harry found himself belatedly scrambling to his feet as neatly ordered rows of dragels began to file into the auditorium. He found himself somehow holding Kyle's arm with Quinn's own wrapped on his, as the two simply pulled him up alongside with them. He almost wondered what the fuss was for, but simply copied what the others did, figuring it couldn't hurt.

"We stand to show respect for the first entry," Kyle whispered.

_When the announcer reads out the order of the processions, we stand in respect. Nothing to worry about._ Quinn squeezed Harry's arm, lightly. A faint glow of excitement had colored his lovely teal eyes and a smattering of vividly colored scales fluxed in along his cheeks and neck.

Quinn's explanation was longer and more useful, Harry decided. He shared a smile with the blond, brightening as he caught sight of Quinn's lovely scales. In all the dragels he'd seen so far, only Quinn had four distinct colors to his. A moment later, a musical fanfare signaled that they could return to their seats for the remainder of the procession.

"Best behavior," Delani called out, a hint of warning in her voice. "Privacy wards coming down, alright?" A slight ripple of magic passed over them as the darkened tint on the clear panels of the viewing box lightened to their natural clear hue, as if they did not exist at all.
Harry stiffened, feeling as if he'd been exposed by the sudden influx of natural light. It sent a restless curl spiraling through his body, his magic knitting itself together, trying to prepare for an attack with the struggling levels present within. He felt a wave of reassurance coming in from Theo and Charlie through their shared bonds. It eased his worries somewhat.

Quinn nipped him, ever so slightly. *Everything alright?*

Harry nearly shrugged. He was surprised that Quinn had noticed, but then again the Healer had always been oddly perceptive in their few encounters, knowing just what to say and when to say it. "The privacy wards...?"

*Ah. Well, we have to also stand in respect for the element that we belong to. Quinn offered a small smile. In your case, you can stand for whichever element you identify with the most or your Alpha's element.*

"Oh. I see. Thanks."

*Anytime.*

They stood again, shoulder to shoulder and at one point and as directed, they all placed a two-finger salute over their hearts and recited a pledge of general allegiance of sorts. Harry didn't understand the half of it, but he dutifully repeated the words as Quinn recited them into his head for him.

"...for that which we have founded, by hands young and old. We give thanks, respect and love. We maintain our loyalty for the pledge taken by our souls, to uphold truth, honor and individuality. We ask nothing and take nothing. We give that which will not destroy us and we build up that which requires repair. For the earth beneath our feet, we stand tall. For the fire within our hearts, we burn bright. For the air that we breathe, we shout for joy. For the tears that we cry, that we will never forget. For the shadows that lurk at our feet, we accept. For the storms that simmer overhead, we understand. For that which joins us all, we count ourselves as one with the universe. We stand as one, united. By Arielle's sacred name, our thanks to Ergen, Portgas, Alloras, Styris, Meeras, Saurenth, Orus and Hyenda. Eternal harmony to us all."

"That's beautiful." Harry murmured, picking out the individual reference to each element and smiling as he figured out that the Nameless was the last one to receive a salute. He'd wondered how they would include it.

"First to present, is the royal house of the Earth element. We warmly welcome Prince Raspen, the crown prince of the Earth Royals and his entourage. Welcome to his ministers, his court and the royal guard." The announcer said.

Harry scrambled to his feet again, this time without any further prompting. He was starting to feel as if this was some bizarre exercise routine. Kyle and Quinn stood up once more as well. He then hesitated, realizing that only Kyle, Quinn, Theo and Ilsa were standing. Another careful look showed that Okahn, Nathan and Jacques were standing as well. *Earth elementals,* he realized, belatedly. He mentally shrugged it off, realizing that there was nothing wrong with standing up to respect Theo's element. He wondered if he could stand for more than one. Quinn hadn't mentioned that.

A growing rumble of cheers rose up from below and Harry found Theo at his side, urging him forward to come and stand at the front of the viewing box so he could see all the way down to the earthy center of the auditorium. He could see close-up shots from the hovering shimmering screens floating at different levels and sections below, but his sharp eyesight could make out the details on
The ground cracked and shifted, until earthen pillars began to rise from the dusty depths. Waves of dirt crumbled and sprayed every way as the pillars shuddered, forming a ceiling-less pavilion, with four thrones in the center, each throne facing a specific side, back to back, with stone steps leading up to the newly formed dais.

Four walkways were formed into existence. The dirt molding into hard, packed matter, then whispering away to reveal smooth, grey stone and fancy stonework. At the far right end of the giant circular center, Harry saw a gaping hole beginning to yaw up out of the ground. He didn't realize he was squeezing the feeling out Theo's hand, until he heard his Alpha's soft chuckle in his ear.

"Ease up, Harry. It's all theatrical. Don't worry. Nothing can happen here like it has in the wizarding world."

Harry slackened his grip, wondering when they'd started holding hands, when Theo rested his chin on his shoulder and he let his attention return to the beautiful display of impressive spellwork. He felt his jaw drop when it became obvious that there were stairs leading down into that gaping hole and there were dragels coming into view.

From deep underground, they came.

In solemn procession with musical fanfare, the earth court came to the surface. Then the music began to fill the air. Almost tribal in nature, They were clad in earthen tones of browns and gold, bearing a royal crest boldly upon the chest and sleeves of their tunics and overtunics. They marched in perfect unison, first came two Military Circles that branched off to stand at attention, while the others filed through. The musicians took up the second section of the pathway, lining up with their shiny instruments. The third section was filled with performers, mages with impressive animated replicas trotting along between and beside each other.

In the fourth section of the procession, came the royal court. Advisors and council men and women, bedecked in gilded robes.

And then, came the prince.

Harry couldn't stop the little sound of surprise that slipped past his lips as he processed what exactly it was that he was seeing. He'd expected the Royals to be something big, but he certainly hadn't imagined this vision of loveliness.

Prince Raspen was a lovely young man with charming boyish features and the traditional golden-eyed gaze expected of all earthen elemental. His hair had the same chocolate-hued curls as Theo, with wide full lips and a tilt to his chin that silently proclaimed his royal status without screaming of arrogance. He was dressed in exquisite robes with several layers and shimmering golden embroidery. Atop his head, of course, was a simply decorated crown with an even row of points around the circle and a glimmering amber-colored jewel set in each tip. He waved to each side as he walked, escorted by a circle of bodyguards. Matching rings glimmered on each hand.

Behind his formal procession an almost grotesque hulk of rippling, dripping mud rose up until it took the form of a giant golem, faceless, but with gaping holes for a mouth. It remained silent as it followed obediently, the wetness drying with each step until it looked as if a living statue trailed after them.

Prince Raspen walked to the foot of the stairs leading up to one throne and waited until his court—
the advisors and council—had taken their respective positions on the stairs, before gliding forward to take his place on the throne. He smiled when the golem settled down with a huff, slumping into a restful state to his right. His familiar was the most unique out of all of the elements, save, perhaps, for the Storm section. He turned to face the crowd as his bodyguards took up protective stances around the throne, with watchful eyes looking out to the general public.

"I thank you for this warm and hearty welcome," his voice echoed in the air, husky with a touch of warmth. "I am pleased to lend my presence to the Hunt and I wish everyone health, happiness and eternity in finding their soulmates. May you continue to uphold the reputation of our respected element and embody all that the earth is." He sat.

A round of applause and cheers started up again.

When the noise died down, Prince Raspen leaned to the side, listening to something whispered in one ear, then he nodded and turned to face the crowd once more. "It is also my pleasure to introduce to you, her royal highness, the Princess Ebony, crown-intended, of the Fire Royals with her entourage. Welcome to her ministers, court and the royal guard. The Earth Clans extend their warmest welcome and express their sincere appreciation for the alliance between our elements."

"Quinn?" Dyshoka rose to her feet with Dahlia behind her. "They said we'll be presented, we need to leave now." She gave a short bow of apology in Bahn and Bhindi's general direction.

"All of us?" Kyle wanted to know. He looked at Emily and then Quinn, before his brown-eyed gaze flickered over to Harry. Quinn seemed to be thinking the same thing, because his own teal gaze found Harry's eyes.

Dyshoka smiled. "You can be the one to tell Mama otherwise." She suggested, cheerfully. "I'll see you later love," she turned to give Dahlia a peck on the cheek. "Look me up for lunch, alright? We'll probably be on stage forever."

"Why?" Harry looked from her to Quinn, rather wishing that Quinn would answer.

"Family name." Dyshoka waited while Quinn and the others made their way over to her. "We're Kalzikis. We are currently favored in the Royal courts because of our healing talents. They were still processing our ranks, but apparently we're approved, which means we'll have to be screened for security, which means we need to leave now. We'll be presented with the Earth Clan Chiefs."

Dahlia snickered and leaned over to whisper something into her lover's ear. Dyshoka's lips twitched at that and she elbowed her in answer. "Ow, hey!" Dahlia protested, dancing back a step. "Have fun."

"I'll be standing and looking pretty," Dyshoka retorted. "How do you think I'll have fun?" She threw a wink to Harry. "Keep an eye out for us in the ranks." She looked to Lewis. "Doesn't your Circle present too?"

Lewis had a distant look in his eyes as he stared off into the distance a moment later, he jolted upright to his feet. A sheepish look registered and he sighed. "Sorry. I'm being recalled too."

"I thought it was odd that it was just us," Dyshoka offered him a smile. "Want to use the same 'portal?'"

"That would be lovely, thanks." Lewis smiled gratefully. "Harry, I'll be by later, alright? Enjoy the ceremony. I'll be in the Air section with the Clan chiefs."
Harry nodded in understanding. He felt a little disappointed that everyone seemed to be leaving just as soon as they'd started to settle down. A hand touched his and Harry blinked to find himself staring up into Quinn's vivid teal eyes.

*Take it easy for the rest of today, stay close to Theo or Charlie. Try not to use your magic if you can help it. You should be fine by tomorrow. Rest, sugar and blood will be perfect for speeding things up. Simply pull on their magic if you need to.* Quinn smiled.

"Will you come back?" Harry heard himself asking before he could help it. "I mean-"

Amusement showed plainly on Quinn's face. *I suppose I could. If not today, then tomorrow.*

Harry smiled. "Great. Uh, have fun?" He echoed Dahlia's suggestion, uncertainly.

Quinn laughed, silently. *I'll try. Standing up for hours makes it feel like I've cast a permanent numbing charm on my feet and my brain.*

Harry laughed and watched him leave as Dyshoka held hands with Lewis to cast the portal. He gave a tentative wave as Lewis looked over at him and was rewarded with a warm smile from his uncle.

By the time everyone had left, the Deveraines finally settled down. Theo and Charlie took up a handful of seats in the front row and Harry let himself be guided to Theo's right side. He found himself staring down at the final arrangements of the Earth Royal's procession and realized that they were readying for the second entrance. "That was," he tried to find the words.

"Showy and unnecessary?" Theo suggested, with a chuckle. "Our element is actually the most subtle of all."

Harry found himself turning with a smile on his face. He hadn't thought it was very showy, at least, compared to some of the elaborate fanfare he remembered from the TriWizard Tournament at Hogwarts. On second thought, it probably was a tad showier, but then his mind flickered back to the dramatic entrance of the other two schools and he tried not to think of the other memories that came with them. "It was actually—not what I was expecting. It was nice."

"Nice?" Theo teased. "Eloquent as always, my treasure." He looped an arm around Harry's neck, drawing the smaller dragel to his side. "Keep watching. It'll be ten years before you see this again."

Harry snuggled into the proffered side, turning his attention back to the center stage below.

It was why his reaction was so quick and severe when the Fire element made itself known.

Strips of fire blazed down the aisle rails, leaving behind hovering flames, a line of torchless lights illuminating each section. The visual effect from a distance, appeared as if it were a spider's web, neatly and precisely woven. Then, sections began to blaze brighter than others and Harry realized it was the Fire elemental themselves.

His reaction had been equally instantaneous. He was on his feet, wrenched free from Theo's side, wand drawn on the floating flame, words at his lips for a spell he hadn't even considered, adrenaline surging up and through his veins. It wasn't until he felt Theo's arm curling around his waist, honey-soft voice in his ear, that he jolted back to the unsettling present.

His grip on his wand tightened, the tip wavering as he warily processed the threat for what it was and allowed Theo to talk him down. He had not been expecting that and embarrassment came next next
as he realized that no one had really reacted, except for the Gheyos had started forward at his movement.

"Hey," Ilisa's voice filtered over Theo's murmurs. "Harry?" She threaded her way through the tiny crowd of her Bonded to stand in the aisle behind Harry, one tier higher. "You have my word that you are safe here," she said, quietly. "Rest assured that none of ours would be sitting this comfortably." She extended a hand to Harry's side, with careful movements and gently pushed his wand hand down.

He let her, feeling his face warm and a rush of giddiness as the adrenaline faded as quickly as it had come. He briefly squeezed his eyes shut, hating the feeling as if he was always somehow managing to do the wrong thing, the opposite of what seemed to be expected of him—every single time.

"Good reflexes, Harry." Delani praised. "I think only Greta is halfway that fast with a focus object." Her smile was gentle and a look of understanding simmered in her soft orange eyes. "Ilisa is correct though. It is her duty and theirs," she gestured to the Gheyos that were strategically lounging in the corners of their viewing box and hovering by the closed entrance. "This is actually their time to shine. They love being useful in a way that only they can be."

Harry gave a small nod, then focused on tucking his wand back up his sleeve into the arm holster. He had noticed the Gheyos keeping to the fringes of the activity, while also placing themselves directly in the perfect spot to counter any potential attacks. He had seen it, read it for what it was, but hadn't been able to stop his own reaction to it.

A flutter of movement beside him registered as Ilisa. Harry stopped himself from flinching, when she reached across the seats to pull his head back towards her. He was completely unprepared for the soft press of cool, dry lips to the side of his temple and a gentle rub to his spell-neatened hair. Ilisa made a deep humming sound in her throat and released him, stepping back to retreat to her original position.

She only said one word, "Theo." And continued back to her seat of honor beside an anxious Bahn and vaguely worried Bhindi.

Theo didn't need any further urging. He was already on his feet, having been a half-pace behind Harry, his own instincts finely attuned to his Submissive and Charlie had been just a breath behind him. Now, Theo reached out, wrapping his arms tightly around Harry and nuzzling the side of his neck, a soothing rumble working up in his throat.

Harry felt the next strands of tension beginning to bleed away. He turned enough to bury his face in Theo's neck, seeking the particular scent that calmed his shot nerves and reminded him that he was safe in a strange place. He sighed, body growing slack in Theo's strong arms.

"It's alright. It's just fire." Theo murmured into his hair, splaying his fingers on Harry's back, one above his waist, the other between his shoulder blades. He gave a few pats and then tilted his head to the side so he could press his cheek to Harry's ruffled hair. "I did not think that would startle you, treasure." He kissed the top of Harry's head, shifting to accommodate the weight as Harry sagged back against him. "I should have warned you." He shifted towards the seats. "I thought you were fine after the earthquake."

Harry blinked at him, allowing himself to be seated.

Theo looked at him. "Didn't you feel the earthquake?"
"What earthquake?"

Theo's lips twitched. "You have a greater affinity with earth than you may be willing to acknowledge," he said, lightly. "Everyone who wasn't connected to earth, felt it deeply enough to stumble or grab at their chairs." He tilted his head towards Charlie who had risen along with them, but had been glared back into his seat by a scowling Loren. The Fire Gheyo had snapped at him to sit down, as it would be disrespectful to his element for him to stand before it was cleared to do so.

"You can stand now," a grumpy Loren muttered, a moment later after Theo and Harry had been settled. His fiery hair had burst into rich, red flames and his brown eyes had taken on a glittering hue. "And control your flames, please."

Charlie shifted to his feet, his blue eyes clouding over, a tinge of red visible. He was annoyed at the older dragel's displeasure, but once Theo had calmed Harry, he'd listened and reseated himself. Now, he made a mental note to keep watch for potential triggers for Harry.

He could easily piece together the reason for Harry's reaction. The pomp and circumstance of the Hunting Season was close to the festivities for the TriWizard Tournament. He'd been called in as a Dragon Handler to help with keeping the dragons manageable for that first task. He'd also seen Harry's quick thinking, fast reflexes and grim determination. He knew all too well how haunting the echo of a memory could be.

Harry had probably reacted purely on instinct. Charlie shrugged his shoulders back, feeling the heat simmering beneath his skin, his element roiled up within. His ponytail escaped its confines to burst into a froth of flame reminiscent of the triple-color hues he'd been sporting since the realization of his inheritance. The flames burned a vivid, deep red at the crown, lightening to a bright orange before it tapered off to a respectable yellow at the tips. He stared down at the center of the stone stage. This was his element in full glory.

The sound of marching feet drew attention to the aisle and Harry stared as solemn ranks of fire Gheyos descended the aisle stairways in single file. They passed just outside of the viewing box in solemn procession. Many of them were clad in bright reds, oranges and yellows, every single one of them had fiery hair and proud expressions.

From the far end of the auditorium on the ground floor, twin double-doors were opened to admit the royal procession. The dragels filing down from the aisles, simply vaulted over the protective railings and into the dirt center. From beyond the double doors, came a rumbling roar. The Gheyos that had filled the center now formed a line, standing at attention as a giant scaly paw stretched out into the natural light.

The shadows of the entryway parted to reveal a massive, blood-red dragon in full, true form. The great head was ridged and horned, showing an intelligent face with a wide, fanged mouth, lips curled back in a roar that charged the air. Aerobic performers came next, cartwheeling, flipping and dancing with great, glittering lengths of ribbon, breathing fire and singing a song that seemed to be the very fire itself.

The crowning moment was the ornate figure perched atop the massive dragon's head.

In a sea full of redheads, Princess Ebony was a petite beauty with hair the color of pitch black. It cascaded down thin shoulders and streamed out behind her, some strands even long enough to splay out behind the crest of the dragon she rode. Her jewelry was simple, flame-colored stones dangling from her ears and nestled in the curve of her generous bosom. Lips painted the brightest, boldest red, the same color of the silken cape twined around her shoulders. Her crown, a delicate matter of twisted gold with blood-rubies set in each of the four points, identical to the signet ring.
on her right hand.

Her procession continued until they reached the base of the stairs leading up to the dais. From the
gaggle of performers, certain individuals began to move forward, taking up the same ranks as
Prince Raspen's royal court had. Their flashy costumes melted away to show respectable robes of
office. The great dragon was the last to approach and when it reached the bottom of the stairs, it
simply bowed the great head, allowing the princess to slide down to the ground.

She stood tall and proud beside it, whispering something that only the dragon could hear. A
moment later, a shimmer of magic shrank the massive body to one tenth of the size, allowing it to
follow her up the stairs, where it curled around the base of her throne. She curtsied to Prince
Raspen, who solemnly inclined his head to her in turn.

The smile on her face stretched from one end to the other and she leaned over to one advisor to
hear the prompted words.

Charlie sat down, heavily, mouth open, eyes blinking, hands clenching and unclenching. He didn't
know exactly what to say or if he should say anything at all. He hadn't mentioned anything to Theo
or Harry yet, simply because he hadn't had the chance. Now, he wished he had someone to share
this revelation with.

He'd been offered a mentorship by the Royal Princess of the fire element. He could see her clearly
in his mind's eye exactly as she'd been on the way to the bathhouse. Her causal offer and the no
nonsense way of speaking. The air of authority gathered around her and the grace with which she
had carried herself.

He couldn't believe his luck. Merlin! This was the very last thing he'd expected and it left him at a
distinct loss for words in more way than one.

Suddenly, he very much wanted to accept, except for—wait—He looked at Harry, biting his lip. It
didn't seem fair to be taking on his own mentor and haring off to learn whatever it was that
mentors and their mentored students did, while Harry desperately needed a teacher of his own. He
could understand the gap between perfectly matched elements and otherwise—after all, one only
need to look at Theo and Ilsa and see how the earth element connected them so deeply that they
were practically shadows of each other.

He thought of Lewis and Harry's cheerful reception to the man that was apparently his uncle, a few
greats back. Charlie bit back a sigh of near-worry. If he only mentioned his worry to Harry, the
younger man would immediately insist that he accept Ebony's offer. That was simply who Harry
was.

A jolt of warmth traveled through him as Charlie remembered the intensity in those burning eyes.
He wondered how they would meet again so he could accept and then pushed that thought away.
Ebony seemed like the type of dragel that would make circumstances come about to whatever she
desired. He would wait—at least until the day was over. He wanted to ask Theo and Harry first.

"...and so I thank you for this welcome," Princess Ebony's voice rang out, clear and brisk. "As head
of the royal house of our element, I am pleased to lend my presence to the Hunt. I wish health,
happiness and eternity to each of you in finding your soulmates. We are all one half of a whole.
May you find your missing half. May you uphold the reputation of our element with pride and
dignity as you embody all that the power of flame is."
A round of applause started up, accompanied by a rush of cheers and happy screeches.

Princess Ebony smiled at the reception and waited until the noise died down, before continuing her welcome speech. "It is my greatest hope that you will extend this warm welcome to our friends, the Air Clan. It is my honor to introduce to you to our hosting element this season, her royal highness, the Princess Dawne, crown-intended, of the Air Royals with her full entourage. Welcome to her ministers, her court and her impressive royal guard. On behalf of the Fire Clans, I extend our warmest welcome and express our sincere appreciation for the alliance between our elements." Princess Ebony rose to her feet and craned her neck upwards. "Look to the sky!"

And so they did.

Harry let his head roll back to rest on Theo's shoulder as he stared up into the clear, slightly tinted ceiling of the viewing box. At first, he couldn't see much of anything, then a glimmer of light caught his eye and then a flicker of silver, then the entire overhead sky was filled with glittering, shimmering, reflections of all colors.

The gasp that escaped him was accompanied by a soft chuckle from Theo, who now sat comfortably, one arm wrapped securely around Harry's waist. "They're gorgeous, aren't they?"

"Yes," Harry breathed. *Like angels…*

The angle of the light changed and a collective gasp of awe rose from the seated crowd below. Princess Dawne and her entire entourage descended from the sky in a flurry of glittering wings, shimmering scales and airy, whispery magic so potent that the air grew thick and heavy with it.

As the Earth types had taken to soft earthy colors and the Fire types had claimed the reds, oranges and yellows of their element, the Air clan made full use of white, silver and gold. Harry started faintly when he realized nearly the entire Deveraine Circle was standing out of respect for their respective element, but Theo patted his stomach in a soothing manner. "It is their element, they can stand, we do not have to." He murmured.

Harry hummed in agreement, turning slightly to see as each of the Air Deveraines in turn, stretched out beautiful wings, looking perfect in their pristine white dresswear and perfectly plaited golden hair. He could now understand Bahn's horror at seeing his Bonded's efforts to dress themselves. He could also understand the vaguely superior air that surrounded all of the Deveraines on principle, because now, seeing the Air's fantastic display, it made sense.

They descended in ordered ranks, the royal guard first, followed by the royal court of ministers and advisors. The final one to set foot on the smooth ground was the Princess Dawne herself. She was clad in numerous layers of shimmery, near-transparent white fabric that expertly swathed her tall, lithe figure. She was at least an entire head and shoulders taller than Princess Ebony and the exact opposite in looks. Ebony sported rich, tanned skin and hair such a rich shade of red that it appeared black, Dawne was all pale skin and nearly white hair.

She waited patiently while her entourage arranged themselves into the respective greeting line. A happy screech overhead had everyone looking up and Princess Dawne merely smiled and held out an arm. Overhead, a circling shadow gave way to a brilliant white bird that gradually grew smaller as it approached until it could safely perch on Dawne's slender arm. Princess and familiar greeted each other with affectionate nuzzles, before a minister urged them forward.

Princess Dawne greeted both of her fellow Royals with a deep curtsy and a few murmured words that were not broadcasted to the entire auditorium. She did not take her seat, as the other two had done, however, but instead turned towards the gaping hole that Prince Raspen's entrance had left.
A fond smile settled on her face and she waved off her entire court to take their positions by her empty throne. Standing alone off to the edge of the stage, she spoke in a strong, clear voice. "As the hosting element for this Hunting Season, it is my greatest pleasure to welcome the Water element, that which completes the foundation of our four corners. I welcome the Aqua'Kin'e, the Merrow, as we know them. A hearty and honest welcome to the Crown Prince and his court. Please show your appreciation for Prince Alcandor!"

At her request, the fine smattering of applause rounded out to a decent-sized cheer of welcome. Princess Dawne favored the excited crowd with a gentle smile in reward and waited for her welcome and invitation to be acknowledged.

For several minutes, nothing happened.

The applause tapered off and it seemed as if nothing was happening.

But her smile didn't waver and instead, it morphed into something showing fond exasperation as a gurgling, bubbling sound drew all eyes to the darkened hole in the floor, where water had begun to spring. At first, it was a pale brown color, then it began to lighten, until it was vivid, bright blue.

Like liquid crystal, the water sprang up from the gaping hole and began to snake towards the royal platform. It poured forth, filling the ground, lapping at the edge of the raised platform of the royals. It was the loveliest shade of blue and almost too clear to be believed, as it settled into a nearly smooth surface.

Perfectly safe from the new water, Princess Dawne continued to wait, smiling when her familiar chattered in her ear. She reached up with one hand to stroke the downy feathers and fought to keep the smile on her face from growing wider by the second.

A loud sucking sound announced a vortex that swirled to life in the center of the hole where the pouring water now stilled. From the shadowed, nearly black depths, three pointed golden tips emerged, taking on the shape of a trident that towered overhead before a crown was visible.

With slow precision, the darkened figures rose from the watery whirlpool one after another. They came into full view, the moment they stepped free from the transportation portal and the Merrow magic made itself known first. Sweet and cloying almost, a heady rush accompanied the oppressive feeling as the proud Merrow marched in perfect unison to form the greeting line for their Royal.

When the last one had stepped from the portal, Prince Alcandor stepped fully into view. The same collective gasp that had greeted Princess Dawne, now repeated itself in the face of witnessing the ethereal beauty of the haughty Merrow Royal. At first glance, the differences between Merrow and Landwalking dragels were painfully clear.

Every single Merrow had skin the color of pale teal, hair the color of rich blue and fluted, scalloped ears that peeked out from their unnaturally colored hair. The obvious differences seemed to vanish in the face of the reality of a closer look. Every Merrow present was clad in identical sleeveless tunics and slender fitting trousers with shiny, heeled boots. Jewels and precious metals adorned them from delicate earrings to fat cuffs on a wrist or bicept and cords of gold draped around their necks. Each face wore a look of bland indifference and the court surrounded a section of twenty young Merrows—young, because they were shorter than all of the others present.

The Merrow guards were heavily armed and clad in deep purple armor with gleaming shell segments and flexible leathery hides. They were a head and shoulders taller than even the advisors, draped in their official garb. Not a single scar, mark or blemish was present on any body and it was
almost as if they were all operating on some semblance of a hive mind.

Prince Alcandor strode forward, head held high, grip firm on his gleaming golden trident. Six Merrow at the head of his procession stepped to the side and raised twisted flutes to their lips, playing a lovely, eerie melody that seemed to sum up the strange beauty and attitude of the Merrow.

Of all the Merrow present, the Prince was the only one shirtless. The shirtless state of dress was the only obvious hint to the androgynous features that Alcandor was definitely male. His chest, well-defined and bare, sported a ring of gold from each dusky nipple and a fat collar of ornate craftsmanship with jewels the color of the sea. His hair was a deep navy hue and it fell almost to his knees, held away from his face by a few intricate braids interwoven with strands of shimmering gold and pinned with the stately crown perched atop his head.

A sumptuous cloak of shimmering greens and blues were draped around his shoulders and fell to the ground, fanning out behind him for several feet in a luxurious train. His body proudly displayed the tattoos of his dragel heritage, the elegant scrolls quite visible on his pale blue skin. In the left hand, he held a swirling blue orb in a round, gilded cage. It glowed with every step that he took.

This was the Merrow Royal.

Harry found himself frowning as he watched the Merrow's entrance. He now had the answer to his question, as to whether Alec was a unique Merrow or not—as far as he could tell, Alec was not. Every Merrow was blue in the same way—skin color, eye color, hair color and so on. It was impossible to tell any of them apart, at least from this distance.

Careful study allowed him to pick out a few minute details such as smaller eyes, fuller lips or a pointed jaw. However, it was almost as if they'd planned for it to be that way, at least for the group of twenty Merrow that stood proudly a few paces from the royal platform, the cool blue water lapping at their ankles.

The water didn't seem to bother any of them.

Harry squinted at the group, realizing that instead of the darker blues of the advisors and ministers, the twenty were dressed far more openly, compared to the conservative official dress. While the officials wore patterned robes with white, blue and green hues, the twenty in the group were identical in every way. There were no fancy jewels or necklaces either, they all wore matching blue earrings, black-corded necklaces and bracelets and more than one had an anklet on each leg.

What really surprised Harry, however, wasn't the strangeness of the entire procession, but the familiar face of one Advisor Kieran. He stepped forward, with a guiding hand that never once touched Prince Alcandor, but urged the royal forward and into the very public eye.

This Merrow Royal was an absolute pleasure to look at.

Charlie made a soft sound from Theo's other side.

Loren snorted. "Don't even think in that direction," he half-scolded. "Our kind doesn't mix well with theirs. Especially our kind." He said, meaningfully. "You'd best resign yourself to being scorned for no other reason than the element you were born with. Merrow do not trifle with fire types."

Charlie's look of interest faded away to one of pensive thought. "Just because we're Fire types?"
"What is more unnerving to a fire type than water?" Loren retorted. "Think about it, they could douse and drown us before we even had a moment to-

"Don't scare him off," Ilsa scolded. "If he's interested, he's interested and he has just as much right as anyone else." She sent a severe frown in Loren's direction until the Gheyo huffed and turned away. "Charlie, Loren does have a point in that you will find it just as easy to avoid them as they will avoid you. The same way they can—drown you, as Loren so charmingly put it—is the same way that with a hot enough fire, we could kill them, burning out all the moisture in their body. Much along the same tune that you would torture a beached mermaid. I tell you this in allowance for your wizarding upbringing. It's best not to mingle with them." She turned her frown to Harry, who remained with his head half-nestled in the crook of Theo's neck. "And Harry, please be careful. You might be a Nameless element and Theo is an Earth one, but with Charlie as your Beta—there will be problems and it would likely be best that you kept a respectable distance as well."

Theo snorted. "He's been cursed by Merrow magic, Oretta. I think he's passed the point of respectable distance."

Harry elbowed Theo's stomach. "That was an accident!"

"Try not to have any more accidents?" There was a hint of exasperated fondness in Ilsa's voice as she turned and murmured in Elven, an answer to something Bahn was whispering in her ear. "Right. Harry, I'll try to meet with my father sometime this afternoon. I can't promise how fast he will react, but he has access to Prince Raspen, which will likely allow us some sort of opportunity to speak to a Merrow in good standing to take a look at that spell on you, alright?"

Harry nodded at that. "Thanks."

Her smile softened. "I will try to rush things if I can, so that you do not have to bear that longer than you should."

"Do you recognize anyone?" Theo asked, staring down at the stage. "They all look alike, don't they?"

"Don't say that to their face," Loren snorted.

"By which, Loren means that he had the misfortune of being the reason why our Circle does not boast of a Merrow Bonded." Bhindi sighed. "Take a word of advice and don't invite trouble. You won't have a moment's rest if you should be as unfortunate enough to survive a Merrow courtship." She sniffed.

Harry's eyes narrowed faintly in her direction.

"What they both mean is that a Merrow took interest a few seasons back," Ilsa said, quietly. "Long before I was ever involved in this-" she gestured to the twins cuddled up between her and Delani. "And they declined to engage in a formal courtship after discovering Loren's presence."

"But we're all dragels," Harry said, softly.

Bahn snorted. "True, but Merrow are special dragels." The smile on his face turned wistful. "And if you are lucky-" here he shot a glare at his twin. "Then you will yourself to be very, very blessed by the powers that be."

"Look in front, Harry." Theo interrupted, before the conversation could grow too serious. "You'll miss the formal introductions."
"It is my pleasure to present to you his royal highness," Advisor Kieran began. "He no longer stands before you as a crown-intended prince, but as the accepted ruler of his domain, King Alcandor from the clan of her royal highness, Queen Manhestia. I give you her favored son and the people's choice. He has ruled with a kind and firm hand since assuming his duty seven years before. I ask that you welcome him with the respect that is due his elevated station."

Princess Dawne stared in shock for a moment, recovering quickly with a bright, charming smile as she started forward to the edge of the royal platform. As Alcandor approached, she held out both hands to him. The young king immediately passed his trident over to Advisor Kieran and the orb to the one on his left. He inclined his head, grasping both of her pale white hands in his and bringing each of them up to kiss the knuckles in turn.

The Princess blushed prettily, swatches of color blossoming on her pale features and she offered him a slight curtsy, leaving her hands in his.

A friendly smile cracked across his solemn face and almost at once, it seemed as if everyone relaxed. "Princess Dawne," he said, silkily. "You have grown infinitely more beautiful than the last occasion I had the pleasure of your company. Eternal harmony to you and yours."

"You went and changed crowns before all us," she chided softly. "I am so pleased to see that it suits you so well. Welcome to the Hunt."

"It is a weight I bear with gladness," Alcandor returned. "I thank you for this welcome."

"Where is Goonter?"

"I will summon him after you are safely seated," A smirk played across his face. "Well met to you, dear lady." He inclined his head to the feathered familiar. The long-feathered bird stretched her head out and nibbled a tiny blue braid peeking out from beneath his golden crown. "Does it suit me?" He inquired. He released Dawne's hands and held out his arm. "Shall we, my dear?"

Dawne accepted the arm with no small amount of amusement. "Chivalrous as ever," she hummed. "You'll be vicious in a minute, won't you?"

"Why, whomever to?" Alcandor led her to the throne and saw that she was properly seated. "Raspen," he murmured, stepping down from the dias and crossing over to his own empty throne.

Ebony bristled faintly, but held her head high and said nothing as he deliberately ignored her and took his place.

"Goonter," the single name was spoken with a faint hiss.

A loud roar erupted from the swirling whirlpool and with playful roar, Goonter's head surfaced, followed by the rest of his gleaming, scaled body. The iridescent shimmer cast a faint rainbow sheen along the tall stone walls of the auditorium. Goonter's significant bulk continued to stream forth from the portal as the giant sea serpent coiled himself around the royal platform, folding the rest of himself into a comfortable coil close to Alcandor's throne.

One wisp of movement drew attention to the great, flared head and as the colorful ruff flared out, a young Merrow could be seen perched on Goonter's head, dressed in a wetsuit, a sour look on his face.

**Alec.** Harry straightened up at once, leaning forward. A feeling of triumph surged through him and he wondered, briefly whether the scowl was simply Alec's standard look, before the original
annoyance at their last encounter registered. He mentally began to recite spells in alphabetical order in his head to distract his temper from simmering any hotter than necessary.

If he had to bet on anything, he would say that Alec's latest spell had caused him that headache at the introductions just minutes ago. *Idiot Merrow. The next time we meet...* Harry snorted. Alec was not the apologizing type, as far as he could tell, so he didn't delude himself with the thought of a possible apology, but he didn't dismiss it either.

The disturbing scene he'd witnessed between Alec and Advisor Kieran had left him feeling very, very unsettled and he wished he knew more about Merrows and Merrow politics to understand which rules he could actually break and which ones he ought to be mindful of.

"Harry?" Theo leaned forward with him. "Who is it? What is it?"

"It's smerlf!" Harry tried to point, disturbed when he found his hand wandering off everywhere else but where he was trying to point it. That was new. He hadn't experienced that particular side effect before.

Theo grabbed his wrist, frowning at the spark of magic that leapt between them. "I take it this curse is more complicated than we thought. You can see him, he's there? The one that did this?"

"It's a he and not a she?" Charlie wanted to verify. "How can you tell?" He frowned. "Not that I see any-"

Loren snickered. "There hasn't been a female Merrow anywhere near the surface in centuries," he said, shaking his head. "Don't repeat that to anyone else. Only the men surface and as if that's not insulting enough, see that bunch in the center there? That little gaggle of twenty?"

Charlie slowly nodded.

"Those are all the available Merrow that will surface that are available for courting or being courted. No one else. In fact, his new royal highness will have to give a speech about the proper conduct and acceptable behaviors towards them in a moment." His lips curved into a bitter smile. "They think us to be barbarians."

"For good reason," Ilsa said briskly. "Do not dwell on that which is unchangeable. Now, if you keep on talking, you will miss that lovely speech on good manners."

"...and so I wish to impart a few words of wisdom. Those you see standing before you here today are those who have agreed to surface and permit interaction aboveground. There are twenty eligible Merrows of varied ranks, none are Alpha and none are Submissive. Beyond that, you will have to discover their individuality on your own. During the day time, our kind will move freely with yours. At night, we will reside in the White Caverns, as we always have, during the Hunt. There are no exceptions to this. Each Merrow is required to report in for the night, a failure to do so will incur my immediate displeasure and consequent wrath." Alcandor paused.

The Merrow guards stood stiffly at attention, a tangible wave of magic rippling on outward. There was no room for misunderstanding the veiled threat.

"You should be well aware of the jewelry worn by the eligible, they are marked tokens of favor and if gifted, you should understand that you have been chosen or accepted to some degree. We are expressive and seductive creatures, please beware that the term 'harmless flirting' is something entirely different to us. At any time, should an incident of criminal nature occur involving one of our own, we reserve the right to refer to Merrow Law. In following with our native laws, expect
Merrow justice." Alcandor offered a smile. "Hopefully I have not discouraged you from befriending these charming young fellows, because I assure you, they are polite and interested."

"Thank you, Alcandor." Princess Dawne spoke next. "Next to join us are the respective heads for the remaining two elements. I give you Lady Bianca Dreswell, head of the Storm Clan and those with that unique element. Please welcome her!"

The expected round of applause started up.

And then a streak of lightning sizzled down on the platform, followed by another and another, framed by the echo of thunder looming in the distance. A ball of white-purple energy formed out of thin air and then the following successive cracks gave way to eight long legs. The center ball of energy twisted and morphed until a spider's shape was visible.

The final crack of thunder revealed a short, golden-skinned young woman with bushy, blonde hair and a grim expression. She was dressed in a skintight suit of black and purple and she made no speech or announcement, but simply settled atop the head of her created spider.

The odd creature rose up and walked around the platform, settling down on the space between Alcandor and Dawne, the sponsors of her element.

"Thank you for gracing us with your presence, Lady Bianca." Princess Dawne said, formally. "You are-?"

"My court is here." The Lady said, uncomfortably. "They need not be acknowledged."

Princess Dawne smiled. "As you wish." She turned to her left. "Ebony? Your turn."

Princess Ebony mirrored the smile offered and turned to face her section of the auditorium. "I wish to welcome, on behalf of myself and Prince Raspen, our shared element, the Shadow Clans. We welcome Lord Cunningham and his esteemed Circle."

Like the Merrows had, at first, nothing visible appeared to have happened.

Then the shadows from Princess Ebony's throne stretched over to the shadow from Prince Raspen's throne and a large square of blackness rose up, from which the wispy folds parted and a distinguished, bearded fellow stepped forward, holding his arm out for a pretty submissive with her hair done in coiled pigtails.

Following the careful duo, the rest of the Cunningham Circle stepped into the lighted platform. They were all clad in black from head to toe and while it was clear that they were uncomfortable with being in the spotlight, they presented themselves as a unified front.

The final dragel to emerge from the shadow portal was an entirely different story altogether. Tall, with dark hair feathered around a strong, angular face, he wore the expected black and grey hues with one very obvious exception. Two broad sword hilts stuck up over his shoulders and his face was obscured by a lovely black mask with golden scrolls along the border and the eyes. Two feathered plumes adorned the right side, one of scarlet, the other of purple. He stood relaxed and uncaring.

From the shadows at his feet, a massive hound took shape with glowing eyes, one red and the other green. It had the appearance of a mastiff with sloped shoulders, a broad head and large paws. It padded around the Cunningham Circle and took up residence at the Submissive's feet.
In the viewing box, Harry felt his gaze drawn to the proud shadowed figure and for a moment, he panicked. Surely that couldn't be a suggestion that he was Bonded material, could it? He waited, almost breathless, but then nothing happened. No click, no shift and twist, just nothing.

An audible sigh of relief escaped him and Harry leaned into Theo. He smiled inwardly when Theo responded by stroking his side and humming in his throat. The gesture was appreciated. He had enough to think about with Alec and Wikhn, he did not need anything else thrown in there.

The feel of eyes zeroed in on him had Harry turning halfway to find Ilsa's steady golden gaze fixed on him. He swallowed and turned back to Theo. That single look had him remembering her words on the dock the night before. It tickled a bit of his temper and he managed a respectable scowl, settling back against Theo to watch the rest of the proceedings.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whew! and so we're finally here at last, the Royal Introductions. This chapter took forever to hammer out. I couldn't keep it just the way I was seeing it in my head. I hope I did it justice. I hope it lived up to the hype. Now we can really get into the fun stuff. I can't wait. Thank you for your patience and kind reviews in the last chapter. I really appreciate each and every one of you.

The entrance playlist for the Royals, if anyone is interested was:

Enya's "Return to Innocence" (Earth). Fall Out Boy "My Songs Know What You Did in the dark" (Fire). ATC's "So Magical" (Air), Enya's "Deep Forest" (Merrow), Pryda "Nile" (Storm), Nazca's "Aicha" (Shadow).

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry and Deveraines)
Charlie-(with Theo, Harry and Deveraines)
Harry-(with Theo, Charlie and Deveraines)
Deveraine Circle members-(Bahn, Bhindi, Delani, Okahn, Takar, etc. in the private viewing box.)
Deveraine Children: Introductions over, with friends (Ariki, Soula, Lorelei)
Kalziks: Reporting to their family Circle.
Lewis Peverell : Reporting to his Bonded Circle.

~Scion
"...And now that you have all been patient enough, we thank you for the warm reception and we open the floor to the clan chiefs. Please give them the same warmth of welcome that you have afforded us. Thank you very much!" Princess Dawne rose and began to clap. The other Royals immediately followed, rising to their feet and leading the building roar of applause.

The cheers continued as the clan chiefs filed out from the corners of the auditorium with their respective families. There was not as showy opening as the Royals, but it was still quite lovely to look at. They filed out in the same order as the Deveraine Circle had presented themselves, the traditional presentation of the Gheyos, followed by the Pareya, the Betas and Alphas, with the Submissives at the rear. The Clan heads were bedecked in gilded robes and their Circles were similarly outfitted in gorgeous dresswear of complimenting colors.

They filed into ordered ranks, presenting an official front for the public eye, each Circle forming an actual circle, creating a lovely visual effect as they organized according to clan.

When the clan chiefs filed through, Harry paid special attention to the Air division, searching the ranks for Lewis. He finally caught sight of him at the far end in mid-Circle rank, due to his Pareya status, with a pale-faced Alpha and a very short curly-haired Submissive with an almost doll-like appearance with her porcelain features and delicate movements. Lewis looked calm and collected, walking with his head held high and between two other dark-haired, pale-faced Pareya.

"Lewis!" Harry announced to himself. He wondered if he would have a chance to meet Lewis's Circle and whether they would like him. Bahn's Circle had accepted him after they'd spent a few hours together and most likely because of Bahn, Theo and Ilsa. He hoped these new potential relatives would accept him on his own. He could stand on his own, thank you very much, and silently determined to make the best of things whenever the opportunity arose.

Theo made a face at his comment, but did not otherwise protest. "Where?" He asked, grumpily.

Harry rolled his eyes, but pointed.

Charlie followed Harry's line of sight and found the Peverell Pareya a second later. He wondered at
the grim expression on the older dragel's face, but did not mention it. Perhaps there was something else that he could not see. Nearly everyone present held themselves in careful check as if showing too much emotion might give them away as actual friendly beings. They certainly looked collected and professional, but in the same instance, not at all like some of the more expressive fire dragels.

His lips twitched faintly and he nudged Theo. His Alpha turned expectantly and Charlie shifted over one seat, patting the newly vacated spot. Theo smiled and then leaned over and whispered something in Harry's ear. A moment later, a very absent-minded Harry changed seats, his attention still fixed on the clan chiefs and their Circles below.

Charlie settled his arm around Harry's shoulders and smiled when he felt Harry relax into the touch. Harry felt cooler to the touch than he remembered, prompting Charlie to push a touch of his warmth over. That was unusual, but perhaps it was a Submissive thing. He couldn't remember Harry ever being this cool to the touch, but then again, he hadn't exactly had many opportunities to be touching the brunet. For the moment, he would just have to find a minute to ask Harry about Ebony. "Looking for anyone else, besides Lewis?"

Harry shook his head, cheerfully. "No. I see Lewis. I don't know anyone else so I couldn't—wait, is that Shayla?" He pointed to where the Air clan's Chief stood with a very familiar young figure to his right. He would recognize that shock of white-blond hair anywhere. The slender, waif-like Submissive stood proudly beside her father, shoulders thrown back, head held high. "Is it?" He turned to look at Soula for confirmation.

"Most likely," Soula wrinkled her nose and twitched faintly as if it pained her to sit still. "She's always fussing about having to be presented, but she's next in line you know. Looks pretty. I didn't know she'd decided to wear that after all." She made a face at the new outfit her friend was wearing—an entirely different ensemble from the one she'd been wearing earlier that morning. This one showed off status in the way of golden accents and light, wispy fabric meant to accentuate her fair figure.

"Next in line for what?" Harry looked from Shayla back to Soula. He felt like he was missing something there, but all he could tell was that something was different. Shayla looked almost like a living statue at this distance, solemn and beautiful in her own way. Maybe a bit wispier than earlier. For a moment, he almost fancied that he could feel the tremendous power stored inside of her, the same fierce energy he'd felt that previous afternoon on the beach. He shook that thought from his head a moment later, because common sense meant that it was impossible. Instead, he tried to focus on what Soula was explaining for him.

"Like Mum," Soula said. "Mum's the Earth heiress, didn't you know? It means that she's next in line if something happens to the earth's clan chief. Shay's the Air one. Every elemental clan has an heir and because the ruling families occasionally duel for rights, it's only the strongest families that hold clan power." She shrugged. "If something were to happen to Mum—Arielle forbid—I would be next in line. She's gifted me that title, which would make me Soula Gorgens." The brunette shuddered. "I should hope that I wouldn't have to carry that name though. It sounds like I'm some sort of hulking—ow, Ariki!" She turned to punch her older brother, relenting with a pout when he presented her with a tray of snacks. "I wasn't going to say whatever you thought I was."

"I'll believe that after I've heard it." Ariki said, dryly. "Here, take some and pass it down to Harry," Ariki handed over a tray of neatly arranged snacks consisting of tasty finger foods. "And keep looking in front or you'll miss things. This is your first Hunt too, you know."

Harry nodded at that. He continued to scan the groups, searching for anything that might look the least bit familiar. He thought about the other creatures present in Nevarah and wondered why there
was nothing to represent them. He had seen and felt the presence of other creature types, but it seemed that only the dragels were acknowledged in this welcoming ceremony. He took a few salted cracker-sandwiches from the snack tray and licked his fingers when he'd finished.

Soula's words registered and Harry snapped around to stare at Ilsa. He wanted to ask why she was there, since, logically, it seemed as if she shouldn't. If Shayla was presenting as an heiress, that should mean that Ilsa ought to be down there as well. Gold eyes lazily flickered over to him and a gleam of amusement made itself known as if silently daring him to ask her.

Harry felt a warm fuzzy feeling filter over him and he pressed his lips together, fighting back a smile as he turned back to the front. It was a nice feeling to be included in a private joke. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like. He gave a slight wriggle just to feel Charlie's arm readjust itself and Theo's calming rub. A moment later, something warm tapped on his lip and he automatically opened his mouth to find himself chewing on a savory dumpling. Eyebrows rose upwards in curiosity and appreciation.

Charlie chuckled softly, "Tastes good?"

Harry nodded, momentarily distracted by the tasty treat to forget the mesmerizing event taking place in the arena below. "What is it?" He looked over at Charlie and then down at his lap in hopes of seeing the tidbit that hadn't been on the snack tray.

"Theo introduced me to it, actually," Charlie hummed. He held out another one from a paper tray balanced on one knee. "It's called…"

"Shouldn't you leave?" Bahn asked, playing with the mandarin collar of Ilsa's dress armor. She looked positively stunning in her form-fitting attire with gleaming metal accents in all the right places. He found himself hoping that perhaps she'd be up for company tonight. Not that his other Bonded wouldn't happily oblige, but he'd missed her and he wanted more time with her, to be closer in any way she was willing to have him. His fingers splayed over the shiny, smooth surface and he could sense the magic thrumming just beneath it. She was wearing a hefty band of protections woven through the entire thing. He wondered if they were natural or if she'd added them herself. He poked her lightly when she didn't answer his original question.

Ilsa grunted in answer.

"Sometime about now?" Bhindi suggested, stretching over to nuzzle her twin's shoulder and settling for resting her head on it instead. She'd been sticking close to him since the argument that morning. Her own dragel instincts were stretched thin and she was short-tempered and irritated, with the faintest hint of want for her Alpha that would hopefully arrive by evening. She bit back a scowl at Bahn's subtlety. Ilsa could be dense sometimes. "Preferably before they call you out about it." The Gheyo merely glared at her. Bhindi sighed. "Ilsa." There was a hint of disapproval in her voice, but she was too tired to really bother to add more emphasis to it.

"Let her alone, lovey." Delani reached over to pull Bhindi to her side, cuddling the submissive close to her and offering a kiss in reward for her immediate attention. Bhindi whined in answer, but settled down when prompted, sneaking a soft-lipped nuzzle along the Alpha's chin, a not-quite apology just because she felt like it. Delani smiled indulgently and rested her chin atop Bhindi's head as she directed her gaze back to the Gheyo in question. "Ilsa?"

The Gheyo Ace had her eyes squeezed shut, her lips moving with no sound passing through. Aracle's lips twitched faintly and he shifted from his seat over by Takar and Okahn to come and stand behind his lover. "Ils?" He prompted, reaching over to nudge Bahn to join his twin. After a
moment, Bahn shifted over and out of the way, a look of understanding dawning in his pale silver eyes.

"He'll kill me," came Ilsa's soft moan. "I'll be very, very dead, Aracle."

"I will very generously not remind you that you should have considered that before larking off," Aracle teased. "Don't worry, I'm sure he'll revive you for the Champion's Walk. He wouldn't let you miss that for all the realms beneath our-" One golden eye popped open and Ilsa glared up at him. The Rheyo chuckled and tipped her head back to kiss her softly from behind. "He loves you, you know." He murmured against the corner of her mouth. "You are his favorite. I'm sure he'll make it painless. It can't be that bad, can it?"

"I wasn't larking off!" She snapped.

"Mm-hm." Aracle hummed. He stole another kiss. "He's your father. I'm sure he's missed you. Haven't you missed him?"

The other eye popped open and Ilsa reached up. With a quick movement, she flipped him over the seat and into her lap, one hand holding his head steady on her lap, the rest of him sprawled out on the empty space where their Submissives had lounged a moment before. Her other hand was quite deliberately wrapped around his throat. He held up his hands in mock surrender, not fighting the hold or returning the glower.

For a moment, everyone seemed to have frozen in place, Ilsa's fighting aura thrumming about the edges, barely restrained for polite company.

The announcer's voice drew their attention. "...and so I present to you, my daughter, the current reigning Earth Champion of the Blood Titles, Lady Ilsa Gorgens. I have yet to see her since her return, but I am quite proud to announce her entrance. My lords and ladies, I give you Blood Wraith."

Ilsa froze, eyes wide, shoulders hunched forward. She was the perfect picture of misery and reluctance bundled into one precious package. Her fingers flexed, then loosened, her entire body settling into a posture of forced relaxation—a trick that only a well-trained Gheyo could manage.

Aracle turned his head to the side, testing her grip on his neck and judging it slack enough before he slipped off her lap and shifted to kneel on the floor before her. He caught her hands in his and kissed the scarred palms before he rose and pulled her reluctant form up to stand alongside him. The fact that she let him pull her up, spoke volumes. "Go. He's calling you, so go. He's your father. Don't make it any more of an issue than it needs to me. You're back. We missed you. He missed you. Everything is alright now. You'll be fine. Make us all proud."

Ilsa made a distressed sound in the back of her throat. The Deveraine Gheyos all shifted in nervous accordance.

Aracle clicked his tongue against his teeth, capturing her attention once more. "Don't you dare lose yourself in that twisted little mind of yours. Listen to me. You are amazing. You are loved. Go out there and own that title. You've worked very hard for it."

"Go and come back," Bahn added his own postscript. Worry lined his face and a hint of it showed on Bhindi's irritated face as she looked at the byplay between her Bonded, but did not dare speak with Delani's arm draped over her shoulders.
"It's not that simple," Ilsa muttered. "And I have never been his favorite, Aracle. He doesn't have favorites." She winced when he curled one hand around her waist and made sure to dig his fingers under the edge of her dress armor. "Let's not think of favorites, really. This is already an issue."

"There isn't any issue unless you want it to be there," Aracle scolded. "Stop it."

"I'm not doing anything. I'm serious. I haven't-"

"Oretta," Theo began, also beginning to look worried for the first time.

Aracle pinched the side of her neck and she bristled, faintly at the physical reprimand. "If you need more time, I can-"

"No. Don't." She gave a faint shake of her head. "I couldn't ask you to do that whether you would do it or not. I've made my bed and I will have to lie on it." She sucked in a breath. "Even if it kills me. This is no one's fault or problem, but my own. Please do not trouble yourself on my behalf and I probably will not be back until the evening, so do not trouble yourself with worrying about me. I'll come whenever I can." Gold eyes fluxed to pure black and her lips curled back in a snarl. "…Ergen!" There was a flash of gold and white and she vanished.

Harry squirmed in his seat. He'd felt a whisper of that powerful magic wash over him and he also felt her deep sense of regret and longing mushed into one big pulse of emotion. This empathy thing was sorting itself out in painstaking microbits of clarity and magic. He wished it wouldn't take so long, but he was vaguely beginning to appreciate the depth behind it. There was nothing in her face that had given away the feelings that her magic had readily shared with him. He looked from where she'd stood to the giant floating screen that showed an empty stage. She would be fine, he hoped. He also hoped that she would remember to ask her father about the pesky Merrow spell, he would like to have it off, as soon as she could manage it.

Her arrival drew a round of applause. In a flash of the same golden-white magic, Ilsa had disappeared from their little enclosure and reappeared in her full Gheyo glory on the main stage. Her broad wings stretched out behind her in elegant fashion, even as the whispered ripple of dissent filtered through the audience.

Theo's grip on Harry flexed faintly and Harry turned to gauge his expression. "Theo?" He asked. He'd seen her wings earlier when they'd all registered and heard the discussion between her Bonded in regards to her terribly scarred and heavily plated appearance. Now, he could see that there had been actual slits carved into the wings that showed as oval gaps when she arched them forward. He most certainly hadn't seen that before and it stirred an uneasy feeling in his gut. He knew how sensitive his own wings were and then the ordeal with Charlie's own hyper-sensitive ones, the very thought of something being sharp enough to pierce them was painful even in passing.

There was an angry hiss from behind him and Harry started, feeling his magic shifting restlessly inside of him. Empathy aside, it was making his fight or flight response a bit too pronounced. The day was barely half over and he already wanted to be back home and away from the fuss. His nerves were strung too far out and too thin for this sort of additional stress. Hovering on the borderline of wanting to run or fight was exhausting.

"Easy, little one," Loren half-growled. His voice was rough with a rasp as if his dragel-morph was more dragel than human and his eyes had shifted completely from round-orbs to the expected cat-eyed pupils. He had taken up a position behind Charlie, but between his Bonded and the door. He seemed more at ease with Charlie, than either Harry or Theo, most likely on account of the shared element. His sharp-eyed gaze had flickered over to Harry more than once after witnessing his cat-
like reflexes in regards to the Fire Royal's introduction.

Harry understood the set up a second later when he caught sight of a furious Greta, whose eyes had gone completely violet. Her hands were clenched into fists and the expression on her face promised pain to the first individual she encountered. Loren and Edor had shuffled back, taking care not to touch her, but looking equally uneasy themselves. They knew very well the price she'd paid for the scars she now bore.

Bahn gave a soft whine, successfully redirecting Greta's attention, as he shrank back against Callistair who had moved closer to the growing confrontation. The battle mage opted to stand behind Bahn, resting one hand reassuringly on his shoulder. "I'm sure she had her reasons, Greta." Bahn said. There was a furrow in his brow and worry in his eyes. "Is it really that bad?"

"You don't know what they have to do to get wings like that," Greta snapped. Her arms had been folded across her chest and now they hung at her sides, hands twitching and flexing as if she'd like to be wrapping them around Ilia's throat and not the careful arms of Loren and Edor, who were close enough to physically intercept her so she could not rush onto the stage. "That's not just bad, it's worse. Do you have any idea what she had to do to earn those? And I say earn them, even though they are despicable badges."

"That's enough," Delani said, firmly. "It was her choice, I'm sure she had a choice or a reason for choosing that option. We can discuss it later, if it is that troubling. You're 'porting out for a title of your own, aren't you? Compose yourself before venturing out there. You can take it out of her hide later—that's between you two, but I won't have you throwing your temper out because you can. We've had enough of that to last us a lifetime—all of us."

Greta growled in answer.

Aracle rumbled softly in his throat, drawing her attention to him. He weathered her angry glare until it softened into a look of betrayal and hurt. "I'm sure she would have told you on her own, given enough time." He murmured, holding out an arm. "Come."

She shook her head, remaining where she was. But when he came up and slipped an arm around her shoulders, she did not protest. They stood together, a picture of misery and companionship and then she leaned into him, her hands coming up to hold the lapels of his dress shirt as she buried her face in his neck. His other arm came up to curve around her and it only took a second before he hugged her tight.

"Theo?" Harry nudged his Alpha. He wanted to know more about this. In fact, he was starting to find himself wondering just how much there was to know about Gheyos. He would like to find a few of his own, but it seemed like that was a complicated process that no one was open to sharing about. He hoped he could ask Theo about it tonight, maybe, perhaps that was what was wrong with Wikhn—he'd crossed some unknown boundary and the Fae hadn't known how to explain it.

"Her wings," Theo murmured. "To have them carved like that—well, it's her choice, but it's not advised." He bit his lip. "She must have been wearing glamour for quite some time, because I hadn't realized they were that bad. There's a great deal of blood and magic involved with the ritual required for it and it's rather painful. Very painful. It's not something that most Gheyos would do. Those that have, usually never speak of it. I hope—I hope it was worth it for her. I can't begin to imagine what would have made her choose that." His voice was so low that Harry strained to hear it, but he understood the reason for it when he realized that every one of the Deveraine Gheyos had gone unusually still.

Ilia's lone figure filled the small stage that had formed in front of the royal platform. She nodded
sharply to the Earth clan's chief—her father—and spoke the spell that amplified her voice for the next introduction. "Thank you for the welcome. I am glad to return. The years have been kinder than they could have been." Her wings stretched out, the dull scars showing up quite plainly. "And I welcome to the stage the Shadow's champion and blood title, Lord Hadrian Maruk. I give you the Blood Raven."

The masked Gheyo beside Lord Cunningham started faintly, then in a wisp of blackness 'ported directly over to the stage to stand to Ilsa's right. He offered a sweeping bow to the crowd at large and then strode forward. The Gheyos eyed each other for a moment, sizing up at a glance, then offered stiff bows of polite courtesy.

In turn, Hadrian spoke next. "Thank you." He said to Ilsa, before facing the crowd. "It is my pleasure to bring to the stage the Air champion and blood title, Lady Paiielda, Blood Whisper."

Dahlia's sponsor materialized on stage beside her fellow champions and offered the required acknowledgment. She smiled and nodded at the starting cheers that her arrival brought. "Thank you kindly. I invite to the stage the Storm champion and blood title, Lady Greta Deveraine, Blood Rayne."

Harry turned in time to see Greta disappear in similar fashion to Ilsa and reappear on the stage. She looked every inch as regal as her Bonded soulmate and she offered her own greetings to her fellow champions. "Two titles?" Harry nudged Theo. He was starting to have a feeling that his luck was rather strange.

From the obvious respect and show given to the champions, he could now understand the need for the Deveraines to present themselves as a united front with so many of them in such high positions. It struck him as unusual to realize that the high ranks and powerful family ties seemed to be a very big deal, but then again that was no different from the high-born wizarding families and all of their posturing. He thought his luck was showing some inkling of itself here, because to have found himself an Alpha with a clan heiress for a mentor, who was soulbonded to a Gheyo with a blood title—well, that seemed like pure luck.

That particular train of thought made him smile as Harry connected the rest of the dots in his head. Theo was his in every sense of all possible meanings and with Theo, came Ilsa. The same strong woman who had somehow managed to adopt him as well. She would be behind them both from now on, he knew that with the same certainty that he'd known that Theo was right for him. He didn't stop the appreciative purr that slipped out from his throat.

Theo half-smiled at the sound and his question. He chirred softly in answer, more instinct than conscious response. "It's very rare, but yes."

"Not that rare," Bahn interjected from his cuddle spot near Aracle. "I mean, it could be, but it really depends on the Gheyo and how badly they want the title. Greta didn't hold a blood title until she started sparring with Ilsa. I think they challenged each other to the point where they were simply the best in their respective categories and no one has dared challenge them for the titles since. No one wants to fight a clan heiress and well, Greta spars with Ilsa, so that automatically speaks to her talent and skill." He managed a small smile of pride. "I am very proud of them."

Harry nodded. He wondered if the rest of the elemental champions were all women. He couldn't help noticing that the masked shadow fellow was the only man present. Hadrian... the name curled through his mind and he frowned, wondering what the point of the mask was. All the other champions were mask-less and it seemed like a pointless bit of frivolity, even if it did give him a somewhat usual air. Then again, Hadrian had been introduced as a personal hired Gheyo belonging to Lord Cunningham. Harry wondered what Lord Cunningham had to offer or at least, what was
the price of hiring an unbonded Gheyo. It was a nice mask, at least, the more he stared at it, the more it seemed to grow on him, even if it did seem pointless.

"...and so I present the Fire champion and blood title, High Noble Zandian, Blood Flame." Greta cried.

A burst of blue-green flame appeared to show a muscular figure with flaming blue-green hair and a cocky smile. He took an exaggerated bow to the sudden rising cheers and then greeted his fellow champions with a friendly smile. He shook hands with Hadrian and Lady Pai, nodding to Ilsa and Greta.

"Lords and Ladies, your champions!" The announcer cried. "Show your appreciation!"

"There's no one for the Merrows," Harry frowned, clapping anyway with the roar of applause that had started up at the announcer's prompt. "Why?"

Theo looked to Delani, knowing the Alpha would have a more sensible answer on spur of the moment.

The older dragel shot him an amused look but answered anyway. "The Merrow keep to themselves, Harry. They have a champion, but they do not surface unless they are summoned. They hold the blood title of Crimson Tide, because, of course, they must be different from us. It doesn't mean they are any less powerful than the others though."

Harry puzzled that through and then managed a laugh with a shake of his head. That sounded just like the Merrow. He was glad to know they were included though.

"And, in case you were wondering, yes, it is a man." Delani added, a faint twinkle in her eye. "I'm told he's a lovely specimen as the Merrow absolutely do not tolerate scars of any sort. They count it as a personal affront and it is quite a badge of honor to hold a blood title with no outward marks to show for it. He wears a pendant of proof. In case you were wondering, we know this because the few times they have surfaced, we have documented it in our historical texts, complete with artistic rendering. If you should visit the library—make time to take him, Theo—then look it up in the archives. It's quite a lovely experience."

Harry nodded, turning back to the stage. His mind was busy sorting through the information and tucking away bits and pieces for later perusal. He found his eyes straying back to the masked Hadrian. He wondered what the Gheyo looked like beneath the mask and then he wondered if the fellow ever took it off. Then again, Hadrian looked as if he were a rather high-ranking Gheyo and Harry hadn't seen many Shadow Gheyos at all to dispute that fact. He mused some more, then set the thoughts aside. He would think about Gheyos later.

Another detail registered then and Harry frowned. "Where's Shadow?"

"Bruen." Charlie supplied, with a chuckle. He pointed up to the padded corner of the viewing box where the children were happily taking turns cuddling the Nytura and feeding him snacks. Shadow was enjoying himself as he was petted, pampered and generally fussed over.

Alma and Bu hovered protectively nearby, their attention divided between the welcome ceremony and their children's playtime. Sueh had her arms full of two napping little ones, a head pillowed on each shoulder, the slack faces innocent in sleep. Bruen was sitting cross-legged on the soft floor blanket and feeding the Nytura little pieces of salted jerky from his snack plate, while gently stroking the prettily scaled body. He looked up, as if at the sound of his name and offered a very faint smile, before returning his attention to the quietly chirping Shadow.
Satisfied, Harry smiled and turned back to watch the rest of the fun.

The clan chiefs announced special entertainment acts from their favored dragels and dragel Circles, presenting musicians, dancers, shows of magic and recitations of their historical texts in rhythmical poetry. The morning introductions for the high nobles were now complete and the second tier of nobility would begin in a short while. Overall, it was quite the lavish celebration with plenty of pomp and circumstance.

Harry waited eagerly for the Kalzik's presentation, but was disappointed to see that they were only turned out in ordered ranks—he could pick out Quinn's blond hair anywhere, it seemed—and not a formal introduction. As he listened, he could hear that the names had not yet reached that portion of the alphabet and reasoned that was why the Kalziks hadn't taken center stage. He had the impression from Quinn that they were quite important and that his mother favored some element of theatrics. He wondered what they would do, but resigned himself to waiting until the next day—surely it would be worth the wait.

Of course, if Quinn was in it, Harry was sure it would be worth the wait. He had to admit that Quinn had looked quite nice in his traditional Indian wear, the colorful dupatta wrapped around his scarred neck had reminded Harry of their first moments in the Healer Clinic and how Quinn had held him in gentle arms, applying a healing cream that had done wonders for him. Harry could still see Quinn's bright, multi-colored scales in his mind's eye and he wondered how rare it was, as he'd only seen up two colors at a time, blended together amongst the dragels. Quinn had four.

Pushing that line of thought out of his head for later, Harry tried to focus on the change in schedule. He had assumed they would be spending the entire day sitting up in the viewing box in the stand, but apparently only the morning half of the day was reserved for official introductions. The afternoon was free with additional entertainment and lesser noble introductions took up the evening portion of things.

Harry made a mental note to ask Bahn about some sort of official schedule or pattern, as he didn't want to miss out on anything important and because he wanted to see as much as possible. He had wondered why the elaborate displays were so necessary, when he realized that other dragels in the neighboring viewing boxes were already whispering among themselves and trading comments back and forth as to which dragels would be suitable bonding material.

It made him swallow hard to be rid of the forming lump in his throat and he pushed those troublesome thoughts away for later. He wasn't sure how he would handle the entire courting business as it seemed to be more trouble than it was worth. His only interest—Wikhn—hadn't turned out quite so nicely and then of course, there had been Alec, not that Merrow would have spared him a second glance, but he was beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed. Splitting the day up into halves was a very good idea.

A break was given sometime between the noble introductions for the noon meal and general mingling between the newly introduced dragels and the ones already present. At this point, all additional creatures were allowed to join the festivities and here, Harry discovered, was the rich subculture of otherworldly creatures. He'd already known there were werewolves, thanks to Kyle's werewolf girlfriend, he'd scented them for sure when they'd walked through Nevarah, but he was now aware all of a sudden, that there were more of them around and they weren't shy about it.

He was reminded of Remus for a moment and that brought pained thoughts of Sirius and then Cedric followed and for a moment, Harry was lost in his own private little world of regret. He was able to shake himself out of it when he saw Theo angling towards his way and he found a smile just in time for Theo to envelope him in a strong hug, complete with a kiss to the cheek. He let his
cheek rest against one warm shoulder and waited a moment to hear what Theo wanted.

When Theo didn't say anything, he twisted around to look up at his Alpha's face.

"I don't need anything, treasure." Theo kissed the tip of Harry's nose, a smile touching his face. "You just had the 'please give me a hug' look on your face and I absolutely could not resist."

Harry blinked up at him, feeling his face warm as the expected blush began. He didn't pull away though, because the hug was more than welcome. The rise of murmured voices had them turning as one to see what was happening next. The Deveraines had decided on a picnic lunch of sorts and now as they were preparing to leave, apparently there were several dragels waiting just outside of their personal viewing box.

"Harry-love, it's for you." Bahn gave a little jerk of his head. "Come."

Theo gave Harry a little push and he half-stumbled forward, resisting the urge to scowl as he came up behind Bahn and swallowed hard at the sight of the line of well-dressed young men and women, each of them with familiar colored cards in hand.

Favors.

Harry gulped.

Bahn nudged him, a knowing look in his dancing silver eyes. "If I were hunting, this would be the perfect way to start the first day." He said. "Go on, accept them. They've come all this way just to see you."

"I don't really want to-" Harry began, feeling his palms beginning to grow sweaty and his stomach setting itself up for an instant rebellion. He didn't have the first clue how to handle this many potential suitors, he'd accepted the fact that he might have a few suitors, but it hadn't occurred to him that a few might have translated into a few dozen or so. This was more than he'd ever prepared himself for and they all appeared to be hopeful and polite. It would pain him to have to personally reject each invitation at this point and he wasn't sure that he wanted to accept anything, much less deal with the hassle of rejecting them.

"Accept them now and simply say thank you, sort through them later and burn what you don't want." Bahn peered up at him from beneath lowered lashes. "Please tell me that Theo has at least spoken to you of favors and what to do with them?"

Harry squirmed beneath that look and then gave a quick nod. Theo had explained—he just hadn't mentioned how quickly things would happen. A tiny thought niggled at the back of his head and he wondered how many of them were seeking him out because of his dragel morph as a Silverwing dragon.

"Absolutely wonderful." Bahn pronounced. "Go accept them. Now, please. They'll block the walkway if they stand there like that for much longer."

With that final thought in mind, Harry stepped out into the corridor and found himself barely able to smile at the friendly and interested looks that came his way. Nerves threatened to well up and he forcefully pushed them away. He had faced more terrifying things than a long line of potential suitors. Perhaps.

The first dragel to step forward had a tiny sparkling stud embedded in the left side of his nose, his eyes lined with kohl, highlighting the fact that they were a rich, vivid green. "Good day to you," he bowed formally. "May I gift you this favor? You may respond in your own time." He held out a
folded square of green paper—the same color as his eyes—with a white wax seal on the front.

Automatically, Harry reached out to take it. He felt the faintest hum of magic woven throughout it and knew this was what made the favors what they were. "Thank you." He said, unsure of what else to add.

That seemed to be the right answer though, because the green-eyed young man bowed again and started off on his way, the next suitor in line moving up. This fellow had two-toned hair, much like Terius and Ilsa, with rich chocolate-strands mingling with pale blond ones. He had bushy eyebrows and very fine hands that presented his favor to Harry, a pale-blue specimen with a red wax seal. "May I gift you this favor?" He asked, politely. "You are welcome to respond however you so desire."

"Thank you." Harry said. He accepted the square and tucked it on top of the first.

The fellow nodded once more and started off, showing the next suitor—a young woman with a waterfall braid of lovely red hair that fell just to her hips. She offered a tiny curtsy. "Good day to you. I would like to gift you this favor, if you would accept? You may respond whenever you like."

And Harry found himself nodding as he said "thank you" and she moved off, the next one moving up. He licked his lips. This would probably take a little while.

It did take some time, but not as much as he'd thought. By the time he'd weathered through the entire proposal line, as he'd come to call it, Harry found himself with a colorful armful of favors and absolutely no idea as to what to do with them. Bahn solved that issue at once, by shrinking them into a manageable package and banishing them back to the guesthouse. He'd ignored Harry's protests and reminded him that the favors did not have to be answered straight away and he had all the time in the realms to sort through them. When he'd protested, Bahn had smacked him over the head and reminded him that there was a polite waiting period between receiving and declining said favors, unless he really didn't like someone. A too hasty rejection could fall under the category of social faux pas and that was the last thing that Harry needed.

With that neatly sorted out of the way for him, Harry found himself swept up in the easy warmth and flow of the Deveraines as they moved on with their picnic plans, including him, Theo and Charlie. The picnic lunch of sorts was to be eaten outside at the high banks overlooking the Merrow Waters and so they all trooped out to find a suitable spot.

The giant picnic blanket was set somewhat under the shade as Callistair grew a tiny pebble into a smooth, curved rock that cast a shadow over one section of the blanket and provided a nice tanning spot for a happy Loren, who immediately brought his wings out, a rich red and orange scaled display with hints of shimmering gold at the tips. He settled down contentedly on the high edge of the conjured rock, lying on his stomach, his head pillowed on his arms. Bhindi had taken him a few bites of sandwiches and a small glass of juice that she'd fed him, before he'd refused in lieu of a nap. She patted his stomach, stroked his wings and then kissed his forehead, before leaving him alone. He'd purred through the entire moment, soaking up his Submissive's exclusive attention.

Harry found himself wanting Charlie to bring his wings out, after seeing that happy display of red and orange and he'd reclined in the shade of his Beta's navy-hued ones. It was a good shade and Charlie was an even better pillow. There was the faintest thread of urgency curling around him, but he pushed it away. He would hunt, just not that…very minute. He'd always wondered what it would be like to enjoy a fun family-oriented picnic. Something that wasn't as pristine or painful as one of Aunt Petunia and Dudley's sort of excursions.
This was certainly much better—well, if he ignored the fact that nearly every Pareya present was fretting over the fact that he was too thin and not eating enough. Bahn had finally called them off, fighting a smile the whole time as he directed them over to the children and promised that Harry would have enough to eat.

Theo had been too busy trying not to laugh, while Charlie had gamely accepted the new additions to his own plate, surprisingly able to pack it all away. Harry eventually crawled between the two of them and settled down for a nap, enjoying the shared warmth, the outdoor breeze and letting the light conversation drift over him.

Bahn allowed Harry the luxury of a short nap before Bhindi left at the request of some noble circle to pay her respects. The moment his twin was safely out of earshot, Bahn immediately cozied up to his Alpha, a look of pure mischief on his face. It took Delani an entire minute for the look to register and when it did, she schooled her expression into something of resignation.

"What exactly am I about to be dragged into?" She asked, wryly. She handed off her drinking glass to Sueh and straightened up to reach over and pull Bahn into her lap.

He nuzzled her chin, the innocent smile still visible as he settled down in the embrace, but didn't relax. She let him rest there for a moment, then leaned back, bracing on her hands and waiting for him to start. "It's been hours," he began, playing with the tips of his braids by tracing the outline of the embroidery on her dresswear. "Hours and hours."

Delani thunked her chin atop his head. "Hours and hours, eh?" She repeated. "It probably seems that way to her."

"Can we? Can't we?" Bahn wriggled, his energy seeming to have finally returned. "We should, just to be sure. For moral support."

"Moral support?" Delani echoed again. "I am not sure I even want to know what kind of things are circling around in that head of yours to arrive at such a skewed conclusion, but if you'd like to go, you know you need only to ask nicely."

Bahn beamed up at her and looped his arms around her neck. "May I," he kissed her left cheek. "Go and visit," he kissed her right cheek, "the clan chiefs?"

Delani leaned back just out of reach. "And?" She prompted, one eyebrow arched. She'd apparently had this sort of conversation before.

Bahn's eyes fairly sparkled. "And rescue Ilsa?"

"You may," Delani said. She straightened up and carefully threaded one hand through his elaborate hairstyle to hold him steady for the delightful kiss that followed. He blinked owlishly up at her when she finally pulled away. "I take it we're all going?"

"Don't want to, love," Sueh reappeared at her side, handing down the empty glass she'd whisked away moments before. "The children want to see the water carnival and I wanted to visit the gem market. The girls are coming with me for a turn at the hot springs. If you don't necessarily need us there for all of that important posturing and whatnot, I'd just as soon leave you lot to your own devices."

"You don't want to come with me?" Bahn's lips curved into a near pout, but his soft grey eyes were careful and assessing in their look.
Sueh scrunched up her face and gave a definite shake of her head. "It makes my skin crawl," she said. "I'd avoid it, if you didn't mind. I don't particularly care to be making nice with them, just yet."

Bahn nodded, understanding something that wasn't outright said. He smiled up at her when she kissed one fingertip and touched it to his nose.

"Don't stress yourself out, alright? You're free to move around as you like and please use some of your magic, at least half of it, before the day is over." Sueh said.

There was another nod from Bahn and then he turned from his Bonded to look at a curious Theo and Charlie, with Harry nestled between them. "Would you like to meet the Clan Chiefs?" The hopeful look in his face and the strangely even tone in his voice hinted that it was more than a mere suggestion.

Harry looked between Theo and Charlie, to receive a nod from each of them. He tempered the urge to shrug and nodded. "Is there anything I should do?"

"Do?" Bahn let himself be lifted to his feet by Takar and held still while his Beta cast several diagnostic charms over him. "You need only to be yourself, Harry. In fact, if there were ever a time and place to be yourself, I would say it is here." He twisted around to look at Takar. "What does it say?"

"It says you are having too much fun at other people's expense," Takar said, dryly. He slung an arm around Bahn's shoulders and gave it a slight squeeze. "It also says you need to eat a little more fruit and some more blood before tonight. The babes are fine, everything else is alright."

Bahn wrinkled his nose. "Very well." He called out a farewell to his Bonded and beckoned to Harry.

"Exactly how are we rescuing Ilsa?" Takar wanted to know. "Won't we make things worse?"

"Things are often worse before they are better," Bahn said, cheerfully. "Don't worry about it."

The Beta rubbed his forehead and sighed. "Now I'm worried." He muttered.

Delani elbowed him as she quickened her pace to be walking directly in sync with Bahn. Nara, the advisor among their Bonded, had also joined them for the excursion. Their submissive was happily making his way towards the guarded living quarters on the outside of the giant auditorium. It wasn't terribly fancy on the outside, but it stood proudly, a large, white stone building, with the traditional square sides, in full view just out of reach of the grand entrance and just within several rows of armed Gheyos keeping watch.

As they drew nearer, Bahn slowed his steps and fussed a bit with his hair and face. By the time they had reached the Gheyo-lined walkway, he'd shifted back to walk just slightly behind Delani and Nara, one hand brushing against Takar as he went. Harry could feel the sudden shift from curious interest to carefully concealed apprehension.

They reached tall wrought gates that towered several feet overhead with spiraled, pointed tips. There were six tall, thoroughly scarred Gheyos, two lounging on the ground, two leaning on the respective gate posts and the final two standing at attention. Delani didn't seem to be the least bit bothered as she strode forward and held up her wrist, showing off a white braided cord and a golden charm that seemed to be the Deveraine coat of arms.
After a second, the lock on the gates clicked open and the doors swung inward, admitting them to the guard lined walkway that led up to the main door. Head held high, Delani made her way up to the front door where she tapped the silver button beside the door and walked straight on in as the door swung open.

Harry found himself standing in a large, high-ceiling foyer with Bahn beside him, pale grey eyes searching his face as if to see whether it was alright to continue. Harry offered an encouraging smile and it served its intended purpose, because Bahn brightened almost at once and started off—this time pulling Harry along with him.

Bahn seemed to know where he was going and Delani favored him with an indulgent look every now and then as Bahn trotted along beside her, always a half-step ahead, but never further. Harry found himself taking in the pure white décor with accents of navy blue and little else. The entire lower floor seemed to be spotless with no personal touches present.

At the end of each hallway, a Gheyo was stationed with a white half-column of wood that served as a stool, blending into the white walls of the building. The sound of voices filtered through the air, rising and falling as if there were people present, but Harry didn't catch a single glimpse of them nor could he sense them.

"They're not here yet," Bahn explained, catching his eye at one point. "They're on the upper floors. That's where we're headed. This is the receiving floor."

"Upper floors," Harry said. "And we're heading there?"

"Oh no, they have to send someone for us," Bahn grinned. "They'll probably send Greta, because-"

"Because Ilsa is a big 'fraidy cat." Greta's bored voice came from behind them and Bahn's smile grew wider.

He turned around and their entire little group followed his direction, turning to see a mildly disgruntled Greta moving towards them from the opposite end of the hallway from where they'd just been. "Greta," Bahn said. He went forward, making a sound of irritation when she greeted him with a mere nod. He pulled on her arm the moment he was close enough to do so.

The storm Gheyo huffed in answer and bent down to let him kiss her cheek. Her brow furrowed at once, seemingly in response to the whispered question in her ear. "I don't know," she said, at last, straightening up. "I wasn't there."

Delani's eyebrows arched upwards. "I would ask where you were, but something tells me that it isn't something I need to know. I thought you were with Ilsa. Have you seen her? How is she?"

"Getting what she deserves." Greta sighed. "Are you all heading up?" The question was half-muttered as she ran a hand through her short crop of hair and then looked back down the hallway. "Of course you're all heading up. I suppose I don't have to warn anyone to be nice and on their best behavior?"

"I'm always on my best behavior." Bahn flashed his most charming smile and nudged Harry, subtly. "Aren't we, Harry?"

Somehow, Harry found himself smiling. He didn't answer, but Greta didn't seem to be waiting for an answer. She simply gave a little jerk of her head and summoned a ball of violet-white magic at her fingertips. It crackled to life and her portal sprang to life beneath their feet.

By the time Harry processed that, they were standing in a new room, a sitting room of sorts,
decorated in rich burgundies and browns with golden accents and he felt as if his hair was standing on end.

"Greta!" Bahn frowned. "You didn't have to do that." He held a hand to his head and his expression had changed. He threw an apologetic look at Harry. "Here, let me do that." He reached over with his free hand and a spark of soft-white light leapt between them, attempting to smooth Harry's new spiky-haired look. "Static," he explained, at Harry's perplexed look. "Storm element, remember?"

Ilsa noticed them first. She was sitting on a small black settee, dressed in a long formal robe instead of her Gheyo dresswear, there were hints of golden hairpins in her two-tone hair and her hands sported several fat golden, bejeweled rings. She was leaning over the low table before the settee poring over what appeared to be seating charts, taking a bite out of a miniature spinach-and-cheese tart.

Golden eyes grew wide at once with something akin to shock, then pure relief as she crammed the rest of the tart in her mouth and propped to her feet, ruining the image of ladylike elegance. "Bahn, loveling, light of my life and love of my soul—you have impeccable timing."

Bahn happily went to her, accepting the proper hug of appreciation and looking around her side for the tray of tarts. His pale grey eyes had dimmed faintly as he took in the room's interior and he stroked her arm, holding her for a moment longer than necessary. She relaxed almost at once under his touch and turned to survey their little group, her eyes and smile landing on Harry.

"I see he dragged you lot out with him," her eyes flickered to Delani and then to Nara. She hesitated, as if she'd like to say more, then turned on her heel and pivoted to face the distinguished looking fellow who had taken up the other side of the settee. He was halfway to her, the tray of tarts in hand. A look of exasperation replaced the tentative worry on her face as Ilsa pushed away the hand offering the tart. "Father, I'm stuffed! Really, I can't eat anything more. I swear I am fine. You do not have to-"

"You didn't look the least bit fine," the man protested. He allowed her to push his hand away and pretended not to notice when Bahn snitched two tarts right off the tray. "You looked pale, thin and as if you hadn't slept in weeks, let alone months. Then there were your wings."

Ilsa gave a theatrical wince. "Yes. My wings. We went over that part already. My ears are still blistered. Can we please move on?" She sent a light swat to Bahn's questing hands once more. "Don't be greedy."

"It's for Harry," Bahn said, innocently. He'd already eaten his first two and decided they were worth sharing. He handed over one of the flaky pastries to Harry and happily filled his own mouth, looking expectantly to Ilsa's father.

He heaved a sigh and relinquished the tray to Ilsa's hands, watching as she crossed over to set it down atop the table and it's neatly arranged papers. "We still have to finish those-" he began.

"And please do pardon his terrible manners," Ilsa waved them over. "Come in and sit down." She shot a look to him and he twisted his hands together for a moment, brow furrowed. She threw up her hands in the air. "Fine. What do you want me to do?"

There was a long moment of silence and then he sighed. "You know I cannot help my instincts and I know that yours aren't any better either."

Ilsa bit her lip for a moment, then moved to stand by his side where she accepted a one-armed hug
and after a faint wave of golden light was pushed over her, she pulled away. Her golden-eyed gaze fixed on Harry next and she linked her arm through her father’s. "Harry, I’d like you to meet my father, Thomas. He is my birth father—otherwise known as my Sire, in Nevarean terms—and I did speak to him about your run in with the-" her voice trailed off as Thomas took a step forward, his intense honey-gold eyes fixed on Harry's shorter form.

"You are Harry?" He asked. The honey-gold eyes swept over the brunet from head to toe. He was taller than Ilsa by a whole head and shoulders, standing even taller, thanks to well-worn, heeled boots. He radiated quiet strength and deliberate authority, a sharpness touching his weathered face as he focused solely on Harry.

Harry stepped forward, deciding on a half-bow, keeping his eyes up. "Yes sir—mph!"

The rest of his greeting was cut off when Thomas simply pulled him into a hug every bit as warm and bone-crushing as one of Ilsa’s. "Call me Thomas, my titles are only for those who need it." He folded his taller frame over Harry's and breathed softly into the mess of dark hair. "Welcome to Nevarah, little one. Ilsa tells me you have suffered the misfortune of bearing Merrow spellwork?"

Harry sucked in a breath as he was released, finding it a little more difficult than he would have liked. Something about Thomas reminded him of Aracle and the way the Rheyo had greeted him upon finding out of his displacement in a traditional dragel upbringing. He could tell that the older dragel was powerful—Merlin, there was magic practically dripping off of the man—but there was something more beneath it, a detail he couldn't quite yet put his finger on. "Something like that," he said. "I—it was an accident. I thought he was drowning, so I jumped in and well."

Thomas chuckled, a sound of understanding rather than pity. "Merrow have a way of making us do things that we normally would not." He looked over Harry's head. "I take it you are the Alpha," he looked to Theo. "And that would make you the Beta?" His gaze flickered quickly to Charlie and then back to Harry for confirmation.

"Yes. My Alpha, Theo," Harry tilted his head to the right. "And Charlie, our Beta." A sudden spark of inspiration hit him and Harry offered another bow, one he'd given before to Bahn in the kitchen of the borrowed guesthouse for something he hadn't thought he would need to use again. "The House of Nott has no quarrel with yours. I extend our hospitality and goodwill towards you and yours. May this be the start of a prosperous friendship between us." He completed the bow with his right hand fist over his heart and one foot slightly behind the other.

Eyebrows arched upwards in appreciation and understanding. "I see you have kept good company," Thomas said. He looked briefly to Bahn and then copied Harry's posture, bowing deeply from the waist. "The Noble Clan of the Gorgens recognizes you as a friend. We are honored to be offered your friendship and we extend our own and all that it entails. My Circle has no quarrel with yours and so I extend our well wishes. Please accept my hospitality."

The fact that he'd just been offered a peaceful reception by nearly the entire Earthen clan had Harry scrambling to process and accept the sudden change in dynamics. There had been no question as to his sincerity or as to whether would be a suitable candidate for such an offer. Instead, there'd simply been a knowing look in those eyes and a spark of magic to seal the oath sworn between them. Harry felt a touch of warmth decorating his face as he nodded. "I accepted—we accept." He corrected, quickly. "Thank you very much."

"Please think nothing of it." He stepped aside, gesturing for them to start forward. "Good day to you as well, Lord Deveraine."

"I was beginning to think I'd committed some paltry offence." Bahn sniffed. "I sincerely hope you
havent smothered Ilsa to desperation, because it is I who will have to deal with her."

Harry felt his jaw drop at the casual tone and the very serious underlying air as the elfin submissive sailed past to choose a spot on one of the settees. As far as he knew of dragel politics and interactions, Thomas was the equivalent of the Father-In-Law. Ilsa's face had taken on a decidedly pink hue, but before she could speak, the rest of the Deveraines spoke up.

"You will excuse my Submissive on the grounds that being pregnant tends to twist his good humors," Delani said, smoothly. "It is good to see you again, Thomas. How are you and yours?" She stepped forward to grasp his forearms and they exchanged polite kisses to each cheek.

"They are well, thank you." Thomas said. "Busyng themselves somewhere with pointless details that do not require precise handling, but apparently I have somehow managed to scare them off for the time being, leaving-"

"Space for you and our favorite troublemaker?" Nara quipped. She ignored Ilsa's glare and took her turn exchanging greetings with the clan chief in the same manner as Delani had. "Forgive us for showing up unannounced. I hope you two have had time to visit."

"You came in small numbers, I am grateful." Thomas said. He greeted Takar with a nod, the same to Theo and Charlie, gesturing for them to come further into the room and make themselves comfortable.

"Too much time to visit." Ilsa snapped, clearly uncomfortable with being the sole recipient of her Father's attention. "I am perfectly fine. There is nothing wrong with me."

"Of course. There is only a few holes in your wings and perhaps in your head, maybe a few screws loose?" Thomas said, matter-of-factly. "Honestly, Ilsa. You make me worry so. Will you never think of the consequences of your actions?"

"I think about them on a daily, if not hourly basis. We are not having this conversation again." Ilsa threw a look in his direction and folded her arms over her chest. "They also didn't come here to hear you lecture me—of which, I might add, you have already done. Can we please move on?"

"If you like," Thomas said, placidly. "Do make yourselves comfortable and ignore my daughter's temper. She seems to be operating in fits and bursts of it today. I wager you are here either for Ilsa or to see of what she asked of me?"

"Harry's spell," Theo said, speaking up for the first time. He'd noticed Thomas's careful greeting of him and realized the reason for it a moment later. It made him smile warmly to temper his following request. "If there's anything at all you can do for Harry, we'd be quite indebted to you for your expertise."

"There's plenty, actually." Thomas's smile settled into an easy curve and he seemed to relax imperceptibly. "My status affords me quite a bit of freedom in terms of making results happen. I would like to discuss the actual terms for what I am capable of doing, so that we do not inadvertently cause Harry any distress, physical, mental or otherwise." He paused. "Would you care for some tea? This might take a while," he held up his right hand, golden eyes lightening to a near yellow, before he snapped his fingers once. A full tea service with the appropriate number of dishes and matching refreshments replaced the paper clutter on the low table and the tray of spinach tarts disappeared.

Bahn made a disgruntled sound, but hushed when Delani pulled him over to her side. He nibbled on the last tart in his hand and cuddled close, content for the moment. He would not interrupt the
following conversation if it wasn't necessary and as he'd already made his point, he knew that Thomas would understanding.

"Wonderful. Now, I'd like to start with hearing just what happened to gain you this spell, if you wouldn't mind?" Thomas asked. He had summoned the spinach-and-cheese tray back, allowing himself to remain in Bahn's temporary good graces. He now leaned forward to pour tea for all of his guests. The sleeves on his official robes rode up slightly, revealing Bonding marks on each arm from the wrist and further up, disappearing from sight.

It was at that precise moment that Harry made the connection his brain had puzzled over just moments before, the same realization that Theo had also discovered. Clan Chief Thomas Gorgen was a Submissive.

SNAPES'S QUARTERS : NEVARAH

The shadow at the corner of his field of vision was enough of a warning for Terius to lose all control over his carefully contained Pareyic instincts. As a fully-functioning adult and somewhat acquainted with his students from Hogwarts, Terius logically knew that he should not leave Hermione on her own.

As a stressed out, exhausted Bonded Pareya with a pregnant Submissive not within his current line of sight, Terius was on his feet and moving out of the room and heading for the outer hall where he could still feel Severus's presence. The distinct chill in the air forced him to walk slowly and carefully, as pure fear registered in terms of what he was feeling.

This presence was no good. This presence meant danger. He would have to trust the enchantments he'd cast over Hermione—enchantments that he hadn't cast over Draco, Calida or Severus, because they were too stubborn to let him. So Terius hurried. He was out of their living quarters and bursting through the front door just as a few of the neon pink feathers floated to the floor from his arm.

He collided face-to-chest with Severus and looked up to see the fierce look on his Alpha's face shifting to something reflecting vague perplexion before evening out to be entirely expressionless. "Terius," Severus began.

"Move now." Terius pushed the magical power at his disposal into the words that left his lips, weighting them with the natural, inherent musical tinge that ensured Severus would be forced to listen to him.

"Terius?" Calida wearily poked her head around the corner of the hallway leading down to the transportation rooms. She had apparently sensed his sudden and dramatic change in attitude and magic, because she took one look at him and then jerked around. "Draco!"

Draco appeared a second later, looking sulky and defiant, a feat in itself when his pale grey eyes lit on Terius, who currently had a hand fisted in the collar of Severus's dress robes. "Terius?"

"I want to visit my mother," Terius snapped, with more patience than he honestly had to spare. He turned as best as he could manage and started forward. He froze when the approaching wave of magic stretched out to him and he charged forward, pulling on Severus as he did so. The hand around his Alpha's collar switched to be a vise-grip on Severus's skinny wrist. With his feathered hand, Terius flapped it at both Draco and Calida, herding them forward and towards the transportation room. "Later. Not now. Move!" He barked out, punctuating each of his words with a
deliberate pulse of protective magic, silencing all potential protests with the authority granted to him as a Pareya.

They tumbled into the transportation room, just as the magical wave reached them. Terius gave a low-pitched whine and dropped to a crouch, his pink-feathered arm hanging limply as his eyes burned with pure white fire. "Arielle forgive me," he murmured. "Temprificus Orus."

Draco's frantic, close-lipped protest died away in the rush of loud, defensive magic that burst to life in a pillar of pure whiteness, just as soft wisps of shadow magic passed through the walls and shattered the hastily cast defense. It had nothing to latch onto, however, because Terius had been quick enough and the portal completed itself just as the second wave of magic rippled through the building floor, the unpleasant aftershock blowing all the closed doors open and shattering anything that trembled.
See first chapter for disclaimers/warnings/summaries. Link to TBDH Forum is in my profile. This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. This chapter is dedicated to all of my re-readers, Thank You! New FAN ART has been posted in the FF forums by NirvanaElder, stop by and show some love. :)

RECAP: Harry and Co. have enjoyed the first half of the morning introductions and after a brief lunch break, they accompany Bahn to meet Ilsa and her father, Thomas, the Chief of the Earth Clan. Thomas warmly welcomes all of them and Bahn has a craving for spinach tarts. In the meantime, The Snapes react to finding Aiden standing in their sitting room and Terius 'ports all of them into the same guarded living quarters as Bahn, Harry and the others.

NEVARAH : SNAPE CIRCLE : GUARDED LIVING QUARTERS

The Snapes were thrown out into an empty, white-walled corridor from Terius's hastily cast portal. He caught Calida, while Severus had grabbed Draco. For a moment, all four dragels sat on the floor in various states of alarm and emotional disarray, until the reality caught up to them.

Terius heaved himself up to sit upright, braced against the wall, pulling Calida into his lap and forcing her head to his neck, so she would breathe in the calming pheromones he'd begun to release. She whined and whimpered, nuzzling his neck, frantically, hands scrabbling at the front of his robes, a pale orange glow enveloping her from head to toe, a Carrier's defense beginning to activate.

He let his head thunk back against the wall and ran a reassuring hand up and down along her spine, chirring softly in answer to her instinctive declarations of worry and unease. "Hush," Terius soothed, when her whines did not quiet. He did not want to force his protection spells over her natural defenses, a Carrier's magic was quite different compared to that of a Submissive or Pareya—and it was always specially tailored for the child they carried.

Terius struggled inwardly and then held his magic back from reaching out to her. He would comfort her however else he could, because out of all of them, he hadn't expected the rush portal to upset her that much, but he was glad his reflexes had kept them all safe. The orange glow dimmed, wavered and then fizzled out as she calmed visibly beneath his embrace. He focused on breathing in and out, working to sort what he'd just seen. The terrible, shadowy image remained burned in his mind and he could not shake it just yet. So that was what Death felt like. "We are safe. It was—I was fast enough." He wrapped his arms even more tightly around her, resting his cheek atop her head, careful to hold her gently, but firmly. His magic was forcefully thrown out from him, encompassing Severus and Draco was well, radiating a fierce protection and sealing off the corridor from both ends.
"You have exactly ten seconds to explain yourself, before I-" Severus began, shifting Draco on his lap, mirroring Terius's position with Calida. He looked absolutely furious and considering the rough few hours from their previous argument, he wasn't any calmer now than then.

"We left Hermione," Draco said, softly. His voice was steady and his silver eyes were bright, a sign that his mind was busily working through what had just happened. "Severus, we left her. We have to return-" he grimaced. They had promised Harry that they would look after his friend, whether he honestly cared about Granger or not was irrelevant, because Harry was a fellow Submissive and promises between dragel Submissives were not to be taken lightly.

Terius shuddered, violently, his grip tightening on Calida who released his robes in favor of locking her arms around his neck. "No one will be returning there. Not now. Perhaps not ever." Terius took a careful breath, holding up a finger before Draco could plead his case. "Your—friend-" Terius swallowed. "Is either dead or about to be. I will not risk you or our child."

Severus's pale face grew even whiter at that declaration and he half-lurched to his feet, against Draco's protests. "Exactly what do you-"

"We will find my mother as soon as I trust my own feet," Terius said, with more calm than he felt. "And from there, we will see about acquiring a new residence. The residual magic could be harmful to our child, considering that we all share the same element and there is absolutely no possibility for a strain of shadow magic to manifest."

"Terius," Draco let Severus stand and then hugged him tightly around the waist, seeking his comfort that way. "I do not understand. What just happened? What's wrong with Granger?"

"There was a Hellhound in our sitting room," Terius said. "An actively hunting hound. I did not think it was safe to remain under the same roof." He eyed Severus's standing form and shifted at once to be on his own feet, pulling Calida up with him. He would not allow his Alpha to look down on him, not after this had happened. He'd reacted, yes, and perhaps more on instinct than logic, but it had paid off and they were all safe. He'd done his duty—and he'd done it as he was, without a second thought for himself, their safety being his sole priority. He'd been prepared, if the portal hadn't worked.

"Safe?" Severus growled. His temper simmered faintly, but he forced himself to calm down as he took in Terius's defensive, slightly hunched posture and the defiant look in his eyes. The Pareya clearly expected to be taken to task for his quick action, but at the same time remained entirely unrepentant for it. Something about the defensive stance tugged sharply on his miniscule conscience, reminding him that this was a Pareya—their Pareya—and he had reacted just as a Pareya would have. He made himself focus on the next order of business, mentally reminding himself to save their private conversation for when they were both rested and in better tempers. "How exactly is leaving Miss Granger behind, safe?"

Calida took a shuddering breath and tugged on Terius's neck. He rumbled softly and then nudged her head to the side, nosing along her neck, to find the temporary claim mark that denoted her as their chosen Carrier. He licked once, then bit down with care, holding the intent to calm her restlessness. She twitched in his arms, then relaxed, almost boneless in his grasp.

"Good girl," Terius crooned, swooping her up in his arms so she would be more comfortable. She immediately pillowed her head on his shoulder and used her own magic to alter her weight so he would not have a difficult time of carrying her. "It's alright. Everything will be fine."

"It will be, after you explain yourself," Severus said, sternly.
Terius sighed, head lowered faintly in deference to Severus's displeased glower. "Leaving Miss Granger behind is safe because the young woman bears a hellhound's crest. There is nothing I would not do for either of you," he said, steadily. "And if my death would ensure your continued safety, be assured that I would not hesitate. However, I am not keen to rush to an early grave and I am neither brave nor foolish enough to stand between one of Death's emissaries and that which they claim as theirs."

Draco stiffened, pulling away faintly from Severus's grasp. He ignored Severus's strangled little response and instead, looked to Terius, brows furrowed deeply. "What do you mean, a hellhound?" He remembered the conversation they'd had when Harry had been there, the talk of Merrows and Hellhounds, as well as Calida's dreamy-eyed explanations. It made his skin crawl, the thought of a Hellhound walking about, freely, in their living quarters.

"I mean a being cloaked in death and shadow magic, with blood-red eyes and fangs." Terius did not spare them. "I mean an emissary of Death, one of her own pets. Death has reapers and hounds that torment and gather her souls, be them willing or not and where they run, Death follows."

"...not a vampire?" Severus had to check. His anger fled just as quickly as it had come, his logical mind taking over. He had partially agreed with their diagnostic of Hermione Granger, especially after seeing the pictures of the seals and the imprint on the young witch's stomach. The potions she'd had in her had meant certain death and yet, somehow, she'd lived.

"Idiotic, perhaps, not useless," Severus muttered. He could definitely think of several instances where Terius had been more than useful—as well as idiotic. They would definitely have to speak in private again. He cast a glance up and down both ends of the corridor, hating the fact that he could not recognize anything and as a result, did not know where he was. But he was also used to being thrown into such situations and now that the initial threat was mostly handled, he would focus on the present. One of them had to, anyway. "Where exactly did you bring us and how interested is your mother in meeting us?"

"The armored living quarters for all Clan chiefs and Royals during the hunt," Terius said. He blinked, and a faint touch of pink decorated his cheeks. "My mother will likely despise you on principle and welcome you once she realizes why we have Calida. She was very partial to Calida."

"Oh?" Severus kept one arm around Draco's shoulders and drew him close, feeling a faint twinge in the back of his mind and being unable to classify what it meant.

Draco flinched and then turned to half-shove him into the wall. "Terius-!"

The words were cut off when Terius stumbled, but regained his footing and the building seemed to quiver beneath their feet, a powerful magical shockwave rippling through the corridor and shattering Terius's hastily cast defenses.

"Draco!" Severus cast a diagnostic spell over him and then one at Terius and Calida, when the Pareya lurched forward to stand on their side of the corridor. "What was that? Focus, man!"

"That," Terius licked his lips, looking sufficiently shaken anew. "That was one of the protections guarding our realm." He adjusted his grip on Calida and suppressed a shudder. "Something just broke."

The sound of shouts and running feet, drew their attention, four armed Gheyos appeared around the
right corner, weapons drawn. The lead Gheyo bared their fangs with an audible hiss that carried across to the other end of the hallway.

Terius immediately shoved Calida into Severus's arms and took up a protective stance before the trio, calling out his wings with a deliberate flair. "Stand down! We mean no harm. I am Councilman Terius Snape, formerly, Terius Baronsworth. I am here to see my mother about a private matter of some urgency, Lady Baronsworth should be expecting me." His fingers twitched, hidden from the Gheyo's view, an emergency message sent to his mother. He hoped she would answer in time.

NEVARAH : GUARDED LIVING QUARTERS : Harry & Co. and the Deveraines

"I may not be able to help you directly this afternoon," Thomas began, once they were all seated and furnished with the appropriate refreshments. "But I can definitely see you straight to the right person and with luck, we will have this spell off before night falls." He was seated beside Ilsa who had finally given up on fighting the instinctive pull that required her to be near her Sire after such a long separation. She shared his plate of sweet biscuits and sat close enough for their arms to touch.

Bahn was happily munching away on his spinach tarts—apparently they were his current craving—and Harry had discovered that strong honey ginger tea was something he could come to enjoy on a regular basis. Takar sat on Bahn's other side and Narah had joined Ilsa and her father on the settee. Harry, Theo and Charlie took up a settee all on their own and now they looked to Thomas to hear his side of things.

"It is definitely a Merrow spell," Thomas said. "Ilsa swears uphill and downhill that it is and I could sense the presence of Merrow on Harry, which means we'll need a Merrow to remove it and since none of them aren't likely to talk to us, I will have to speak to Prince Raspen who should know someone who can settle this for us." He frowned. "You are hunting this season, are you not? Today is not the best of first days then, is it?" He frowned. "You shouldn't pursue anything while under a spell's influence, especially Merrow spellwork as we can't be sure what it can do and how it can manipulate you." He paused, teacup halfway to his mouth. "And make no mistake, Merrow spells are meant to manipulate you. It's simply the nature of their magic. If you wouldn't care to tell me exactly what happened?"

And so Harry did.

By the time Harry had finished his story, Thomas had grown pensive and Bahn had stopped nibbling on the refreshments. Both Submissives in turn seemed to be somewhat disturbed, but unable to discern why.

"And you said you couldn't point him out?" Thomas asked. "Not at all, not even really look at him?"

"I could look at sekrl." Harry rolled his eyes at the garbled speech that came through his mouth without any warning. Now it was starting to wear on his nerves. "I could look. I just couldn't look directly all the time, but off to the side and I certainly couldn't point either."

"It sounds like a protective spell," Bahn said, at last. He had straightened up and was now cuddled on Delani's lap, his feet resting on Takar's lap. "Protective, you know," he added, when none of the others seemed to follow. "The spell is centered around keeping us from knowing this Merrow's identity, yes?"
A dawning look of realization settled over the occupants present and Thomas gave a slow nod. "So it would seem."

"Which would make the spell more defensive than offensive and defensive spells are usually for one of three reasons, to protect someone, something or yourself. I would wager this Merrow is protecting himself for whatever reason." He frowned. "I can't really see why he'd have to go to such lengths, but if I knew what Merrow thought, then perhaps I would have convinced one to join me." There was a wistful look on his face, before it straightened out to be a rather serious expression. "Can you help us with this? Is there something you can do? Because if not, you do understand that Harry is Hunting this season and it would be best for him to have that off before realistically pursuing any interested parties."

Thomas smiled. "I'm sure we can work something out," he said. "In fact, usually the Royals ask us Chiefs over for some sort of tea or dinner-affair. Nothing terribly formal, just a general gathering so we are all somewhat on the same page." His lips twitched, faintly. "Our resident Merrow is not always present, but sometimes an advisor or trusted guard is left with us and they keep the Merrow Royal up to date on necessary affairs." He frowned. "Can you describe this Merrow at all? Or does the spell prevent you from answering?"

"The spell keeps him from doing anything remotely connected to the Merrow, save for saying that he didn't see one at all." Charlie explained. "Theo and I tried this morning and there was very little we could gather from what Harry could share with us. He couldn't even sketch something—by hand"

Thomas frowned. "I see. This could be somewhat troublesome, but I understand that—what is it Mason?" He looked to the doorway at the left corner of the far wall. A sliver of a shadow could be seen on the doorjamb—a Gheyo keeping watch just out of public view. "If it's one of ours, send them in, perhaps they can help. I can't approach Prince Raspen with so little to work with. He wouldn't know what to do with it either and the rest of the Earth Royals haven't arrived yet." The growing sound of three voices brought a smile to Thomas's face as he recognized one speaker, who now spoke above her companions.

"Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it, Patrick." Surajini's voice filtered through the doorway and a few minutes later, the soft chime and tinkle of bangles and golden metal accents, announced her entry into the sitting room. She was a vision of beauty at once, in a room mostly full of men and lady Gheyos. Pale skin and pitch-black hair, she was dressed in a brightly colored lehenga, a cropped blouse of rich dark blue and gold, with a full skirt that swished at her ankles and a matching dupatta pinned to the fat knot of hair at the nape of her neck, framing her face. Vivid green eyes immediately took stock of the room and then her eyes landed on Thomas. "Thomas," she pronounced the name with ceremony, eyes narrowing. "I want a word with Alonso, if you would be so kind?"

For a moment, Thomas returned her stare, brow furrowed—lips pursed as if he'd been about to welcome her—then he turned and called over his shoulder. "Alsono? Lady Kalzik would like a word with you, if you could spare the time?"

There was the sound of shuffling feet, the clink of armor and then the Gheyo in question appeared around the second hidden doorway in the sitting room. Mason stood directly in view of the room now, one hand resting on a sword hilt, as he took in the room's occupants and checked the doorways.

Harry bit back the chuckle that wanted to escape. He had wondered what kind of security was in place around the house, but now he was beginning to see just what Theo had meant when he said
that the Earth element was subtle. He would wager there were at least three more hidden panels or doors, at least one at each corner of the room in addition to the main entrance that they'd passed through. It would certainly make sense and it would explain why Thomas, a high-ranking Submissive, could be so at ease in a social setting with strangers that he barely knew.

Well, not quite strangers, Harry amended to himself. Ilsa thought of Theo as family and now, that apparently included him and Charlie as well. Keeping his thoughts neatly ordered, Harry tucked them away and turned to study the new specimen of Gheyo that had appeared at Thomas's request.

Alonso was tall and lean, with barely muscled arms, soft brown eyes and light brown curly hair playing about the corners of his face. There was something deceptively light about him and if it weren't for the flecks of gold in said brown eyes, Harry wouldn't have thought he was an Earth element at all. Clad in flexible leather armor with only his weapons belt in metal and black, Harry found himself staring at a slender-bladed sheath that could only hold the blade for the ridiculously ornamental hilt that dangled from the right of Alonso's belt.

The light and easy tread suggested that this Gheyo had an easy temperament and a very quick hand. Alonso nodded gamely to Thomas and turned a friendly smile to Surajini, who was scowling darkly, arms folded over her chest. "How may I be of assistance, dear lady?"

"Spare me your platitudes. A moment, if you would?" She said, brusquely. She moved from the center of the room, gesturing towards a corner out of everyone's way, but still within Thomas's view, the barest of courtesies.

Harry watched them step aside, their footsteps perfectly coordinated. His lips pursed in thought as he recalled the address. Lady Kalzik. Kalzik. Quinn Kalzik. Perhaps they were related? He shifted forward, slightly, wondering whether he should ask and how he ought to ask. The familiar feeling of additional magic had him turning in time to see two gentlemen entering through the door that Mason held open.

One of them was a head shorter than the other, with olive skin and straight hair the same pitch-black shade as Lady Kalzik. He was wearing a traditional Indian outfit, much as Quinn and Kyle had earlier, with a royal blue and purple dupatta artfully arranged around his neck. It was draped in just the right way to show off two perfect mating marks, one on each side of his neck, visible to anyone who was looking for them—and even more disappearing out of sight due to the Sherwani's neckline.

Alpha. The thought leapt into his head. Which meant that the other gentlemen had to be the—and Harry's thoughts promptly short-circuited themselves as he caught sight of the other dragel. He felt Charlie start faintly beside him and knew they were all seeing the same thing.

Whereas Lord Kalzik was dark and compact in stature, the Beta was tall, willowy, pale and blond in every other way. His hair was gathered in a thick, full ponytail that fell just to his waist, held together with a hair clasp that matched the fancy necklace around Lady Kalzik's neck and the fat earrings worn by their Alpha.

The most surprising detail about him, however, was the striking resemblance to a certain mute Healer.

"Quinn!" The name slipped out from Harry's mouth before he could stop himself and he froze when bright blue-green eyes suddenly zeroed in on him. The face was too familiar and the magic, soft and gentle, stretched out to him in a way Harry distinctly remembered from Quinn.

The eyes remained, even as the Beta turned—he only bore two single marks on his neck—and
addressed Thomas. "Health and longevity to you and yours, Chief Gorgens. That was an impressive display this morning. You honor our shared element quite well."

"The same to you as well, Patrick." Thomas rose from his seat on the couch to exchange greetings with both dragels. "That was a very well-executed turnout this morning, Hiram. Surajini must have been up all night coordinating that."

"Please don't remind me," Patrick said, with a chuckle. "Some of us had to be up all night with her."

Hiram mirrored the easy laugh. "I'm glad it looked that way. I heard about every single detail that wasn't quite right." But there was more fondness than annoyance in his tone as he snuck another glance over his shoulder at his Submissive, who was off in the corner. "She's been on edge since this morning and I can't figure out why. She won't say a word—well," he stopped, brow furrowed and exchanged a glance with Patrick. "You don't think that…?"

Patrick stared at him for a moment, then frowned in turn. Both dragels looked over to where Surajini was speaking heatedly with Alonso, gesturing in the air, her expression downright furious. There was a thin layer of visible mist hanging over them, a privacy spell with a courtesy spell layered over it, so the room's occupants would understand that the conversation was of some importance and not to interrupt to attempt to eavesdrop. "I'd like to think that she would say something if there was anything wrong, but we just received the message. I don't think—you don't?"

Hiram gave a slow nod of acceptance. "I suppose you may be right. Pardon our intrusion in your—"

"It's perfectly alright, in fact, you might be able to help." Thomas waved them towards empty seats. "Please, do sit down. We were just about to start. Care for some tea?"

"If you wouldn't mind," Hiram sat down on the right side of the settee and Patrick to the left. "How can I help? Or do you need Surajini?"

"It's a bit of a long story, I take it you have the time?"

"Time of sorts. Jini wanted to see if Orseno had dropped in yet." Patrick's brow furrowed as he tipped his head lightly in Surajini's direction. "We've been playing the perfect host and hostess all morning, the usual schemes. Famous Circles and pairs to be nice to, faces and friends we haven't seen since the last Hunt. I think I shall have to suffer through a dinner or three for tonight alone. My stomach is already churning."

Hiram turned his laugh into a cough. "Your stomach? I'm sure we have a potion for that."

Patrick gave him a look.

Thomas chuckled. "That sounds like my tomorrow. I make it a rule to never try to manage my social obligations on the first day. It's simply too much and after the hassle of seeing everyone up, fed and dressed—it's all I can do to present them and maintain my sanity. Asking for politeness and coherence among the upper ranks is suicide on a day like that." He took a sip from his cup. "As for Orseno, I don't believe I've seen him yet—not even in passing. They skipped the intros, didn't they?" He chuckled. "Of course they did, that's why she's here, isn't it?" He shook his head. "You would think that he would learn, but the last I heard, his Alpha had him on a delightfully short leash."

"Somehow I doubt that helped." Patrick slid his biscuits over to Hiram's plate. "Did it?"

"It did absolutely nothing for either of them and he's still all fired up. Something tells me we'll have
a few scandals before the week is out. He hasn't been by, though if he does stop in, I'll be roping him into this issue as well. If either one of you can help, Ilsa and I will be forever grateful. It is on behalf of this charming Submissive you see sitting over there—" Thomas raised his cup to Harry. "Harry Gorgens-Nott."

"Issue?" Patrick settled himself, a furrow nesting in his brow. "You rarely ever involve yourself with matters outside of state. Whatever is the matter?" He now turned his penetrating gaze to rest on Harry, this time, scrutinizing him in detail.

"In due time," Thomas said, calmly. "I would rather not repeat myself and it doesn't look like your lady will be taking a breath any time soon." He cast a glance over to Alonso and Surajini. "Then again, I trust you can keep her updated. This particular issue is personal. Our company today is courtesy of my dear Ilsa on behalf of her mentored student. The charming young gentleman who shares our element is her Theodore. The tall fellow is the Beta, Charlie and I'll leave you to guess on his element. Between them is Harry."

Patrick and Hiram exchanged a glance, then mirrored each other with the perfect tilt of their head in acceptable greeting.

Thomas smiled encouragingly at the silent trio and Theo shifted to the forward of their shared seat, preparing to speak for them. To his surprise, Thomas gave the faintest shake of his head and directed his next dialogue to Harry, his golden gaze softening as he took in Harry's curious expression and faint mask of worry. "Harry, I would like you to meet my dear friends from the Kalzik Healer clan and the head of the Kalzik family Circles. The Alpha, Hiram Kalzik, his Beta, Patrick and their wife and Submissive, Surajini, who is currently manipulating my Ace, Alonso."

"You gave her permission," Hiram said. "I told you she would take you up on it."

"I am honored that she has," Thomas said, quickly. "I am more worried for why."

Patrick offered a tight smile. "That would make two of us." He looked to Hiram.

The Kalzik Alpha was smiling at Theo. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I apologize for interrupting your evening. This was not a planned visit, but if it requires a healer's expertise, we are more than qualified to help. What seems to the problem?"


Patrick's head snapped around to stare at Harry and for one moment, those almost-teal eyes seemed to be an impossible shade of blue, before he looked away and leaned forward to murmur something in Hiram's ear. His Alpha shook his head and Patrick frowned, glancing up at Harry and the others, before repeating his whispered question.

Harry couldn't make it out at all, but he tried to call up a friendly smile.

"Would you mind if I tested it to be sure it was Merrow?" Hiram asked. He looked from Theo to Harry and then at Charlie. Patrick sat tall beside him, a slight furrow in his brow. "Only with your express permission, of course."

Harry gave a quick nod. He scooted forward to the edge of the settee when Patrick rose to stand in front of him. He held his head high and waited.

"Relax," Patrick said, softly. He made a fist with his left hand and held it out. "Touch the palm of your dominant hand here and think back to the spell, who cast it—if you know—and when it happened." He flinched when Harry's hand rested atop his own. "Wait—you're magic sensitive?"
Harry nodded. "I had a-"

"You're the Silverwing." Hiram interrupted. "Patrick, it's him."

"My guess was right then," Patrick said, smoothly. "Sorry about that, but you looked so familiar and I am thinking—never mind what I am thinking—just hold your hand steady. I'll use a different spell."

Harry opened his mouth to say that he was, when he realized that his hand was trembling ever so faintly. He sucked in a slow breath and carefully focused on stilling the tremors in his hand. With some effort, it stilled. "That's never happened before." He said.

"Magic sensitivity often has several different after effects, depending on the individual. There is nothing strange, unusual or weird about it." Patrick placed his free hand atop Harry's.

"Approximately eight percent of rare and high-magic dragels suffer from magic sensitivity. It's simply when the physical body cannot hold the amount of magical power belonging to that single entity. It is a good thing you are dragel—I wager you would have had a terrible time growing up otherwise."

"Which actually brings me to another matter," Thomas said. He set his cup down on the low table to the side of the seating charts spread out over the top. "Ilsa told me that he was wizard-born and raised, with no mention—hide nor hair—of his mentor. I don't suppose either of you have heard anything of a missing person with that sort of assignment?"

"Off hand, no." Hiram said, after a moment. "You know the council is rather strict about that sort of thing. Usually those who fail to present are hunted—you know this."

"I do." Thomas acknowledged. "I also know that when they are caught, they usually end up in a Healer's care for very specific reasons. I was hoping you might have…?"

"Eh, but he's a Nameless, isn't he?" Patrick asked. "Breathe through your nose, Harry, not your mouth. Think back on the moment the spell was cast and if you can't recall it, then think of the moment where you realized you were spelled." He frowned. "I haven't heard anything either and they do tend to call me when there is a situation of that sort."

"Which was why I'm asking." Thomas sighed. "If that's not the case, then what other alternatives are there?"

Hiram began to silently tick things off on his fingers. He frowned. "The ones that are left, I do not like." He rose from the settee and came over to see how Patrick fared. "Have you done anything about it?"

"I filed it at the Council Hall and I have mentioned it to anyone that will give me an ear." Ilsa said, speaking up. "I have tried a few simple tracers of my own, but I do not have the necessary authority to hunt them."

"And you won't be receiving that, anytime soon." Bahn scolded. He poked her in the side and she half-bared her teeth in answer. "I have asked for some footwork on behalf of the Elves, but they are only seeking information for the time being and they have not arrived in Nevarah as yet. They will be here within the next few days, I believe."

"Nothing at all?" Thomas asked. "That is…unusual."

"Which worries me." Bahn said. "Harry said he also told ah, Councilman Terius, I believe."
"Councilman Terius?" Thomas repeated. "As in Terius Baronsworth?"

"He's Bonded now," Ilsa said, helpfully. "Terius Snape. Has a nice, dark broody Alpha and everything. They are beautifully mismatched."

"Terius?" Thomas repeated, surprised. "Well, I suppose I ought to congratulate him the next time I see him." He smiled. "It's about time. He stopped hunting since the last Hunt. I'm very happy for him." He paused. "And he hadn't heard anything about a missing mentor?"

"Why exactly is this so complicated?" Charlie asked. He'd been listening to the conversations for some time and now he spoke up, his concern clearly written on his face.

"It's actually rather simple, love." Delani nudged Bahn off of her lap and into Takar's. She rose from the settee to come closer and see what was happening with Patrick and Harry. "You saw the amount of magic displayed by the Royals, yes?"

Charlie nodded. It had been rather impressive.

"That's only a fraction of their power. They do possess an unbelievable amount of raw power, but also they have experience and practice on their side of things. They do not have to be all-powerful, but they should be capable of making important decisions that affect their entire following. You can only imagine what kind of chaos there would be if that sort of power ran unchecked with no training, restraint or proper regulations."

Theo gave a slow nod. "I do—and coming into it isn't a pretty thing either. There's no ribbons and heavenly choirs, just a lot of pain and confusion." Ilsa made a soft, clicking sound, clearly meant to be soothing and directed to Theo. His lips quirked into his usual almost-smile and the rest of the dragels smiled outright.

"A mentor helps with that transition," Delani continued. "They provide the stability and the acceptance that is crucial during those formative years. They teach you to trust your instincts, to exercise and grow your magic and abilities. They teach you the necessary etiquette, the formal laws, courting and hunting, but most of all, they are there for you." A sad smile touched her face. She watched Patrick murmur something to Harry.

Harry readjusted his hand based on the instruction. Patrick nodded.

"When your family Circle doesn't provide the support you need or it feels like your world is caving in on you with all the responsibilities and drama, your mentor is there. They are not perfect, but they are present and that makes an unbelievable difference. I am quite indebted to mine." Delani threw a smile over her shoulder at Bahn, who was tracking every move she made with a watchful eye. "They are also old enough to have significant experience behind them—you cannot offer a mentorship unless you have met certain requirements—so if they do not show up to claim their mentored student, then you have to know that something is terribly wrong somewhere. They come from a Bonded Circle, which is how they can teach of Bonded dynamics and they are either Pareyas or Submissives, meaning they have full support that can be called to their aid at any given time and significant power at their disposal to defend themselves."

"Then why is it taking so long to find out what happened to Harry's?" Theo demanded. "And I honestly do not wish to hear some ridiculous excuse as to the Hunt being-"

"I will see that it is taken care of," Thomas said. "You have my word."

Delani tipped her head in his direction, her words directed at Theo. "You are speaking to one of the
people who can actually do as he says, take his word for it—and if Ilsa has been working on it as well, then there will be some results to show soon."

"The real reason," Ilsa began. "Depends on Border conditions, you saw what it took to 'port here, yes?"

Theo gave a brisk nod.

"You also recall the situation that drew me here when we were preparing to leave? The announcement about the Fabrine? There are occasional spikes depending on where they gather and why. The why is what requires extra assistance and that was why I was not able to join you. It is not a little matter. This is significant. Our effects are more focused on external matters than internal concerns at the moment. The fact that it is happening during hunting season means there are larger gaps to cover and certain priorities will be reshuffled. Finding Harry's mentor is extremely important—but so is keeping Nevarah safe, while Harry is inside of it."

Bahn sat up at once, knocking his head into Takar's chin. He shushed his Beta's muffled protest and patted the injured spot, absently with gentle fingers. "What situation? You never said anything about a situation. Ilsa! Tell me it wasn't that woman."

Ilsa sighed. "Her name is Mauriel and I was her last resort. You know that. She called me while I was...out. In responding, I ended up here." Her cheeks flushed a faint pink.

Bahn's pale eyes narrowed faintly and he stopped patting Takar's face. "Define last resort." He said, dangerously. "And do think very carefully, my dearest, before you answer."

'I'm sure she can explain herself later." Nara rose from her own seat and flashed a smile with a hint of warning in it. "I am sure no one else really cares to know, Bahn." She nodded towards Patrick. "How goes it?"

'I'll know in a minute." Patrick closed his eyes and hummed. The sound in his throat was very soft and gentle, but as he did so, a pale blue light began to glow around his hand and fist. An audible spark crackled between them and Harry squeaked in surprise, instinctively jerking his hand back—or rather, trying to.

"Don't!" Hiram sprang forward, pushing Patrick's hands away as Harry's own came free. A spark of golden energy leapt between them and then Hiram was wiping his hands on the front of his sherwani with a face. "You're lucky Jini didn't see that, she'd skin you alive. I thought you said you had your levels straight."

"I do." Patrick stared down at his own hands in puzzlement. "Thank you. I just—that's never—" he stared at Harry, then turned to Hiram who was now inspecting his hands. "My hands are fine, his own—"

"The last time you had a reaction like that—"

"Jini almost killed me, I know." Patrick gently tugged them free from his Alpha's grasp and his sharp gaze zeroed in on Harry. "You've just had a Blood Seal removed, correct?"

Harry paled. "I did." He said, quietly. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"Not now, seeing as it's off." Hiram answered. He looked at Harry's hands, frowning. "But you do not exactly acquire a Blood Seal within—Thomas, how old is he?"

"You could ask him yourself," Thomas said, mildly. "Whatever is the matter?"
"Jini?" Hiram turned faintly, calling over his shoulder. "Surajini!" A vaguely mystified look registered on his face. "I would apologize in advance," his lips twitched. "But she's honestly better at Seals than we are. It's her specialty. I tend to focus more on rehabilitation and Patrick's specialty is-"

"Not mentioned in polite company." Patrick interrupted. He gave Hiram a look that said more in a single raised eyebrow. "You do know she will smother him?"

"I'm counting on it."

Hiram's words did not make sense until Surajini and Alonso had finished their business and she came over to see what was happening with everyone else. The moment Thomas had brought her up to date with everything that had happened, she reacted in very much the same method as Thomas had.

"You dear child." Surajini breathed. She took three steps forward and hugged Harry to her, resting her chin atop his head. Magic flowed liberally out from her, a beautiful, pale golden color that wrapped around them both from head to toe. It fizzled angrily in a few spots, but she ignored them, a look of concern on her face.

When she did release him, she kept ahold of his hands and turned back to Hiram and Patrick, speaking in rapid-fire Hindi with a flick of her eyes towards Thomas. Both of her Bonded listened then shook their heads in alternating moments. Surajini scowled. She pulled Harry to her side, keeping an arm draped around him, turning her half-glare to Thomas.

He held up his hands at once. "I would be the last one to stand in front of you, Lady Kalzik."

Her golden-green eyes narrowed, faintly. "I told you not to call me that, you-"

The scent of blood wafted through the air and effectively cut off whatever she was about to say. "Scent charms," Patrick managed to sound out, before magic flickered through the room and several sparks of magic leapt to obey.

Light footsteps announced the return of Alonso and both Patrick and Hiram grew rather still. Surajini's lips merely tightened into a line as she watched the Gheyo step into the room, stop a respectable distance away and tip his head in acknowledgement. He was wearing the same outfit he'd had on earlier, with the exception that there was now a faint trickle of blood from his left temple—from a neat slice just above his eyebrow—and various other red smudges along his upper torso. She returned the nod and watched him until he was out of the room.

There was a flicker of magic from Bahn's corner and then a powerful wind blew through the room, airing it out. When the scent charms fizzled out, there was a burst of chatter.

"Surajini!" Patrick exclaimed.

"Surajini!" Hiram echoed.

She drew herself up, shoulders squared. "Neither of you were doing anything about it," her voice was deceptively light. "I thank you, Thomas, for the use of your Gheyo. He has never failed me."

Thomas swallowed, a vaguely unsettled expression flickering over his face. "Anytime." He said. "Was—is everything alright?"

"It is now." Surajini gently squeezed Harry's shoulders and released him. "And seeing as I have
something new to occupy me, I shall be quite fine."

"Surajini," Hiram began. There was a definite scowl on his face. "I sincerely hope that-"

"I shouldn't have favorites," Surajini said, lightly. She turned her smile toward him. "And Arielle help me, I swear that I don't, but Dyshoka is not some cheap whore for sale. Lord Belden should have kept his despicable desires to himself." Her eyes flashed pure gold. "How dare he lay a hand on my daughter." There was a low growl deep in her throat. "How dare he!"

"So you asked a blood price?" Patrick shot back. "On the first day of the Hunt? Surajini-"

"I asked Alonso, with Thomas's permission." She scowled. "I have no regrets. I could not have asked one of our own and you know this."

"I know that we are Healers!" Hiram retorted. "There are some things we must not do."

"And yet, there some that we must." Surajini held her head up high. "Scold me for it later if you must and if I am in more trouble than that, I will accept whatever you believe my transgressions worthy of. However, for the time being, I believe we should pay a visit to the other Clan Chiefs, as Thomas appears to be useless in this particular brand of spellwork. Perhaps a Royal is on the premises and we can see about helping Harry." She smiled, thinly. "Helping Harry should be our top priority at the moment, as Healers, shouldn't it?"

Hiram made a sound in his throat. "We'll help." He said, stiffly. "And we will speak of this to-"

"Leave it." Patrick said, quietly. His blue-eyed gaze lowered to the floor and his clenched hands slowly uncurled.

Hiram turned on him. "Leave it?"

"As if you didn't want to gut the bastard yourself." Patrick's smile was pure ice. "I hope you asked him for all that he was willing to give."

Surajini's own smile was rather frightening with the hint of fang and the very tangible aura of power in the air. "I asked Alonso. I think that is an explanation in itself."

Thomas shuddered. "It is. I am very glad we are friends, Jini."

"Speaking of which," Surajini sharp-eyes flickered to Ilsa and drilled directly into her. "It seems our Dyshoka has something for your daughter. Something I was entirely unaware of, until this morning."

Ilsa choked.

By the time everything was sorted out—Harry was able to piece together some of the details. He was surprised that the Kalziks and the Deveraines had never met, but then he took into consideration the differences between Earth and Air elements and wondered how exactly he would balance that if he were to court a dragel of a different element. As a Nameless element, he didn't have to wonder about elemental attraction—though it would definitely come into play at times, seeing as he tended to lean towards Theo's earthen touch rather than Charlie's fiery warmth.

Once the little initial shock had filtered out, Ilsa had proven herself to be quite a capable lady—and elemental heiress—when she'd risen to her feet and offered something of a bow. "I count my Dahlia as a gift and we are honored that your daughter would consider her as a worthy Intended."
Surajini snorted. "I would say they are more than Intended."

Ilsa's lips curved into a fierce smile. "True. I was the witness for their marking ceremony."

All three Kalzik's started visibly.

"Marking ceremony?" Patrick found his voice first. It was rather faint.

"Bahn, dearest, I wouldn't ask, except for, well, I am asking." Ilsa held out a hand.

Bahn moved to join her and he paused, looking between Ilsa to Surajini, before his eyes fluxed silver. "She is happy?" He asked.

Ilsa's smile softened. "Happier than you can know." Greta made a noise in her throat. Ilsa gave a faint shake of her head. "She's old enough—older than the others and it's her choice."

There was a slow nod from Bahn and he turned to face Surajini, affecting the same pose that Harry had shown Thomas earlier. "On behalf of my Gheyo, with the interest in our joined families, the House of Deveraine, has no quarrel with yours."

Pure shock registered on Surajini's face, eyebrows arched upwards, jaw dropping. After a moment, she mirrored the bow and a tiny smile played at the corners of her mouth. "On my daughter's behalf, with the apparent joining of our families, the Kalzik Clan and my Circle, has no quarrel with yours."

They shook hands and hugged.

Relief showed on Patrick and Hiram's faces, with the rest of the Deveraines finally relaxing, with the final threads of tension out the air.

"Wonderful," Theo drawled. "Can we focus on Harry now?"

Harry blushed.

"Lord and Lady Imaldis are on their way up," Thomas's Gheyo, Mason, informed him. "Shall I ask them in?"

"Please do, at least on our behalf, if not his." Delani said. She cast a glance back at Ilsa. "Step out, if you would?"

Ilsa grunted. Greta rolled her eyes and pulled her out of the room.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked. He dutifully turned in a circle as directed by Surajini who was now trying her hand at removing the Merrow spell as Patrick and Hiram's efforts had been fruitless. "Why can't she be here?"

"She's an Earth element and the Imaldis Circle has always had issues with that." Bahn explained. "They have never liked the fact that Shayla has come over to play with Soula." He smirked. "It annoys them that she is not an Air element, but the girls have been friends for years. Our Circle is also officially registered as Air and our social ranking makes it impossible for them to ignore us, so while they might make excuses to Thomas, they won't to us." He sniffed. "What are you doing now?"

"Diagnostics." Surajini said, in a clipped tone, focused solely on Harry. "Please do not stand so close to him. You will skew the readings. Breathe in love—and hold it."
Harry did as directed, squinting upwards as she waved her wand over his head, chanting softly in Hindi. Patrick was examining the readings from her wand that were inscribing themselves on a floating piece of parchment. Hiram was mentally sifting through the shared medical database that all Healers had access to, searching for some sort of information on Merrow spells and their successful removal.

"I do not understand how one so young can have so many seals," Patrick muttered. "If I would have my hands 'round their neck, believe me, I would renounce my Healer's Oaths."

Hiram winced. "Can you take any of them off?"

"At the moment, no, not without upsetting the poor thing." Surajini hummed. She rapped Harry smartly over the head, twice, with her wand. "You can breathe now. What did that one say?"

Patrick leaned over to show her the scrap of parchment. "It's not exactly what I was hoping for, but look at this. Maybe we can do something with this part here?" The three Healers put their heads together, conferring quietly for a moment.

Harry swung his arms out, carefully working at the stiffness that had come from the wealth of spells cast over him.

"How are you holding up, Harry?" Charlie asked. He moved over to hug Harry from behind, pushing his element over into him, just the way that Surajini had told him would help with the stiffness. "Is it helping anything?"

"I can't tell yet." Harry tilted his face to the side for the kiss to his cheek that came from Theo's side. "I'm fine, Theo. Sorry it's such a hassle."

Charlie thumped him on the head. "You're not a hassle—and does it look like they mind helping?" He motioned towards the Kalziks who were now drawing shapes in the air with their wands, leaving faintly colored lines behind, a complicated medallion of sorts.

"Not really, I guess." Harry bit his lip. "But I'm sure they weren't planning on spending their first day of the Hunt trying to figure out how-ow!" Harry looked down at Bahn on his other side. "What was that for?"

"Being depressed." The elfin Submissive said, cheerfully. "Besides, they are Healers. They're on call twenty-four-seven. Whenever there's a public announcement asking for help, they are the first responders. If they are physically unable to help, then they send whatever magic they can through the same channels that Hiram is using to check that database." He smiled at Harry. The smile wavered and then he trilled a faint note of distress in time for Takar to snatch him up, turning his back to the far wall in an instinctive move to shield him.

Harry choked, gasping when he felt the impact before it actually registered for everyone else.

A powerful magical shockwave rippled through the room, drawing flinches, screeches of displeasure and the occasional hiss. Something had just happened somewhere nearby.

Mason had burst into the room at Thomas's screech and now, he held his Submissive tightly, forcefully checking him over. "It's a breach, Mason. I'm fine." Thomas squirmed, but didn't protest further. "Is everyone alright?"

"That was absolutely—terrible." Surajini said flatly. She was sandwiched between Patrick and Hiram and all three Healers wore the exact same expression of grimness. "Wait for it," she said, darkly. "Anytime now."
"Wait for what?" Bahn wriggled for Takar to put him down. "I'm fine, Tak." He nuzzled his Beta's neck and glanced down at his stomach. "It's gone. That was only one—I could feel it on the air. Check me." Takar eased him to his feet and immediately cast a diagnostic spell. "They're fine," Bahn breathed, a second later. "Thank you." Takar nodded, but kept an arm around him still.

Harry had shrunk back into Charlie's embrace, half-sandwiched himself when Theo had moved to shield his front. "What was that?" He asked, feeling a little hint of anger surfacing. That had been the very last thing he'd expected, but it reminded him of a certain graveyard and exploding gravestones. He willed his mind to keep the memories away and focused as best as he could on the reality in front of him. He would deal with those later. He needed to focus here now.

"Shockwave," Thomas said. Mason had released him, but Thomas kept him near, with a tug on his uniformed sleeve. The Gheyo gave a wry smile and took up a guarding position just to his Submissive's left. "Something must have—Nevarah is protected by special protections in many, many layers. That felt like a layer—like something breaking." He shuddered again.

A hazy mist of white-grey winked into existence, hovering just in front of the Kalzik's before it grew to be the size of a dinner plate. Within seconds, a hazy, colored image began to twist into shape. "Mum? Mum, it's Dy!" Dyshoka's garbled voice grew clearer. "There's been a breach in the Seventh dome over the North side of the Realm's border. I'm fine, I was with Dahlia Deveraine, she's left to join her Circle. I'm with Quinn, Kyle and Emily. We're all fine, but we're close and there's—" The image twisted and faded out, before coming back. "There's Fabrine crawling around here. Not much, but the Gheyos are—keep down, Kyle!" The image shuddered again. "—watch your head, you big lug. He's fine, Mum. They're already repairing things, but there's some pretty bad injuries. We're not sure what happened yet. A lot of Pareyas were injured—they felt the attack coming on. We could use some help—Quinn, over here! She's having trouble breathing."

Dyshoka's message vanished just as a golden beam of light streaked down from the ceiling. A metallic voice began to speak. "This is a general announcement for all active Healers. Please respond to situation twenty-nine-oh-two in the North quadrant of section three. There has been a breach at the border walls. Injured ranks are Gheyos and Pareyas. There are no Submissive injuries. Fabrine may be present, but we are working to have them eliminated. Do not respond if you do not have a defensive Bonded to accompany you."

Surajini scowled as the light faded. "They can never just say what they need us for, can they?" She growled. "Harry-love. I will leave you in Thomas's capable hands. My readings show the same as his did, you'll need a Merrow to take that off. As much as it pains me to admit it, my method of help may do more harm than good at this point. I have no desire to put you through the pain that will forcibly remove it. If you have exhausted all other options by tonight, then send me a message. I'll see what I can do. Perhaps I'll think of something." She elbowed Patrick. "Stop standing on my feet. You weigh a good—"

"You'll look after him personally?" Hiram asked Thomas. "I understand your parental obligation, but—"

"I will and he will." Ilsa answered for both of them. She stood by her father, having returned when the shockwave had passed. "Be careful."

"We always are." Patrick half-smiled. "Jini?"

Surajini tilted her neck to the side, her aura was deliberately thrown out. "Temptrificus Meeras, permission for three master healers for situation twenty-nine-oh-two. Immediate vicinity of Dyshoka Kalzik."
Luna skipped up the steps leading to the Fairy Queen's private quarters. Her soft-soled shoes made very little noise on the white marbled floor and she playfully twirled around some of the large pillars lining the walkway up the gold and crystal encrusted doorway. She bobbed her head in necessary politeness to the four guards standing watch at the door.

They eyed her suspiciously for a moment, then parted to admit her. She waited as they opened the doors and then held her head high as she strode through the doorway. The room was light and airy, with colorful, pastel shades of sunlight streaming from the circular ceiling, a swinging bed anchored from a hook in the center of the ceiling dome.

It was a fantastic room, covered with realistic images of the former Fairy Queens, their lovers, and famous scenes from their colorful history. Luna allowed herself a quick look around before she scanned the room in search of said Queen. Her smile surfaced, faintly, when she caught sight of Her Royal Highness seated near a window at one side of the room, her official golden quill in hand.

"Luna," her name was breathed with the warmth of spring and the hope that was often associated with that same season. In a swirl of pale green fabric and tinkling jewelry, the Fairy Queen enveloped Luna in a warm hug. "I am so glad to see you made it to us safely. Your father has not yet arrived," she sighed, wrapping an arm around Luna's shoulders and guiding her towards the door that led out to her private garden. "Are you well?"

"I am quite well, dear lady," Luna said. "But things at school are not."

"Tell me everything," the Fairy Queen said. She took a seat on the garden swing and waited while Luna settled in next to her—cross-legged. She gave a light push on the cobblestone walkway and the swing began to move back and forth, gently.

"It is rather complicated," Luna said, at last. "Remember what I told you, about Albus Dumbledore?"

"The wizard who killed your mother?" The Fairy Queen furrowed her brow in puzzlement. "I thought you had said that you intended to-"

"I did." Luna said, calmly. "But then he made another mistake and I thought it would hurt more if I made him clean up his own mess." At the Fairy Queen's arched eyebrow, Luna took her wand out from behind her ear and tapped it on her right knee to send a bit of fairy dust down to the tip. "It's easier if you would take a look?"

The Fairy Queen inclined her head, the golden tiara tilting to the side from her mound of bronze, flower-braided hair. "If you like," she said.

Luna smiled. She waved her wand in a figure-eight pattern, twice clockwise and once counterclockwise, ending with a slight flourish at the end. In the rectangular area where she'd been casting, the fairy dust had hovered in mid-air, forming a thin, but visible cloud and an acceptable viewing surface. Within seconds, an image began to play—a projected memory—a few moments after the images were moving, sound accompanied it.

It showed Hogwarts sitting at attention for their Ending Feast at the end of the year, with all the students weary, but glad to have their schoolwork over with, the professors themselves looking as if the holiday could not approach fast enough. The tables were overflowing with food and there was even a faint strain of music in the background, a treat for the student's last day.
A perfectly ordinary scene, except for the moment where Dumbledore lifted his cup in a toast and cast a spell upon every child present in the Great Hall. Luna's lower lip quivered, faintly, before her expression schooled into one of hardness, her angry gaze drilling into the image of Dumbledore.

To the naked eye, in a regular wizard's pensieve, there was no proof of any spell cast.

To a Magical Creature, viewing a memory replay through fairy dust, it was painfully obvious to see the runes etched into his cup, the flash of blue eyes and the deliberate spell cast with Torvak magic, a nearly invisible wave of wispy whiteness that had bubbled up and over from every single goblet on the table, spilling over to each child—and teacher—in turn, until they were all enveloped in a cocoon of sorts, one that stretched, strengthened and moved with their every step.

"Easy child," The Fairy Queen tapped Luna's wand hand, where she'd been gripping her wand hard enough to break.

Luna managed a tight smile. "I-" she began, the usual playfulness faltering as she asked a silent question she could not put into words.

The Fairy Queen smiled, her softness melting away to sharp edges and a mother's fierceness as she pulled Luna into a careful hug. "I do not know why men—and wizards—must do such things, but there is always a solution. Always an answer. Always hope. Never lose sight of that." She pressed a kiss to Luna's pale forehead. "I take it there is more creature blood present among the pureblood than they would wish known?"

Luna half-laughed, snuggling into the hug, a gesture of affection she rarely found anywhere, save for her father and only in the times when they were together. "Dragel, Torvak, Vampire, Succubus, Dyrad, Ethnic, Elemental and Werecreature." She ticked the types off on her fingers. "And of course, nothing. Some truly are purebloods, not a single hint of anything creature-related." She frowned. "It could mean that they used purification potions though."

"It could," the Fairy Queen agreed. "How would you have me help?"

There was a long pause and then Luna sighed. "I do not know, my lady. I only—I only know that I cannot leave it alone and that I feel as if I must make him pay."

"He must." The Fairy Queen said, quietly. "And not necessarily by your hand if you do not wish it, but this Dumbledore will pay. You do not toy with such things and expect no consequences." She frowned. "Must take a charm before you travel once more, I will not have you realm-hopping with no protection of any sort."

Luna wrinkled her nose as the embrace ended, the Fairy Queen now thinking deeply. "The pathways are still safe," she began. "There was hardly any-" she broke off as the Fairy Queen gave her a look.

"Hardly any?" The Fairy Queen prompted. "I sincerely hope you were not about to make some foolish statement such as 'there were hardly any Fabrine skulking about' because that would invite a lecture I have yet to compose about the importance of protecting oneself from things they should not yet know of."

A sheepish smile danced over Luna's face, then settled into her old familiar one. "I did not come by the pathways," she admitted. "I used Mum's medallion—and you know that. I would never travel those pathways alone, not now." She chewed on the tip of her wand for a moment before she caught herself and glared at it. "The other realms are disturbed, aren't they?"
"Death walks," The Fairy Queen said, mildly. She gave a little kick at the ground, jostling the
garden swing into movement once more. "And when she walks, all the shadow crawl on their
knees, begging her to end their misery." She sighed. "Very well, you know where the armory is and
you know where I shall be, you have my blessing. Travel safely."

Luna slid off the swing and twirled to a stop. "Nevarah?" She clarified.

"Indeed. It is their Hunting season and I do believe there are some of our own that are soulbonded.
I will be escorting them and offering my blessing to the newly bonded Circles. You are free to drop
in."

The blonde witch shook her head very faintly. "I would rather not. I have much to do."

"And you will do it well. You make me proud, spriteling—as if you were my own." The Fairy
Queen held out one hand. Luna caught it in her own and lightly kissed the back. With a bob of her
head, she turned on her heel and with two slashing arcs of her wand, sprouted white and blue wings
that carried her swiftly from the garden and out of sight.

The Fairy Queen watched her until her figure as a mere spark in the sky and then sighed. "Rolf?"

Her nephew straightened up from his position to the far left of the little garden patio, a hedge
clipper in hand. "Auntie?" He folded his hands in front of him and bowed respectfully.

"Follow her. Make sure she is safe."

Rolf's lips twitched into an almost smile and he stood to his full height, clicking his heels together
and offering a salute. "I always do."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whew! That was 10k words worth of a roller-coaster ride. *wipes sweat from
keyboard* I hope that was a fun chapter for everyone. ;) I certainly had some fun with
it. The hint of Luna and some about the Snapes, hopefully helps to get some of the
actual voldy and dumbles plot going. The next chapter will be coming up soon, I'm
already working on it, probably about a quarter of the way through. ~Scion

forum.fanfiction.net/forum/There_Be_Dragons_Harry_Forum/108964/

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry and Deveraines)

Charlie-(with Theo, Harry and Deveraines)

Harry-(with Theo, Charlie and Deveraines)

Deveraine Circle members-(Bahn, Delani, Takar, Ilsa and Nara-with Harry and Co. All
others are off doing their own thing.)
**Set In Motion**

Chapter Summary

Thomas takes Harry and Co. to meet Prince Raspen to see about having the Merrow Spell removed. Meanwhile, Jun, along with Regulus and George are trying to make their way to Nevarah. Hermione’s circumstances are changing all at once.

Chapter Notes

See first chapter for disclaimers/warnings/summaries. Link to TBDH Forum is in my profile. This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. New FAN ART has been posted in the forums and new ONESHOTS have been posted to my profile. Stop by and show some love. :)

RECAP: Harry and Co. accompany Bahn to meet Ilsa and her father, Thomas, the Chief of the Earth Clan. The Snapes are ‘ported to the same guarded living quarters as the Deveraines and Harry. A sudden Fabrine attack on the protective dome over Nevarah startles everyone just as Thomas is attempting to get an audience with Prince Raspen(earth element). Quinn’s parents, are called to respond to injuries from the Fabrine attack and Luna Lovegood visits the Fairy Queen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**JUN BLACK : UNPLOTTABLE SPACE**

"Are we all set?" Jun traced the last rune on the floor and dusted her hands with a satisfied expression. "Reggie, love, don't stand in my line of sight, I can't make the words out from there—George, could you—yes, thank you." She accepted the black velvet cloth from the little tray he held out for her. "You're a quick study, I'll give you that." She flashed a faint smile at him, a hint of sadness and worry mixed together. Her emerald eyes flickered over the little tray's contents, the chalk, the cloth and a slender, ornate silver knife.

"Is there nothing else you need to tend to?" Regulus asked, he was very carefully dusting black powder all along the complicated lines Jun had drawn on the floor of his study. "I mean, I thought we had to leave."

"We did—I mean, we are. We do. Stop that!" Jun threw a look at him over her shoulder.

He was distracting her and while it was normally quite helpful, it was starting to wear on her nerves on account of the mental battle taking place within her. She was dredging up memories and bonds and emotions that she had buried for a very, very long time. Being an Empath was a very difficult role in itself, but she’d had decades to perfect it and it meant that she was strong enough to know when to lock the empathy away. Regulus had been invaluable, endearing himself to her with
the way he'd always managed to skillfully change the subject or suitably distract her.

The look he sent in her direction was vaguely apologetic and mostly playful. He wasn't trying too hard to distract her, already knowing on his own that it wasn't what was needed in their present situation.

"George, darling, hold this right here and hold it steady." Jun thumped a fat candle on the tray and blew at it. The wick sputtered and fizzled out, a thin stream of smoke rising from it. She hadn't quite calculated that properly and it showed now, to her extreme annoyance.

George's lips twitched faintly.

Jun glared at him. "Well, don't just stand there, give it a shot." She turned away with a huff, having grabbed two more sticks of silvery chalk from the tray. Gathering up her skirt with one hand, she tip-toed over the neatly drawn sections, bending over to add a jot or tittle here and there.

With a half-smile, George blew softly on the candle. The wick flared to life, a steady, blood red flame. He frowned upon seeing the color, but worked to hold the tray steady. The moment the candle had taken the flame, the weight began to increase, trying to draw the tray down.

"What color is the flame?" Jun asked, twirling over another section and bending over to inscribe a simple spiral in a blank spot. "Reggie, make a little mound two paces to your left. I want it to explode."

"Uh, red." George flexed his arms, focusing on the flame and not the increasing weight of the little tray.

"Red?" Jun repeated. "Surely you can do better than that—no Regulus. A mound. A little pyramid. You know, a pile?" She gestured with her hands. "What kind of red, George?"

"Very—very red." George swallowed. "More like a rusty red?"

"Blood red," Regulus said, coming over to stand by George and looking over the younger dragel's shoulder. He'd poured the last of the explosive powder into a tiny little mound and then immediately exited the finished product. Jun's medallions were powerful and doubly so when they were active. He didn't trust it without her standing directly in the middle of it to counteract any temperamental magic. "It's very close to Blood red, which means you shouldn't be waltzing about in there, because he won't be able to hold this for longer than a few more seconds."

"Waltzing about? Is that what you think I'm doing? You're a beast, Regulus." Jun snorted. She came to a graceful stop just to the left of the center of her perfectly created medallion. From the folds of her sleeved blouse, she drew out the silver knife from earlier and tucked it into her mouth. "Stand back," she said, speaking with difficulty. "and hold it steady, George. I quite like my head where it belongs, not blown off into some unknown realm."

George and Regulus exchanged a gulp. George's arms quivered faintly. Regulus gently patted his arm.

"Oh come on, it wasn't that bad," Jun mopped George's sweaty brow with a handful of her skirt as she knelt on the stone floor beside him. "Honestly."

But it had been, at least for anyone who wasn't Jun.

Regulus was sprawled out on the floor nearby, his dark eyes fixed determinedly on the ceiling.
George was curled up, glassy-eyed and smelling faintly of smoke—Jun had just extinguished his external flames—and had yet to speak a word.

"Jun, love. I adore you, and you are my life, you know this—why must you continually insist on reducing what few years I have left to nothing?" Regulus somehow managed to find the breath to speak and did so with as much ceremony as he could muster. He had been prepared for a lot of things, but he hadn't expected that.

He couldn't recall ever feeling such raw, potent magic pouring out of the woman he was proud to call his wife. A tiny feeling in the back of his head reminded him that this woman was a powerful Empath, a Rune Mistress on top of that and a dragel to boot. It had been sheer luck they'd met, but she'd had a life before him, he was certain, even if she never spoke of it. They hadn't even started the journey to Nevarah yet and things were already exploding. Something told him that he was in for a hell of a ride.

"Because it's fun, darling." Jun squinted down at George and with a flicker of her hand, materialized a nifty paper fan that she began to wave over him, wafting away the final smoky wisps. "Don't try to speak just yet, give it a minute and try not to feed the fire on the outside. It only caught you off balance because you weren't paying attention. You're fine. You're on solid ground and I would never let anything happen to you. "Any of you." She amended. "Besides, I'm alright, aren't I?"

"That's not the point," Regulus huffed. He peeled himself off the floor and looked over to the fruit of their labor, a fiercely glowing white medallion with a nine-pointed star and three distinct transportation circles humming to life as magic rolled off of Jun and fed directly into it. "Is there a point?"

"I don't think there's a point," George groaned. He pushed away the fan and sat up with a grimace. He had a better grasp on his flames now, latching onto to them with a determined, single-mindedness. The explosion had startled him and he'd instinctively reacted with his external flames, operating on the belief that if he was flaming himself, then the flames around him couldn't hurt. But they'd disappeared almost as quickly as they'd flashed to life and he realized it was only to burn out the powder. "Floors need cushioning charms." He said, for lack of anything useful to say.

Jun laughed and patted his head, rising to her feet. She'd already cast subtle diagnostics over both of them to be sure that they could handle the trip, her magic and the portal she was about to invoke. The only reason she had remained unruffled was the simple point that it was her magic. She knew it inside and out, just like every crevice of her soul. "Men," she said with fond exasperation. "Honestly, you'd think I haven't done this before."

"You haven't!" They chorused together.

"I'm fairly certain you haven't," Regulus amended. He looked to George who offered a half-shrug of support. "Mostly certain?"

The redhead's shoulders shook with laughter. "As a matter of fact, I have. I did have a life before you two, you know." She tossed her head, then reached back to pull her hair into a thick, bouncing ponytail. "Now hurry up, we've only about ten minutes before this is fully activated and it will be the ride of a lifetime."

Regulus warily approached, having stopped by George to check the younger dragel over and be sure he was alright. "Now I'm worried," he said, plainly. He crouched down to sit beside George, offering himself as a brace so the younger dragel could catch his breath.
"Don't be. This is how I ended up here," Jun whirled around and leaned forward, kissing Regulus on the cheek and George on the forehead. "Now, step forward on my mark and only walk in a straight line and only on the lines that are green or gold. If you touch anything else, you'll be blown to bits."

Regulus squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his forehead. "It'll be fine," he said, faintly, clapping George on the shoulder. "I'm sure it will be." He gave George another minute. "Think you can stand?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"With us, you always do." Regulus assured him. "Do not worry, everything will be alright."

George looked between them to Regulus's exasperated expression to Jun's cheerful one. He decided to settle somewhere in the middle and cracked an easy-smile of his own. He could understand this devil-may-care sort of attitude, it was the playful sort of air that he and Fred had always assumed when inventing their pranks and jokes. Now, he simply looked to Jun, waiting for her cue to enter the medallion. She was working powerful magic here, the kind that he'd never seen before and most certainly not this close-up.

Regulus seemed quite fine with it, as if the sheer magnitude was nothing new to him. There was almost something comforting in that realization and George understood why, a moment later, when Jun's tempered magic washed over him. It made his heart ache because it reminded him of home and Mum.

Stepping into Jun's transportation medallion was very, very noisy.

In fact, George rather wished that he had earplugs of some sort, except that having them would have meant using them and he certainly wouldn't have had a chance to do so with Jun shouting out instructions to them both. She'd explained beforehand that she was constructing a private pathway through which they would simply walk from this uncharted realm to Nevarah, which counted as a 'nevermore realm' because it did not touch any actively known plane of existence and required one to be either born there or Bonded to a native Nevarean, in order to be able to travel to it.

Ordering the rare supplies that that been required just to write the medallion had taken a few days and that was why their trip had been delayed. Of course, Jun was an excellent teacher, if nothing else and George was an exceptional student—when he put his mind to it. They'd spent most of their waking hours studying, sparring and learning more about each other in a way that was different, compared to any wizarding experience George could recall.

Now, with the wind rushing up from under him and the chatter of a thousand voices, he could barely focus on placing one foot in front of the other—remembering to make a straight line—to reach her outstretched hand. He had her left side, Regulus had her right and they needed to hold her to hand to be grounded, lest the portal blow them away.

It took all of his concentration to walk the three feet forward to graze the fingertips of her outstretched hand. The moment he touched her, the noise amplified by ten and the wind surged upwards in unrelenting gales.

_Breathe through your mouth._ Came the projected words. _Don't look down—look forward!_

George squinted at her, turning his head to face forward with some difficulty, the moment he caught a glimpse of what was before him, he almost forgot to breathe. It was a web-like tunnel,
seeming to connect stars with strands of pure, glistening white light.

"This is called a Runewalk." Jun smirked. "It's not your standard 'portal or transportation object. Only those who are sworn to the Runes can access them. This will allow us to bypass about three weeks' worth of portals, portkeys and other irritating methods of transportation—as long as you don't pass out on me." Her grip tightened on each of her companions' hands. "There is also a time difference involved. Nevarah runs on different time, but I'm aiming to throw us somewhere into their current timeline, so everything will straighten out." She held up a hand at Regulus's expression. "You can ask for an explanation later and if I feel like explaining the magical physics of it, I will. If not, I'll find you a book," she said, matter-of-factly. "Now then. Remember to hold on tight and do not let go. Understand?"

George squeezed back, wondering at the same time, how a portkey could last three weeks. He decided he didn't want to know when he realized that the familiar surroundings of the comfortable home were now disintegrating before his very eyes. The wind blew cold, before he drew on his own talents as Jun had taught him and turned it into a tolerable warmth. A swirl of black feathers passed over him and he snuck a look to the side to see Regulus morphing from human-avian hybrid into a giant black bird, that hunkered down behind them, no longer needing to hold Jun's hand. Instead, he hung his huge black beak over Jun's shoulder, hooking it on her shoulder as if for extra insurance.

And then it happened.

Like the blink of an eye, a twinkling star in the sky, something shifted and everything moved.

Light and darkness swirled together and George could only hold on for the ride. He could've sworn that he'd seen planets as everything blurred past and then the ground melted away from beneath his feet and reformed into something else. He blinked.

And then there was green grass under his feet, a starry sky above and clean, unpressured air around him. He sucked in one great heaving breath after another and was vaguely aware of half of his face being pressed against something warm, soft and familiar. It turned out to be Jun as she stood beside him, carding a hand through his hair and smiling down at him with the most tender expression he'd ever seen on her face.

"That wasn't so bad, now was it?" She asked again, but there was a teasing note in her voice and he knew that she didn't mean for him to answer.

"Regulus?" George coughed out, ducking away from her hands as his stomach roiled.

Jun simply replaced her hand over his forehead and chuckled, following his movements so he couldn't quite pull away. The sudden coolness in her hands, soothed the aftermaths and after a moment, he calmed, the urge to vomit slowly fading. "There we go, better ne?" She patted his head, then took her magic hands over to Regulus, who was working on being more human than bird at the moment and having a terrible time of it. "I didn't mean for you to break out the feathers, darling," She cooed.

He shied away from her hands, much in the same fashion as George had—he would have remembered the burning magic that had traveled through her and into him as they had literally been pulled across realms and times too complicated for a single mind to fathom. "What was that?" He gasped out, hunched forward on his hands and knees. "All those things, the shadows-" he cringed, reaching feathered hands up to scrabble at his face.

Jun grabbed them at once, pushing back with some force to keep him from carving lines into his
agitated face. "Regulus!" She said, sharply. "Please get a hold of yourself, man." She gave his arms a little shake and then straightened, releasing him when he went limp in her grasp. "We call those Fabrine. Those of us who are Nevarean, that is. To us, Fabrine are—dark or fallen, souls that roam about until a reaper or a hellhound comes to consume them or collect them. They are drawn to magic, moths to light and all that, they feed and prey on whatever is weaker than them."

"There was a lot of them down there," George shivered. He stood up and began to brush himself off, grimacing at the faint quiver in his muscles. This particular method of transportation felt as if it had yanked him in a hundred different directions for far longer than necessary, but he'd also been able to retain a very necessary hold on his magic, quite differently from the original dragel 'portals that Jun had pulled him through before. "Is that normal?"

"Fabrine? Normal? No." Jun frowned. "I'd say they're unnatural too, but that wouldn't be very nice of me." She relaxed, faintly when Regulus began to find his own feet. She hadn't stopped stroking his shiny feathers and he stretched forward, preening her wild red hair, before finally settling down for the transformation that returned him to his usual hybrid self. "How are you feeling now—both of you?"

"Land legs will come in a second," Regulus grimaced. "You could warn us next time, love." He butted her shoulder, affectionately.

"Where would be the fun in that?" Jun said, dryly. Her lips twitched. "Next time." She scratched a hand gently through his thick black hair. He leaned into the caress and a look of warmth was shared between them.

"Let's not have a next time," George suggested. "Should we warn someone?"

"Good idea." Jun rubbed her chin in thought. "I suppose we should—and I ought to report in before we start mingling about. Very well. Come on."

"Another one?" George groaned. He didn't think he could stand to stomach another Runewalk, but he didn't want to be the reason they were stuck where they were—wherever they were. So willingly came forward and followed Regulus's example, as the Torvak-hybrid motioned for him to copy his movements. They hugged Jun around the middle and she wrapped a strong arm around their shoulders in turn. "Should I hold my breath?" He asked, uncertainly. He wasn't sure that holding his breath had really helped much during the Runewalk.

Regulus turned his chuckle into a cough. "That is usually a good idea," he said, as Jun stepped on his foot. "It helps with the nausea."

"Temptrificus Ergen! Dragel royal, by permission granted to the house of Evanson, Acting Prince, immediate vicinity."

NEVARAH : ROYALS' LIVING QUARTERS : FRIDAY - AFTERNOON

"Thomas?" A grey-haired woman appeared in the main doorway, her silvery hair hiding one half of her face, a single golden eye causing her appearance to look even more aged than her agitated footsteps suggested. She came to a stop just inside the room and at once, zeroed in on Thomas. "Oh Thomas, thank Arielle, you're alright." She started forward and he met her halfway.

"Gloria." Thomas murmured. He clung to her for a moment, soaking up the comfort that came through their Alpha-Submissive bond, before he kissed her throat and she released him with a soft sigh. "I am alright. It was only a shockwave. It only startled me. Is everyone alright? They feel
fine." He'd instinctively reached out to each of his Bonded the moment the quake had begun.

"Startled would be an understatement." Gloria feathered a hand over his face, brushing his dark curls back from his forehead, her eyes solely fixed on him. "Everyone was fine when I left them. I was just about to join the others for a soak at the hot springs, I'd just said yes and then I felt the break and I couldn't reach you fast enough-"

"You were very fast." Thomas praised, leaning into the touch of her cool hands on his face. "And I am quite fine—as you know I will always be, Ergen willing." He smiled up at her, but didn't protest the arm that immediately draped around his waist. "I don't suppose you know if the others-"

"Everyone is fine. Gage left to visit them individually and he made me swear I would 'port straight to you." Gloria finally released a sigh that had her shoulders slumping downwards. "I am glad you are well."

Thomas smiled. He stretched up on tip-toe, curving a hand around her neck to pull her down for a sweet kiss. She leaned down, accepting the token of affection for the reassurance it was meant to be. "I heard a Healer's report when they summoned Lady Kalizk and her triad." He paused. "It sounds as if it was only a superficial break."

"Let's hope it was and is," Gloria said, grimly. "Any casualties?"

"Thankfully, no. The report only said there were multiple injuries for the ranks of Pareya and Gheyo. No Submissive injuries."

Gloria nodded, briskly. That sounded about right and she was glad for it, because it meant that the attack hadn't caused much damage—not as much as it could have, anyway. "Where are you heading now?"

Thomas hesitated for a moment, then chanced a look over his shoulder to where Harry and the Deveraines were watching. "I was taking Harry to see Prince Raspen. He has a Merrow spell on him and we were hoping it could be removed before night, seeing as this is his first day at the Hunt."

"Oh?" Gloria's eyebrows arched upwards. "From which house?" Her gaze flickered to Charlie, then down to Theo, her lips quirking into an odd expression. She knew most of the high noble houses and most certainly all of those within the Earthen element, but there hadn't been any news of a recent Bonding for anyone that she knew.

"Ilsa's Theo." Thomas said, quietly. "Harry is his Submissive."

A faint look flickered across Gloria's face and she inclined her head, slowly. "I see." She did not say anything else.

"Are the Royals on the premises?" Thomas touched her arm to draw her attention back to him. "I know the Clan Chiefs are, but I haven't heard of anyone else."

"Everyone should be here," Gloria said. She looked up to the ceiling, mentally tabulating names, ranks and titles in her head, before nodding that yes, her answer was indeed correct. "Raspen should be on his private floor and his family may or may not be with him, counting the— aftershock."

Thomas smiled, pleasantly. "That's alright. We'll stop by and see if he'll see us." He squeezed her arm, again. "I am quite fine, Gloria. You should take them up on the hot springs, they're always the
best on the first day and I know you always enjoy them."

His Alpha made a disgruntled sound in her throat, but her gaze flickered over to Ilsa, then Theo, before finally resting on Bahn. She could see that he was fine and that had been the only worry on her mind. She tipped her head to the side and turned away. "You will call?"

"Haven't I always?" His smile turned fond. "Do keep me updated, if anything is amiss."

She matched his own smile. "But of course, my love."

They left as a group, slowly acclimating to the fact that whatever had just happened, things were to proceed as normal. Harry didn't exactly like it, because the hair on the back of his neck had yet to stand down and his hands would quiver every now and then without his consent.

Charlie looked rather pensive the entire solemn trek through white walled corridors with Gheyos posted at every doorway. "Very—tight security." He said, at last, for lack of something else to say.

"It's mostly for the Royals," Delani smiled. "The Gheyos are harmless, unless you step on their toes, then they're vicious." She smiled blandly at the pair of Gheyos that stared straight ahead, unmoving, at their left.

Theo twitched, faintly and quickened his step, reaching out to grab one of Harry's hands.

Ilsa snorted from behind him, her face set in a less-than-impressed expression. She was flanking the rear of their little group with Greta opposite of her. Thomas's Gheyos, Mason and Alonso, headed up the front of their little visiting party. "Did anyone say anything?"

Thomas shook his head, faintly. "No actual reports just yet." He was mentally tuned into the security feed that monitored Nevarah, evidenced by a tiny yellow stone just visible from the inside of his left ear. He would reach up to tap it every few minutes since the quake. "We're very lucky there were no serious injuries."

Ilsa grunted. She looked as if she were walking to her death, rather than simply strolling through close quarters. Greta threw her a look. She didn't like it anymore than her lover did, but she was well-mannered enough to keep her displeasure to herself. The look she sent the shorter Gheyo had Ilsa's scowl darkening even more, but after that, no one said anything else for a while.

Prince Raspen's floor was actually rather close and surprisingly, they were admitted with very little fuss when Thomas stepped forward to speak to the two Gheyos on watch. The guards were kind and cheerful, speaking warmly to Thomas as he led their little group upstairs and to Raspen's waiting room.

At this point, having seen them safely to where they ought to be, Nara and Takar immediately excused themselves to 'port out and check on the other members of their own Circle. Delani remained behind with Bahn, Ilsa and Greta, with instructions to Takar and Nara to check in with her the moment they were sure everyone was alright.

"Please have a seat, Chief Gorgens, the prince will be with you shortly." A young woman, unbonded by the lack of visible bonding marks upon her person, was the attending aide who gestured them all towards the neatly arranged seating area. She had a visible earcap over each ear, one side golden and the other side blue, which she tapped now as she spoke, apparently communicating with someone else via the internal security system. "Is it an urgent matter?"
"Thank you, my dear." Thomas nodded, gravely. "It is a matter of some importance. I'd like to know if there were aftershocks and if so, if there is anything pertaining to them that I should know and he is more than welcome to tend to it first. We can wait."

"Of course. I will have some refreshments sent out?"

Bahn made a face and shook his head.

The movement caught her attention and she turned to him, clipboard tucked in the crook of her arm, pencil poised to write. "No?" Her gaze flickered down to the swell of his stomach and she half-smiled in understanding. "Some tea then? Ginger and honey?"

"That would be just fine," Delani said. "Thank you."

With another nod, the aide was gone.

Theo opted for a seat closest to the fire and tugged Harry along with him. Harry didn't complain as he settled himself on the settee and Charlie took up the remaining seat together. He could feel Theo's agitation and Charlie's suppressed worry and he didn't like either of them.

Delani and Bahn didn't settle down until Ils and Greta had taken up preemptive guarding positions between the visible exit and the private door through which the aide had left. They were all tentatively nervous, but attempting to maintain some projected calmness. Mason and Alonso flanked Thomas, who sat directly within line of sight of Ils. When the tea arrived, just as he'd done before, he served them all.

"What exactly will you tell him?" Ils spoke up, at last. It looked as if the tense silence had worn on her nerves and her right hand hovered at her waist, just above her sword hilt.

"Raspen?" Thomas clarified. "The truth, I expect—or rather, a simplified version of what you told me."

"What if they want to start a hunt?"

"What about it?"

"Will you sponsor him?" Ils asked, bluntly. "You know I can't. I haven't the pull for it and it will take some time to regain whatever following I have—at least for the present time."

"I hope the present time remains nice, quiet and clean for a bit," Delani said, half to herself. "But if you do feel a need to make a very obvious and bloody point in a public place, then do give some sort of warning."

Bahn managed a faint chuckle at that. "I would second that," he said. "If you could manage it. If you cannot, do not trouble yourself." His lips twitched and he smiled to himself in remembrance of Ils and the proud, fierce Gheyo he knew her to be. In all honesty, he wouldn't have minded seeing her clean things up.

"Thomas?" Prince Raspen's voice was soft and quiet, coming from the far end of the room—the opposite point from where the aide had exited. He was still dressed in his royal finery from the morning introductions, and his face, while young, bore a few faint stress lines. "Thank Arielle you are alright," he greeted the older dragel with a hug, showing the familiarity between their ranks for the friendship between them. The Gorgens Clan was well-respected and quite powerful.
Thomas had immediately risen to his feet and met the Prince halfway to their little group, offering a hug and a murmured greeting of respect. "The same to you and yours. Can they spare you?" He knew that the Prince was likely busy with the sudden unexpected situation of the quake and all the necessary formalities that would be required to investigate things.

Prince Raspen gave a faint nod. "We received word, actually, a few minutes before the breach—we were able to minimize damage, at least as best as could be expected with the given timeframe." He touched Thomas's elbow and gestured forward to where everyone else remained seated and politely waiting. "Shall we? I hear that you have quite a puzzle for me."

"Hopefully not as puzzling to you as it is to me," Thomas smiled. He led the way over to where Harry was anxiously perched on the edge of the settee. "Tea?" He asked, as a matter of course.

"In a moment, perhaps. Present the problem first and we shall see what we shall see." The Prince declined. He turned curious golden eyes to Harry's bright green ones, a flicker of warmth registered as he took in Harry's posture of forced relaxation. That simply would not do. He would have to set them at ease as soon as he could. He preferred respect over fear in any situation, unless otherwise needed. "And as simply as you can manage it, you need not be detailed."

"Of course," Thomas looked relieved at that and he gestured towards the settee, sitting only after Prince Raspen had seated himself. "You know of my Ilsa?"

"I do believe everyone does," Prince Raspen chuckled. He turned and looked directly at Ilsa, his golden eyes darkening to a light hazel. "I am very pleased to see you within our ranks once more, Lady Gorgens."

Ilsa swallowed. "Of course, my prince. I did not—mean to stay away for such a prolonged period."

"It is well that you have returned," Prince Raspen said, simply. "Continue, Thomas."

Harry fought back the thread of restlessness that was slowly settling over him. Prince Raspen had brought a peculiar scent with him from the very moment he'd entered the room and something about it was making his dragel excited. As far as he could tell, the scent was fresh and very nicely mixed with the earthy undertone that he could tell was Prince Raspen himself, but layered over that was something that vaguely reminded him of Charlie. A hint of smoke, a sliver of dominance and a musk that he could only think of as being—well, fierce.

That particularly embarrassing thought had him shaking his head, then cringing inwardly when it drew Prince Raspen's sharp golden-eyed gaze. He forced himself not to blush, even as he felt the telltale warmth surfacing, before thankfully, it faded away. He breathed a short puff of relief, trying to focus on the conversation and not the fact that Prince Raspen's golden eyes were quite nice and definitely more golden than Theo's. He did not want to think of anyone in comparison to Theo.

Not his Theo. His Theo was absolutely perfect. Harry blinked. Well, mostly perfect, he amended, to himself. Perfect enough, and that was just fine with him.

"I see," Prince Raspen said, at last. "That is quite a puzzle indeed." He sat back, propping up his chin with one hand, deep in thought.

Harry tried not to notice just how adorable he looked with his chin propped up in one hand and his eyebrows furrowed together. Inwardly, he fought the urge to squirm, forcing himself to focus on the words the Prince was actually saying.
“Have you ordered a hunt of any sort? It is within your rights.” Prince Raspen said. The family Circle usually held the first rights and while a Royal or a Clan Chief could override them, it was common courtesy to inquire about such things first.

“I did not wish to take the liberty, my prince.” Thomas said, calmly. “But I would not be amiss to having one assembled.”

“Good,” Prince Raspen straightened up and snapped his fingers.

His aide appeared almost at once, as if peeling herself out of the shadows along the wall, she approached, clipboard balanced in the crook of her arm. She bobbed a short, cursory curtsy, her eyes fixed on him. "My prince?"

"Fetch me Lord Cunningham." Prince Raspen said, briskly. "And ask him to see that his Hunters are ready and I wish to see his paid Gheyo as well." If there was anyone within their ranks that could track and hunt on pure instinct, then it was Cunningham and his lot.

"Of course, my prince. I shall see to it." She murmured.

Prince Raspen gave a dismissive wave, turning back to their group. "Now then, you said the spell was Merrow? May I have a look?"

"If Harry is willing," Thomas finally beckoned to the silent trio of the Nott Circle. "Harry, may I present his royal highness, Prince Raspen. My prince, this is Harry, his Alpha Theo and his Beta Charlie."

"A pleasure," Prince Raspen said. He rose to his feet in a single fluid movement, looking expectantly to Harry.

Wriggling out from Charlie's arm draped over his shoulder, Harry stood up, taking a step forward to be away from his Bonded, in case Prince Raspen decided to try any reactive spellwork. He felt as if he ought to say something, anything to distract his wayward train of thought. "Thank you for seeing me—us," he corrected, a fraction later.

Prince Raspen smiled. "Do not thank me yet, I have not done anything." He pursed his lips for a moment. "You said the Kalziks saw him? Lord and Lady Kalzik, her ladyship?" He asked, in reference to Surajini, for he knew her quite well and just how thorough her methods would have been. He'd been under the care of her talented hands before and knew to trust her healer's instinct.

"She did and said that while she did have an option to remove it, that it might be painful and she had no desire to cause him any physical discomfort if it could be avoided." Thomas explained. "She stopped by to visit and I asked her to take a look. She left with her triad because of the quake. They were recalling every available healer."

There was a faint wince at that and Prince Raspen gave a slight shake of his head. "Her pain tolerance is far above mine," he said, good-naturedly. "I would say that her mention of physical discomfort is probably quite close to being burnt alive." He gave a faint shake of his head. He had expected her entire Circle and family clan to have reported for the incident, so it was no news to him of her whereabouts. "This should not hurt," he began, directing his words to Harry. "So please do stop me if you feel any pain at all, alright?"

Harry nodded. "Sure."

"It might be bright," Prince Raspen warned. He clasped his hands together then spread them apart, a ball of energy hovering in the space between them, such a pale golden color that it was almost
white. "And here we are," Prince Raspen said. He held the ball of energy in one hand and gently lobbed it towards Harry.

Instinctively, Harry threw out his hands, and felt the magical energy pass right through him—painlessly—with a faint tickle. He twitched as the odd feeling trickled over him and then a moment later, reared back when the ball came back through his chest.

Prince Raspen caught it in his outstretched hand and it was absorbed back into his body with little fanfare. "Well, that was utterly pointless," he said, cheerfully. "We'll have to have a Merrow brought in." His lips twitched. "Alcandor will kill me."

"Not in your sleep, I hope." A new voice cut through the air, a young woman, approaching from the same shadowed corner where Prince Raspen had entered. "Then again, the bastard has a flair for the wrong kind of drama without even trying."

"Come now, Ebony, that's hardly fair to him and you know he baits you because you always react." Prince Raspen turned to greet the fire Princess that drew near their little group, her long black hair swaying behind her, gown swishing softly as she moved with ease and grace. He stepped away from their little group and went to offer her his arm, which she took, a small smile on his face. They exchanged the usual polite kiss to the cheek, the custom of higher nobles who knew each other well enough to accept such intimate familiarity. "Is everything alright?"

"Quite alright," Princess Ebony looked him over from head to toe. "The information was good, which you already know and I need not repeat the standard report, of which I am also sure you already know." She released his arm turning to look at the others and her gaze softened as it rested on Charlie. "Fate has a way of bringing us together." She remarked. "Did you make up your mind already?"

"Make up his—who? For what?" Prince Raspen looked from her to the Nott Circle and back.

"Charles," Princess Ebony said, simply. "I offered to mentor him."

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**AIDEN : HELLHOUND : ARYTHMOOR ESTATE : FRIDAY**

Aiden was in a delightfully dark mood when he received the report of his new consort's whereabouts. While he had originally been inclined to leave her be wherever that would have been—he had felt her magical signature when she'd been brought through the borders into Nevarah—the fact that the Hunt was about to begin had set him on edge.

Their kind—darklings, hellhounds and all other sentient beings of neutral darkness, such as Vampires—were allowed to run wild and free during the Hunt, so as long as they did their duty and maintained the strict security measures in place around the beloved capital city.

Nevarah, being a nevermore realm of light and general peace, was often a target for restless spirits, unhitched caspers and the occasional Spiritwalker.

It was also a magnet for the wretched, despicable creatures known as Fabrine.

The moment he'd been able to call some shambles of his council together, he'd order a border patrol and then he'd set in motion the formal announcement of a Reaping. One of the largest portions of Fabrine was made up of the restless spirits turning from their pure grief into true rage, a point of no return that often meant the individual was no longer afforded eternal peace or rest.

As a hellhound, Death's emissary in every breath and form, second only to her Grim Reapers, it
was their duty to perform the cleansings. A heavy burden that he would carry for the rest of his eternal existence and one that each member of his pack shouldered from the moment they were turned into his service.

A soft knock on the door announced Melacor, before the young pup stuck his head around the door, a tangle of gleaming black paws and wet, pointed nose. Pink tongue lolling from his mouth and wisps of shadow rising from his hound form, Melacor trotted over, circling 'round the ornate desk to awkwardly scrabble up onto the newly available lap.

With a muted chuckle, Aiden helped him up, settling the affectionate pup with a few good rubs and allowing a lick or two to his pale face. "I see you've been practicing. You hold your form very well," he praised. Melacor barked in happiness. "Yes, yes. I'm very proud of you. It seems you have been paying attention in your studies and as soon as I can spare an afternoon, you shall be duly rewarded for your brilliance and talent." Aiden leaned away as Melacor yipped in excitement. "Yes, yes, I know. Change back before I am deaf in my undead ear."

There was a twist of black-grey shadow and then the corporal black puppy fluxed into pure, wispy shadow, until it reformed into a small, childlike figure and when the tendrils of magic faded, young Melacor sat, perched upon his Alpha's knee, earnestly searching that pale face for signs of approval.

Aiden gently bumped his chin to the boy's forehead, a low growl of approval in his throat as Melacor tentatively wrapped skinny arms around his neck, relaxing in a way that he would never allow the rest of the pack to see. "I hope you are bringing me good news and not pointless drivel," he said.

Melacor brightened at once. "I am, Lord Aiden." He said, softly. "I found the exact coordinates for ah," he bit his lip, unsure of what to call the mysterious consort that he knew so little about. It wasn't exactly his business to know everything about his lord, but he did know more than the rest of the pack gave him credit for. Lord Aiden was the closest thing he'd had to a decent father in years and he'd done his best to earn the respect and responsibility that was his reward.

Aiden sighed. "My consort. You can say it. 'Tis only in title anyhow." He rose, easily settling the boy on one hip and gathering up the rest of the report on his desk. "Hold this." He instructed. "And keep talking." He exited his office through the hidden passageway that led to his private quarters and listened to the rest of Melacor's report.

"She was brought over with a group of Wizards from the Wizarding World. They got in to Nevarah because of Councilman Terius Barowntown who is now Terius Snape, and they are living in the family tower that belongs to the Barowntown Circle." Melacor held the paper file carefully. "I traced your signature to a specific floor and then a room on that floor. That's got to be where she is."

Aiden gave a slow nod, stopping to set Melacor down as he stepped into his bedroom. "Excellent. Thank you for seeing to her quarters. I will—likely—entrust her care to you, please be prepared to handle it in addition to your regular duties."

"Yes, Lord Aiden." Melacor immediately hurried across the room to fetch Aiden's preferred traveling cloak. "Is there anything else I should tend to in your absence?"

"I shouldn't be gone long enough for it to be an absence." Aiden muttered. "Fetch me two of those, would you?"

Melacor shifted uneasily at the mention of those, but he dutifully stopped by the nightstand and
opened the top drawer. Inside the drawer were several miniature boxes in black with ornate silvery designs carved on the front and some with gold and others with red. His hand hovered over them, unsure. "Which ones?"

"The silver is fine."

He selected the two closest to him and trotted over to where Aiden stood in front of a tall, floor-length mirror, focusing on his magic to make sure his human-esque appearance held. He knelt so Melacor could settle the cloak around his shoulders and do up the fastenings, accepting the two little boxes without comment. The top of each box bore his seal, an elegant rose insignia. Pressing the top of each box in turn to his lips, he sucked softly, inhaling the trapped the soul that refueled his dark nature.

The boxes shriveled away to dust at once, the moment the life-source within them was consumed and no longer sustaining the preservation spell that held them in limbo. Aiden licked his lips and rose when Melacor patted his shoulder gently in a wordless gesture to mean that he was finished. "Thank you," he said, stiffly. "See that there is appropriate—human food, on hand. This—consort—will likely be in need of some sort of sustenance and I doubt she can appreciate our true diet."

A ghost of a smile touched Melacor's face and he nodded. He would see to it.

Focusing on the faint pull of his own magic, Aiden drew sharply on the thread he'd left attached to Hermione. This would 'port him directly to her side and hopefully, he could bypass any wards and additional security. It wasn't as if anything existed to repel Death anyway and as one of her chosen emissaries, he would be able to pass through them, unharmed.

If he was lucky, this wouldn't take longer than a few minutes.

If he was lucky.

SNAPES'S QUARTERS : NEVARAH : FRIDAY

The problem with being the most brilliant witch of any age usually encompasses a host of annoying adventures and irritating little quirks that serve to remind said witch just how human she may or may not be. For Hermione, her most recent annoyance had come in the form of a fellow that reeked of death and darkness just in his funeral-like fashion and pale, red-eyed appearance. If she'd known any less of vampires than she already did, then she might have thought he was one, however, as a veritable Ravenclaw in Gyffindor skin, Hermione had always done her homework—early to boot—and knew that the broody agent of darkness that had—for want of a better word—rescued her was most definitely not a vampire.

She had silently cursed him from the face of the earth to hell and back, right along with Severus Snape when she'd first awakened from the frightful sleep that he'd put her into. It was a sleep where she was very much conscious of just how dark and bleak nothing was. Nothing was simply that, absolutely nothing. A void filled with the absence of everything.

Being the only speck of life in her mind had nearly driven her to madness, but it was hard to even approach the lowest form of madness when she discovered just how trapped within herself she was. At that point, Hermione had found herself reciting her lessons for that entire year over and over in her head, turning each piece of information over in her mind, searching for something that worked or didn't.

It was a simple trick, one that her mother had taught her and one that they used with new patients at
the dentistry office. Then of course, there had been the arrival of one Severus Snape.

That was when the cursing had started.

Hermione was far too frustrated to care that it probably wasn't the least bit ladylike and certainly not proper for a young witch of her age, but in all honesty, all she wanted to be was awake and aware. She knew that somehow, Severus Snape had found her and—remarkably—the dour man had not hexed her for stupidity nor left her to die, but rather had handled all of her care personally, displaying a surprising knowledge of rudimentary healing talents with precise and impersonal hands.

It was hard to be mortified when she realized that he was definitely not taking any liberties at all with her—not that she had thought he would, good Merlin, no!—but still, it was somewhat reassuring. He also occasionally spoke to her with the same acerbic tongue always used in class, when growling at her to keep her bloody hand down and not waving about in the air lest she disturb the air currents and somehow cause poor Neville's cauldron to blow up yet again.

It was almost as if he knew she was awake.

Maybe.

She'd been taken somewhere else, she knew that much, where, she had no clue. It was hard to follow the conversations around her without a single visual reference to ease them along, but she knew that Harry was somewhere close by and surprisingly, a few familiar voices—Teacher Terius, Professor Snape and Draco—along with voices that she didn't know, Theodore Nott and Charlie Weasley.

Theodore and Charlie seemed to be quite familiar and intimate with Harry now—and if that didn't count for utter mortification, Hermione didn't know what did—she would rather have been anywhere else than confined to a lucid sleep of sorts while hearing some of their sleepy conversations and the grunts, groans and growls that she really hoped weren't for what she thought they were.

Harry was quite distraught over her, she knew that much—at one point, he'd all but thrown himself over her and refused to leave—something that had both touched and alarmed her in the same instance. Alarmed, because she hadn't expected it. She had been fully prepared to stand up for Harry, simply because he was her friend, but touched when she realized that their friendship was deeper than she'd fully understood before. He cared about her and not just as a smart, bookworm friend, but as someone equal in heart and magic.

It had warmed her bruised heart in a way she hadn't thought possible and then the guilt had come, because she did know that she had ignored him quite terribly for the past few weeks—months, even, if she was honest—and just because she had her own problems and didn't know how to solve them. Perhaps if she'd dared to tell him, he might have been able to help. Out of everyone, Harry wouldn't have judged her, she knew that for certain now and it almost made her want to cry.

But she'd cried enough tears, more than enough tears before she'd left to die. She'd left him a letter, but it seemed as if he hadn't received it and that was good, in a way, because at least she wouldn't have to explain it when she woke—if she woke—it would be one less wound to bandage on their friendship. She hoped he would still be her friend, before she realized that yes, he would be, because he was loyal—even when she didn't deserve it.

Her mind tortured her with thoughts of how she'd greeted him at the start of the year and how nosy she must have seen, trying to overcompensate so he wouldn't notice that she was falling apart at the
seams and then—there was always a then—she remembered that painful, terrible moment in the bathroom where she'd done the unthinkable and obliterated him.

Of all the stupid, stupid, stupid!—things to do, she'd done the worst. If he ever found out—oh who was she kidding, he was Harry Potter, The Harry Potter—of course he would find out, for all she knew, he could have broken the memory charm already, after all, she hadn't had the heart nor the concentration to pour the kind of magical energy required for it to hold.

She'd been too weak to do so and it would have killed her inside to actually follow through.

At first, everything had been fine, but then Lavender had approached her with a question that had brought all her doubts to the surface. Things had been good with Ron, until they went bad and then, Lavender had come along. She'd asked that pointless question, that ridiculous phrase of whether they were dating or not and her world had crumbled. She hadn't been able to remember anything definite and so, she'd foolishly gone to Ron to ask.

He hadn't given her a straight answer, but he'd been insistent—as he usually was—and she had convinced herself that he preferred actions to words and that what they'd shared was proof of their love and surely there was only one kind of love, wasn't there? A true, perfect love? But then she'd come downstairs and Lavender had shaken her head as if she had a right to judge her and they'd argued—and she would never forget the smirk on Lavender's face where she'd claimed that it wouldn't be worth the trouble of bothering with Ron again, that if her precious Won-won preferred bushy-haired swots, she would simply wait until he grew tired of her, because she knew how to please a real man.

Hermione had thrown up that afternoon. Then Harry had come to help and she'd Obliviated him for his efforts.

Merlin, she was a terrible friend.

But Ron—he didn't even have anything to say when Hermione had stumbled across them, he'd simply blinked up at her with that stupidly adorable look of confusion on his face, the expression that said oops, I've been discovered—the kind that he gave when Snape glared at them for whispering in class and that had said more than any words could have.

Of course, with all of that aside, there were more pressing things to deal with, namely, one snippet of information that had worried her to no end. See, Harry and the others had let the Snapes—and did that realization make her shudder—look after her while they went off to take care of things and they had spoken of hellhounds.

Hell. Hounds.

Hellhounds, as if they were real. As if they existed. As if they were real, living creatures that could indeed drag her down to some terrible, fire and brimstone eternity. That kind of hellhound.

And then they'd proved it.

She had nearly died all over again, from the sheer shock and absurdity of it all when they'd lifted her shirt to check her stomach—granted they had preserved what little modesty was her own—but knowing that they were right, that had truly burned. What did that mean? Where would she end up? What would happen to her now? And what on earth had she ever done to deserve any of this?

The only blessing out of the bleak lot had been the lack of headaches and burning magic that had drained her for days on end with the cacophony of voices in her head since inheriting that blasted
silvertongue. The absence of that immense pressure and the lack of physical weakness had relieved her of a burden she hadn't even known she'd been carrying.

Inwardly, she shuddered at the nasty potions that Snape had forced down her throat, she knew why he hadn't spelled them into her stomach, it would have ruined the potency of them and the man knew his work, he had been the youngest potions master of his age, after all and she had found herself moving closer and closer to clarity since that dreadful moment when that eerie, red-eyed hellhound—for that was what he had to be—had saved her from certain death.

Time passed with excruciating slowness and it embarrassed her to no end when Snape tended to her on a daily basis, casting the necessary elimination spells to keep her body in proper function, and coaxing new potions down her throat. She was thankful for the cheerful Calida, who had tried and somewhat succeeded in brushing her hair into a semblance of order, while wiping down her face with a clean cloth and applying a bit of face cream for the sake of her delicate skin. That had been a gesture of kindness she hadn't expected from a young woman that she didn't know anything about. Teacher Terius had painted a rune on her face—with his own blood, she was sure, the man was obsessed with blood magic—for protection and then Draco had spoken to her once, about finding her wand and placing it beside her in a little wooden box.

The Snapes were certainly an odd bunch, she would give them that. She couldn't understand why they were fighting so much, as it seemed that there was no need to, but they also seemed to be somewhat out of sync, as if they were short-handed and she could understand that. It was almost like a soap opera on the telly. She could tell that Draco was bored and because of it, acting out—after all, hadn't Ron always done that? She knew all too well just how many times she'd had to distract him and sometimes even Harry, just so she could finish her work—or keep them out of trouble.

The latest development between the Snapes had been both sobering and troublesome though, because while even she could tell the men cared about each other, in typical men fashion, it seemed that they were too thick-headed to realize it on their own. A ridiculous argument had broken out over some prank Draco had played and on top of Snape's frazzled nerves, that hadn't gone over very well at all and Calida was exempt, being pregnant and in possession of a formidable temper of her own, which meant that Teacher Terius bore the brunt of Snape's temper as a very irate Alpha.

Hermione had felt sorry for him, especially after Snape had ordered Draco and Calida out of their quarters for the 'private talk' that really hadn't had much 'talking' in it at all. Terius had made a soft, keening sound that had felt as if it would rip her barely beating heart in two. The sadness permeating the room had been overwhelming in the aftermath of Snape's exit and she was almost glad that he'd sought some form of comfort by staying near her unmoving self, even if there was nothing she could offer him at all. She was also glad that she couldn't see his face, because something told her that the strong man was probably quite close to tears, torn between instinct and common sense.

He was barely there for a mere handful of minutes, before the temperature in the room had dropped to a sudden, definite chill and a tingle of fear and familiarity washed over her. She was very aware of where that last feeling had come from and she didn't like it one bit. She felt Teacher Terius's fear as a tangible jolt from the rune pressed to her face and it seared into her skin, hot enough to draw a cry, if she'd been able to speak. Then she felt a streak of his magic washing over her and a blissful coolness sank into her skin, before it faded away.

Somehow, she knew that he had removed it and she didn't have to know why, because the chill grew deeper and a hissing voice began to grow stronger. She silently screamed for him to stay,
even as she heard him back out of the room and run, his panic very real and very close. When a shockwave of magic blew outward from somewhere to her right, Hermione knew she was no longer alone in the room.

"Run. Yes, run," the voice hissed, furious in its anger. "Who said you could take her?" The words ended in a growl and she felt the chill ease just a bit, a flicker of magic passing over her with careful inspection. Her body shivered and heaved, a detail that registered with surprising slowness as Hermione understood the sleeping spell she'd been under was now being undone.

Familiar hands—and how did she even know them, so soon?—slid beneath her body, strong in their care and impersonal in their touch. She hoped if it was that dark, disagreeable fellow—it had to be, who else could possibly feel this tentatively familiar—that he would remember to take her wand. She didn't want to leave it behind. But then she felt and heard the rumbling growl from where her ear was pressed to one solid, chest and a frightening jolt of magic washed over her and she knew no more.

**AIDEN : HELLHOUND : ARYTHMOOR ESTATE : CONSORT'S QUARTERS**

When Hermione opened her eyes, it felt like the weight of the world came rushing back to rest on her impossibly young and small shoulders. She ran through the quick checklist in her head that every girl did when finding themselves waking up in a strange bed—clothes, check, magic, check, virginity—a rustle to her left drew an immediate reaction.

With strength born from pure adrenaline and little else, Hermione lurched upward into a half-sitting position. She found herself staring straight up into blood red eyes, just inches away from where her face had been, a familiar face framed by pitch-black hair, and ridiculously pale skin peeking out from an unbuttoned collar and rolled shirtsleeves.

Had he ever told her his name?

Hermione shook that thought from her head, even though the movement made her half-dizzy. She didn't know where she was and what she was doing there. Staying calm was nowhere in the picture.

"Get away from me!" The words were hoarse, as her voice was rusty from lack of use and Hermione scrabbled in the soft cotton sheets, hoping to find some sort of weapon—even her wand, however impossible—and snatched up an oblong throw pillow that was half propped up beside her. "I want nothing to do with you!"

Aiden blinked at her, a long slow blink with those blood red eyes, before he straightened with a deliberate flip of his inky black hair, offering a mocking bow. "As you like, my little lady." He then turned on his heel and stalked to the door, pausing to speak to the young boy who opened it for him. "Feed it and amuse it, Melacor. I care not how you do so. She is not to leave this room."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whew. This was another monster chapter. Apologies for the long wait. I didn't mean for it to take quite that long. Happy Valentine's Day! :) I have two new oneshots up in my profile, one with Harry/Wikhn and another with Harry/Charlie. Feel free to check them out. Upcoming chapter will have Harry's spell removal, Charlie and Ebony talking, as well as a glimpse at the Snapes/and the rest of the Weasleys, as things start
heating up. (and yes, there's plenty of courting coming about too). I hope you enjoyed the glimpse of Jun, Reg and George, now that they are in Nevarah, guess how long it will take for Harry to run into them? Thanks for reading! ~Scion

REVIEW RESPONSES are in the FORUM for Ch 86 will probably be done by tomorrow night, as long as my internet cooperates. Copy and paste to get there, click on the appropriate chapter number and scroll down to find your review and my reply. Replace the (heresadot) with actual dots as FF eats all urls. Live link is on my profile.

forum(heresadot)fanfiction(heresadot)net/forum/The re_Be_Dragons_Harry_Forum/108964/

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry and Deveraines)
Charlie-(with Theo, Harry and Deveraines)
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Deveraine Circle members-(Bahn, Delani, Ilsa and Greta-with Harry and Co. All others are off doing their own thing.)
NEVARAH – FRIDAY AFTERNOON – ROYALS’ QUARTERS

"...I offered to mentor him." Princess Ebony said, calmly. She looked between them all, briefly, but her main gaze was fixed on Charlie, obviously awaiting his answer.

Harry started visibly. His head jerked around to look between Charlie and Princess Ebony and his brilliant mind immediately went to work cataloguing the most likely time and place for where the offer must have been issued. Glittering green eyes narrowed almost at once as Harry recalled the pensive expression he’d seen on Charlie's face, after his whole transformation episode and then way he sat, frozen in his seat, when the Fire Royal Procession had entered the auditorium.

Something must have happened with Charlie after he'd had his private moment with Theo before his second run-in with Alec, Harry mused.

He had hoped good things would continue to come their way while they were in Nevarah. Yes, things had certainly been quite confusing and complicated; to say the least, but with his usual track record, Harry thought they were managing quite well. So far, he'd been hugged and quite possibly unofficially adopted by at least a half-dozen people—at least, that's what it felt like. He'd learned about relatives he'd never known existed—and there were probably even more that he might be able to meet, if all went well—and his magic had come back, he had more of it than ever before and he seemed to have genuine friends who didn't care that he was the Boy-Who-Lived. Case-in-point being Bahn, who was torn between careful protectiveness and outright worry, in spite of his quirks, Harry knew that the elfin submissive did care for him.

"Charlie?" Harry nudged his Beta, patiently. Knowing what he did of Charlie, he could guess that perhaps the redhead had been waiting for a more appropriate time to mention it.

Charlie's expression was torn somewhere between uncertainty and reluctance. He'd wanted to tell his Bonded on his own, but it seemed that the same fate that had thrown him into Ebony's path was
the very same one that had now brought them back to each other. He'd wanted time to think this over, to decide for sure, but now, he was the center of attention and her question hung in the air.

"Charlie," Theo said, when he didn't answer right away. He looked from Charlie's pleading blue eyes to Harry's worried gaze and then back at the expectant Princess Ebony. He could feel the turmoil between them through the bonds they shared. He would have to take charge and hopefully buy a few minutes of time so they could sort this out. Charlie looked as if he were caught between impossible choices with an improbable outcome and didn't know how to explain. Harry looked as if he ought to be defending Charlie. Theo had a fairly good idea that his protective instincts had come to the front, regardless of whether they were actually needed or not. "Perhaps we could sit down and sort this out?" He suggested. He nudged Harry back towards the settee where they'd been waiting earlier. "Please," he added, when it seemed as if no one was about to move.

Charlie twitched, faintly, but allowed Theo's gentle hands to herd him and Harry back to a sitting position. He knew, on an instinctive level, that his Bonded wouldn't really be upset with him, but the knee-jerk reaction had been anything but pleasant. In consideration for the current complications they'd weathered since arriving in Nevarah, Charlie was loathe to spring any sort of surprise on their little Circle. He'd wanted time to think about things and time to talk to Harry. "I meant to tell you," he began, as a note of desperation colored his voice. He had meant to mention it, but they hadn't exactly had much time to themselves for the day. "I wasn't trying to-"

Harry reached over and calmly covered his mouth, sitting close enough to Charlie for their knees to touch. He would have done a bit more than simply a hand over his Beta's mouth, but he was mindful of their audience and as comfortable as he was with his Bonded, he did not care for an audience for their more personal interactions. Keeping one hand on Charlie's mouth, to stop him from saying anything ridiculous, Harry turned to face the rest of the room. His gaze zeroed in on Princess Ebony and he offered her the best smile he could manage just then. This was a development he'd never considered nor expected in his wildest dreams of Nevarah adventures. "Would you mentor him?" He asked.

Princess Ebony had accepted Prince Raspen's hand and seated herself quite elegantly across from Harry's trio. She pleased to see the depth of the connection between them, even for such a young triad. She could tell that the Submissive's magic was strong and their Alpha was reliable. He was also quite adorable in his fussing and the princess hid a smile to herself, realizing that her intended student was very well cared for between his Bonded.

She made herself focus on the conversation and realized that the Submissive had asked her a question. "I would indeed." She said, simply. It hadn't been a difficult decision at all. The moment he'd run into her at the baths, something had clicked between him and she chose to acknowledge it for what it was. There were some mentored teacher-student pairs that shared bonds similar to a soulbond, but not for romantic love, but rather for true friendship and a quest for knowledge, a secure relationship where they could learn from each other while balancing their naturally volatile magic. Her own fire gift was quite destructive and she'd recognized his capabilities when her fire portal had washed over him as she left, for the proof had been in his lovely tri-colored hair. It was an unusual combination, just like her nearly black tresses and the most obvious warning to other fire dragels of just what kind of temperament they bore. "I had made my offer this morning, but was recalled before I could hear his answer." She half-smiled. "Our magics are compatible and there is much I could teach him." She hesitated. "And, I also feel—drawn to him."

Harry nodded. "Thank you." He said, simply. He turned to Charlie, his expression serious. He could read several emotions rolling off of the redhead and the biggest one was anxiety, followed by apprehension and neatly rounded out with worry for Harry. That made it much easier for him to grasp the situation and react accordingly. As far as he could make out, Charlie had been worried
about his reaction above all and that was the very last thing on Harry's mind. He did not care about
his own missing mentor in the face of Charlie's potential one. He would gladly suffer his own
issues to see Charlie with a mentor of his own, he certainly deserved one, considering the
circumstances in which he'd become a dragel. "You don't have a mentor yet, right? There wasn't
one when we checked."

Charlie blinked in surprise and then gave a slow nod, careful not to dislodge Harry's hand.

"Did you register him for one, Theo?" Harry looked to Theo, who was frowning, slightly. He had
very vague memories of their trip to the city council, he hadn't quite felt himself until they'd made it
out of Quinn's clutches that day.

"I registered you." Theo admitted. "And filed the paperwork for your missing mentor as well. I
skipped Charlie, because he hadn't made up his mind yet." He looked to Charlie, as if for
verification that he had indeed done as wished. Charlie offered a faint smile in recognition. He'd
declined, because he'd always been a quick study and figured that Harry was the greater priority
between them.

"So he didn't have one like I did?" Harry's brows furrowed together in adorable confusion.

"He wouldn't have," Princess Ebony spoke up. She had a small smile on her face and her entire
posture had relaxed at last. She could see from the equally blank looks on all three of their faces
that they were confused and very much in tune with each other. It made her smile grow a bit wider.
"He said he was from the Wizarding World and yet, his magic and his nature was and is new—as
if it were just revealed." She held a handful of red-almost-black hair in her lap and stroked her
fingers through the sleek strands. "He's old enough that he's past the age where they would be
assigned. After a certain age passes and no formal claims have been filed or sought, the mentor is
assigned to a new charge and that is it." She said, quietly. "I did check, by the way—and I still have
yet to hear your answer, Charles."

Theo looked as if he were about to say something and then, he sighed and reached over, tugging
Harry's hands back to his sides, so Charlie could speak. "Did she give you conditions?" He asked.
He could not ask much more, not in their current company and knew that it would be best if
Charlie did more of the speaking than Harry or himself. A mentor's proposal was not something to
take lightly and usually, if they were a good mentor, they would have certain specifications or
conditions attached to their proposal. He did not want to influence Charlie's choice, but he would
not be able to remain quiet if it had been a standard proposal offered. Charlie deserved—no needed
—something more and he would speak up if it was necessary.

Princess Ebony looked to be a bit too young to have mentored more than one student and Theo did
not want to insult the Royal by daring to ask such a question in the presence of their current
audience. Perhaps if there were no others present, he would have ventured to do so. Most mentors
usually taught several young dragels, as not all individuals chose to keep the mentor-student bond
after they had formed their Bonded Circle.

Charlie nodded, as if he didn't trust himself to speak just yet, but his blue eyes had a brighter sheen
to them than they had several minutes ago. He was obviously silently thinking things through and
drawing his own conclusions.

That was enough for Theo to give him the nudge he needed. "If they are acceptable, then the lady
requires an answer." His eyes flickered to a lovely warm shade of honey-gold, a glimmer of
something that looked like pride as he hugged Harry from behind, nestling his chin atop Harry's
head, effectively keeping Harry from distracting Charlie, who seemed torn between pride and
impatience for their Beta.
The furrow in Charlie's brow smoothed out at once as he read between the lines and understood just what his Bonded were hinting at. Yes, he really hadn't taken much time to puzzle through the reality of having a mentor, things had just been coming straight at them, one after the other since they'd arrived in Nevarah and he was almost afraid to take a breath for fear of what that simple, necessary action could bring. But now, as he watched, Theo's expression—though carefully closed—said that he was happy for Charlie and Harry's own expressive face bore unmistakable traces of hope and happiness, as if he were excited for Charlie to have found a mentor—even though his own had yet to turn up. Ebony's words from earlier were still quite clear in his head and if he had to be honest, then yes, he had felt a pull towards her as well.

Silence hung in the room for another minute and then Harry rolled his eyes, his head lolling to the side in an effort to dislodge Theo from using him as a resting post. "Char-lie!" The name was drawn out with a knowing look and as close of a whine as Harry would ever allow himself. "Please don't refuse her just because I don't have mine yet. We'll find mine—whatever happened to them, we'll know. It'll just take some time. It's alright—for you, it's alright." He tried to reassure.

Charlie swallowed, his eyes impossibly blue as he turned to face Ebony's bright orange gaze. He took a deep breath and then rose to his feet. "I accept." He said. "Is there—is there anything that I have to—do?" He faltered.

Ebony's eyes flared a bright, blazing orange and the temperature in the room leapt upwards by several degrees. "Do you, Charles Weasley of the Nott Circle, accept me as your mentor—to care for you, guide you and teach you, according to the sworn duty that is placed upon every worthy mentor?" She rose from the chair, every inch a fire witch and every stitch radiating well-earned pride and hard-won strength. She extended a hand to him, palm facing down.

Harry held his breath, feeling Theo's gentle squeeze from behind him, betraying his Alpha's own worry at the delicate dance of authority happening in front of them. This was something that only Charlie could do and as much as he wanted to simply reach out and make it happen, Harry understood that the best he could do was to offer his support from where he was. He watched as Charlie approached Ebony and then dropped to one knee, then the other, and gently took her proffered hand in his, touching it to his forehead in a gesture that spoke volumes.

The mentor-student ceremony required a binder—namely a mentor-student pair already matched—and three witnesses, one for honesty, one for clarity and one for legality.

Theo and Ilsa were immediately called out as the mentor-student pair to perform the binding service and Prince Raspen sent his aide to fetch a length of special scarlet ribbon. The coffee table was moved out from between the settees and a quick cleaning and cushioning charm cast in quick succession at the ornamental rug on the wooden floor.

They took up the traditional positions between them, Princess Ebony standing tall in the center of the rug and Charlie kneeling before her, their gazes locked. Her rich red-orange eyes glittering with the same strange fire that was now present in Charlie's blue ones.

Harry scratched at his arm, absently, feeling the prickle of too much heavy magic in the air. Bahn touched his side and Harry turned to smile at his fellow submissive. Bahn returned the smile, his soft grey eyes lightening as he watched Harry and then Charlie.

"They'll make a good match," he said, softly. "Their magic already knows it." He winced as a particularly strong wave of heat rippled through the room. "You can tell." He grimaced. "They'd better watch the temperature, I do not need to feel as if I am being baked alive in a sauna." He looked across the room, lips quirking into a pout that brought Takar directly to his side.
"Cooling charms, loveling," Takar said, with a chuckle. He rapped Bahn over the head with his wand and automatically did the same to Harry, catching himself a moment later, with an apologetic look. "Sorry, Harry, force of habit." He offered a smile.

Feeling a trickle of blessed coolness washing over him, Harry wasn't about to protest. "It's fine." He said, smiling at the worried Beta. Bahn's Bonded seemed determined to fuss over him whether he cared or not and he was starting to find that perhaps it wasn't as smothering as he'd expected—well, apart from the whole sneaking more food onto his plate bit, that was definitely smothering.

"I should have asked," Takar said, dryly, with a glance cast at Theo, who was watching them with half an eye from across the room. He stood with Ilsa, paying attention to what was required from them for the binding oath and allowed a stiff, begrudging nod at Takar's silent question in the tilt of his head.

"It's fine," Harry repeated. He hadn't thought to cast any charms of his own and he was a wary of testing his own magic, given the day's track record. Magic sensitivity seemed to be something he would have to learn more about quite soon.

"Air element," Takar said, softly, looping an arm around Bahn from behind, one hand reaching down to rest lightly on his Submissive's pregnant stomach. "Things like cooling charms and featherweight charms usually work better with air magic," he added, seeing Harry's look of surprise.

"Thanks," Harry offered, after a moment.

Bahn grinned.

The ceremony was very simple, at least to Harry. He found himself watching in fascination and no small amount of longing as he watched Thomas and Bahn officiate as the resident submissives present. He could not join them, as Charlie was Bonded to him, but he could watch and that was enough.

Bahn recited the formal requirements between mentor and student and Thomas extracted their individual promises, before Ilsa and Theo took up their positions beside the new pair.

Princess Ebony and Charlie faced each other, while Ilsa and Theo were perpendicular to them, forming an odd sort of box, between them. Charlie held his prospective mentor's hand in both of his, kneeling before her. Ilsa's hand stretched out towards their clasped hands, her magic crackling at her fingers and Theo held his wand at them from the other side.

"And so we call you as witness," Thomas intoned. "Delani Deveraine, Prince Raspen, Alonso Gorgens." The three individuals named stood up and to the right of the mentor-student pairs. "Bear witness to this new joining of friendship and magic formed on mutual respect and the element shared between them."

"We see and bear witness." The three witnesses murmured in unison.

"If you would proceed, your highness?" Thomas prompted the fire princess.

She flashed a smile with a hint of fang. "I, Princess Ebony Caveral, hereby swear on my honor that I shall, at all times and places, in thought, word and deed, live up to the high ideals and dignity of my element, in my capacity as a capable mentor to Charles Weasley. I shall see myself as his mentor, a friend and a teacher, to guide him through the paths of knowledge known to our kind, recognizing all the while that I am no less a learner myself. I shall strive to empower him to
actualize his individual potential to the maximum in a manner that will lead to personal and social transformations. I will endeavor to build his confidence and belief in his natural talents and whatever dreams may reside in his heart. I shall strive not to pass judgment without consideration, but will do my utmost to understand and appreciate his uniqueness. I will also hear his appeals and petitions, whatsoever he should ask of me." She paused for a breath.

Charlie's blue eyes were suspiciously bright, but he only swallowed hard and gripped her hands tighter in his own, understanding the weight of what was passing between them on a level that would never be measured.

"I shall care for him with the favor and partiality belonging to him as his mentor. I shall not hesitate to bring to his attention any failings or shortcomings that should be remedied for his betterment, so as long as it is within his best interests. Towards these ends, I shall invest myself and my magic to develop within him, love, kindness, patience, that which allows me to speak this oath in true honesty. I will remain forever aware of the power and authority I wield over him and treasure the vulnerability and innocence he trusts to me. I will neither abuse nor misuse these gifts and should I do so, may the wrath of Saurenth devour my soul to be scourged in the forever flame of hellfire. I will not permit considerations of elemental affiliation, nationality, prejudice or material advancement intervene in any way with my ability to be a steady, dependable mentor as decreed between our shared elements and the responsibilities to which I am beholden as a Royal on Nevarah's sacred soil."

A spark of blood red magic crackled down from her arms and circled around their wrists as Ilsa strode forward and began to loop the red ribbon around their clasped hands. Charlie wavered, once, and Princess Ebony offered him a smile that trembled faintly, before the temperature in the room rose even higher as their magic swirled around each other.

"Lastly, as his mentor, I swear to be his advocate in all matters of social nuance, shouldering the responsibility of his education in all areas of training. This bond I wish to forge between us, I call Saurenth as our officiator and I make this pledge in full heart, being of sound body and mind. May that which magic has decreed, never be torn apart." She squeezed Charlie's hands as her magic settled around his wrists, as if they were bracelets, then sank beneath his skin, hidden from view. Her smile was a near smirk now as she looked down at him. "Your turn."

A flicker of amusement shone through and Charlie squared his shoulders, staring confidently up at her red-orange eyes. "I, Charles Weasley, hereby swear on my magic and honor that I shall, at all times and places, in thought, word and deed, live up to the high ideals and dignity of my element, in my capacity as the mentored student of Princess Ebony Caveral. I accept her proposal and all that it entails, knowing fully well that I will defer to her as is her right, should it ever be asked of me. I will learn from her in whichever subjects she has sworn to instruct me, recognizing that we learn together. I reserve the right to appeal and petition, should I ever feel the need to do so. I will remain forever aware of the power and authority she wields over me and treasure the vulnerability and friendship entrusted to me as a result of that. I will neither abuse nor misuse the power within my grasp as and should I do so, may the wrath of Saurenth be my end. I, also, will not permit considerations of elemental affiliation, nationality, prejudice or material advancement intervene in any way with my role as her mentored student, as decreed between our shared elements and the responsibilities to which I am beholden."

A spark of glimmering gold-orange magic sparked to life at Charlie's shoulders and crackled down from his arms to circle around his new mentor's wrists, just as hers had done. The red ribbon knotted about their clasped hands vanished in a flicker of bright red flames and Charlie felt the final, accepting caress of their magic at peace with each other.
He spoke the final phrase of his oath with the same unwavering confidence in which he held her gaze. "Finally, as her mentored student, I swear to be her apprentice in all matters of social nuance, accepting that she bears the responsibility of my education in all necessary areas. This bond forged between us is witnessed by Saurenth. I make this pledge in full heart, being of sound body and mind. May that which magic has decreed, never be torn apart." He shivered as his magic settled around his wrists, then sank beneath the skin, hidden from view.

"So it has been witnessed," Theo began.

"And so it has been decreed." Ilsa finished.

"Let me be so." They chorused together. A soft golden glow of magic—as per their earth element—washed over the newly pledged pair. The three witnesses approached them in turn, adding their own blessing to the clasped hands. With that, the temperature in the room finally cooled to a tolerable point.

Theo rubbed Harry's slender arms as carefully as he could without drawing attention to them as they watched Charlie and Ebony sealing the bond between them as mentor and mentored student. It stirred up old feelings of affection, warmth and hope in his chest and he looked up in time to catch Ilsa's gaze across the room.

Her golden gaze glittered at him for a moment, then her lips twisted into that half-quirk of a near-smile and he found himself smiling back, before looking down to bury his nose in the sweetly scented tufts of Harry's dark hair. He hadn't been able to curb the feelings of possessiveness when he'd seen Takar cast a simple cooling charm over his Submissive. Logically, he knew that an air elemental had a softer magical touch for that sort of spell, considering Harry's recent magical sensitivity, but instinctively, he didn't want another's magical signature on Harry, but his own.

The moment he'd been released from his duty as part of the ceremony, he'd made a beeline for Harry. Normally, he wouldn't really have his hands on Harry quite this openly, given their current company, but he could feel a few carefully contained pulses of confusion, pride and sadness through their shared bond and this was the best he could do right now.

As if knowing that, Harry leaned back into the embrace, ever so slightly, smiling when he felt Theo nuzzling into his hair. He reached up with one hand to grip the arms wrapped around his shoulders and torso. He watched as Charlie hugged Ebony around the middle, who had moved forward to embrace him in turn, her thick, red-black hair spilling over her shoulders and an entirely new look passed between them, the first of many, between mentee and mentor. He could see the glow of their new bond slowly faded away as the room finally eased back to a more normal temperature.

This was certainly an unexpected situation for their first day on the Hunt, but he found that he didn't mind in the least. Not in the least.

For several minutes, no one spoke.

Then Prince Raspen moved forward and touched Princess Ebony's shoulder, careful to stay within her line of sight and not approaching her from behind. Her instincts would be riding close to the surface and he did not want to tempt them, even if he knew that she did not consider him to be a threat with the years of friendship they had between them. The new bond between mentor and mentee would take some time to settle in. "Congratulations on acquiring a mentored student," he said, formally. He looked to Charlie. "Don't ever let her appearance fool you, she's stronger than
she looks, twice as powerful and forever loyal." He broke into a wide grin. Even if he hadn't said as much, the oath that Ebony had sworn was quite serious. He was happy for them both. "Congratulations to you as well." He clapped Charlie on the shoulder.

Soon, everyone moved forward, taking turns at congratulating Charlie and then Princess Ebony, who graciously allowed Theo and Harry the use of her name without her royal title. By the time they'd settled down again, Prince Raspen's aide had returned, waving him aside to whisper about the errand he'd sent her off on.

He sighed and nodded, sending her off with another request, before returning to the circle where they all sat. "Lord Cunningham is a bit indisposed at the moment, due to an inner-Circle matter, but he will come as soon as he is able, which does hint that it should be some time before dinner."

Ebony shook her head with a faint wince, that of someone knowing something that perhaps they should not. "I really shouldn't say," she began. "But I can almost promise you I know what happened. He might not make it here before dinner."

"Then let us say you told me and I listened," Prince Raspen said, smoothly. "You need not break his confidence. I am sure he will come as quickly as he is able, the moment he is free. Besides, his hunters are the best and you know it." He smiled in remembered appreciation, for all Gheyos of the shadow element taught by the famed Lord Cunningham were wild, powerful and completely merciless.

"Indeed I do," Ebony allowed. She frowned. "How exactly did you plan on removing the spell?" She gestured towards Harry. They had shared his plight with her and she'd immediately become quite concerned as Charlie was now her mentored student and Harry was Charlie's submissive.

"With bribes and perhaps a small dose of groveling," Prince Raspen said, with a chuckle. "How else? You know as well as I do how fickle he can be, but if he has even the slightest inclination to help, he will help."

"That may require more groveling that you're in the mood for," Ebony shot back. "I cannot see his royal grumpiness agreeing to any of the usual options for removing Merrow spellwork and forgive me for saying so, but he's alive, isn't that enough?"

"Alive?" Harry frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

Ebony hesitated, ignoring Prince Raspen's sharp look. "Merrows usually don't bother with the hassle of spelling landwalkers. They kill them. The fact that you're alive—sorry, Charlie, but this is the truth—that is saying quite a bit. Wouldn't you agree, Ras?"

Grudgingly, Prince Raspen gave a curt nod, seeing Charlie's look of disbelief. "Still. I am sure that we can resolve this peacefully."

Ebony shivered. "You were always the most optimistic out of us." She bit her lip. "I don't mean to scare you—any of you, my apologies if I have. It is only that what I know of Merrow spellwork is rather devilish. I wouldn't tamper with it if my life depended on it. Not on my own, anyway and even with help, I'm not sure I would trust a Merrow to remove it. If it didn't hurt to cast it, it most certainly will to remove it. They can never do anything simply."

"Speaking from experience?" Charlie had to know. He wondered if she would 'tamper' with it, if his life were in danger and then decided that she would, considering the oaths they had just sworn.

Ebony gave him a wry smile. "I have had more than my share of magical accidents and I have been
both witness and referee to more than my fair share of enchantments in a handful of years. Sometimes there is help and hope. Other times, it is best to leave well enough alone. I could sense that it wasn't particularly dangerous, but even so, I don't trust my own reading."

Princess Dawne entered the room, her own personal aide walking beside her. ".Please do let me know when they are ready and I will come." She smiled at the young woman. "Thank you. Go and see to it." She turned to see the full room and her eyebrows arched upwards in clear surprise. "Good afternoon," she inclined her head. "I was unaware that you were entertaining, Ras."

"I wasn't really," Prince Raspen chuckled. He rose to greet and escort her back to their little group. "Thomas merely had a quick request and I am trying to help, though perhaps I am not doing quite as good a job as I had hoped."

"Oh?" Princess Dawne kissed his cheek and then took his arm, allowing him to guide her over to where they were all seated. "Eby!" She exclaimed, her gaze falling on the fire princess. "You look wonderful. I hardly had a moment to say two words to you on stage." The two royals embraced as two sisters meeting after a long time. "I loved your entrance, darling. It was fantastic."

"And you were also equally stunning." Ebony said, immediately. She looked her childhood friend over from head to toe, with a smile of admiration. They only saw each other during official events, corresponding through occasional letters or during breaks when an elemental council was held and required royal supervision. The Hunt was just as much fun for them as it was for the other Nevareans. "I loved that touch with the wind though, I didn't know you'd mastered wind-walking quite that well. Impressive. You've been holding out on us."

"Practice," Princess Dawne said, theatrically with a hand to her forehead. "Weeks upon weeks of practice." She smiled. "Believe me, it was quite boring, but very necessary. I think now I might be able to take a few breaths on my own—you know, without being watched every single second of the day?" The princesses laughed. "You do look well though, considering what I've heard of your courts." Princess Dawne reached over and squeezed Ebony's hand in support. "I wish I could do something to help, but I don't want to be in the way."

"They will work themselves out and I am doing quite well, thanks." Ebony said. Her realm was beneath the earth, where the shadows fled at the sight of the fire that burned within the heart of Nevarah. The mountains were hers, including all that came with the volcanic region that breathed lava and flame. Her courts could be as volatile as her element, but she had enough control to weather through obvious obstacles. "Never mind those though. Tis' my own headache to deal with. While you've been practicing though, I have been busy. Found myself a mentored student and all that."

Eventually, after the next set of introductions were out of the way, it was determined that Princess Dawne was the most neutral of all the royals and therefore able to request an audience with King Alcandor or his current advisor, Lord Kieran. She had been equally disturbed upon hearing Harry's tale and immediately agreed to help, voicing that for politics' sake, she would do so on behalf of the Deveraine Circle.

Harry did not quite mind being on the sidelines of things, even though it seemed that with his luck,
he would soon be the sole focus of everyone, a position that he had never relished. It bothered him to have to keep up the slightly formal air that their present company required, but he reminded himself that he was lucky to have the opportunity at all. He couldn't follow their talk of courts and entertainment arrangements for the Hunt, but he was already gaining a steady supply of knowledge on the finer points of his empathy gift.

Nearly all the royals were painstakingly easy to read. When he wasn't focusing on Prince Raspen's charming dimples, the earth prince fairly radiated strength both inside and out. Harry's empathy had taken to it at once, akin to a satisfied cat purring on the lap of its owner. The refreshing aura had eased the tension out of their little group and Harry was able to relax enough to try and follow some of the confusing conversations. He wondered if it was because of the earth affinity that Theo teased him of having or if whether it was simply the fact that he could respect and admire the prince for what the title and responsibility meant.

Princess Ebony or just Ebony—it would take some time for Harry to adjust to that—was pure mischief and cheerful vividness. Her aura had Theo and Charlie relaxing, which in turn eased a nice little burden off of Harry's weighted shoulders and set their group at ease. She had plenty of amusing vignettes which she shared in between of the official royal talk. She was careful to include them all in the conversations and surprisingly good at keeping a steady stream of entertainment flowing.

As for Princess Dawne, she was an entirely different individual compared to her fellow royals. Her aura was so faint, Harry could barely manage to read it, even when he instinctively tried to ferret it out. He could only sense that she was kind and generous, two distinguishable traits that was easy to see in the graceful way she carried herself and the soft grey eyes that spoke volumes.

Harry tucked all of knowledge away for future reference—and hopefully use—while focusing on the subtext of the conversation from earlier. He remembered the roundabout way that Prince Raspen had taken to ask the pale-haired princess whether she would be agreeable to asking after the Merrow king. From the poorly concealed scowl on Ebony's side, he wondered if their elemental rivalry was more dangerous behind closed doors than it had been during the introductions. He hoped no one would be caught unawares in the midst of it all. That would be very disturbing.

Princess Dawne left to see about their request with little fanfare, merely excusing herself and stepping outside into the hall. When she returned, there was an expression of mild confusion on her face and she accepted a cup of tea from Prince Raspen, allowing Ebony to usher her into a seat. She did not speak just yet and after a moment, Ebony was the one to prompt her.

"Did he bite your head off? Sorry, you are still in possession of it. I meant, did he perhaps-"

"Lady Baronsworth seems to be in a fit of—pique." Princess Dawne said, delicately. "I excused myself before she started throwing things."

"Throwing things? Lady Baronsworth?" Ebony stared at her in confusion. Lady Baronsworth, the Gheyo wife of Lord Baronsworth, an esteemed Beta, was a prominent council man in the Nevarean High Court and in spite of their shared bond, both dragels held a seat on the council. "What sorts of things?"

"Sharp things, Eby. Very sharp things." Princess Dawne suppressed a shudder. "What do you think she would throw?" But she shook her head, not expecting an answer. "Apparently her youngest son had some sort of an issue and showed up unannounced—while I was there."

"The quake from the dome?" Ebony frowned. "No one expected that and I would think that being a Gheyo, she's weathered through more surprises than most councilwomen."
Princess Dawne gave a rather unladylike shrug. "I cannot say exactly. He was there and apparently he brought his entire Circle with him, small as it was. Lady Baronsworth did not know that he had Bonded."

"Oh." Ebony blinked. "Oh." She winced. "Very sharp things you said?"

Princess Dawne did not answer, instead she sipped at the light-colored tea and held out an arm that showed her pretty gauzy gown to be slashed through several of the delicate ruffles. A flicker of magic repaired the damage and she diverted the attention from herself by throwing smile in Harry's direction, opting to redirect the conversation away from the task that she had been set and the family matters of one of her court. "For the sake of privacy, I did ask for the wards around the room to be strengthened and soundproofed." She smiled at Bahn next, picking on a thread of conversation that no one had touched on just yet. "And congratulations, Lord Deveraine. I did mean to say so earlier." Her gaze flicked to his pregnant belly and then back to her teacup, a polite hint.

A flicker of surprise passed over Bahn's face, but he smiled back easily enough, looking equal parts pleased and embarrassed that his elemental royal had taken notice of him. "Thank you kindly, princess." A pretty pink blush dusted his cheeks and he held his head up, quite proudly, one hand resting on the swell of his stomach. Takar hid a smile of his own and snuggled Bahn a little deeper to his side.

"Has your Alpha returned?" Princess Dawne asked. The famed Ithycar Deveraine was a very charming fellow who had, on occasion, graced the dinner tables of various high nobles, building friendships and alliances for future use. He had not been in the royal courts for some time though, suggesting that he had been quite busy with whatever had last taken his fancy. She had hoped to see him for the Hunting season though, especially with this last instance of the Fabrine attack. The man had connections and she would gladly make use of them if she could.

"He should be on his way." Bahn fiddled with the cup and saucer on his lap. His brow furrowed as he seemed to be thinking through something. "Was there something that you needed from him? Our house has functioned in his absence, I am sure we could-

"Ah, no. I was merely curious." Princess Dawne settled back, her golden waves spilling over her shoulders and framing her face quite nicely. "I would have him over for dinner, sometime, when he returns. Please let him know. You and yours are of course, welcome as well. You need only send a missive when you have an afternoon free and I shall let you know whether I am available."

"Of course. Thank you, your highness."

The Air princess smiled again, in her soft way. "By the way, Alcandor will be here shortly. Please try not to antagonize him, Eby."

"It took you long enough to mention it," Ebony snorted. "I was beginning to think he'd refused. What did he make you do in exchange for his dreadful attendance? No, wait—what did he charge you for requesting his presence? Your first-born child?"

Princess Dawne muffled a choking sound, then swallowed, mirth dancing in her eyes. "First and second-born, actually." She teased, with a shake of her head. "You're not helping things, you know. It's that sort of thinking that leads to animosity in all the wrong places. He was quite nice about it and said he would come straightaway. He didn't even ask what I wanted."

"And exactly which places would be the right ones?" Ebony groused. She could easily recall the slight during the introductions and while it was expected, that did not mean that she had to like it.
"I don't have to look for it. It's usually right there and he ever only is nice to you because he likes you."

"He likes Ras too and Lord Cunningham and Lady Bianca. It's only you that--" Ebony began.

"Really, Ebony." Prince Raspen reproved. "What exactly did he do, apart from snubbing you in the entrance ceremony? Which, I might add, he has always done?" He perked a brow. It was not just the opening ceremony but any instance where the fire and water element had met under the public view. He was sure that half of it was politics and his own personal observations of the two led him to believe it was more like a cat and dog sort of thing, they would hiss and bark at each other, but if they had to work together, they could. He had seen proof of it before, anyway. "You know how he is and he only baits you because you let him. Honestly. If you didn't answer everything he threw your way, I highly doubt that you would find him so disagreeable."

Ebony didn't answer, but the grumpy expression on her face evened out somewhat. "I don't need a lecture, Ras. I have known him just as long the rest of you. I'm only trying to determine whether he is in a helpful mood or otherwise predisposition to declare Harry's spell as something that is out of his hands. I won't have that. It's not fair to Harry, at least. This is his first Hunt, he should be able to court and be courted without worrying about a spell and you know as well as I do that magical connections during the Hunt is half of the compatibility process, a lingering magical signature could be devastating. Besides, you know Alcandor's been on edge. You cannot tell me you did not notice."

"We all noticed," Prince Raspen said, quietly. "But perhaps we were not so quick to discuss it, hm?" He did not add that whatever was borrowing the Merrow king was likely something quite significant and therefore worthy of their notice. Merrows could be quite carefree, but if something caught their attention, then it was wise to take a closer look on principle. He could discuss this later, but not in their present company. As much as he trusted Thomas Gorgens, there were royal matters that would always be royal matters and this was one of them.

Ebony gave a wan smile at that. "I worry, Ras and you know how I am when I worry." At those words, the other two royals exchanged a look and let it be, sharing a smile between them. Scarcely a moment later, Ebony winced and leaned forward, handing off her cup to Charlie, who took it after a moment and set it on the edge of the table.

"Eby?" Princess Dawne looked at her.

"He's here." The fire-princess muttered. She winced. "Oh believe me, he's here and he's in a terrible mood. What did you tell him, Dawne? I thought you said he didn't mind."

"He didn't mind, at least, he didn't when I spoke to him…" Princess Dawne's voice trailed off.

"You can sense him?" Charlie heard himself saying. He looked between the royals and then to his new mentor.

"He's a royal," Ebony said, stiffly. "We always sense each other, but we can temper it to some degree and he's not very—tempered right now. Sit here." She tapped the side of the settee where she was perched, motioning to the floor. "It would probably be best if you weren't anywhere near Harry if we want his help. He might be fickle enough to refuse simply because you're bonded."

"Would he really?" Theo spoke up, frowning. He did not like that detail at all and he certainly would not stand by while Charlie was discriminated against. Harry mirrored his frown, lips pressed
together as if to keep from saying something that he shouldn't.

"He might," Ebony allowed. "And he might not." She added, at Prince Raspen's look. "One never knows with the Merrow."

"Won't he be able to tell anyway?" Charlie asked. But he did move forward, seating himself easily on the floor atop the soft rug near her feet. He would gladly stay out of sight if it helped their situation so Harry's spell could be removed. While he was sure he would at least try to hold his own, he did not want Theo to be involved, which was sure to be the case if complications started on his own. Not to mention that as fascinating as the Merrow's entrance had been, along with the fierce, otherworldly beauty of the Merrow king himself, Charlie was in no hurry to be the single recipient of that blue-eyed stare. He shot an apologetic look to Harry, having vacated his seat beside his submissive.

Harry offered an impish smile and directed his attention towards the main door, waiting to see who would appear next. He would be fine. Theo was still beside him anyway and Charlie was well within reach if needed. Not to mention both the Deveraines and the Gorgens were happily smothering him in a nice, warm blanket of overprotectiveness. He couldn't quite say that he minded.

"Did you?" Ebony prompted. "Speak to him?"

"I actually didn't speak to him at all, I spoke to Lord Baronsw-" Princess Dawne trailed off as loud voices could be heard from the hallway—muffled—but still present.

"...and that's final, Kieran!" King Alcandor stormed into the room with a glower that would send a dementor scurrying for its mother. "Do I look as if I care whether such an insipid miscreant lives to see tomorrow morning? Hang him for all I care. Shackle him to the cliffs—by his crippled claws. Better yet, beach him. Scrub him with black sand. Burn him!" He whirled around, fiercely, to face the dour Advisor that followed him sedately, his hands tucked into his sleeves. "Fillet the dimwit and spare me the agony of wasted brain cells over trying to resolve his hopeless situation!" Blue-scaled hands were thrown up in the air, to make his point, before King Alcandor folded his arms over his chest.

Lord Kieran merely sighed. "And you are sure of his, my king?"

A muffled sound that might have been a growl, exploded from the Merrow's mouth. "If I am sure. If I am sure, he says. As if I haven't been assuring you of that very thing for the past—Kesmar's bloody reefs, Kieran, yes I'm sure! Perhaps I ought to skin and salt you!"

"If it would help, your majesty," Lord Kieran said, calmly. "Though I cannot see how it would possibly resolve anything."

"He is ruining my courts and I am not running some poorly-trained theater troupe!" King Alcandor snapped. "Holding court is no joking matter. There are lives at stake and power! An enormous quantity of lives and power. Anyone failing to comprehend such does not deserve to have his head resting firmly upon his shoulders. I want him dead! I want his Clan crippled. I want everything he holds dear burned. I won't have them breathing the same air as I do—spear his familiar, if you must. It was a rather pretty little thing, but I don't care about the rest of it. I don't care about him. I want him begging to die."

"Killing him will only solve half of the problem," Lord Kieran said. "What will you do about the change in the-"
"I'll appoint the second chancellor's son to her ladyship's right hand and I will demote her cousin to the rank of court feeder. I have actually given this some thought, Kieran. Which, if you had actually read the report I sent to you last night, you should be quite familiar with my methods and the way in which I intend to see this little act of rebellion ripped from the blunted fangs that snatched it."

"I did see it and I did read it." Lord Kieran said. "Indeed. I am very surprised. You do occasionally use your brilliance for the right purpose. I suppose you will, of course, be the one to inform Lord Shalimar that you have—er—removed his son from the running?"

"Of course not. That's your job." King Alcandor smiled, tightly. "It's why I can't fillet you, even though I dearly wish to." There was a faint tick at his left forehead. "However, though I can't fillet you, I could always salt you and watch it burn through your pretty little scales and that would make me feel so much better."

For a long moment, both Merrows glowered at each other, neither of them giving an inch and both looking as if they were liable to engage in some sort of fisticuffs, if it weren't beneath the arrogant dignity they both clung to. After a very long breath of silence, King Alcandor's arms slowly unfolded and fell to his sides. "Kesmar, Kieran," he muttered, sounding more weary than angry. "What would you have me do? You know very well what he is doing and all that we've worked so hard for will be ruined because he is a child in a man's body, who has not yet grasped the true impact of his decisions, be they excellent or abhorrent."

"...perhaps I could seek an alternative solution." Lord Kieran suggested, delicately. Temper had apparently ran its course and now they could converse somewhat coherently.

"You have already provided me with several useless alternatives which do absolutely nothing. Your duty is to provide me with options, that is what you do. I think we can both agree that neither of those will solve this." King Alcandor reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. He took a noisy breath and then feathered a hand through his thick, navy blue tresses. They fell silkily back to his shoulders, gleaming in the pale light of the room's wall sconces.

"Perhaps, but I have only had but a handful of hours to think of something." Lord Kieran returned. "You will only receive what you have asked for."

"Are you asking me for more time, Kieran?" There was a dangerous tone of voice as the Merrow king eyed him with something bordering on extreme distaste.

"I would never dream of it, sire." Came the quick, subservient reply.

"...wise." He snorted. "You have twenty-four hours." King Alcandor said, abruptly. "If you have not devised a suitable solution to our problem, then I expect you to bring me his head on a pike." He lifted his chin, every inch the king that he was. "Shrunken and salted, so that I might spare yours."

"As you wish it."

"I wish it. Dismissed." King Alcandor snapped. "And Kesmar help you if I see you before those hours are through. I want something workable so that even a child could follow those directions, understood? Send your secretary to replace you. I have other matters to attend to, much as it pains me to admit. They are, however, marginally more pleasant than discussing your demise, so I shall take it for the reprieve that it is." He waved a hand, irritably. "Away with you."

"Of course." Lord Kieran bowed deeply at the waist, his hands still folded in the voluminous
sleeves of his official robes. He turned to leave and then hovered in the doorway, his bright blue-eyed gaze darted to the side and took in the sight of the other three royals and their guests. His posture stiffened even more. "Forgive me for asking, but will you tell them?" His tone was faintly accusing.

King Alcandor blinked in surprise, then followed his Advisor's gaze over to the rest of the room's occupants and his mask slid into place almost at once as if he'd flipped a switch of some sort. All traces of frustration, annoyance and anger melted away to a look that was perfectly polite, if not somewhat bland and vaguely reminiscent of the expression he'd worn during the introduction ceremony. "We have already had that discussion," he smiled, with a touch of gleaming fangs. "And you already know what I will say. My answer has not and will not change. They have a right to know. Do not make me bring you around to my way of thinking. It will be highly unpleasant for the both of us."

The older Merrow growled, audibly and left in a snap and whirl of his fancy robes, taking some of the tension with him. King Alcandor stood where he was, listening, it seemed until he deemed the footsteps far enough. The moment he turned back to face them, Princess Dawne was already crossing the room to meet him. They embraced briefly and he kissed her cheek, allowing her to return the favor to his own blue-scaled self.

"Did something happen?" She asked, reaching up to rub away the furrow between his brows.

"Politics," King Alcandor said, simply. He sighed as if terribly pained by her attention, but did not protest even as a faint shimmer of amusement reflected in his deep blue eyes. She affected a pout in turn and tapped his delicately sloped nose in retaliation, before turning around. He curved an arm around her waist and drew her to his side, starting forward towards the seated group. "A crown is a heavy burden, my dearest."

"Save your sweet tongue for them then," she teased. "You need not convince me of your innocence."

"Do I look that guilty?"

"You were shouting about salt and heads and pikes." She gave him a look, tempered by the somewhat teasing smile on her face. "Surely you understand how misleading that can be."

"I am but a bloodthirsty villain who desires nothing more than to bathe in the blood of those foolish enough to annoy me." He didn't so much as twitch when Princess Dawne deliberately poked his bare side. "My apologies. I shall curb my darker urges for the sake of your delicate ears." He sidestepped, neatly, to avoid her follow-up jab.

"My delicate ears? I'll show you delicacy if you've a mind to see it." She shook her head, leaning into his one-armed embrace. She knew what a strain it could be to deal with rambunctious courts and did not envy him the higher duties and responsibilities as a crowned royal, as opposed to her own status. "I do hope I didn't disturb you. I sent the message through one of your court, because they said you were not to be disturbed. I would have asked in person."

"Tis no fault of your own. I left explicit instructions with the guards. Besides, you were elected to—fetch me—I'm sure," he said, simply. He appreciated her kind gesture, and welcoming attitude. It helped to soothe some of his irritation and for that, he resolved to see if he could help her with whatever had been important enough to require his presence. "Exactly how may I be of assistance?"

"Ai!" Prince Raspen stood to greet them, gesturing for the two royals to enter the seating area. "I
was beginning to think you'd floated out with the tide. Everything alright?"

"Everything is always alright."

Prince Raspen gave him a look, but did not pry.

King Alcandor managed a slight smile at that. "No worse than expected, anyway." He looked the other prince over with a critical eye. "You look well, considering the past few minutes. Was there much damage?" He asked, referring to the fabrine attack. It had been quite unexpected for all of them.

Prince Raspen chuckled. "We actually had the very slightest of warnings. We were lucky. It could have been worse. How are yours taking it?"

"We are Merrow. We don't take that sort of thing." King Alcandor said, haughtily. "We were all below the surface when it hit. I was gathering the Intendeds for a private audience and as such, had recalled my court with me." He frowned. "But that is not what I am here to discuss. At least I hope not."

"It is not." Prince Raspen agreed. "It is actually something a bit more unique to your abilities."

What is it you want, Ras? Speak plainly or hold your tongue. Only you would go to such lengths to have Dawne ask me over for a private audience." Dark blue eyes gleamed. "I sincerely hope you are not about to make some foolish request, because I have already suffered through one half of this wretched day and I would prefer to spend the remainder of it below the surface and away from obvious displays of stupidity."

"Of course you would," Prince Raspen said. His lips twitched as if he would like to laugh, but instead, he remained standing and gestured towards Harry and his Circle to stand as well. "My Clan Chief had an unusual request on behalf of his daughter, concerning the Submissive of her mentored student."

"Oh? And this concerns me, how?"

"Well," Prince Raspen began, delicately. "It was about the removal of recently acquired Merrow spell."

King Alcandor frowned. "By recently acquired, exactly what time frame are we speaking of?"

"...last night."

King Alcandor blinked, looking adorably confused and far from terrifying as his navy brows knitted themselves together in a look of complete incomprehension. "Pardon?" He asked, hesitantly.

Prince Raspen turned his half-chuckle into a cough. "The spell was cast last night and it has been active this entire day. Can you kindly remove it? We would be quite indebted to you."

There was a dismissive noise from the Merrow king, but he released the arm he'd draped around Princess Dawne and now folded them over his chest once more as if to make his displeasure more obvious. He was not wearing his fancy cloak, but a loose, silken shirt of bright blue with no buttons, tucked into the front of his trousers. The imprint of nipple rings was visible as the fabric of his shirt pulled tight over them and his dusky lips twisted into a scowl. "That is absolutely impossible."
Golden eyes blinked in surprise. "Impossible?" Prince Raspen repeated, somewhat shocked by the sudden vehemence. "Actually, it isn't. I've tried to remove it myself and it's rather stubborn. I've never worked with something like this before."

"Ask one of them, then." King Alcandor nodded towards Ebony and Princess Dawne. "I'm sure the three of you could figure something out that did not require tearing me away from important matters of."

"It is a Merrow spell." Prince Raspen said, patiently. "That is more than obvious. Take a look for yourself if you do not believe me." He motioned for Harry to come to his side and did not object when Theo followed Harry.

"I will do no such thing. It is impossible because there were no Merrows present last night who could have cast any spell at all." King Alcandor said, matter-of-factly. "No Merrow has been released to the surface even since the introductions. They still await my approval. They were presented, yes, but I did not grant them permission to mingle and as such, they have been under heavy guard—beneath the surface. No one has slipped out." He gave a faint shake of his head. "If they had, I would have known. You cannot have a Merrow spell on you, because there is no way you could have acquired one. Someone is playing an elaborate game of some sorts—perhaps a courting prank—but I cannot remove it because there is nothing to remove."

Ebony snorted. That sounded just like the pompous Merrow to be spouting off nonsense before actually looking at the facts. She itched to hex him, if only for his idiocy, but doing so would set a bad example for Charlie and she wasn't about to start out their mentorship with losing her temper, no matter how necessary it might be. Besides, she had better self-control than that and now was a good time to start making use of it. There were few things that really managed to slip under her skin and this particular Merrow was one of them.

Princess Dawne shot a look at her fellow royal, then tugged gently on the King's arm, attempting to uncross them. "Couldn't you try anyway, Al? It's tricky spellwork." She said, hopefully. Out of all of them, Alcandor had always been the best at spell-weaving and crafting, a natural talent from his birth mother, one of the few secrets he had shared with her. They were closer than the other royals, if only because their elements were complimentary and as such, they spent time between the Storm element that was sponsored by them. "I'm sure you would love to unravel it."

"I would not." He said, stiffly. But even as he spoke, he wavered, for it was Dawne asking and within reason, there was little he would ever refuse her.

"That would be a first," Ebony muttered. She had a hand resting lightly atop Charlie's shoulder, pressing just hard enough to keep him where he was when the Merrow king had calmly refused. Charlie shifted beneath her touch, but remained where he was. He didn't look any happier than she did about the direction the conversation had changed.

Prince Raspen sent her a look and then tried again. "Al, even if it isn't Merrow, this his first Hunt, he really shouldn't be worrying about spells upon his person. Won't you please take a look?"

"You could at least try!" Harry snapped, before he could check the words that tumbled out of his mouth. "I wasn't looking to be spelled or cursed or anything. I was trying to help a dlkfp and if this is a courting game then I think that someone ought to-!"

Theo clapped a hand over Harry's mouth, his golden eyes halfway-hazel. He tapped Harry's cheek, gently, a silent warning. Ticking off their royal audience would not earn them any favors, no matter how unfair the situation might seem and something told him that this was a one-shot chance. He wouldn't have minded a chance to say a few choice words of his own, but this was far
too delicate a situation for his Slytherin temper to unveil itself. If all he had to do was hold his temper until it was over with, by Arielle and Merlin, he would. "Enough, Harry." He said, softly, tempering his words with a hidden pat to Harry's side.

Harry swallowed, feeling the familiar warm flush along his neck and ears that meant he was blushing a very obvious shade of red. He waited the few seconds it took for Theo's hand to drop so he could speak again. "I only meant," he said, softly. "That I was trying to save a surlkg from-"

"What did you say?" King Alcandor's head had snapped up at once to fix on Harry the moment the first garbled word had left his mouth. He gently caught Princess Dawne by the shoulders, shuffling her out of his way to move forward and look at Harry. Dark-blue eyes fixed on Harry's face with surprisingly intensity. "Say that again."

Harry blinked. "What part?" He mentally scrambled to backtrack, trying to see what he'd said that had triggered such a response. "I didn't really, I was only-"

"Not that. Say something else." King Alcandor waved a hand again, in a now familiar dismissive gesture. "The last part. The one where you said that you were saving an idiot named what?"

The flush on his cheeks grew warmer and Harry wished his hair was long enough to hide his eyes. He had not said 'idiot' but it was what he had meant when he'd thought of Alec and tried to say as much. "I was trying to save a-" he licked his lips. "A crkgld-"

Dark-blue eyes grew round and wide as the Merrow king simply stared.

An awkward silence began to settle and Charlie shifted restlessly on the floor. Ebony immediately reached down and patted his head this time, instead of his shoulder, her orange-eyed gaze fixed on her fellow royals. Something had just changed and she couldn't put her flames on it just yet.

"Al?" Prince Raspen tried.

"Hush." A blue scaled hand flapped at him. Another beat of silence passed, before he spoke again. "You met a Merrow." King Alcandor said, faintly accusing as he stared at Harry. "You actually met one?" He seemed to question rather than declare the statement.

Harry barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Yes! I did! That's what everyone has been trying to-"

"How did you meet one when they were under strict orders to remain below the surface upon pain of death? I'll have their head for it. Did you try to summon one? They swore oaths that they would not surface until I gave them leave. Please understand what you are saying. This is quite serious."

"Summon a—no!" Harry sputtered. "Why would I even have—that's not." He gave a faint shake of his head. "I know what I saw. You're not listening to anything that anyone here is trying to tell you. I didn't do anything. I was just there and-!"

"Of course I'm listening, but listening does not afford me the answers I desire." King Alcandor scowled at him. "Do you even realize what this means?"

"No, but I'm sure you'll tell me," Harry snarked. He could feel his temper beginning to flare and simmer once more. It seemed that Merrows were destined to bring that out in him.

"Indeed. If you had half a mind to comprehend it." The king snapped. "Would you swear on your magic that you had nothing to do with summoning one of my people?"
"What? But I didn't." Harry exclaimed. "Yes. Fine. I would. Why would I lie? I have no reason to-

"True. No one in their right mind would agree to swear such on their magic, unless they were telling the truth." Dusky lips curved into a smile that was more shiny white fangs than anything else.

Instinctively, Harry felt himself easing backwards, grateful for Theo's steadying, calming presence behind him. His entire focus had shifted to focus solely on the Merrow king and he definitely was not thinking of the others in the room any more. "Whatever you're trying to say, just say it." He said, bravely. Theo pinched him from behind and Harry twitched, faintly at the reprimand, but didn't see any reason to be respectful of an authority figure that didn't seem to be worthy of the respect required.

As if sensing his train of thought, the Merrow king's smile turned into a smirk. "Very well then. Do you hate him?"

Harry blinked, completely baffled. "...what?"

King Alcandor sniffed. "That was as plainly spoken as I could manage. Be you deaf? There are customs surrounding you that you do not even understand. Try to keep up. I asked, do you hate him? The Merrow who spelled you. Please answer carefully. His head may hang in the balance of my good temper and your honest answer."

"Good temper?" Harry couldn't stop himself from saying. He scowled. It was no joke to make light of people's lives and he despised those in power who did so. Yes, sometimes sacrifices had to be made, but he was fairly certain this was no one of those times. He scrambled for something else to say, when those dark blue eyes narrowed.

"Cursed is more like it," Ebony muttered, biting her tongue to keep from adding more. She acknowledged Charlie's not-so-subtle elbow to the side and threw him an apologetic glance. He was behaving quite nicely, so far, it would not do to let her own temper run away on them.

"That is not the question I asked. Do you hate him?"

"Hate him?" Harry repeated, uncertainly. His eyes narrowed, before he remembered that the King could not have known it was Alec, but rather was reacting to the knowledge that no female Merrows ever surfaced. "I'm not sure I understand," he said, slowly. "Why would I have to hate—I don't like him," he said, at last, searching for a safe middle ground. "I mean, I don't even know him. I just—I didn't need this. It wasn't—it's. I just want this spell off. Can you take it off? Please?" He added, hurriedly.

"I am only asking, because you're hardly worth the trouble of spelling—or cursing—and as you are a landwalker, it is much easier to simply kill you." He rubbed his chin with one hand, looking quite puzzled for the moment.

Harry felt his cheeks growing warm again. "Kill me?" He tried to keep the anger from his voice. Why did every single topic manage to circle around to death where Merrows were concerned? Were they really that bloodthirsty? He clenched his hands tightly to keep from asking outright, because that would most definitely be rude and even if his earlier outbursts could be excused, he wasn't about to deliberately commit a social faux pas without any chance of some reward in sight. But, then again, he'd championed the cause of lesser, weaker individuals before and he realized that he would not be able to keep his mouth shut any more than he could stop breathing. "Why is it that the solution to any kind of Merrow and 'landwalking' problem is to kill without dis-"
"He must really like you," the Merrow king mused, completely ignoring Harry's starting rant. "Or he must want to court you. Either way, I am curious as to why. That is the only logical reason a Merrow go to such lengths. He couldn't have actually known you for anything apart from a few minutes or maybe an hour, which is hardly enough time to fall into attraction or lust with each other." He sighed. "If it worries you though, what he did cast on you is not a harmful spell, in fact, it is really quite harmless."

*Harmless?* Harry nearly snapped. He would beg to differ that the spell had been anything but harmless. It had landed him with yet another bothersome headache since arriving in Nevarah and he wanted it off, thank you very much. "I still want it off." He said, tightly. "Please?"

But King Alcandor was still talking as if he hadn't heard him at all. "It was meant to keep you protected from—something, I cannot tell what—and would have only affected your hunting in very subtle ways. In fact, I am almost certain it would wear off by tomorrow." An almost-smile touched his lips as if he had finally figured something out. "Most likely set to trigger after I have given my permission to surface and hunt."

"Subtle ways?" Harry burst out, unable to help himself yet again. He was mildly gratified to note that this time, Theo did not try to stop him from speaking. "Affect me in subtle ways? Like turning into a Silverwing right before the Introductions? Spouting out gibberish every time I try to explain to my Bonded that I almost drowned? That's not very subtle!"

"There really is no need to raise your voice," The Merrow king said, calmly. He inspected his black-lacquered fingernails with an air of disinterest. Whatever good humors were his to call, had apparently somewhat returned to him.

Harry tried to not to notice that those fingernails were pointed. Very obviously pointed. They could do serious damage, if the need arose. "I didn't raise my voice!" He snapped, managing to keep the outrage from his voice, but only just barely as his empathic powers began to rise up a few notches. He couldn't read the Merrow king, but he could read almost everyone else in the room and they were caught in a mixed array of surprise, righteous anger and frustration. They were on his side and that was just the boost he needed to speak his mind.

King Alcandor merely perked a brow. "Of course, if you say so." He sighed. "And you are sure you want it off?"

"Excuse me?" Ilsa burst out. "Begging your majesty's pardon, of course he's sure he wants it off! Would we even be here if he didn't? And what kind of ridiculous protection spell requires a timer? Of all the stupid-" she broke off with a squeak of pain, turning her fierce glare on the innocent Greta beside her, who had not-too-subtly tread on her foot. "I'm only stating the facts," she grumbled, a bit quieter. "It seems like a lot of trouble to me and I know you Merrow prefer to avoid complications like the plague."

"Only when they are complicated." King Alcandor said, smoothly. "Most complications are quite amusing. However, if you wish for it to be removed, then I shall remove it. Far be it from me that I would subject you to the horrors of a protection spell when you could be waltzing about without one." There was a distinct note of sarcasm and he gave his nails one final look before allowing his arms to fall back to his sides. "That said, could you please keep talking?" He looked at Harry, expectantly. "I need to know exactly what spell was placed on you."

"What do you want me to say?" Harry shot back.

"Something that uses the spell, I need to hear what you're saying."
"He's been speaking perfect-" Princess Dawne began.

"Merrowspeak, I know." King Alcandor frowned. "Changing his dialect every third syllable. That's quite a lovely spell." He frowned. "I honestly do not see the problem with it, but you landwalkers have always been strange. Say something else? I need to know just how many dialects are present and how they are incorporated. The words you are using are placeholders and that does not narrow anything down. There are quite literally hundreds of variations, but I only need to hear a specific strain, if you could?" He was almost polite in his demand, now, but it was a demand, just the same. The bored look from his face had shifted to a polite mask once more.

After a moment, a rather self-conscious Harry began to speak, deliberately focusing on the nighttime adventure and the confusion that had come with it. His voice faded in and out at time, each garbled word gaining him either a nod or a slight shake from the Merrow king who listen, enraptured almost, as the very best kind of audience.

"...and so I told Theo and Charlie that herlph-"

"That! That right there." King Alcandor stopped him with a raised hand. "I was right." He murmured. "There are only a handful of Merrow that speak that particular dialect. They reside in the Shadow Waters, literally by Kesmar's Reefs." He sighed, reaching up to tuck his navy hair behind his pale, blue fluted ears. He fingered the little golden earrings there, then pursed his lips. "That narrows down the possibilities quite significantly, though I must ask you a few questions before I draw my final conclusion." A truly terrifying smirk settled on his face. "Answer me this, did he tell you his name?"

Harry blinked. As a matter of fact—Alec had, but he didn't quite understand the significance, not that he could really say the name anyway. Then again... "He did."

"And was his name Alec?"

Harry's jaw dropped.

The Merrow king snorted. He turned to look over his shoulder. "Fetch me Lord Kieran's ward," he barked. "And be quick about it. I do not care if you drag him all the way here." His lips twisted into a smirk. "In fact, I would enjoy it."

There was a murmur from an invisible being and then three wisps of shadow seemed to blur out of the room.

Harry squinted and blinked, resisting the urge to rub his eyes. He could have sworn, that for a whole ten seconds, he'd seen three fierce Merrow guards standing at attention, before rushing off to see to their King's bidding and then there was nothing. It made some inkling of sense that the Merrow king would have invisible guards, but it was another thing to actually see them.

A quick glance around him showed that no one else even seemed to have noticed them. Harry swallowed, feeling the sudden surge of adrenaline beginning to fade from his earlier outburst. He reached back, half-heartedly to lean against Theo, who immediately inched closer and braced him yet again without complaint.

"Ai?" Princess Dawne ventured, carefully. "Is there any...?"

"Actually, there is." He tossed his head, lightly, navy blue hair swishing around him. "I need to have a word with all of you, Lord Cunningham and Lady Bianca as well. I trust you can spare a few minutes from your burdened schedules?"
"Depends on how many minutes," Ebony rose, her scowl in place, but somewhat tempered, now that at least, it seemed Alcandor was willing to help them for the time being. "Whatever is wrong this time?"

"I will send for Lady Bianca," Prince Raspen said.

"I already did." King Alcandor offered the faintest touch of a smile. "I called her on my way here. It is simply a matter of whether they shall appear before my guards return or after."

As if on cue, Prince Raspen's aide appeared at the doorway, clearing her throat politely for their attention. "Yes?" Prince Raspen turned to her expectantly.

"Lord Cunningham and Lady Bianca to see your royal highnesses."

"Please see them in," Prince Raspen said, smoothly. He cast a quick glance around the room at the Deveraines and the Gorgens. "Al, is this official?"

"Very official," the Merrow king said, grimly. "If you could lend us your inner chambers for at least a moment?"

Prince Raspen grimaced. "But of course," he said, stiffly. "If you would excuse us?" He looked to Thomas. The Clan Chief merely nodded and reseated himself. The Prince smiled, relieved that the shift in authority had been so easily accepted. They might have been family, all connected to each other in some way or another, but he wanted Thomas left in charge in his official capacity. As good as it was to have Lady Ilsa back among them, he was sure that her return brought ripples and waves that were still yet to be weathered and personally, he would prefer that his sitting room remained intact. Next to Dawne's quarters, his was the only neutral meeting ground that could be offered to everyone. "This way?" He gestured towards the door at the opposite end of the room, where he'd originally entered from. "If you could let us know when...?" His voice trailed off and he nodded towards Alcandor.

His aide bobbed her head and curtsy in tandem. "I will alert you straightaway," she said, smoothly. She returned to the doorway and ushered in the distinguished Lord Cunningham and Lady Bianca. Lord Cunningham had arrived, accompanied by his paid Gheyo and blood title for the shadow ranks, the famed Lord Hadrian Maruk. True to form, Hadrian still wore his trademark mask of metallic coal black with the two colored plumes of scarlet and violet, clad in black from head to toe, his swords nowhere on his immediate person. That was a notable detail, because it meant that instead of regulating himself to a single weapon upon his person, he was open to the use of summoning whatever would work best in whichever situation befell him and his current employer.

At a gesture from Lord Cunningham, Hadrian bowed slightly and moved off to the side where the others were. The royals disappeared into Raspen's private rooms, with Lord Cunningham and Lady Bianca trailing after them.

Harry found himself staring at the newcomer—Hadrian, was it?—as he approached their group and nodded respectfully to Thomas and Greta, before he looked over to Ilsa. For a moment, Harry tried to squelch the sad feeling that he hadn't been 'greeted' as the others, when he realized that Hadrian had angled his course to come to a stop near the two Gheyos.

Ah, so it was a Gheyo thing. Harry mused. He found himself wondering how exactly he was to acquire a Gheyo and what was required of him before hunting about for one. Maybe he could ask Ilsa. As terrifying as the woman was, she was infinitely more approachable than say, Greta or Merlin, forbid, Dahlia. He had the vaguest hint of a feeling that perhaps he could have pursued
Wikhn in a different way and that perhaps that would have changed the outcome. Dahlia had seemed somewhat disapproving when she'd seen Wikhn's attentions to him and he wondered whether he'd stumbled onto something that he shouldn't have.

He twitched faintly, banishing that train of thought. He had clearly seen the look of adoration on the dark fae's face when he'd been sandwiched between Quinn's sister, Dyshoka and his Ace, Dahlia. That was not the expression of someone with a mere crush, but rather the look of willing and devoted lover. Harry frowned, shaking the thought off for later, if he felt like it. Personally, he wished that there were more obvious cues for when someone was taken.

Not that the shared kiss had been regretted in any way, but Harry did wish that perhaps he had known that rejection was hovering somewhere in the wings before he'd given said kiss away. In his mind's eye, he could still see Wikhn's pale face and the memory of the faint silvery scars along his features made him frown. There was something about Wikhn that he could not put his finger on and it bothered him.

"Blood Wraith," Hadrian greeted, softly.

Ilsa looked him over, her earlier annoyance easily replaced with curiosity and interest at the prospect of a decent conversation with a fellow Gheyo and Ace. "Blood Raven," she returned the formal greeting. "Excellent introduction. I did not expect to see you there today, at least, not your title. You have not been in Nevarah for the past few—years?" She tried, thinking back. She had been gone for some time, after all.

"My heart was elsewhere," Hadrian said, simply. He looked about the room, his dark-eyed gaze finally sweeping over Harry and his Bonded, the faintest hint of a smile on his full lips. "Forgive me if I am interrupting anything."

"No interruptions at all," Greta was the one to speak next, she started forward, angling for one of the empty settees. The others had begun to shuffle back to their seats, in the absence of the Royals. "I'm here on Ilsa's behalf."

"Who was here to ask a favor of my father," Ilsa tipped her head towards Thomas. "On account of that lovely little bit, there." She smirked in Harry's direction. He pulled at face at her, but did not contradict the words.

Hadrian followed her prompt and turned his own gentle smile, full-force on Harry. "Nothing too serious, I hope." He said, smoothly. "Is everything alright?"

"It's fine, actually. Or it will be quite soon." Ilsa started faintly when Bahn escaped from Delani's clutches to come over and deposit himself in her lap. Her smirk softened and she nuzzled along his cheek, accurately reading the near pout on his face for an inkling of jealousy in regards to Hadrian. The male Gheyo was definitely quite delightful to look at and Bahn had seen her appreciative gaze. "Feeling better?" She asked.

Bahn sniffed. He didn't answer, but he did study Hadrian for a moment, before effectively turning his back to him with a huff, pillowing his head on Ilsa's shoulder. The Gheyo chuckled and rubbed a hand up and down his back. "You're heavy," she remarked, after a moment. "Which means you're tired, aren't you?" Usually, he would alter his weight with magic to keep said magic from building up throughout the day. Dragel pregnancies often left the Carrier with an excess of magic up to ten times their natural stores to protect them from harm and coax the magical spark to life within their unborn offspring. Pregnant submissives were expected to expend a certain amount of that magical energy per day, to keep from being overwhelmed. "You can take a catnap, if you like. I'll wake you before the fun starts."
"Had a nap at lunch," Bahn yawned into her neck, relaxing as she didn't stop petting him. It felt nice. He drew slightly on his elemental gift to alter his weight, because while he might be vaguely annoyed at his darling Ilsa, he did want a cuddle and this small concession meant he would have it and perhaps a little more. "Long day. Maybe." His heavy-lidded gaze flickered over to Harry. He nudged Ilsa ever so slightly, the movement hidden from view.

Ilsa twitched, faintly, then turned back to Hadrian, who had remained quiet throughout the exchange. She could read in a glance that Harry was curious, if not interested and that Hadrian was not the type to speak first and pry into stranger's business. Perhaps he would speak up if they were no longer strangers though. That would be quite fun, she supposed, if there was a mutual spark between them, it would take some coaxing. She tugged lightly on the bond between her and Greta, waiting.

"I haven't seen you in the cages for weeks—years even, Hadrian." Greta said. She settled down on the floor, seemingly more comfortable there than sitting on the furniture. She leaned back to brace against Ilsa's leg, angling herself towards Hadrian, a deceptive position, but a natural one, considering that her pregnant Submissive was currently lounging in the lap of her Ace. While Hadrian would not outright attack them unprovoked, she would remain close by just in case something did happen. Ilsa's first priority would be to protect Bahn and so hers would be to protect Ilsa. "Last I heard, you were running." She said, causally. It was a subtle barb and she would judge him on how well he handled it.

Ilsa perked a brow. Running? She certainly hadn't heard that bit of news for the famed shadow Lord, then again, she hadn't been around to hear it. That was certainly something to look into at some point. She nudged Greta with her foot, conveying her surprise and receiving a light pat for her efforts. She looked to him for confirmation.

"Drifting more so than running," Hadrian said. "I drifted to the end where shadows meet shades. Lord Cunningham was kind enough to offer a paid contract. Said it wasn't right for one with our element to be without roots. The pay is good and I am occasionally allowed to be as messy as I like." He half-smiled, knowing both women would understand what he meant. He had left Nevarah searching for something to ease his troubled soul and had returned home at his employer's orders. "I have not seen you for some years as well, my lady." He remembered sparring with her a few times before the restlessness had overtaken him. "How fares you and yours?" The formality of his speech was softened with the newly relaxed posture as he settled back on the settee, finally at ease.

"Quite well, thank you." Greta chuckled. She had remembered him before his little disappearance and he seemed much better for the time spent away from the public view. He had handled her question well and that was what she'd hoped. She'd known him a bit before Ilsa had and was relieved to see that his rough edges had been well-sanded off, leaving behind a tempered maturity that held an unmistakable allure. She hoped his contract included provisions for free sparring slots. It would be electrifying to test her mettle against his. Unlike their parental elements of Fire and Water, Shadow and Storm managed to coexist quite nicely. She remembered the reason for his presence though and decided to ask outright. "Are you the only hunter free? I was under the impression there would be more of you."

Hadrian gave that odd half-smile again and he opened his mouth to speak when the door to Prince Raspen's quarters banged open and Ebony came stalking through.

Charlie flinched in his seat, a confused burble slipping through his lips at the very obvious feedback he received through his mentored bond. He didn't have to look at Ebony's scowling face to understand that something new had come up and it was disturbing her on more than one level. Theo immediately looked to him in concern and Charlie managed a half-smile, to show he was
alright. It would take him some time to sort through having a mentored bond in additional to his Circle bonds.

Harry's attention shifted at once to the royals as they streamed out of Prince Raspen's private room, all of them in various states of barely concealed anger, with the exception of the Merrow king. He wondered what they had spoken of and realized that perhaps he would never know.

"...I don't bloody care!" The fire princess snarled. "Count your only blessing as the fact that you chose to tell us," she hissed. "If you had dared keep such information to yourself, I would have-"

"Ebony!" Prince Raspen's voice was fierce and commanding, demanding the respect that he did not outright ask for. It had the desired effect and the fire princess fell silent at once, though her glower of displeasure did not abate. "That is quite enough. Alcandor chose to tell us and we should be-"

"Grateful?" Princess Dawne picked up, her own voice laced with fury. "How do you think I feel having heard that there is a-"

"Thank you for informing us," Lady Bianca said, serenely, interrupting whatever the air princess had been about to say. "I truly appreciate what it must have cost you to share such information. If you would not mind, I wish to speak to my Circle about this. They ought to be informed." She bowed, formally and headed for the exit.

The two Princesses quieted at her departure and then they looked to Lord Cunningham, who was stroking his scruffy beard, lips pursed in thought. "I do not agree with it," he said, at last. "But I do understand it. I might have done the same, in your position." His dark eyes glittered. "And I echo, Lady Bianca's sentiments. Thank you for the warning, I will also inform my Circle at the earliest opportunity."

King Alcandor stepped into the room and back into view, looking every inch his haughty Merrow self. "Consider it a courtesy between Royals and ruling powers," he said, stiffly. "My Courts would not have me speak of it, but I thought you deserved to know." He huffed out a short breath and perked up almost at once, as Prince Raspen's aide signaled for the royal's attention.

"There is a young Merrow in the hall-" she began, gesturing towards the doorway.

"Send them in." King Alcandor said, cheerfully, his good humors apparently easily restored at the prospect of an outlet for his temper. "And do let us have this over and done with as quickly as possible?"

"Have what?" Lord Cunningham wanted to know. He followed them over to where the others were sitting and came to stand directly behind the settee where Hadrian was seated. He touched the Gheyo's shoulder gently and the two communicated silently for a moment, before Hadrian half-shrugged.

"Removal of a Merrow spell," Ebony said. "Imagine that."

King Alcandor growled faintly, but waited while four Merrow guards appeared, guiding between them a sullen Alec. He looked over at the little group and crooked two fingers at Harry. While he waited for Harry to come over, he turned his attention to Alec, a faintly vindictive gleam in his dark blue eyes. "I have a very simple question for you, Alec," he said, calmly. "Do you recognize him?" He nodded to Harry, who had come to stand before him, with Theo beside him, as before.

Harry had started faintly the moment the other Merrows had entered the room and he was surprised to see they had found Alec, at least, he was fairly certain it was Alec, because of the
sulky pout and the familiar wetsuit. That was good. At least this could be over with soon and he could return to hunting things—whatever those things might be. Favors…the thought trickled through his head and Harry straightened. That was right. He had favors to sort through when he was through for the day, so the sooner this Merrow spell was over with—and piercing blue eyes seemed to suck all the breath from his body as Harry found himself staring straight up at the Merrow king.

It was harder to fight the natural curiosity within when the Merrow stood so close to him. He was, unable to help the new fascination with the king who was all arrogance, rich blue scales and fierce beauty. The tilt of his head made his crown cant to the side, his ear jewelry tinkling with the movement and his navy blue hair slipping over one shoulder. Compared to Alec, the Merrow king was a whole different species altogether, Harry was sure.

"I have never seen him before in my life," Alec said, bluntly. He stood off to the left, his arms crossed over his chest, his scowl more noticeable up close, surrounded by the four guards.

Harry barely held back a gasp. The nerve! He was almost certain that this was indeed the same Alec, but he'd never thought in a million years that the Merrow would deny it. Then again…he mentally scrambled, hoping there was some way he could prove his story, at least so the spell would be removed.

King Alcandor nodded, absently, still gazing down at Harry. "And do you recognize him?" He asked Harry, with a tilt of his head towards Alec.

Harry made himself focus on the important question asked and mentally dredged up the encounter from the previous night. "I think so," he said, brows furrowed. That was the best he could offer. "I mean, I haven't seen many Merrows. But he was wearing a wetsuit and his hair was—is—brighter than yours." He blushed, realizing that he'd been comparing blue hair colors between Merrows. That was something he could never have predicted.

King Alcandor merely nodded, turning back to Alec. "You deny seeing him before?" Alec glared in answer, but did not verbalize the affirmative once more. The king did not push him, instead, he asked a different question. "How about cursing him?"

"I have cursed no one." Alec snapped, shoulders hunching forward. "How could I curse someone I never saw?"

"Of course," King Alcandor said, blithely. "Imagine that. It would be quite a feat and I would be most interested in knowing how you managed it." He sighed. "However, that is beside the point. I suppose you would not know how your magical signature ended up all over this—Harry, then, yes?"

Alec blinked once, twice, a mulish expression settling on his sharp features. "I have been everywhere with Goonter and he has been liberally covered in my magic since the day we first met. Perhaps there is residual magical present."

"Ah. Of course. That must be it." There was a hint of sarcasm from the Merrow king and he sniffed, delicately. "Where were you, yesterday afternoon?"

"…training Goonter, your highness."

"Mmmhm." King Alcandor murmured. "And in this training you were near the surface?"

"You issued specific instructions for no one to breach the surface until your arrival." Alec said,
stiffly. He still refused to even glance in Harry's direction, opting to pretend that there were no others present in the room.

"That is not answering the question. Were you or were you not?"

Alec huffed. "I may have been close to it," he admitted, reluctantly. "Goonter is very large. We need a great deal of space to practice our maneuvers for the entertainment display. You are well aware of this, my king." He all but spat out the title, his glower darkening even more.

King Alcandor sighed, turning away from Harry at last to fully face the other Merrow. "You know, Alec, I honestly thought Kieran taught you to lie better than that."

A faint lilac flush of color rippled over Alec's pale blue cheeks and then he looked away, swiftly. "I have no need of lying, your highness." He said, calmly. "I am only telling the truth."

"Of course you are," King Alcandor said. "Which is why you cannot actually say it to my face, now can you? I suppose next you will say there is certainly no reason to even think of lying to save your neck." His lower lip curled. "Scrawny as it is." He paused. "If I ask Goonter what happened last night, will your reports match up?"

Alec froze. "If you mean to imply that a Harron's dragon is-"

"I sincerely hope you are not about to insult the intelligence of my familiar." King Alcandor said, amused. "Because that would most certainly be in very poor taste."

Harry was caught somewhere between surprise, shock and anger that Alec would outright lie and then a mixture of surprise that he was digging himself a deeper hole with every single word he spoke. From the earlier conversation he'd heard between the king and his advisor, he had a feeling that a mere slap on the wrist would not be a potential remedy for the current situation. He wondered what King Alcandor would do now and whether Alec's word as a Merrow would count for more than his own. Then again, they had spoken of magical signatures and Harry knew that those were unique to their respective casters. He swallowed hard.

"By all means then, ask him!" Alec threw back.

There was a deliberate pause and then King Alcandor sighed. "So your final word is that you are absolutely blameless from this entire—situation?"

Alec lifted his chin. "Indeed."

"Curious." King Alcandor said. He turned to face Harry, softening ever so slightly at the look of worry on the young dragel's face. "For the record, Alec. If I were to kill you, Kieran would be terribly upset. He might mope for days—weeks, even—and that would distinctly disturb my court on more than one level. Since I have neither the time nor the patience to deal with a mopey advisor, consider yourself lucky that you are his ward." His head snapped around, a fierce glare visible on his sharp features. "And that is as lucky as you will ever be, you may find that death would have been a much easier option." He snapped his fingers together, with a slight wave of dismissal. "Take him to my chambers and leave him there. Chain him to the bedposts if he fights. I will deal with him as I see fit when I no longer feel the urge to kill him." Blue eyes seemed to burn with a dark fire. "Do you have any idea what your little stunt is costing me? Of course not, you pathetic little eel!" A low, angry growl rumbled in his throat.

The first inkling of uncertainty filtered through to Alec's face and he shrank back, even as the guards caught him by the arms and began to pull him away from the group. He seemed to catch
himself a moment later and fought viciously as the guards manhandled him out of sight, as per their king's orders.

Harry opened his mouth to protest and shut it with a click when King Alcandor's head snapped back around to look at him, the eerie fire still flickering in his dark eyes. He swallowed again. He did not blame Alec's reaction in the face of that intense gaze.

"Allow me to—apologize—on behalf of my advisor's ward. Alec is a special case. One that does not always seem to be in proper possession of the mental faculties that ought to reside within the folds of the nonexistent brain in his empty-skulled head." The insult and apology was delivered flawlessly. "I will remove the spell, with your express permission, if that is what you wish."

"It is." Harry found his voice quite quickly. After all of this fuss, he definitely wanted the spell off. "What will I have to do?"

"Do? Absolutely nothing. Stand still and breathe." The Merrow king scowled. "Definitely breathe and definitely do not move." He screwed up his face in an expression of distaste. "Believe me when I say that I will take absolutely no pleasure in this whatsoever."

"What will you do to him?" Ebony spoke up, at once, already on her feet and halfway over to Harry, with Charlie trailing after her. They stood behind him, presenting a united front as Ilsa came to stand with them, having handed off Bahn to Greta.

"I will do absolutely nothing, but that which has been requested of me." King Alcandor said, stiffly. "You do wish for me to remove the spell, yes?"

"We do," Theo said, quietly. His burrow furrowed just enough to show that he followed their conversation, but was not yet certain that he liked the way certain events were panning out.

"Al?" Prince Raspen tried. "Is there anything that you would prefer to-"

"You can all help by standing still and not interfering. It will be absolutely painless and he will be perfectly fine."

Thomas now joined their little gaggle and he reached out to squeeze Harry's shoulder reassuringly. "You will be fine, Harry." He said, warmly. "We are all here with you." He threw a sharp look at the Merrow king who seemed more bored and annoyed with each passing second.

When no more protests were voiced, King Alcandor clasped his hands behind his back and leaned forward and down, slanting his lips directly over Harry's to the sound of everyone's surprised gasps.

There was a muffled squeak of surprise from Harry and then he discovered that he actually couldn't move at all, not that he actually wanted to, after the initial shock had passed. This was quite a singular experience that was turning out to be quite wonderful, at least, as far as the unexpected went. Breathing was still possible and Harry could breathe, but any movement beyond that was pointless as it seemed he could not move a single muscle.

The lips over his own were cool, smooth and just the right shape, it seemed as they teased and caressed him. It took Harry a moment to understand the fact that the Merrow king tasted like pineapple, tart and sweet at the same time. He was vaguely aware of strands of navy blue hair brushing softly against his cheek as King Alcandor took control of the kiss and nibbled gently along his lower lip, silently asking for entrance.

A moment of resistance was exactly that. A single moment. Harry gasped into the cool mouth as
the kiss deepened and he felt his entire body quivering and trembling in spite of his immobile state. If kissing Charlie was like being burnt alive, then kissing the Merrow king was like drowning without water and in that instance, Harry didn't care if he drowned—it would be a good death.

Sensual, seductive and oh-so-gentle, Harry gave up on figuring out the how's and why's and simply let it happen. He quivered inside as those talented lips held him fast in a dance as old as time that definitely lasted longer than anything he could quite recall. Then he felt it, an icy strand of energy worming its way out from the tips of his toes, slithering back up his body.

He tried to protest, a sound, a warning, anything—because he didn't think he could bear this wild feeling that wrestled through him with a mind of its own and then—then a tentative tongue poked through his lips and tangled teasingly with his own, playful and encouraging in the same moment. Harry's eyes slid shut and he focused on the sensations, allowing his mouth to be quite effectively plundered by a dominating kiss that one-hundred percent pure skill. He had never been kissed like this before.

He felt hot, then cold and then dizzy all at the same time, before the entire cycle repeated itself and he was gasping into that wonderful mouth, wishing he could move and cling to the source of clarity, the focal point, the Merrow King Alcandor.

The icy feeling worked its way up through his stomach and then lurched up to his shoulders, before slowly, slowly, oh-so-slowly, crawling up his throat and into his mouth, stopping just where they were joined at the lips. Harry trembled, feeling the icy feeling building up inside of him, seeking an outlet, somewhere to manifest and not finding what it desired.

Somehow, his hands were moving and he scrabbled against cool, scaled skin, a brush of metal and then a handful of something silky. He grabbed that and held on in hopes of conveying his desperation. The second before the ice would have been utterly unbearable, the kiss ended.

Harry gasped as he felt those cool lips—warm now, in comparison to the unnatural coolness that had been moving around inside of him—begin to withdraw. He couldn't stop the whine that bubbled out from his throat and he pulled, reflexively on the softness in his hands, wishing the moment wasn't over yet.

As if to console him, the lips returned, kissing him softly, carefully and then finally pulling away for good.

Harry's eyes popped open as he opened his mouth to protest and found himself staring into deep, dark blue eyes. A single navy blue eyebrow arched upwards in an unspoken question and Harry blushed bright red. He looked down, only to find that he had grabbed handfuls of the Merrow king's thick hair and immediately released it, feeling his ears burn with the sheer intensity of the blush.

When he dared to look up, King Alcandor had taken a few steps back and looked rather bored as he opened his mouth and reached inside with two fingers. A disgusting slurping sound filled the room and then a shimmering white band of energy was held in his hand, having been pulled from his throat. It hung limply, like a used dishrag and sparked faintly when Harry stared at it, repulsed.

"I take it that is the spell?" Princess Dawne asked, faintly.

King Alcandor threw the glittering strand of magic up into the air and snapped his fingers. It exploded into a puff of blue sparkles that vanished before they ever reached the floor. He grimaced and then accepted an empty teacup from Lord Cunningham, before coughing and spitting into it. He handed the cup back and wiped his lips with a grimace. "Congratulations," he said,
sarcastically. "I would wish you happy hunting, but it is not quite in my nature to do so. That said. Have a perfectly dreadful evening. Now if the rest of you could excuse me, unlike yourselves, I do have royal duties to attend to."

With a practiced flip of his hair, he strode from the room, flanked by six guards who shimmered into existence the moment he was two paces away from their little group.

There was a moment of silence and then Harry leaned back, welcoming Charlie's strong warm arms that wrapped around him from behind. He let himself be led to the settee and sat down yet again, unable to keep one hand from reaching up and touching his still tingling lips.

AUGUSTA LONGBOTTOM'S ANCESTRAL MANOR

"How soon can we leave?" Molly braced herself in the comfy armchair by the fireplace, eating her breakfast from the tray seated atop her lap. She looked weak and exhausted, but there was a flush of color in her cheeks that had finally surfaced since they'd all turned up at Longbottom Manor. "Not that your hospitality is lacking in any way, Auggie, but it is not safe here."

"As if I didn't know that myself," Augusta huffed. "Eat your soup and stop fussing. We'll discuss things as soon as my lie-abed grandson and his girlfriend can show their faces."

Molly perked a brow at that and dutifully took another spoonful of soup. "Don't be too hard on the boy," she said, softly. "Dryads can be just as persuasive as succubae."

Augusta scowled. "Believe me, I know." She squinted at the doorway. "She's up and she's fine, the lot of you don't need to hang about there. Either come in or stay out."

A sheepish Seamus and a worried Ginny came streaking in from the doorway, a more sedate Dean shuffling in after them. They looked between the two witches, before Ginny was on her knees by her mother's side, searching that familiar face for any sign of distress.

"I'm fine, Ginny-girl," Molly made herself smile for her. The only child she currently had left. The one thing that Arthur hadn't been able to take.

"Oh Mum, I was so worried." Ginny clasped the proffered hand to her, feeling the calloused fingers and noting how cool they were. It made her frown, because her mother was seated right in front of the fire, eating hot soup—she could still see the steam from it—and yet, she looked as if not a wisp of that warmth had even registered.

"She'll be fine," Augusta said. She waved the two standing young men to a settee on the other side. "And we can leave as soon as you finish that soup."

Molly smiled, weakly.

"Where are we headed?" Dean folded his arms over his chest. He craved a place where he could have some privacy with Seamus and safety for the rest of their little group.

"You've heard of Nevarah?" Molly set her spoon down and gently reclaimed her hand from Ginny. She pushed the tray away from herself with a regretful smile. "It's lovely, Auggie, but I'm afraid—I need—I need to be home right now. I can't—you know what I need."

"Home is gone," Ginny said, slowly.
"Heard of it," Seamus said. "Always thought it was something of a legend though."

"Real legends are the things you don't hear about," Lavender stood in the doorway, finger-combing her pale brown strands. She looked content and sated, wearing clean robes—courtesy of the Longbottom house elves—and rather alive, compared to her earlier appearance. "Nevy, love, they're in here. Everyone's here."

Dean nearly choked at the endearment spoken in such a sweet tone of voice. Seamus elbowed him, even though a laugh threatened to escape as well. Ginny wrinkled her nose at the nickname and shifted her attention from her mother to the new pair.

Neville came striding through the door, two steaming cups of hot chocolate in hand, evidenced by the mountain of whipped topping floating on the surface and the chocolatey smell that filled the room. He passed one of the cups to Lavender and crossed the room to greet his Gran with a murmur, a kiss and a whisper of a message from one of the house elves.

Augusta accepted the greeting, shaking her head to his answered question and then waving them to a seat of their own. "Molly was about to announce our new destination." She eyed her friend for a moment, then called a house elf to take away the food tray. "Nevarah, as you children should have heard or learned at some point or another, due to your creature heritage, is a nevermore realm where many creature kind and hybrid creatures, magical and otherwise, live in harmony."

Lavender waited until Neville had seated himself on the floor beside his Gran, then moved over to sit, bracing against him for support. He smiled indulgently at her, a half-sad smile on his face, as he shifted his cup to the other hand and let his newly freed hand rest on her shoulder. She made no acknowledgement of it, but she didn't brush him away either.

"When you say other creatures, what exactly do you mean?" Ginny asked, tentatively. "I mean, until—recently—I didn't know that I was—that I could be, I mean, I didn't." She couldn't look at her mother. Things had been a mess since that day at the Burrow and she didn't know if they would ever be the same again, much less if she would ever see her father or her siblings in the future.

Augusta gave her a pitying look, settling back in her chair, her hands picking at the knitted blanket thrown over her lap. "When I say other creatures, I mean everything, child. Everything from were-creatures, vampires, Succubae, Dryads, Elves, Fae of all kinds, the very hounds of hell, spirits from every plane and dragons." A flicker of fire showed in her soft brown eyes. "Definitely dragons. I will leave the explanation of dragel and what you are, to your mother, I would never take that from her," she directed the last phrase to Molly, who gave a weak smile of understanding. "Suffice it to say that dragels are elemental dragons. They are part creature and part magic. They require an open mind and a tremendous amount of respect, I expect you all to retain as much." She turned just as a house elf popped up at her elbow. "Is it ready?"

"Whenever youse is ready, Madam Augusta."

"We will be there, directly." Augusta began to fold the blanket on her lap. The house elf popped away. "You are all smart enough to know why we are heading there, so I won't insult you by explaining it."

"It's Dumbledore, isn't it?" Ginny said. There was a glint in her hazel eyes. She was not happy at the way things had fallen apart and she was even more upset to see the way it was affecting her mother.

Augusta regarded her silently for a moment, then gave a single nod. "Yes. That blathering old fool has dug his own grave." She rose from the chair with an audible groan and a pained grimace. "My
roots are stirring, come. We must leave quickly. You came in search of a sanctuary I can best offer elsewhere. The sooner we are out of this world, the safer we all will be and perhaps there will be more time to explain."

"What is Nevarah like?" Lavender yawned, allowing Neville to help her to her feet. "I mean, I've heard of it, and Mum's spoken of—places—but, is there anything—what will we do when we're there? I don't know anyone and I—well," she stopped, looking at Neville, seriously. "I suppose that's not quite a problem anymore, now is it?"

"Indeed, young lady," Augusta said. "Indeed. Come along." She moved to help Molly stand, with Ginny's help. They each supported the witch with an arm around the waist, holding her up as best as they could. "We will talk more when we've reached or rather, while we travel. Just not here."

"Thanks for taking us with you," Seamus piped up.

Augusta half-smiled. "I could no more leave you than leave my Neville," she said, softly. "Come now. Quickly." She led them out in the back gardens and towards a giant, clear blue pool that shimmered and glittered in the sunlight. They walked until they reached the water's edge and then she stretched one skinny leg to the watery surface.

The ground shook as she left Molly to be supported by Ginny and Neville, standing knee-deep in the pristine pond. The same creaking groan that had left her lips upon rising from her chair, now seemed to be coming from the very earth itself. The water rippled and shook as Augusta lost some of her age and gained a bit more life in her eyes. "When the pool begins to swirl, you must turn around and back into the water. Keep your eyes on me." She warned. "Do not look anywhere else, lest you find yourself in a place where I am not welcome, I am your key and this is the lock." The water began to churn, steadily growing swifter into an active whirlpool. "It will not hurt you. You will be safe."

"Let me be first," Molly volunteered. Waterways were her least favorite method of transportation, considering her fire element, but she had no choice in the matter and she knew she could not stay in the wizarding world much longer. Her magic, her nameless talent of family magic, had been heavily tied to her precious family and now, without her boys, without Arthur, it was crumbling. She needed the next best anchor, a member of her dragel family. "I have traveled this way before and I can help them as they arrive."

"Mum, you're not-!" Ginny started to say, a flicker of fear in her eyes. This was all too new and too confusing and for the first time, the reality of a war, Voldemort and pain, was becoming a bit too clear to her.

"Shh." Molly soothed. "I will not disappear. I will be waiting for you." She lifted her gaze to encompass all of the young men and women. "All of you. Listen to Lady Longbottom and hold your breath before you walk under." As if to demonstrate, she sucked in a deep breath and waded out into the water, heading for the whirlpool.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: HAPPY TWO YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF TBDH! I really appreciate all the wonderful reviews, comments, suggestions and support for this monster of a fic for the past two years. Thank you SO much! This is another monster chapter of 20k, so read slowly or go back and reread it to make sure you follow everything. There's
Charlie and Ebony's mentor ceremony and then the whole Harry's Merrow Spell removal, as far as the important points go. Next chapter should have the dispatch of Hunters to find Harry's missing mentor, maybe a glimpse at either the WW or Hermione and more Harry. Stay tuned for courting fun and a touch of romance. ~Scion

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry and Deveraines)

Charlie-(with Theo, Harry and Deveraines)

Harry-(with Theo, Charlie and Deveraines)

Deveraine Circle members-(Bahn, Delani, Ilsa and Greta-with Harry and Co. All others are off doing their own thing.)
Mad Maury - Part I

Chapter Summary

Harry's about to learn of his missing mentor. First part of a mini-arc in the searching for a missing dragel.

Chapter Notes

! TRIGGER WARNINGS - for mentions of death, suicide, gore and torture in this chapter.!

See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries. TBDH Forum is on ff.net. This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. She is doing better now. :D All remaining mistakes are my own.

RECAP: Harry and Co., the Deveraines and Ilsa's father, Thomas, the Chief of the Earth Clan are currently with the Royals after the successful removal of Harry's Merrow spell, thanks to the Merrow King Alcandor's help. Prince Raspen sets things in motion for finding Harry's missing mentor and the other Royals pitch in, along with the Shadow Lord and his hired Gheyo, Lord Cunningham and Hadrian.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

! TRIGGER WARNINGS - for mentions of death, suicide, gore and torture in this chapter. !

NEVARAH – FRIDAY AFTERNOON – ROYALS' QUARTERS

"Harry, are you alright?" Ilsa looked as if she would like to crush him in a hug, if her arms were not currently full with Bahn, who now clung to her, his face a storm. He didn't seem very happy with the way things had played out and there was a very obvious sign of worry on his face, as he looked to Harry. He said something to Ilsa and a moment later, it was Greta who half squashed Harry instead.

Greta and Theo, since Harry's Alpha refused to release him just yet. He'd pulled Harry right back up off of the settee, holding him tightly, as if afraid he would be snatched away. "I did not expect that." She said, sounding quite upset. "He didn't—I mean, are you alright? He didn't-?" and Ilsa stopped there, her brows tightly furrowed together and the look on her face, an expression of such deep concern that Harry managed to shake his head, slowly.

"I'm fine," He said, surprised at how calm his voice was. "I mean, I wasn't expecting it, but he didn't—I mean, he was mostly removing the spell?" Harry touched his lips again, unable to quite banish the feeling of such cool, smoothness sliding so easily over him. One part of him wondered if that was what kissing Alec would be like, while the rest of him processed the fact that Alec would be in trouble. Quite a significant amount of trouble. As much as he'd wanted to see the Merrow repent for his actions, Harry did not want him hurt. Green eyes grew wide. "Alec!" He
thought of their encounter in the night and then more recently on the grassy bank near the water's edge. Alec had been almost friendly or at least as friendly as Harry thought he was capable of.

"What about him?" Charlie growled, not the least bit happy to have laid eyes on the one who landed his Harry in this mixed up situation in the first place. He did not like the way the spell had been removed, nor had he liked the arrogant, heavy-handed manner of the Merrow king. He thought the blue-skinned devil could stand to be taken down a notch or two, at least for having taken advantage of Harry in such a public audience. "He deserves what he's-"

"No, Charlie. That's not fair." Harry shushed him, twisting as best as he could in the twin embrace that sandwiched him to his Bonded. "Ilsa, he won't kill him, will he?" Harry turned his pleading gaze to Theo and then back to Ilsa, unable to express the fact that he didn't think he could shoulder the burden of knowing he had brought some degree of pain to someone that may not have had entirely devious motives towards him. "I mean, I didn't know it was a protection spell and if it did wear off-"

"Oh no you don't, Harry." Theo said, firmly. "Don't you dare make this out to be your fault. Yes, you shouldn't have been wandering about the docks, but Alec, as I now know his name, was the one to cast that spell. The moment he did so, he had to know there would be consequences for it. You are not responsible for his trouble."

"But-!" Harry started to say. He felt a little knot in his chest tighten at the thought of Alec being in trouble and even more so at the thought of Alec being in big trouble. He didn't like that at all.

"No, Theo's right." Charlie said, from his side behind Harry. He leaned down to press his lips against the back of Harry's neck, just barely resisting the instinctive urge to bite. "Don't feel sorry for something that-

"Will he?" Harry leaned out from their arms to look at Ilsa. He didn't know why it mattered, but he had to know.

Ilsa blinked, her dark brown eyes flickering a shade lighter. She was unconsciously swaying an unprotesting Bahn in her arms and after a moment, she gave a stiff shake of her head. "He said he wouldn't." She said, with a frown, mentally backtracking through the elaborate verbal exchange between the two Merrows. "And you needn't worry after him. Listen to your Bonded, they have excellent points." She looked down at Greta, who had now resumed her causal seat on the floor, her soft purple eyes watching them all.

Harry twisted his hands together, unsure of that. He could follow their logical reasoning, but that did not mean he had to like it. There was something about Alec that reminded him of Wikhn and what Harry remembered from Wikhn was the incredible feeling of strange fragility, as if the dark fae had been wearing a mask of sorts that was as thin as parchment and about to succumb to flame. Alec's dark eyes had betrayed a similar emotion, a bundle of tightly restrained hurt, hope and heart, all rolled into one, when he'd apologized—or tried to—right before Theo's portal had whisked him away.

Bringing himself back to the present, Harry felt his face heat as he realized that everyone in the room had just witnessed the spell's removal—and the subsequent liplock with said Merrow king. Inwardly, he moaned. Could his life never be simple? Then again, He was Harry bloody Potter and some things, it seemed, would never change. This was likely fate's own hand for having granted his Charlie a suitable mentor. Harry swallowed, working up his Gryffindor courage to sneak a peek at the other Royals in the room, remembering belatedly that the rest of the Deveraines, the Gorgens and—Merlin help him—Hadrian were still present.
Ebony was looking him over with the same line of worry that Harry had seen in Ilsa's face and Princess Dawne was in a quiet conversation with Lord Cunningham. Hadrian's dark eyes drilled straight into Harry from behind that plumed mask, but there was no real way to tell what he was feeling. Harry felt something twist and shift inside of him, before it settled down for the second time that day, as if incomplete.

He managed to work a hand free from Theo and Charlie's hug sandwich and rubbed ineffectively at his chest. It hadn't clicked and that, he felt, was an important detail, but the fact that it almost had, was enough for him to take notice. He rubbed at his chest again, it didn't do a single thing, but he found himself making a mental note to keep track of those urges. He'd felt it with Wikhn, but that hadn't really turned into anything and then just a moment ago, he almost thought he'd felt it with Alec. Harry scowled. He looked to Prince Raspen and saw that the earth royal was venturing forward, coming to a full stop a few feet away from them when Theo had instinctively growled.

"Theo, I'm fine." Harry said. He leaned forward, touching his cheek to Theo's. "I'm—fine." He directed at Charlie, hitching a breath when he felt a tiny lick from his Beta on the back of his neck. That was nice. He knew this was likely instinct on both of their parts and as nice as it was to be sort of smothered by them, he didn't quite care for the time or the place, but understood that it was something out of his control. He threw an apologetic look to the earth royal, hoping it would be understood.

Prince Raspen's lips quirked into a warm smile, reading exactly what Harry had hoped; he had enough experience with his own kind to understand. The new triad had been rudely jolted out of their little 'glowing' period, akin to the honeymoon period that most bonded couples went through. "That's quite fine. They'll calm in a minute, as long as you're calm. If you meant Alec, then he'll be fine. Al won't kill him. He has a terrible temper, but he does care for his people and he is fair. Merrow law is rather harsh, but they choose their Royals, not the other way around like the rest of us. We're born into our Royalty, he isn't. They chose him because he is fair and I suppose kind, in his own way. By Merrow standards, anyway." Prince Raspen sighed. "And undoubtedly because he embodies everything that they treasure. I am sorry about the method though. Alcandor can be a bastard when he's in a good mood and I did not see that coming or else I would have stopped him. I thought he would simply reverse the incantation."

"But he didn't say anything," Harry said. He turned the memory over in his head, trying and recalling that Alec had not directly spelled him, that he was aware of.

"Pardon?"

"Alec," Harry said, slowly. "When he cast it—however he cast it—I don't remember him saying anything. I didn't even feel it and when I asked him to take it off, he said that he hadn't put anything on me." Now that he thought of it, Harry wondered if Alec's spell removal would have used the same methods. His face warmed, briefly.

Prince Raspen's eyebrows danced upwards. After a moment, he ran a hand through his dark wavy hair. "I suppose that did complicate things. That's quite—unexpected." He said at least. "But still, I am sorry for that. You are alright, Harry?" His golden-eyed gaze flickered to Theo as the rest of Harry's explanation registered. "When did you say you asked him to take it off…?"

"Er," Harry looked away. He hadn't been about to reveal that he'd run into the Merrow a second time, somehow, that seemed to be a bit too personal and he did not want to share it. "This is taking longer than I thought it would." He licked his lips. "What about my mentor? You said you would send Hunters?"

The Prince gave him a look that said he knew quite well that Harry was avoiding the subject, but
he allowed it. Instead, he directed his next question to Theo. "That is what Lord Cunningham was called for. He has quite a crew of Hunters at his disposal." He frowned. "Are you well, Theo?"

"I will—manage." Theo said, at least. Seeing the Merrow King calmly snogging his Harry had not been the worst shock he'd weathered, but it was definitely not a welcome sight. He was not happy at the method any more than his prince seemed to be, but he would keep his temper for the time being. At least for Harry's sake, as he had no intention of further embarrassing him, if the faint blush on Harry's cheeks were any indication. Of course, Theo could easily put that aside for later thought, he was also interested in what exactly those Hunters would be doing and that was a perfectly safe switch in topics.

By the time everyone was calm again—and really, Harry couldn't quite blame them, how could anyone be calm after such an event like that—they settled down to business once more. Prince Raspen's aide took away the used teacup from Lord Cunningham and everyone managed to arrange themselves according to their respective Circles, leaving the Royals as a group and Hadrian with his employer.

Theo was still fussing over Harry, having plied him with tea and sweet ginger newts. Of course, such small acts hadn't really helped much and in the end, Theo kissed him quite thoroughly before his Alpha dragel nature would settle enough for him to regain his usual poise. Charlie, not to be outdone, had immediately picked up from where Theo had left off and between the two of them, Harry was not quite sitting on his own, but rather, awkwardly distributed on their laps.

"M'fine, Theo." Harry finally protested. He felt as if he would never stop blushing now. "Really. It was just-" he stopped, face burning red once more. He did not finish that sentence, because one, it had definitely been far more than a mere 'kiss' and two, if he'd seen anyone take that sort of liberty with any of his Bonded, he would have been all angry claws and fangs. A little part of him was decidedly distressed that such a rare occurrence would never happen again, as obviously snogging the Merrow king simply wasn't done and a larger part of himself knew that it would realistically never happen again. Still, he couldn't help thinking that the kiss, as mind-blowing as it was, had been deliberately impersonal. He'd responded, perhaps out of instinct or curiosity Harry didn't know, but he'd felt a pang of regret at realizing that there was no way to know what it would feel like to have such a kiss eagerly returned.

Charlie and Theo exchanged another look between them and Harry didn't have a chance to protest as Theo caught his chin and turned him to the right in time for another delightful kiss. That successfully shuttled his thoughts in the proper direction and Harry banished his current musings of the Merrow king for later perusal. For the moment, he hummed happily into the token of Theo's affection, even as his face remained quite warm on account of the audience they shared. He blinked, owlishly, when it was over, pink tongue poking out to lick his lips when Charlie turned him to the left next and Harry sighed into the warm mouth that devoured his own in turn.

He found himself feeling surprisingly content and unruffled in spite of their barely-polite-for-company claims of dominance and could not deny the fire pooling in his belly when Charlie huffed, smugly, a knowing look in his brilliant blue eyes. Harry realized belatedly, that Charlie had added an extra kick to their liplock than strictly necessary and he resisted the urge to growl. Charlie's timing was awful, but not quite unwelcome. Harry was distracted next when Theo gave a low growl and leaned over him to immediately lay claim to his Beta as well.

Harry's eyebrows arched upwards in mild shock and genuine appreciation, for Theo and Charlie were a lovely, wonderful thing to watch and even though Charlie's lips were currently on Theo, Harry could swear he felt flames licking at his own lips. In spite of their size and obvious
difference of appearance, Charlie was quite obviously giving in to Theo's demanding, dominating kiss—purring into it even—and leaning into the pull of hands fisted in the front of his dress robes. Harry supposed he was somewhat thankful that it was only kissing. He didn't think he could handle either of their fangs on his person at that moment and just thinking of it, made him twice as hot and bothered all over than their not-quite-public show. He fought, valiantly, to keep a deeper blush from resurfacing to stay for good.

Ilsa cleared her throat from somewhere across the room and Theo bristled quite visibly, instinctively recognizing her, even though his dragel nature rode close to the surface. "Not that I'm not enjoying the show," she drawled. "But this is not your sitting room and there are Royals present, if you could kindly conduct yourselves with the bearings afforded to your station, I am quite sure that your instincts are more than satisfied for the moment."

The kiss between Alpha and Beta ended then, Theo reluctant to let Charlie off so easily, choosing instead to end with smaller kisses and light nips to the pinked lips before turning to meet his mentor's smirk with a scowl of his own. She waved him off, whatever he was about to say and made a sign with one hand that had Theo slouching into his side of the settee, before yanking Harry flush against him and completely out of Charlie's lap.

Harry found himself wanting to curl into his Alpha and he fought the instinct for a few moments, before he was swept up into Charlie's lap and half-cuddled once more between both of his Bonded. Any embarrassment he might have had over that was vanished when he saw a glimmer of approval in both Thomas and Ilsa's eyes. There was no pity or disdain present and he relaxed, realizing that perhaps there wasn't any weakness in giving in to their comfort.

"Now that you've managed to take care of that for the time being," Ilsa began. "There are some more pressing matters to see to." She inclined her head to Prince Raspen, who was now seated beside Lord Cunningham, with the mysterious Hadrian standing directly behind his employer. "I believe we were about to discuss the matters of your missing mentor?"

The shift of authority made sense when Harry understood that Ilsa was Theo's mentor and that was the reason why she had been the one to interrupt them, over anyone else. Bahn wore a pleased expression of his own. He was nestled between Delani and Nara, who had gifted him a few kisses of his own, at his insistence. Their faces reflected loving indulgence and the atmosphere in the room settled into something almost homey.

"My Hunters have been recalled, but they are not yet here." Lord Cunningham said, at last. "They will come when I summon them, if we decide before they arrive."

His words didn't seem to be an issue, for the royals nodded amongst themselves and Prince Raspen took up the mantle of spokesperson once more. He had Harry explain where he'd lived until his Inheritance and then to describe the neighborhood, using a magical map to have him pinpoint Surrey and then the Dursley's house.

The magical map glowed and expanded, allowing the prince to focus on the immaculate two-story house with the pristine lawn and flawless presentation in accordance with the rest of the cookie-cutter neighborhood.

Just seeing it, even at a distance, through the blue-tint of the magical map, made Harry's stomach churn. He remembered, in snatches, the feeling of waking up to pain—tremendous pain—and then the agony of his wings, new, weak and bloody. How vulnerable he'd felt. How helpless to realize that his magic wasn't there. How sensitive the new wings had been when he'd tried to bathe them in the shower. How panicked he had been when he'd first seen his own scales in the bathroom mirror. How terrified he'd been that Uncle Vernon would truly hurt him this time. How relieved he'd been
to discover that they'd left him home—alone.

Theo's slender hands trapped one of Harry's between his own and he played with his Submissive's slack fingers, rubbing and warming each digit in his hand, an impromptu hand massage. He worked each of the joints in turn and tugged lightly on said fingers, gently pushing his love and care for Harry through their shared bond as he felt the feedback of confusion, hurt and fear. His Harry did not need to be afraid of anything that was there in that muggle city, he would make sure of it.

At first, he'd thought that perhaps Harry was afraid for his relatives, until Harry had gone unnaturally still when Prince Raspen had frozen the image of the house and front yard. That was not the normal reaction of someone upon seeing their childhood home—he would know, as his own reaction to the Nott Manor wasn't exactly one of impromptu Quidditch and merry holidays. It was one of the reasons he hadn't wanted to send Harry there when the Grey magic had crept through Hogwarts.

Pulling himself back into the present, and mentally forcing himself to stay there, Theo tuned into the current conversation. The royals and Lord Cunningham had instantly broken the conversation down to strategy and possible magical entries and exit routes, based on long-distance transportation portals. They knew what routes to take for the quickest results and whether it would cause any disturbance in the wizarding world.

Theo had opted to listen to the conversation with half-an-ear, noting that Charlie was also taking note of Harry's withdrawn state. He felt a definite sliver of warmth trickle through their shared bonds and knew that Charlie was worried, but also standing strong for all of them. He sent a smile to his Beta, just over Harry's head as emerald eyes stared forward, unblinking.

"...it would be best to send a scout first," Lord Cunningham stroked his scruffy beard, his dark eyes glittering. He was well-versed in tactics and battle strategy, but his element also held the record for cunning and underhandedness for the right causes. He would not dispatch his Hunters unless it was absolutely necessary and that meant a thorough investigation would happen soon, if not straightaway.

"A scout?" Ebony manipulated the glowing three-dimensional magical map with her own faintly glowing fingertips. She took in the state of the property, both front and back and scowled. It was a rather small looking home, at least in dragel terms. "It's dreadfully dull. I don't see how you could stand it." But there was a faint twitch of her lips in Harry's direction, meant to soften the words. It hadn't escaped her notice that Harry had yet to say anything about the place, after he'd given the address—with some coaxing from his Bonded.

"A scout would make sense." Princess Dawne allowed, her own sharp gaze roving over the residence with an eye of strategy. "But how long would that take? How long can we afford for it to take?"

"Depends on what kind of a report you want," Lord Cunningham mused. "I have just the one to send, but it would take, perhaps a day of our time? It would be best to rush it without ruining it, if I may say so?"

"A day?" Prince Raspen said, dismayed. He gave a half-nod at Lord Cunningham's words. Seeing as they'd closed off the borders of Nevarah, inter-realm travel would be difficult to handle to keep from drawing attention to themselves.

"A day of our time," Lord Cunningham repeated. "There would be time-shifts upon realm-walking and we would have to employ a good Caster or a Rune user to keep the timelines in proper order, not to mention it would be rather foolish to simply barge in without taking into consideration the
fact that the neighborhood seems quite magicless. To descend en masse would be impractical and pointless."

"Know thy enemy," Prince Raspen said, more understanding this time around. "Very well. I concede to your years of expertise. Send for your scout."

"Do we know who it was?" Princess Dawne sat back on the settee, folding one arm across her chest and tapping her chin. "Which clan does he hail from? I would think—seeing as Harry is a Nameless—her soft grey gaze flickered to Prince Raspen for confirmation and at his slight nod, continued. "Magic would have seen that he was suitably matched to a Nameless dragel." She frowned. "Most Nameless are usually family-taught, however, so that significantly lowers the list of potential candidates."

"Might I ask what your nameless talent is?" Ebony looked to Harry.

Harry did not answer. He was only seeing the second floor window and remembering the bars installed, then the twins and Ron that summer. He shuddered and twisted inside. Ron surely would not be happy to learn of his changed nature and he had a feeling that their fragile friendship would not handle the strain this time around. Of course, there was also the very real worry of that actually was at Privet 4 drive. If they sent dragels there to search for his mentor, what would they find? Would they know what had happened to him there? Would they be able to tell? What would they do if they found out? What would they think? What would they say? Would it matter?

Theo's arm draped around his shoulders and Harry leaned into the embrace, craving the gentle physical touch as a grounding point. He knew he would not return there—never again—not now that he had Charlie in addition to Theo. He was sure that Theo had an ancestral manor somewhere and surely he'd sorted out whatever legal matters he'd had that prevented them from staying there in the first place. Charlie at least, had a spot in Romania on the dragon reserve and his room at the Burrow. He would always be able to stay with one of them, even if they did not have a set place of residence as yet. He was sure that Ils would not kick them out of the guesthouse and that meant that he never had to return to that house, with the cupboard under the stairs and the second bedroom with the cat flap in the door.

The numb feeling slowly faded as he processed that heavenly bit of reality. He'd wished, hoped and cried inside for so long, just for that precious moment of freedom. To be able to live anywhere else but beneath the Dursley's thumb, to be free of their disgusted gazes, to hear Dudley shrieking "freak" and Petunia looking down her nose at him while Vernon tried to beat the magic out of him. It hadn't always been terrible, but it had never been good and that made it even worse now that Harry had something to compare it to.

His mind flickered back to the beach picnic with Bahn and his Circle. He remembered their friendly gazes and unearthly beauty. He remembered their liberal use of magic and constant teasing. He remembered seeing Bahn slather sunscreen lotion over his children. He remembered Bahn telling him of Bu and Sueh sneaking more food onto his plate. He remembered seeing the cold, aloof Callistair, thawing enough to tell a story, his dark eyes dancing with merriment when he realized that he'd captured Harry's attention.

Harry swallowed. Good memories. Such good memories. They did not completely outweigh the bad ones, but they were there, still. They were there. They were real. They counted, because it meant that they cared. These new friends, the new faces and all those confusing little details of Nevarah—it was nothing, because he could only remember the parts that mattered.

Writhing beneath Theo and Charlie, feeling such intense pleasure and love—pure love—from both of them. Quinn's careful hands rubbing that cooling gel into his aching arms and legs, cradling him
as if he were something precious and honestly discussing his physical condition without any of the
delicacy, confusion or condescending nature that Madam Pomfrey had oft times employed. Ilsa's
tight hugs that squeezed the breath out of him, but filled his heart to the brim. Bahn's half-smile,
half-smirks and the easy camaraderie between them on the beach, under the sun. Dahlia's grudging
acceptance, enough of Ilsa inside of her to escort them all to a corner of Nevarah that he would not
have experienced otherwise—and meeting her lover, Quinn's sister, a pretty Beta that had helped
him without reservation and without a care to which form he was in. Discovering he was a dragon
and walking out in full public view to hear cheers of admiration and acceptance—not jeers and
curses.

A bubble of sound welled up in his throat and Harry hated himself for feeling so weak and open in
front of all of them. He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to gather himself together as he heard
someone ask him a question and then, Theo's hands were rubbing his back and Charlie pulled him
over to his side for keeps, cuddling him on his lap, his searing warmth burning through everything,
grounding him to the steadiness of their shared bonds and asking nothing of him.

He felt the rasp of teeth on his neck and let his head fall forward, forehead braced on Charlie's
collarbone. Theo on his right, Charlie on his left. They bit at the same time, in perfect sync and
Harry literally felt the stress drain out of him to be replaced with strong, burning warmth that
enveloped him from head to toe. He understood what it meant and silently thought a prayer of
thanks that he did not have to explain anything at all.

"...it's been a stressful first day for you, hasn't it?" Princess Dawne said, a note of understanding in
her voice. "Poor thing. He must be exhausted."

"That makes two of them," Delani said, petting Bahn's sleeping head. Her submissive had dozed
off somewhere between their chatter of perimeters and searching the official records. He usually
spent a great deal of the day napping in the arms of whatever Bonded was closest, as this particular
phase in the pregnancy drew heavily on his magical and physical reserves. "Perhaps a short break
might prove to be useful?"

"I should have suggested it earlier," Prince Raspen said, smoothly. "Of course that would be the
expected side effect of removing a spell of such magnitude." He stroked his chin for a moment.
"Dawne, if I might impose on you just this once, for the evening? I haven't had the time to organize
our usual for tonight"

The blonde matched him with a smile. "It is never an imposition, you know I love to entertain." She
straightened, catching their gazes in turn. She hadn't the time any more than he did, but she did
have a few nobles within the shared, private residence and she would gladly make use of them.
"How about dinner?" Princess Dawne rose from her seat, straightening the folds of her exquisite
gown. "I can entertain for this first night, if we are all agreeable?" She looked to Prince Raspen
and Ebony. Her fellow royals managed smiles of relief mixed with a hint of appreciation.
"Wonderful. I will see to a few arrangements and suitable company, perhaps? And Ras, you can
take them somewhere nicer to relax."

"My study is quite private," Ebony offered. "We can finalize the details there." She eyed Harry
critically. "Perhaps a nap and some blood would speed the recovery. You have been through quite
an ordeal and also been subject to various strengths and types of magic, I wouldn't wonder that a
moment's rest would be well received."

"You said you were having the records sent over? From City Hall?" Prince Raspen signaled his
aide. Ebony had an excellent point and the fact that she had voiced it, meant that he could easily
back her up. He looked to Thomas in time to see the Clan Chief nod in answer to his earlier
question. "I suppose if we can sort through them manually, we might find the connection we're looking for."

"I would not refuse extra eyes and hands." Thomas said, smoothly. The sooner this mess was sorted out, the happier he'd be for all of them. "Shall we?"

And so it was settled.

They retired to Ebony's private quarters with a lovely study. It was large room colored in rich burgundies and browns with a roaring fire in the grate, filling the space with warmth both magical and literal. Delani and Theo were given the chairs closest to the fire and a thick, fluffy rug was spread on the floor before the hearth. A whispered conversation with a sleepy Bahn was conducted before he consented to be placed on the rug and happily curled into the softness, immediately returning to dreamland.

Some gentle persuasion led to Harry joining him and they slept, back to back, their hands tangled with the fingers of their respective Alphas, bathed in the orange glow of the fire. Harry had a short feeding from one of Theo's pale wrists and had fallen asleep as close to his Alpha as he could, without giving up his position on the nice comfy rug.

The records Thomas had requested were charmed against magical retrieval as an anti-theft measure and as such, required manual searching. The usual dragel in charge of the records was on maternity leave and currently in the middle of delivering her first child, a circumstance that effectively excused her from official duty on more than one count. Thomas had not been joking when he'd said the extra hands would be appreciated.

Without hesitation, all of the Royals present simply rolled up their sleeves and dove into the paperwork. It was fairly clear within a handful of minutes that they were accustomed to handling, sorting and understanding massive amounts of legalese and complicated filing systems. All playfulness had subsided and in their stead, it was plain to see that each Royal was well suited for the responsibilities assigned to them.

Charlie gave up trying to make sense of the stacks of files and merely followed Ebony's short, clipped directions, as she focused all of her attention on sorting, stacking and quickly categorizing the files. They were making significant headway by the time Bahn stirred from his ordered nap, a quick look exchanged between Thomas and Delani, led to the Deveraine Alpha manipulating the shared bonding mark to coax Bahn back to sleep.

The moment Bahn was back in dreamland, the furrows on Harry's small brow smoothed out once more. He was obviously drawing some measure of comfort and safety from having his friend nearby and understanding, on an instinctive level, that Bahn would not be resting peacefully if there were any sort of danger nearby.

Eventually, both Submissives did wake, Harry with a rumble of protest and Bahn with an instinctive whine. They both looked for their respective Alphas, seeking comfort and pampering that was sure to follow in their barely awake states. Delani obliged with twitching lips and Theo similarly held back a smirk as he supported a groggy Harry, slipping down from his armchair to join him on the rug in front of the fire.

Charlie watched them, amused, glad to see that they were awake. He worried about the effects of the spell removal and knew that it bothered Harry to feel so weak and exhausted all the time. He didn't blame him. He did know, however, that magic could be a fickle thing and that there was
always a price to pay.

The spell removal appeared to have been absolutely painless—something that both Theo and Charlie had been utterly grateful for—but it had also exhausted Harry, and perhaps even the Merrow King, if his hasty retreat left anything to the imagination. It had Charlie wondering just how powerful Merrow magic was and how that pesky Alec, a mere ward, could wield such powerful spells that it would take a Royal to remove. He was drawn from his musings by the rest of the group stretching and talking amongst themselves.

"I think this is it for all the current Nameless holders," Princess Dawne said, pushing her stack towards the center of their little group. By now, they had all abandoned the strict rigors of formality and overrobes had been shed and sleeves had been rolled up. Princess Dawne had calmly settled down in front of Nara, allowing the Deveraine Advisor to rebraid her extremely pale hair as she sifted through the armloads of folders and their contents. "If you're all done, then this shouldn't take very long, yes? I'd like to see some sort of results sometime today."

"I'm almost through too," Prince Raspen said. He slapped down the second to last folder atop his stack. His photographic memory helped him make quick work of things and he could tell from the shared glances between the Princesses that they were about ready as well. "How about you, Eby?"

"I'm close enough." She said. "What I'm curious about is our scout," Ebony said, stretching her arms upward. "How soon can we send them and how long will it take?" She gave a happy groan when Charlie reached over one warm hand to gently rub her aching wrists. He had been helping to supply the files to each person and undo the locking and privacy charms cast over each one.

"Straightaway. I'll call them," Lord Cunningham said. "As for how long it will take, that is entirely dependent on circumstances. I would prefer not to have a set date, but allow them some leeway. I assure you they will not dally." He turned. "Hadrian?" The Dark Gheyo turned to face him.

"Fetch." He said, pleasantly.

Hadrian merely inclined his head and then grew transparent until he vanished into absolutely nothing.

Charlie blinked at the now empty space and then looked to Ebony.

She smiled, seeing his expression as one of confusion, interest and caution. "He's a Shadow type, love." She explained. "They do everything in mysterious ways. Be warned that they are notoriously possessive and protective of what is theirs and prefer to keep their affairs as private as possible."

Charlie half-smiled at that and nodded to show he'd remember.

"I found it!" Princess Dawne exclaimed. She looked relieved as all eyes turned to her.

"Found what, Dawne?" Prince Raspen leaned over to take a look and grimaced when his body protested the sudden movement.

"Him! The missing mentor. Mr. Maurice Elswood." She brandished a cream colored folder with a flourish. "Take a look. It's been assigned to one Mr. Harry James Potter." Both Prince Raspen and Ebony lurched forward to grab it. Princess Dawne chuckled, holding it out of reach. "One at a time or I could tell you what it says."

"Do share, your highness." Delani said, calmly. "That way we will all be on the same page?"

Murmurs of assent filled the room and the Air Princess nodded.

"Harry is a Nameless, right? Well, that significantly narrows his choices when it comes to potential
mentors. You've said he's magic sensitive and I'm hoping that his Nameless gift has been named, yes?"

A complicated three-way glance was exchanged between Harry, Theo and Charlie. Harry sighed and spoke up. "I'm an Empath, according to Healer Quinn Kalzik." Theo patted him comfortingly and Harry leaned into the caress, feeling himself waking up even more, as the last threads of sleep left him.

Prince Raspen gave a low whistle. "Well." He said, admiringly. "That's quite a handy thing, isn't it?" He smiled warmly. "Are you having any trouble with it?"

"I don't even know what it really is." Harry countered. The Prince's reaction was heartening and he liked it. "It's confusion. A Medic—Kyle Kalzik, cast a dampening spell on it so I could function today. It was—overwhelming."

"I can imagine," Princess Dawne said, kindly. "Empathy is a very special gift and it also a very personal one. It requires tremendous selflessness." Her grey eyes softened. "Which says a great deal about your character. We'll have to drag this Maurice over here as quickly as possible for both of your sakes. I am very interested to know what kept him from meeting you. Empaths, Telepaths and certain types of Spellcrafters share the same burden as you now will. It is a gift that is ruthless as a teacher, impenetrable as a defense and unending as eternity, because it will make you look inside yourself and make peace with your own soul." She half-smiled. "I do not mean to scare you, but it is an honored gift." She looked through the file. "There are a handful of empaths currently among us and they usually don't like to teach one of their own, because it's very stressful. The emotions are multiplied and rampant, regardless of the best of intentions."

Harry scowled. He didn't know what to make of that, so he didn't say anything yet, but instead waited to hear more about this missing mentor who had currently screwed up the Nevarean side of his life. He would definitely have quite a few words to say to him. He'd had enough of other people meddling in his affairs and now was as good a time as any to make his feelings known on the matter.

"This Maurice has a very powerful Nameless gift known as Refracting." Princess Dawne said. "Which will spare you some of the headache than if he'd been an Empath. It's a bit complimentary to your gift, Harry. Refracting uses some of the similar principals of Empathy casting. You take a spell and modify it according to what you feel can best suit the situation. Maurice was apparently one of the very best Refractors of our current age." She frowned as she skimmed the paper in front of her. "That is odd…”

"What?" Lord Cunningham looked at her, suspiciously.

"He's listed as a Submissive, but no Circle." Princess Dawne frowned. "That is odd, isn't it?"

"Elswood, Elswood." Lord Cunningham muttered, deep in thought. "That's an old name so it must be one of the founding Circles in some extended relation or another."

"True. Elswood—I haven't heard that at all in my time." Prince Raspen said, thoughtfully. "I thought they had died out. There would have been some hint of them in the Courts if any of them were still living, wouldn't you say?" He frowned. "Who are you thinking of?"

"I have not heard of them for some time. I believe they had all passed on." Lord Cunningham mirrored the frown. He did not want to show his hand just yet and there were too many memories surrounding this particular name. "Is there anything else in his file?"
"He's marked as a Submissive, which isn't anything unusual." Princess Dawne rifled through the folder. "He's received a dozen certifications and awards for all sorts of things. There's no birth certificates though, so I suppose no children." She flipped to the back of the file and frowned. "No one found a death certificate of any sort, right? So he is alive?" There was a definite question to her tone.

Prince Raspen rubbed his forehead, mentally sifting through everything he had scanned in the past hour. "Not that I recall." He said, after a moment. "I didn't see anything of the Elswood's either. What's the matter?"

"Same for me." Ebony added. "Did he leave a will or something? What kind of a file is that? Shouldn't it just have the basics of-

"Maurice was a special case." Princess Dawne said absently. She was tracing her fingers over something in the file and didn't seem able to explain it just yet. "There's a phial of his blood present in the Noah's Vault, you may summon it and we can scry for him or at least check before we send your scout in," she looked to Lord Cunningham as she spoke.

"A pinpoint location spell would be greatly appreciated," Lord Cunningham said. His eyes glazed over, briefly. "Hadrian is returning."

Sure enough, a moment later, Hadrian materialized in the room, a young Gheyo woman beside him. Her face was painted with black and grey dots and lines, and she wore light, comfortable clothes in black with several knife hilts visible on her person. At a single glance, four hilts in her boots could be seen, followed by two strapped to her thighs and arms, with a thin X-shaped band over her chest and shoulders, holding several throwing stars. Her gaze swept over the room, its occupants and lit on her Alpha. She immediately crossed the room to kneel beside him, eyes closed in happiness when he acknowledged her with a single pat to the head.

"Thank you, Hadrian."

The Shadow Gheyo offered a brief smile and retreated to his official position just behind his hired employer. His dark eyes darted quickly about the room as if to discern what he had missed in his absence. For one split-second, his pitch-black eyes lingered on Harry, then moved on.

"Scout," Lord Cunningham began. "I need you do a very special favor for me." He looked at her, waiting.

The young woman sat up, attentively, hands folded neatly in her lap.

"We have a name for a missing mentor and we are determining whether to hunt him or extract him. I wish for you to examine a specific location where he should have been, and report back to me exactly what you experience."

Scout bobbed her head, quickly and held up a hand, fingers splayed. She made a quick motion with them and mouthed a few words, ending with a shrug.

"I cannot say," Lord Cunningham paused. "That is what we are hoping to learn. Can you do this?"

Scout nodded at once, looking almost like an eager bloodhound, wishing to be set on the trail of its prey.

"Good girl." He praised. "The blood, your highness?" He asked. "She is very good with tracking spells and monitoring charms, making them blood-specific would significantly narrow things down."
"If you would trust him with access," Princess Dawne threw an appraising glance at Hadrian. He was a good neutral party between them all, even if he was Shadow. His hired status meant that his loyalties were neutral enough, as far as the Royals were concerned. "He was rather fast."

"He always is." Lord Cunningham smiled. "Hadrian. Listen to the princess and fetch." The words were spoken with a degree of formality that took away the sting of the base command.

Harry watched as Hadrian placed a hand over his heart, bowed slightly and vanished with the same fading technique he'd seen before. He wondered, briefly, just what kind of a Gheyo that Hadrian was. He didn't seem as old as the esteemed Lord Cunningham, but there was no mistaking the experienced air around him. Harry wondered, if perhaps, he was an Ace, like Ilsa, as the two seemed to have come to some sort of unspoken agreement between them, but then he was reminded of Greta and her easy-going nature, with the same veiled danger lurking beneath the surface. He'd have to think more on it.

He tucked that detail away for later thought, it would certainly keep his mind busy for a bit. Hadrian was lovely and dangerous—and somehow, he couldn't help thinking that it was a fitting combination. As much as he wanted to find out more about this mystery mentor—Maurice, the man had a name—Harry hoped that the process took just a bit longer, because that would be the perfect opportunity to see more of the Royals and Hadrian.

It was only a few tense minutes before Hadrian returned, returning the charmed plaque—the key—to Princess Dawne and producing a crystal phial bearing a suspended animation seal declaring the blood sample to be viable. "Very well done." Lord Cunningham praised. Hadrian gave a barely perceptible smile and retreated to his official position once more.

Scout had remained kneeling by her Alpha's side, her eyes respectfully lowered to the ground, her hands playing with one of the throwing stars from her impressive bladed arsenal. She looked up when Lord Cunningham gently nudged her knee with the side of his leg, where she'd been leaning against him.

"Use it sparingly," He admonished.

Scout nodded. She tucked away the knife and took the phial, checking the seal and then leaning forward to draw on the floor with her hands. A thin, glittery trail of pale silver magic began to show as she sketched several runes and the symbol for her Shadow Clan.

Hadrian started faintly at that and cleared his throat to be noticed. Lord Cunningham simply tilted his head, not bothering to look. "If you would like to use my blood as a base, so it cannot be traced, I would be happy to volunteer." He said, calmly.

Lord Cunningham did turn to look at him this time, his dark brows furrowed and then he gave a curt nod. "Scout?" He nudged her again.

Scout paused. She looked up at him. He held a hand out, the universal sign to stop and wait. She sat back on her heels with quirk of her lips, the phial still sealed and the little magic circle glowing on the floor.

"Mariana?" Lord Cunningham raised his voice, softly. "A moment of your time, my dearest."

Mariana materialized in much the same fashion as Hadrian did. She faded in to physical substance, looking small, pale and rather doll-like in her dark floral kimono with her hair still neatly pinned and curled as it had been for the Introductions. She was barefoot and her hands were devoid of any
jewelry, apparently she'd been in the middle of her nighttime routine. "Yes, Alpha?" The use of the formal title was deliberate.

He spoke rapidly to her in a language that was sharp and punctuated with the occasional hiss. When he finished, her lips pressed together in a thin, blushed line, before she glided forward to stand opposite of Scout. She held out one pale wrist and made no sound or grimace when the petite Gheyo drew blood with a practiced swipe.

Hadrian joined them as well, offering his wrist. Another quick swipe and the shimmering silver circle turned dark purple, then dark blue. Then a soft, metallic clink sounded and the magic faded away to show a small, delicate ring of red. Scout picked it up with careful fingers and then slipped it onto a silver chain that Hadrian produced out of nowhere. She threaded it over her head and then tucked it inside her clothes.

"Go safely," Mariana murmured. She pressed a kiss to Scout's forehead. "Do not rush." She threw a half-look over her shoulder at Lord Cunningham. "Night's blessings on your shadow."

The faintest tip of her head was the only acknowledgement before Scout slowly vanished, gradually fading until she simply no longer stood among them.

Mariana frowned at the empty space, then at Hadrian and the room in general.

Lord Cunningham held out a hand to her. When she perked a brow he looked down at her bare feet, pointedly. She sighed and moved over to sit on his lap. He tapped her feet at once, spelling on a pair of silk slippers that matched her delicate dressing gown. Hadrian circled around them to stand in his usual position. "Scout will take some time make a report of her findings," he said. "Is there anything else in that file? I feel as if I am missing something, but I cannot tell just what."

Mariana muttered something and flinched when he pinched her side in retaliation.

"There really isn't much," Princess Dawne said, finally surrendering the file over to Ebony's insistent hands. "I mean, well—it just says that he was involved with a Class 12 Disaster-Clause."

Lord Cunningham grew rather still. "W-was that, perchance about thirty years or so ago? The date?" He asked, his voice urgent.

Ebony named it, closing the file in favor of looking at the older dragel. "Is something the matter?"

A flicker of worry danced over her face before it smoothed out.

"Mad Maury." Lord Cunningham muttered. "Arielle-!" Mariana grabbed one of his hands in hers hand squeezed it tight.

"Mad who?" Prince Raspen looked from Lord Cunningham to Thomas. The Earth Clan Chief was looking decidedly disturbed as he worked through the mental gymnastics himself, apparently drawing the same conclusion. "A hint would help." He prompted, after a moment of silence.

"You're all too young to remember," Thomas said. "Far too young." He ran a hand through his hair.

"But you've probably covered it in your history studies." Lord Cunningham twitched faintly as Mariana released his hand and began to preen his scruffy hair with neat, efficient fingers. "About thirty years ago, there was an isolated incident with some very angry Torvaks."

"Oh dear." Ebony said, quietly.

"Ebony?" Charlie looked at her. A newly somber mood had taken over the entire room. He shifted uncomfortably, looking to where Harry was sitting close to Theo.
"You're right. It's a bit older than I am, but it was a mess, to put it frankly and no one can really say why. It's clear it was an ambush." She sighed. "Which meant there was a traitor involved, which meant that people died. Good people. Bad people. Everyone." She closed her eyes as if wishing they could skip the subject altogether.

Lord Cunningham cleared his throat. "Yes. Well. I remember the Elswoods—very faintly." He sighed. "One of their Jokers used to spar with ours."

"Multiple Jokers?" Ilsa spoke up, eyebrows raised.

"It was a Military Circle. An elite Military Circle. They were all Gheyos with the exception of the Submissive." He took a deep breath. "A Submissive that was jealously guarded and protected, I don't believe I ever saw him." He looked down at Mariana, who quirked her lips in answer to the silent question. "Maurice, I mean. They were Hunters—much like my own—and so we occasionally ran into each other at the pits and such."

"The Elswoods?" Delani repeated. She looked to Nara, but the advisor was shaking her head. She'd been thinking of the name since it had been first mentioned, but unlike Nara, her knowledge was largely confined to Elven heritage and pureblooded lines, not dragels.

"I don't know them, not by that name." Nara said, apologetically. "They must have gone by something else. I'm usually rather good with names," she added, by way of explanation. She snuck a look down at Greta who had gone rather still at the mention of Elswood. She did not pry however, realizing that whatever secrets that Greta had come with, were hers to keep. Instead, she reached down with one hand and gently stroked the short hair. The Storm Gheyo tilted her head back, ever so slightly, leaning into the barely-there caress.

"Elswood wasn't the name they used," Lord Cunningham explained. "Because of what it meant, they chose to use a callsign of sorts. They never wanted to draw attention to what they were, but with their reputation, it was impossible. You might have known them as the self-titled team, Ryker's Bane."

Thomas suppressed a shudder at once that drew all of their attention. "That was—are you sure?" He asked, tightly. He had heard of them and what he knew of them, he did not like. It had been decades since he'd heard the name. Ryker's Bane had been a stellar example of cool, precise logic and ruthless efficiency—the stellar embodiment of the Shadow element.

"Quite." Came the grim answer. "Suffice it to say that they handled a great deal of work that wasn't necessarily right or wrong, but merely questionable. They always performed quite well and never failed in any mission assigned to them. Except for this one time."

"They weren't mere Hunters," Thomas spoke up, unhappy, but still contributing to the conversation. His bias was personal, but it was from a Submissive point-of-view, he would take care to keep his personal opinion from the discussion. "Ryker's Bane was a very unique band of fighters. They were all powerful, seasoned veterans."

"And as part of their assigned duties, they hazed new recruits—young Gheyos who had just come of age—usually those with a Nameless, Shadow or Storm affinity, because it was safer." Lord Cunningham picked up. "They would take them out in the wilderness and run them to the ground to knock the stubbornness out of them. Then they'd break them and put them back together. They turned out some of the most fearsome Gheyos walking in Nevarah right now."

Mariana snorted. "Fearsome and handsome," she said, softly, eyes closed as if in remembrance. "They were vicious, but for the right reasons, I suppose." She shivered and snuggled closer to her...
"It was an ambush," Lord Cunningham continued. "An ambush during one of their training camps, if you will. Torvaks do not play fair. They never have. They fight dirty and they know how to attack whatever they choose to hunt. It was a Hunting Party, about thirty or forty of them, according to the report. They were hunting to harvest for ingredients."

Harry felt a chill wash over him and he shrank back into Theo's embrace, vaguely aware of being pulled onto his lap and the soft crooning in his ear. A sickening feeling wrestled in his stomach and he had a very desperate wish that this story would not end in the way he already felt it would. "They—children?" Was all he could manage to say.

"Keep in mind that children for us is a mere fifteen to sixteen years of age." Lord Cunningham said. "Newly turned. They would have just come into their inheritance. They would have been—very much like you, Harry, without any of your innocence. All gangly limbs, uncontrollable magic and very short tempers. Rather a recipe for disaster, if you would."

"I wouldn't." Thomas said, irritated. His gold eyes flickered to Harry's change in posture and subsequent shift to Theo's lap. "Could you please not draw this out?"

Lord Cunningham shot him a look, but apparently saw something in Thomas' face that made him reconsider. "Very well." He said, stiffly. "They used the children to force them into compliance and then killed them all, one by one."

Harry choked. He couldn't explain why it hit him as hard as it did, but the very matter-of-fact way of which Lord Cunningham spoke, left him feeling raw and angry. He glared at the dark-eyed man, feeling his temper simmering merrily away beneath the surface. "And no one came to help them?"

He demanded. "Weren't they powerful?"

"They used his Circle against him." Lord Cunningham said, simply. "Power had nothing to do with it."

"So my mentor is dead?"

"Oh, I didn't say that." Lord Cunningham shook his head very slowly. "No. I didn't say that. I cannot say because I do not know. But, you see, they said they would spare the children, if the Circle was subdued. If Maurice and his Circle stood down, then the children would be allowed to leave, unharmed. They agreed of course, anything to save the children. I doubt anyone would have chosen otherwise. Our instincts are too deep. It was a promise the Torvaks did not intend to keep and as a result, when they found out, they tried to fight back. It was too late by then and they caught the Submissive—they caught Maurice when he broke free of his restraints."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. "And…?" He almost didn't want to hear it.

"They made him watch." Thomas said, his voice wavered. That detail, he remembered quite clearly from the day when the report had first come in.

"And he went mad." Lord Cunningham said, quietly. "There's no other way to explain it. We called him Mad Maury, because in the aftermath, he killed them all and ate half of their corpses."

Harry slumped back against Theo. A sudden numbness filtered over him, mixed with horror and disgust as he processed that last sentence. He couldn't articulate what he felt just yet, but he sure as Merlin had something to say.

"The Torvaks used runes to hide them, that is how the ambush succeeded. When two days passed
from when they should have checked in, that's when everyone started to worry. There was an entire company dispatched to find them, just in case, and they found Maury, covered in blood, gnawing on bodies that he'd piled up and torn to bits. He'd buried his entire Circle and all the children and he was feral. Absolutely feral. It took five months to coax him into a Halfling form and from there, another year and a half before he would even speak. They had to bind his magic so he would not harm the Healers who were sent to look after him.

Charlie looked a bit green and Theo's grip on Harry tightened even more. Neither of them seemed as if they would speak, their eyes glittering furiously with suppressed emotion.

Harry found his voice. "...and you made him my mentor?" He couldn't keep the anger from it. Mad Maurice indeed. The man sounded like a tormented devil.

Prince Raspen winced. "Harry, mentorship is magically chosen. It's a matter of compatibility and experience. He was chosen because he had something to teach you and something to learn from you. That's how it works."

"Really?" Harry said, dangerously.

"He applied for Charum Mortus, didn't he?" Mariana said, quietly.

Lord Cunningham started, faintly and he switched his glare from Thomas to his Submissive. She didn't wither beneath it though, but rather lifted her chin. A moment passed and Alpha and Submissive seemed to be having a silent contest of wills before Mariana finally sighed and leaned forward until their foreheads were touching. The effect was immediate as almost at once, they both relaxed and Hadrian gave a small smile.

"Didn't he?" Mariana straightened, looking directly at Princess Dawne. "He requested it at least, didn't he? Isn't that why you asked for his death certificate?"

The Air Princess did not answer straight away, but rather averted her gaze and gripped the file in her small hands. That was one detail she hadn't wanted to throw out in the open when she'd discovered the file.

"Dawne?" Ebony prompted. "Did he?" A deep sadness reflected in her eyes.

"He did." Princess Dawne said, quietly. "It was granted."

Bahn flinched and Thomas winced. Mariana didn't even blink, looking as if she'd expected that answer.

Harry looked at them all and then over at the Air Princess. This was yet another one of those things he didn't understand. He sighed, biting back his temper. "What does that mean?" He thought the words were vaguely reminiscent of Latin, but when he couldn't place them, he figured it was a different language altogether. Dragel, perhaps, as he'd never really been able to take advantage of the knowledge transfer that Theo had gifted him for that.

Charlie looked to Ebony, but the fire Princess merely squeezed his hand and stared down at her lap, her lips pressed into a tight line. Prince Raspen looked a touch pale and Lord Cunningham tightened his grip on Mariana.

"It means 'a charming death'" Delani said, quietly. She looked at Harry, a sad smile on her face, having spoken up when it seemed that no one else would. "It is a very old, ancient law created for the Submissives." She pulled Bahn into her lap and cuddled him close, pressing a kiss atop his head. "It is the equivalent of a," she looked upset and when Bahn whimpered, she did not finish her
It is a very charming death," Mariana said, flatly. "It is a means of assisted suicide." She wriggled faintly in Lord Cunningham's grasp when he held her a bit too tightly. "As a Submissive, you should know this," she looked directly to Harry, her eyes just as pitch black as Hadrian's. "At least, before you judge him. He may have been mad, but he did not go insane willingly. He had help. He was forced there. That doesn't make it right or wrong, but I will say this. In the event that something were to ever happen to your entire Circle, you could claim Charum Mortus and unless there is an official decree endorsed by every element, then you are free to end your own existence." She gave a bitter smile. "It would be a paltry life to live after your Bonded have passed," she said, quietly. "All of them. Especially if the family and friendship Circles you have formed cannot help you in anyway or no longer exist as well. If you didn't have that precious little Alpha of yours and that little Beta over there, where would that leave you?"

Harry felt his mouth turn dry. He couldn't answer.

"Leave the boy alone, Mariana." Lord Cunningham said, sharply. "He doesn't understand and he is young."

"That is never a good excuse." Mariana said, coolly. "Never a good excuse. It is something he should know of and something he should think about." She folded her hands primly in her lap, a gesture reminiscent of Scout. "Excuse me, I find the company to be tiring and it has been a long day." She turned and kissed his cheek. "Good night. Do not keep me waiting." Her eyes narrowed. "And if we are hunting, I expect your call." There was a wisp of black smoke and then she vanished.

Lord Cunningham did not apologize for her.

Harry realized that straightaway when the conversation picked up. Lord Cunningham had simply accepted her behavior as if it was nothing out of the ordinary and Hadrian had remained silent through the entire exchange. Harry was still processing the accusing look her pitch black eyes and wrestled with the feelings it produced. It was a legitimate question, considering that for most of his life up to this moment, he hadn't considered that perhaps he would survive meeting Voldemort. He'd made no future plans. He hadn't needed to do so before.

Harry was also not happy to know that his missing mentor was a dragel who was insane enough to earn the name of 'Mad Maury' and with a tragic history of his own to boot. It was too much. Why couldn't the people in his life be normal for once? Normal folks without hidden secrets, painful histories and heavy burdens. He felt his empathic gift jerk and twist angrily inside of him, muted, thanks to Kyle's spell.

One of Theo's hands ran up and down his side, reassuringly without pause. He made a soft rumbling sound in his chest and it helped Harry to focus. He could feel Theo's concern traveling through their bond, layered by Charlie's muted worry. Charlie had made to leave Ebony's side, but Harry had given him a look meant to convey 'stay' and Ebony had stilled him with a hand on his arm.

Harry realized that an awkward silence had fallen over the room and he looked up to see that everyone seemed to be waiting for him to speak. He swallowed and quickly backtracked to recall the conversation. "What does it mean?" He asked, at last. "I don't understand."

A tiny glimmer of approval radiated from Lord Cunningham and he sat back, comfortably. "It means that the only reason Maurice did not follow through on his original plan is because he must
"What?" Harry stared at him. That didn't make any sense at all.

"One of the ways to help dragels without any living family or strong friendships is usually through a mentorship. Our kind craves family and friends, something to protect and nurture, that will in turn protect and nurture them." He toyed with a golden signet ring. "Maurice was likely assigned to you in hopes that he would not follow through on Charus Mortus. The worrying part in all of this, so that you can follow our line of thinking, is that if a regular mentor, someone without any combat training or experience, vanishes without a trace—that is cause for worry."

Harry nodded, slowly. He could understand that. He'd worked that out on his own, already. "And?"

"And if someone of Maurice's caliber was deliberately prevented from finding you, that may be all the warning we have before another unfortunate accident. There are larger forces in play and we will need to act accordingly. Maurice would have been more than capable of protecting himself, given that his talent is Refraction and his ties are to the Elswood family."

"But he claimed that Charus Mortus." Harry protested. "Wouldn't that—I mean—doesn't that change things?"

"He did and that does. But regardless of my feelings on the matter, Charus Mortus is a painless, sacrificial way to leave this plane of existence." Lord Cunningham said.

"How do you know?" Harry challenged. In his experience, it was possible to Avada Kedavra yourself with a mirror, if the caster was smart enough.

"Charus Mortus requires visiting a specific location that you will never learn of, unless you have applied and been granted permission, from where you will 'port yourself there alone and cast a very specific spell.' He watched as Harry's brows furrowed. "A spell that requires all of your magic to be fed into the protections—the domes over this realm—and when you have finished the backlash will see that your wish is granted. It has never left a living soul behind."

Harry choked. "That's-"

"Painless." Hadrian said, calmly, speaking up at last. His eyes were steady and understanding. "Usually, your mentor would explain this and only if you were in a position where you might have considered it. It is meant to be a merciful death, because sometimes some things cannot be fixed and it is better than pretending that everything is fine." He touched Lord Cunningham's shoulder and at a nod from the man, bowed to excuse himself from the present company.

"My inheritance came through a few months ago," Harry heard himself say. "So he was—waiting all this time because he might have been assigned to me?"

"Of course not," Thomas said. "He would have received his permission in conjunction with your first instance of accidental magic."

"What?"

"Your first instance of accidental magic shows that you are a dragel that will eventually require a mentor." Thomas explained. "He would have been given your file, with your heritage lines, your probability of being Nameless—hence his choice as your mentor—and your birthdate. I do not know what he would have done in the meantime, but all of his plans would have been put on hold until you were of age, he should have arrived approximately about a week to a month in advance to look after you. He is required to stay with you through the entire transformation and ideally until
"He is not mad." Lord Cunningham said, quietly. "Not in the way that you would think he is. I did not know him personally, but I knew enough of him. He was very—sad. Losing his entire Circle was a traumatic experience at best—you can imagine what it is at worst." He eyed Harry contemplatively. "They had no children and he was the last surviving member of the Elswood line. You would be his only reason to remain among us. I thought you should know, before he was found and however he is found." He rose, elegantly from the settee. "You do not look like someone who would appreciate surprises and I believe it is only fair that you know something of him. At least if he is dead, then perhaps you might find it in yourself to forgive him—someday." He moved to stand before Princess Dawne and extended a hand to her. "I find myself interested in his dinner of yours." He said, with a charming smile. "Perhaps we could impose upon you to have it around now?"

"That would be—fine." Princess Dawne accepted his hand and rose to her feet. "And thank you for sharing your knowledge. History books only tell so much." She looked around at everyone, a wan smile on her face. "Dinner will be now, I think, if we are all agreeable?"

"We're agreeable." Ebony said, rising to her feet and gesturing for Charlie to join her. He huffed and began to unfold his tall frame from the ground only for her to reach down and grab his arm, helpfully hauling him to his feet. The others roused themselves and began to stand, assembling into some sort of unspoken order. "Lead the way."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whew! What a chapter. And so starts the first part of this mini-arc with the hunt for Harry's missing mentor. Mad Maury is going to be quite a story. It's been a long time in coming and I know some of you have been dying to find out who, what, where and why—so sit down and buckle up. It's gonna be a wild ride. Stay tuned for courting fun and a touch of romance. ~Scion

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry and Deveraines)

Charlie-(with Theo, Harry and Deveraines)

Harry-(with Theo, Charlie and Deveraines)

Deveraine Circle members-(Bahn, Delani, Ilsa and Greta-with Harry and Co. All others are off doing their own thing.)
RECAP: Harry and Co., the Deveraines and Ilisa's father, Thomas, the Chief of the Earth Clan, the Royals (minus the Merrow King) and Lord Cunningham and Hadrian have gathered at the dining room of Terius' mother, Lady Baronsworth, for an impromptu dinner party, after sorting through the paperwork that revealed the identity of Harry's Missing Mentor, a lone dragel from a tragic incident, known as "Mad Maury" Elsworth.
course, not all that she'd said to Lady Baronsworth, but the rest of it was private and Princess Dawne saw no need to share it with their present company.

The doors swung open and the Princesses entered the formal dining room with the grace and elegance imparted to them since birth. They glided in on the arms of the respective Gheyo bodyguards who had escorted them there.

Prince Raspen was trailing behind, speaking to Thomas about reinforcement spells and checking the receiving room for the last of the scheduled arrivals. Nevarah was well and truly closed off from all outside contact in preparation for something known as the Night of a Thousand Prophecies.

Harry tried not to listen, because he didn't think his head could handle any other information. In all honesty, he didn't quite want to suffer through a formal dinner—and that was the way it was sounding like it would end up—he wanted to call it an early night and sleep like the dead until the morning. There was so much new information swirling around in his head that he wasn't sure when or how he'd be able to sort through all of it to find out anything useful. It had been a busy day with many things happening to and around him, from all sides with little to no recourse. He'd been through more things in a single day than most individuals handled in a week—maybe even a month.

Harry huffed, softly. He'd have to start pulling himself together in spite of it all—from the looks of things, he would not be given a chance to do so, not if fate intended to see him perpetually kept off balance. Perhaps he could kick it in the face for picking on him all the time. He was certainly in a good place to play up his Slytherin side. Nevarah was a strong, magical realm and no one seemed to bat an eye over ridiculous displays of magic, drama or weaponry—if the existence of Gheyos were anything to take note of. It hadn't escaped his attention that the raw power swirling around the older, bonded dragels projected something that he'd never even caught a glimpse of around Dumbledore.

These were strong individuals who knew to lean on each other and reach inside themselves at the same time. These were people that could teach him—perhaps—if he asked. Dumbledore had never given him that sort of feeling or sense of security, now that he thought of it. In fact, the one memory that stood out the worst, was during Fourth Year when that blasted goblet had vomited his name into that wretched tournament. Harry would never forget the look of complete utter fury he'd seen in the older wizard's face.

He'd been terrified, but doubly so when Dumbledore had practically shoved him into a desk and demanded to know if he'd put his name in the goblet. Of course he hadn't. Why would he? He had enough life-threatening experiences to deal with on a yearly basis, there was no earthly reason for him to deliberately subject himself to something that was so obviously designed to kill foolhardy young witches and wizards before their twentieth birthday.

But that memory lingered the longest, because it was the first moment that Harry could actively recall where he was one-hundred percent, absolutely, positively, most definitely afraid of Albus Dumbledore.

Shoving those thoughts further back into his head—again—Harry made himself focus. He needed to survive this formal dinner with whatever dignity he still possessed and then beat a hasty retreat to the beach house where he could decompress in privacy with the safety of his Bonded nearby.

Harry silently mused to himself, wondering how long this mentor-hunt would take. He hadn't realized that the mention of sending a scount was an actual woman by the name of Scout, a woman that was apparently mute or deaf, as she hadn't spoken a single word and now that he thought of it,
Harry realized that Lord Cunningham had spoken to her only when she was looking directly at him. In fact, the same had been true for Mariana.

Harry scowled. He had a feeling he might not like the mouthy submissive, even if she had been the only one brave enough to speak up about the whole charmed death thing. It was something he honestly did not want to know, but was glad to be informed of. Mariana did have something of a point—he'd honestly never considered himself as having family, much less a future and yet, now that he had them and that bright future seemed just within reach, Harry understood why some would sacrifice all. If it came down to his Circle, his Theo, his Charlie—Harry knew that there would be no contest. Screw the wizarding world. He'd found his slice of happiness and Merlin be damned, but he'd cling to it with every scrap of strength that he could.

Knowing that he had Theo and Charlie by his side, knowing that with them came Ilsa, Bahn, Thomas, the Kalziks and the Peverells, for the first time in his young life, Harry felt that he might have a chance. Not a very big one and perhaps not a very promising chance either, but he had one, just the same and that was more than he'd ever felt before.

Facing off against Voldemort had always seemed like some giant, insurmountable obstacle that would surely require his life—his very life and everything that made it—blood, magic, his rag-tag, mismatched family, the essence of what made Harry Potter.

Harry sighed. He was supposed to be focusing on the present, keeping things together and making a conscious effort not to accidentally make a spectacle of himself. Of course, given that now everyone in their little party knew about the absence of his mentor, he had a feeling that they would not call him out on any social faux pas, but that they would temper their disapproval instead of being obvious about it.

Reaching up to tug at his hair and then at his ear, Harry snuck a look at Theo. His Alpha glided along beside him, silent, golden gaze fixed straight ahead, never wavering. Harry had to admire that. Theo was definitely a true Slytherin and Harry was glad to know that Theo was his.

As he mused, Harry found himself wondering how long things would take. Scout hadn't been gone long, but he wanted her back already. He wanted to know what had happened to Maurice and what she had found. He wanted to know how far she would go and how deeply she'd dig into what she found at Privet Drive. From the way things had progressed, he had a feeling that Scout was a very well-trained operative, who would no doubt put together a thorough report before returning.

He hoped she wouldn't venture into the house—surely Maurice hadn't made it inside—and that would mean that his secrets would remain safe, at least for now. He certainly hadn't seen or felt Maurice, so it was likely that perhaps Scout would find some sinister trap outdoors and report back.

He hoped. Harry rolled his eyes to himself. It wasn't very likely, but he did not want to think about this. There were some things he hadn't been able to tell Theo and Charlie. Not yet. Not them. Perhaps not ever. It seemed like so long ago and he'd been hoping that it would stay that way—buried and forgotten.

A dark laugh bubbled in his chest as he thought of Rita Skeeter—the madwoman would surely have a field day if news of his wretched childhood years ever reached the Daily Prophet. That one interview with him during the tournament, the telling phrase where she'd dragged him into a broom closet and mentioned that he'd feel right at home, it rankled even now. He'd never been able to figure out how she'd known and he was too shocked to give much of a reaction when she'd said it, so that was one secret that stayed a secret—for the time being.

The Wizarding public would surely despise their hero once they learned the truth—not that they
were particularly welcoming to him at present. This very year, his return had been heralded by
more lies in print and Skeeter's smirking face from her byline.

But surely some secrets could stay buried, Harry mused. It didn't seem fair. He had tried his best to
stand up for himself, but it had always brought such harsh consequences that it was almost never
worth it. Almost. Some things, like blowing up Aunt Marge, for one, had been liberating. Though,
now that he did consider it, Harry did not want to think of the reactions that would come from his
new 'family members.' He hadn't quite seen the full extent of his Bonded's temper, but he had
experienced a few minutes of their extreme protectiveness. Knowing what he did of the Weasley
temperament and Slytherin possessiveness, Harry knew that if they truly understood the depth of
what the Dursleys had done, then it was very unlikely that said Dursleys would live to see another
day.

Theo could be vicious, if he had a mind to—Harry had seen glimpses of it. Charlie might not
outright kill them, but Harry knew for certain that Charlie would not stop Theo from killing them.
His stomach twisted at that thought and even though they had twisted his childhood into a
nightmare that still haunted him, a tiny sliver of his heart begged for their lives. They were cruel
and undeserving of mercy, but he did not want to be the judge, jury and executioner.

Not for them.

And then he realized that Theo had an equally bloodthirsty, short-tempered mentor—Ilsa, and now
Charlie had a decidedly hot-headed, powerful royal for a mentor—Ebony, either way, the Dursleys
were doomed. Harry was sure that neither woman would allow any inkling of injustice to pass,
unpunished, especially if they learned of how they'd treated him.

Suddenly, he didn't want to be thinking of those differences. Instead, he thunked his head against
Theo's shoulder, wishing that he could be closer to his Alpha than he was at present. Theo still had
yet to let him go and managed to walk smoothly with an arm around Harry's waist without
breaking his stride, but it wasn't close enough.

Strangely, Harry hadn't really cared. He welcomed the touch and the warmth that came with it,
watching Charlie who awkwardly fell into his new role as a mentored student, walking two steps
just behind Ebony. He hoped that Charlie would settle in alright. "M'fine, Theo." He said, softly,
when he felt those golden eyes flicker over him once more—right along with Charlie's lovely blue
ones. He wasn't really, but he also didn't want them to worry for him. Tonight, he could share his
worries and they would handle it together, but for now, he was fine. As fine as could be. He could
practically taste Theo's concern, rolling off of him in waves and Charlie's barely disguised worry
was kept at bay only because he could see that Theo was there.

"Home?" Theo asked, softly. He wished that they could leave without seeming rude. It had been a
long day and he knew that not only Harry, but Charlie as well, would benefit from an early night
and some private time with just the three of them. The day had been filled with more shocks and
surprises than he'd ever weathered in a single Hogwarts session—but he had a disturbing feeling
that it was quite normal for his charming, green-eyed Submissive. Gently, he squeezed Harry's
shoulders, drawing him a fraction closer to him as they continued the walk up to the dining hall.

Harry half-smiled. Of course Theo would understand. A flicker of contentment filtered through
their shared bonds as he thanked whatever fates that were, that Theo was his Alpha. "Yes." He
wished he was home and calling it an early night. He didn't care if there was plenty of an evening
left up to him or whatever. He just wanted a break and he wanted to enjoy that break. Maybe even
sort those troublesome favors. He sighed.

"Soon." Theo murmured. "We'll stay only as long as necessary. I would—but." He stopped.
Harry smiled at him, fully. He understood the hesitation there, even if he didn't particularly care for social politics. It would be very rude of them to refuse a royal invitation, especially seeing as said royals had been rather instrumental in finding out about his missing mentor and seeing that appropriate action was taken to retrieve him. "It's fine." He said. "I understand."

"We could skip dessert." Theo teased, half-heartedly.

"No way!" Harry protested. "If I'm sitting through dinner, I want my treacle tart."

"Treacle tart?" Theo perked a brow.

Harry grinned, impishly. "Two of them."

Theo chuckled softly, before his face smoothly slipped into his pureblooded mask. "Smile." He said, speaking through his teeth. "I think we're about to meet the Mother-in-Law of my illustrious head of house."

Harry puzzled that out in time to make the connection between Snape, Terius and Lady Baronsworth, before he was filing in to a cozy dining room with a large square table laden with food and set with exquisite china and golden utensils. Theo's matter-of-fact summary was the only warning he had before he saw the evidence before them. Standing behind their respective seats, Harry caught sight of a glowing Severus Snape, a pained Terius Snape, a stony-faced Draco Snape and a serene, pregnant Calida.

He swallowed. Oh Merlin!

When Harry Potter and his charming triad waltzed through the doors of the dining room, Severus Snape wished that he had a time turner at his disposal. He would have used it to rewind everything back to the pivotal point in history when his mother had decided to screw up his life by marrying Tobias Snape. At that point, he might have killed her and thus erased his own miserable existence—no, wait—he would have engineered a brighter, more powerful future for himself and left Britain before the miserable wretch of a Dark Lord ever surfaced—he would make sure to kill him and then, perhaps, everything else would work out.

Such morbid thoughts did little to improve his already strained good-temper—not that he actually had much to spare—and Severus Snape would deny to his last breath, just how ill-equipped he was to deal with the current company before him. He really wished he had a time turner when Terius gave an odd little whimper, a reaction he hadn't been able to temper. He flinched, inwardly, a reflexive action that he could not fight.

It tugged on his Alpha nature and reminded him that while his Pareya had been brave and very quick on his feet to save them all, he had also left behind one incapacitated Hermione Granger, a detail that was sure to interest one Harry Potter. Severus had been able to check back at their flat and found absolutely nothing. There were no hints as to who had taken her and where she had gone, but Severus Snape had not been a spy for nothing. He'd weathered and hardened himself over long, dreary years and now it seemed, that he would have to conduct himself as the bastard that everyone expected him to be, even when he would really rather smuggle his entire Circle far away—forever.

Experience had taught him that Harry Potter was definitely stronger and more powerful than he appeared to be. In spite of his mediocre study habits and occasional skiving off, he could be surprisingly intelligent every once in a while. His potions work—a standard by which Severus often judged most people, after all, potions had never failed him—was abysmal when his
Slytherins simply took turns ensuring that Harry seldom completed a satisfactory brew, but he expected it of them. After all, half of the dunderheaded brats had parents in precarious positions in Dumbledore's ridiculous war of Light and Dark. Technically, Harry should have been at least an average brewer, considering that Lily had eventually managed to become a competent brewer with his tutoring.

Severus clenched and unclenched his wand hand, five times in quick succession, before holding himself perfectly still. He had his own little tricks for keeping his temper neatly under wraps and after a few hours of agonizing silence and clipped, one-word answers to the annoying woman now known as Lady Baronsworth, he could feel the first stirrings of a headache. It would be by sheer dumb luck or every ounce of skill and finesse that he possessed, for them to make it through this evening, relatively unscathed.

This dinner was sure to be a recipe for disaster. The moment that the real reason for their presence within these quarters was publicly broadcasted, Harry Potter would lose what little stability and peace of mind he had, if at all. Hermione Granger had been one of his first friends, even if they had been a bit distracted and distant that year. Harry, in the goodness of his Gryffindor heart, would be horrified to learn of her abduction—horrified, right before he let his recklessness take over.

In that way, Harry was most definitely Lily's son, for hell hath no fury like a redhead's temper.

It didn't matter that Harry's hair wasn't the slightest shade of red—he'd Bonded to a great brute of a redhead—and Severus remembered Charlie Weasley quite well from his Hogwarts days. A gentle giant with an uncanny knack for handling animals with a tempered edge that even Hagrid didn't possess, in addition to an eerily perceptive manner for a Weasley.

Severus didn't bother to temper the sour look that he knew was forming over his face. This was not the way he'd intended to spend the first day of this ridiculous Hunt. Draco shifted uncertainly beside him and Severus resisted the urge to look at him, checking their bonds instead and forcing whatever tendrils of calmness through it, that he could manage to dredge up from his dreary thoughts. He could still feel those damned eyes of Lady Baronsworth drilling through him, her very real anger over their incomplete triad and frustration when she realized what responsibilities Terius was shouldering.

It had resulted in a rather spectacular row and he was thankful for his quick reflexes honed from both Dumbledore, Voldemort's Death Eater practices and his own years growing up with the odd scrap here and there, the Marauders notwithstanding. It had fashioned his vindictive style of dueling into a more refined skill that also took his own talent into consideration. There was, after all, more than simply a healthy curiosity behind his fascination with the dark arts—he'd found a kinship in it, the kind that only a rare few were privileged to know, the kinship where it did not devour his soul, but rather, courted it.

Calida shifted on her feet, one hand on her rounded stomach, a hint of fang peeking over her lower lip, betraying her nervousness. She'd certainly had quite an exciting time since she'd joined them and Severus had a feeling it would only become more complicated as time went on. It was at that moment that he caught sight of Theo's carefully blank face and Charlie's neutral expression.

Oh. That was definitely not good. Not good at all.

He recalled that Theo had sent him a message the previous day, inquiring about Granger and whether there had been any changes. He had not sent a reply, as there was nothing to say and Terius and Draco had chosen that day to wear on his nerves. He'd spent the majority of the day soothing tempers, playing mediator and attempting to brew a potion that he thought might have been of some use to Granger. He had meant to send a reply when the potion was complete and if it
worked. He certainly wasn't about to report on his own failures, but then things had become complicated in their usual way and he hadn't the time to send a message at all.

An oversight that would now rear its ugly head and only served to reinforce his Alpha instincts. He could already see the glint in Theo's golden eyes that meant he would have to play nice.

And Severus Snape hated playing nice. It was such a waste of wit.

With a hasty flicker of his magic, he gently pushed two short bursts through their shared bonds, projecting Hermione and then a deliberate shake of his head in the split-second that his Bonded looked at him. No matter what, they would need to skirt the issue for the time being. There was no conceivable way he would be sharing that bit of news with the present company.

When the dinner was over, he would conduct an investigation of his own when they were safely settled in a new home—they were most certainly not returning to their flat again—and then he'd break the news as carefully as he could. Perhaps by that time he would have managed to dig up Granger's whereabouts or at least some useful hints as to where she was.

Besides, there was no safe way to announce that Hermione Granger had been abducted by a hellhound. Honestly, Severus Snape did keep his wits about him, thank you very much.

Introductions happened quickly and neatly, the polite chatter kept to a minimum and then they were all seated along the table. In typical hostess fashion, Princess Dawne occupied one head of the table and Lady Baronsworth, the other.

Harry found himself seated near the end of the table, closer to Lady Baronsworth than Princess Dawne, with Theo on his right and Charlie on his left, with Ebony on Charlie's left. He made sense of the seating arrangements a moment later as he realized that the Royals were quite strategically placed so that they were not grouped together. He wondered if there was a specific reason for it and then chalked it to royal protocols of some sort.

A faint weight settled over him and Harry instinctively looked up to find the pitch black eyes of Severus Snape resting on him.

He shifted beneath the scrutiny, then lifted his chin, meeting the man's gaze squarely. Before he could think to react to the penetrating stare, Snape looked away and the tension was broken. A murmured ripple made its way around the table and Harry found himself holding hands with Theo and Charlie, everyone linking hands as the Royals bowed their head.

"Shokesaneh," the blessing was uttered.

Magic rippled through the joined hands and then Harry blinked. Food was magically served, a delightful feast blinking into existence. He glanced at Theo to verify that he knew which utensils went with what and bit back the protest that came when Charlie automatically filled his plate. It seemed that his Bonded would be a bit more protective of him for a little while longer—not that he was about to complain.

As if sensing what he thought, Theo shared a smile as he snuck a brightly colored portion of steamed veggies on his plate, lips twitching at the faint grimace that Harry afforded him. A general conversation started up about the rest of the Nevarean history in the past thirty years and any Torvak sightings since then.

Harry listened with half an ear, even when Ebony took enough of a break from the politics of the conversation to explain the basic etiquette of their dining to Charlie, in her quick, brisk way. Her
A low growl of frustration slipped out before Harry could check himself. He'd been trying to ask about Hermione for the past half-hour, but it seemed that neither of the Snapes were inclined to allow him an opening in the dinner conversation and whenever he did manage to start his question, someone else would speak up and he'd have to wait again.

His empathy hackles had already begun to stir and he spared a single thought for worrying and wondering how long the suppression spell Kyle had cast, would last him. He'd hoped at least until they were home, but he could feel the faintest touches of a headache teasing at his head.

The next opening he had in the conversation, Harry mustered up every ounce of loathing he could manage and glared at Draco. It wasn't too hard, considering the past they had shared. Even if he liked—or rather, could tolerate—the blond in the capacity of a fellow Submissive, he was starting to feel his magic stir in tandem with his temper. Quite aware that he would make a scene if he did not calm down, Harry pinched his thigh, using it as a focal point as he kept his glare on Draco, waiting to be noticed.

He could tell the moment that Draco registered his scrutiny, because the polite mask on his face wavered for a fraction of a moment, before puzzled silvery eyes turned to meet Harry's gaze. Draco blinked in surprise, silver eyes growing wide as he took in Harry's entire glower and then the fact that no one else had noticed yet.

A small portion of Harry relished in the knowledge that he could make the blond squirm this time around—just as Draco had done to him in past years at Hogwarts. At least, in Harry's case, he had a legitimate reason for his animosity for this evening and he wasn't about to watch his one chance for information slip away. After all, Theo had sent a message and they'd never received a reply and considering that Draco was a pureblood and Terius was likely the same, Harry didn't understand how they could stomach such a terrible breach of manners.

For a moment, he had the horrible thought that the message had gone to Snape and in true Snape-fashion, the dour man had deliberately ignored it, before Harry reassured himself that Theo had sent the message. Not him. Surely Snape wouldn't refuse a message from one of his own Snakes. He'd always favored his Slytherins and Harry was sure that he wouldn't change now, even if Hogwarts and Houses were no longer involved in their current circumstances.

"Excuse me," Harry didn't bother to keep the ice from his voice. "Could one of you kindly tell me who is watching Hermione, seeing as you're all here?"

"...her hound came for her!" Draco blurted out, standing straight up from his chair and nearly knocking it over. Distress was etched in every line of worry on his pale face and his body grew rigid. He paled even more as his words seemed to register and his silver eyes darkened to a very obvious grey. One hand went to his throat and he licked his lips, conscious of everyone staring at him, the immediate object of attention.

An awkward silence settled over the table for a moment, then Princess Dawne set her fork down and delicately blotted at her mouth, before smiling gently at them. "Hound?"

"We have no idea where she is." Draco lifted his chin, even as his shoulders began to hunch forward. "There was nothing we could do." He looked down at the table, then his head jerked to the side where he met his Alpha's unfathomable eyes.
Severus Snape was holding true to his usual impression of an inscrutable statue and now, he had slowly risen to stand beside Draco, when it was apparent that his Submissive had no intention of sitting down again. He said absolutely nothing when Draco began to babble and remained silent, even as the magic in the room began to grow agitated. For one hushed moment, their eyes met.

A sound of distress bubbled out of Draco's throat and he threw his napkin atop his half-eaten dinner, whirling away from his Alpha. "Excuse me—begging your royal pardons." A sharp wind rustled through the room before Draco turned and bolted.

"Draco-!" Terius leapt from his seat, knocking over his own chair as he rushed to intercept Draco and missed by a few inches. He paused long enough to throw a Look at Severus and frowned at Calida, before he streaked off after him.

Silence reigned for a tense moment, before Calida moaned and pressed a hand to her mouth.

Before she could lurch out of her chair, Severus' hand snapped out and dragged it back from the table. The petite Carrier squeaked and doubled over, only to be caught and gently cradled to his side, while he produced a calming draught from the voluminous folds of his severe black robes. He bit the cork off and upended the phial in her mouth, with ease born of practice, obviously having done it before, as he managed to pry her hands from her mouth and coax the potion down her throat before her dinner could resurface.

After a few seconds, her eyes darkened a few shades and she stood up on her own, a very obvious scowl on her face. "Arielle, what is he doing?" She rubbed at her stomach, smoothing the fabric over her slight baby bump. "Remind me to give him all the symptoms tonight." Her scowl deepened.

"Do you need any-"

"No. Your potions work wonders," Calida cracked her neck to the side. "Aren't we supposed to dash out after them?"

Severus merely perked a brow.

She rolled her eyes and turned back to the dinner table, offering a deep bow. "Do excuse us. There's been a bit of a crisis." She frowned. "Severus?"

He offered his arm and a faint breeze rippled through the room. "Indeed."

"He's terrified of you." Lady Baronsworth's voice cut through the shocked silence. She was glaring at Severus as if she would like to hack his head off with the silver steak knife clenched in one hand. Her eyes were a near black and she quivered faintly. "I knew it. What kind of Alpha are you? He's terrified of you."

Severus favored her with a glare. "I will thank you to keep your comments about my Circle, to yourself, Madam."

"I didn't raise my son to be a cowering-"

"-he walked out of this room on his own two feet."

"-your own submissive ran from you and you're standing here debating how he ran? Whatever is wrong with you? What have you done to-"

"Contrary to your belief, I have never raised a hand to either of-!"
"If you don't find yourself a Beta before this Hunt is over, I'll find you one myself. You're so unbalanced just watching you makes me dizzy!"

"You will do no such thing!"

"Enough!" Lord Baronsworth inserted himself before a suddenly glowering Severus Snape and his wife, before the lady Gheyo could launch herself at him. "This is not—you have an audience." He snapped. "Conduct yourselves accordingly!"

Severus lifted his chin, drawing himself up to his full height—enough to top the lady by at least four inches—before he offered his hand to Calida. The Carrier trustingly pressed up against his side, turning her face into his robes to prepare for the 'port he was obviously about to cast. His temper had finally reached the very final strands of control that he possessed and he knew he needed to leave the room before he said or did something that would be absolutely unforgivable. "I have neither groveled nor caved to the demands of two masters who think their sole purpose in life is to destroy my soul with their depraved whims." His voice was a poisonous, velvet whisper. "And though they commanded me, I chose to obey. You are nothing more than a third vying for ownership over something that is no longer yours." He hissed. "If Terius did not come to us, I would not have chosen him." His lip curled into a sneer. "We may not fit your standard of perfection, but not deign to assume that your interference is welcome in our personal affairs. Do your worst."

One arm was wrapped securely around Calida, as the other caught the end of his robe and drew it around them in a billowing arc. The portal was silent and instantaneous. The fluttering of the black fabric had scarcely begun before both Severus and Calida had vanished from view.

Another round of silence filled the dining room.

"Well," Princess Dawne began, with forced cheer. "When I asked you to entertain, Lady Baronsworth, this was not quite what I had in mind." She licked her lips, brow furrowed, as if decided how exactly to handle the agitated woman.

Lady Baronsworth whirled around, her eyes snapping angrily, her own air element making itself known with the sudden rush of wind in the room that ruffled the napkins and tablecloths, while pulling at the guests. "You think I want my son to deal with a madman like that?" She screeched. "The bloody fool—he'll drag them all down and our good name with it and my son! I would like to remind you that I didn't decide to host a dinner party tonight. You demanded that I-"

Lord Baronsworth darted forward, clapping a hand over his Bonded's mouth and wrestling her back against him with a warning growl. "Please excuse my wife," he said, formally. "She is—emotionally overwrought. It has been a very long and trying day." He winced when she stomped on his foot, trying to twist her head free of his hand. "And whatever it is that she—broke, I shall do my best to make proper reparations for the loss." He grunted when she elbowed him in the stomach. "My most sincere apologies for disrupting the evening meal-!" He bit off the word with a squeak, releasing his hold on said wife, clutching a suddenly bloody hand to his chest. "Arielle, woman—did you bite me?" He stared at her incredulously.

"You think I'm joking?" Lady Baronsworth spat. Her shoulders jerked and twitched, her wings restless, but not emerging just yet. "My son—our Terius—a Councilman, shackled to that-that, pathetic, boorish, wizard-raised, excuse of an Alpha-!"

A flare of soft white light announced the healing magic used to tend to his hand as a newly upset Lord Baronsworth narrowed his eyes in a calculating look. "Ten second head start." He said, calmly, ignoring her rant.
"You think I won't do it, will you? I will. I'll find someone. I won't have this—I won't let him—"

Lord Baronsworth simply held up his newly healed hand. The fingers lengthened, the nails grew pointed and within seconds, it was more of a claw than a hand. He curled and uncurled it, the meaning clear.

The gravity of the situation finally registered with the distraught Lady Baronsworth as her eyes fluxed pure black and she bared her fangs in an audible hiss. "He's my son!" She snarled. "I won't leave him to the tender mercies of some idiotic-."

"He's my son too." Lord Baronsworth said, with the same maddening calmness as before. He started forward, rolling his shoulders back, his formal robe shifting and rippling to show the elegant robe obviously designed with dragels in mind. The folds parted as his wing tips began to peek out from beneath the heavy fabric.

Lady Baronsworth froze, mouth open and gaping as she stared for a moment. Her shoulders twitched and shuddered, her wings fighting to be released as she backed towards the exit—and then ran.

Lord Baronsworth stared after her for a long moment, then looked back to the table. He quirked a brow.

Princess Dawne waved a hand at him, looking away.

He nodded in thanks and strode from the room, scales appearing along the sides of his neck, the stifling feeling in the room, easing by tenfold as his presence faded and silencing wards were thrown up.

A very relieved breath came from Ebony as she stared at her fellow princess. "Dawne—did you-?" She began.

"I did not." Princess Dawne said, primly. "I would never have asked her to host otherwise. I have no desire for anyone to be permanently scarred by the pointless bickering and squabbling by the one Councilwoman I cannot seem to be rid of."

"Please tell me you won't allow her to slip off without some sort of-"

"I will not. That was rude, even for her."

"Thank you." Ebony shook her head. "I was hoping for a nice quiet dinner." She looked at Charlie. "Alright there, Charles?"

The redhead gave a faint nod, his blue-eyed gaze riveted to Harry's stricken face. "Fine." The entire shouting match had not been expected by anyone, it seemed and Harry had sat perfectly still and unmoving through the entire tirade. He'd been more shocked by Draco's running, than the argument between the Baronsworths' and Snape, but now, he didn't even start when Charlie attempted to hold his hand beneath the table.

"Assign her to jury duty." Prince Raspen said. He shook his head. "I almost forgot that Terius was hers—they're nothing alike."

"He takes after his father." Princess Dawne sighed. "And I may just do that. I've already maxed out their fines and I do not wish to bankrupt them with the number of future incidents that will no doubt make their way to my desk before this Hunt is over." She sighed. "I don't see what she was
complaining about though. The alpha was a nice bit. He seemed very concerned and anyone would take offense to what she was insinuating."

"When he said the hound took her," Ilsa's voice cut clearly across the table, her golden eyes fixed on Harry. "Was he speaking of your friend?"

All eyes turned to Harry, who wore a conflicted expression on his face. He started, faintly, as if realizing that he was now the center of attention. He lifted anguished emerald eyes to meet Ilsa's own, before he scooted his chair back. "May I be excused?"

Theo and Charlie both opened their mouths to speak, when Ebony beat them to it. "Down the hall on your right, second door." She said, quietly. "Take your time."

Harry was on his feet, head bobbing in acknowledgement. "Thank you."

"It seems," Thomas began, carefully. "That our dinner party is greatly reduced in numbers."

"That only means more dessert for the rest of us," Lord Cunningham said with chuckle. "Allow me to echo your earlier words," he looked to Prince Raspen. "It has been quite a long first day, hasn't it?" He gave a slight jerk of his head and Hadrian, who had been lounging against the wall the entire time, surreptitiously left.

Harry followed Ebony's instructions to find himself at a neatly furnished en suite tucked at the corner of the long hallway. He ducked inside, gratefully and stood over the marble sink, staring at his reflection in the mirror. After a moment, he turned the taps on and began to splash his face with the cool water.

Hermione taken by a Hellound.

His chest ached.

That was one complication he'd never considered and now, he felt guilty for not realizing the danger she would've been in, sooner. If only they'd realized that her bearing a Hellhound's seal meant that—Harry shook his head to clear it. He could almost hear Theo and Charlie's concerned voices in his head.

He could certainly feel their worry and concern trickling through their shared bonds. They were trying not to alarm him, but they were both quite obviously worried, with the way this last bit of news had been compounded on top of everything else that had happened that day.

Taking his time, he washed his face again and his hands twice—with soap—before he had to stop stalling. The sooner he composed himself and returned, the sooner they could leave the table. He'd seen the look of genuine distress on Calida's face and determined that perhaps, things might be a bit more serious than he'd realized for the Snape Circle. He didn't think that Snape was as bad as Terius' Mum had made him out to be—after all the man was a bastard, but not evil either.

As if on cue, Harry could swear he heard Hermione's voice in his head, mentally chiding him to say 'Professor Snape' instead of just Snape, because teachers deserved respect. He huffed, mentally pulling himself together and squaring his shoulders before he stared back at his reflection in the mirror.

He'd made it through worse things before and it wasn't like he hadn't ever dealt with losing a friend, there was Ron during the Tournament and— and worse, he was sure of it. A grim smile fixed itself to his face as Harry dried his hands on the appointed towel and stepped out of the en
suite. He looked up and down the carpeted hallways, an odd state of calm washing over him.

The walls were white and the wall sconces cast a soft glow of light over the empty hall, not a single Gheyo anywhere in sight. Harry frowned, his brows knitting together as he stepped out from the corner en suite and heard the door click shut behind him. For a moment, he almost forgot if he'd come from the left or the right side, when he remembered that Ebony had said right and therefore, that meant the return trip was a left.

He scowled inwardly, wondering why dragels had to complicate even their living spaces with such long corridors and so many doors. Then a memory of Terius teaching in DADA filtered back into his mind and he pursed his lips, remembering that the Pareya had spoken of the need for large casting grounds.

That was most likely his answer.

Trotting down the hall to his left, Harry didn't sense nor see her until they collided. A whiff of floral perfume—so slight he wouldn't have caught the scent if they weren't so close—and a flash of brilliant red hair was all that he saw before their eyes connected.

The apology on his lips turned into a choked gasp that did not leave his throat as Harry found himself staring up into a face that absolutely could not be real. Perfect red hair in neat spiraled curls and vivid green eyes, the exact same shade as his own, and creamy, porcelain skin without the slightest hint of freckles.

Harry would have thought he was dreaming except for the arms that he'd grabbed, steadied him without question. For a few stuttering heartbeats, Harry didn't quite breathe. The woman holding him returned his steady gaze, a not-quite-smile halfway painted across her lips, her body warm and soft, with a definite hint of muscle beneath, as she half-hugged him.

A wave of powerful calm washed over him and Harry felt his eyes fill with tears from the sheer relief of the crushing emotional pressure that had been hovering over him since the first seal that Quinn had removed. His lips parted in a soundless cry and he squeezed the arms holding him, reflexively, too surprised to speak.

"It cannot be that bad, little one." The woman said, softly. She bent down as if to kiss his forehead, when something caught her attention. Her head snapped up to the side and she immediately released Harry, stepping away and to the side, her head still cocked to the right, hearing something that he had yet to notice. The smile that finally touched her face was bittersweet and almost apologetic, before she turned and glided down the hall.

Harry stared after her, when the sound of approaching feet caught his ear. He turned around to look, just as Hadrian rounded the corner, plumed mask and all. Harry stared at him, then jerked around to look back for the mysterious redhead.

She was nowhere in sight.

"Wait-!" He called out to the empty corridor. "Please-!" Harry ran to the end of the corridor, grabbing the corner of the wall as he rounded the bend only to find that it was completely empty, not even a Gheyo standing guard at one of the many doors. The hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention and Harry grimaced, reaching up to tug at his hair.

He had seen her. He had.

"Harry?"
Harry turned back to face Hadrian, but words failed him as the older dragel approached, having broken into a sprint as well to catch up with him. Hadrian came to a stop beside him, his sword hand resting on the hilt of his one of his dark-hilted swords, obviously ready to act at a moment's notice.

"Harry?" Hadrian tried again. "Talk to me."

Harry opened and shut his mouth, before he mutely held out a hand, unable to translate the confusion inside of him into something he could explain.

"Are you alright? Did something happen?" The hand Harry had offered was gently taken and Hadrian bent forward to be on his level.

After a long moment, Harry shook his head. "D-did you see someone here? When you came 'round the corner? A redhead?"

"A redhead?" Hadrian looked at him carefully and then slowly shook his head. "You were alone. I didn't see or sense anyone." He frowned. "Did you see a redhead?"

Harry grimaced. "N-not exactly." He tugged his hand back, to gain Hadrian's attention, a bit disappointed. "I'd rather not say." He frowned. "Were you looking for me?" He reached out to his bonded, finding that they were alright, anxious, but alright and so he relaxed enough for realize that Hadrian had taken up a rather protective stance beside him, his dark eyes keeping a watchful gaze divided between him and the hall.

"You shouldn't quite be wandering about on your own." Hadrian said, mildly. "Given the events of this evening." His lips quirked into a smile at the expression on Harry's face. "But if you find my immediate presence to be inconvenient, I will gladly make my physical self less conspicuous."

"Wait-what?" Harry shook his head. "No. You're fine—I just. Which way back?" He tipped his head to one side.

"Other side," Hadrian said, amused. "You turned around twice." He took Harry's hand back and tucked it into the crook of his elbow, gliding forward as if he were a formal escort. "Are you alright?"

"One of these days I will be," Harry said, honestly. "And when I am, I won't have people asking that question anymore."

Hadrian smiled in understanding. "Know your strengths," he advised. "And work yourself to the bone until it is no longer a strength, but rather a part of you, then keep on improving and never falter."

"Speaking from experience?"

"I wager my experience is quite different from yours."

"Oh, I don't know." Harry said, nonchalantly. "I've fought a basilisk, a dragon, grindylows, a bloody narcissistic madman that thinks it's his life's mission to kill me and that was all before I turned into this." The moment he'd spoken, Harry winced inwardly, wondering why in Merlin's name, he was being so open and friendly with a man that seemed cloaked in the very darkness of his shadowed element.

"...that is—enlightening." Hadrian said, after a moment.
"Sounds far more exciting than my own escapades," Hadrian snorted. He caught the look of interest on Harry's face before it was masked by immediate politeness and smiled to himself. "Though, if you were wondering. I fought my parents when I was eight years old after they were consumed by an obedience potion out of jealousy from a political rival, that resulted in the release of our family secret, which led to being assigned to the pits for taking my revenge on them, where I insulted a Hellhound at age ten and was permanently marked for my troubles, earning a spectacularly horrible scar for such idiocy. At the age of thirteen, I accidentally made a deal with a Dark Shifter and was indebted to him for five years, where he then tried to kill me on my eighteenth birthday, I found my way back home and wound up adopting a tragic little girl who is now my sister in everything but blood. We decided that the gossip was annoying so we left for a while."

It was said in a perfectly bland, matter-of-fact tone that Harry didn't know what to say. He stared up at him instead, scrambling to find words. "That's-" he started and shook his head. He didn't know what had possessed him to speak so honestly about things he'd only hinted to his Bonded, but Hadrian had calmly returned the favor and any apprehension he'd felt at first, now faded. Harry could feel that telling Hadrian wouldn't result in any negative repercussions and he craved the acceptance that came with that realization. Yes, Hadrian's magic was dark—Merlin, was it dark—but it was soft and gentle, not harsh or demanding. "Even?"

"Please," Hadrian agreed. "I think you win though, by the time I was eighteen I had already gathered myself together—and I was born into this life, I knew what to expect, more or less."

"...thanks."

"A secret shared, deserves another to keep it company." Hadrian said, simply. "Secrets should always be shared because they halve the burden on the soul. Besides, now we are even, are we not?"

Harry shrugged at that. They were even and the fact that Hadrian had shared a slice of his own odd history was somewhat comforting. He knew then, that the Gheyo would not mention anything he'd said—either in jest or passing. The silence hung between them for a moment longer and Harry frowned as they passed a silver and blue potted plant nestled in a lovely, bejeweled planter. He could've sworn that he hadn't passed that before. "Are we taking the scenic route?"

"I thought you might appreciate a moment." Hadrian said, looking down at him. "Forgive me for being forward, but Lady Baronsworth was still shrieking in the halls when you left."

Harry's lips twitched. He could now see why Hadrian might have come after him. He would not have been expecting any kind of attack, constant vigilance aside, had good reflexes, but not the same iron control on his magic that fully-trained, adult Gheyo would have. He appreciated the gesture and found himself relaxing even more. "Did she start throwing things?"

"I thought you might appreciate a moment." Hadrian said, looking down at him. "Forgive me for being forward, but Lady Baronsworth was still shrieking in the halls when you left."

The Gheyo's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. "Not yet, I think she would at least remember that the Royals are in the room and hopefully, curb her more impulsive urges until she has left the floor or they have excused themselves for the night. Her fits are quite legendary."

"Why don't they stop her?"

"The Royals?" Hadrian chuckled at Harry's nod. "She actually has not done anything, apart from mouthing off and disrupting her own dinner party—think about it. She hasn't done anything. You might not be used to this sort of open authority, I suppose, but our Royals are different. They are
very flexible, not to say that they will not stand up and intervene if it is necessary—believe me, they will—but this is partially a Circle matter, so unless they choose to make it official business, there is no reason for them to interfere."

Harry scowled. "But isn't that a bit—I don't know, something?"

"Confusing? Perhaps, at first." Hadrian allowed. "Think of it as a very large family dinner, in which the older siblings look indulgently on the temper tantrums of the smaller ones, well aware that should their parents enter the room, all hell will break loose." He smirked. "It might not sound like it, but I assure you that our Royals can handle their own. Lady Baronsworth can be charming, I'm told, when she's not in a mood. Twelve years ago, she defended the Northern gate for fourteen days—alone, during one of the Realm Shifts, where the Fabrine sometimes leak through. Even if she acts like a child, it is only in the presence of those that she is most comfortable with."

"Realm Shifts? What are those?"

"Ever heard of a nevermore realm?"

"Heard it. Don't have a clue what it is." Harry answered. "Is it bad?"

"It means it is a realm where time passes differently-"

"Know that."

"-and in order for that to be possible, it means it is a freestanding realm that does not touch anything else." 

"...I don't understand."

"Most realms are connected to each other in some way or another, that is how you have Realmwalkers. They can just—walk from one world into another as if they were parting a curtain." Hadrian explained. "Nevarah is not like that. You can only enter through the gates or if you have a truly powerful individual with ties already in Nevarah, to pull you between realms."

"Like Ilsa." Harry breathed, feeling the information click into the proper spot in his brain. He remembered the awful portal that had brought them over from the Wizarding World. He remembered Ilsa shifting into dragon form inside of the strange, magical space. He remembered Aracle taking over the portal from her. He remembered touching down on Nevarah and desperately using the threads of Charlie's magic that he could reach—to throw off the Fabrine encroaching around them.

"Make sense now?"

"Yes. Thanks."

Hadrian smiled. "At any rate, there are twelve gates into Nevarah, three on each of the four sides, each side belongs to an element and to guard any one of them alone for longer than a week, that's admirable, especially if you do not have a one of the caspers bonded to you, like how your friend, Lady Ilsa, has Ergen bonded to her."

"Oh. Is it hard to—how hard is it to have a casper?" Harry asked.

"It's not something done lightly." Hadrian said, after a pause. "It requires a great deal of control and magic, there is a significant amount of responsibility involved. Why?"
Harry resisted the urge to shrug. "Just wondering."

"Hmm." Hadrian said, noncommittally. "When you said there were only four sides for the four elements, what about your element? Is Shadow and Storm always overlooked?" Harry asked, before he could stop himself. For a moment, he was worried that he had offended the older drigel, only to find a look of faint amusement on what could be seen on the unmasked portion of Hadrian's face.

"We're not quite overlooked, so much as allowed to run free." Hadrian smiled, sadly. "It's a bit more complicated than I could understand in mere minutes."

"Oh." Harry flexed his hand tucked in the crook of the armored elbow. He could make out faint swirled patterns on Hadrian's flexible armor that somehow remained cool to the touch, even though they had been walking for a few minutes. They rounded another corner and Harry found his footsteps slowing of his own accord. He wanted to spend more time talking to the man, but he knew they would return to the dining room any moment now.

As if sensing his reluctance, Hadrian slowed his own steps.

"Why are you wearing a mask?" Harry had to ask, when his brain drew a blank for a way to continue the conversation. "The Hellhound scar?"

Hadrian stared at him for a moment, dark eyes drilling into emerald orbs.

Harry hastily backtracked, feeling his cheeks grow warm. "I mean, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to, it isn't really my-"

A warm, rich laugh filled the hallway. "I can honestly say I have never heard that one before." Hadrian said, when he caught his breath. "No, actually, that's not where it is." Something glittered in his deep black eyes, now alight with warmth that hadn't been there before. "But perhaps, someday, if you do ask, I might be inclined to tell you."

"You can't show me?" Harry wished they hadn't started walking again already. "I could show you my basilisk scar." A little ripple of self-satisfaction coursed through him as Harry did not blush immediately after said proposition.

A choked sound came from Hadrian before he shook his head, lips curved into a definite smile. "Absolutely not—tempting as you are." He shook his head. "Your Alpha would have my head for it, I expect."

"I didn't say where it was." Harry countered.

"And I will take a guess that it is no more appropriate for public display than my own." Hadrian countered. "The mask is part of my contract and I prefer the anonymity it grants me."

"It's just a mask. Can't someone tell anyway?"

"It's more than a mask and when I was last in Nevarah, I was nothing like how I am now, so no. With a bit of luck, no one would remember me."

"Ilsa did."

"Lady Ilsa holds a blood title—as do I. Blood titles fight each other and train together at some point or another. I have done both. We have." He amended.
Harry chewed on his lower lip in thought. He decided to let that be. "How does that work? Being contracted, I mean—I thought that you had to be bonded?"

"It depends. As I'm sure you can tell. I'm a Gheyo. An Ace, specifically." Hadrian explained. "We can hire ourselves out, especially if we don't have a set preference for military work or we have decided not to train anyone beneath us. Training lower ranks isn't a requirement, unless we've achieved a certain level and if we bond into a Circle before then, a few years allowance are gifted so we can adjust for the added responsibility."

"So you're not—bonded?"

"I am contracted." Hadrian corrected. "There is a difference, however slight. My loyalties are sworn to Lord Cunningham and Lady Mariana. I will do whatever they ask of me, no matter the cost." He half-smiled. "In exchange for that absolute loyalty, they treat me as if I were one of their own." He paused. "Without the sex, of course."

Harry choked.

The smirk on Hadrian's face said that he'd done it on purpose though and it had worked, because Harry was now almost laughing. Sharing the laughter himself, Hadrian slipped his arm free of Harry's hand, clapping him on the back. "Deep breaths, Harry." He said, lightly. "Deep breaths—and honestly, you asked." He ushered Harry to walk in front of him as they neared the final corner. He'd seen how protective Harry's Bonded were and he didn't want to antagonize them in any way. "But no, to answer your question, I am not hunting this season."

"Don't you want to?"

"It is not a matter of want, it's a matter of duty and honor." Hadrian nudged Harry forward again, then stopped touching him altogether. "If you are asking as an interested Submissive, then ask me when my contract is up."

Harry let that sink in for a moment, before he processed the fact that Hadrian had not outright rejected him. That was promising, wasn't it? They rounded the corner together just as Harry turned back to look at him. "When is your contract up?"

"Harry!" Theo's relieved voice broke into the private moment before Hadrian could answer. "I was starting to wonder and—did something happen?" He looked from Harry to the somewhat amused Gheyo standing just behind him. His golden eyes narrowed faintly. Harry had something of a blush on his cheeks and there was a smile on Hadrian's face that could only be termed as indulgent.

Charlie was already moving forward though and he pulled Harry into a hug, subtly casting the barrage of diagnostic spells that Theo had been itching to cast. He figured that perhaps Harry had lost himself in the maze of corridors and it was lucky that Hadrian had gone after him, obviously knowing the layout of the floor. "What happened?"

"Happened?" Harry told Charlie's chest, where he was mostly squashed and held fast, as Charlie's arms didn't seem like they would release him anytime soon. "Charlie!"

"Don't smother him," Theo groused, nudging his Beta and trying to catch Harry's eye. "You felt—there was a moment when you were absolutely terrified and then, you were fine. Perfectly fine. What happened?"

"That could be interpreted so many ways," Harry muttered, untangling himself from Charlie's bear hug when his Beta obeyed Theo's prompt. "I-I'll tell you later. It's nothing to worry about. What's
happening? Did I miss something?" He would explain about the mysterious redheaded encounter later—much later—when it was just the three of them.

At the moment, it seemed like Theo and Charlie had left the dining room and were now gathering around, clustered together. None of the royals, save for Ebony was present and she had been talking to Charlie, before Harry had turned up with Hadrian. Now, she stood off to the side of their little trio, her sharp orange eyes moving critically over him.

"Calling it a night," She said, moving to be more fully in Harry's line-of-sight. "I figured you'd had enough for the day and I plan on at least being able to start my mentorship on good terms with this fellow." She patted Charlie's shoulder. "From the sound of things, I'll need to be training you in some sort of formal combat and defensive magics, both of which stipulate the necessity of a good night's rest. While I won't be starting you tomorrow or possibly this week, I will make time to test your abilities so a suitable training schedule can be worked out." She nodded at Harry. "He means the world to you, so I wager you would rather learn first how to use what you'll have at your disposal, than of traditional etiquette and social niceties."

Charlie nodded, gratefully. "I would, thank you, Prin—Ebony."

"Oretta." She said, lightly, correctly interpreting his near stumble over her name. She knew her title was not a problem for him, but he had been well-raised and manners would always show. That was good. It meant she had enough to work with for now. "The others gave their excuses and apologies," she looked to Harry. "I should see you tomorrow, but if not, Happy Hunting, little one."

Harry felt his cheeks color. He wanted to protest the endearment, but the sudden seriousness in her pale orange eyes, gave him pause. She didn't say it to belittle him, but rather as an obvious claim that she considered him dear, just as she did Charlie. It made a flutter of warmth blossom in his belly, twining around the lax relief from earlier. "Thank you—Ebony." He managed to say.

She smiled at them, the regal air surrounding her becoming more pronounced as she lifted her chin and strode confidently down the hall, settling into the center of the formation of Gheyos that escorted her away.

"...and he's right out here, Bahn." Ilsa's voice filtered out from the door. "Aracle is coming, I can feel him. Now come on."

"My feet hurt." Bahn said, tiredly. "And I thought he was with Bhindi. Did something happen to her?"

"I'm sure she's fine." Ilsa reassured him. "That's where Takar went, remember? He wouldn't have said they were alright, if they weren't."

Bahn stepped out, cuddled into Ilsa's side, a yawn on his lips. He brightened considerably at seeing Harry and pulled away from Ilsa to hold out a square-shaped, neatly wrapped bundle of white cloth. "You missed dessert." He said. "I thought you might want some."

"Did the—it's over?" Harry asked, uncertainly. He didn't think that he'd been walking with Hadrian for that long, but then again, stranger things had happened since his arrival to Nevarah.

"A full council was called." Bahn explained. "It convenes at midnight, so the Royals left. It's standard procedure after there's been an attack like earlier." He held up the wrapped bundle. "Here, take this."

Harry accepted the bundle, feeling a mixture of relief and guilt, wondering if his absence from the
table had given them a short window to decide to disband the dinner party. A cinnamon-sweet scent wafted up to his nose as he carefully held the wrapped bundle of desserts from Bahn. From the weight of it, he had a feeling the elfin submissive had cheerfully shoveled half of the dessert table into portable containers. "Thank you."

"We'll call it a night, loves." Ilsa said, firmly. She rubbed a hand up and down Bahn's arm, pressing him closer to her side. He was looking sleepy and mildly disgruntled all over again, while her expression was one of muted fondness. "If something happens, you'll likely hear it from me, so don't worry about it."

"Thank you, Oretta." Theo said, gratefully. He did not like that their evening had turned into such a muddle, but now that it had and they were released from formal obligations, he wanted to be home with his Bonded and not thinking about the next day—not yet anyway.

"Sleep well, all of you." Ilsa held out her free arm to pull Theo into a hug. He complied, happily, hugging her back and murmuring his farewell greetings to Bahn.

Charlie was just within reach to be pulled in for a hug as well and when he was released, he found his hands suddenly holding Harry's wrapped desserts, before both Ilsa and Bahn caught Harry up in a twin-hug of sorts. A faint smile registered as Harry was well-hugged, his hair ruffled and well wishes for the night whispered in his ear, before he was thrust back into Theo's welcoming arms.

Bahn smiled, softly, giving a wave of his hand as Ilsa went to bid her father goodnight. Greta came to take Ilsa's place almost at once, and Bahn happily snuggled up to her without complaint.

"Lord Cunningham said to tell you," Greta began, beckoning to Hadrian.

He moved over to stand beside her and listened when she whispered in his ear, giving a short sharp nod. "Thank you kindly, dear lady."

Greta snorted. "Save the flirting for someone who cares." She threw back. "I'll see you in the pits tomorrow?"

"I wish." He chuckled. "Lady Mariana is not happy with my latest adventure, so I am being punished by personal restriction from the pits until the second week."

Greta winced. "The second?" That was cruel and unusual punishment for a fighting Gheyo, as most Aces tended to be. They lived for the thrill of the fight, often born with a healthy battelust to drive them on to perfecting their personal repertoire of defense and strategy that kept their Circles safe. They loved the burn of training, the camaraderie afforded to those bonded through combat and were always, above all else, driven to prove their worth in the most spectacular ways possible.

"My sentence could be lessened for good behavior." Hadrian said, lips twitching. "But I am not holding my breath. Good night to you all." His dark eyed gaze flickered to Harry, then Theo, as he smirked, then vanished in a swirl of inky shadows.

"Shadow's blessings." Greta muttered after him. She brightened as a portal began to open on the floor beneath them. Aracle emerged from the golden, swirling glow, crossing over to greet them with hugs and kisses. She easily handed over Bahn and they prepared to leave, as Ilsa returned to join them.

"I think we've said all the goodbyes we need to," Theo murmured into Harry's ear. "Shall we?"

Harry turned in his Alpha's arms, tapping into the strength that Theo offered and dredging up the feeling of pure calm and relief he'd felt from before. "Yes." He said, softly. "Home."
The 'portal deposited them in the upstairs kitchen where Theo had brought Bahn after their first run-in.

Harry stepped out from Theo's now slack arms with a sigh of contentment. He took the wrapped bundle of desserts from Charlie and set it on the table, casting a quick look around to be sure that everything was exactly as he'd left it. Satisfied that it was, he began to unwrap the bundle to reach the tantalizing scents within.

"Tea?" Charlie asked, already moving to rummage through the cupboard where the kettle was kept.

Theo smiled at them both and with a flick of his wand—he was more used to using it than not, after all—he banished their formal robes upstairs and exchanged their dress shoes for house slippers. "At this time of night?" He asked. "I won't say no."

Harry smiled. He found plates and forks and the served up the crème cakes and sugared tarts, pleased to note that Bahn had taken their numbers into consideration and gifted them at least double of some treats and triple of others. By the time Charlie had finished fiddling with the kettle to produce a nice, boiling pot of water, Theo had found the tea set and laid it out on the table.

Between the three of them, it fell to Theo to make the tea and Harry to serve it, which happened quite quickly and efficiently without much ceremony. They gathered around the table, eating and drinking silently for a moment, before Harry popped up from the table, plate in hand, cup in the other.

Theo looked at him, uncertainly, while Charlie mirrored concern in his big blue eyes.

"Upstairs," Harry said, softly. "It feels so—cold down here."

Identical looks of understanding flashed over his Bonded's faces and without comment, both Theo and Charlie gathered up their treats and followed Harry upstairs.

It didn't take long to change into their pyjamas and settle comfortably against the headboard, with Harry sitting between Charlie and Theo, and the bonds between them humming with happiness.

Charlie speared a chunk of sugared fruit off of his tart and nudged Harry with his elbow, offering him the morsel on the tip of his fork. Harry blinked, a slight blush surfacing as he turned enough to accept it. Theo had finished his cake already and now, he cradled a steaming cup of tea to his chest, angling himself in such a way as to keep Harry snuggled up to his side.

"What was it you wanted to say earlier?" Theo asked.

Harry sighed and set his fork down. He was thinking back to his encounter with his Uncle Lewis and the revelation that there were more Peverells out there and that he had actual, blood family to call his own. He remembered seeing Lewis and being struck by the startling similarity of the older dragel to the few wizarding photos he had of his father, James. He hadn't allowed himself to ever consider that he would have family apart from the Durseley's, because if he had, then surely they would have come for him, would have claimed him, would have cared about him.

"Here," Charlie speared another bite of fruit and teased it lightly against Harry's lips. Distraction was something that seemed to work well when Harry's thoughts diverted to more depressing depths.

Opening his mouth, Harry accepted the tidbit and tilted his head back to rest against the headboard as he organized his thoughts into something that he could share. "Remember Lewis Peverell,
today?" He asked, carefully. He remembered Theo's obvious dislike of the Pareya and could not figure out why, but did not want to raise his Alpha's protective hackles any higher.

Predictably, however, Theo growled, golden eyes narrowing. "I do." He said, taking a long sip of tea to apparently keep himself from adding anything else to the statement.

"Well, when I first saw him—what I mean is, have you ever seen a picture of my father? Of James Potter?" Harry asked.

Charlie hesitated for a moment, forehead crinkled in thought, while Theo adopted a puzzled look. "I have," Theo said, after a moment. He stared down at his cup of tea for a moment, then muttered something, before handing the mug over to Charlie.

Harry peered inside as Charlie leaned over to see. A murky image of James Potter floated atop the watery surface, a magical image conjured from memory and relying on Theo's ability. "Yes. That's him." Harry half-smiled, watching as Theo reclaimed his cup and took another deliberate sip. "Except for the glasses, he looks just like Lewis or rather, Lewis looked just like him."

"Oh Harry." Charlie caught on first and he immediately set his plate on the nightstand beside the bed and turned to give his full attention to the brunet. Looping an arm around Harry's shoulders, he drew him close and dropped a kiss atop that messy head of hair.

"I called him Dad," Harry said, quietly. He looked down at the strawberry torte on his plate and made himself eat a bite, even though it tasted too sweet in his mouth. "I thought—for a moment, I thought that—" he stopped. Theo presented his teacup once more, holding it just within reach of Harry's mouth. Harry leaned forward and took a comforting sip. Theo liked his tea brewed more strongly than the rest of them and the sharp taste served to ground him in the moment.

"I'm sorry," Theo said, after a moment.

"It's no one's fault," Harry said, quickly. "Really it isn't. I just—I didn't expect it." He took a deep breath. "And I never thought that I would have family here. Family that was alive," he looked at Charlie. "Which had me wondering about yours, Charlie, because you had to be dragel from somewhere and there are no Potters here, but there are Peverells."

Understanding dawned as Charlie followed Harry's train of thought. "You think there might be," he stopped. "We can check later." His blue eyes narrowed. Harry was building up to something.

As if sensing what Charlie had realized, Harry began to speak once more. "And when I left the dinner—I ran into someone, a woman—who looked like—"

"Like Lily." Theo finished. He'd finally caught on to what his Bonded were discussing and now, his worry filtered quite plainly through their shared bonds. "But Harry, you said that—"

"That there was only Mum and Aunt-" Harry stopped. Even now, he hated to use her title of 'aunt' when it seemed that she was so undeserving of it. "Petunia." He grimaced. "And she never looked anything like Mum." There were near opposites, in fact, because for everything of Lily that was brilliant red hair and vibrant green eyes, Petunia was mousey brown-blondish and boring hazel eyes.

"And this mystery woman, she was exactly like her?"

"Well, no." Harry said, slowly. "Her hair was different, it was all—curled, Mum's hair was kind of wavy, like it used to be curled, but it wasn't any more. In the pictures I've seen with her, her hair is never curly, but-" Harry stopped. He took a careful breath and resolutely carved out a chunk of his
torte and stuck it in his mouth. He chewed slowly and deliberately, focusing on that fantastic feeling of calm until he settled. "It looked just like her." He said, firmly. "Just like her."

"Only it couldn't be," Charlie added. He frowned. "What are you thinking?"

"Quinn said something about the families of Evanson and Peverell, that first day in the clinic." Harry explained. He toyed with his fork. "He said that I had family seals on me, he couldn't tell from when, but he could say that they were from two prominent families and that I could probably have them officially removed before they wore off on their own. Lewis said he'd see about asking to have the Peverell seal removed because it took time for the preparations to be made."

"He was sure they would wear off?" Theo asked. "I mean, seals are serious business." He set his empty tea cup on the nightstand on his side of the bed and began to tug lightly at the covers beneath him. He remembered the painful, awkward conversation they'd had after Harry's first trip to the Clinic, to hear bits and pieces of the trying experiences he'd endured—while just trying to stay alive. "Finish your cake."

Harry dutifully took another bite, thinking as he chewed. "He said that they were harmless, that sometimes it meant that a young dragel's physical body couldn't handle the magical power." He polished off the last of the cake and frowned, mentally reviewing everything that had happened that day at the Clinic. There was so much to keep track of, it made his head spin.

"Would you like to us to see if we can visit someone from the house of Evanson?" Theo asked, at last. He couldn't recall there being an actual Evanson family present in Nevarah, but then again, he'd never actively searched for one. Ilsa only toured the upper tier of the elven social class and the high ranks of the Gheyos, she wouldn't have branched out into the dragel high nobles, unless absolutely necessary.

Harry brightened almost at once. "Would you?"

Theo found himself smiling back as he read the relief and joy in those glimmering emerald eyes. "Anything for you, my treasure." He said, leaning forward for a kiss. Harry tasted like the strawberries and cream he was feasting on, with a hint of lemony zest from the previous sugared treat.

Charlie took Harry's plate from his slack hands and after a moment, slid off the bed and reached over to pick up Harry so Theo could pull the covers back. It took a few minutes of maneuvering, but soon they were cuddled together beneath the fluffy duvet, Harry sandwiched between them, a quiet, happy purr emanating from his chest.

"I will look into the Evansons' when I am searching for the Kadels," Theo said, lacing his fingers through Harry's right hand. "Also, be prepared for tomorrow. It's sure to be just as long, exhausting and interesting as today." There was a wry note in his voice.

Harry found himself able to smile at that, even as he felt his body slowly giving into the weariness of the day.

"The Kadels?" Charlie questioned.

"A family that is very involved in prophecies and such," Theo explained. He yawned. "Perhaps they'll be able to tell us something about Harry's." Of all the things he'd heard from Harry so far, the one that did bother him on more than one level, was the mention of a prophecy. Granted, Theo wasn't exactly the sort of person to believe in prophecies, but he was wise enough to know that such things ought to be taken into consideration, whether he personally believed it or not.
"Good idea," Charlie approved. "Any information we have to work with is an advantage for our side." He breathed in Harry's sweet scent as he nuzzled along Harry's shoulder. He relaxed when he felt Harry's smaller fingers twining around his own calloused ones.

"Sleep." Theo said. "I'm tired and I can feel how tired you two are. We can talk more in the morning."

With a hum of agreement, Harry slipped into a peaceful sleep—the first peaceful night in a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you all for the amazing response to the last chapter! I am so glad you enjoyed reading about the mysterious missing mentor and all the drama that came with it. XD Y'all have brissygirl to thank for the lack of a "cliffhanger" on the end of this chapter. XD I figured our boys had enough excitement for the day and so I sent them back home. There's going to be some POV shifts, so we can find out what's been going on with the hunt for Maury, the Torvaks, and perhaps a glimpse at the WW too. Thanks for reading and Happy Easter, to those of you who celebrate it. ~Scion

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STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry at the guest beachhouse)
Charlie-(with Theo, Harry)
Harry-(with Theo, Charlie)

Deveraine Circle members-(Bahn, Delani, Ilsa and Greta reporting to their own home to meet with the rest of their Bonded.)
NEVARAH – FRIDAY AFTERNOON – RASPEN’S PRIVATE STUDY

"Regulus, darling, whatever are you doing?" Jun looked up from her spot on the settee beside the fire in Prince Raspen's study. She was currently reading one of the many reports from the large pile on the floor, catching up to the latest news since her absence from Nevarah. Halfway through her relaxed perusals, Regulus had joined George near the virtual map of Nevarah and they explored it together as neither of them had ever set foot in Nevarah before.

After well over an hour, however, both of them grew restless and eventually, Regulus began to pace, while George amused himself with pieces of balled up parchment. He attempted to flick them at the agitated Regulus, who irritably swatted them away with unerring precision as the magic in the room stirred up to worrisome proportions.

"Are you finished yet?" Regulus asked, tersely. He didn't like the room and he especially didn't like the fact that he couldn't see outside. Of course, he'd lived with Jun for years, since they'd bonded, but there was a difference between being safely sequestered below ground, trusting her instinct and expertise, than locked into a study in a building, on a realm that he'd never visited before.

"No," Jun said. Her green eyes flickered up from the report in her hands and she eyed him contemplatively. It had been years—she wasn't sure how much, exactly, because time was a tricky thing to play with—but she needed to be completely up to date with what was happening socially and politically since her absence. The Evansons were a strong family clan within Nevarah and her absence would have been obvious to those who knew to keep an eye out for her. "Why?"
"I don't like it here." He half-growled. "Can't see outside. Room is too small. Can't scent anything and it—it makes me *itchy*.

"Oh?" Jun sat up, at that. It didn't bother her in the least, because she was used to it for necessities sake and she did trust the earth Royals, even if she couldn't be entirely sure about the others. Blind loyalty had never been a strongpoint, but she'd had to learn to accept it. Her empathy was enough for her to know if something would turn out to be terribly wrong and so far, as far as she could tell anyway, they were all fine. "And how about you, George?"

"I'd like to be out of here too." He rubbed the back of his neck. Regulus' magic was making him antsy as well and he didn't like that they were currently locked into the Prince's study, because no one was supposed to know that Jun was back. Locked in the room. He could barely stand thinking about that detail. Jun was one of many high-profile operatives between realms and officially, she wasn't supposed to be back yet.

"Come now, you two. It's not that bad." Jun rose from her seat, setting the report down on the desk. She crossed over to hug Regulus, nuzzling her face into his soft, black feathers and placing a kiss in the hollow of his throat. "Shh. It's alright." She couldn't leave until she'd spoken to Raspen's father. He'd been the one to assign the mission to her after all and even if Raspen was an earth Royal, he was still a prince and therefore, not her King.

"It's not, Jun. I need—we can't stay here."

"We won't stay here." Jun said, calmly. "We will visit my father, as soon as I have official leave to do so." She was looking forward to seeing him, the grizzled old grump. His bark was just as bad as his bite, but he held something of a soft spot for her, because she was the only daughter of his soulbonded Rheyo. She couldn't wait to see him and her Mum. He would doubtless pitch a fit at Regulus, but calm down when he realized that she'd taken an apprentice.

"And when will that be?"

"As soon as I have been released from my duties, we are free to roam." She sighed when he scowled and pulled away. "I cannot waltz about in public without there being some sort of announcement and if I show up on my family's doorstep right now, they'll eat both of you alive."

Regulus' scowl deepened even more. "What about your Circle?"

Jun hesitated. She was starting to feel the faintest threads of unease in reference to them and it was bothering her. She couldn't tell what it was that was wrong, but there was something lurking beneath the surface and she didn't like it. "They will keep us until the announcement, at least." She said, at last. Because they would, whether she asked them to or not and they would include Regulus and George. She didn't speak of them out of habit—it was never good for an operative to be speaking of the life and loved ones that were not a part of her work—especially when she was in the field, alone.

"You never talk about them," he said, quietly. "You never even mention them in passing, except for the few times you were either far too drunk to be healthy or explaining something to George. I don't even know what I'll be stepping into, just following you around and—"

"You're mine." Jun said, simply. "That's enough. They will not turn out you, if that is what worries you."

"Worries me? I'm more worried about you. How do you think they'll react to—"
"It's fine, Regulus." She said, sharply. He flinched back from her and she shuddered at the emotion that rippled through her. An expression of genuine remorse painted itself across her face. "Sorry. I'm sorry, Reg—I just—talking about it would have made it worse. So much worse and it's not part of my cover either, so it only would have confused things."

"Don't share now, on my account." Regulus sniped. "If we'll only meet them in a few hours, it doesn't make sense for you to worry your head about it now."

Jun pinched the bridge of her nose. "Do not start with me." She said, warningly. "I know your rank was a Pareya and I know that you've kept those tendencies. Listen to your instincts, however muddled they are and tell me that you disagree with my handling of this."

A pained grimace overtook Regulus’ expressive face and he sat down with a huff. He couldn't answer to that, because they were effectively bonded the moment that Jun had decided to save him. He knew it was because of his presence that she had been able to stay away from her Circle for such an extended period of time.

"I thought so." Jun said. "But if you'd really like to, I suppose I can speed things up." Regulus didn't answer, but George was now watching them with worried eyes. They rarely ever bumped heads over anything, so this was something for him to take note of. "George?" She moved over to where he sat cross-legged on the floor, his little mountain of parchment balls lined up in front of him. "Do you have anything to add?"

"Oretta." He said, simply. He shook his head. He wanted out of the room too, but he could feel Jun's distress through their shared mentor-student bond and she was clearly worried about something. He did not want to add to that.

Jun sighed. "You are trouble. The both of you." She reached down and patted George lightly on the head, her fingers skimming over his fiery red hair. "Figure out between the two of you, what to use as an anchor for a private portal, I'll meet you when I'm through. We'll likely have to leave in a hurry. I will see if I can speak with Raspen—or his father, hopefully, as that would produce better results. I sincerely hope whatever I interrupt them from is worth it, because if I land myself with a Royal reprimand within mere hours of setting foot on home soil, I will personally see to it that you—"

"Thank you." Regulus said, relieved. "Go. Just go. We'll—it'll. Go."

She perked a brow at him and sighed. "Very well. When I call—both of you answer. Not a moment's delay, understood?" Both of her men murmured in agreement. With a fond shake of her head, Jun pierced one finger with the tip of a fang and sketched a few runes on her chest. They flared up, burning a soft green, before they faded into her pale skin. "I'll be back within a minute."

George watched her vanish in a flare of green flame, before his brows furrowed together. "Reg?"

"Hmm?"

"How exactly are we supposed to leave here?"

The Torvak-hybrid lit up with an expression of unbridled glee as his lips twisted into a smirk. "That, Georgie—is the fun part."

Jun's portal spat them out on the front of a spacious green lawn leading up to a house that seemed built into the massive brown cliff ahead. It seemed like more of a cliff than a house and a vivid
green lawn sported vibrant rows of colorful flowers and wooden lawn furniture. The trio landed just within the wards and on the right side of the armed, white fence that crackled ominously as the odd trio picked themselves up and dusted off their clothes. Jun cast a cleansing spell over herself, almost at once and then did the same for the rest of them.

"Jun?" Regulus twisted his neck to the side. He'd felt the magical protections forcefully wash over them and he'd also seen the stricken look on her face when she'd called them into her portal. There hadn't even been time to brace himself before she'd flung her magic out over them and then things had been moving, shifting and twisting around them. "What happened?"

She helped George up from the ground, liberally dusting him off as well. George endured the fussing for all of fifteen seconds, before he squirmed away to set himself to rights. He sniffed the air a few times, before he shook his head. There was the faintest touch of a scent that was almost familiar, but he couldn't place it. The thought flickered away from him as the cleansing spell completed itself and the mystery scent vanished.

"What do you mean?" There was an absent note to her voice, her green eyes reflecting her mental state—she was not quite all there as yet.

"You arrived looking as if you'd seen a ghost. What happened?" Regulus tried again, a bit gentler. Jun's frown deepened. "I-I can't say." She said, at last. She cocked her head to the side. "I really can't, because I don't know. I do know what it was, but it shouldn't—it couldn't be possible. The timeline would be all wrong." She sighed. "It is pointless to worry about that though. Perhaps it is just a new one, after all."

"A new what?"

"An Empath. A very young one. I only went close enough to speak to Raspen—mentally, because he was in the middle of a dinner party somewhere—and I didn't want to interrupt, but on my way back to his study, I felt a pull and then I heard a call and it was—I couldn't ignore it." A hand went to her mouth, her other arm wrapping around her waist for comfort.

"Jun?" Regulus moved closer, worried. George immediately did the same, worry showing in his soft brown eyes. "How young are we talking about-?"

"Young enough, probably younger than he looked." She squeezed her eyes shut, sifting through the emotions again. "It was almost like there was something familiar in his magic, though I can't think why. It shouldn't be possible." She shook her head. "He was very young probably just within his inheritance—like our George here." She smiled at George. "But he was, well, crying, for lack of a better word. He was one giant ball of pain and hurt and loneliness." She took a shuddering breath. "It's healing, slowly, I could tell that much, but—it was so raw." A hand went to her mouth, a soundless scream welling up inside of her. She'd been shielding, yes, but there was a code among empaths, ancient and scarcely known as it was, they were never to leave each other in such intense, overwhelming pain. She had no more been able to resist him than he would have been able to resist her.

Regulus half-pulled her into a hug, rubbing his hands briskly up and down her arms. "It's alright," he crooned. "It's alright." He mouthed over her head for George to cast a personal fire spell to see if he could warm her up. The redhead nodded at once, quickly focusing on his hands to call and cast the magic.

"No. No, I don't think it was." Jun sighed as a new warmth washed over her. "His eyes—they were so, grateful. It was as if he'd never seen one of his own kind before, as if he'd thought he was all
alone.” She leaned forward and buried her face in Regulus' feathered neck. After a moment, George joined the group hug, a tad awkwardly, but readily. Jun smiled. She allowed the group hug for a good moment, before she jerked away from them and muttered something that had dirt flying into the air as a hole dug itself just a few feet away.

"Jun?"

"A moment, please."

Reggie quickly backed away, pulling George with him. They watched as the hole finished digging itself and Jun immediately hopped into the muddy space, crouching down to the bottom, hugging her arms to herself.

"Don't stand overhead, darling." There was a hint of sarcasm in her voice. "Unless you really don't like being alive. Use your wings and watch George. Count to one hundred."

"A hundred?" George echoed. "What will you—ack!" He was caught in a headlock and pulled away from the gaping hole. He found himself nestled in Regulus' arms, surrounded and protected on all sides by his thick, soft, black feathers. He didn't feel anything at first, and then the powerful wave of empathic energy that made his teeth chatter as it flared out in a wide radius from Jun's new hiding place. He couldn't hold back the whimper that left his lips.

Regulus made a soft trilling sound overhead, vaguely soothing in his own way, but the wings tightened obligingly as the rush of magic slowly ebbed away. He began to count from one to a hundred, whispering the words to give George an audible reference. It was a few minutes before Jun called to them. Slowly, black wings parted and George blinked at the sudden shift in darkness to light, as he took in Jun's muddy figure as she directed the dirt back into the hole, smoothing it over as if nothing had happened.

"What exactly was that?" He demanded.

Jun gave him a tired chuckle. "That was me sticking my nose perhaps where it didn't belong," she said, cryptically.

"Which is?" George pressed. "You've never done that before."

"Not that you've seen, have I?" Jun mused. "It's actually quite common, considering that if I were not Nameless, my element should have been Earth. What I just did is known as an earth grounding. As you know, I was born into an earth elemental family and my mother was the only unusual dragel there, she was a fire element. The result was my Namelessness, however, when my empathy needs an outlet, the best option is to ground myself, depending on the intensity of the emotion, I can use a magically strengthened object made for that specific purpose, I can seek the assistance of my Bonded or I can push the feeling into the earth."

George brightened, mentally connecting the dots with her words. "What happens to it then? It stays there?"

"The earth makes use of it." Jun said, simply. "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." She recited, dusting her hands or rather, trying to. She grimaced at the dirt. A muttered spell had her spotless and wrinkle-free a moment later, as she gathered her hair up into a high ponytail, so it would be out of the way. Gathering her empathy threads together, she pulled them close. "Don't worry, I only do that as a very last resort and there's very few things that would set me off like that." She offered a smile that was as reassuring as she could manage. "Reggie couldn't handle it and neither would you. It wouldn't be fair and I—I didn't want to carry that home with
me." She frowned. "Come along, we'd best be hurrying."

"Should we be prepared for anything?" George asked, curiously.

They now made their way to the house atop the hill and the walk seemed much longer than it should have been. Jun rolled her eyes, a touch of exasperation showing on her face as she tucked a stray curl of red behind one ear. "Exactly what kind of preparation were you thinking of?" She countered.

"Duck and cover?" Regulus suggested.

"Be quiet, you." Jun scolded. "No. There isn't. You simply stay behind me and well out of reach of my wings." She shook her head. "Honestly—what did you teach him in the few minutes I was out of his sight?"

"It's an honest question," Regulus quipped. "And as I said earlier, you haven't exactly been forthcoming about—"

"You'll see what I mean," Jun said, irritated. "Now leave it be."

George exchanged a glance with Regulus, a hint of puzzlement in his face. He'd never seen or known her to be this short and snippy before. He wondered if perhaps she hadn't grounded everything in her little hole. "Reg…?"

"Shared bonds." Regulus explained. "She's an empath, remember? The closer she is to her Circle, the more emotions I'd wager she's sifting through. She probably had to put up blocks to deal with them, but because of the distance, she took them down." He nodded towards Jun's occasional flinch. "I would say that they're not very happy with her, but that they also can't believe that she's here either. They're restless, you can feel that in the magic, if you're looking for it."

"Won't there be problems?" George asked. "I mean, with everything I've learned so far, just turning up like this, won't it cause trouble?"

"There is never a shortage of trouble where my Circle is concerned," Jun said, dryly. "I think we're magnets for it, specifically my submissive."

"Who you never name?" Regulus hinted. He'd heard bits and pieces about her Bonded through the years, but it was always as if she was careful to never give too much away. At one point, he'd wondered if she truly had a full, Bonded Circle, and then of course, he'd remember the proof, an elegant line of claim marks that stretched across the top of her shoulders, from her left to her right, stopping just above each bicep. It was proof of slightly larger than average Circle. George was right in his questioning. He wondered how they would react after all of this time, turning up with him, a half-Torvak hybrid of sorts and a fire apprentice.

"Name?" George looked from one to the other. "You have a Submissive?" He seemed a bit surprised, even though he hadn't seen proof of it, that particular detail hadn't seemed very real until this moment.

Jun rolled her eyes again. "Of course I have a Submissive." She huffed at George. "If I didn't, how else could I possibly be—stop smirking, Regulus. Briar. His name is Briar. Are you happy now?"

"Juniper and Briar?" Regulus repeated, incredulously. "Was something in season when you were all named-?"

"I like my name!" Jun protested. "Don't be rude." But a fierce blush was now beginning to paint
itself across her creamy features. "Flower names are very—distinguished." She refused to look him in the eye.

"Indeed. Very, very distinguished, I'm sure." The Torvak-hybrid smirked. He wasn't about to let this thread of conversation die. "I'm being quite nice, Jun, dearest and I'm starting to wonder what other names you have, seeing as we have a Juniper and a Briar, the rest of them must be quite—interesting. Is there a Rose? A Peony? Tigerlily, perhaps?" *

Jun moaned. "Shut up!"

George sniggered. "You picked him for his name or for his-"

"Quiet, the both of you!" Jun snapped, but her lips were twitching into something of a smile even as she scolded. They were nearly up to the house by then and she held up a hand to halt them several feet from the colored stone walkway leading up to the ornate front door. "Wait here—and don't interfere." She frowned. "In fact, try and stay out of the way if things are a bit—I don't know—rough?" what does the front of the house look like?

"Rough?" Regulus' eyebrows danced up. "When you say rough, exactly what are you-"

"I mean that you are not to step in for any reason at all, Reggie. I mean it, don't make me make you swear it. George, darling, keep back and well away from all wings and claws. Do not use your fire as we know how destructive it can be, you may use shield spells or anything that may be useful—if you are accidentally noticed and dragged into anything." She ran a hand through her hair. "There will be yelling, shouting, plenty of spells flying about and I'm sure a fair amount of hissing, growling and spitting." Her lips quirked. "You've been warned."

The front door was opened by a very tall, thin-faced woman with deep, forest green hair and very long, pointed ears. For a long moment, she simply stared down at Jun, then over at Regulus and George and back to Jun. Her mouth opened and closed, before she ducked her head to step out onto the front landing and pulled the door firmly shut behind her. "I don't know what kind of-"

"Your name is Ivyana, you prefer Ivy, we met at the second tier during the Hunt with the Cherry Blossom viewing under the reign of Queen Eldana. You are allergic to strawberries, you have a tattoo on the left in-step of your right foot and your knowledge of grey magic is extensive in both legal and other means. I once told you that if giving my right hand was the price for your eternal loyalty and love, I would pay it in a heartbeat, because you are a rare thing to be treasured for your entire life."

The woman quivered for a moment, her head tipping forward, curtains of deep green hair spilling over her thin, bony shoulders, before miserable brown eyes filled with tears. "Juniper." She said, softly, bending down for the hug that came at once. "Oh Jun. Alpha. My Alpha." A choked sob left her. "Why did you leave us for so long?"

"Shhh." Jun wrapped her arms around her, as best as she could and hugged tight. "Ivy. My precious Ivy." She crooned. "I missed you, dearheart. I'm so sorry it took me so long to return. I would have come sooner if I could. I never thought it would be longer than a year, tops, but I'm here now. Hush. It's alright."

Warm tears continued to spill over for several minutes and it took a great deal of coaxing, hugging and the occasional kiss before Jun could extract herself from Ivy's arms, keeping physical contact with her Pareya, as she eased her down to sit on the front stoop. Ivy was obviously an Earth Fae, her trademark hair and eyes, reminiscent of Kyle Kalzik. Her hands fluttered, awkwardly,
worriedly, as if they couldn't stop touching her Alpha. "Everyone will be mad." She said, at last. She gave the appearance of a gentle giant, a fae that was a bit too tall and not quite sure what to do with her height.

"I'm expecting it," Jun said, ruefully. "Though in truth, I honestly did not think I would be gone that long. This long." She amended. "Has everything been alright?"

"Years, Jun." Ivy said, solemnly. "How can you possibly think this was alright?"

"I sent letters, every week." Jun said, quietly. "No one ever answered, I assumed that-" she winced. That was the wrong word to use, particularly for this Bonded. "I mean-"

"Assumption is a poor substitute for suspicion." Ivy said, calmly. "And if you thought there was something wrong, surely you would have looked into the matter within the first year?"

"I did." Jun frowned. "I spoke to Father and he-" she stopped, her hands curling into fists. "Has Father been by?"

"Your father has had nothing to do with us since your absence." Ivy lifted her chin. "You know he never cared much for our-"

Jun made a distressed sound in her throat, conflict showing plainly on her face, before she snatched Ivy into a hug that the Pareya gladly gave into. 'I'm sorry, Ivy. So very sorry. I thought that—I can't believe he—I swear I will—what about Mum?"

Ivy stiffened.

Jun pulled away at once. "Ivy?" She'd reached out with her empathy only to feel all emotions abruptly cut off. It was a trick she had taught all of her Bonded, so they wouldn't overwhelm her with little, everyday things. The fact that Ivy was using it now, only made her stomach begin to twist and churn. She wouldn't like this bit of news.

"You don't know?" A stricken look settled over Ivy's face. "Oh Jun." Her shoulders quivered. "I'm sorry. I am so very sorry."

"Ivy?"

"She passed from us about three years after you left." She wrung her hands together, awkwardly. "Her flame burns eternally in the Hall of Remembrance. I-I'm sorry, Jun. I truly am. We sent word but, you did not come. I wondered if you truly did know."

"N-no. This can't—she was fine! She was strong, healthy—her fire-"

"Her fire burned strong until the very end." Ivy said, steadily. Her eyes shimmered with tears as she struggled to maintain the emotional block that kept her Alpha from being overwhelmed with emotions that were not her own.

The distressed sound faded to a soft, high-pitched whine, before Jun crumpled to her knees, hugging her arms around herself. She drew in great heaving breaths, her grief tearless for the moment. She bit her lip hard enough to truly hurt and focused her best on channeling all of that pain into the cool ground beneath her.

When the initial wave had passed through her, she lifted her head, a great sorrow now present on her countenance. "Did she—suffer?"
"I do not think so. I felt her spirit pass. It was—calm. We were all," Ivy hesitated. "Not quite welcome. Briar went though and Rian." She added, when Jun's anguished eyes met hers. "You can visit the Hall yourself, if you do not believe me." She crouched down to be on Jun's level. "It is the first monument on the left, third path down."

"I could verify it a lot sooner if you would stop blocking me from seeing if—ah! Oh." The second Ivy's emotional barrier dissolved, Jun rocked forward, barely catching herself on her hands, even as Ivy gently pulled her into a hug. "Oh no. no. no. NO!" The words trailed off into an inarticulate howl as Ivy's Pareyic magic flared out in a pretty shimmer of green, a silencing spell layered over a containment spell.

And Jun cried, her hands fisted in Ivy's blouse as Ivy simply tucked her head beneath her chin, long arms wrapping around her. Tears gathered at the corner of Ivy's eyes and a feeling of tremendous sadness exploded out from the pair in a vicious wave of magic that nearly sent Regulus and George to their feet.

It was quite some time before Jun gathered herself together again.

Ivy did not rush her in any way, she simply sat on the front steps, holding Jun until she pulled away, slowly composing herself enough to ask after the rest of their Circle. "W-was she-?"

"It was natural, as far as I could understand. You'll have to ask Rian or Briar. I've never been very good at subtle politics."

Jun gave a slow nod. It would take her a while to process this. She took a deep breath, held it and then blew it out, repeating the exercise several more times, before she could speak again. "How have you all fared since?"

"We made do with what we had." Ivy said wearily. She lifted her chin at Jun's pointed eyebrow. "We have not lost anything in social standing, if that is what you are asking. Save for what was expected during your absence and the mess with the—everyone is alright."

Jun processed that for a moment and then decided to pretend she hadn't caught Ivy's slip. "Thank you."

"How about yourself? I would say you were all alone, but you obviously weren't." Ivy tilted her head to the side, looking over at Regulus and George. "Dare I ask?"

"Dare you?" Jun found a spark of her fire at Ivy's insinuation. "Ivy, really! I wouldn't have—that is Reg, Regulus, actually and your guess is correct, as I saved him from Torvaks by turning him into one, but the redhead is George—my new apprentice of sorts. He was new into his inheritance and needed a mentor. I volunteered. There's strength in his fire, I couldn't ignore that, but he's not my son, if that's what you're thinking."

Ivy smiled thinly. She had felt the bonds shift inside of her hours ago and had prepared herself for a new face, recognizing the feeling even though it had been years in coming. She could also see why Jun was handling her Mum's death a bit easier as well, George was obviously a fire type and just asearth looked after their own, fire did the same. His flame would have provided Jun with the instinctive, elemental balance she drew from her parents. That was good. "I would never presume to-mmph." Brown eyes blinked comically wide as Jun proceeded to kiss her senseless for a very long moment. When they parted, Ivy reached one hand up to touch her lips, her eyes shining again with unshed tears. "Jun…"

"Shush." Jun touched a finger to Ivy's lips. "There is a tremendous amount of things we will have
to work through, but right now, I just want to see all of you and make sure that everyone is alright. Could you do me a favor?"

"Depends."

"Send them out, one by one, so I can handle them. I'll deal with Briar last, if he's home, because I can't sense him right now or Rian."

"...he probably isn't. I think he had things to do today and Rian probably went with him. You know he'll fight you, Jun."

"I'd be worried if he didn't." Jun said, briskly. "Up and off with you. I don't want to be up all night talking when there are more important things to be done." She frowned. "And Ivy?"

"Yes?"

"If there has been anyone—anyone at all, who hasn't been perfectly polite to any of you, I want to know about it, understand?" There was a hint of steel in her voice. "I may have been absent for some time, but it has not dulled my senses in the slightest."

"Yes, Alpha."

"Good girl. Now shoo." Jun patted her shoulder, lightly. "The sooner we start, the sooner it's over with, alright?"

Ivy exchanged a nervous look with Regulus, before carefully unfolding her tall frame. She was well-over six feet and it showed as she stood next to Jun. "Jun?"

"What?"

"You should know that Zeph's not here."

Green eyes flickered with a flare of warmth. "He shouldn't be. I sent him to the pits before I left, especially since Briar couldn't so much as blink without finding something new to pick on the poor thing." She shook her head. "His term should've been up within the standard ten years though, unless you sent for him sooner, then the ten would repeat. He likes it in there, so he probably would've stayed." She didn't want to ask how long she'd been gone—not yet.

"W-we didn't." Ivy licked her lips. "Send for him, I mean." She said, referring to their Gheyo Joker. He had been the newest addition to their Circle, happening right before Jun had taken her leave. "It's been a while. We didn't know. We thought-"

A pained sigh left Jun's lips. "You thought that perhaps it was something of a mistake?"

"He didn't bond to Briar." Ivy tried to explain. "Or any of the rest of us, what were we supposed to think? You brought him home two weeks before you left. That was hardly enough time to know someone."

"It's not your fault." Jun soothed. "And he's a Joker, they usually only bond to one and it's either the Ace or the Alpha. Gardenia wasn't there for his testing, so they never marked each other, I suppose." She rubbed her forehead. "This is more of a mess than I was expecting."

"What were you expecting? Everyone to move on as if everything was normal?" Ivy demanded. A flicker of emotion registered in her soft brown eyes. "Really, Juniper."
"No. No, I wasn't. But I thought that someone would have at least made sure you were looked after, even if my Father couldn't be bothered to do it himself." She scowled. "May I see Flora next, if she's there? Orchid or Heather, perhaps?"

"I'll call whoever is closest." Ivy whispered. She fled into the house, leaving a baffled Jun staring after her.

"Jun?" Regulus ventured. "Anything I should know now? He didn't have to be an expert to tell that there was something terribly wrong here. None of the questions or information that Jun was sorting out, made sense to him. Of course, he didn't know any of the names, faces or situations that they'd dealt with, but he'd thought that Jun was a woman of upstanding character. He clung to that now as he watched her tug at her crimson hair.

"Not yet, Reggie—something's wrong." She cast a sad smile at him and then at George. "It might take a bit longer than I was thinking. Do you need anything before then?"

Something was indeed wrong.

They were sharing something of an impromptu lunch in an enclosed rear porch, lit by soft amber lights and charmed against insects and noise, allowing a bit of privacy for their odd reunion of sorts. There were crackers, juice, some vegetable wraps and veggie sticks, along with cubed fruit and meat, enough to satisfy most cravings. Evening had dawned and night was on its way in the remaining hours of fading daylight.

Jun introduced several lovely Fae Pareya next, her Circle seemed to be turning out as a vibrant flower of dragels in their own right. There was Flora with her vibrant pink hair and twin ponytails, Orchid with pink and purple streaked hair and lovely, rainbow-pastel butterfly wings that were always permanently extended, Heather, who turned out to be a pureblooded earth dragel, with eyes a startling shade of yellow-gold, hair the color of her name—a rich, dark purple—and beautiful, coffee-colored skin. They were all strong, beautiful women, who welcomed Jun back in their own way.

The others came out, one by one and slowly, they began to congregate on the front yard in various states of emotional disarray. The Gheyos were upset with her long absence and the Pareya were hiding their true reactions for later. They'd been satisfied enough to hold Jun and be held in turn, before focusing on the finer details of why she'd turned up now.

At one point, Jun felt the bonds flare, proof that another one of her Bonded had returned home. She thought it was her Beta, Florian or Rian, as he preferred, seeing as he had yet to appear, but it worried her that she could not sense Briar. "Rian's home, isn't he?" Jun asked, mentally counting off each of her Bonded in turn. "And—the children?"

"The children are fine." Orchid said, quietly. She was sitting at Jun's feet on the front steps, absently playing with the few stray curls from Jun's fiery hair. "They've all grown. Peony is sweet on a high noble along the Imaldis clan, some young thing that's a few times removed, nothing direct, else I doubt she would've even been allowed to see him." Orchid sighed. "Yarrow prefers Arrow over everything else and refuses to answer if you call him anything else. He's been readying himself to attend the Halls and well, the others are alright. We've sent them to stay with some of Heather's family, who volunteered to take them to play in the upper tiers at the coliseum. I'm afraid none of us quite felt like joining in the festivities. Aspen is happily Bonded, she has a full Circle and took on a fire Beta and a fire Ace. They're expecting the first child in about three months."

"Is she happy?"
"Immensely. Cried buckets when you didn't show up for the official bonding ceremony, but I'm sure if you buy her something bright and shiny, it will ease her temper enough to hear the explanation that you still haven't given us."

Jun winced. "Right. Thank you." They didn't have many children, as Briar wasn't exactly that type, but the few they had were definitely cherished.

"You haven't met Wistar either."

Jun's head snapped around so fast that everyone within range, flinched as the broadcasted shock. "Who?"

"He's eight now. Belongs to Leif and Azalea," Orchid continued, a bit cautiously. "He's a Gheyo child, so-"

"Who does he look like?"

Orchid blinked. "Er," she looked to the rest of her Bonded for help.

"He's adorable." Jasmine, the Gheyo King, wiggled her fingers, conjuring up a hazy, misty image to hover in the palm of her hand. "Has his father's good looks and his mother's terrible temper. He's a quiet boy and he begged to attend the Hunt something awful, but Leif wouldn't have it. Azalea had to take him with her down to the Gheyo section for the training camps, she was worried he'd sneak out."

"He sounds wonderful."

Jasmine snorted. "From your point of view. You haven't met the imp." But there was fondness even as she spoke. "Gardenia's on her way back, by the way."

"-and Briar?" Jun tried. No one was really giving her a straight answer on where her Submissive was and she still felt a bit too raw to demand it of them. As quickly as she'd felt Rian's signature, it had vanished once more. He wasn't blocking her, she could tell that for sure, but he'd 'ported back out almost at once.

"...he hasn't been himself since you left." Heather explained. "When you left, we all saw him wither and die inside. You won't be able to simply walk back in here, Jun. You've survived because you had him." She gave a jerk of her head at Regulus. "Briar only had us and we were a poor substitute when he wanted you. Rian bore the brunt of his temper most of the time, which, these days, isn't much. It's changed them both. It's almost as if they think you're never returning. I know you needed to keep your strands closed for the sake of—everything, but couldn't you have opened them every now and then? Just for him?"

A frown slowly formed on Jun's face, this time her puzzlement was plain for all to see. "I never cut you off." She said, quietly. "The threads were always open, I would have never—I could feel all of you."

Heather's sad smile reflected the look in Jun's eyes. "No letters. No tangible bonds. No anything." She said, quietly.

"...and the girls?" Jun's voice wavered. She almost didn't dare to ask. This answer could break her, if she wasn't careful. "Lily? Lily and Petunia?"
The Fae exchanged glances between them, before Orchid slowly shook her head, speaking for them all. "What girls?"

The hopeless, soft sound that Jun made, had every Pareya flinching and moving toward her in tandem as a hiccupped sob left her lips. Ivy shucked off her shirt halfway there, showing a cropped green camisole and a wealth of claim marks along her arms and one on her midriff as she immediately folded Jun into her arms, tall enough to dwarf her Alpha for the second time that day, this time, offering the physical comfort that could soothe an agitated empath through skin-to-skin contact.

"No. Not them. Not my girls. They were just babes. It wasn't a dream, I swear it was real. They were—I held them. In my hands." She cried. "No…"

"Shh." Orchid tugged her hair free from its confines, the purple strands beginning to curl and blossom into the flowers of her namesake. The sweet floral scent filled the air as she cuddled up to Jun's left side, her wings beginning to beat a soft rhythm, a faint, sparkling sheen wafting through the air, fairy dust taking flight. "It's alright," she murmured. "It's alright."

"No. No it's not."

"Listen to Orchid," Flora hummed, choosing an old tune that they were all familiar with. "It's alright, Jun. You're here with us." She took Jun's hands in hers and gently pressed them to her face, warm tears spilling over the cold fingers as she tried to coax some warmth back into her Alpha. She could feel Jun retreating from them and desperately tried to pull her back. A repressed Empath was a dangerous being and withholding even the slightest feeling after an evening of so much intense emotion, could be devastating. "Don't hide it, Jun. Let it out. It's alright to feel."

Jun hiccupped and shuddered. "My babies," she cried. "My little girls. How could you not—I sent them, I sent them with-" and then she screamed in rage, distraught and disturbed to the very core, thinking of the two precious little girls she'd borne. She couldn't process this. Not yet. Not now. Not here without Briar.

A powerful wave of magic rippled out from her.

Heather had been trading flames with George, who sat a few feet away, working to maintain the little flicker of green fire that she'd thrown at him. He didn't have the natural knack for healing that she did, but he could maintain it if it was given to him. They'd hit it off quite well, considering that they'd only known each other for a few hours. She now unfolded herself from her seat on the floor and moved with the others to sit around Jun, arranging themselves so they were all touching each other as comfortably as they could. It took her a moment before she flipped up the long, flowing fabric of her skirt, exposing pale legs that tangled easily with Jun's own, attempting to ground her in the moment, before her magic stretched further than the outdoor porch.

George shuddered as the magic passed over him and he was filled with a longing so vivid and intense, it made his heart ache. A second pain made itself known, conjuring up images of his family, his siblings, his Mum, his Dad, all of them happy together, an ache that he felt in his very bones, it seemed. He shrank a bit inside, unable to keep the unhappy chir from escaping.

Regulus perched off to the corner, occasionally preening his feathers and watching them all with wary eyes. He'd been welcomed, but the reception was a bit lukewarm. Now, as he listened to Jun, he understood. Her bonded could obviously sense that she was more than simply distressed, this time around. He could scarcely follow all of the news they were sharing, but when he heard George's unhappy chir, he eased himself up to offer some comfort. He could tell that Jun's empathy had been too heavily controlled and repressed for too long. He was feeling waves upon waves of
intense, soul-burning emotion for things he hadn't even thought of in years.

George didn't fight the embrace. He simply sagged into Regulus' strong arms in sheer relief, as the magical current rippling through the room was effectively nullified as Regulus cast a few spells to keep it from overwhelming them. He could tell that the Evansons would handle their own, so he left Jun to them, even as his very soul ached for her.

"Briar?" Rian hurried forward to catch up to his Submissive. "Slow down! What's wrong? You're pale as a-" he feathered a hand over Briar's high forehead. "Do you need to sit down?"

"No. I'm fine." Briar sighed, patiently. "Aiden is simply being his usual impatient self and the others are already there. I need to hurry, because it reflects badly on me when I am not present and the rest of our kind is." He scowled. "And you're not coming with me."

"Briar!"

"No, Rian. You don't like it there anyway and I hate having to put you through that." He sighed. "I'm fine. I will be fine. It should only take a few hours."

"A few hours?"

"It's likely a briefing about the Fabrine attack."

"That breach brought Fabrine with it?"

"Yes, it did. Do try and keep up." Briar frowned. "I can still sense some of the darkness in the air, but it's very faint."

"Lovely. Now I'd really rather you weren't traipsing out to Arythmoor Estate on your own. Things are dangerous enough as it is, what with the tremors and the number of Healers required to handle things-"

Briar chuckled, leaning forward for the embrace that came. "You worry too much, Rian." He said. Soft, doe-eyes blinked innocently up at Rian's disgruntled expression. "You'll turn grey before we even have grandchildren."

"And you don't worry near enough." The Beta grumbled. "Every grey hair I have is solely your fault. I know that Aiden is back and you are required to pay your respects, but you're currently empty-handed and it's been a very long day. I'd rather you simply went home."

"Where you can keep an eye on me?"

"Briar." Rian sighed. "Why are you being difficult?"

"Hover and I'll bite you." Briar said, seriously. "In your sleep—where it'll hurt." He ignored the dark look his Beta sent him and instead, reached out through his bonds to check on his Circle. They'd been very restless for today and the attack had only put them all more on edge. He knew that returning home early for the afternoon was one of the better options available to him, but there were duties that he had sworn to tend to and this was one of them.

As for his Circle, well, they'd ventured out a little bit, but in Jun's absence, no one was particularly inclined to be out and about. She was their fierce flame, their vibrant fire, the spark that made their simple life burn just bright enough. Without her, the Hunts had been rather dreary. So after they'd brought the children out to stretch their legs, he'd sent them back home, because they were safer
there, even as their instincts demanded that they protect him. He was safe enough on his own. The only working compromise he'd made was to allow Rian to accompany him to check on things at the Grand Council. So far, the Royals had gathered and there was sure to be a Midnight Council of sorts, which meant that Aiden was likely scheming as well.

"Rude." Came Rian's predictable reply. He caught Briar in a bear hug, holding him just tight enough so the smaller dragel couldn't wriggle free without resorting to more active physical measures. "You know I don't feel—ugh." He flinched, releasing his hold in time to hold his head. "What is that?"

"What is—ohhh." Briar moaned, both hands went straight to his neck, then one moved to hover his heart, where one particular claim mark resided. He grimaced, another sound of pain escaping his lips. He swore softly before reaching out to grab Rian's arm, attempting to ground himself as a veritable maelstrom of emotions churned through him. He hadn't felt this sort of distress in years. It made his chest ache and his bones burn, his breath coming in short puffs.

Rian shuffled them off of the public walkway and into a more private spot on a side street. They'd been on their way out of the main city, but the crowds didn't seem to pay any attention to them. His eyes narrowed in worry, his grip tightening around Briar's arm, as he forcefully pulled the smaller dragel into his arms, pushing his magic through their bonds with all the love he felt for their Circle. "Easy, Briar." He murmured. "Breathe. That's it, just breathe. It's alright. It's alright." Several short breaths later, Briar's rigid posture eased a mere fraction. "Tell me that isn't what I thought it—"

"It's her." Briar whispered. His free hand curled into a fist and he shuddered.

"Briar, are you sure?"

"Just as sure as I know that it's really you that's here, holding me." Briar stifled a moan.

"Juniper…"

"She actually came back." Briar released his grip on Rian to hide his face. He struggled to sort through the emotions streaming so rapidly through the shared bonds, trying to differentiate between what was his and what was his Alpha's. It wasn't a picnic to have an Empath in a bonded Circle, but it was rarer still to have that Empath be the Circle Alpha. But he'd always known what he would have to deal with when he'd accepted Jun's proposal. Recent hiccups aside, he would always choose her. "She's alive."

"She'd better be." Rian grumbled. "Of course she is. No one's scales turned black, now did they?" He sighed, running a hand through his curly hair. He'd managed to block the whirlwind blast of emotional torment and now, reached out, mentally, to help his Submissive do the same. He'd almost forgotten that little detail of Juniper. Almost. "There hasn't been any kind of official announcement. If she is back, she knows better than to show her face in a public setting before an official announcement. She'd come to us first, which—" he stopped.

Briar whimpered. "Shut it off, Rian. Turn it all off. I can't—she's-"

Rian leaned over, pushing away Briar's hands from his head and face, he placed one palm on each side of his temple and pressed gently. "Shh. Look at me, Briar. It's alright. Look at me—there we go. Now, three, two, one—ah. Better?"

Relief showed plainly on Briar's face and he nodded, reaching up to hold one of Rian's wrists. "Thank you—I just—" he faltered. He knew how to block her, Arielle help him, if there was anyone in their Circle who knew how to block her, it was him, but he'd missed her for so long, hadn't felt
her for so many years, that even sharing her pain had been better than the odd silence.

"I think she's home." Rian said, quietly. "I can feel the others perking up already."

"She went—home?" Briar's voice sounded small and lost. "Why wouldn't she come to me-"

Rian leaned forward to press his lips to Briar's forehead, pushing all the calm he could muster through their Submissive-Beta bond. "I don't know. I really don't know. No one ever knows what she thinks. It's Juniper." He paused, allowing a moment to gather their thoughts together. "Tell you what, why don't we stop by and-"

"No." Briar pulled away, dodging Rian's following hands. "I'm not running home just because she's decided it's a fantastic time to show her face and make a big entrance, just because she can-"

Rian stared at him, incredulously, for a full minute. Then he smacked his forehead and uttered a rather unflattering phrase beneath his breath. "Arielle, please tell me you're not doing what I think you're doing." Rian rolled his eyes skyward. "Please!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Briar said, primly. "I'm fine. I don't need you hovering." He held one hand over his eyes as if shielding them from the light. "I believe I already made that clear. Now, I already do not have the time for this and I can't keep Lord Aiden waiting."

"Tell him you have a family emergency. He'll understand, I should hope."

"He's her hound, pack comes first and I've been absent for some time. He might understand on a rational level, but otherwise—I need to be there." Briar's hand fell from his face, dark brown eyes now showing themselves to be a bright, vivid red. His face had gone paler now and his dark brown hair seemed to darken to a near black. "Besides, it could be a false alarm."

"False alarm?" Rian stared at him, incredulously. Jun didn't have false alarms. If they'd felt her—and they had—then she was most definitely there. As an empath, she couldn't fool those kinds of bonds, not the ones that they shared. "I don't believe this. Fine. Wait here. Stay." He added, warningly. "Let me check. If you've moved before I return, you'll have the rest of this Hunt to regret it."

Briar folded his arms over his chest, bristling at the implied consequence, but not protesting otherwise. He waited while Rian cast a simple portal and vanished for a moment. It was scarcely but a minute before he reappeared, looking exactly as disgruntled as Briar felt. "Well?"

"She's back." Rian said, grimly.

"And?" Briar said, smugly.

"And you're entitled to your own reaction, no matter what it might be."

"What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know. I didn't stay that long and I certainly didn't hear what they were saying, except…" Rian frowned.

"Except?"

"If we didn't hear anything from her, do you suppose the same was true from her?"

"What?" Briar jerked around to stare at him. "That's not—she wouldn't have—Jun's smarter than
"Smart, yes. Focused, very much so. You know she doesn't count time the way the rest of us normal folk do. She's a Rune Mistress, they play with time like it's a toy."

"It's been years, Rian. I don't think that she would have-"

"Exactly. Years. How much do you think she's missed?"

Briar's new paleness went a few shades whiter. He turned on his heel and stalked off. He didn't even flinch when Rian hurried after him, grabbing one arm. But he kept on walking, setting a brisk pace. He would not turn back now. "If you're coming, keep your head down and do not speak." He said, in clipped tones. "I will have Aiden excuse you, but I cannot skip this meeting." He frowned. "The sooner it is over and done with, the sooner I can return home."

TORVAKS - SEPTIMUS WEASLEY RESIDENCE

"Ceddy?" Septimus craned his head around the door, looking adorably frazzled as he sought for his wife in the mess of flour, sugar and spice that made up her kitchen domain. He searched for her usual crop of strawberry blonde hair and spotted her at the far end, up to her elbows in bread dough.

"I'm over here." She called out.

"Do I even want to know?" There was a wry note to his voice as he threaded his way through the young women who were busily working away in the kitchen.

They used house elves, yes, but for some of the traditional dishes, the ones served only once per year, the womenfolk did it all by hand. They were preparing for the annual night-long Vigil, an auspicious time when all Torvaks entered a state of complete meditation to seek out, by a mystical flame, the individuals that were blacklisted and therefore, free to hunt for the coming year.

He had just finished explaining the tradition to his grandchildren and now, he was coming to speak to his wife, who had been handling the preparation of the strange potion for Ronald, or Ron, as the hot-headed redhead preferred. "How is the potion coming along?"

"I have a timer set, it should be done by tomorrow night." Cedrella said, regret clear in her voice. "I cannot finish it before the Vigil begins. He will either have to sit with us, without it or, skip it until next year."

"I would rather neither of you skipped it." Septimus said, worriedly. "He needs the experience and I have always valued your input, you know this."

"Indeed I do." Cedrella paused to kiss his stubbled cheek. "Do shave, darling. You know I prefer it." She smiled at him. "Do not worry, I will place the potion in stasis and at the quarter break, I will complete it and Ron can drink it. If all goes as it should, then he will be able to join us for at least the final six hours."

"You are a marvel," Septimus praised. "Do you need any help? Anything at all?"

"Yes. You out of my kitchen." She teased. "You know men aren't allowed in here, not until it's all in the oven, now get!"
He ducked away from her snapped towel and scurried from the kitchen, a slight smile playing on his face. He checked his watch, taking note of the time. Their final territory conference was due in the hour and it would finish with enough time for a full night’s rest before the Vigil began. He was looking forward to speaking to Lord Heron, who had been leading their patrols for some time and he’d agreed to take a look down at Arthur’s home, the Burrow place or whatever it was called.

Loud voices and angry shouts drew his attention and Septimus rushed from the hallway out into the front room where an injured Lady Amanda was being eased down onto one of the broad settees. He called for order in the room, but then stepped aside as their healers came rushing in and chaos descended once more.

He succeeded in catching ahold of Lord Heron and dragging him off to the side for a private interrogation. "Heron!"

"Lord Weasley!" The young noble stammered. "I er, we're not sure what happened."

"Tell me in as plain and few words as possible." Septimus snapped. "What happened?"

"Well, you know there are time shifts, yes?"

"But of course." Septimus waved a hand. "There have always been time shifts, did you pass through one on your way down?"

"Indeed." Lord Heron rubbed the back of his neck, looking far younger than he actually was. "We landed sometime after Arthur must have left, I cannot say how long, only that there was proof of dragel-kind there."

Septimus bristled. "That wretched witch—she was there?"

Lord Heron hesitated. "Y-es." He said, slowly.

"And? Spit it out, man!"

"She was there with a girl, a redhead, just like her and several other—children."

Septimus blinked. "Other children?" He repeated. "Hers?"

"I don't think so," Lord Heron bit back a yawn from his exhausted body. "They didn't look a thing like her, but-"

"But she's dragel and they always breed in packs, leaving their poor children a muddled mess." Septimus clenched his fists. Dragels were freakish, ill-bred creatures of darkness. If that stupid Molly had dared to cheat on Arthur, he'd gut her himself—if she wasn't already dead. "And?" He prompted.

"Well, we approached with the intent of taking them alive, you know, just in case all wasn't as it seemed, but-"

"But?" Septimus barely resisted the urge to shake the man. It was then that he realized a faint, smoky tinge had filled the air and that Lord Heron, for all of his apparent exhaustion, he was covered in a fine smattering of ashy dust.

"She's a dragel, alright." Lord Heron heaved a breath. "She 'ported out, took them all with her." He shuddered. "Guess what element she is?"
"Red hair?" Septimus snorted. "Fire. Easy."

"Indeed."

"Tell me you at least landed a hit." His eyes sparked, dangerously. "Tell me, Heron!"

The young lord looked away. "She didn't just 'port out, she used some other spell or the place was rigged. We were lucky to survive with our lives." He bristled. "Amanda—she," he choked. "She took the brunt of the fire 'portal. It burned her hair and she was half transformed before-"

"Half-transformed? Whatever for? If there was enough place for a full-grown dragel in there, surely-"

"It's a magical house." Lord Heron sighed. He scrubbed a hand through his hair that was half inky feathers and half hair. "It was spell resistant. Either, she was used to keeping her wings in or indoor wings, at any rate. There wasn't anywhere near enough room for us in there, Amanda—well, she's the smallest of us and I—I sent her in first." He bowed his head.

Septimus pressed his lips together in a grim line, but he did reach out and squeeze Heron's shoulder in a show of support. "Tis not your fault." He said, briskly. "So you would deem her-?"

"Dangerous." Lord Heron said, readily. "Absolutely feral. Engage on sight. Beware of her flames and attack only if there is more than one." He grimaced at the soot on his hand. "I can't speak for the children, but they didn't seem afraid of her, so I'm assuming that they weren't kidnapped and either belong to her or they have some dragel in them, no other creature would trust a dragel."

"Thank you for the report." Septimus gave his sooty shoulder another squeeze. "Why don't you call it a night? Sleep through the meeting and I'll have someone bring you current before the Vigil."

Lord Heron gave a wan smile. "I just might." He looked back over his shoulder to where the healers were patching up Lady Amanda. "We left a few triggers in place. If anyone returns to that place, dragel or otherwise, we'll know and if it's her," his eyes gleamed. "I'll be first in the queue to pay her a visit."

The Vigil began with strict solemnity.

Every high-ranking Torvak was present, a Lord and Lady from each house, even though their numbers had been greatly diminished with time. There were fewer Torvak children these days and they were all quite precious.

Seated together in the privacy of the upper attic room of Septimus' home, they sat in silent meditation, hands clasped, magic shared and their magical artefact, the Frozen Flame, a symbol of their icy powers and the strength of their resolve. It flared and hummed from where it rested in the center of their circle.

A clock chimed, sounding out the time from somewhere beneath them. They shifted and murmured as one, before Cedrella led the next meditative chant. It was a group trance of sorts, showing where their might was needed the most and helping them to prevent what disasters they could, before nature tried to tear her creations apart.

Time passed with excruciating slowness.

At one point, Cedrella stirred, seconds before the third chime sounded. Their meditative circle broke ranks, everyone beginning to shift and rise, rubbing aching muscles and throbbing limbs as
they roused themselves for a short break. Septimus smiled as he watched Cedrella hurry away to complete the potion that would bring Ron into their ranks at last.

He checked the others as they talked amongst themselves, already discussing the visions they'd seen. This time, it seemed as if they were destined to fight legions of the undead for the coming year. Sure, there were a few rogue were-creatures in there, the occasional dark fae that had dabbled in things a bit too dark, a dark Veela or two—by order their own council—and then, of course, the made vampires. While the Vampires tended to police themselves, Septimus knew that they would not interfere, because it saved them from staining their immortal fingers.

Made vampires—unless sanctioned by their own kind, could turn into ugly, feral beasts, hell-bent on causing destruction wherever they went. He'd seen a few plots in his mind, courtesy of the Frozen Flame, and knew that it would indeed be a busy year, all other things aside. He hated fighting vampires, the blasted leeches were crafty little buggers that always tried to fight back.

A scream filled the air and Septimus lurched to his feet, hurrying for the stairs. He heard the others rallying behind him as he took the steps three at a time, bounding around the hallway corner to see Cedrella braced against the wall, staring in horror at the room where she'd been brewing for the past few days.

At first, he didn't see anything and then russet feathers emerged from the brewing room, about head-height, with a single, deformed claw, gripping the door jamb, before the feathered head turned and Septimus saw golden eyes. They blinked and squinted at him, the pupils narrowing, before human legs stepped through the doorway.

"G-grandma?" Ron's voice was raw and hoarse. "Grandpa? Dad?" He stepped fully out of the room, head swiveling in the direction of their collective gasp. He shied away from the sound, his normal, left hand, hanging limply at his side.

"Ronald?" Septimus was the first one to speak. He couldn't believe what was before him, except that he could see the proof, plain as day. "What did you do?"

"He drank the potion." Cedrella picked herself up off the floor, brushing off her blouse. "I startled him and he didn't finish it all." She bit her lip. "He drank it too early. It had to sit before I added the final ingredient."

"Foolish, foolish boy!" Septimus growled. "Felix, find Arthur, hurry!"

Felix bobbed his head and blurred away. Bilius stood grimly beside his father, confusion evident in his eyes. "What will you do?"

"Grandma?" Ron's voice wavered. "Anyone?"

"He can't hear." Cedrella said, abruptly. "Ronald? Ron?" She stepped forward, reaching for him.

Septimus lurched forward, pulling her back. "Don't approach it." He snapped. "You don't know that-"

"It was only a botched potion." Cedrella shrank away from him. "He couldn't—hurt us. He's not himself." But there was uncertainty in her voice as she watched the Ron-hybrid, stumble to the wall of the hallway.

From gangly, awkward teenage limbs, a freckled face, messy red hair and soft brown eyes, Ron had morphed into a half-creature that was strangely terrifying. His brown eyes were now a dull, golden color, his red hair now a mass of fluffed, russet-hued feathers and his nose significantly
more pointed, lips thinner and mouth wider, pointed teeth showing when he tried to speak. The most obvious change, beyond the feathered hair and changed eyes, was his right hand—his wand hand—that no longer sported human fingers, but was now a four-taloned claw.

Bloody footprints marked the wooden floor, proof that the beaker holding the potion had smashed, for Ron's feet remained in their human shape, but a few angry gashes were quite visible to the naked eye. He tried to speak again, but his throat worked and a rough croak emerged instead.

"Uncle Bilius?" Percy's haughty voice cut through the murmurs as he approached from the rear of the group. He'd been dodging a mildly enraged Fred for most of the day, due to an untimely comment about the absence of George. Bill and Fleur were off—as usual—and so that had left Percy to his own devices, until he'd seen Felix streaking through the halls, calling for his father. "Dad went with—Ron?" He said, incredulously.

Septimus sighed. He reached out and clamped a hand down on Percy's shoulder. "Don't approach him." He said, wearily. "Not until we know for sure that he's harmless. Bilius—wards. The rest of you calm down and back up. We'll take a vote on finishing the Vigil and-"

"Don't be a fool, Septimus." Primus spoke. "He's your grandson or at least he was. Deal with your family. We saw enough in the trance, I don't think we'll miss anything by skipping the final section."

A slight ripple of agreement came from the uneasy crowd. Cedrella shrugged, neutrally. She didn't want to think how much of their agreement was based on logic and how much was based on fear of the unknown. Placing themselves in a trance that was deep enough to commune with the Frozen Flame made them temporarily vulnerable—she didn't blame them for wanting to skip the final quarter, if it meant there was even the slightest possibility that Ron was not quite, all Ron.

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**LUNA LOVEGOOD**

"You know, I'm not following you because I've been ordered to," Rolf said, calmly. He braced himself for a moment, then leapt up, grabbing one handful of craggy rock and finding a foothold, as he propelled himself forward. He was used to climbing and running, quickly and easily, regardless of terrain. His grandfather, Newt Scamander, had taught him well, on how to survive in any climate, while cataloguing and investigating claims of new creatures and such. It was how he'd stumbled into Luna in the first place.

"Really?"

"I do actually enjoy your company, rare as it is."

"I'm not rare, Rolf." Luna said, matter-of-factly. "I'm quite ordinary."

She didn't see the soft smile that graced his face or the way he easily climbed past her, scaling the cliff with grace and scrambling to the top before she did. He didn't think of her as ordinary at all. He immediately anchored a rope and threw it down to her, bracing himself to help it and her along. It was a matter of minutes before they both lay atop the rock, attempting to catch their breath.

"I know you're now following orders," Luna said, after a long moment. "But it doesn't hurt that the orders are exactly what you would do on your own." She was glad to have him along, for it meant the easing of the weight that often felt like a chokehold of a collar 'round her neck.

Rolf turned sideways to look at her. She was so beautiful in moments like this, so fragile and so
heart-breakingly beautiful, he could draw a week's worth of strength from her smile alone. It was seeing her like this that reminded him that no matter how strong she was, that every hero needed a safe haven. He prayed that he could be hers.

"Perhaps." He said, stretching his hand just far enough to brush her fingers with his own.

She smiled, thinly, turning her face back up to the sky where the sun could kiss her pale skin. She tapped his fingers once, twice with her own and then neatly laced their hands together, squeezing gently. "One more minute, then we must hurry." She'd heard the stirrings of the dark Fae and while Fae in general could be quite genial at times, the dark Fae were something else altogether. She did not want to encounter them, not when it would slow them considerably and she had no patience for the politics that she would have to play as the Fae Queen's favorite.

"Shall I count?"

She squeezed his hand in answer, turning her face to the side so that her ear could press against the jagged rock. She was listening for the sound of approaching feet and the faint tremors of magic that would alert her to unwanted guests. She could not make out anything beyond the faintest rhythm of an animal's gait and that was quickly dismissed. That meant that the Elves were moving early.

The Fae granted them safe passage through their woods, as it provided a rather convenient shortcut and now that there was a peace treaty of sorts signed between them, travel was relatively safe and both sides made an effort to stay out of each other's way. Perhaps they would run into each other. They would not pay too much attention to her and Rolf, if they couldn't tell that they were Fae and that meant that maybe she could gather some news of what else was happening in the realms.

She started faintly, feeling Rolf's tight squeeze to her hand. "One minute already?" She asked, wistfully.

"I'm afraid so." Rolf picked himself up, twisting his head to the side to hear his neck crack as things shifted back into place. He'd learned early on, just how important it was to trust Luna's timing. It was always perfect. "You look exhausted." He said, bluntly. She did look quite tired, but he knew better than to suggest she take a moment's rest.

Luna gave him a look, but accepted his hand in rising from the cold, hard rock. She was tired, she'd been using her gift to See during the night, to know that they were heading in the right direction and because she knew that he would be able to keep watch over both of them, even if she wasn't quite up to full strength. Seeing him in action once, had been more than enough. He was all deadly grace and pure efficiency, a combination she'd never expected to find in her own fae-kind.

"We should set up camp and call it a day," he mused. "You can rest up and we'll start out early in the morning, that should-"

"There's plenty of daylight left." Luna tugged her hand free from his and began to bend and twist herself into a series of fluid stretches that seemed almost like a dance, limbering up her body for the strain she would doubtless put on it before the daylight hours were over. "We need to make as much—oof!" She grunted as she was rather suddenly and unceremoniously swooped up and tossed over Rolf's shoulder. She made a sound of disagreement, but he merely held her a bit more securely, his fairy wings easing out from his overtunic.

"Stay still before I drop you." He warned.

"Rolf!" she tried not to laugh, even as her skinny shoulders twitched with mirth. Rolf could always make her laugh. Always.
He gave her bum a light pat and with a skip and a hop, launched himself into the air, plunging over the side of the cliff they'd just scaled. It provided the kick that he needed to fuel his body with pure adrenaline. It took a moment to attain a suitable height, his body lightening further as his true fae nature came to the front.

His wings beat furiously, the sparkling, glittering appendages seasoning the air around them with a fragrant, light breeze. Any further protest Luna might have had, died away in the wake of that heavenly scent. She gradually relaxed and gave into the sleep that came to claim her. He smiled, easing his hold on her—with the aid of his fairy dust—until he could hold her properly in his arms. Ah. That was better, much better.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Happy Mother's Day to the moms who are reading this. :)  
Whew! Well, that was a lot happening in a short amount of time. This is an interlude chapter to keep the minor characters in movement with the main storyline while Harry is sleeping. (and to tie up some subplots I had in there), LOL. I hope you enjoyed the surprises and twists and getting to see Jun's Circle. The list of names/Bonded for her Circle are included below. To clarify, yes, Jun is Harry's grandmother. Yes. Briar is talking about Aiden, the hellhound who has Hermione.

~SHAMELESS PLUG FOR NEW ONESHOT~ I did a Mother's Day oneshot for TBDH on ff.net. If you're feeling adventurous, check it out for family fluff and pure cuteness. -Scion

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry at the guest beachhouse)

Charlie-(with Theo, Harry)

Harry-(with Theo, Charlie)

Deveraine Circle members-(Home to meet with the rest of their Bonded.)

JUN'S Circle :Jun(alpha), Rian(Beta), Briar(Sub), Ivy(Pareya), Flora(Pareya), Orchid(Pareya), Heather(Pareya), Gardenia(Gheyo ACE), Jasmine(Gheyo King), Leif(Gheyo Queen), Azalea(Gheyo Prince), Zephyranth (Gheyo Joker), Crisanto (Gheyo Princess) Yes, the names are flowers on purpose. No, you don't really need to keep track of all of them, they won't be main characters. Thanks for reading! -Scion
This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

RECAP: Harry and Co have retired for the night, after an eventful dinner party hosted by Lady Baronsworth, by order of Princess Dawne. In the meantime, Jun, Regulus and George return to Nevarah and Jun's Circle. Upon her arrival, Jun learns that several distressing things have happened in her absence, including the loss of two children—Petunia and Lily. Back at the Torvaks' home base with the Weasleys, Ron accidentally drinks his changing potion too early and is transformed into a grotesque hybrid creature. Luna and Rolf are making progress in their mysterious journey across the magical realms and slowly growing closer to each other.

WIZARDING WORLD – MINERVA McGONAGALL

Minerva McGonagall strolled down the darkened corridors of Hogwarts, frowning when she glanced through one of the massive, arched windows set in the sturdy stone wall. Albus had finally gone to speak to that bumbling fool of a Minster after all. She already had a slight feeling how it would end though—and it didn't look good.

Albus had listened to her—she'd made sure of it—and so Hogwarts had been closed from the moment the Grey Magic had come hurtling through their wards. She was thankful that there would be no casualties from it. Her knowledge of Grey Magic was limited, but she remembered the first times it had made an appearance in the wizarding world. It was used as a scare tactic, to isolate certain groups and leech off of their combined magical forces. That was why she'd wanted the children out of Hogwarts right away. Albus could play the General all he wanted, but sometimes he forgot to look after the troops. Minerva's scowl deepened another notch as she glided silently down the hallway.

The children had been sent home as soon as magically possible and those that remained, had been privately portkeyed out by the other teachers, notably, Filius and Pomona, who had willingly taken the Gryffindors and Slytherins along with their own Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Granted, they'd always worked together, house rivalry between them was rather pointless, after all, but she had worried for them just the same.

With Albus out of the way, her role of Deputy Headmistress had switched to Acting Headmistress and for her own peace of mind, she'd stayed behind in Hogwarts to cast and maintain the necessary protections that would keep their school safe. Hogwarts was home for many and of course the rest of the staff would stay as well. She hadn't asked them to, but they had. She'd known they would stay, just as she knew that she wouldn't leave. The Ministry had attempted to send Aurors, only for the Grey magic to become so thick and dense like fog, that they'd all been forced to retreat—just as she had predicted.
Of course, it was right around that time that Dementors were accidentally set loose and Minerva decided that something had to be done. She’d all but forced Albus to stop scheming in his office and go speak to Fudge. The moment he’d passed through the wards and apparated, something tangible in the air changed.

It was a sudden feeling of complete unease, as if Albus had been holding something terrible back and that with his absence, the darkness thought it was just fine to come wandering on over to say hello. She had expected that, after all, Grey magic would not attack someone that was willing to use it. She didn't like what that said about Albus, but resolved to think about it a different time. It was easy enough to cast her special wards that would keep the magic back and if she had to be the one to maintain them, then she would.

She was currently heading for her office to take a look at the student ledger that she maintained throughout the school year. It held the little snippets of information that she gathered on a daily basis that she couldn't always puzzle through. Later in the evenings, she would reread the entries and piece together some of the mysteries that Albus would never remember to tell her. She left a notice—using the house elves, of course—for the other Professors to meet her there, if they should return before the day was over. It would be best to know where everyone was and how they'd fared for the day. Regroup and strategize and all that.

Evening drew near and though she hadn't thought too deeply on it, she wondered how Severus Snape fared. The man had vanished almost at once and he'd taken Terius with him. He was dark, dour and unbearably rude at times, but he'd never said one thing and done another. He was a true Slytherin and a man of his word, however rare it would be. She also knew that he cared for his snakes the same way she tried to care for her lions. For all of their pride and arrogance, the snakes stuck together.

It was listening to some of the Slytherin gossip that she heard a little bit about what had happened with Harry Potter. Especially after it had Severus scowling so ferociously that day when she'd asked him to make sure that Harry went to see Poppy. She’d asked because she was worried about Harry and he didn't seem to be taking her concern seriously. Then again, he'd been very on edge himself the entire week and she hadn't been able to pinpoint why, because with him it could've been anything.

Albus had even made a point of requesting that Harry visit Poppy, but Harry somehow managed to make himself nearly invisible since his return for the school year. It was almost as if he'd had some sort of notice-me-not charm cast over him. She'd tried a few discreet attempts at a 'finite incantam' but it hadn't changed anything at all.

At first, it was a detail that she was grateful for—because Merlin knew that he was ten times the trouble magnet that James had been—and it meant that perhaps the school year could progress a bit more smoothly this time. A true school year, without all of the usual mishaps, meant more knowledge and if Harry was truly to be the key in defeating Voldemort, then he needed to study, learn and grow as quickly as he could.

His escapades had simultaneously worried and amused her, while turning her already grey hair a new shade of silver. When she’d first realized his lack of magic—and it hadn't taken her longer than a day, thank you very much—she hadn't wanted to acknowledge what it meant. Harry Potter without magic? That couldn't possibly be.

But then the weekly faculty meeting confirmed her observations and she realized that except for Severus' class—since Potions didn't necessarily need to use magic in some cases—Harry wasn't using his magic at all. Oh he had his wand out for all the right classes, he went through the
motions and he did try with extra effort, but the results simply weren't there. Except for that moment with a sudden, wild burst of desperate magic in that first class, there'd been nothing else. When she'd mentioned that to Albus and it had brought a most peculiar expression to his face.

Minerva hadn't thought of it until later, when Albus had asked them all to keep an eye on Harry and to take turns encouraging him to visit Poppy for some necessary tests. That was when things had become complicated. In all of the years she'd known Harry, had interacted with Harry, had done the best that she could for him, she'd never realized just how independent he'd become. He held some respect for her, she was sure of that, but simple respect was not enough for him to take her word and visit the hospital wing. He was worse than Sirius Black trying to avoid a mandatory check-up.

Poppy complained of trying to retrieve him herself, only to never actually lay eyes on him apart from the occasional mealtime opportunity when she joined them at the staff table. She'd tried to approach him several times, only to find herself subtly repelled each time. At first, she thought it was a charm, so she made sure to use several finite incantems before approaching him the next time.

The result was the same.

Minerva had borne witness to that. She'd tried herself and had succeeded in approaching and speaking to Harry, but he hadn't taken her suggestion seriously and Poppy remained suitably distressed. Filius had tried next and even Pomona, bless her dear warm heart, but the one Harry Potter in question, for all of his apparent lack of magic, was protected by something far greater and more powerful than either of them could fathom. That was when she had genuinely begun to worry.

The protection did not bother Albus and Minerva wondered if it was because of the strength of his magic, until she realized that even if Albus could approach Harry—just like her—Harry seemed immune to their inquiries into his health, magic and personal life. He simply continued to do what he had to and for once, kept his head down.

It was unnerving and disturbing in the same breath.

Minerva had finally given up after stopping by the DADA classroom with a delivery of requested antidotes for Terius and discovering that he really was teaching them Blood Magic—just as he'd calmly stated in his curriculum proposal. He was a quiet, mysterious fellow, who was strangely tolerated by Severus and had no issues dealing with the formerly troublesome Draco Malfoy, but he was also teaching Harry in a very hands-on manner.

Where the rest of the Hogwarts Professors, herself included, were aware of Harry's lack of magic and what to do about it, neither of them had thought of doing things the way that Terius had done. She'd walked in on a class session where the students were instructed to cast an incantation for familial protection, using some strange sort of diagram. Terius patrolled the desk aisles, correcting wand movements, stopping potential squabbles with a look every bit as meaningful as the 'Snape Stare' and pausing at Harry's desk to watch him complete the movements.

He stopped, watching as Harry went through the motions and then calmly reached over, wrapped his own hand around Harry's and guided the wand in the proper pattern—channeling his own magic through Harry to produce the desired result. Once done, he said something to Harry and waited while Harry wrote it down, before continuing on, picking up his lecture right where he'd left off. He hadn't let Harry's lack of magic faze him in the least and he hadn't been afraid to take such a personal, hands-on approach.
Minerva had been stunned. It had never occurred to her—or the others really—to do something like that. True, sometimes parents taught their younger children how to manage their magic by combining and channeling their own, more mature energy through them, so the child would have a familiar point of reference, but for a teacher to do so with a student? Minerva had been absolutely speechless. That sort of magical sharing was rather personal and to see the ease with which Terius had used it, suggested that he'd done it before and that Harry had no problem with it.

Shaking her head, Minerva brought her thoughts back to her original focus. Hogwarts and the children who had been sent home in secrecy and tears. Some of them had nowhere to really turn to and they would be held in temporary homes until someone from their family could come to pick them up.

Aurora Sinestra had taken charge of that and she'd been quick and efficient. Most parents wanted their children back the moment they'd heard the whispers of Grey magic. Minerva tried not to think about it. She knew what it was—the unsettling, disturbing type of magical energy that bridged the gap between dark magic and black magic and Merlin, there was a difference.

Dark magic was forgivable things, like the use of Blood Magic, perhaps—depending on the reasons for its use and whether it was a natural inclination or some poor bloke trying to conjure something he couldn't control. That was the sort of tricky magic that Terius taught, but he was painstakingly careful to keep his spells and lectures very light-magic oriented. She'd wondered several times, just how light his own magic was.

As for the rest of the magical categories—there was only Black magic. Black magic was very, very bad. Minerva stifled a shudder. Black magic had to do with Necromancy, Death magic and spells of immortality so terrible and horrifying that they'd been stricken from the history of magic by Merlin himself, or so it was said.

Personally, she would have preferred that Merlin wiped it out entirely. It was true that sometimes the light side did use things that could be a bit dark, but they didn't give into them, not the way that a certain Tom Riddle had. The hairs on her arms began to stand on end and Minerva grimaced.

Normally, walking through Hogwarts in the quiet times, be it on patrol or otherwise, had often been soothing and comforting to her. Now, it felt as if a dark oppression lingered in the air, sucking out the very life within the magical walls. Sharp ears picked up on the sound of something approaching—an approach that she could only hear because of her animagus form. A smile started and faded as Minerva recalled her last encounter with the finicky Mrs. Norris.

She did get along quite nicely with her own feline kind, every now and again, but lately, Mrs. Norris had been putting on airs and had chased her up two flights of stairs the last time she'd gone to stretch her legs. Now that she was back in her human form, Minerva wasn't of the inclination to forget that particular experience. She'd nearly fallen between the moving staircase that had proved to be her saving, because Mrs. Norris hadn't dared to take the same jump.

Minerva sighed. Wherever the blasted cat went, Argus Filch was sure to follow. The last thing she wanted was the headache that came with the conversation that was sure to follow if they actually ran into each other. Recently, she'd worried about Argus Filch. There was something off about him, had been for nearly the entire year, but most noticeably since the arrival of the students for the new academic year. He was angrier, more easily rattled and had begun to shout insults of a less pleasant nature at the students who accidentally ran into him—or Merlin forbid—actually pranked him.

She'd had actually rescued two of her own first year lions from his angry shouts, fist-waving threats and an ugly sneer that she'd never seen on his face before. Granted, she didn't understand
why Albus kept the poor Squib on, as it seemed to her that he'd be happier retired somewhere, living on a pension, than having to deal with the children—a feat that did indeed drive her to drink at times.

She heard his mutterings as he rounded the corner, cradling Mrs. Norris in his skinny, bony arms. He went right by her, never even looking up as he passed, grumbling and—wait, trilling? Minerva opened and shut her mouth, wondering at how he hadn't even seen her when she'd been standing right there. She barely managed to hold her tongue when a ruff of black feathers sprouted from his neck as he stomped and limped down to the end of the corridor, in his usual awkward gait.

It couldn't be possible. Filch was a Squib and therefore, unable to cast glamours of such an unusual kind upon his person, so that meant that she had seen him sprout feathers from his neck and wrists. Casting a silent charm on her own feet, Minerva started forward, then stopped. It was probably best to follow him in her feline form, even if she loathed the prospect of another encounter with his pesky familiar at present. She'd just have to remember to transform back, if it came down to that.

Blurring into her speckled tabby form, Minerva loped off down the hall after the caretaker. She followed him down almost to the dungeons where he detoured through a shortcut she hadn't even known existed. He followed it down a completely different section of the castle, into a small, short hallway with three doors.

He entered one and Minerva hurriedly slipped in after him. She found herself standing inside of a brightly lit, neatly ordered and stocked office—with potions ingredients lining the walls. If she had been human, her jaw would have touched the floor, as her shock was far too great for the inquisitive mew that desperately wanted to escape.

It took some effort to keep her silence and she stared, slipping under the large oak desk to hide from his possible sight, while keeping her ears pricked to listen for anything useful. She heard him muttering to himself in what she could now make out as a language that was most definitely not English. He was searching for something along the shelves and seemed to be gathering things to make a potion.

It was that detail that she realized was rather realistic, as a Squib, he didn't have much magic, but he could make a potion—and depending on whether he could impart his magical signature to it or not, the potion might actually be useable and effective. But it was odd, because she'd never known him to take an interest in potions before.

He crouched down on the floor to drag something out from a bottom shelf and here, Minerva poked her whiskered face around the corner to have a better look. She stared as he drew out two tall corked phials of pale blue potion with a very familiar set of handwritten initials on the label. If she had a hairball to choke on, Minerva knew she would have hacked it up right then and there.

**Those are Albus' potions! I've seen them in his office before. He's—what is Argus doing with them? Surely he won't drink them, will he?**

Her confusion was easily answered because he wrestled the cork off and downed the contents in a few, large gulps. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and tossed the emptied phial and cork into an empty box in the corner, marked for washing and reuse. She slunk out from beneath the desk to follow him around and see where he was headed with the second phial.

To her surprise, he went to the desk which, she had now begun to wonder at its great size, but Mrs. Norris was somewhere on top and Minerva couldn't see anything from down on the floor. She could make out the fact that Argus was administering the potion, right about the time when her human mind caught up to her feline musings.
Retreating to the far end of the little storeroom-turned-office, she barely managed to stay out of sight, as she tried to find a nice, vantage point. A quick, carefully timed leap, allowed her to perch on a small, dusty corner table, just out of view. She stared at he poured the potion over Mrs. Norris and muttered a bit more.

A pale blue glow surrounded the figure and the large fluffy cat became a petite woman with fluffy cat ears and long, unruly hair, splayed over bare skin. Red, cat-eyes blinked up at the caretaker, before she began to cough and choke, spitting up a saliva-coated glob of hair. Argus shook his head, limp strands of hair smacking against his face. "Waited a bit too long this time, didn't ya?" He grumbled.

"Get away from me, you filthy beast!" Mrs. Norris clasped one arm over her bared chest, drawing her legs up and out of reach of his hand, edging to the other side of the desk.

A desk, Minerva noted, that looked a bit too much like a rather large table, now that she thought of it. Shock settled over her as she watched the duo interact for a few minutes, until it became quite clear that Mrs. Norris was most definitely human and Argus Filch was a strange, black-feathered bird-creature. He was tending to the many cuts, scrapes and bruises that she'd acquired, smearing on a thick, healing paste often found in the hospital wing, ignoring her obvious protests. "Thankless as always in this form, aren't ya?" Argus muttered.

Minerva could only stare. Albus took the same pale blue potion—she'd seen him drink it several times, but remain the same—and now, the dark, heavy feeling that had been hanging over the entire school, seemed to concentrate itself in the small room. She'd never felt such a strong, pressing magical oppression before—and concentrated exactly in this room. What was Argus? Should she confront him now? Did Albus know?

"As if you're any better!" Mrs. Norris snapped. She turned her head to the side, her nose in the air. "To be paired with someone like you!"

"Now, now, dearie..." Filch gave her a look. "It's a fine time to make claims t'modesty when you've not got a shred t' spare." His waved a hand at her as he covered the healing balm and stashed it back on one of his many shelves. "You only have yourself to blame for this. I told ya stay away from there, but you couldn't keep your nose out of other people's business." His frown grew darker. "Just like you couldn't keep away from that Snape brat! You almost got us kicked out of here. Going after a submissive—a pregnant one at that. Albus could've killed you and where'd that have left ya, eh?"

Mrs. Norris tried to speak, but Filch held up a charmed pendant from one pocket. "I don't want to hear it," he snapped. "They were our only chance to find out where those scaly little demons live and you had to go and ruin it."

"How was I supposed to know that Grey magic would come into play? It's not my fault!" Mrs. Norris whined. "I was only doing what my instincts told me to."

"And they told ya to cause me a lifetime's worth of trouble, didn't they?" Filch grumbled. "Whatever yer excuses are, I don't want t' hear about them. Now Snape's gone and taken his lot with 'im. We're back t' square one. Stay still. You'll be back as you like soon enough."

Mrs. Norris' words turned into yowls and hisses as he circled the desk, trailing the pendant around the edge, muttering the activation charm as he did. She hissed and spat at him, swiping with one hand, as if she couldn't remember how to use her human hand in the absence of her clawed paw.

Filch merely ducked out of range, moving faster than Minerva had ever thought he was capable of.
She stared in horror as Mrs. Norris twisted from humanesque to her natural, feline form. It took a minute and when he was done, Mrs. Norris sat daintily in the center of the desk, her bushy tail curled around her paws. They stared at each other for a long moment, then Filch held out his arms and Mrs. Norris calmly padded over to be carried.

Once settled comfortably for the ride, Filch backtracked to the door, muttering about all the work he had to do to keep an empty school in perfect condition. As he left the room, Mrs. Norris stretched up to tuck her face in the crook of his neck, ruby red eyes looking straight at Minerva's hiding spot.

NEVARAH : ARYTHMOOR ESTATE : PRIVATE COUNCIL ROOM (AIDEN:Hellhound)

"Briar," Thorne stood at the entrance to the private council room within Arythmoor Manor. He looked over his son with a critical eye and then stood back, allowing him to step forward. "You look terrible. Something else happen?" He could see a new shadow on Briar's face, a set to his jaw that hadn't been there before. The stubborn look on his son's face suggested that he would not know what caused it though.

Thorne Macaslan remained as one of the respected members of Lord Aiden's high court, always staying just within the hellhound's favor and as a result, his family shared the benefits of his political dancing. Briar had well and truly earned his place in their ranks, but in the most recent years, he'd been slowly slipping out of public view. He knew it had something to do with the absence of his son's Alpha, the famous Juniper Evanson. She was the favorite daughter of the former Earth Clan Chief, until the Evansons had lost the last election to the Gorgens. Briar and Jun were natural bookends, two fierce individuals who shared their hearts and dreams, while facing in opposite directions.

"It's wonderful to see you again, as well, Father." Briar said, smoothly. He held out a hand to stop Rian from following him. "You know you're not allowed past the door," he said, a faint tic at the side of his head. "Go take a walk around the grounds or something. I'll call you when we're through."

"And how long am I supposed to wander about before-"

"Go, Rian!" Briar turned to glare at him. "Before I lose what little patience is not mine."

"Yours and mine both," Rian muttered. "Don't think I'll put up with your attitude for much longer." He ran a hand through his hair, roughing up the normally sleek locks. "Fine. Call me when you're through." He sauntered off, a faint scowl on his face.

"Still faithful as ever, I see" Thorne observed. He watched the disgruntled Beta slip away and then hid a smile at Briar's equally irritated expression. He had once wondered if they really were suited for each other, but then he'd see them in moments like this and they were absolutely perfect. Something must have set them both on edge, but he dismissed such thoughts almost at once. Their lives were private and he would never think to meddle in them. They were adults, after all.

"As if he would be anything but," Briar huffed. He hadn't meant to snap, but he wasn't looking forward to the meeting any more than he was looking forward to seeing Jun. It seemed like all of his least-favorite scenarios had gathered together for a party without his consent and he couldn't finagle his way out of accepting the invitation.

"True," Thorne said. "Shall we?"
"After you, of course."

"So considerate of your elders," Thorne drawled. "It seems I did teach you something useful, after all."

"That was all mother, it had nothing to do with you." Briar elbowed him as he passed into the room, wishing that he didn't blush quite so easily. He didn't smile, even when his father patted him on the head, a gesture of affection, mixed with amusement.

"Wise woman, your mother," Thorne agreed. He missed her dearly, but he could see glimpses of her in each of their children. He searched the room now, relaxing when his reddening gaze settled on Lord Aiden.

Aiden lounged at the head of the oval conference table, slouched in his chair, his shiny, black-booted feet propped up on the table. The Hellhound was the picture perfect example of supreme irritation. Annoyance was plain from the way his sharpened, dark fingernails drummed against his pale, scarred arm, to the twitch of his shoulders, every time the murmured conversation in the room tipped a few notches too loud.

Thorne moved over to pay his respects, angling for the two empty seats near the head of the table. He would make sure that Briar sat by him this time and didn't slip away into one of the lower ranked seats near the end of the table. "My lord," he greeted. He clicked his heels together, a hand over his chest, offering a deep bow of respect.

Briar mimicked the bow, dropping to one knee when he felt Lord Aiden's penetrating gaze settle over him, silently demanding an explanation for his prolonged absence from their private courts. "My Lord, please excuse my absence in these past meetings."

"Your excuse?"

"Circle matters of a personal nature."

Aiden growled, softly. That was one excuse that would spare any dragel the majority of any impending wrath, granted that they could prove the truth and sincerity of their need to attend to their Circle. His red eyes glittered, but after a moment, he gave a slight jerk of his head to indicate that the matter was more or less suspended for the moment. He preferred to reprimand his subordinates in private, unless the idiot in question made a public bungle of things. He could tear a few strips of the Evanson submissive—later, if he still felt like it.

Thorne bowed again, catching Briar by the arm, they stood as one and took their seats. A few stood in line behind them, waiting to greet Lord Aiden as well. After a moment, everyone shuffled about for their preferred seats and the meeting was called to order with little ceremony.

"I have called this Council to gather tonight, as the Royals convene within their little white-walled rooms to speak about the matter of the Fabrine." Aiden's lip curled as he spoke, his tone betraying his absolute disgust of the dark manifestations that had attacked. "You know what we are required to do by Lady Death, herself. We must fulfill our sworn duty by showing our strength and repaying our obligation to her."

An excited murmur rippled through the gathered ranks, pale red eyes now darkening with battlelust as magic swelled and flowed through the room. They eagerly awaited the command that would free them from the fetters of politeness and bind them to their true, darker nature.

The smirk that curved across Aiden's face was worthy of Death herself. "Tonight," he said,
Rian tried not to grumble as he shoved his hands in his pockets and sauntered down the hall. He hated the Arythmoor mansion, if only on principle and partially because the entire thing was a bloody maze inside. He was good at mental puzzles, when the situation called for it, but it didn't necessarily mean that he liked them. Briar was also wearing on his nerves and if he had to be honest, then he was quite close to making his displeasure known.

Closing his eyes for a moment, he sucked in a deep breath and held it for a count of three, before releasing it. An idea flickered through his head and he quickly inhaled, sorting through the myriad of scents that came rushing to him. The scent of fresh air was present, but very, very faint and sniffing the air a few more times, he began to make his way down the red-carpeted halls.

It did take some time, but Rian eventually found himself outside on the front steps. He chose a nice, smooth stone step and settled down near the black, wrought railing, leaning against it for support. From his new seat, he had a fairly interesting view of the front half of the Arythmoor Estate and all the way up to the murky, dark purple barrier that stretched to the property line. It was meant to discourage intruders and it worked quite well.

After a moment of simply sitting, Rian snuck a look around before he reclined on the cool stone steps, turning his face up to the sky. He was glad that the daylight was fading away. He preferred the darkened shadows of the night and it had been a very long day. He was looking forward to a nice, peaceful night.

The memory of Jun's presence flickered through his mind. He winced. Any hopes he had of a peaceful night were shattered right there and then. From the stubborn gleam he'd seen in Briar's eye to the sheer, raw emotion he'd felt from Jun, they were in for a very explosive night. A smirk stole over his face. Knowing Jun, depending on just how wound up she was, their resolution would be the all kinds of satisfying and not-meant-for-prying eyes type of reconciliation. It stirred up renewed warmth in his belly. Perhaps they'd let him watch.

It was bound to be amusing and all he really needed was something different from the dreary routine they'd settled into these past years. Life with Jun was exciting. Life with Briar was exhausting. Life with both of them—exhilarating. The soft ache in his chest reminded him of how much he'd missed Jun on his own. It was painful to watch Briar retreating into himself without Jun's vibrant personality to encourage and support him. Then again, they'd all faded somewhat in Jun's absence.

Even Orchid's wings had turned into an almost murky grey and that was proof enough of the trouble within their ranks. He'd tried his best and Arielle knew, so had Briar. He hoped that whatever had kept her was worth the price they'd all paid in her absence. He turned his head to the side, feeling the cool stone beneath one ear, using one free hand to rub at the single earring in the other.

The sound of running, wild feet registered a few seconds too late to be useful.

Rian lurched halfway-up to a sitting position when the large front door opened and a bushy-haired young woman clattered down the stairs and tripped over him, taking them both to the hard, concrete below. He winced at the impact when she slipped and fell face-first into his lap, her elbow clipping him in the chin and stomach, her frantic flails accompanied by her panicked "no, no, no!"

"Hey—hey—easy!" Rian grunted softly as her full weight pushed the air from his body and the front door clicked shut. He tried to sit up, but it took a moment to catch his breath. Sensitive ears
picked up a second set of smaller footsteps drawing near and Rian burst into action.

Expert hands immediately wrestled the young woman into a restrained position, one hand over her mouth, as he scooted back to the stairs, pressing himself up against the side where they wouldn't be seen straightaway. "Keep quiet if you don't want to be found," he hissed in one ear. "Technically, I'm not supposed to be outside, so it would help if you could stay quiet for longer than a minute."

She stopped fighting him.

A minute passed with agonizing slowness.

Rian heard the steps stop and he closed his eyes, pulling sharply on the shadows that were available to him. The shadow of the nearby front steps, grew larger and wrapped around them, obligingly shielding them from sight at his request. The door opened and a young head appeared around the corner. The young man looked around, carefully, before ducking back inside. The footsteps continued on and when he couldn't hear them anymore, Rian blew out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

He released his grip on the shadow and the young woman, standing up to set her on the stairs. "I'm terribly sorry about that, miss," he apologized. "Are you alright? What's the matter?" He patted his pockets, before retrieving a crumpled, plaid kerchief. He shook it out, grimacing at the wrinkles, but handed it over, as it was clean and he didn't have any spares.

She was a pretty young witch, with soulful brown eyes and a head of gorgeous, haphazard curls. She was wearing an odd uniform of a buttoned blouse beneath a jumper, and plain grey skirt. There were scrapes on her hands and one smudge on her face. She sat, perfectly postured, her hands loosely clasped in her lap, her head tall. She did not answer him.

Rian sighed, one hand reaching up to tug at his earring again, an obvious tell for when he was trying to think and really didn't want to. "I'm sorry," he repeated, a bit slower this time. "I wasn't expecting to be trampled this afternoon and if I was found, they'd drag me back inside and I can't stand the inside of that house."

"Try being locked up in a room inside of it!" The witch snapped. Her shoulders quivered faintly and she looked up at him, briefly, before looking away again.

"Locked up?" Rian frowned. "Whatever for?" He dropped down to a crouch in front of her, so he could meet her gaze. He reached out, with slow movements, taking one of her hands in his and gently brushing the dirt free from the scraped skin.

"I don't know and I don't care. I just need to get out of here and then I'll—I'll," she stopped. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"You'll-?" Rian prompted.

"I'll be free," she said, hoarsely.

"Sounds—wonderful." Rian wrapped her hand in the kerchief and duplicated another with a twitch of his fingers. His eyes flared red, briefly, as the magic he drew on came from the shadowed side of his Nameless nature. He reached for her other hand and found himself floored when she burst into movement, shoving him away.

"One of—what? Ow," he mumbled half to himself, standing up the second kerchief in hand. "I'm
"Your eyes. They—you just," she backed up a step, her hand gripping the metal railing, her knuckles white.

"My what—oh." Rian blinked. He stared down at the kerchief, then tossed it to the stairs and backed away, his hands held out in front of him. "I'm not a hound, but my mother was a Shadow element," He half-shrugged. "I can't help the eyes, but I am not one of those soul-sucking, pointy-fanged beasts that wallow in the despair of the innocents." He gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I'm just unlucky enough to have a very good reason for being here, even though I'd really rather be home with a very strong cup of tea and that new book by-"

"Prove it."

"Pardon?"

"You're not—a hound, you said?" She swallowed, her grip on the railing easing slightly. "Can you prove it?"

Rian stared at her for a long moment, then he swung his arms up overhead and stretched. "If you like," there was a hint of warning in his voice. "Try not to be alarmed."

To her credit, she didn't flinch when the broad, black wings exploded out from his slender body, stretching up and away, showing off pale grey spines and pretty, glimmering scales. Though his wings were black, they were glittering and beautiful in the fading light of the afternoon. His eyes, a dark-reddish brown, seemed to gleam as he held up hands that had morphed into wicked claws. He held her gaze for a moment, then with a shudder, folded everything back in.

"Y-you're one of them," she breathed. Hermione's expression changed at once to one of uncertainty and well-masked fear, to an expression of relief and hope. "A real one. Oh please, you have to help me. I need to find my friend." She took the steps two at a time and stood in front of him, catching herself a moment before she could reach out. "My name is Hermione Granger," she said, quietly. "I'm trying to find a boy named Harry Potter—I think he's a lot like you."

Hermione Granger, Rian discovered, was a very smart young witch, with a great deal of troubles on her very young shoulders. She was also a Silvertongue. He listened to her tale of how she'd come end up in Nevarah and how she was searching for her friend, a young boy named Harry Potter, who seemed to have fallen in with dragels of his own. She shared everything that she could remember, everything that she knew and then asked if there was any possible way he could help her.

From the despairing look in her soft brown eyes, Rian knew that she expected him to refuse. There was a vaguely stubborn gleam that suggested she wouldn't let him refuse without a significant amount of protest, but the weariness lurking at the edges of her magical aura, suggested that she was working on the last of her frayed nerves.

"I'll ask my submissive," Rian said, at last. "He knows quite a few—"

"Who is he?"

"My sub? Briar? He's a pint-sized firecracker with a temper too big for his—"

The front door banged open and a scowling Briar came stomping down the steps, his fiery eyes aglow. Hermione scrambled to her feet and down the steps, reaching out to stop Rian when he
started forward, only to be gently pushed behind him in a protective gesture.

"Rian?"

"I would say something to the effect of speak of the devil, but that would be pointless," Rian muttered. "It took you long enough, Briar." He gestured impatiently with one hand. "Hurry up, we need to leave the grounds, I can feel the energy rising as if there's going to be a cleansing of sorts and I'd rather not be anywhere near-"

"I have orders," Briar said, bluntly. He made his way delicately down the stairs, a more dignified air stealing over his injured attitude. His red-eyed gaze flickered briefly over Hermione standing just behind Rian and he mentally dismissed her, preparing himself to 'port. He wanted to be home —and away from Juniper—and hacking something to pieces to sate the new surge of bloodlust coursing through his body. He was thankful that Lord Aiden had indeed granted permission for a reaping that night—if he hadn't, Briar would have gone hunting for lost souls anyway, his body craved it far too much. "You're welcome to pop on 'round home and-"

"Briar."

"We're reaping tonight," Briar said, lightly. "So you're right, we'd best not linger."

"R-reaping?" Rian stammered, his already pale face seemed to whiten a few shades more. "Briar, don't tell me that-"

"You don't really think the Royals issued a curfew just because they felt like it, did you?" Briar scoffed. "The Fabrine just so happen to have brought other troublesome friends with them and as a result, his lordship has decided there will be a reaping tonight." His red eyes gleaming with a sudden, unholy flare. "A full reaping."

Rian reached behind him and pulled Hermione a bit closer, keeping up the protective stance. Briar in a temper was not something he wished to inflict on strangers and he knew that Hermione had already survived a rather trying day. "That's lovely, Briar, but a full reaping means-"

"If you think, even for a moment, that I won't be going, I don't have a choice, Rian," Briar said, stiffly. "I've been ordered to do my duty." His smile held a hint more fang than warmth. "Shall we—or do you wish to 'port yourself?"

"I was actually about to ask you to provide sanctuary for this young woman," Rian stepped aside, gesturing to Hermione. "She's had a very trying day and she's not from this realm. I thought we could offer some hospitality."

Briar's red-eyed gaze flickered to Hermione and then to Rian. His eyes narrowed. "No."

Rian blinked. "Pardon?"

"No."

"Briar, she's a human witch."

"The answer is still no. We haven't the time nor the energy for guests and if you haven't quite reconciled the latest information in your head, then allow me to remind you—Juniper is home. If you think that someone such as your new friend would survive the reunion between myself and a certain missing Alpha, then you're sorely mistaken. I doubt the house will be standing when we're through with it."
"You are not leveling the house," Rian said, flatly. "We live there and I'm tired of rebuilding it. You'll resolve your differences outside or so help me, by Arielle's sacred breath, I will settle you both myself."

Briar snorted. "You can try."

"If she can't stay at the house, then she can stay with Wistar at-"

"She cannot."

"Why not?"

"Didn't you say she's a human witch? No human witch is staying with-"

Rian leaned over and helpfully smacked his fuming Submissive over the head. "She'll stay with my niece then," he said, firmly. "And you'll be coming with me while I see her settled." He frowned and turned to Hermione, who'd been watching their interaction with interest. "How are you with children?" He asked.

Hermione gulped. "They're—alright." She said, slowly.

Something must have shown in her face though, because Rian chuckled. "I'm only asking because my niece recently had a set of twins and she has a four-year-old. They are usually quiet children and she likely wouldn't need any help, but if you're not comfortable around magical children, then I'll see if I can ask someone else for-"

"Oh," Hermione said, relieved. "Oh, no, that's quite fine. I don't mind that. It'll be—fine."

"Thank you," Rian smiled. "I know for sure that you can stay with her. Have you 'ported before? Hm, I suppose you would have to arrive here."

"I don't really remember it," Hermione explained. "Is it like apparating?"

"It's—close enough," Rian said. "I'll do it, since it's your first. Briar, stop sulking and come over here. You know you were asking for that," he frowned. A scowling Briar shuffled over to stand closer, his arms crossed over his chest, an invisible energy field seemed to ripple around him—his aura expanding.

Hermione eyed him warily for a moment, then looked at Rian. "You can help me find Harry?" She asked—just to be sure.

"I will do my best," Rian said. "I give you my word on that."

"...thank you."

"Shall we?"

"What do I have to do?"

"Hold my arm, if you would?" Rian held out his arms, his left to her and his right to Briar. A reluctant—still scowling—Briar, took it and Hermione did the same. "This is a bit trickier than you'd expect, so I'll ask you to hold your breath for the first time," he said, seriously. "On count of three—one, two, three—temptrificus-!"

The portal sprang to life and swallowed them whole.
"Olivia?" Rian knocked on the door, waiting.

They were standing in the front yard of a modest estate with a rich garden lining the sprawling white walls and the open courtyard. It was cozy and open, without seeming overwhelming. Two large doors were bolted together and a brass knocker hung in the center. Rian didn't bother to touch it, he simply knocked on the door once more and waited.

A quiet groaning sound signaled the doors opening and soon, a middle-aged woman could be seen. Her greying hair was tied back with a wrinkled headband, she was clad in Healer's garb, a swaddled baby balanced over one shoulder, a burp cloth in hand. Her expression was harried, but it softened almost at once, upon seeing who darkened her doorstep. "Uncle Rian!" she leaned forward, offering a one-armed hug. "You look stressed, hello. Come in—please, do come in."

"You look as stressed as I feel," Rian countered. He hugged her back, careful of the babe and followed her from the outer courtyard into the inner section. "Have you been getting any sleep at all or are those-"

"It's been a long day. You know how it is," Olivia smoothed her sweat-dampened hair back from her high forehead with the back of her free hand. "The others are still out," she said, referring to her bonded. "You'd think the notice of 'emergencies only' would cut down on the number of patients," she sighed.

"It didn't?"

"No, it didn't." Olivia stepped out and looked behind her for the four-year-old that shuffled after her, clutching the hem of her overtunic. She spoke softly to the child in a mishmash of fae-speak and dragel tongue, before the child leaned out from behind see who the strangers were.

"Unca Bri!" the little boy exclaimed, holding up his arms as he ran over to Briar. "Up!"

"We say please," Olivia said, wearily. "It's nice to say please, darling."

"Up, please!" the little boy repeated. Briar obliged, scooping the toddler up into his arms and cuddling him beneath his chin.

"He's been impossible since the others left," Olivia eased herself down to sit on the low wall that circled one of the ornamental garden displays. "The other one is sleeping," she tipped her head at the twin on her shoulder. "Please, come in and sit wherever you like. What can I help you with?"

"The others are out?"

"I'm too tired to heal properly," Olivia said, bluntly. "I'd be more of a hazard than a help, so I'm home, which means yes, everyone else is out." She sighed. "I also had the joy of losing two decent healers and the excellent Gheyo that worked with them, which meant."

"I thought you were short-handed at the Clinic already."

"I am. We are. We were—still are," Olivia stumbled over the words and yawned. "We probably always will be at the rate things are going."

Rian frowned, noting her tiredness and the too-relaxed manner she had at present. While it wasn't unusual for her to invite them into the courtyard—they were family after all—she hadn't taken any notice of Hermione, a stranger. "Have you taken any blood at all?" He asked, sternly. She was a touch too pale for his liking. "Which healers did you lose?"
"The Kalzik one," Olivia wrinkled her nose. "I probably shouldn't have pushed them so hard, but all those people—I hate Hunting season. So many idiots and too little time to cure them of their stupidity."

Rian perked a brow. "You had a Kalzik healer and you lost them?" That was news to him, but then again, there had been rumors that one of the Kalziks had actually deigned to work in the public healer system.

"It's—far more complicated than it sounds," she said, weakly. "I had the mute one—you know the one I'm talking about, don't you? Nearly everyone does. He Soul Casts—that one? And his Medic friend, the Fae. They were invaluable really. We've helped so many since their arrival, but you know how it is when you have one of them around."

"They have their own following," Rian said. "I know. Their mother is very much the same. I'm guessing that it brought far more than you were expecting?"

"I don't think anyone can properly prepare for the kind of cult following a Kalzik has," Olivia said, bitterly. "The Clinic is supposed to help people and yet he had all these fancy clients coming in from nowhere for the 'famed Kalzik' expertise and if I dared to turn them away, to try to get him to put his talents to better use—I was the villain." She laughed, but the sound was sorrowful. "I just—" she began to cough, her shoulders shuddering.

Rian quickly spun a sound charm over the drowsy baby so it wouldn't be disturbed. "Olivia."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine," he said, worriedly. He reached out to feel her forehead. "You should know by now that a healer that can't—"

"I know, Unk, really." Her shoulders slumped tiredly. "A healer that can't look after themselves has no business healing others. You know that I would never have reached this place if there wasn't a good enough reason. The Clinic doesn't have anywhere near enough room or funding for the overhaul it needs—and that idiotic Calamaris brat seems to think that he can throw around weight that isn't his yet. Everything's just a mess. I'm stressed. Fine, but stressed and it doesn't help that the Hunt is in session."

"Calamaris, Calamaris..." Rian muttered. "I can't place them." He smoothed a hand over her hair, stopping to pick out a few smooshed vegetables. "Let me guess, someone is going through a phase?" He took the burp cloth from her hand and began to pat it in a few places.

"His father doesn't like vegetables either," Olivia huffed. "But he'll have to learn—just like his father."

"What's happening at the Clinic? What made it turn out so terribly?"

"It's actually pretty simple. You know that new Sub, the one in the Inner Courts that's been making waves? Yanek something or the other. I'm pretending he doesn't exist." She stifled a shudder. "He's been sticking his nose and fingers where it doesn't belong and I hate doing this sort of thing, you know. I'd really rather just—"

"I know," he said. He set the cloth on his lap and turned to see how Briar and Hermione were faring. His toddler nephew was currently keeping Hermione occupied with a colorful charm bracelet and the story behind every single colorful charm. Rian hid a smile. "I'll try speaking to your father again, if you like."
"I like, please—I like." Olivia said, wearily. "All I wanted was to be a good healer, not a manager, an accountant and the problem-solver for every empty-headed idiot within fifty paces of where I stand. I wanted to do art therapy and here I am stuck in a place where all I can do is shout about cheating over time-cards."

"Shhh, easy." Rian murmured. He unbuttoned his shirt-cuff and began to roll his sleeve up his arm. "You shouldn't be home alone when you're in a mood like this. Did they all have to go? Every single last one of them?"

"Pareyic Coven," Olivia reminded him. "It hurts to leave me behind, but everyone else went—even the children. They couldn't take me and these little ones, they're too young. I chose them. I knew what I was getting into. You don't need to scold me for it. I'm a big girl now."

"So I see," Rian said. "Am I scolding or simply worrying for your well-being since my brother is an idiot?" He sighed. "Don't answer that. I'm actually here to ask you a favor and I'm in a bit of a rush, because your Uncle Briar can't wait to throw himself headlong into the hole he spent the past few years digging for himself."

Olivia winced. "I already feel sorry for him," she said, sincerely.

"Whose side are you on?" Rian countered. "The young woman with him is a human witch from Earth. She wound up here through some very complicated circumstances and landed in Lord Aiden's personal mansion. I'm asking you to grant her a safe haven until I can come for her. She's looking for a friend of hers, a young boy by the name of Harry Potter."

A faint furrow made itself known in Olivia's brow and she frowned.

"Something wrong?"

"Name's almost familiar," she muttered. "Can't think of why though." She shook her head. "I suppose I can look after her for a bit. Not like I have anything else to do."

"Oh?"

"I've taken administrative leave," she sighed. "So I'm not professionally suspended, because if I—do you know what happened this week? Do you have any idea what I've been through, Unk? I sent word, since it was first-hand, but I didn't hear back, so I couldn't be sure that you knew." She looked over at Briar, a gleam in her eyes. "The Immortals are waking—probably up by now, even—though I'm sure you and yours would be the first to know."

Rian's eyes flared red, briefly. He held his wrist out to her. "Bite."

Her miserable eyes flicked up to his face, before her face flushed. She bent her head and opened her mouth, delicate fangs surging up through her gums. She notched them gently, in his wrist and drank quickly and efficiently. He kept his blood clean—a requirement that was necessary for a Healer—and a detail that was very much appreciated in times like this.

When she'd taken enough, she pulled away, licking her lips. "Thanks-"

"Keep drinking," Rian pressed the wound to her lips. "You haven't taken nearly enough."

Olivia made a soft sound of distress in her throat. "Unk-!

"Knowing your Bonded, they'll be out until the wee hours of the morning and you'll be alone, exhausted and without a good blood source." His eyes narrowed, meaningfully. "I'm not leaving a
human witch in your care unless I know you'll be able to take care of her and yourself—drink!"

Reluctantly, she did.

When he was satisfied, he tapped her head to have her stop. She pulled away, licking her lips and
offered him the burp cloth to wipe it clean. Licking the bite wound was a bit too personal and she
didn't trust herself to pull on the healing talents that would urge it to heal faster. Rian smiled,
faintly, taking the cloth and pressing it to the slowly healing mark.

"Her name is Hermione Granger," he said, at last. "If she wishes to tell you her story, then listen. I
only ask that you look after her. I'll be back for her as soon as I can—and if I can speak to your
father before then, I will. Don't worry about the clinic. Worry about yourself." He tipped her head
down and kissed the crown. "Make a sloppy dinner and call it an early night."

"Unk?"

"There'll be a reaping tonight," he said, grimly. "A full reaping and since you'll hear it by
tomorrow at least, your Aunt Juniper is back."

Olivia went from a flushed red to a pale white in the space of a single minute. "Aunt Jun?" she
breathed. "No—that's not—she's really?"

"She's really," Rian confirmed. "Which means it might be a little bit before I'm back, so if you
could look after Hermione until then, I'd be grateful."

"Take all the time you need," Olivia said, fervently. "I can't even begin to imagine-!" She
shuddered, clutching her baby with both hands.

"Thank you," he smiled, warmly. "You always were my favorite niece."

"I'm your only niece," Olivia said, dryly. "You'd best introduce us and get going." She bit her lip.
"If she's from Earth, then she's clueless, isn't she?"

"Er, that would be putting it nicely."

"May I take her to the library?"

"Take her wherever you like." Rian said. "She might like that, the library. Seems like a smart girl.
A bit sad, but smart and sharper than she looks."

Olivia smiled. "A girl after my own heart."

NEVARAH - JUNIPER EVANSON

Juniper had cried every single tear that she had to spare. By the time she'd managed to pull herself
together, the Pareyas had begun to bustle around, rustling together an evening meal, playfully
including Regulus and George into their routine without a single hitch. It made her chest ache just
watching them. They'd accepted her back—not completely, as yet—but enough to be welcoming to
the two that she'd brought along with her.

The fact that they had, made her wonder at Briar's reaction. None of her Bonded would give her
straight answer on him and she'd stopped asking. Their answers wouldn't have really satisfied her
anyway—not when she wanted to see and hold him for her own. There was a deliberate itch
crawling atop her shoulders and back as time ticked by and Briar didn't return.
Rian was with him so that meant she didn't have worry too much—but then again, it was Rian and Juniper knew that for all of his quiet patience and strength, he was more than well-equipped to deal with her and Briar. It was what made him such a good Beta. If he wasn't happy with her and Briar, they'd have to settle that imbalance first. She rubbed her arms briskly, starting faintly when Ivy came up behind her, wrapping her in a warm embrace.

"Ivy-love," Jun hummed softly, turning her face for the kiss to her cheek. She'd forgotten how nice these spontaneous hugs felt.

"June-bug," Ivy said, chuckling at the childish nickname. "They'll be home soon, why don't you come and eat something?"

"What about the children? And the Gheyos? The rest of them?"

"Worry about them when it comes," Ivy said, softly. "They'll all be home soon. Come. Eat. Rest. We have missed you. Dramatics and guests aside, we have missed you." She unwound her long arms from Juniper's tingling frame and extended a hand in silent invitation. "Your Regulus and George are already at the table. Come join us, please?"

Jun didn't need any further prompting.

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NEVARAH -PEVERELL TRAVEL HOME

Lewis sighed, cradling the sleeping Nytura in his arms as he padded down the softly lit halls, heading for his Alpha's personal chambers. He hadn't expected the little creature to seek him out, but it had and then it'd promptly refused to leave. It hadn't bitten him, so he was forced to communicate with it through an awkward series of signs, mixed with trial-and-error. In the end, he'd only been able to understand that it wanted to stay with him and wouldn't be put off.

He'd just come from his Submissive's room — after profusely apologizing for his absence for a good chunk of the morning — and had been grudgingly forgiven, though partially because Cora had seen Shadow and decided that whatever story he was telling that involved a Nytura was enough of an excuse. He'd just left her to the care of the other Pareyas. The tremors shook them all up, even though they were Air types and had been in their temporary, floating home when it had happened.

Feelings of unease and worry had overtaken him at once as he worried now for the new great-nephew he hadn't known existed. He wondered how Harry was faring and hoped that the Deveraines would continue to take good care of him, even if they disliked the Peverell name. Harry had been a delightful surprise, yet the first impression of the green-eyed young man still lingered, making his heart ache in a way that it hadn't for many years.

Harry had looked up at him in one moment, completely unguarded and said — Dad.

Lewis swallowed, feeling his chest seize up once more. Of all the regrets he had, letting things turn out as they had was the very worst. He silently resolved to make sure that he could maintain a connection with Harry, whether the Deveraines approved of it or not. Those soulful green eyes had said so much more than Harry ever could have in those few moments when he'd been trying to help him after the broken portal.

There was a depth of pain hidden in their emerald shadows and a strength that seemed as if it had come straight out of sorrow, yet tempered so expertly that it could be nothing but the proud fire that he'd seen when Harry had walked out into the arena for his formal introduction. He hadn't thought that Harry would do it, but the moment he'd decided to go ahead — Lewis had caught a glimpse of a
fighting spirit that was so fierce and beautiful, that he didn't doubt their relation for a moment.

Only a Peverell could show such confidence in such circumstances.

He was sure that proving their familial connection wouldn't be too difficult. There had been a few imposters over the years who had attempted to claim some portion of the Peverell fortune and fame, but their current family Head had seen through their disguises. He'd tested them both magically and with the usual trials that every Peverell youngling was required to take upon coming of age.

They had failed.

Harry, Lewis was sure, would do just fine.

Reaching the double gilded doors that opened to his Alpha's private rooms, Lewis reached up to tuck Shadow on his shoulder, before he knocked. There was an answering murmur from within and Lewis smiled. He pushed open the door and entered, leaving his slippers outside of the room.

"Henry?"

"Lewis—I was starting to wonder. How is Cora?"

"Excited and exhausted from the day," Lewis said. He crossed over to join Henry on the bed, who sat up, braced against the headboard, holding a newly gathered sheaf of papers in his hands. "Excited because it was a good first day, I think and exhausted because of the tremors." Lewis cast a careful look around the room.

"And how are you?" Henry set the papers on the nightstand and beckoned his Bonded a bit closer. "I heard from your formation leader about a particularly spectacular dive to save a-"

"Ah, well," Lewis looked away. He started faintly when he felt Shadow's tiny paws digging into his neck and shoulder. "Shadow!"

"Shad—oh." Henry said, amused. "Is that a Nytura?" His gaze fixed on the small scaled creature with interest.

"It is," Lewis said, somewhat grumpily. He eased himself onto the bed and reached up to pull Shadow back into his hands. To his surprise, Henry calmly took the little scaled creature and stroked it with careful fingers. A quiet chirring sound filled the room and after several minutes, Henry let Shadow rest in his lap, before he reached up to catch Lewis with one hand at the back of his neck.

Any protest Lewis had was swiftly muffled by the warm, open-mouthed kiss that followed. He relaxed almost at once, reaching up to brace a hand against Henry's shoulder and enjoying the moment. It ended too soon and Lewis found himself awkwardly stretched across the bed, his head pillowed on Henry's shoulder, Shadow cuddled between them.

"Anything you want to tell me?"

"You can't stay here by yourself," Lewis murmured. The day's events were catching up to him and he stifled a yawn, feeling his body growing heavy. It played havoc with his instincts, since he was naturally inclined to protect and falling asleep went against that urge.

"And you can hardly stay awake," Henry said, fondly. "Cora ran you all ragged, didn't she?" He reached up with one hand, patting Lewis' cheek. "Will you tell me who you stole this from or
should I assume that we are courting again?" He scratched Shadow's chin with one tapered fingernail. The Nytura chimed happily at the attention.

Lewis managed to stutter a laugh, even as his eyes slid shut. Henry's soft hand on his cheek brought comfort that warmed him inside and out. "Something like that. It belongs to a new Submissive, his name is Harry—he's my," Lewis hesitated. He felt Henry's hand shift from patting his cheek to cradling his head, gently pulling him closer. "My great-nephew."

Henry froze.

"I'm sure we can prove it, which means that-" Lewis said, hurriedly.

"That Aldor did make it to earth after all," Henry sighed. "That is quite a change of events."

Lewis mirrored the sigh, the tension fading away as he realized that Henry's reaction had been rather mild and accepting. He hadn't even hoped for that. "Yes. Yes he did."

Henry was quiet for a moment, studying Shadow and then taking note of Lewis's current state. He scooped up the Nytura and deposited it in Lewis' lap, before pulling said Pareya properly onto his lap. He cuddled him close for a moment, nuzzling along his jaw and neck, before wrapping his arms securely around Lewis' exhausted figure. "And?"

"And what?" Lewis hummed contentedly, soaking up the individual attention showered on him. Moments with Henry were sometimes few and far in between because their Circle shared everything. Even now, the moment wouldn't last, because he could feel his Bonded approaching down the hall. They would disrupt the moment, but it was also all he needed to be able to finally relax. Having them close and being able to see them would ease his mind significantly. He was not the head Pareya, or else he would not be able to even think of sleep at such a moment, but having his Bonded closer would ease the instinctive urges.

Henry patted Shadow's head, directing his gaze from Lewis to the Nytura, waiting for the answer.

"Oh, it's named Shadow. It followed me. I'm not sure why," Lewis felt his eyelids grow heavy as his gaze fixed on the bedroom door. "But Henry—Alpha—he has one of our seals on him. Harry, I mean. It's there. I saw it and I felt it. It's real."

Henry twisted around to look at him. "A Peverell seal?"

"Yes." Lewis straightened up, rousing himself to be more awake, both eyes opened. "He actually has several seals on him, but I could feel our seal. The Peverell Clan signature—that's how I knew he wasn't an imposter and his eyes, Henry. His eyes are green."

"Green?" Henry repeated, incredulously. That was a very telling detail. "He's not an Air element?"

"I believe he's Nameless, though he's bonded to an Earth Alpha and a Fire Beta. It remains to be seen if he has an affinity to either of them though. I haven't seen him use his magic."

Henry made a sound in his throat, but did not comment. That was intriguing and worrying in the same thought. He would have to do some research on this Harry. "Is he actively hunting?"

"Yes, they were formally introduced today. It's his first Hunt. He was the Silverwing."

"The Silverwing? Who was?" Cora stood in the bedroom doorway, wearing her favorite long nightgown, clutching her favorite pillow, surrounded by the rest of their Bonded, dressed in sleepwear. "I'd ask if I'm interrupting, but your faces are saying quite a bit." She stepped into the
room and the others filed in after her. It only took a few minutes for everyone to be situated on the large bed.

The Head Pareya, Vincent, herded them to the center of the bed, prodding Henry to leave his spot by the headboard and Lewis to take up one of the usual traditional positions for a Pareya. After a bit of rearranging, the pillows were piled on the center and everyone settled down, the Gheyos interspersed between them, the Pareyas settled on the outside.

"We should have gone to the sleeping room," Lewis grumbled, trying to make himself comfortable on the edge of the bed. His instincts had finally and truly roused, Henry's subtle aura no longer keeping him calm. He felt edgy and his shoulders itched, his wings wanting out.

Vincent rumbled in warning.

Lewis huffed and settled down, unhappily. It was an unspoken scold and he didn't like it.

"Who was the Silverwing?" Cora asked, when all was quiet again.

"I'll tell you in the morning, dearest," Henry said, quietly. He pulled her closer to him, tucking her head beneath his chin. "And I'll see that it happens for him, Lewis. I'll contact the Clan head in the morning. Now sleep, all of you. There's a very long day ahead of us tomorrow."

Lewis chirred in answer and curled up as best as he could. He felt Shadow's tiny paws padding over his arm and it prompted a slight smile, as the little Nytura clambered over him until it could curl up in the hollow of his throat. He began to count his breaths, summoning up the meditative trance of his rank. It would allow him to rest somewhat, while still remaining alert and therefore able to protect his Bonded in case of any emergency.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey everyone! I did my best to rush this chapter out as soon as brissy got it back to me. Three cheers to her for managing to beta this chapter, even while she had computer issues this past week. The entire month of June was a crazy mess-ay yi yi. A HUGE THANK YOU, to everyone who has been so incredibly patient while waiting for this new chapter-your understanding and encouragement has meant the world to me. As some of you know, checking the "chatterbox" thread in the TBDH forum on fanfiction.net is where you can always find updates on the next chapter's progress and whether there are some issues in RL keeping me from writing/updating.

Next chapter, 93, we'll have Harry and Co. coming back, we'll see where Scout went and we'll get some Quinn and family in there as well. Thanks for reading!

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry at the guest beachhouse)
Charlie-(with Theo, Harry)
Harry-(with Theo, Charlie)
Deveraine Circle members-(Home to meet with the rest of their Bonded.)
Mad Maury : Part II

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

RECAP: Harry and Co have retired for the night. Jun returns to her Circle to learn that she's been gone for years. Hermione escapes Aiden's clutches with the help of Rian and Briar, where she winds up staying with Matron Oliva. Aiden calls a formal reaping and all the Hellhounds assemble. Back in the WW, Minerva McGonagall has a few reflections on the recent troublesome happenings and witnesses Filch's Torvak side. Grey magic still linger around Hogwarts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CUNNINGHAM ESTATE : NEVARAH

Lord Cunningham entered his private bedroom in the Alpha section of their large manor, exhaustion was evident in every line of his body as he shut the door firmly behind him and mentally reinforced the wards, before releasing the tight control he'd maintained over his magic and personal aura. Like a rubber band, it joyfully exploded, easing the stifled feeling he'd endured all day for the sake of the Hunt. He was glad to be out of the dining room and away from the young triad that would make it, in spite of everything else. He didn't think he would have been able to keep up appearances for much longer.

In all his years, he never would have expected Maurice Elswood to be the little Submissive's missing mentor. He didn't like what it meant and he really didn't want any of Maurice's private life dragged into the open. Arielle knew the man had been a quiet, intensely private dragel and he would hate the kind of fuss that would likely come with the inquiry into his absence.

With a sigh, Lord Cunningham reached out through his bonds, checking each of his Bonded in turn and Hadrian last. His Circle was fine, bedded down for the night, minus their Sub and Hadrian was keeping watch, as was his wont to do whenever he could feel their restlessness. A quick glance at the bed told him that his guess was accurate, Mariana was waiting for him and he almost smiled at that, before tugging sharply on Hadrian's bond to remind the Gheyo to at least trade watch halfway through the night. Hadrian would stay awake all night unless ordered otherwise at times.

Shaking his head, Lord Cunningham stepped forward. He could feel Mariana's eyes as he approached the bed and stretched out a hand to greet her, with enough time for her to see it and accept or refuse. There was a rustle of the sheets and duvet, before he felt her head beneath his hand, a silent request to be petted.

He smiled and gently stroked her soft, silky hair, glad she'd removed the dreaded hairspray. He had hoped to find her in his bed after the unexpected revelation that evening. They would need to talk. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting, milady." He withdrew, moving over to the shared vanity set to
handle his nightly routine. "Did no one offer to keep you company?"

Mariana snorted, her eyes tracking his every move as he went about shucking his formal wear for the less restrictive sleepwear. "They all offered, but I sent them to bed. They'll need the rest." She sighed. "You never keep me waiting anyway. I am perfectly capable of looking out for myself until you are near."

"I would never insinuate otherwise." He said, smoothly.

A moment later he appeared, faintly illuminated by the light over the sink, as he stepped out wearing a pair of pyjama bottoms slung low over his hips. He murmured the word to cancel the illumination spell and made his way back to the bed, smiling when his Submissive held up the covers for him.

Sliding into the warm spot, he settled comfortably and then drew her into his arms, starting faintly when his fingers met sleep-warmed skin. It was the only warning he had before his pyjama bottoms were banished and he sighed at the very obvious hint. "That bad, eh?"

"You have no idea, milord." Mariana nibbled along his neck, marking it to her liking, her fingers sharpening into familiar claws that dug into his shoulders with the right mixture of pleasure-pain. "Try raw inside and out." She whispered. "I thought it wouldn't hurt this much—after all this time—it's been thirty years." She sucked in a deep breath and blew it out. "Thirty—bloody—years!"

Lord Cunningham didn't answer straightaway, giving her a chance to speak first. He only held her to him. He knew to read her moods the same as she did for him. They'd had years to learn each other, after all.

"Was it terrible?" She asked, referring to the formal dinner. There was no way on the face of their beloved realm that she would have remained polite enough to suffer through it, but she knew enough to understand that he would have apologized for her abruptness by attending in both of their steads.

"Quite." He smoothed a hand down her side, fingers skimming over familiar, ridged scars. She wore all of hers like a badge of honor. "I'll take it out on you in the practice courts tomorrow." She poked him in agreement and he returned the favor with a pinch instead. "You didn't have to snap at him. He is only a boy."

"No one else would have told him. You saw how they were." She scowled. "He had a right to know and there's nothing that masks how ugly or necessary it may seem to some. It was best to have it over and said." Her eyes glittered at him. "Don't you agree?"

Lord Cunningham hummed in answer, stretching his head back to allow her better access to his neck. She continued to nip and scrape, in short angry bites. He tightened his hold on her, moulding her curves to his muscled frame, one arm curled possessively around her waist.

Of all the things he'd expected today, he hadn't seen that twist coming at all. Maurice Elswood had been a very near and dear friend to his Mariana, even if they rarely met face to face. The letters exchanged between them through the years had become almost legendary among their respective Circles. He would never quite understand what was shared between them, but he respected them both too much to ask. It was private and he had his own secrets, after all. She would never keep necessary information from him and certain things were meant for Submissives alone. "Did you ever think he was alive?"

"Arielle, no." Mariana gave up on ravaging his throat, licking away the last of the blood, before
nuzzling the claim mark she'd branded into him, so many years ago through magic and pure need. Their bonding had shaken the entire Shadow Clan with the strength and force of the raw power contained within them. She was lucky. So was he. "I can't believe that—I mean, I hoped. We all did, I think. I knew he would've claimed it. I didn't try to stop him. I-I couldn't." She wrapped her arms around him instead, a tinge of sorrow in her voice making it sound like a growl, more than anything else. "He suffered so much and I couldn't even—I couldn't do a damned thing about it."

"There was nothing we could do." Lord Cunningham gave a bitter laugh. Of all the things that bothered him the most about that tragedy, it was the lack of retribution as there had been little to no information and those responsible had already been rendered lifeless—courtesy of Maurice himself. "There wasn't a single thing either of us could have done. We did try, dearest."

"If he's alive, I'll kill him." She dug her claws into his biceps, her dark eyes reflecting pure misery in the darkness—visible to him, because of their element. "I swear I will."

"If he's alive, he'll let you." Lord Cunningham answered. He didn't wince when she drew more blood with her claws, rather than biting. He knew just what sort of mood she was in. He was rather close to it himself. "It's been thirty years. Statutes are cleared now."

"And would you claim the right?" She demanded. "Would you?"

"If you asked it of me." He said, evenly.

"And if I did?"

"Then I would grant you whatever your heart desired."

"Black as it is?"

"No darker than mine."

A hiccupped sob left her lips as Mariana buried her face in his neck and pulled with her hands, to hint at what she wanted. Her Alpha complied, rolling them over so that his weight was comfortably settled over her without comment. He kissed the top of her head and opened the bonds between them as wide as he possibly could, sharing her pain and distress.

There were officially two ways to grant Charum Mortus, one was through the official channels of higher authority, as Maurice had done and the other was through the Alpha's signed permission in their final will. He'd signed Mariana's, at her request, upon their bonding night. He didn't need to read her mind through their bond to know what she was thinking. He could feel it the same way that his chest ached with the shared remembrance.

"...Make me forget." She wound her arms around his neck and pulled him down, tipping her neck to the side. "Please."

"Mariana--"

"Just for tonight," She arched up beneath him, a clear invitation in every flicker of her magic and kiss of her skin upon his. "Please. I promise I'll be better in the morning, nothing a good fight couldn't fix—I just wasn't expecting this and I didn't—I wasn't prepared. Please."

"Don't promise unnecessary things," he murmured. "You know you need only ask." He touched his cheek to hers, feeling the hot angry tears that spilled over.

"Please..."
He mouthed over the pulsing vein in her neck and stroked the claim mark that was just above her right hip. His own hands shifted and changed as his fingers lengthened into blunted claws, that he trailed along her bare sides. He wouldn't draw blood on her. Not in this state. Never when she was like this. "...I claimed the Alpha's rights in his favor the minute they were free to take." He whispered in her ear. "Be as devious as you like, my little temptress. Know that my shadow is forever yours."

She twisted to capture his lips in a desperate kiss. "Thank you." She whispered. "Thank you!" Her arms locked tight around his neck. "You could never replace Ryuusen. No more than Maury could ever replace me to you." The tears had vanished as quickly as they'd come. She would process the rest of the emotion in the morning. For now, she wanted whatever her Alpha would give her.

He chuckled darkly. "I am very glad to hear that." The hand stroking along her claim mark, dipped a bit lower.

She parted her legs, willingly and accepted the kiss that came with the intimate caress. "How's Scout?"

"She's found something and it's not good and she's tired." He huffed. "Silly girl. She works herself too hard, but she was practically dancing the moment she knew it was a recon mission."

Mariana laughed softly. "It was her choice and she wouldn't have accepted if she couldn't handle it."

"True," he chuckled. "Did you order Hadrian to keep an eye on the little brat?"

"Not in so many words, no."

"Oh?"

"He's clueless and he needs looking after. Tell me you think I'm wrong and I'll reassign him."

"I didn't say anything."

"Oho. Indeed," she huffed, tugging ineffectively at his neck to communicate that she wanted his mouth elsewhere and not trying to maintain a conversation. "Stop teasing."

"I'm teasing?" he asked, innocently. "I shall stop at once then. Tell me, is it because he's Maury's?"

"Bite me."

"Where?" He asked, wickedly.

"You brute!" She bumped his chin with her forehead, hard enough to hurt. "I refuse to talk about him when we are doing this." She writhed beneath him, eliciting a pleasurable hiss at the sudden friction. "We'll deal with it in the morning. Nothing irreparable can happen before then."

"With our luck?" he smirked. "Want to bet?"

"Shush." Mariana said, fiercely. "Put that mouth of yours to good use and make me scream or I swear I will."

"Your wish is my command, milady."
Scout did not like using her contacts for small missions. She really didn't like taking missions when she could be home, loving and being loved, by the rest of her Circle. She was due for a celebrate-Scout-day and she'd been looking forward to it. Like most of the Shadow kind, she'd given up her birthday in favor of the day when she'd joined her Circle, a day that would be celebrated in place of it, from then on out. The Hunt usually meant that they could rest for a while, so the resting units could have a chance to prove their strengths. It often meant very full nights and very busy days, with lots of training and bonding to be had for all of them.

But she had been able to read something in Hadrian's gaze when he'd come to fetch her. Granted, she'd never seen the man with his mask off, but his eyes were so expressive, it was almost as if he didn't need to speak at all. Hearing her Alpha's request had stirred up a bit of curiosity inside of her, so when Hadrian had asked for a volunteer to scout, she'd raised her hand. It sounded interesting and she couldn't help wanting to know more.

Granted, her name was Scout, after all, she had earned it—but it was still nice to be asked and not assumed that she desired every single little reconnaissance mission because of it. Now, she made her way to the edge of Nevarah where the shadows met the Void where nothing lived or died. It was here that all Shadow types came to pay what few respects they had and where they learned to Realmwalk.

She hummed to herself, off-key in the eerie silence, but the sound only translated into a soft vibration running through her. She had given up her hearing for a gift from the Shadow guardians that refused to be caspered beings, yet still looked over their own elemental kind. She had traded her mortal, natural hearing for the ability to hear anything unearthly and otherworldly, a valuable asset in her given field of work.

On the battlefield, she could efficiently and expertly help to plot and plan out a suitable course of action, while gathering the kind of information that would put others at great risk. Now, she held out her hands, palms up, chin to her chest, silently asking the Void if she could step through from Nevarah to the planet Earth, specifically, to the coordinates her Alpha had planted in her mind.

There was a twist and shift from the myriad of shadows stretched out before her, a spot where grey met black and only the vaguest of hints and shapes could be seen. After several long, empty minutes, the shadows reached out to her, caressing her palms and teasing about her face.

She smiled and closed her eyes.

When the portal drew her in, the pain was excruciating.

When the portal ended, all discomfort vanished with it.

Scout found herself hovering in mid-air, suspended by her personal shadows, staring down on a strange set of houses in neat little rows on a brilliantly lit street.

Ah. That wouldn't do at all.

Tipping her head to the side, Scout mouthed the words that would summon the native shadows to her side. As they came, she lowered herself to perch atop a lamp post, snuffing out the illumination within, settling down for the night. The first rule of information gathering was always to observe for a full twenty-four hour cycle.

She sighed and crossed her legs, propping up her chin with one hand. Unless something significant happened—life-threatening or realm-shattering—she would sit, watch and wait, until a full day had
passed. During the allotted time, she would see the natural, everyday routines of those present and thus be able to offer specifically tailored suggestions when she returned.

When the last of the shadows in the area came to her, Scout snuffed out the rest of the line for that street and stretched out her dragel senses, checking to see if there were any dragel signs present. She hadn't felt any immediate distress or any friendly magical signatures, so if there was anything present, it was well hidden or long gone.

The faintest of magical tingles returned to her and Scout frowned. It had come from the house, and they were very thin, barely-there, wards. They would be a flimsy magical barrier, scarcely useful for protecting anything, even a pet. Her brow furrowed. That was not good.

Rolling her shoulders back, uneasily, Scout drew her magic back and wrapped it tightly around herself.

Twenty-four hours couldn't pass fast enough.

Twenty-four hours passed with mind-numbing boredom.

Scout amused herself by continually filtering through the magical web she'd cast over the street and the house, recording every minute change that registered. She tuned in to the mental link of her Alpha, listening to the occasional tidbits that he fed her as the evening and dinner progressed. It eased the monotony somewhat as Lord Cunningham was not well-known for the very powerful mental abilities that he was born with.

It meant that their entire Circle could literally operate on the military precision they did, running off good, solid intel and not just pure instinct and raw magic. He kept them all informed and involved, continually drawing their Circle closer together in every possible way. Between him and Mariana, Scout knew she was lucky.

That was one of the reasons she'd squirmed inside since witnessing the little moment between them when Maurice Elswood had been mentioned. They did tend to play off of each other, they had been bonded for decades, after all, but it never failed to make her twitchy when they were out of sync. She hoped they would settle it before she saw them again.

Granted, it didn't happen too often, but they were strong personalities with equally stubborn tendencies and sometimes, reconciliation was at least a week in happening. A week, because that was how long it took for the daily sparring matches during the week, to build up to the weekend tournaments between them.

Anything that couldn't be settled through a mind meld or in the bedroom, could be easily duked out in the sparring ring—no holds barred. Scout rolled her neck around to the side, testing her limbs in turn, so as not to give away her position, but not to lose feeling in said limbs either. Sometimes, she would employ the use of a self-inflicted paralysis spell to ensure that she was appropriately motionless and therefore undetected by the parties she'd been sent to observe, but as far as she could tell, the house at 4 Privet Drive was empty. There was the vaguest hint that something might have been there, but no matter how hard she tried to verify that, it was such a faint wisp that she could not properly grasp it.

At least, there had been no one moving about inside and no one had come to check anything. The slight tingle from the faint wards still bugged her, but Lord Cunningham had warned her not to investigate alone. She was to take note of everything and inform him if there was something off and call for back-up, if necessary.
Given that they had been discussing the tragedy of Maurice Elswood, Scout was not about to complain. She could still feel Mariana's distress through the shared bonds and it made her twitchy as she'd waited for the stupid dinner to be over. The sooner that Lord Cunningham could excuse himself, the sooner that Mariana would be at ease and in turn, the rest of their Circle.

It was several hours later before she finally felt the twin threads of warmth, passion and contentment filtering through the bonds. Scout smiled, relaxing at last, knowing that her Lord and Lady had managed to solve their differences for a touchy subject without allowing their tempers to run away with each other. That was good. Her only regret was not being home and therefore eligible for a romp of her own.

Her foot twitched again and Scout made a face, slowly shifting to stand atop her lamp post perch. She mentally reached out into the magical web cast about the street and the house, before drawing on the shadows to lift her up overhead. She had entered in the nighttime and now that the day was there, it was time to release the shadows.

The moment her internal clock chimed, Scout drew in a deep breath and forcefully blew it out. Shadows streaked down from her darkened figure, pooling on the ground before they slithered off to their natural spaces.

Scout waited until she felt them settle and then floated a bit higher into the sky. She was invisible from non-magical eyes and cloaked to anyone who wasn't dragel, as it wouldn't do to be seen. Peering down at the odd, cookie-cutter little neighborhood, her stomach clenched tight and her mouth grew dry at the sight that greeted her.

She hadn't seen this before. It hadn't been visible.

For a moment, Scout could not react to the sudden, unexpected chill that washed over her. She reached both hands up to her ears and covered them, palms flat against her head. Horror coursed through her as she tripped her own internal trigger for her special ability to activate and verify what her eyes were seeing.

And then she heard it.

Faint, but present.

Tortured cries, anguished pleas, a ghostly echo of a battle that had taken place directly over 4 Privet Drive. She could not see the replay of whatever had happened, that was not what her gift did. But she could piece together what dastardly business had taken place here. It made her sick to her stomach.

A mental poke through her bonds alerted her to her Circle's immediate worry, as they'd felt her intense reaction to the new realization.

SCOUT! Lord Cunningham's mental shout was the first to reach her.

I'm fine, Alpha. She sent back. But you'll want to see this. She trembled, faintly, her mind working to process what she'd learned in addition to the evidence that was now visible, even as her body reacted.

See what? Mariana asked, curious and sated from her earlier activities. Can't you project it, darling?

Did he live here? The boy? Scout asked.
He did, though now that you mention it, I don't believe he was very happy about saying so. Lord Cunningham answered.

How could he be? Scout said, bitterly. How could anyone be happy here?

Scout?

There's a beacon here. Scout said, first, because she honestly didn't know where else to start. Her hands clenched into fists as she dropped them from her ears and let them hang at her sides, quivering with suppressed rage. Someone was hunting him—actively hunting him. There's a bloody beacon on his home!

Scout winced with the immediate feedback that came from her entire Circle. She muted her mental links to prevent a headache as they all expressed their opinions over her discovery and asked for verification. She waited until the chatter died down and then sent back the proof that was now before her.

There was another pause and Scout had no doubts that she was about to be swamped and assisted in the same breath. The only time there was ever such a quiet pause meant that Mariana was scheming, plotting or otherwise putting her devious mind to work. Mariana had not earned her fearsome reputation by staying quiet and keeping still—no, hers was a legacy bathed in blood from a revenge well-executed. Another shudder rippled through her and Scout squared her shoulders, mentally counting down from ten and reminding herself that she could not afford to let her emotions interfere while active on a mission. She huffed and crossed her arms over her chest.

Scout, darling? Mariana fairly purred through the mental links.

Yes, milady?

Stay where you are. We'll come to you. Monitor everything until we arrive and sort out any doubts you have about the information you've obtained. I want a clear, concise and accurate report when I see you.

Scout perked up, glad to have been right about the pause. She wanted company. She did not want to stay here by herself. Company meant comfort—and possibly a conscience. The fear was bleeding away to anger, a dark, uncontrollable urge to hunt and slaughter the ones who had dared place a beacon on a dragel child's home and she could not afford to give into that side of her nature—yet. She made herself focus on Mariana's orders and then she had to double-check. We?

We. Lord Cunningham said, decisively. Stay out of sight and do as her ladyship says. Keep eyes on them if there are any individuals present. Do not let me find that you have done otherwise, else I shall be most displeased.

I would never disobey you, Alpha.

Good girl. We're on our way.

Breathe, darling. Mariana added. We'll be right there—I promise.

CUNNINGHAM ESTATE : NEVARAH

"Mariana?" Lord Cunningham asked, sitting up and allowing the covers to pool around his waist.
Mariana had rolled out of bed the moment she'd cut the mental connection to Scout and there was a grim look on her face. She shivered in the coolness of the night air and waved a hand at the shadows, calling her armor to her. "This is worse than we thought, isn't it?" She asked, softly. Her earlier funk had passed and she was more in tune with herself now.

He slid out from the tangle of covers and moved to stand behind her. He bent to kiss her shoulder and then her neck, trailing kisses up to her cheek as he wrapped his arms around her and offered his warmth while her shadows gathered together. "So it would seem. A beacon is serious business."

"Indeed. It's been years since I've heard of an active one in place—someone must have—on earth? Really?" Mariana shook her head. "They shouldn't have been able to sense him, especially if he was wizard-born and wizard-raised, that would mean that someone outside of the home—forced his inheritance to come out." She twisted, turning in his arms, her face lifted for more of his light kisses. "That's never good."

"It means we're looking for someone that's managed to stay well-hidden for years," Lord Cunningham agreed. It would be a headache to investigate, but they would investigate just the same. Having heard Harry's story, there were so many things wrong with it, that he'd actively fought his instincts to keep from joining the newly formed group of protectors he'd found in the Deveraines. They'd obviously taken the young man under their care.

Mariana hummed, swaying gently in his arms. "You know, there's probably going to be a reaping tonight. I could actually feel the Fabrine moving about on the edges of the Void. That's never good." She leaned back to look at his face. "Once we step through, it's probably not a good idea to come back—not without answers anyway."

"You're probably right," he agreed.

"To which one?"

"Both. You're always right," he chuckled. One hand slid free to twine itself in her hair, holding her steady for the comforting press of his lips. "I'll ask Thorne about a reaping and we can leave here—squared off. Is there anything else?"

She wiggled her fingers, the room lighting a few shades brighter as more shadows crept out to cling to her. "No. That helps. I'll wake the others."

"Everyone?" he asked, double-checking. They had several roaming Jokers that hadn't reported in for a few months or years, but almost everyone else was there. He was asking whether their entire Circle was turning out as a show of strength on high alert, or whether they were turning out to actively hunt. There was a massive difference between the two, but a full hunt couldn't be authorized unless sanctioned by a Royal—not for them, anyway. Mariana's reputation alone required royal permission for her to do more than sneeze, some days.

From the slight thread of worry, then complete fury that he'd felt from Scout, he knew that there would be no more resting for some time. Anything that disturbed any of his Bonded on such a level, did not deserve to reside in the plane of the living. He had accurately felt and seen her horror in the shared images and emotions over the beacon on 4 Privet Drive. It had wakened an urge to search and destroy, until Scout was back to herself—no matter how fleeting the moment of worry had been.

He had no delusions as to how Mariana felt, she was even more sensitive to such things than he was. The moment she'd caught Scout's tangent, she'd startled out of a deep sleep, her mind already working in spite of only just waking. She could not maintain the same constant mental links that he
did, but she was quite intimately tuned to his mental capabilities and if something was wrong, then she would know.

"Everyone," she said, slowly. "I'll summon the missing ones. Do you think we're overreacting?"

"You, my dearest?" He shook his head, decisively. "Never you." He released her from the embrace, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I trust your judgment and history itself agrees with me. Light a fire under our wandering stragglers, if you must. Let's not keep our girl waiting."

Mariana half-smiled and nodded. She paused halfway to the bedroom door as the shadows wrapped around her body begun to mold themselves into heavy-duty armor, rich, dark magic pouring off of it. The transformation took several moments and when it finished, she tossed her head, clicking out of the room on deadly high heels.

Lord Cunningham smiled to himself, listening until he could no longer make out her footsteps, before he retreated to sit on the edge of the bed. He closed his eyes, reaching out with his mental links for one of the favored Shadow Clan lords belonging to the Hellhound courts, one Thorne Macaslan. If there was a reaping tonight, then Thorne would know.

Mariana tapped softly on the door that led to the manor's rooftop balcony, the only hint of warning before she turned the knob and stepped out to see the lovely wide space. She'd roused her entire Circle, saving their hired hand for last. Hadrian had his own ways and quirks. She wouldn't have taken him on, their Circle was quite closely-knit after all, but then she'd caught sight of the haunted look in his pitch black eyes and her heart had melted. She could no more have ignored him than he could have refused her spontaneous offer to secure his services.

"Hadrian?" she called, softly.

The Gheyo in question was perched on the corner of the balcony, sitting on the railing, gazing down at the estate. He turned at her approach and immediately slid off the rail to stand, holding his hands out, palms up. The last time she'd sought him out, it was for a very thorough scolding and punishment detail for running himself so far into the ground, it had taken all six of their Healer Gheyos to bring him back up to a safe place.

She hadn't been happy, Lord Cunningham hadn't been happy and Hadrian had bravely weathered their combined displeasure with a significant amount of discomfort. Now, he made an effort to stay within her good graces and was rewarded for his consideration with small tokens and the occasional concession. Somehow, it was sweeter than when he'd wandered alone, roaming from place to place, stopping only for the odd duel here and there.

"I've only been watching," he said. "Nothing else." She'd asked him to cut down on his practices when his magic levels had spontaneously spiked. He was to spend the time in meditations instead, to fine-tune his control so the power would stay.

"So I see," she said. She took his hands turned them over, inspecting each one and feeling for any new callouses that would compromise his story. There were none and no signs of a recent healing either. She held his hands up to her face and nuzzled them gently, watching when he relaxed at the gesture and finally returned her smile. "What's on your mind?"

He sighed, allowing the hug that followed, leaning forward to rest his chin atop her head. "Too much," he said, truthfully. "The night is so restless, I can feel it under my skin."

She chuckled. "You and me both. I wondered if you'd sleep tonight."
Hadrian snorted. "Sleep? Who could sleep on such a night as this?" His arms came up to rest on her waist, his hands light.

"True," she agreed, leaning back to study his face. "You tuned out a few hours ago and I-"

A delightful blush painted itself across Hadrian's face and he quickly took a step back, his arms returning to his sides. "I ah," he began, flustered. "It was something of-"

Mariana stifled a smile, taking pity on him. They were a tight-knit Circle, for all that they were Militaristic. While she could block the empathic feedback through their links and shared bonds during shared moments with her Alpha, she'd long ago learned it was something of a comfort to the others—even if it did make a few of them all hot and bothered.

"You are contracted to us, not bonded," she said, knowingly. "You are more than welcome to excuse yourself from such things. Next time, I'll prod you a bit so you can rejoin the conversation—afterwards. I'll have to give you a short summary."

"Has something happened?"

"Scout's discovered something—troubling."

Hadrian's brow furrowed. "Troubling?" He knew she'd been sent to investigate things and he hadn't expected to hear anything back for some time.

Mariana held up a hand. After a moment, he leaned down, his chin nestled in her palm, just the right height for their foreheads to touch. The mind-meld began almost at once. Hadrian shuddered as the initial connection was established and then information flooded across the open mental passageway. When the connection was broken, he took a step back to brace on the rail.

"A beacon?" There was something odd in his voice. "On his home? That young submissive?"

"Yes. We're heading over there now and if it is what I fear it may be, then it will be some time before we—return." Her lips quirked into a semblance of a smile. "Quite some time."

Hadrian's dark eyes glittered. "You're not taking me with you," he stated, picking up instantly on what wasn't said.

"No, I am not." Mariana said, simply.

A flicker of disappointment flitted across his face, but it vanished almost at once as his expression smoothed out into a blank mask. "Have I done something else to displease you in some way?"

"Ach, no. No, darling. This is not a punishment." Mariana reached out to tweak his nose, smiling at the reaction elicited. "My lord tells me there's a reaping tonight."

Hadrian's head snapped up. He made the connection between that a bit faster than the first.

Her own dark eyes matched the glimmer reflected in his. "Keep an eye on that young submissive," her lips twitched. "They don't have a Gheyo and they don't know anyone. The Deveraines will be taking care of their own, most likely and while it may occur to them to send some sort of help over—those three are so new and wet behind the ears, I doubt the place is properly warded against Fabrine."

A quick nod came from Hadrian. He remembered the genuine emotion reflected in the vivid forest-green eyes of Harry. He'd been fighting the instinctive itch to protect the young submissive from
the moment he'd laid eyes on him. There was just something about the quiet strength that he
exuded, the calm weariness around him and the natural dragel allure that made him absolutely
enticing. Fingers snapped in front of his face and he flinched backward, unable to help the
trademark scowl that surfaced from the unwanted interruption.

Mariana's eyes danced, a sign that she was laughing—and most likely laughing at his expense—but
there was also a hint of knowing in there and Hadrian knew that she truly was looking after him,
with his best interests in heart. He would much more prefer to stay within Nevarah monitoring
things from afar and taking the chance to fully indulge his protective instincts. Ensuring Harry's
continued safety was an opportunity he did not intend to pass up and as one of the lesser known
faces of Mariana's entourage, he would be able to skulk about in the shadows and gather any
necessary information.

"See that you keep an eye on him," Mariana murmured. "And keep your links open, if I need
something, you will be my contact."

"Yes milady," he said, at once. "You will let me know if—if there is, anything?"

"I always do," she said, simply.

He could read the seriousness in her tone and understood that whatever she was keeping from him
was only because she hadn't made her mind up yet. He nodded in acceptance. That was good
enough for him. He'd slowly grown to trust her judgment over time and there was no reason to start
doubting her now.

"Good boy," she stretched up on tip-toe and he leaned down without hesitation.

It was the briefest, softest of kisses and then she twisted in his arms, morphing from a physical
being in his arms to something far less substantial. Her form of thick, wispy shadows flew away
from his fingertips and a sudden, unnatural silence settled over the Cunningham estate.

Hadrian sighed. They had all left. He felt it as the thin warmth interspersed through the entire
Estate—now a sudden, icy coldness. "Happy hunting," he told the night. He knew the sentiment
would reach them, wherever they were.

A single tendril of dark energy stretched out to him, no longer held back by the tangible presence
of every single active Gheyo of the Cunningham Circle. Hadrian's dark smirk could have spawned
nightmares. His black eyes grew even blacker as shadows swarmed around his figure, hiding it
completely from sight.

When he leapt from the rooftop balcony, it was to streak through the air, wingless and light as a
feather, blurring across the estate and over property lines, heading for the waterside district where
the Deveraines made their home. He would not insult them or Harry by taking on a duty they
hadn't personally assigned to him, but Mariana had given him more than enough leeway to do as he
liked with the broad order.

The water's edge was close to the Void and that was where the shadows met the darkness and even
darker things were born. He knew that after the earlier attack, the Royals would gather to cast a
combination defense spell and that they would spend the entire night taking turns reinforcing the
domes and checking all the other protections around Nevarah.

They would also order a curfew and everyone would be expected to obey. The moment the streets
were cleared and empty, he was sure that all the dark creatures—the nightwalking Vampires, the
Dark Fae, the Hellhounds and every Gheyo from the Shadow element, would report for duty and
make a party out of cleaning up the Fabrine.

The alluring scent of innocent, but dark creatures like themselves, always lured the Fabrine out from wherever they'd hidden, crevices in the city, shadows in the underground and lurking in the storm clouds overhead. Always hungry, always seeking something to leech from, Fabrine had simple needs and complex minds—just enough to be a challenge to the ones that hunted them.

Hadrian felt his jaw ache as his fangs stubbornly refused to retract. He resigned himself to the fact that he'd simply be a bit more feral than he'd planned on for the next few hours or so. Fabrine hunting was fun. He'd be sure to enjoy himself. His shadow-walking slowed as he emerged in the first section of the waterside district.

If he stayed directly overhead, high into the clouds, the Fabrine would come to him. They would feel his darkened magic first and it would drive them mad. They would be so out of their minds, they would never think to go after Harry and that particular thought left Hadrian feeling very, very pleased with himself.

He smirked, morphing into his Halfling form and delighting in the stretch of wings, claws and tail. Magic surged and rippled beneath his skin as he called the dark things to him.

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**WIZARDING WORLD. 4 PRIVET DRIVE**

*Scout?* Lord Cunningham was the first to emerge from the portal. He stepped out in mid-air, hovering beside her, his sharp eyes roving quickly over her controlled form. *Any change?* He would keep their interactions limited to the mental plane for now, it was best not to give anything away—their entire Circle was used to it anyway.

*Nothing at all,* she reported. Her eyes silently pleaded with him.

He held and arm out, obligingly, and she cuddled into his side at once. The rest of their Bonded silently materialized in a formidable half-circle formation, with Mariana bringing up the rear. She was checking to see that even the missing Jokers had reported in—they had and she was pleased, for the moment.

Scout left his side at once, to go straight for her. Mariana hugged her tight, checking her over, before bestowing a kiss meant to calm and soothe, her submissive aura manipulating the gesture of affection. *Tell me everything,* she projected, carefully. *And is there anyone inside?*

And so Scout did.

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The first thing they did was catalogue the lot. Checking over every single inch of the outside, every brick, every roof shingle and examining all the magical imprints left behind, by the time she'd matched up Scout's report with the evidence before her, Mariana was definitely not pleased.

Her Bonded stayed well out of her way as she inspected a few things personally, before coming to stop on the front door, her hand poised to knock. There was a powerful stasis spell cast over the entirety of 4 Privet Drive, it was melded with several other spells—some of dragel origin and some of Torvak making.

The most disturbing point, however, was the dragel Death Seal fused into the very ground—for several miles down—by a generous amount of magically potent dragel blood. Mariana had turned several shades of pale when she'd cast the spell to see who had cast the Death Seal.
The name returned had made them all restless and Lord Cunningham had actually grimaced.

Maurice Elswood.

_Do you think_ Scout hesitated. _Is he still alive?_

_I will not guess at things that I can discern for myself_, Mariana thought, darkly._Come help me, all of you, we'll need to see if we can work around it. If he is here and he is alive, undoing it might kill him._ She did not add that if he was dead, she'd simply revive him and kill him herself. Maurice had been the kind of friend that one hoped to have, but never actually found. She would do everything within her power to see that his name and his sacrifices were not forgotten.

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**JUNIPER EVANSON : NEVARAH**

Jun stood on the front porch, her hand shading her eyes as she stared off into the murky distance, her eyes adjusting to the darkness. She could feel Briar and Rian approaching, then fading. She puzzled through a list of reasons in her head, before deciding that it was probably best to meet them outside.

The last time she'd accidentally gotten herself caught up with Inner Court politics, she'd stayed away for two-and-a-half weeks. Upon her return, Briar had pitched an unholy fit and they'd brought half the house down in the argument. Jun winced and reached up to rub her left ear with a rueful smile. They were all young and foolish back then, with plenty of bumps in the road ahead of them. She hadn't really meant for the house to get involved, but back then, it was difficult to control her emotions and her empathy had been wild and unmeasured. It was poor Rian who had to pull them apart—by the ears—and he'd been furious.

Since that memorable day, Jun had made a point of never leaving for longer than a week at a time, no matter what mission was assigned to her. As the years passed, Briar eventually calmed himself enough to allow longer periods of separation and she learned to work quicker and more efficiently. The longest she'd ever taken was a month, before the absence of her entire Circle had affected her so deeply, she'd barely managed to finish the assignment. She'd 'ported home and straight to Briar's bedroom—and his arms.

They'd later discovered that regular communications between them—even if only one-sided on Jun's part—would prevent her almost panic-attack from happening and it would significantly calm Briar and the others, as long as a continuing dialogue was maintained. She'd been sending her weekly reports and letters since she'd taken this mission. Occasionally, she would receive feelings of contentment, happiness and joy through her bonds, even though no letters had come back.

While it had bothered her, Jun had pushed it aside in favor of a clear mind to tackle her assignment. She had later decided, as the month of acceptable absence drew to a close, to try her hand at using runes to manipulate the time. She didn't say anything to her Bonded, after all, playing with time was dangerous and it was best if they didn't know. She was careful and precise though, and never before had something this disastrous happened before.

A shiver ran down her spine and Jun hunched her shoulders forward. She hoped that her missing Bonded were home soon. Three guesses said that Briar had been required to attend the Hellhound courts because of the 'quake, but Rian hated accompanying him there, so it was likely that they'd split up to meet elsewhere. She reached out, tentatively through the bonds and withdrew at once when she found them closed tightly.
They were aware that she was home, but they were both apparently in sync and neither wished to speak to her at that precise moment.

Jun sighed again.

This would be harder than she thought, but not as bad as she had feared. At least the bonds were still there. From what her Bonded had shared so far, she understood that she'd been missing for years—and they'd never received a single communication. In her absence, Briar had taken care to scry for her every single year, according to Ivy and when her name returned among the living, he would wait until the following year to ask again.

Her mind flickered to her father and she wondered if he'd ever received any of her other communications. She'd spoken to him in a dream, once and he'd assured her that everything was perfectly fine. She hadn't thought too much of it, figuring that perhaps it was just for her protection that their missives weren't coming through. Still, even if he had thought something was off, he never would have said anything, she was sure that her Bonded would not have gone to him—as much as she'd once been his favorite, she didn't think he would pass up the opportunity to cause trouble. Idle hands led to loose tongues and rumors of the very worst kind.

"Jun?" Chris hovered in the doorway, his entire form glowing with the familiar pale light natural to his fae-kind. "You've been standing here for some time."

She turned with a smile, even though it hurt. "He's on his way home," she said, softly.

Chris frowned, his brow furrowing into neat rows. "I suppose it'd be pointless to ask you two not to fight, wouldn't it?"

Her sad smile reflected in her vivid green eyes, darkened a few shades from emerald to forest-green. "I would try my best," she said. "I would try my absolute best, but-"

"Two broken hearts seeking each other in the dark," Chris murmured. He moved forward to hug her, an impulse he'd learned to indulge over time. As an empath, honest, friendly physical affection was crucial to her wellbeing. He could see now why she would have claimed Regulus and taken on George. She would have needed them for her sanity, whether she realized how much time had truly passed or not. "It's a wonder they don't cut themselves on the shards that fell apart."

"Still writing poetry?" Jun snuggled into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder, even though he was shorter. "That's lovely."

"It's you and Briar," Chris hummed. "Thank you and yes, I am. Arrow has taken a liking to it as well, I think he intends to woo some poor sweet girl, if his parents ever let him out of their sight."

"Oh?" Jun said, interestedly. "Orchid said something about his wanting to work in the Hall of Remembrance."

"He wants to and he's old enough, but as I'm sure you can tell—we haven't exactly ventured out much."

"I see," Jun tipped her head sideways to kiss his cheek. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "So sorry, Chris. I never meant for things to turn out like this—the time lost, the—everything." She couldn't properly articulate the entire mess just yet—because there were some answers that only her father or Briar could give—and only so much her empathy could handle in a single day.

He sighed, warily. "I know. I can feel your sincerity and your regret is so thick, I could eat it like soup."
Jun's empathic reaction dimmed at once, fading by half. She pulled back with a faint smile. She'd thought she'd tempered most of it, but her control had apparently slipped again. Her mind was twisted in torment for the thought of two precious little girls who should have been grown and bonded. "Sorry. I guess I'm a bit too tired to properly temper things."

"You don't have to keep apologizing. It isn't like you." He began to glow a bit stronger and then his shoulders shuddered as his wings materialized behind him. They were lovely, glowing specimens of swirling gold—delicate, as all fairy-wings were—and beautiful to behold. He stepped back from Jun, holding her hands as his wings began to flutter and slowly, his feet left the ground. A fine, golden mist of fairy dust sprinkled over her from head to toe as he smiled and bent down to kiss the back of her hand. "I've got to make Leif set the wards, don't stay out here all night, please?"

"I'll only stay as long as-"

"For me," Chris prompted. "Please?"

She smiled, but didn't answer.

He mirrored the smile and flew higher, until he she had to tilt her head all the way back to see him. He flew around to the back and disappeared from view.

Jun sighed, guessing that he was likely hovering outside of Leif's bedroom window. It annoyed the Gheyo, but it also made sure that Chris didn't actually have to walk the perimeter himself—at night. As a light fairy, he abhorred the dark and avoided it whenever he could. She figured that he'd been worried about seeing her standing there in the dark and come to make sure that she was alright. Gathering up the few feelings of warmth that had finally begun to rekindle, she pushed them down through Chris' bond and waited for the happy feedback that meant he'd received it.

A few seconds later, it came.

Briar and Rian 'ported in at the foot of the hill leading up to their home, just outside of the wards. They were let in by a grumpy Leif, who was walking the perimeter, clad in his pyjamas.

"She's home," Leif muttered, as they passed through the opening he'd provided. He began to seal the wards, keying them to his unique signature. "And she didn't know."

Briar stiffened, but continued walking. He didn't answer or look back.

Rian sighed. "Thank you," he said, quietly. "How are the others taking it?"

"It's hard to explain," Leif reached up to tug on his hair. "It's probably best if you take a look yourself. It'll explain it a lot better."

"That bad, eh?" Rian chuckled. "Hurry up with that, I can cast the protections when I'm on the porch." Leif beamed.

Briar drew near the front porch and his steps faltered when he caught his first sight of his newly returned Alpha.

Jun stood by the railing, covered in an even dusting of glowing fairy dust—from Chris, she was sure—and dressed in one of Ivy's old housedresses, a long, billowy green thing that was still too big for her, in spite of her height. She hugged her arms to herself and from the steady wind blowing through the night, her fiery crimson locks streamed out.
She was a vision both beautiful and terrible and it made something hurt inside of him. The closer he came, the more difficult it was to breathe. He could taste her sorrow, rolling off of her in tangible waves of empathy. He'd felt her hurts before, but never to this degree. He saw the moment when she saw him, because her green eyes seemed to stab straight through him, sucking all the air from his body.

Her arms loosened and fell to her sides and she watched him, tracking his every step all the way up to the porch. He stopped then, when he was on the final step and she was to his right, just close enough to touch if he reached out. They stared at each other for a long, painful moment. Briar held her gaze until he couldn't bear it a second longer, his temper had flared, his emotions staggered drunkenly around him and every carefully rehearsed lecture he'd practiced, turned into a muddle.

After all this time, just being so close to her, prompted an instinctive urge to rage, cling and possess—not necessarily in that order. He'd missed her, he'd wanted her and now she was here and he didn't know what to do about it. There was so much that would have to be sorted out between them—least of all WHY she had thought it was alright to break their agreement of the maximum absence of a month. His eyes began to burn and he knew they were fluxing to the trademark red of his hellhound nature. He broke the stare, moving to walk past her into the house. They didn't have time for this. He had to prepare for the reaping and dealing with Jun right now would take time he couldn't spare. It was bad enough that Lord Aiden had given him that look before the meeting, but if he didn't at least meet his quota for the night—he was sure the consequences would be quite unpleasant.

Her fingers brushed against his hand as he passed and curled gently—briefly—around his own before releasing.

He paused in the doorway, hovering—for no logical reason—shoulders taut, back straight, head held high. "Welcome back," he said, stiffly.

Jun sighed and the wind seemed to die down. Her magic tentatively reached out to him, growing stronger when it wasn't rebuffed. This was the woman he'd courted, the Alpha that was commanding enough to counter his stubbornness, yet graceful and gentle, even when firm. Her green eyes had shifted to another hue, from the bright, vivid and—most certainly dark green—to something a little darker, a touch blacker, the obvious hint that her instincts hovered dangerously close to the surface.

Briar swallowed. That look, he knew a bit too well. It was the sort of look that said that any and all of his arguments were over and done with before he'd even presented them. It meant that he'd lost or he'd won—and it didn't matter which—because the end result was always the same and just as much as he wanted it, he was equally terrified of it.

Her lips twitched faintly and it would have been a smile if it didn't look so close to a smirk. But she didn't make a move to stop him.

He resisted the urge to squirm and lifted his chin. She still did not speak. A shivery feeling ran down his spine and Briar ducked into the house and bolted down the halls.

Jun chuckled softly. There was a certain fondness in her gaze as she turned away from the railing and turned her amusement to Rian. He stood on the bottom step of the front stairs, slowly climbing up the few steps. "Hello, my wonderful, charming and absolutely perfect in every single way-

Rian snorted. "Don't hurt yourself," he snarked. He stepped onto the porch and held out an arm.
She moved forward almost at once, allowing him to fold her into an embrace. They both relaxed as one, feeling the Alpha-Beta bonds shifting and clicking back into place, the vows between them renewed by such close proximity. "But you are, dearest. You're the best Beta I've ever had."

"I'm the only one you've ever had," Rian shot back. He nuzzled along her cheek and ear, breathing in the familiar scent of her skin and hair. He'd missed her too and to be able to hold her all over again, without having to jump right into the serious talk that they would have—sometime—it was like a balm being poured over him from head to toe. He trembled for a moment, then stilled as his magic began to reach out to her. "Did you miss me?"

"Missed you terribly," she breathed.

"How—much?"

"Like water to a dying man in the desert," she murmured. "I fully intend to drink my fill now that I have you right here before me." She nuzzled at the claim mark on the side of his neck. "I'm parched."

Rian hummed, pleased. His inner vanity was soothed and stroked while his instinctive urge to reaffirm their bonds snapped to the surface. He was thrilled inside, glad to know that even if she had been gone—that they'd never been far from her thoughts. They couldn't have been, not if she was like this now. "Drink," he murmured. "Or drown, however you like."

Jun laughed, low and rasping with a hint of a playful growl at the end. "Mmm, indeed. You know, I suddenly have a feeling I know how all of our dates are going to be for the next few months." Her teeth scraped gently over the claim mark.

"Months?" Rian threw back, he leaned just out of reach, forcing her to look up at him when she couldn't bite just yet. "Try years." He drew her flush against him and bent down to kiss her willing mouth. Her magic flared to life and wrapped purposefully around him, the Alpha-Beta bonds stirring with the itch to fall perfectly into place.

The kiss continued for another beautiful moment before Jun pulled away with the slightest hint of a growl, her eyes pitch black. "Stop distracting me," she rasped.

Rian chuckled, wickedly. "It's not my fault you're so easily—amused." He tipped his head to the side, offering unrestricted access to her claim mark he sported on his neck. He bit back a groan as her fangs dug harshly into his neck, her clawed hands gripping his hips to hold him still. He shuddered pleasurably as she trembled in his arms and the Alpha-Beta bonds melded into harmony once more.

She hummed a moment later, baring her own neck in a non-verbal hint for him to return the favor. He didn't need any further encouragement, but her appreciative chirp prompted him to wrap her more securely in his arms, as if to be sure that she wouldn't vanish before he was ready.

They broke apart only when an angry Briar came storming through the doorway, his combat boots in hand, knotted at the laces. She'd been sort of cuddling from her position in Rian's arms and he'd been sharing some of the necessary tidbits of information that only a Beta could tell. Briar flumped down on the front steps and began to shove his feet into the respective boots. The scowl on his face said far more than his mouth would have, but whatever had set him off came to a halt when Jun spoke up.

"And where exactly are you headed at this time of night?"
Briar's head jerked around to stare at her, his gaze flickered between her and Rian, before he deliberately busied himself with the laces on his boots. "I'm not headed anywhere," he said, crossly. "I am reaping tonight. As you do know, it is a duty I cannot refuse. Excuse me."

"Ah, ah, ah!" Jun pulled away from Rian and was quick enough to catch Briar by the elbow. "Not in that frame of mind you're not," she eyed him critically and cast a look back into the house. "Who said what?"

"No one said anything, I have work to do," he gave his arm a jerk. "Jun."

"Briar."

"Juniper!"

"Are we really going to do this?" she asked, her tone light and conversational. "Tonight? Just you?"

"Just me," he said, tightly. "Tonight."

"On a night like this?"

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"I'm sure I can think of a few," Jun returned.

"Are you offering to accompany me?" Briar sniped.

"Since you asked so nicely, yes."

"As if I'd trust you," Briar growled. "You can't fix this the way you're thinking you can!"

"Watch me."

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"Jun says we're reaping," Briar called over his shoulder, carelessly. "Everyone."

Jun frowned and ignored Rian's perked eyebrow. That was not what she'd said, but she was curious as to how that detail would pan out. She'd never required all of them to join a reaping. Not when Chris was a light fairy who couldn't even stomach the dark auras that surrounded them on a reaping night. He could handle it, if he stayed in the middle and maintained a protective shield around the other Pareya, but he didn't like it. She'd always specifically ordered him to stay behind so he wouldn't be accidentally exposed or injured when the Fabrine were on the prowl.

"Everyone?" Chris' soft voice came from directly behind Jun. His face was pale and his tone was cautious. He didn't look her in the eye, for his gaze was fixed on Briar and then Rian, a silent plea visible in his light eyes.

"Why not?" Jun said. "The more the merrier. It isn't safe for Briar to be out there alone, you know."

Chris swallowed hard, his pale-eyed gaze flicking briefly to Briar, then Jun, before he seemed to shrink in on himself. "I see."

"Juniper," Rian said, sharply. His gaze flashed between her and Briar, before he frowned. He could feel that what she was saying was very different from what she was feeling, evidence through their tentatively renewed bonds. He didn't like the implication or what the rest of their Bonded would read into it.
There was a general shuffling of feet before slowly, the entire Evanson Circle assembled on the front lawn, filing silently out of the house. A confused Regulus and George were among them, finding themselves jostled into positions near the Pareyas as the Gheyos began to summon their armor and suit up. No one said a word.

Chris remained frozen behind the triad on the porch, his light aura significantly dimmed.

Briar stood up at last, his eyes burning a deep, rich crimson. He opened his mouth to speak as Chris walked past—crept, was more like it.

But Jun turned to him with a wide smile that was more fang than reassurance. She grabbed Chris’ wrist and pulled him to a stop beside her. He halted at once, eyes darting to look up at her face and then away.

An awkward silence descended on the porch for several long moments.

Jun huffed and threw up her hands, looking thoroughly annoyed. "I'll skin them," she muttered, thinking of the invisible enemy that had left her Cricle so frightened. "I'll skin them alive and stuff it down their miserable throats, then I'll burn their fingers and toes to ash and bleed them dry." Her hands curled into fists. "Then I'll kill them!" An angry growl rumbled in her throat and scales rippled along the side of her face as her hands morphed into claws. "Really? All of you? After all these years, how can you think so little of me?"

Briar flinched back, and the rest shuffled uneasily.

"Do I look broken to you? Useless? Or have I somehow turned into a monster?" She looked straight at Chris until he reluctantly met her gaze. "Your collective wellbeing has always come first, it has always and will always remain my highest priority."

Rian bit back a sigh. He didn't have to agree with her methods, but he did have to back her up and he could tell that she'd decided to simply cut straight to the heart of things. Inwardly, he braced himself, sure that the next few minutes would be entertaining, if not emotionally draining. He'd felt her emphatic control flicker a few times, but it held steady.

Jun pinned Chris in place with her dark-eyed stare. "I have never ordered you to accompany us on a reaping, never! And just because it's been some time since the last time I was here, doesn't mean that I've changed that. I am more than aware of what it would do to you and I have always excused you from it, regardless of whether you remembered to ask or I remembered to tell you. What made you think that had changed? Have I not been reaffirming all of you from the moment of my return? I understand that this is not easy—I am not trying to make light of this—and this is serious, but I haven't changed any more than you all have."

She reached into her bonds and tugged sharply on them, with her Alpha's authority, watching with grim satisfaction as each Bonded in turn, squirmed and twitched as their claim marks burned and began to glow. She would reaffirm her rank and the respect it demanded right there and then, if that was what they wished.

All eyes lowered as she met their stares in turn.

There was a glint of steel in her gaze when she finally turned to Briar and he stared back, defiance written in every fiber of him. Silence hung between them. "Paraphrase me like that again and I will correct your speech in a manner that is decidedly not to your liking, understood?" Jun said.

Briar hissed, even as his body twitched and rippled his inner hound wanting out.
She ignored the hiss and simply gathered herself together. She'd made her point and she knew he'd heard it. That was all that mattered. There were more important things to focus on now. "Down, off the porch," Jun said, briskly. "Transform quickly before you hurt yourself trying to hold it back."

Rian helped to shuffle him down the stairs, backing away quickly as Briar fell to his hands and knees. The unearthly howl that ripped from his throat made everything tremble. The Evansons were vocal in their unease, a few hisses and growls making themselves known, but they all flinched as one when Briar's transformation exploded out of him.

Bristling black fur, gleaming ivory fangs and blood-red eyes bearing the stain of the souls that he harvested, Briar Evanson came into his hellhound form with a howl of dark delight. He shook himself all over, pawing at the soft grass beneath his feet and tossing his great head as the night wind whistled around him. He howled up to the sky, listening and reacting to the answering howls he could hear in the distance.

His massive size was a thing of beauty, in spite of his reason for being. He stood nearly twice Jun's height and curled his lips back in a snarl.

Jun eyed him, a bored expression on her face. "Don't you take that tone with me, Submissive," she said, sternly. "You know full well deserve what you have coming to you," She smirked. "I'm sorry I stayed away for so long, but we're all to blame here, so pointing fingers is pointless. If it makes you feel better though, then how about best out of three?"

Briar shook his head at once, then shook himself all over.

Jun chuckled. "Four out of five then? That's your only other option. If you win, you can top—and if you lose, then Rian can watch." She winked and ran a hand through his silky fur. "We will settle this tonight, one way or another, Submissive of mine."

Briar whined, lowering his head to rest on his paws.

Jun reached up to tug on one large, pointed ear. "It won't be that bad. You're terrible, but I love you even when you're pitching a fit," she said, softly. "Four out of five?" He nodded, shaking himself all over again. She chuckled again and turned to the rest of her Bonded. It would be best if they were all here, some Circle bonding would be good for everyone, though it wouldn't completely settle everything just yet. "Where are the children?"

Some general shuffling produced a reluctant Jasmine as spokesperson. "They're indoors," she looked to Chris, biting her lip. "You'll look after them, won't you?"

"He will not," Jun said, matter-of-factly. "Call them—the children."

"But-!" Lief began and stopped, when Jasmine gave him a look.

Jun pretended not to notice as she circled around her Bonded to take a look at George and Regulus. "My first thought was to leave you here," she said, slowly. "But I think that you're both capable of keeping up and helping out, so you'll be accompanying us. It's very basic work on a single operating principle, kill or be killed. Fabrine is not something to take lightly and it has many forms, however, you are protected because of the bonds you have to me and by default, Briar as well. You may use any exorcist spells you have learned in our time together and any protective shields you have at your disposal. The idea is to move quickly and leave nothing behind."

"Jun—Alpha," Chris faltered. He stopped a few feet away from her, his cheeks red.

"You're accompanying us," Jun said, quietly. "I'm sure you know why?"
He ducked his head, the blush creeping further up his face and neck. "I shouldn't have doubted you."

"Consider your apology accepted and this is your punishment," She caught him by the chin and kissed him softly. "Stay within the inner formations and look after the children and Regulus."

He nodded, understandingly. It was better to join them, than to stay in the silent house with his own doubts creeping through his mind.

"You can't seriously be making him join us," Gardenia said, incredulously. "Juniper!"

"If he had a problem, then I assure you that he'd speak of it now," Jun's green eyes narrowed. "I guess it just means that you'll have to make sure nothing slips past our formation, eh?"

The children were assembled, Yarrow—or Arrow, as he really did prefer—was a sharp young man with very powerful offensive magic, his sister, Peony, was sweet and slight of build, with deceptively dark magic at her beck and call. Wistar was thrilled to have his Alpha's permission to join the reaping, even as both of his parents' disapproval hung in the air—his magic was eager and straining, promising to do whatever he so desired.

As a collective whole, they assumed their positions for the formation that they would maintain until daybreak. It was a simple one, moving perimeters with the Gheyos on the outermost side, the Pareyas on the second section and everyone else on the inner Circle. The children, Chris and Regulus were in the center, while Jun, Rian, Briar and George headed up the front.

Jun painted the runes for protection, concentration and purity, using her blood as a medium and painting the forehead and cheeks of each Bonded and child in turn. Now that it was decided, a restlessness had overtaken them and the night seemed to grow darker as the final runes were cast and Jun returned to Briar's side. She reached up to fist a hand in his ruff as he bent enough for her climb on.

Sitting proudly atop Briar's back, Jun kept her balance with one hand as his eyes began to burn with the telltale flame of hellfire. She felt the power in this form as his legs bunched beneath him and he sprang forward with a blood-curdling war cry that echoed across the night. She clutched her casting staff in her free hand and wore the same simple, forest green garb she'd worn when visiting the Weasleys.

Powerful, stifling magic stretched out from their formation, devouring everything in sight until they stumbled across the first Fabrine. A dark thing with wisps and shadows cloaking it, the miserable scrap of darkness shrieked as the first spell was cast and it became nothing.

DEVERAINE GUEST HOUSE : NEVARAH

Theo roused himself from the lovely land of dreams to discover that the reason he couldn't quite breathe as freely as he liked was due to Harry's vise-like grip around his middle, effectively squeezing the life out of him. He wriggled around for a bit, until he found a more comfortable position and then gently fed calmness through their shared bonds. It took a few minutes, but soon Harry's grip slackened and Theo was able to relax.

He chuckled to himself, pressing a kiss to the top of Harry's head and reaching out through their bonds to check on Charlie. They'd had quite the first day welcome to the Hunt and if he wasn't so...
curious to know what the second would bring, he might have admitted that it filled him with
trepidation.

Harry snuffled in his sleep, rolling over to burrow into Charlie's warmth, his pajama jacket riding
up from his pajama bottoms, exposing a delightful strip of sleep-warmed skin to Theo's innocent
hands. He smirked to himself, sliding one hand up the smooth expanse of lightly haired chest and
softly defined muscles. Harry played Quidditch, which did help somewhat with muscle definition
—but then he was so skinny, that it hadn't really stuck.

Theo was sure that it was nothing a good physical training regimen couldn't fix. He knew it would
be beneficial and after hearing Harry's plea to be trained more both in wizard magic and dragel
magic, he made a mental note to see it happen. Harry was sure to throw himself whole-heartedly
into anything that was guaranteed to make him stronger. He'd seen Harry striving to do his best and
use whatever resources he had around him to help in the quest against Voldemort. It was time to
lend a hand of his own.

A slight magical tingle reached out to him and Theo frowned, trying to pinpoint it, only for the
elusive sensation to slither away. He tucked the thought away for later and mentally reached out to
check the wards around the beach house. Everything was intact and it eased his worry by a mere
fraction. He wondered if anything else had happened, but knew that he'd have to hear the news
from a reliable source.

With a sigh of regret, Theo leaned forward to kiss Harry's cheek and slid out from the warmth of
the bed to start the day. He checked the wards on the guesthouse, something that would become a
definite habit with time and noted that while they felt battered, they had held. He wondered what
had happened to them, but figured that he'd find out soon enough, if he asked the right person.

Tugging lightly on his mentor-bond, Theo fished out a pair of running shorts and a cotton shirt. He
would dress for a run and let Charlie and Harry have a bit of a lie-in, Merlin knew they needed it,
after a day like yesterday. Wandering into the kitchen, he paused to set a pot of hot water on to boil,
with a monitoring charm to keep an eye on it. The limited groceries that Bahn had stocked them
with, weren't really limited at all—but Theo wasn't a cook and didn't have the slightest idea what
do with any of it, apart from the fruit—which didn't require any preparation at all.

Sighing to himself, he wished he'd paid more attention when Ilsa had tried to teach him how to
cook. His thoughts settled firmly on her and he hurried out of the kitchen as he felt her presence
draw near. He exited the beach house and came down to the shaded area at the bottom, where he
waited until Ilsa came into sight.

She was dressed in her customary beachwear, jogging lightly along the sand, just at the edge where
the water met land. Grinning to himself, Theo waved and trotted on out to meet her. He fell into
step with her rhythm, easily keeping up from dozens of mornings where he'd gone running himself.

"Morning, Oretta," he greeted, when they'd traveled a ways.

She smirked over at him. "And a very good morning to you too, my Theo."

The run left him hot and sweaty, a problem that was solved when he waded into the water far
enough to drench himself from head to toe. Ilsa had done the same as well and together, they
trooped back to the shaded portion of the guesthouse, pausing to rinse the sand from their feet at
the edge of the concrete pad.

"What was it you needed at this hour of the morning that you couldn't wait a little longer?" Ilsa
asked. She twitched her fingers and summoned a clean towel out of the hidden cabinet behind the picnic table. She tossed one to Theo and looped the other around her shoulders, using the ends to rub at her wet hair. It was only a few hours off until they would have met up at the Hunt again, but Theo had reached out to her and so she'd come.

"Remember the obstacle course you made for me? When I first started training?" Theo took a seat on one of the benches that was just within the shade and wiped his face with the towel.

"What about it?"

"Could you summon it here—for Harry?"

"Harry?" Ilsa's eyebrows arched up. "What did he do?"

Theo blinked. "Do? Oh—no, he didn't do anything, it's just—he asked me why I'd stopped with our impromptu training sessions and I should've made the time to keep them up." He resisted the urge to shrug. "The course helped me and I thought it would do the same for him, allow him to build up some physical stamina, which in turn would filter through to his magic. Control of body, then mind and magic."

"Never mind that the particular course you're asking for is the one that made you swear I was the devil in a woman's body for two years straight?" Ilsa asked, innocently. Her lips twitched into a near smile at the affronted look on Theo's face. "I'll summon it," she said, chuckling. "And I do remember every single thing you had to say about that particular course. It's a good one though. If he doesn't resent it, the results will come quicker." She grinned. "Where did you want it?"

Theo hopped to his feet. "I was thinking of somewhere up there…" He pointed up to the ridge that overlooked the beach area. "That way you wouldn't have to worry about proximity to the water during a brewing storm and it's different air up there."

Ilsa followed his pointing finger and broke into a wide smile. "That's absolutely perfect," she agreed. "Shall we?"

By the time they'd set up the obstacle course, Ilsa's stomach had growled and they'd taken up residence in the kitchen. A grumpy Greta 'ported in to see them, carrying a basket of rather large, freshly baked muffins and a few sweet breakfast pastries, along with a carafe of strong tea. There were plenty of flavours and Greta thumped the basket on the table, before leaning forward to rest her head right next to it, pillowed atop her arms.

"Greta?" Ilsa fished out a banana-oatmeal muffin and handed it to Theo, ignoring his injured look. "Fibre. Eat one for the fibre," she scolded. "Then the pastries."

He made a face, but ate it anyway. He liked oatmeal muffins, fibre or not. He poured himself a cup of tea and fixed it the way he liked, pouring tea for the two women as well, having long learned their preferences as well. He watched with a small measure of concern as Ilsa spoke quietly to Greta.

"It was a stupid night, Ilsa," Greta growled. "The last thing I want to do is talk about it. I'm bloody exhausted, can't you tell? Unlike you, I didn't have the luxury of digging myself a hole and leeching energy out of the earth. It doesn't work that way for nmph-!" the angry tirade was cut off by a kiss, before Ilsa pulled away with a sigh.

"You, loveling, are terribly out of sorts," Ilsa ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know why Aracle let you out of his sight with you in such a state." She tugged on Greta's arm. "Up with you," her
golden eyes flicked to Theo. "I meant to ask—have you screened Harry's favours?"

Theo perked up. "No, actually, I meant to—but last night, it was such, well,” he held up his hands, palms-upturned, as close to a shrug as he would offer, while trying to maintain his manners as a host.

"I'll help you with them, if you fetch—quickly."

Theo hurried out of the kitchen as he heard Ilsa prodding Greta to stand. He didn't bother to listen beyond that.

By the time he'd reached the stairway, Harry and Charlie had appeared, Charlie standing behind a sleepy Harry, who was wearing Charlie's oversized pyjama jacket, unbuttoned down the front, with just his pants, his pyjama bottoms elsewhere. Theo didn't have to be a genius to figure out how their morning wake-up had gone.

He smiled up at Harry, who stood, dwarfed in Charlie's long-sleeves and contemplating the stairs as if it were a tremendous obstacle to be overcome. "Just pick him up," Theo suggested, catching sight of Charlie's amusement as he debated whether to help or stand back.

Harry squeaked as Charlie easily scooped him up and carried him down the stairs, ignoring the half-hearted thumps of protest. "Adorable," Charlie pronounced, smiling at the predictable blush that followed. "or just being yourself, if that makes you feel better." He held Harry securely in his arms, feeling the magic shift and ripple pleasantly between them, the Sub-Beta bonds singing with contentment.

Theo chuckled as Charlie paused for his morning kiss and then held Harry still, so he could receive his own as well. Kissing them both, a gentle smile on his face, Theo ruffled a hand through Harry's soft hair. "I was actually heading up to retrieve your favors. Did you want to sort through them this morning? It's best not to let them pile up."

Harry's brow furrowed. He'd intended to look through them yesterday, but it hadn't worked out that way. "Why were you looking for them?" He asked, curiously.

"To check for hexes and jinxes, just in case," Theo explained. "You shouldn't have enemies over here, but it never hurts to be careful." Slytherin habits were habits for life and it had been ingrained into his pureblooded self that a moment of caution was worth a year of decent legal representation.

"I left them on the dresser," Charlie supplied, readjusting his grip on Harry, refusing to put him down just yet. He felt the moment when Harry calmly relaxed in his arms, subconsciously snuggling into his constant warmth. "I was actually heading up to retrieve your favors. Did you want to sort through them this morning? It's best not to let them pile up."

The pile of neatly stacked, colorful favours came soaring down the stairs and into Theo's hands. They walked back to the kitchen together, where Ilsa and Greta were nowhere to be found. Theo set about fixing tea and dishing out muffins, until he was satisfied that both of his bonded had something suitably balanced for the morning meal in front of them.

"Ilsa and Greta are here," he added, eyes straying back to Harry's half-dressed form. He tugged on the towel around his shoulders and transfigured it into a pair of pyjama bottoms that were gratefully accepted.

Freed from Charlie's clutches, Harry slipped into the transfigured pyjama bottoms and chose the seat between Theo and Charlie, drawing a cup of tea close enough to wrap both hands around it. He was awake and alert, looking well-rested, compared to the day before. It was nice to be spoiled in
simple ways—cuddles, kisses and mild fussing, especially when he could tell that Theo and Charlie simply wanted to be closer to him. He couldn't deny them that and last night, even though he'd slept well, he'd awakened with a shiver and a strange sense of foreboding.

Charlie happily dug in his muffins, watching curiously as Theo set the favours down on the table. Harry sipped on the strong tea and couldn't help the sigh that escaped at the familiar taste—he wondered when Theo had started paying attention to his favorite type of tea. He nibbled on a muffin to discover that it was a nice, ginger-carrot mix, a perfect accompaniment to the tea and tamped down the silly grin that wanted to dance across his face.

Theo paused for a moment, his head cocked to the side before he frowned and continued on with his portioning of more breakfast foods, refilling Charlie's plate as if his hands simply needed something to do. The frown remained however and a furrow in his brow accompanied it.

"Did something happen?" Harry asked. He looked around the kitchen, noting that nothing seemed out of the ordinary and that as far as he could tell, everything was alright. Reaching out with his magic, he could sense the presence of Ilsa and Greta, even though he couldn't see them yet.

"Nothing at all, my treasure," Theo deposited another muffin onto the napkin in front of Harry. "I asked Oretta over for a favour and Greta decided to be nice and bring breakfast." His lips twitched into a slight smirk. "I think. Or maybe Bahn sent it. I'm not sure."

Harry rolled his eyes at the not-too-subtle hint of a third muffin before he'd even touched the second one, but he didn't complain. If they all tasted as good as this one, he was sure he'd find room in his stomach. He studied the pile of favours that Theo had set in the middle of the table.

Snatching his breakfast up and away from the sudden cascade of favours. He didn't remember there being so many of them. An inquisitive sound burbled up in his throat and Theo finished spelling a containment ward around them.

"Favours, when grouped together, if someone was unable to send you one in person, they could simply ask to have it delivered to your place of residence," Theo explained. "I should have mentioned that earlier. There are more than you might remember, because of that."

"They came in while we were sleeping?" Harry swallowed. There were a lot of favors—more than he remembered from the receiving line at the Introductions. He stretched a hand towards the pile and stopped, turning to look at Theo. He hadn't seen him cast any sort of detection spell and his magic tingled at his fingertips. "Did you check them?"

"I'll do it," Ilsa's voice came from the hallway as she entered, towing a reluctant Greta behind her. The Storm Gheyo looked marginally less irritated than she had been a few minutes ago. When Ilsa took a seat at the table, Greta yawned and slumped down to the floor to sit at her feet, her head pillowed on Ilsa's thigh. Ilsa sighed, and reached down to stroke her fingers through the short hair. Greta huffed, but didn't complain.

"Is everything alright?" Theo asked, politely.

Ilsa gave a short nod. "As good as it can be," she stretched a hand towards the favours and a shimmer of golden light spilled out in answer to an unspoken spell. "There, that should do it." She managed a smile for Harry's sake.

Harry frowned. "Did something happen?" he asked, worriedly.
For a moment, Ilsa didn't speak, and then she sighed. "There was a reaping last night."

The earlier shiver replayed in Harry's mind as he slowly set his cup down. A vague idea had already begun to form in his mind, but he had to ask anyway. "What's a reaping?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey everyone! I am feeling generous, so here's a nice long chapter and a update time shorter than a month. LOL. Welcome to the new readers and all those lovely lurkers-I see you over there in the shadows-XD. I hope you enjoyed this second installment into the Mad Maury arc, as well as the interaction of a Military Circle under the shadow element. Yay for more Hadrian and the Cunninghams. I didn't get to Quinn in this chapter, but maybe the next one? We'll see. I hope you liked the fluff at the end. Day 2 of the Hunt is now starting, there's gonna be some fun coming up. Thanks for reading!

~SHAMELESS PLUG FOR NEW ONESHOT~ An Ilsa Moment. Check it out for Harry/Ilsa Fluff.

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(with Charlie, Harry at the guest beachhouse)

Charlie-(with Theo, Harry)

Harry-(with Theo, Charlie)

Deveraine Circle members-(Home to meet with the rest of their Bonded.)
The Hunt : Day Two

Chapter Summary

It's Day Two of the Hunt and Harry and Co. are in for another slew of surprises.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries. -Read A/N at end-

RECAP: The military Circle with Lord Cunningham and Mariana, have caught up with Scout, who was investigating the Dursley's and 4 Privet drive. They discover a mysterious magical beacon present on the property and conclude that Harry was being maliciously targeted. Jun makes up with her Circle and strikes a bargain of reconciliation with her Sub, Briar. As a family, the entire Evanson Circle decides to join Briar in the nightly reaping. The next morning, Harry and Co. are having a quick breakfast, when Ilsa mentions the hellhound's reaping, the previous night.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DEVERAINE BEACH HOUSE : HARRY AND Co. : NEVARAH

Theo and Ilsa exchanged another one of their looks. One that went right over Harry's head and brought Charlie's frown into play. "It's what it sounds like, Harry," Theo said, at last. "Remember there are Hellhounds and dark creatures within Nevarah?"

Harry nodded. His mind flickered back to the awful dinner party and then the reason it had all gone downhill-Hermione. He hoped she was alright, wherever she was. Terius or Calida had said something about Hermione having a Hellhound's seal. Harry's grip on his cup tightened a bit more. That couldn't end well at all. "What about it?"

"A reaping is what happens when a curfew is called into order," Ilsa said. "Eat your muffin, Theo—you too, Harry." She waved a hand towards the kitchen window. "See out there? Way past the front fence, specific wards are in place. They come with the property. In the event of a royally ordered Curfew, it restricts all persons to the grounds and prevents any incoming or outgoing portals. Basically, you're locked in—for your own safety. You should have been able to feel it." Golden eyes rested on Harry. "You especially should be able to feel it, seeing as you're magically sensitive."

Harry couldn't stifle the shudder that made him start. He remembered the odd feeling right before he'd fallen asleep and the strange sense of something not quite right. But there hadn't been anything out of place and reaching out to his Bonded had reassured him that all was well, even if Theo
hadn't been beside him upon waking. "I felt it," he said.

Theo and Charlie nodded as well.

Ilsa offered a grim smile. "What happened last night, that little—quake? The dome shattering? It let in Fabrine, which you already know. That's common, general knowledge, but what they don't always talk about is how they get rid of it. It's unmentioned for fear of mass panic or hysteria by the visiting guests. Usually, there's a curfew put in place and every native Nevarean knows to move indoors and stay there, until it passes—which is usually an hour past daybreak. They also know to take their guests with them and keep them occupied until the curfew is over."

"But what exactly is the reaping?" Harry pressed.

"A ravenous pack of Hellhounds led by the Hound himself, Death's very own pet," Ilsa said, matter-of-factly. "It is every single dark creature, the vampires, the dark fae, the cursed and the uncursed were-creatures, and any true holder of the Shadow element or Nameless born in the Shadow element. They track, hunt and fight until daybreak. At daybreak, because of the reduced numbers, if not entirely eradicated, they all gather and the one who holds the Shadow's most powerful casper present—will cast a purifying spell to cleanse all that remains."

"And no one else helps? And they just—die?"

"The Fabrine? Sort of. It depends on how they're killed and as they're more dark manifestations, evil spirits, not-quite-demons, whatever you'd like to call them—they are everything that is dark and terrible, with no redeeming factors," Ilsa said. "Do not waste a single ounce of sympathy or pity for them, Harry. Just as there is light in this world, there must be darkness. If we are the light, then they are the shadow."

Harry fiddled with his cup. That was true, to some degree, he supposed.

Ilsa looked down at a bleary-eyed Greta and continued her gentle petting. It had been a busy night and she would need to move Greta to the pits soon. "Harry, no one else can really help, because anyone who doesn't have some sort of curse or shadow-like nature becomes an instant magnet for the Fabrine. If you aren't strong enough and you don't have enough support to help to fight them off, you can exhaust your friends, your Circle, all of your hired Gheyos. You can even burn out your magic."

Harry blanched. He hadn't thought that was possible, seeing as how the dragels seemed to live, breathe and move with excess magic everywhere and not a second thought for it.

Charlie frowned. "If it's so dangerous-

"Sometimes the Storm-types help," Greta said, from beneath the table. With some difficulty, she slowly stood up, armour creaking and joints popping. A faint flicker of magic rippled over, a mild-healing spell. Her violet-hued gaze flickered to Ilsa, then the muffins on the table.

Ilsa eased her chair back from the table and patted her lap. "I'll take you down to the pits just now, promise," she coaxed. Her physical form twisted and shifted, stretching taller to better fit the current circumstance. "Just a few more minutes."

Greta huffed, but accepted the impromptu cuddle and watched while her favourite muffin was torn into neat pieces for easy consumption. She tucked her head in the crook of Ilsa's neck and allowed her shoulders to slump in relaxation. "It's dangerous only if you don't know what you're doing," she explained. "Otherwise, it's a great way to let some steam off and you can be as wild and vicious as
you like. Last night was a heavy reaping in terms of Fabrine, but it was actually pretty quick, compared to some of the other times."

"Really?" Ilsa held up a piece of muffin to her lover's lips.

Greta took it from her and swallowed it in one bite. "You'll hear about it sometime today, I expect, but one of the little hounds—little as in young—decided to show his face last night. They were in top form—all of them. I think they had some sort of competition between them. Saved me a larger headache, I suppose."

"Oh? Which family?" Ilsa asked, interested. She hadn't ventured further than the sky-wards above their family residence, but Greta, being a Storm element holder, had wandered about, fighting to her heart's content—and apparent exhaustion. She would be sure to listen in on the night's gossip—after they were both safely settled in the pits. There was sure to be some interesting bits floating about.

Greta gave her a look, the impact somewhat ruined by her sleepy glare. "I like my head, thanks. I have no clue if I'm supposed to say something or not, so I won't. There's probably something tracking the name anyway." She looked over at Harry. "Has there been any news of your friend? The one who was taken?"

Theo rose from the table. He paused to squeeze Harry's shoulder, before moving over to the kitchen sink. "I haven't heard from Severus today," he said. "If there had been any change, I'm sure he would have sent a message. Why?"

"There were no new faces, if you know what I mean," Greta said. "I mean, there were some Circles that debuted for the first time, but they were nothing unexpected. I did not see your friend amongst them. If her Hound came for her, he certainly doesn't have her with him right now."

Harry released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Part of him was relieved at the thought that Hermione hadn't been caught up in the complicated situation of a reaping, but it worried him that she hadn't been spotted at all. "You didn't see her anywhere?"

Greta yawned. "I couldn't be everywhere," she said, lightly. "But she was not where I was."

"How can you be sure the—Hound—doesn't have her?"

"Because Hounds are notoriously possessive and needy creatures," Ilsa filled in. "They keep their spawn close and their consorts even closer, not that you'd hear any of them complain about it. If she was with him, you shouldn't have had to worry, because they are said to be very-well cared for. That aside, exposure to death magic—she would've been human, like you." Ilsa nodded at Harry. "That's the part that worries me. You can't stay at a hound's side or bear their mark, unless you give up your mortality. There are few exceptions to the rule."

"No exceptions," Greta said, darkly. "Those that are made usually require a price that is twice as steep as the first offer." The pale purple light in her eyes darkened as she turned and stretched her jaw.

Ilsa grimaced a second later, when she felt the strong fangs buried in her neck. "Greta," there was a hint of a whine in her voice. "We're leaving, already."

In answer, Greta merely looped her arms around her neck and held her steady.

The teapot refilled itself and Theo moved away from the sink. He made sure that all the cups were refilled and took his seat again. He added extra sugar to Ilsa's own and pushed it over with a
sympathetic smile. "We'll catch up with you at the hunt, later, Oretta. Thank you for coming."

"Was something wrong?" Charlie asked. He took another muffin, tearing it in half to give one piece to Harry. He munched on the other end himself, trying to recall if he'd forgotten something from the previous day. He didn't remember any specific reason for Ilsa to come over this early in the morning."

"I asked for a favour," Theo said, simply. He'd tell them about the obstacle course later. "Have you heard from Ebony?"

Charlie shook his head.

"She may send you a message later on. You'll want to spend some time with her today," Theo explained. "Make some time for it. Your mentored bond is still new and the more time you spend together, the more you'll learn about and with each other."

A shadow passed over Harry's face. He set his cup down and picked up the muffin half that Charlie had placed in front of him. He tried not to think of the muddle from yesterday. He tried not to dwell on the contradicting words that Ilsa had shared. A reaping sounded bad, but he was supposed to believe that his friend was alright?

"The-o," the name came out as something of a huff. Harry rested his head atop his arms folded on the table. He turned his head to the side, relaxing faintly when Theo's long-fingered hand ruffled his hair. "I need to find her."

Theo's gentle smile remained. He patted Harry's head. "We'll find her. Maybe a bit slower than you'd like, but we will find her."

Greta straightened up, licking blood-flecked lips. "Pits," she said to Ilsa. "Now. Or I'll really-"

"As you wish, my dearest," Ilsa deadpanned. "Theo—look after your own today, alright? Find me after lunch, if you like. You know where our box is. Off my lap, Greta," Ilsa gave her another shove. "I can't 'port us if you're not--"

Greta's thick, dark wings snapped out filling the kitchen. A thin, pale pink-purple haze of energy swarmed around her as she locked her arms around Ilsa's neck. "I'm well aware, just stay where you are, hm?"

There was a flicker of worry in Ilsa's eyes. There was no time for a warning, but she threw a hand out at the pile of favours on the table. A fierce golden ripple of magic washed over it, checking for harmful intent.

A flare of bright white flashed and both women vanished.

Theo had leapt to his feet, one hand over Harry's eyes. "Eyes, Charlie!" he'd called out, right before the transport spell had activated. His shoulders slumped as the magical tension in the room melted away. "That was a bit more eventful than I expected," he said, calmly. He withdrew his hand when Harry sat up straight.

"What was that?"

"That was a very specific type of storm-elemental transportation spell," Theo rubbed his face.

"Never look directly at it, if you can help it. You alright?" He looked between Harry and Charlie.

Charlie blinked. "Fine. What was wrong with her?"
Theo's lips quirked. "Gheyo business, I would imagine. Now, who would like to take a look at these favours? They'll keep on growing if we don't start somewhere…"

"How am I supposed to sort through these?" Harry wanted to know. He tugged at his hair, causing tufts to stick up in mismatched clumps. He'd opened several of them and each favour was just as different as the previous one. Some came with a magical photograph inside, usually a shot where the sender was smiling or waving. They were in different colours, shapes and sizes—all of them sealed with a wax imprint bearing an impressive coat of arms.

"One at a time," Charlie quipped. "I don't know if we can actually help though." He was inspecting his singed knuckles after Theo had shouted a warning a bit too late. He hadn't noticed any unpleasant magic and he'd thought that Ilsa's spell had removed all of harmful intent.

"Let me see," Theo said, tapping his shoulder. "You're a fire type, this shouldn't affect you." He took Charlie's broad hand in his and inspected the fingers, casting wandless healing magic at the tips.

"How come?" Charlie asked. He nodded at the pile of favours.

"Oretta's spell was likely just for harmful intent to Harry and our Circle in general." Theo frowned. "It should have picked that up…" He looked down at the slip of pale yellow paper that was resting atop the pile of favours. "Who sent it, Harry?"

Harry squinted at the elegant, scrolling scrip that spelled out Owen Calamaris. The name wasn't the least bit familiar, but the favour contained and invitation to dinner that afternoon, interspersed with plenty of flowery phrases and polite compliments. Harry pulled a face. "It's some Owen Calamaris," he said.

Theo started faintly. His golden eyes fluxed dark brown and his lip curled back in a half-snarl. "Calamaris?" the name came out as a hiss.

Harry took one look at Theo, before he caught sight of Charlie's troubled gaze. With scarcely a thought to the action, he made a slashing motion with his right hand and the favour burst into flame. Harry ignored the minute flinches of his Bonded, feeling a slight simmer of anger at the thought that whoever the mysterious Calamaris happened to be, they'd been troublesome enough to provoke a decidedly negative reaction in his Bonded.

"Harry?" Theo prompted a moment later.

"Anything you'd like to share?" Harry countered, patting the empty chair beside him.

Theo slid into the seat, still holding Charlie's hand, their fingers now intertwined. "The Calamaris may not be very—kind, towards us." He said, at last.

Harry huffed. "Which means what, exactly?"

"That's the one I saw yesterday?" Charlie asked, tugging on Theo's hand for his attention. "The one after we-?"

"Yes."

"Yes?" Harry gave him a look.

"While was I actively under Oretta's tutelage, we stayed in Nevarah for weeks at a time, before
slipping out into another realm or so." Theo took a deep breath. "Oretta was not quite speaking to her Circle as she is now and—while I did occasionally meet some of the others when I was with Aracle or even Bhindi, it was never with her. As you can see, they hold social standing in high regard and so of course, their children didn't play with next door neighbours."

"Shayla and Soula," Harry said, realizing where this was headed. "So what happened?"

"Oretta brought me back here to recover from a wing injury. I had an indoor extension and couldn't temper it to allow my wings to phase through. It was very painful. She brought me to see a dragel healer and left me with her Circle while it healed. I played with a group of young children, about my age, more or less."

Charlie squeezed their hands together, a sympathetic look in his eyes. His parents hadn't cared about things like pureblood mingling, so it'd never been an issue for him. But he had seen how some of the pure-blooded children at Hogwarts had always grouped together as if they were afraid any half-bloods and muggleborns would taint them. It had occurred to him at some point that perhaps they were simply acting as they had been raised.

"I meet a young man by the name of Yanek Doursen. He was the favoured son of a high noble house that had just fallen into tremendous disgrace," Theo began. "He was small and blond and with a mouth too big for his own sake. I rescued him from losing his head a few times, because he had no standing with the others and they weren't afraid to let him know it. At the time, I don't believe it had registered that he'd lost something. He didn't know what made them turn on him and I was too much of an outsider to really interact with them." He sighed. "Time passes differently though, so the last time I'd seen him, he'd decided that revenge was a good thing to have. He was upset over the way his family had been treated and swore that he would see their name restored."

"But the name was Calamaris?" Harry asked.

"Yanek bonded into the Calamaris clan. They're a political powerhouse, careful to never hold a position of power, say like the clan chiefs, but with enough backing that they can make things happen—without having to play by the same rules."

"What does that have to do with us?"

Theo squared his shoulders, his smile morphing into a grimace. "The last time I saw Yanek, he'd made sure that he'd stayed a Submissive. Now, there are ways to encourage your Submissive nature to stay, if the rank hasn't settled yet and he used them. The reason he did so, was because he knew I was an Alpha and he had decided that I would suit him best."

Harry looked at him sharply. "He what?"

"He became aggressive in trying to gain my attention and approval. He wanted me to court him and I refused—twice. When he didn't seem like he'd be giving up, I told Oretta. She made sure that we didn't meet again, the next time we came to Nevarah." Theo looked at the pile of fading ash. "He originally wanted one of the Calamaris Alphas, because it would have afforded him all the status and power that he desired. He said he made an exception for me, because we were 'friends' and that, with Ilisa's name behind us, we would be on equal social standing."

Green eyes flashed with emotion and Harry sat back in his chair. "He wanted you for your name?"

"For Ilisa's name that she'd passed down to me," Theo corrected. "But yes."

"And you saw him yesterday?"
"Yes. He was very—interested in Charlie," Theo scowled. "He mostly wanted to measure up, to see where I was and how I'd done for myself. He showed off three Pareya and his Alpha couldn't be bothered to come and say hello but—"

"But?" Harry prompted.

"He was building a vanity circle," Theo said. His brows furrowed together. "That's what we call building your Circle based on power and names, without any other considerations or allowances. He has several Bonded from several prominent families and they share his sentiments, else they wouldn't have bonded with him."

"And you're worried?" Harry guessed. "Why? It's not like he—oh."

Theo half-smiled. "Yes. Oh. I can't be certain that he won't try anything and he made it clear—before his Pareya arrived—that he would be willing to make an allowance, if I wanted to merge our Circles, except that he couldn't guarantee that I'd have the high rank I would've had, if I'd accepted his offer all those years ago."

Harry swallowed. "Did you ever-?"

"Yanek Doursen was a whiny, spoiled, cruel child." Theo said, stiffly. "Yanek Calamaris is cold, calculating and still cruel."

Charlie's grip tightened. "So yesterday was—what?"

"A reminder, I suppose." Theo said, lightly. "I can't say what he'll be up to—if anything—but I'd appreciate it if you both would avoid him, whenever you can."

It took several minutes for that news to sink in.

An air of gloom settled over the kitchen, though Harry seemed more irritated than surprised by the revelation. There were all kinds of the people in the realms, he knew that. Though he didn't have to like or understand it, really, he did have to acknowledge that it was true. He sneaked a look at Theo, who was busy casting more healing spells over an indulgent Charlie, who insisted he was fine.

Soft chimes sounded through the kitchen and Harry twitched, realizing it meant that someone was at the front door. He slid out of his chair, carrying the dishes to the sink, before turning towards the door.

"It's Soula," Theo said, as he passed them. "And maybe someone else."

Harry bit back a smile. He made his way to the door and opened it. Theo was right. It was Soula and a disgruntled Loren.

"Harry!" Soula launched herself forward, looping her arms around his neck in a happy hug. "Oh good, you're awake. I was kind of hoping you'd be up. You're not dressed for the hunt?" She drew back, holding him at arm's length to take in his casual attire. "Oh never mind, we'll just have to take you shopping today. You can't go through the whole hunt looking like that."

"Hi Soula," Harry managed. He found himself smiling, though it made his chest twinge. Hermione hugged him like that—hard enough to make him rock back a few steps, squeezing the air from his lungs and then stepping back to make sure that he was alright. "Won't you come in?"

"Thanks," Soula chirped. She linked arms with him and strolled right on in.
Loren stepped in after them, locking the door and casting a spell that flared a soft shade of orange, before trailing after them.

Harry hesitated, wondering if he ought to say something, when Soula towed him along the hallway and towards the kitchen. He was briefly reminded that this was one of their guesthouses, so of course they'd both be familiar with the place. They wound up in the kitchen, where Theo was setting out cups and plates.

"Oooh, so that's where the muffins went," Soula said. She helped herself to one and flashed a welcoming smile at both Theo and Charlie. "Hi!"

"Hi Soula," Theo said, kindly. "Are we late?"

"Hm? No. Mera and Dera are arguing over sash colours. That can take a few hours at least," she winked. "Unless someone decides to help them." Her happy gaze flickered to the table of favours.

"Are you answering favours? Oh that's so lucky! I only got a few yesterday, but I think that's 'cause Da is monitoring them." She huffed, setting her muffin down on a clean plate. "It's not like I'm about to accept a stupid one or something." She pouted. "You're so lucky you can choose for yourself."

Harry poured her a cup of tea and then looked to Loren.

The fire Gheyo pulled one of the chairs out from the table—a few feet away—and dropped into it soundlessly. He gave the slightest shake of his head at Harry's unspoken question and his sharp, orange-eyed gaze was fixed on Soula, with a vague hint of concern present.

"How are you sorting them?"

"Sorting?" Harry and his Bonded turned to stare at her as if the idea hadn't occurred to either of them. Apart from the Calamaris favour, Harry had yet to even process any of the others. "What do you mean?"

Soula rolled her eyes. "You know. Any ones that won't fit, just burn them off straightaway. That way, they're free to keep on sending favours to others and you can take your time with the ones you really want."

"Fit, like how?" Harry asked, cautiously. He took his seat once more, noting that something felt slightly off about his friend. Her cheer seemed a bit too forced and she was studiously ignoring Loren. "I mean, I don't want anything to do with the Calamaris Circle, I know that much." He bit his lip. "Probably not the Peverell's either, since they're family."

"That's a good start, but that doesn't help too much." She frowned. "You wouldn't know how to divide them, would you?" Her voice softened as the realization dawned. She winced. "Sorry. That was—tactless of me."

"That's alright," Theo said, smoothly. "How would you suggest—dividing them?"

"Well, I'd recommend burning every one that's female," Soula said, matter-of-factly. She smirked at the faint blush that appeared on all three of the young men's faces. That was amusing. "I wasn't expecting that reaction," she teased. "Unless you want a woman in your Circle—and the operating triad usually is a good indication of whether you're inclined one way or another—then burn those first. After that, look for any potential family connections, there's a spell for it and burn those. Usually, you won't really have any, because everyone knows everyone as far as family lines, but seeing you're new."
Harry nodded. "That makes sense." He looked towards the pile of colourful favours. "Is there a spell for that?"

Soula's smirk grew wider. "There is, actually, it's called seratius-divino. It looks like this," she extended one hand out, two fingers pointed, thumb, ring finger and pinky folded together. "Seratius-divino!" Magic leapt from her fingertips and about two-dozen favours flew out from the pile, stacking themselves into a neat tower between Harry and Soula. "And then just burn them," she said.

With a wave of his hand, Harry did so. He watched them curl up beneath the flames of red and gold, before a small pile of ash remained. A few minutes later, the ash faded as well, as if nothing had ever been there. "Thanks," he said, faintly.

"Other considerations are simple—don't take any Gheyos until you have an Ace. So any of them that require an immediate answer—say like, within the next week or so? Burn them. If you want to keep any others, you can keep them but make sure you check timestamps."

"Timestamps?" Harry turned a pale blue favour over in his hands. It was folded quite nicely and creatively, with a sketched emblem on the front, instead of a waxed seal. He didn't see any sort of timestamp anywhere.

"Use a revealing spell," Soula said. "Anyway, until you have an Ace, skip all the Gheyos, alright? You can add anything else you like in any order, but it's usually best to take the Ace near to last and they'll help you find Gheyos."

"Why?" Harry held out the blue favour as she cast the revealing spell. He saw a tiny string of numbers appear at one corner.

"Because that's the least insulting way to do it," Loren rumbled from his chair in the corner. "We follow our Aces—anywhere. We'd join a weak Circle, if they had a strong Ace and by doing so, the entire Circle is raised in strength and standing. If an Ace trusts you, then we're happy to do the same."

"You don't trust the Alpha?" Harry looked between Loren and Soula. He had a feeling he was missing something between them.

Soula fidgeted in her chair. "It's a bit different, Harry. An Ace, swears to you—not to Theo. If something were to happen to Theo and Charlie was keeping the ranks together, it's the Ace—not your Pareya—that would take charge of you. They'd be the ones to organize an attack, if necessary and keep things functioning—with Charlie’s help—until Theo could return. The dynamics only change if they swear to Theo, then they wouldn't swear to you and that only happens when it's a military Circle. It works in reverse, that if anything ever happens to the Submissive then the Alpha can depend on the Ace."

"Betas are unique, in that they are always a Beta and never an Alpha," Loren recited. His flame-coloured gaze settled on Charlie. "They hold the Beta ranks because they are best suited for it. An Ace has the forcefulness that an Alpha needs and no qualms about wielding their authority. They are also trained into their rank, so they can act appropriately submissive if needed, in the absence of their bonded Submissive."

Soula snorted. "Yeah, but you still wanted to fight Mum when she came back."

Loren growled in answer, but he didn't speak.
Harry's ears warmed. He turned back to the favours pile. "Sorting spells?"

It took a while to sort the favours into manageable piles. Soula was helpful with her spell knowledge and submissive upbringing, apparently taught how to handle such things from an early age. She helped him group the remaining four piles into neat stacks for later perusal.

"Now, keep in mind that because you haven't answered any of these, if you encounter them in the Hunt and they don't speak—it's because they're expecting you to make the first move. This was their chance and technically, they shouldn't engage you unless you've agreed to be courted."

"Thanks," Harry smiled at her. "What if there's someone I don't really want anything to do with?"

"Burn it straightaway," Soula said, briskly. "Especially if they send more than one and then after the third favour, you can hex it."

"Soula!" Loren's tone was disapproving. "That is not what you—do not listen to her." He sent a look at her and then a milder one to Harry. "Do not hex any favours, if you can control yourself," he said, firmly. "It is quite rude and a mark of immaturity. If you do not wish to have the favour repeated, then burn it with blue fire." He inclined his head in Charlie's direction. "You can use his flames; simply think of making it more permanent and it will happen. The Hunt may seem like a large and anonymous gathering, but I assure you, most Circles know who is who. Do not craft your reputation into something you cannot handle."

That was the most Harry had ever heard the fire Gheyo speak and he found himself staring in shock for a moment, before Theo nudged his foot under the table. He should say something.

"Right. Thanks," he ducked his head. "Anything else I should know?"

"If looks matter, sort by the ones with pictures first—burn the ones that don't fit what you're wanting. If there's even a hint of doubt, then burn it."

Harry frowned. "Isn't that harsh-?"

"Hardly. Shallow? Vain? Probably, but everyone is on some level or another. Besides, you don't want to wake up next to an ugly face for the rest of your life, do you? Spare yourself the headache, if you can."

"Soula!" The sharpness in Loren's voice couldn't be mistaken for anything other than what it was. He stood up from his chair, his fiery hair taking on its trademark flames. His orange eyes were fixed deliberately on Soula. "That was uncalled for."

Soula snorted. "He can sort them however he likes; I was only saying that-"

"I heard what you said and I disagree. Please look at me when you are speaking," Loren frowned. She twisted around in her seat, mouth open to speak when she caught sight of his flaming hair. He crooked a finger in her direction and she visibly shrunk down on herself. "Da-!"

"Could you come here, for a moment?"

"I was just offering an opinion. There's nothing wrong with having an opinion-"

"Could you excuse us, Theo?" Loren asked.

Soula started from her chair, standing up so quickly that it wobbled—steadied only by Harry's
quick hand. "They don't have to leave. This is their-" she stopped when Loren simply tilted his head to the side, the pale orange flames darkening to a rich red. Her hands fisted at her sides. "You're not my father. You can't order me around as if I'm one of-

"I am not your sire, but I am your parent. That affords me a certain amount of authority and a measure of respect, Soula. I understand that you're upset this morning for reasons that you chose not to share. I respect your request for privacy. I agreed to escort you here to visit your friend, even though there are a hundred other places I could be right now."

"I didn't make you come," Soula muttered, folding her arms over her chest. "You could have stayed. It's not like you were ordered to-

"And if you had left on your own after specifically being told to stay within the wards?" Loren shook his head. "Your Sire made his wishes quite clear."

"Dahlia spent the night with-"

"We are not speaking of your sister and she is old enough to make those choices on her own and is engaged. It is natural for her to spend some time with her Intended. She also belongs to a training house. Lady Paielda has her well in hand."

"Just because she's a Gheyo-!"

"You know, your temper—like your mother's—tends to cloud your judgment when you forget yourself." Loren said, calmly. "Harry is a new Submissive with no parental guidance or a mentor's hand to help in one of the most important and life-altering points in his life. Building a Circle is no small matter nor is it something to make light of. These are unique individuals that he will spend the rest of his life with. When you carelessly share a hurtful opinion, you might not see the hurt today—but that doesn't leave you blameless. You are responsible for every word that comes out of your mouth."

"Mera wasn't!" Soula snarled. "She didn't care that she drove-"

"What happened between your mother and your Mera has nothing to do with you." Loren interrupted. "That is solely between them and no one else." He sighed. "Come here, please."

Soula hesitated, before her shoulders drooped and she shuffled into range.

Loren stepped forward to close the gap, wrapping his arms around her in a warm hug. He rested his chin atop her head and gave a quiet hum of reassurance. She quivered for a moment, before her hands found the fabric in the spaces of his armour and tugged for purchase. He rumbled softly when she sniffled, moving one hand to cradle her head. "Better?"

Soula whined, softly.

Theo had been halfway up out of his chair, when Loren gave the faintest shake of his head that it was alright. He didn't relax, but he did sit down. He had thought there was something bothering the young woman, but had decided not to pry as it wasn't his place.

Charlie wore a knowing look on his face, having seen such moments with his younger siblings. He was impressed that Loren's fire had remained under control and his tone, while firm—had stayed calm. He also made a mental note to ask Ebony about blue flames. Magic was definitely half intent and half power, but if Harry would be drawing on his fire element, then it was probably best to actually know the spell. Ebony probably wouldn't mind.
Loren conversed softly with her in drage-l-speak for several minutes, before he cleared his throat to gain Theo's attention. "If you'll excuse us, my apologies for the disturbance." He looked to Harry. "Except for the last part—unless you are inclined that way and I would be surprised to know that—then all of her advice was sound. An Ace, like your Alpha and Beta, is one of the pillars of your Circle. Choose one that would die for you and trust their judgment."

"Like you trust Ilsa?" Harry shot back. He couldn't help it. He had to know.

A glimmer of approval shone in Loren's eyes. "Exactly," he said. "Exactly like how I trust her—with my life and with that of my Bonded." The hand cradling Soula's head moved down to rub her arm. "Kindly excuse us." He turned his attention to Soula. "Shh. Now's not the time for tears," he murmured. "You'll have to redo all that lovely make-up if you keep on like that."

"So she's upset at Ilsa?" Harry asked. He stood still in the centre of their bedroom while Theo whisked a ribbon around his neck and tied it into a neat bow. His shirt was long-sleeved with a slightly ruffled neck and his dress robe was crisp and styled to show off the fancy neckline. He allowed Theo's fussing, because he could tell that his Alpha was more agitated than usual after the Calamaris favour had appeared.

His empathy was in a lovely muddle, thanks to the hyped—or carefully suppressed, in Loren's case—emotions. On top of that, Theo and Charlie were still having invisible conversations over his head—not about him—but still. It was at that point that Harry had decided to set the favours aside in the interesting of readying for the daily excursion to the Hunt.

Theo was already impeccably dressed and Charlie was due out of the shower any minute. "Sort of," Theo allowed. "Lift your chin." He continued straightening the collar and smoothing the ribbon. "Oretta's absence has repercussions, Harry. No one simply leaves their Circle like that—not for years and then returns, expecting everything to be alright. It doesn't work that way. I wouldn't dare to presume what's happening between any of them, but it's probably costing them to show that united front."

"So why did she come over this morning?" Harry sat back on the bed when prompted by Theo. He obediently held his hands out for the cuff links and noted that they were crafted with the same simple design that his claim marks held. They were new and pretty. He smiled to himself, pleased that Theo was looking after the kind of details he'd never even considered.

"Probably because she was hoping to see Oretta," Theo hummed. He straightened the cuffs and nodded at his own handiwork. "Charlie!" he called over his shoulder. "Hurry up in there!" He'd made sure that Charlie showered last, in the interest of speeding things along. "Of all the times to be basking in hot water," he muttered.

Harry stifled a giggle and as Theo fixed his other cuff, he inched one sock-clad foot up Theo's thigh, light and teasing in his touch. When Theo didn't respond, Harry repeated the gesture. The lack of response led to locking both legs around Theo, trapping him in place. Theo looked up at him at once, puzzled—before the furrow in his brow eased.

"Adorable little thing, aren't you?" Theo purred. He released Harry's wrists and leaned down to capture his smirking lips in a sweet kiss. "You have terrible timing, my treasure."

"M'not adorable," Harry protested. His face warmed and he reached up to pull Theo with him as he leaned back onto the bed. "And I'm not little." He

"Are too," Theo chuckled, darkly. "You are so delectable that I can't help but want to devour you
whole every single time you show me that face." He allowed Harry to tumble them back onto the bed, taking care not to crush their outfits.

"What—f-face?" Harry gasped out, between wet kisses. He purred contentedly as Theo's hands ran up and down his clothed sides. He'd had Charlie this morning, but he'd missed Theo. It didn't help that Theo looked stunning in his formal attire and Harry's hands itched to strip it off of him.

"That—face." Theo whispered. Eyes wide and shimmering, cheeks flushed, pink tongue licking his lips, it was a lovely face indeed. Theo drew back, kissing the tip of Harry's nose. "And as I just said, you have terrible timing."

"Doesn't look like it's stopping you though," Charlie said. He waltzed out, wearing a towel slung low about his hips. Wisps of steam followed him out from the warm shower, water droplets disappearing as he stepped into the bedroom.

Theo growled faintly, sparing him a look from where he hovered over Harry. "Dress! We'll be late."

"Weren't the introductions yesterday?" Charlie asked, innocently dropping the towel and leaning over to rummage in the dresser drawers for a clean pair of pants.

Harry gave an appreciative chirp from his sideways view on the bed. Charlie's tattoos were out and swirling beautifully on his rich, tanned skin—not the least bit diminished in their loveliness by the myriad of scars from his dragon-handling. It didn't help that his equally tanned bum was on display either.

"There are events on every single morning," Theo said. He hovered over Harry for a moment, and then regretfully kissed him one last time. As much as he would like to take him then and there—it would be ten years until the next Hunt and he would have Harry all to himself for tonight. Bahn had sent word that they were 'porting in and Theo could meet them just inside the main entrance.

"Oh? What kind of events?" Charlie shimmed into a silky pair of navy blue pants and then fished out a pair of clean socks with more ceremony than necessary.

"Certain clans presenting, entertainment performances, the run of the Hounds—which I think none of you would want to miss—and some displays of talent by notable individuals." Theo slipped off the bed and held out a hand to Harry. He stayed strong, resisting the tug that was meant to pull him back. "Up, Harry."

"Hellhounds?" Charlie sent the towel flying to the drying rack as he made his way to the bed where Theo had his outfit laid out for him. "That kind of hound?" He made a face at the outfit on the bed. "Theo, there's a lot of ruffles here."

Theo rolled his eyes heavenward. Harry had said something to the same effect, but when he'd mentioned it the previous day, neither of his Bonded had offered an opinion. They didn't bother him—clothes were simply professional extensions of himself. In this case, it was important to present a united front. "We match." He said, meaningfully. "I'll skip the ruffles next time. Do you need help?"

"No. I think I can manage," Charlie said, straight-faced. "I think Harry could use some help."

Theo groaned. "Dress!" He turned back to Harry who was still tugging on his hand, an imploring look on his face. "No, Harry." Inwardly, he struggled to tamp down on the instinctive need to happily claim his ready submissive. "Tonight, alright?" He tugged back when Harry did; pulling
him up into his arms and peppering his sulking face with soft kisses. "Tonight, I promise."

Charlie buttoned up his shirt, holding up the length of ribbon. He stared at it in puzzlement. He knew enough of formal wear, but this was ridiculous. "A ribbon? Really?"

Theo muttered something beneath his breath and lightly set Harry down on the bed, gesturing for Charlie to circle around so he could reach them. He turned to face Charlie, straightening the white collar, before looping the ribbon around it. He deftly knotted the ends, turning the collar down over the satin strip, checking with two fingers to be sure it wasn't too tight. "How's that?"

"It's different," Charlie said, winking over Theo's shoulder at a pouting Harry. "It's a little tight though?" He reached up to tug at it.

Swatting his hands away, Theo unknotted the ribbon and tried again. "How about now?" He looked up in time to catch Charlie's too-innocent look. "Trousers!" He snapped, spinning him around and giving a not-so-gentle swat on the bum in the direction of the remainder of his outfit. "And hurry!"

Harry made a disgruntled sound in his throat and lurched forward to hug Theo from behind, this time, he made sure to wrap his legs around Theo's waist, digging his heels into a certain, sensitive place. "The-o!"

Theo's shoulders drooped.

"Incorrigible, both of you," Theo said, haughtily. He unfolded his shirt sleeves and fixed them with a simple spell. They automatically returned to their original state of perfection, stiff with the renewed flash of magic.

A pink-cheeked, thoroughly kissed, perfectly sated Harry, lay sprawled out on the bed, panting softly as his body came down from a very sudden, pleasurable high. He whined as Theo left him there, quieting when a soothing rumble came in answer. While he'd been quite satisfied with Theo's wicked hands, he hoped that there would still be more—tonight at least, when Theo had scolded him about walking and the strength of certain intimate healing spells.

He was still blushing from the sensual moment. In spite of his mutterings, Theo had been gentle and attentive—as always. He twisted around enough to see Theo circling to the other side of the bed, where he'd managed to bind Charlie's wrists to the headboard—to keep him from interfering.

Harry chirruped inquisitively. He would've preferred a brief cuddle before Theo started bustling around. At the moment, moving took too much effort, so he stayed where he was.

"Since neither of you can be bothered to hurry, I suppose I'll have to hurry for all of us," Theo said, smoothly. "Stay where you are." He patted Harry's stomach, before moving out of reach, heading for his Beta.

Charlie had tried to join them, when Theo had finally given in to Harry's insistence. Making their twosome a threesome would have taken more time—and Theo was trying to be efficient, thank you very much—so he'd simply chosen the next best option of handcuffing Charlie to the wrought bedframe.

Now, he approached, noting that his calculation had been somewhat off, as the cuffs forced Charlie to lean halfway over the bed, unable to properly straighten up. Theo bit back the pleased rumble in his throat as he smoothed Charlie's dress shirt over his back.
The picture Charlie had presented, bent over and cuffed—did things that he would have the redhead remedy—later. Much later. He would not be late. Theo felt taut muscle and unnaturally warm skin beneath his fingers, proof of Charlie's fire element riding close to the surface. Theo leaned over him, dipping one hand straight into Charlie's pants without preamble.

Charlie started faintly, twisting at the bonds that held his hands stuck to the headboard. "Theo," he protested, a slight flush visible on his tanned face. He hadn't expected his Alpha to be quite that direct. Theo's hands were delightfully wicked, startlingly smooth—and still covered with lube from taking care of Harry. "I—I," Charlie groaned. "Theo!"

"Yes?" Theo said, innocently. He deliberately leaned forward enough to put some of his weight on Charlie, even as he felt the redhead's knees quiver.

"Not—fair. I—wasn't—wouldn't—touch." Charlie managed to say.

"Even if I want you to?" Theo hummed. He reached over to loosen the leather cord that made up Charlie's usual ponytail. He loved the redhead's tri-colored hair and enjoyed the effect much more when it was left to fall to his shoulders.

Charlie glared at him over his shoulder, the effect ruined by the fact that his lips were parted and there were traces of red on his tanned face. It didn't help that flickers of flame were curling up from his fiery hair and the look in his rich blue eyes silently demanded more.

Theo smirked a moment later when Charlie spilled into his hand, shuddering in pleasure. He kissed the clothed shoulder and withdrew, a murmured cleaning spell taking care of business as he released the bonds on Charlie's wrists. There would be more time to play—later.

Charlie straightened with a muted groan. He would have to remember that spell for future use—not that being cuffed was a bad thing, but still. He hadn't known Theo had that in him.

"Trousers," Theo repeated, more patiently this time. He added a playful smack for good measure, when Charlie didn't seem to move.

Trousers were the very last thing on his mind. Charlie growled softly, catching Theo before he could move too far away. He made use of his height, gifting a kiss of appreciation for the too-brief moment between them. He felt Theo's pleased hum and the hint of smugness that travelled down their shared bonds. He laughed to himself and released the smaller dragel when he began to squirm. "What about you?"

"Apparently I am in possession of more self-control than both of you combined," Theo huffed. He could manage until night. Maybe. "Dress—and do not make me repeat that again!"

Harry found his energy when Theo stood between his legs a moment later, surveying his naked figure with open appreciation and adoration. He knew he was blushing from head to toe and didn't care. Theo didn't seem to mind anyway. He shivered as Theo stroked one bare leg, and then reached for the pile of neatly spell-folded clothes off to his left.

Theo ignored his whine and patiently dressed him one article at a time. Socks, then pants, then undershirt, then dress shirt and trousers. He kissed and bit at Harry's neck, to settle him when Harry had begun to protest again—making another attempt to try and divest Theo of some of his own clothing. Of course, Theo wasn't having any of it and as before, managed to stay entirely clothed.

Expert fingers tied, buckled and knotted at a speed Harry hadn't expected. He thought that it would
make him feel smothered to be dressed as if he were a child, but Theo was delightfully quick and sweet. He was rewarded with a warm kiss when he accepted Theo's hand to slide off the bed. His legs wobbled for a moment and Charlie chuckled off to his right.

Harry sniffed, ignoring his knowing look as he watched Theo fuss over Charlie next. Charlie wasn't any more used to the extra finery than Harry was, it seemed, but he was patient as Theo tugged, tucked, and smoothed his outfit into order. He chirred softly when Theo gave Charlie's chest a final pat. "Ready?"

"We'd best be," Theo said, dryly. "Come, my treasure," he fairly purred.

Sandwiched between the two of them, Harry felt his empathy swirl and stretch out from him, brimming with happiness. He watched as Theo caught Charlie's chin and held him steady for a kiss, even as his free hand cupped the back of Harry's neck. Charlie's hands were equally divided, one grasping Theo's shoulder and the other locked around Harry's waist.

In that single moment, Harry felt completely and entirely cherished.

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THE HUNT : MAIN ENTRANCE

"...and they'll be here," Bahn said, a slight hint of irritation in his voice. "Honestly. You lot can bear to stand around for another minute so that I can—Harry!" The elfin submissive shot a look of pure relief in their direction as he spied them passing through the main entrance. "What happened to you three? You were late. I was worried."

"They're fine, Bahn," Takar trailed after him, a wary eye kept on the growing crowds. His lips twitched when he caught sight of Harry's blush, Charlie's loose hair and Theo's perfectly straight face.

"Are you alright?" Bahn asked, scooting closer for his welcoming hug. Camalis was cradled to his chest in a soft, fabric sling. Alma hovered nearby, her sharp, dark-eyed gaze alternating between her Sub and her son.

"Fine, Bahn," Harry managed. He hugged his friend back and found himself smiling at the wide-awake baby peering curiously at him. "Sorry we're late—that's my fault, I wasn't fast enough."

Charlie choked. There were too many ways to interpret that.

Harry kept his smile fixed on his face as he inched one foot back and stepped on Charlie's toe as hard as he could. He didn't have to be an empath to know what his Beta was thinking.

"I hope you weren't waiting too long," Theo said, smoothly. He stepped between Charlie and Harry, effectively separating them. "Morning Takar, Bahn."

"Theo," Takar said, simply. "We're fine. The little bits are restless, but they're fine too."

"I'm not a wittle bith, Da!" Bruen's lisping protest came from where he'd followed his parents through the crowd by keeping a hold on Takar's trouser leg.

"You're right, you're a very small bit," Takar bent down to pick him up. "Say hello?"

"Hi Haweh," Bruen dutifully recited, before hiding his face in his father's neck.

They followed Bahn back to where his Circle waited in varying degrees of impatience. Delani's frown eased a fraction when she laid on eyes on Harry and she straightened up, her crossed arms falling to her sides.

"That's enough," she said, quietly. All the murmurs and voices stopped at once. She held her stern gaze over each of them until every single one of her Bonded, acknowledged the silent assertion of authority. She was not happy with their behavior and she would address it—later, when they weren't in public. "You are free to wander about and mingle as you please—after the first presentation. I'll see you all at dinner—it can be a late dinner. Children, that includes you. Now, orderly file. Thank you."

Bahn and Bhindi wore identical looks on their faces that had their Bonded scrambling to comply with Delani's simple instructions. Soon enough, everyone was gathered in the stands, choosing their seats in the private box from the day before.

Ilsa and Greta were nowhere to be found, Harry discovered. Neither were Loren and Soula. Dahlia and Ariki were there, minus Mimei and Wikhn. A scowling Lorelei joined their ranks along with a few more of the older Deveraine children that Harry hadn't seen before. He guessed they belonged to Bhindi's side—and then he realized they were bonded.

Their parents greeted them enthusiastically and introductions were made all around. Kandra, Harry noted, was not among them. He wondered about the young woman who had given up her dragel heritage to live as an Elf, in order to escape the ones who had ruined her life.

The newcomers eventually seated themselves and no one insisted on introductions or other formalities. It was simply as if he belonged and that was that. Harry was relieved to sit back in his seat just in time to hear the announcement for the first block.

"...and so we welcome, Lady Surajini Kalzik and her esteemed Circle, along with her sisters Roshini and Tirajini. Together, they are the pillar of health for Nevarah and this morning, they offer a blessing of good health, long life and harmony with all. Lords and Ladies, welcome—The Kalzik Clans!"

Harry leaned forward in his seat, feeling a sudden thrill coursing through him. The giant floating screens broadcasted the footage from below, showing a colourful throng of dragels. A warm, strong wave of magic rippled out from the centre stage and through the entire stadium. Harry sucked in a breath, feeling that familiar magical signature washing over him. He trembled, eyes closing faintly. He could recognize it as Surajini—but now he could definitely see where Quinn's magic had come from.

He smiled. This was definitely worth the rushed morning.

The Kalzik Clan's blessing was a thing of beauty.

It began when two lines of single-file edged the long, silvery-white walkway from end to end. The women were dressed in shimmering lenghas and the men wore matching sherwanis. Gold, silver and every other colour imaginable was displayed between them all.

Once everyone was in position, they began to march in place.

What sounded like a tiny smattering of sound grew to be an ocean of rhythm until a steady, thrumming beat reverberated through the air. A lone figure strolled out to the centre, clad in bright pink, purple and orange—Surajini—when her face was visible on the screen. She eased herself
down to a seated position; one knee bent in front of her as she bowed her head and rested her hands on the ground on each side of her.

The rhythm stopped.

Warm air continued to blow through the stands, flickers of golden light proving that it was no natural breeze.

Surajini lifted her head and one hand. When she opened her mouth, the voice that left her lips was haunting and mesmerizing. It rang clearly in the magically-charged air, stirring in the soul and curling around the heart. It demanded nothing, but left behind a deep, soothing calmness that could not be denied.

At an unseen signal, the dance began.

What a dance it was!

In a continuous swirl of rainbow, each step seemed to flow directly into the next and the accompanying melody rose even higher. However, wherever Surajini moved, glowing imprints from her feet were left behind on the stage. She was outlining an intricate pattern. Her sisters walked out from opposite ends of the walkway-turned-stage. Together, they joined hands and their glowing footsteps completed a beautiful symbol that stretched from one end of the walkway to another.

Then, the others began to contribute.

One by one, they left their posts, dancing out to join the three women in the centre. They added a flare of magic to a tiny flame at the centre and then returned to their appointed position.

Too soon, the dance came to an end and the tiny flame was now a towering pillar of sparkling, sea-green energy with flecks of gold and silver scattered throughout.

"Lords and ladies," the Announcer said. "The Kalzik Clan. May the blessings they have asked on your behalf, be imparted to you now. Happy Hunting."

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Harry gripped Theo and Charlie's hands tight as the massive wave of magic exploded out from the walkway. He waited for the overwhelming, crushing pressure—but instead, only a gentle, tingling feeling danced over him as the visible wave stretched out. He heard Camalis gurgle and Bruen giggle. The others laughed and began to applaud.

"Are you alright?" Theo asked, squeezing his hand back. "It's a layered healing spell, meant to heal minor things and give hope."

"I feel very hopeful," Charlie said, lips twitching. He leaned over and nuzzled Harry's cheek. "It felt warm."

"It felt cool," Theo contradicted, brow furrowed.

"It felt like home," Harry said, quietly. He released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. It had filled him with a strong sense of courage and belonging, as if he could survive anything, because there was somewhere that would always welcome him back. "It feels like home," he repeated.

Tears welled in Harry's eyes, but did not spill over. Saying those words reminded him of every
single time his heart had ached with the reality that his blood family did not care for him—before he'd come here, before Theo, before Charlie.

Now it brought new meaning to the term, home. He had one now. A place to belong, a place to return to—even if it was a whole other realm. They both squeezed his hands, gently—a mixture of emotion and magic filtering through their shared bonds. Harry took a slow breath, holding the feeling in his mind even as the applause built up around him and the Kalziks exited the stage.

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Harry soon found himself outside of the stadium while the others paired off amidst hasty farewells and a host of new faces. He watched as Theo was dragged off by Delani to meet a group of influential nobles. Bahn and Bhindi were required to pay their respects to a few new faces that had turned up overnight, to maintain peace—a note that Harry translated as having to meet the in-laws to ensure that everything continued on smoothly.

Charlie was left with him, until Ebony appeared with two bodyguards and a walking scribe. She'd greeted them both and with Harry's permission, whisked Charlie away for a casual lunch that might include the clan chiefs. Harry waved a teasing smile on his face as he watched his Beta disappear into the crowd, an expression of mild panic on his face.

He was glad that they weren't smothering him, though he hadn't been prepared for the sudden weight of being alone after the crowded company for the past hour. The tingle of loneliness made him scowl and he stepped into the crowd, intending to simply walk wherever his feet wanted.

A slight tug on his empathy gift had him turning in confusion. He slammed face-first into a bare chest and warm, calloused hands.

"Excuse me?" A rough voice sounded from somewhere overhead. "I didn't see you—you're shorter than—I think you'd better sit down. Are you alright?" The warm hands gently ushered him forward.

Harry managed to puzzle out that he was sitting on the ground, away from the passing crowd, while the stars faded from his eyes. He hadn't been walking that fast—but he also hadn't expected to walk right into the stern fellow currently leaning over him.

"Er-" Harry began and stopped.

The Indian fellow was dressed in a very familiar outfit. Dark green and gold trousers with a fancy waistband and a matching dupatta looped around his neck. One half of the silky dupatta fell down his back, while the other hung in front. Pitch black hair was pulled back into a neat topknot and heavy gold earrings hung from his ears. Other gold accents decorated his muscular arms and his eyes were a surprising shade of green-gold, complimenting his darker complexion.

"Hi," Harry managed. He was aware the fellow was speaking, but his head was ringing and he had yet to figure out what kind of reaction it was and why. His magic had twisted a scant half-second before he'd walked into the fellow.

"Ach," the fellow muttered. "You haven't heard a word I said. I didn't hit you that hard and most people move out of the way before my personal shield even activates."

"Ale!" A familiar voice rang out. "Where are you—Harry?" It was Dyshoka, threading her way through the crowd, clad in brilliant purple and blue with golden accents. She was barefoot and her arms were filled with a picnic blanket and two woven baskets. "Alejandro!" She scolded at once. "Take these." She thrust them into his arms and helpfully smacked him over the head. "Tell me you
didn't walk into him. I told you to moderate that ridiculous shield of yours."

Harry swallowed. "Dysho-"

"You poor thing," Dyshoka crooned. She offered him a hand up from the ground and began casting diagnostic spells. "Really, Alejandro. He's magic sensitive you know. That's why you shouldn't build things into spells that don't need to be there."

A soft tingle of healing magic helped the last of the stars to vanish and Harry jumped when Dyshoka smacked Alejandro on the shoulder, her lips puffed in a pout. "You never listen me, you brute."

Alejandro merely perked a brow and readjusted his new armful of picnic preparations. "If he's fine, I'll see you upstairs."

"Upstairs?" Dyshoka rolled her eyes. "Arielle. Fine. Go. Don't walk into anyone else—and take that spell off!" She huffed, turning back to Harry. "I'm sorry about that. He's been in a terrible mood all morning. Older brother of mine. He usually has better manners though. Are you feeling alright? I didn't expect to see you today."

"I'm fine now. What was that? I didn't even sense anything."

Dyshoka gave a sad smile. "That's part of his specialty. He's a different kind of healer than the rest of us—actually handles more therapy than you'd think." She shook her head. "He operates on the idea of 'tough love' though and sometimes, it makes me want to hit him over the head with his own thick-headedness!"

Harry winced. He didn't think that was possible, but he didn't bother to correct her. "It's alright. Nothing serious."

"Nothing serious doesn't have you sitting down to catch your balance," Dyshoka said, tartly. "How are you managing today? Enjoying the morning?" She pulled him into a friendly hug.

"Very," Harry said. He allowed her hug and hugged her back. "That was a very nice presentation."

"The blessing?" Dyshoka smiled. "Thank you. We practiced quite a bit for it. Summoning that much magic with only pure intent takes a great deal of concentration." She smiled. "Everyone helped." She looked from side to side, her hands on her hips. "Alone, I see. Are you off Hunting then? I won't keep you if you are."

"Theo had Alpha things to do and Charlie's mentor came," Harry resisted the urge to shrug. He hadn't figured out what to do next—yet. "I was—I-"

"No one in mind at the moment?" Her smile softened.

"Well, I just-"

"Why don't you join us?" Dyshoka said, perking up at once. "You don't have to, but it'll be fun." She held out a hand, wiggling her fingers invitingly. "It's on the skyline level."

"What's the skyline level-" Harry started to say, when she gave up on waiting for him to take her hand and simply leaned forward, looping her arm around his.

"Walk and talk. An adorable sub like you shouldn't stand about in the hall like this if you don't want to be approached." Dyshoka made a soft clicking sound with her teeth. "If you're worried, I'll
ask Mama. She shouldn't mind." She looked to Harry. "There's always room for one more, in fact—Mama!" She stood on tip-toe and waved above the crowd.

Harry found himself well-hugged in the following minutes as Surajini arrived, the rest of her Circle in tow. They had been following the crowd up the walkway and most of them continued on, while she broke away to see who had called her. She handed over her armful of picnic things to Dyshoka and caught Harry up in a warm, motherly hug. She held him at arm’s length a moment later, automatically casting a barrage of healing spells and tipping his chin up to check the light in his eyes.

"You look much better than yesterday," she proclaimed, releasing him at once. Her smile turned fond. "How are you faring?"

"Darling, you didn't even give him a chance to speak—and you've already pronounced him in good health," Patrick teased. "How can you expect him to answer?"

"Shush, you," Surajini perked a brow. "I don't want to hear that from the man who had a lecture about Quinn's-"

"I'm shushing. Very quiet now," Patrick interrupted. A faint flush teased his pale features. "Shouldn't you be paying attention to the lunch provisions before Hiram decides that-" he stepped out of the way when Surajini whirled around to see what he meant.

"Hiram, what are you doing—no! Don't put that there," she started off, angling towards her Alpha. "Take everything straight up to the skyline floor. No stops. I have a sensitive stomach and I won't risk any of the sides being contaminated by a-"

Their voices faded and Patrick had to chuckle, a faint gleam in his eyes. He flinched, predictably when Dyshoka smacked his shoulder. "Da! That's not nice."

He offered a smile that was a touch too innocent to be believed. "Of course not. How terrible of me."

"Da!" Dyshoka rolled her eyes. "Harry can join us today, can't he?"

"Hmm-?" Patrick's blue-green eyes locked onto Harry and his lips quirked. "Of course he can, if he wants to. Freedom of choice, remember?" He looked at Harry. "Would you like to join us? You're more than welcome."

"That'd be—nice." Harry allowed.

"Lovely," Dyshoka pronounced. "Now, I'm off and if you see Dahlia—don't tell her you saw me."

"Oh? Are we playing that again?"

"Shush." Dyshoka fluttered a hand. "We have a bet running—and she knows it. If I hear from her that she heard from you-"

Patrick held both hands over his mouth. He waited until Dyshoka was out of sight, before his hands dropped back to his sides. A fond look stole over his features. "It seems that all the women in my life are destined to tell me to keep my words to myself," he hummed. "This will be interesting. Shall we, Harry?"

Harry found himself on the skyline level, which turned out to be the highest section of the stadium,
without a hint of shade in sight. The overhanging awnings for the sections below made up the floor of the skyline level itself. The Kalziks—and there were many of them—simply showed up and began to spread out blankets, chairs and tables.

Snacks appeared on the tables, a few simple games were set out and a shaded pavilion was magically constructed to allow some respite from the sun. Harry was ushered into a corner of the shaded space, given a glass of chilled fruit juice and a soft, fluffy pillow to sit on. He sat and sipped the juice, watching them bustle around. Hiram paused to welcome him with a nod and a pat to the head. Patrick winked and snuck him a sweet pastry filled with coloured coconut.

Quinn and Kyle were nowhere to be seen. Harry wondered where they went. He ate the strange snack and decided it was good. Licking his fingers, he settled down to observe. No one had asked anything of him as yet and those that had paid him some form of notice, treated him as an honored guest.

Surajini was in top form, snapping out orders left and right, while her Bonded hurried to comply. It was quite clear that they'd done this routine before, because in a matter of minutes, the plain open space became a cosy, temporary shelter. Once done, she called them to order and requested an informal itinerary.

"Make sure you take enough protein balls," Surajini held up a platter in one hand, bearing some rounded snacks rolled in sesame seeds. "And if you're skipping the ritual tonight, then do not have any caffeine after seven, because you'll be needed for the morning rites. Understood?"

"Yes, Mama," a general chorus went up from her gathered offspring. Some took the protein treats, while others simply came for a hug and kiss, before disappearing back down to the lower levels of the stadium. When things were mostly calm again, Surajini joined him in the shaded spot, her sharp eyes catching the smudges of colour on his fingers, before she passed him a napkin.

"I will not ask which one of those gave you that," she grumbled. "But you should have an extra glass of juice and probably a protein ball. There's an herbed mixture in that sweet that helps with digestion." Her eyebrow twitched. "Patrick—we're missing two, where did you leave Quinn and-

"We're here!" Kyle wheezed, standing atop the staircase. He allowed himself to be pushed out of the way by a vaguely irritated Quinn who came up behind him, carrying a large silver platter of foodstuffs, covered by a colourful cloth. "He wouldn't rush the baking spell!" He trotted over to the shaded space and collapsed dramatically into Surajini's lap.

A laugh bubbled up in Harry's throat. Kyle made great faces. Neither of the duo seemed to have noticed him yet.

"My poor darling," Surajini said, dryly. She bent and kissed his damp brow, smoothing back the wild tufts of forest green hair. They fell perfectly into place beneath her preening fingers. She summoned a glass of juice to her hand and a straw, before she offered it to him. "Did you find the dye?"

Kyle grinned, sitting up and moving to the side. He took the drink, leaning against her when she rested an arm around his shoulders and squeezed gently. "I did, it's in my pocket."

"I can always count on you, can't I?" Surajini hummed. She kissed the top of his head. "Thank you, darling."

Kyle's grin grew wider. He settled comfortably where he was, soaking up the attention. Light brown eyes landed on Harry and Kyle blushed. "H-harry!"
Quinn’s head snapped around at once. He'd just set his platter atop the refreshment table and was nodding in answer to a silent conversation taking place with Patrick. Teal eyes grew round and wide when they landed on Harry and scarcely a second later, his lips curved into a happy smile.

Patrick hid a smile of his own, the expression eerily similar. He bent forward and murmured something that had Quinn leaving the table and moving over to the shaded space. He winked at Harry and busied himself at the table, deliberately turning his back to their little group.

"You forgot to add the fennel, didn't you?" Surajini asked, holding out her free hand. "What does your father think he's doing? I can see what he's putting into those little-"

Quinn shrugged. He dropped to his knees, filling the space between his mother and Harry. He took her hand and touched it to his cheek, eyes locked with her to maintain the mental connection.

"Silly boy," Surajini murmured, her attention already redirected. She kissed his cheek and patted the space beside her. "Sit properly. Did you use sunscreen? You're looking paler than him." Her head tipped in Patrick's direction.

A pale pink blush suffused his cheeks and Quinn nodded. He tipped his head at Harry.

"I don't know, darling, I didn't ask." Surajini leaned forward. "Harry, dear, did you use any sunscreen and do you need it?" Her brow furrowed. "I don't remember a charm on you for that. Your Alpha is Earth, so I wager you'd be alright for a little while. Your Beta's fire, so that would imply some sort of immunity, but that's not always the case."

Harry shook his head. "I don't usually use them, but-" he thought back to the day on the beach with the Deveraines. Bahn had cast a charm on him then and at one point, Theo had fussed over him for staying in the sun. "I guess I should?"

Surajini smiled. She reached across Quinn, holding out her hand to Harry. "Here, I'll do it. You shouldn't use those charms on yourself; they work better when applied by a third-party."

"Really?" Harry lightly touched her fingers, surprised to find that her magic was even softer and lighter than his first impression of her. Her strength could be tempered, it seemed. It curled around him, brushing a deliberate coolness over his entire figure.

"Surajini-!" Hiram called from the far end of the floor. "A moment, please?"

She turned, wrinkling her nose when her sharp brown eyes zeroed in on the reason for her Alpha's polite summons. "The morning's only begun. Lord Rampal, already?" She huffed. "Can't be helped, I suppose. Be nice to our guest, you two." She rose, smoothing her colourful skirts with dignity, before gliding forward—the picture of elegance. Her voice faded as she drew near. "Lord Rampal, how nice to see you on this lovely day..."

Quinn hissed softly. Kyle elbowed him. "Don't. He can probably hear us," he spun a thread of magic on his fingers, throwing up a small sound shield. "At least wait until I cast it." His eyes darkened as he watched the fancy lord greet Surajini with a kiss to her hand. "Leech." He muttered, ignoring the look that Quinn sent him. "He is and you can't tell me otherwise," he snapped. "Hey Harry. Did you like the presentation?"

"It was great," Harry set his empty glass on the ground. He couldn't see anything wrong with the high noble, except that his eyes were an odd, red color and his scent was slightly off. "I didn't see you though." He'd looked for the shock of forest green hair, but hadn't been able to find it. He'd seen Quinn though—it'd been easy to pick out him and Patrick, by their trademark blond hair.
Quinn had been gorgeous and perfectly coordinated.

Quinn's shoulder shook in laughter and he pointed to himself, then to Kyle and pantomimed wrapping his dupatta round his head, teal eyes dancing with mischief.

Harry's jaw dropped. "He was the one next to you? The one with the wrapped-?" It had been easy to pick out Quinn amongst the others.

Kyle snickered. "Guilty as charged. Not everyone appreciates a Fae in the midst of the esteemed Kalzik clan," his look turned fond. "Mama doesn't care though, so she improvised and said that it would look better if some of us had turbans and some didn't. I don't think anyone would have dared to tell her otherwise."

"But you're an Earth Fae—wasn't it an Earth blessing?" Harry asked. He thought it would have made more sense to have a naturally inclined earth-creature to assist with such an important elemental spell.

Quinn shrugged and rolled his eyes, making a twirling sign beside his head.

That, Harry could understand. "Crazy. Right. There's too many like that," he said, before he could stop himself. It worked though and both boys laughed right along with him, Quinn's silent huffing laughter and Kyle's dignified chuckles.

"If it were only that easy," Kyle gasped out. "I knew I liked you for a reason." His eyes sparkled merrily. "There are too many of them," he nudged Quinn with one foot. "He can play Creeper with us, right?"

Harry choked. "What?"

"It's a game. Like tag—but more complicated," Kyle flapped a hand at him. "He can even be on your team, what do you say?"

Quinn gave him a withering look, eyes narrowed.

Harry swallowed. He didn't have to read between the lines to understand the sibling conversation taking place away from his ears. "I've never played-"

"All the more reason for you to join us," Kyle said, smoothly. "And he can wear a bracelet or something, Quinn, it's not like you can't communicate any other way." He frowned. "No using that spell though—or I'll tell."

Quinn huffed, folding his arms over his chest.

"I will—I swear!" Kyle snapped. "You know what it does to you and besides, the specialist is coming, isn't he? Can't you just avoid it for a few more days?" He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Do you see what I have to put up with?" He asked. "This lout!"

Another laugh threatened to come up when Kyle thumped Quinn and earned an affronted look for his declaration. Harry sniggered. "What is Creeper—besides complicated tag?"

"It's fun," Kyle said, cheerfully. "One's the Creeper and he's supposed to hunt you down, only you have two shots to defend yourself. If you hit him, you're the Creeper and you can collect his treasures. Everyone has a treasure to guard and the Creeper is supposed to creep in and steal them. If you've managed to tag everyone by the end of three hours, you can keep all the loot."
"What kind of treasure?"

"Depends on who's playing, really. Trinkets, charms, snacks, jewellery." Kyle shrugged. "It's mostly for fun. It could also be something like a no-questions asked favour for use sometime in the future, a kiss, arranging a date with a sibling, help with your homework, a rematch—whatever you like. It really depends on who's playing. Everyone offers something."

Harry hesitated. It sounded interesting, but he didn't have anything to trade.

"You can even play in teams, which means you have four chances to tag the Creeper instead of two," Kyle winked. "It'll be fun, promise."

Quinn shook his head and said something that had Kyle blushing furiously.

"Of course, I'd pair with Emily!" He sputtered, lunging for the smirking Quinn. "And I'll thank you to keep those thoughts to yourself. As if you wouldn't do the same if you had your eye on someone-!"

"I don't have anything to add," Harry said, before they could start on each other again.

Both Kalziks turned to stare at him. Kyle stopped in mid-strangle and Quinn paused in mid-headlock. He straightened up, effectively tackling Kyle to the ground and pinning him there with one knee and both hands, lips pursed in thought. He shifted to sit on top of Kyle, and then pantomimed buttoning cuffs.

Harry looked down at his wrists and the fancy cufflinks that Theo had given him that morning. It was his first time wearing them. That was an option, he supposed.

"Ow, Quinn! Lemme up," Kyle wriggled. He caught sight of Harry's conflicted look. "Hey, if you play with us, we usually win. You won't lose whatever you bet and if you do, we'll just play again." He gave another wriggle. "Quinn—I'm serious. Off!"

Quinn slipped off of him, patting his head.

Kyle gave him a dirty look and sat up with a huff. "You're lucky I don't have my runes on yet," he muttered. "Come on, Harry. It'll be fun." He stretched up to his full height and offered a hand. "Most of us Kalziks play; you'll be in good company."

Harry started when Quinn's cool, smooth hand slipped into his own. He felt a gentle prod at his mental shields, accompanied by a wisp of Quinn's magic.

You don't have to play if you don't want to. I'll tell Kyle to back off.

The thought scrolled through his head and Harry found himself staring into those mesmerizing teal eyes. He could only think that Quinn's magic was beautiful and special—and that he had been right. Next to Theo, Quinn's hands felt like magic.

Playing sounded like a great idea. Playing with Quinn was even better—and no. Absolutely not thinking in that way at all—Harry blushed.

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THE HUNT : NEVARAH : DAY 1, NIGHT, REAPING

Lord Cunningham materialized in the darkest sliver of shadow present in the Earth Royal's quarters. He ignored the way the King and Queen started at his sudden entrance and strode into the
centre of the room. His guess had been accurate, the other royals had also gathered there, deeming the Earth quarters to be the most secure and private out of all other elements.

He offered a deep, formal bow, holding the bland smile in place as he straightened up. "Begging your royal pardons, your highnesses, but I come tonight with a very specific request."

The Earth King exchanged a look with the Fire Queen. "Speak your mind, shadowed one," he said.

Lord Cunningham inclined his head, one hand still fisted over his heart. "Due to the matter handled by Prince Raspen in respect to the disappearance of Maurice Elswood, I humbly request permission to Hunt on behalf of my Submissive, Lady Mariana."

The Air Queen stiffened in her position behind the sofa where Princess Dawne sat up straight. Barely concealed worry was visible in both pairs of silver eyes, but neither of them spoke. The Air King looked to Lady Bianca, who quirked her shoulders in an unladylike shrug.

"Do you request this in your full capacity?"

"I do and I ask it on Lady Mariana's behalf. There is something disturbing at work. It should be taken care of immediately." Lord Cunningham said.

"Your submissive is a bloodthirsty viper," the Fire King said, coldly. "Her last rampage caused us a tremendous amount of collateral damage in terms of."

"But it is, Maurice, my love," The Fire Queen rested a hand on her Bonded's arm. "He suffered more than anyone should ever have to and he survived."

"You have my permission," Prince Raspen said, quietly.

All heads in the room turned to him.

He stood at the fireplace, a scroll of parchment in hand, a grim look on his face. "You are acting on my behalf, anyway, so I will take full responsibility."

"Raspen!" The Earth King said, sharply.

"My apologies, Father, but it is upon my head." Prince Raspen said, coolly. He cast a look at the perfectly still Lord Cunningham. "You would simply act accordingly, if we refused, would you not?"

"You are too kind, my prince, to grant hope to those who walk within the shadow," Lord Cunningham said. His voice was soft and smooth, the smirk on his lips befitting that of any cursed hound of death. "It would be rude of me to presume."

"Go! Do what you must and if you can be bothered to leave nothing in your wake, then do so. I will not have your recklessness endangering all of us. Be discreet and invisible. If you cannot do so, then bear my wrath upon your hide." Golden eyes fluxed to pitch black. "Am I understood, oh great shadow?"

"Your wish is my only reason for existence."

"Swear it." Prince Raspen demanded.

"I swear it shall be done, my prince."

"Go!"
There was a vicious twist in the slender shadow and it dissolved into nothing. The light in the room flickered and a heavy unpleasantness hung in the air.

"Is that wise?" Princess Dawne asked. She leaned into her mother's supportive hand.

Prince Raspen scowled at the empty space and threw the parchment into the fire. "That isn't of any consequence now, is it?"

"You do not have to shoulder everything, Raspen." Princess Ebony finished braiding her hair and threw it over her shoulder. "I hope you're prepared for what they'll do though. They're on earth right now, aren't they?"

"Earth?" The Earth royals exclaimed in unison.

"Don't, Father, Mother," Prince Raspen said, when both of his parents moved towards him. "It is on my head as I said. Now, will the reaping commence tonight as usual?"

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**THE EVANSONS : DAY 1, REAPING**

"That's two for me!" Arrow whooped. He gave a little shimmy, magic shimmering at his fingertips. "Ha! I knew I hit him."

"No fair, Arrow!" Wistar scowled up at him. "You cheated!"

"He can't cheat, sweetie," Peony consoled her youngest brother. "He's just a bit taller than you and he's learned to use his height to his best advantage. You'll learn that when you're older."

"Really?"

"Of course. Trust me. Now come on, we need to keep up."

"Don't linger!" Chris called back, a hint of sharpness in his normally even tone. "Keep together and stay in the middle."

"Yes, Da!" The three children chorused. Peony's magic blew them a bit forward to keep the hunting formation, allowing the boys to focus on their next offensive spells. She smiled fondly at them, checking left and right to be sure that she was maintaining their position as needed.

"You baby them too much," Ivy said, with a shake of her head. "They'll have to find their own feet."

"Pot, kettle," Peony chuckled. "They'll find their feet and I'll make sure nothing swallows them alive while they're searching, Mum." She sniffed the air, zeroing on a scrap of approaching darkness. "Overhead, three paces off."

Ivy's wings fluttered and she twisted to her left, murmuring the incantation that would activate the moment she laid eyes on the approaching Fabrine. Her spells were more subtle, but no less devastating.

"At least they're not as bad as those two," Jasmine said, wearily.

Ahead, just within sight, Jun viciously hacked down three Fabrine with a fiery shockwave spell. She moved in perfect sync with Briar who tore off the heads of the remaining two, gulping them down whole into his cursed body. It was fuel to him in his present form. He snarled and snapped,
charging forward again.

Shaking himself out, he threw his shaggy head back, howling to the sky. Answering howls reverberated through the air, his fellow hounds also on the prowl. Jun's lip curled in a snarl and the pair streaked forward once more.

"Speak for yourself," Leif grumbled, switching out with Ivy as she broke away from formation, her incantation finished. "I don't even want to know which one of them has more kills at the moment."

Rian sniggered. "That's easily answered. Briar's busy filling his belly and Jun is too busy taking her temper out on everything else. They're about equal."

"That's definitely not good," Jasmine muttered. "Shouldn't you do something about that, Sir Charming?"

"Flattery will take you far, my love," Rian hummed. "Doesn't matter to me which one of them wins, besides, she's showing off a bit—probably for George's sake. The kid's quicker than he looks."

"He's better than I thought he'd be," Leif said, grudging admiration in his voice. "She taught him well, which makes me wonder how long they've known each other. He hasn't questioned her once since they've started."

"Not long enough," Rian said. "Notice that he still watches for her cues?" He didn't add that for all of their bravery, not one of them would dare cross Jun in her current mood. He was fairly certain that Regulus and George were no different.

Leif squinted. He had noticed, but he hadn't connected the dots on that hint. If they'd spent enough time together, a mentor-student duo would move seamlessly together—without having to watch for obvious cues. They'd simply know how the other would react and adjust accordingly. Regulus seemed to be keeping up as well.

"To your left—stop slacking, Da!" Peony called back. She streaked by, her magic visibly swirling around her as she called on her fae nature to raise extra power for all of them.

Leif scowled, but dropped back obligingly and raised his spike staff in anticipation. When the Fabrine came surging up from below, he struck it down with a single blow. He supposed there were worse ways to spend the night. Reaping was probably a good thing right now, because he was sure that Jun's temper would reach new proportions when she met her father again. He stifled a shudder. There wasn't anyone who was looking forward to that meeting.

Chapter End Notes

A/N from 9/2014: Hey everyone. Apologies for the late chapter. I meant to post it earlier, however, when I came to visit my parents, they finally told me that my two cats had passed away. I'm a bit of a mess at the moment. They were the only pets I had and I couldn't take them with me—they were 14-years-old, from the same litter. I'm not that much of an animal person, but I did love my cats.

At any rate, I figured it'd be best to post this chapter instead of trying to finish the review replies, else it would have taken another week. My sincerest thanks to those of
you who read these notes and know to check the forums, before spamming me with PM's. Your empathy and understanding mean the world to me. Thank you for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel's Song. Welcome to the new readers. I'm glad you found this story. I hope everyone enjoyed this installment. Thanks for reading!

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-(at the hunt)

Charlie-(at the hunt)

Harry-(with Quinn and Kyle)

Deveraine Circle members-(at the hunt)
Won't You Come Out And Play?

Chapter Summary

Harry's second day at the hunt, escorted by none other than...Quinn Kalzik?

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries. -Read A/N at end-

RECAP: Harry sorts through some of his favors and Soula Deveraine helps him make some sense of it. Greta Deveraine, exhausted from the reaping, takes Ilsa with her to the pits, after a few important tidbits are shared over a hasty breakfast. Harry and Co. turn up at the hunt in time to see the famous Kalzik blessing over the hunt. Afterwards, everyone seems to pair off, leaving Harry to his own devices. He finds himself caught up with the Kalziks-specifically, Quinn and Kyle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HARRY, QUINN and KYLE. : NEVARAH : THE HUNT, Day 2

"The usual group is over here," Kyle said, gesturing off into the distance. He flanked Harry on the left, while Quinn took the right. "And the games can last for hours, it's really very fun."

Quinn shrugged and smiled, before touching Harry's arm again.

Kyle rolled his eyes. He could see the slight twitch of hesitation before Quinn reached out to make the temporary mental connection. He was sure that Harry wouldn't mind, but Quinn was used to keeping his mental voice to himself. "We'll have to fix that," he said, dryly. "Since you two seem to have an issue."

Quinn gave him a look at that and even Harry snickered. There was enough disdain accompanying those brilliant teal eyes that Harry didn't need words to guess what Quinn had told his pesky adopted brother.

It only made Kyle's grin grow wider and he winked at Harry, before moving forward and taking the lead. "Bharin's probably on his way to the Gheyo pits right about now. If we stop him, he has something that will keep a future headache at bay."

"I'm fine," Harry said, automatically.

Now Quinn gave him a look.

Harry twitched, faintly.
They made a stop near the Gheyo pits and sure enough, Bharin was lounging outside in the long inspection line, leading up to the main entrance. He was talking and laughing with a few of his fellow Gheyos, but turned at once, his dark eyes lighting on Quinn's approach.

The Gheyo pits weren't exactly distinguishable, but Harry supposed that all the Gheyos knew where to find it. He thought that perhaps they were somewhere further off from where Dahlia had taken them that time, but there was mostly a giant wall of rock and a darkened tunnel leading into it, where flickering lights faded into blackness.

Nothing was visible from the mouth of the tunnel, but there were plenty of Gheyos standing around. Some were walking through the tunnel and disappearing from sight, their shadows winking out of existence. Others continued to mill around the entrance, talking and roughhousing with each other. Fangs and claws were prominently displayed, a few with indoor wings extended, showing off the hardened exterior scales.

*Mentored… unofficial mentor.* Harry thought to himself as he quickly focused on Bharin, so as not to find himself staring at the wrong face. There were too many scars and weapons in plain sight and it made it him uneasy.

He watched as Quinn broke away from them and hurried over to make his request. He'd obviously been carrying a mental conversation with Bharin the entire time, because the moment Quinn reached him, the Gheyo shucked two thin gold cuffs off of his wrists and handed them over without hesitation.

"What's he doing?" Harry asked.

"You'll see." Kyle said, keeping a respectful distance from the line of waiting Gheyos. They wouldn't bother them, especially seeing as they were well behind the waiting line marked on the ground, but Harry was a hunting submissive and he didn't want to chance it. Quinn would pitch a fit, Kyle was sure, if anything were to happen to the sad-eyed brunet.

There was something about Harry that simply made his heart ache for the Submissive, as if Harry had somehow seen such great and terrible tragedy in his few years, that the wound would never, ever, completely heal. Kyle elbowed him lightly, when he noticed those bright green eyes fading a touch.

He'd noticed that Harry did that from time to time, just lost himself in his mind, somewhere that light couldn't reach, dwelling on a darkness that no one else seemed to be privy to. Thankfully, Quinn hurried back over, wrestling with the cuffs on his own wrist as he approached.

"Gained a little weight?" Kyle teased. Wincing and shying away with mock theatrics at the scorching glare Quinn levelled his way. Maintaining a healthy weight was an important detail to a healer or medic's life, but it wasn't something that was worth worrying over, so long as one was careful.

Quinn, like Kyle, was always very careful.

In all the time he'd known the blond, Kyle had to admit that he'd never known Quinn to skip a day of training. It was why it was so funny to see him somewhat out of sorts on this Hunting Season. Once his daily training regimen was over, the blond was at somewhat of a loss as to what to do to amuse himself—true amusement and not simply reading or stuffing his face.

It was why Kyle had suggested playing Creeper. The moment he'd realized that Harry was likely stuck with them for the day, he was determined that he would pay his charming brother back for...
the past week of pranks in regards to him and a certain adorable werewolf healer—Emily. If luck was with him—and if Kyle was honest, it usually was—then he'd even be able to wrangle some private time for just the two of them.

There were several possible scenarios scrolling through his head and Kyle decided to try as many of them as he possibly could. Turnabout was fair play, after all and Quinn could use some excitement in his life, not to mention that Harry was too quiet and withdrawn for his own liking.

Quinn would be sure to be considerate and a few steps ahead of any potential suitors, Kyle mused. He knew Quinn wasn't looking for anyone and he figured that perhaps, Harry wasn't exactly hunting today. They were two perfect bookends, at odds and bobs for each other and perhaps, they'd be the friend they were both in need of.

Kyle stifled a smirk when he saw Bharin's wink over Quinn's retreating shoulder. He knew at once that the Gheyo had figured out what he was up to, but like most good guardians, he was letting them resolve what little differences they had—in their own way. He knew Bharin would take him to task if anything got out of hand, but Kyle also knew better. He cared for his adopted brother and wouldn't deliberately do him any lasting harm.

He did, after all, intend to spend a significant portion of his afternoon in the arms of his Emily, snogging away the afternoon and perhaps a few other pleasurable interludes. He wondered, wistfully, if she would take a pledge bond with him this season. He had wanted to ask her for sometime and the hunting season seemed appropriate. He knew she wished for a full Circle, the same as he hoped for, someday, but in the meantime, they had each other.

"They're communication bands," Kyle explained, when Quinn reached them and took Harry's hand. "You need to wear one and he'll wear the other. It saves you a headache—which is what too much mind-speak can do if you're not used to it."

Harry flushed a soft red at once and Quinn dropped his hand, a split-second after Kyle's explanation.

An apologetic look flitted over his face and he bobbed his head in apology, before holding out the bracelet and his hand, silently offering to help Harry put it on.

"Er, that's fine," Harry allowed. He didn't hesitate to hold out his hand this time, watching as Quinn quickly unclasped the hidden catch on the golden cuff and snapped it over his skinny wrist. He couldn't help but feel vaguely pleased that they matched—at least, his dragel side couldn't.

I didn't mean to startle you. Sorry. Quinn's mental voice was light and careful, gently projecting into Harry's mind.

He started faintly, one part of him relaxing at once, remembering the familiar mental presence, while the other part of him began to panic as to the permanence of the link. He'd had enough of things in his head—it rarely ever turned out well—but this was Quinn. So far, Quinn had never done anything to hurt him the way others had. Quinn had always tried to help him, even if his methods were slightly different at first. It's...okay? How does this work? Does it...turn off?

You can still speak normally. Quinn's eyes danced merrily. I can still hear you just fine, I simply can't speak, is all. I thought it would help, instead of having to—grab your hand all the time, as it seems that's what I can't stop doing.

That's fine, I don't—mind. Harry choked. That had come out quite differently than he'd intended—
but he wasn't about to try and correct it.

Kyle's smirking face jolted them from their private conversation. He waggled his eyebrows. "Do I want to know what you two are saying to each other?" He teased. "Or should I tell Mama that you need to switch your healer status, oh brother of mine?"

Quinn gave him a dirty look and stalked forward, gesturing over one shoulder for Harry to follow, with a mental apology for his idiot of an adopted brother.

Kyle's snickers followed them through the crowd.

"It doesn't matter if you don't know anyone," Kyle explained, scanning the crowd for the usual pair of bushy ears that meant Emily was somewhere in the gaggle of young women waiting for the next round of Creeper to start. He'd already sent a note to her since morning and she had promised to find him as soon as she could.

The other Creeper players had gathered around, a fairly diverse group for the first round. Most of them were pairing off, those without partners giggling and pointing at the ones they wished to play with.

Harry perked a brow. He hadn't spotted a single familiar face in the throng of young dragels around them, but he knew very few to begin with. The Deveraine children had been kind and polite enough—but from the episode with Soula that morning, he was more inclined to move about and enjoy the day on his own. "Then how does-?"

"You just have to know who the creeper is and then who might tell on you and you don't need to really know anyone to figure that out." He shrugged. "Do you see Emily anywhere?"

Quinn rolled his eyes and said something that earned him another elbow to the side. He dodged a split-second too late, half side-stepping into Harry to avoid it and then immediately backtracking. 

Sorry, he projected.

"It's fine," Harry said, standing on tip-toe and not really seeing much either. He vaguely remembered Emily from the previous day and wondered if he'd survive this day, considering how the previous ones had gone.

"It's fun," Kyle repeated again, throwing him a reassuring look. "I promise, in fact—if you're courting, it's terribly romantic, if you know what I mean."

He doesn't, Quinn interrupted, scowling. And don't scare him off with your silly ideas.

"Hey—they're not silly! Emily loves Creeper."

That's not all she loves... Quinn ducked.

Harry gave him a mild look. "Quinn."

What?

"Be nice!" The words fell from his lips before he could take them back. His ears warmed, but thankfully, his cheeks didn't.

Quinn ducked his head, looking away, pretending to be offended. Fine.
Kyle shook his head, stifling a smile. "There's some good prizes this year," he said, nodding towards the growing treasure trove of trinkets in the clearing. "There's even a promised rune inscription on the knife of your choice from the Cairothe family."

Quinn perked up at once. The Cairothes?

"Who are they?" Harry wanted to know. He could have sworn he'd heard that name somewhere before.

"Good blood and good spell casters," Kyle explained. "They're all a specialist of some sort in their field and it's pretty neat. One of them, Riven, I think? We've worked with him?" He looked for Quinn's nod of confirmation. "He can actually freeze a killing spell—he can't exactly stop it, but he can freeze it and dismantle enough of it that the person can put their life in order or say goodbye in the hours they have left."

Harry swallowed. He supposed that was good. "What are they doing now?"

"Enchanted forest," Kyle wrinkled his nose. "It's kind of like a maze where we can hide and stuff. It makes it more interesting, since there's so much flat land and open grass," he nodded at the clearing in front of them.

Natural greenery was rather sparse and the waterline could be seen clearly from any point. There were a few trees nearer to the water's edge, but it seemed as if everyone was keeping a respectful distance from the inviting blueness.

Harry watched as curling vines grew into knitted trees, the slender trunks twining together to form a solid trunk. The vines flowered and matching floral bushes began to pop up at the corners.

Kyle's mention of an enchanted forest was quite accurate. The obvious pathways began to shrink and the conjured greenery seemed to grow even faster, taking on a mind of its own before the magic was finished.

"Time!" One of the older players called out. "Pick up your trinkets and if you can't carry them on your person and play, then take one of these favor cards as a temporary claim ticket."

The teens gathered around, murmurs rising and falling as things were traded and other things were replaced upon their person. An excited buzz hummed through the air.

"Make sure you can reach it easily, time is of the essence here," a dark-haired young woman flashed a smile, holding out a claim ticket to Harry. "If you're betting those, then fold them up in this, so you don't have to take them off and put them on, until the round's over." Dark eyes flicked up and down Harry and Quinn. Her smile softened. "Then stick it in your pocket. If you're caught, then you can sit out 'till the next round if you want to win them back."

"Do we have our shots?" Kyle asked. "Or not yet?"

"The Kuroe twins are bringing them," The girl pointed a thumb over one shoulder to where two identical young men were handing out squishy, bright yellow balls.

"And we just throw them?" Harry said, skeptically. He looked to Quinn for an explanation, but the girl answered first.

"One ball in each hand—never two," the girl pantomimed holding something in her hand. "You can put it down and pick it back up, if you have to, but always one at a time. The idea is to tag the creeper and grab their treasure. They play with green. If you're tagged by the Creeper, you'll have
green on you somewhere, so the others know to run."

"You can't be tagged back?" Harry folded up the cufflinks into the paper square and tucked it inside his robe pocket. He held his hands out for two of the soft, squishy yellow balls, marveling that the silky powder left behind was bright enough to be seen, even against some of the more colourful outfits among the players.

It didn't stick to his hands and there was only a faint, powdery scent, which was perfectly fine, as far as Harry was concerned. He hefted it in hand, wondering how far it would travel. He had experience chasing a snitch—but not throwing it.

"It's not hard. It's fun," Quinn smiled at him. "Looks like Kyle's found his partner, so I guess we should be ready.

"Where?" Harry followed Quinn's nod to see Kyle standing off to the corner, happily chatting away, while Emily cuddled up to his side, her bushy twin tails twining around his waist and arm, her wolf-ears flicking back and forth on her head. The couple looked extraordinarily pleased with each other and Kyle had begun to blush at something his girlfriend was whispering in his ear. "Ah. Right."

"Time!" The tallest fellow called out, waving his arms to garner everyone's attention. "Candidates for Creeper?"

A small handful of volunteers stepped forward, quickly weeded out by who had played before. It didn't take long before the Creeper was designated as the stocky Earth dragel named of Julian, with eyes the color of orange-gold and his trademark sack of green squishy balls.

"Time!" the call rang out again.

Everyone scattered.

How's your empathy?

Harry scowled. About the same. Why?

That bad, huh?

I don't even know what to do about it! How would you feel if you had some big mysterious power slapped into you and then you're pretty much told it's important, but no one can help you with it? The words came out a little quicker and bolder than Harry had intended, but he didn't care. It was easier to share more of what he was feeling with a mental connection. The brain-to-mouth filter was somewhat bypassed, thanks to the golden cuffs.

...That's normally where your mentor would come in. Quinn said, somewhat apologetically. I didn't mean to upset you—and I know things are not the best right now. I was asking because Kyle told me he put a dampening spell on you yesterday to help with the sensory overload.

Oh. Yeah. He did.

Do you need another one?

To play Creeper?

No, for the day. You'll likely experience a lot of new things, since this is your first Hunt and all. If
you don't want to be overwhelmed by your empathy, a grounding spell, channeling spell or a dampening spell, would be best.

I'll still feel it though, like yesterday?

Yes, just sort of muted in the background.

Alright. Will you cast it?

...If you like.

I like. Cast the best one and hurry.

Quinn gave him a mild look, but took one of his hands and silently cast a spell of his own choosing.

It spiraled up Harry's arm as warmth and light that seemed to spill into him from every available corner. He took a stuttering breath and managed a smile, a moment later.

Thanks.

You're welcome. It'll wear off at midnight, the usual standard. Ready?

"So we run and hide the whole time?" Harry asked, somewhat disappointed. All they'd done so far was run from Julian and hide behind trees and bushes. His hands and sleeves were partially coated with the yellow mess and he wondered if it was bright enough to give them away.

Quinn gave him an amused look. No, but we don't want to be the first ones tagged, right? So what we do is wait for someone else to be tagged and then decide if we want what they have.

Harry stared. The knut dropped. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I guess that makes sense."

Of course it does. It wouldn't be much fun if there weren't so many treasures at stake. And unless we're aiming for all of the treasures, isn't it more fun to just pick what you want and tag them?

"How do we carry them?"

One at a time, after you snatch the one from the Creeper, you can take it back to the main circle and stash it there. Then the Creeper has to guard it for you while you tag the next person.

"And when they're tagged, they become guardians too?" Harry guessed. He was beginning to finally understand the point of the game.

Teal eyes shimmered with mirth. Exactly! Now you're catching on—this way!

Harry ducked behind one broad-trunked tree and then under the low hanging branches to catch up to Quinn. A flicker of excitement began to blossom.

"Mph!" Harry stopped himself from talking aloud with sheer willpower. Speaking aloud was a natural reflex and he was trying to be as quiet as he could, but he still found himself wanting to whisper instead of using the mental connection as the game grew more intense.

The hand over his mouth was new though. He stared at Quinn, eyes comically wide as he tried not to think about two things. One, Quinn's hand over his mouth and two, what he'd done wrong.
Neither worked.

Quinn's hand was just as slender and dextrous as Harry had remembered from the private moment back at the healer's clinic, where Quinn had tenderly cared for him in the aftermath of the Blood Seal removal.

Two, he was pretty sure that he hadn't done anything wrong, but the hand still remained on his face and Quinn wasn't Theo or Charlie.

He swallowed.

Quinn was staring off into the distance, sharp teal eyes tracking something that Harry couldn't quite see just yet.

Did you hear that? I thought it was you—but it's not. You're quiet, but not that quiet. I think there's two off to our left.

Harry could practically feel the excitement dripping off of Quinn. This was something that was fun for the Healer. Harry kept himself still and took a quick check of their surroundings. If there were others off to their left, then they would have to tag them first—or at least tag-team them. Height would be an advantage, he mused to himself, scanning the tree tops.

He wondered if they would support either of them, then mentally redirected that thought. He was definitely smaller than Quinn, so if anyone would be climbing, Harry was sure he would be the best option. He fidgeted a moment later, when Quinn's hand finally dropped.

Would it help if I was up there?

Harry pointed to a medium-sized limb several feet above the ground. It'd give us an advantage.

Up there? Quinn hesitated. If you want to—it should hold you. He looked Harry up and down, then at the tree. How's your magic?

What?

I tempered the dampening spell so it would work with you. You were magic sensitive—I'd wager you still are, because there isn't much of a cure for that, beyond years of time. So, I'm asking—how's your magic? I'd like to know before scheming up anything elaborate.

So there is a cure? Harry set his squishy balls down at the base of the tree. He wondered if it would matter if he shrugged out of his robe or if he could magic the yellowness away. He also filed away Quinn's choice of words. Scheming wasn't something he associated with the mute blond, but he had a feeling that there was more sides to Quinn than he'd seen so far. Maybe today he'd see a few more glimpses than before.

There is always a cure for something and even if there isn't one, then there is a solution that is almost as good as the cure. Quinn wrinkled his nose. I was asking, because the magic rises in a closed space like this—the entire forest is magically created, so you might find it a bit too nice up there.

Harry felt a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. He could almost hear Quinn's clinical tone shifting to one of vague annoyance. I'll be careful. He hadn't had any other magical issues for the day—at least, not since the Merrow spell had come off.

Quinn gestured with one hand and Harry found himself floated up to the highest foothold. Climb quietly. I think Julian's been tagged, which means that the next Creeper is retreating to stash their
Is it someone you know? Harry asked. He moved quickly and lightly, reaching the desired branch within a matter of minutes. He stretched himself out comfortably over the smooth-barked limb and waved down at Quinn to throw the little yellow balls up. Quinn did.

Harry caught them easily—catching a snitch was harder.

From this slightly elevated height, Harry could see several other pairs attempting to pitch traps and one cautious movement towards one of them.

Harry held his breath as he watched the balls zip through the air and the new Creeper—the young woman with dark hair and beautiful dark skin—donned the green trademark. The torch had passed.

New Creeper. He reported to Quinn. The girl who gave us these. Harry adjusted his grip on one ball. He was careful to keep his weight evenly distributed on the skinny branch—his body remembering the finer techniques of riding a broom.

And someone just tagged her. I don't know who it is now. Harry groaned inwardly. He watched as the easy competition was weeded out. Climbing the tree had been a good idea. He had a bird's eye view and he could witness the game mechanics first-hand. It was certainly a memorable vantage point.

It also didn't hurt that Quinn was comfortably sprawled out on the lush grass below, intently peering through the thicker bushes surrounding Harry's tree.

Harry admired his prone figure for a moment, before the action caught up to him. His face flushed red and he forcefully redirected his attention to the game. He was here to play a game—not ogle Quinn's attractive figure—no matter how appealing it looked.

They tackled the Creeper when he came through.

Harry swung down from the branch—dropping the last two feet to close the gap between tree, air and Creeper. He moved before he had to actually think about what he was doing and effectively tackled the young dragel to the forest floor, smacking him on the shoulder with the ball he had in hand.

Quinn was there in a split-second, tagging him with a yellow ball of his own before he saw the splotch that Harry had made.

"You're surrounded," the Creeper-turned-guardian sing-songed. "They're going to catch you. The round's almost over."

Quinn snorted. That's what he thinks, he thought wryly, to Harry. Tell him to head back to the clearing and you'll be right behind him.

"Clearing," Harry said, picking up the Creeper's fallen claim ticket. "We'll be right behind you."

"No you won't, unless you're stupid—and you're not." He rubbed his neck and winced. "Nice drop landing." He coughed, a loud hacking sound, several times in a row.

Quinn mirrored the earlier roll of the eyes. Keep the claim ticket, take the green balls. Someone's
coming. I can hear them from over there… He helpfully thumped the new guardian on the back, with a touch of healing energy, a nearly automatic reflex.

"We should head that way," Harry pointed, squinting into the distance. That was the one clear spot that he'd seen from above.

"You won't make it," the fellow snickered.

A rustle to their left spurred both Quinn and Harry into movement.

Quinn grabbed Harry's hand and broke into a run.

Hands together, fingers overlapping, footsteps touching the ground in nearly seamless rhythm. Harry moved easily in tandem with Quinn. He scarcely spared a thought for the unexpected compatibility, but found it easy to keep up and fun all over again.

Quinn led him through the magically created forest, ducking, dodging and occasionally stopping still for a moment. They shared a shy, gasping laugh, at one point—teal eyes meeting emerald and warmth stretching out before them.

*How long do we keep running?*

*Tired already?*

*No. How long?* Harry repeated. This was finally turning into something quite interesting and he fully intended to enjoy every single second of it.

*Until the round's up.*

...And?

*I'm counting—give me a moment.*

*Oh. Sorry.*

*Probably another half hour or so.*

*Half an hour?*

*Don't worry. We can keep moving for half an hour.*

*I don't know, this garden is tiny.*

*Then we'll be creative.*

...*The way you said that, worries me.*

*Oh come now, you're having fun, aren't you?*

And that, Harry had to admit, was exactly true. He tightened his grip on Quinn's hand, reflexively, as something snapped and cracked off in the distance. There wasn't a single hesitation before Quinn squeezed back.

*Get down!*

Harry swallowed the hiss as he was tackled to the ground, with Quinn's hand over his mouth.
Again, Quinn! He protested, expectedly.

Shh!

Where are they-?

No talking. They're scanning. They could hear us.

What?

Brilliant teal eyes were suddenly much closer than Harry had ever discovered before. He was vaguely aware that Quinn's quiet, huffing breaths were nearly silent and puffing against his warm cheek.

Ever so slowly, Harry felt his breathing slow, and everything seem to fade and quiet. For a moment, it was almost as if he could hear both of their heartbeats, thumping along in perfect synchronization.

Quinn removed his hand, but remained half-draped over Harry, propped up on his elbows, head tilted to the left, listening with one ear.

That, Harry realized, was his natural superpower of sorts. The lack of a voice meant that he heard far more than what was normally passing around them. His weight, Harry noticed wasn't the least bit noticeable.

Yes, Quinn was muscled, but slender and very, very warm.

Harry discovered that his field of vision was equally limited along with his range of movement and ability to noiselessly extract himself from the current situation. He opted for looking around only to find his eyes drawn to Quinn's neck and the high-collared over tunic he wore.

He thought he could see the tip of one scar at the right side, but only because of the angle of Quinn's head.

As if feeling his eyes on him, Quinn turned.

Lips nearly brushed, but Quinn caught himself before the moment could flip from adrenaline-fueled suspense to anything vaguely romantic. He rolled off and away with a silent push off one arm.

Harry tried not to miss the warmth.

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Do I want to know what you're scheming? Harry dared to ask. They'd been lying in wait for several minutes now and even though he could see who was approaching from where—it appeared that everyone was being just as cautious as they were.

Quinn smirked.

The expression was both oddly frightening and oddly fitting. Harry blinked and the impression vanished almost as quickly as it had registered. He chalked it up to magic in the created forest and crawled closer, using his elbows to propel him forward.

The last pair that's hunting us is the Kuroe twins. They have a twinspeak that's a sort of mental connection, so they're finely attuned to other similar connections. Quinn nodded at Harry's communication band, almost hidden from view on his wrist. We have about five more minutes…
and then we'll win by default if they don't find us. Sorry I tagged him too.

Him—oh. That's fine.

Now we're down to two chances. Quinn grumbled. Not exactly fine.

I'm having fun. Harry said. It's fine.

Quinn turned to stare at him. Whatever he saw on Harry's face must have been answer enough, because he gave a tiny nod and returned to the task of pressing an ear to the ground.

Harry felt the muted presence at the same instance that Quinn jerked upright. He turned in time to see Quinn's yellow ball zinging through the air, but missing the target by mere inches as one Kuroe was pulled to safety by his twin.

Both twins had green balls in their hands and identical smirks on their face.

This, Harry thought, was not part of Quinn's plan—whatever that plan was supposed to be. He lurched to his feet and immediately put the tree behind them—between them.

A tell-tale smack against the wood, let him know that one of the twins had thrown something after him. Quinn scrambled after him, miraculously untouched and crouched near the base of the tree.

The concentrated expression on his face hinted to Harry that perhaps Quinn was actually counting down the time in his head. Harry inched away from the tree, he knew the twins would split up and attempt to nail them both at the same time.

**Hit the one coming for me.** Quinn prompted, wiggling his shoulders as if he were preparing for something.

*Quinn?* Harry prompted, but he threw the ball at the space over Quinn's left shoulder and dove for the ground. The nearby presence he'd sensed, manifested as one twin behind him, aiming for his head and recalculating when he saw his twin had been hit.

Quinn snatched up the yellow ball before it could hit the ground and sent it flying back. It thumped the second twin hovering over Harry—right in the chest as a loud buzzer sounded in the distance.

The twins froze.

Quinn huffed quietly and picked himself up from the ground, dusting off his clothes. He walked over to Harry and helped him up, a self-satisfied smile stretched across his face. *It seems we've won, partner. Congratulations.*

Harry smiled. "Congratulations yourself." He took the proffered hand and stood up, wishing he didn't have to let go of Quinn's hand right away. "Thanks."

He wondered if he imagined it or if Quinn's fingers had really lingered a few seconds longer twined in his.

It took some time to sort out who was playing a second round and who wanted to cash in on the treasures they'd won. Only a handful opted out and most likely for familial obligations—evidenced by parents appearing at the top of the hill above the clearing, calling out names.

Several Pareya showed up and claimed a few younger teens as well. Harry and Quinn sat off to the
side, watching as it was reorganized all over again.

*Want to play another round?*

*I don't know...* Harry mused. His stomach growled.

Quinn laughed silently. *Alright. Food first—a good lunch, then maybe a round two? Or something else?*

*Sounds good to me.*

*Have you seen Kyle?* Quinn scanned the milling crowd for signs of the green-haired fae or his werewolf girlfriend. He hadn't seen them at all during the game and a tiny fission of worry had taken root. Logically, he knew they were most likely snogging in a corner somewhere, otherwise, he couldn't help but worry.

"Not here," Harry said, half to himself. He picked himself up from the ground with a groan. He was feeling a few aches here and there. A hot bath tonight would be welcome. He stretched, enjoying the feeling and squinted into the distance. "I don't see him or Emily."

Quinn's brow furrowed.

"Maybe they were hungry too?" Harry suggested. "He might have wanted to take her to lunch without us tagging along."

*Maybe...* Quinn allowed. *But he usually does mention that sort of thing. He knows I'll look for him. Mama still wants us to stick together.*

"Where exactly is lunch?" Harry slipped a hand into his robe pockets, automatically searching for galleons before he remembered the odd little bracelet that Theo had given him to pass for currency in Nevarah.

...*Wherever you want, I suppose.* Quinn frowned. *I can always find what I need at a-* He stopped at the look on Harry's face and quickly backtracked. *There's a good spot near the square, come on. You'll like it.*

"I will?" Harry started after him. "What about our treasures?"

Quinn smiled. He made a complicated gesture with one hand and the pile of won treasures vanished. *They'll reappear in the common room of wherever you're staying right now. They're all safe, as far as I can tell.*

"Thanks. Now what exactly do you have in mind for lunch?"

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**NEVARAH : THE HUNT (Theo)**

"Now he calls me," Theo grumbled to himself, hurrying down the outerwall, away from the main celebration. There was some note of urgency in Severus' note and he wasn't about to stop and puzzle through it. When a Slytherin asked for help, every available Slytherin came to help—so as long as they safely could.

That was the rule.

That had always been the rule.
It had been one reason why he'd eventually grown closer to the dour potions master, watching as he walked the fine line between most hated professor and fierce head of house. If it were to come down to which Head of House would be more inclined to protect their own, he had a feeling a certain Professor McGonagall would draw about even with their Severus. At least, he hoped so. While McGonagall wasn't always fair sometimes, she was fairer than most and protective of her own, something that most Slytherin's would grudgingly respect.

Of course, it didn't mean that he had to appreciate every Slytherinesque aspect that invaded and permeated every nook and cranny of his life. Harry had been understandably upset about Hermione's disappearance, the lack of information and the unclear recitation of events as to how she'd vanished.

Severus, Theo knew, would have enough to say on the matter, if given the option. There was more to the story than what had been blurted out at Lady Baronsworth's dinner table, but it was probably the sort of story that would or should, only be heard by certain ears.

He made his way through the busy, happy, chattering crowds, skirting some of the more exuberant couples and swallowing back the mix of wistfulness and understanding as new Submissives decided on new Bondeds.

The magical summons pulled and guided him all the way to a quieter section of the hunting festivities and then towards a more private diner, with sectioned balconies overlooking the Merrow waters. It was one of the less popular sections for the newly bonded, but frequented by the older Circles that knew to find luxurious experiences combined with delightfully quieter surroundings and well-bred company.

Theo smirked to himself and paused at the end of the line. He could trust that Severus would know of these sorts of places. He leaned out to the side and beckoned to one of the suited hosts that were waiting for given reservations. "Theodore Nott to see a Severus Snape, he's expecting me."

"The ninth window," the host said, warmly. He gestured to a point beyond them, into the shadowy interior of the dining space. "Will you be ordering? Master Snape has procured light refreshments and no mention of a heavier fare."

"…Not at the moment, thank you. I think that will be fine."

"Of course. Right this way." The host let him past the line and admitted him behind a chained velvet cord, where the lights brightened at once, the moment he crossed from outside to inside.

A dimming spell, Theo noted, relieved that he wouldn't have to stumble his way through the dark and pleased to note that he could at least make out where he was and what he was looking at. He made his way across a well-seated room, large circular tables and quiet chatter filling the air.

He could sense a different sort of atmosphere in the air, more muted and serious, perhaps with a hint of well-masked desperation tinging the corners. Locking onto that particular thought, Theo scanned the room and spotted a familiar head of dark hair, the blunt cut making the inky ends sweep sharply over angular shoulders.

It was a silhouette he'd grown accustomed to seeing after the first year of Hogwarts. He made his way across the dining section and over to the open bar where Severus stood, nursing a small glass half-way filled with a two-coloured liquid.

Theo approached, holding up a single finger when the bartender glanced his way. "Bloodroot Cocktail," he murmured, knowing his request would be heard. He hadn't had one for the day and
while he would take care to limit such indulgences, he was making an exception for the moment.

"Theodore," Severus turned to him, not the least bit surprised at his appearance at his elbow. There was the faintest hint of disapproval, but nothing more.

"Severus," Theo returned, calmly. He ignored the look. He would drink whatever he liked and Severus' own choices were not exactly any less of an issue. A Bloodroot Cocktail was far tamer than the spiked drink in the older dragel's hand. "Harry's been very worried."

"Potter is always worried about something." Severus snapped.

Theo did not comment. He did note that Harry had gone back to 'Potter' but he dismissed that detail, when he followed the taller Alpha's sharp-eyed gaze to the ninth balcony.

Sitting around the circular stone table, Draco sat with his head pillowed on his arms, as Calida and Terius took turns petting his head and shoulders, speaking in quiet whispers. His face was somewhat grey as if something he'd eaten didn't agree with him at all.

"Well?" Theo prompted, a moment later, when it seemed as if Severus wasn't very likely to continue the conversation on his own.

"Hermione was found in the woods, as you know—practically dead from whatever that poison was." Severus said, tightly. He turned back to glare at Theo. "We gave her shelter and whatever potions I thought could ease her suffering."

Theo perked a brow.

"She was likely awake for most of her time with us. I couldn't properly wake her, not without causing some sort of internal mishap. Her organs were being magically repaired—they were… melted, for lack of a better term, then the process was frozen and her natural magic tried to restore it. Unfortunately, it wasn't fast enough, if she woke before the process was complete…"

Theo suppressed a shudder. It sounded too familiar to something he'd heard from his father once—a dark, grim tale about a Death Eater meeting where he'd been listening when he shouldn't have. The horrified conversation would stay with him for years. "But you saved her?"

"I helped her," Severus corrected, haughtily. "For free, I might add."

This time, Theo hid his smile. He was familiar with this particular line of grousing. Severus had always resorted to that phrase when he didn't wish his good deeds to appear as something done from the goodness of his self-proclaimed blackened heart. "And it is very much appreciated."

"The hellhound seal—what Calida said? Terius went to check the archives at the main library. He belonged to the house of Arythmoor, as she thought." Severus took a sip of his drink, grimacing as the strong brew slid down his throat. It reminded him why he was drinking it in the first place as he turned to meet Theo's steady gaze. "The House of Arythmoor is known as the line that spawned from the first Hound."

"The first hound?" Theo repeated, brow furrowing. "Severus-"

"Death itself is reborn every dozen centuries or so," Severus explained. "When it happens—strange and twisted as it is—a new Hound is born to accompany it. For Death may walk alone, but in its wake are the dredges of every darkling. Every lost soul. Every vengeful spirit…every shadow. The Hound walks beside her and guards against anything that would wish to harm her."
"Why do you say her?" Theo hiked himself up onto the empty stool to his right. Severus was welcome to stand, but Theo had no desire to spend their entire conversation staring up into the older man's face.

"Because if Death were a man, then I would be dead." Severus deadpanned. "It is legend, Mr. Nott—kindly use your brain. I know you are in possession of some mental faculties and I would appreciate it if you would make use of them."

Theo simply nodded as the bartender arrived with his cocktail. He curled his fingers around the cool glass. "And?"

"...I do not believe there is any correlation between Death's...supposed gender and that of its Hound. The Hound is always—a man." Severus added, a moment later. His dark eyes glittered, understanding what Theo had posed in such a simple question. "She was marked as a consort and taken, supposedly, by the Hound that marked her, yes?"

"You cannot prove it, can you?" Theo guessed.

Severus fixed him with a look. "One does not need to prove certain things in certain matters—"

"Was he wearing anything? Something that would denote a rank?"

"And if he was?"

"Then perhaps in the Shadow Haunts, one of the houses can verify if there is a new Consort among them." Theo said. He referred to the given name of the Nevarean territory given over to the Shadow elementals.

The Storm types lurked around the edges of the Shadow Haunts and in true dark fashion, the Shadow elementals were quite comfortable among those that shared similar traits or elements. The Hellhounds, though with their own hierarchy and customs, chose to dwell quite near the heart of the Shadow Haunts and in turn, allowed Shadow dragels to join them in their politics and courts.

Of course, where shadows were kept, other things joined. Were creatures were fond of the Shadow Haunts as well, along with dark elves and dark fae. There was even tell that Nevarean Vampires lurked there as well—though few ever saw them to confirm such rumor.

Severus paused, thinking it over. He finally gave a brisk shake of his head. "I doubt it. Terius could give very little detail as to what he saw—only that he was aware that he should not have been a witness. He had cast protective enchantments over Hermione, the standard ones, but he couldn't tell if they held. He didn't feel them break, but the spell that he—kept from us, it destroyed everything back at the apartment. Everything was either broken, torn or completely shattered. Repairing spells didn't work."

Theo inclined his head to show that he was listening. He watched as Severus swirled his glass, an absent movement, pale lavender liquid sloshing up to the lip of the glass, but never leaping over the edge. Pale, skinny fingers gripped the glass, holding it steady, the swirling liquid still spinning inside.

"Your...Harry," Severus said, tightly. "May have all the luck in the realms, but he has already escaped Death more times than I care to count." There was a hint of warning in his voice as he looked at Theo. "Chasing after his friend into the very courts of Death—as all hounds are—is not a wise course of action."

"So you did check the haunts." Theo said, calmly. He had expected the warning—in the same way
that he knew Harry would be going after Hermione anyway. Such dangers, they were real yes, but the friendship between those two had been forged by something stronger, he wagered. At the very least, he knew that Harry would want to try. Because Harry was his, Theo would let him.

Severus growled, softly. "Of course I did."

"And?"

"And the House of Arythmoor is the main house among the hounds." Severus drained his glass and set it down, softly. "She was taken by the main hound."

To his own credit, Theo managed to keep his expression entirely neutral, even as his hand tightened around his own drink. "That is—unusual." He allowed.


"What else did you find out?"

"That isn't enough?"

"So there is more?"

"Nothing to be of any use to you."

Theo's brow furrowed. "I would ask what you had to pay to receive such information," he began, pausing to inspect his neatly groomed fingernails. "But I have no desire to insult you or your methods, whatever they may be."

Severus half-glared at him. "You were always far too perceptive than your oaf of a father ever gave you credit for." He muttered.

"I like to think I take after my mother." Theo said, lightly.

"You do—you have her hair and her mind." Severus said, turning way abruptly.

"What else did you find out?"

"Theodore-"

"Please, Severus," he said, softly.

Severus closed his eyes, briefly—as if to easy some mental image that had returned to haunt him. When he opened them again, they were back to pitch black, unfathomable as always. "They found that she was taken into his house, but not into his personal harem."

"The hound has a harem?"

Severus gave him a look. "He did not take her there, but no one can say where she is—save for that she is not within their dungeons or the—pit. Terius says that she is alive, but he cannot trace her. If the magic was removed, then it was done carefully and not meant to disturb her or the one who cast it."

That was good news, Theo supposed, but the rest of it—not so much. That was another detail of legend. The pit was more of an execution station and things were said to lurk there. Dark, terrible things that would prey upon any soul with a smidgen of light within it. "She is safe?"
"Safe is a four letter word," Severus growled. In his opinion, it ranked right up there with love, but he merely nudged the empty glass away from his hands, towards the bartender hovering just within their line of sight. "She is unhurt for the time being, at least, physically. I can tell you nothing more."

"...Thank you."

"See that you do not kill yourself in an attempt to satisfy the impossible whims of your submissive."

Theo perked a brow. "As impossible as yours not hunting when you can desperately use a fourth?" He deliberately did not look at the man as he spoke. He'd been wondering why they weren't actively hunting, at least, not to his knowledge.

"I have not meddled in the affairs of your own, kindly return the same respect afforded to you."

"You need a fourth and you know it." Theo let some of the concern in his eyes filter through to his words. He tucked away the information that had been given to him, knowing that he could make use of it later. For now, he wanted a few answers of his own to questions that few others would dare ask. "For Terius, even if not for yourselves."

"...I am well aware."

"Wouldn't he allow you to hunt on his own behalf?" Theo guessed. He could see that the bonds between their little trio of sorts were strong, but strained and they were now beginning to grow around Calida as well. He wondered if they would take her in as their own—as it wasn't unheard of for Circles to court and formally Bond with a carrier, bringing them into their Circle.

The look that Severus gave him was partly amused and partly exasperated—that of an older Alpha humoring a younger one, with a knowing air about them.

"My apologies." Theo raised his glass and drained it. "Thank you, Severus."

A slight nod was the only reply.

Slipping off of his stool, Theo began to make his way back across the dining room, heading for the entry hall. He wondered if there was anything he could do for them—after all, Severus had been one of the few to take notice of him, even when Draco and Blaise—though later awkward friends of a sort—they hadn't cared much for him at all. It had been Severus to recognize what was happening with his father and Severus who had devised things to keep him away from home and out of the spotlight.

There was a line leading up to the exit and Theo stood at the end, waiting. He listened with half an ear to the conversations floating past, wondering how he ought to break the news to Harry and what it would cost them. He had no doubt that Severus had done all that he could—using whatever Nevarean contacts he had at his disposal—to acquire all and any information of one Hermione Granger.

"...Oh come now, Viktor. It's quiet—and dark. Just like you. You'll like it, yes?" a lilting voice teased. "Come on! You've been hiding away the entire time since you've arrived and you will enjoy yourself tonight or so help me, I will-"

"You think too highly of yourself, Ivan," a heavily accented voice, dripping with reluctance, answered. "Stop pulling on my arm—what are you, ten?"
"Better ten than a hundred and ten!" 'Ivan' snorted. "You act like an old man—you'll be older before you've even enjoyed whatever youth is left in you."

"Then why can't I enjoy it in peace?"

Theo jerked around to see who was speaking. He caught sight of a vaguely familiar face, almost masked by the shadows and low light of the dining area. The two friends bickered back and forth for another minute and Theo stepped out of the exiting line. He slipped along the shadowed end of the room and stared at a small, private booth where one Viktor Krum and an unidentifiable friend accepted a large tray of drinks and paid generously.

On impulse, Theo hovered a moment longer. They wouldn't see him—he hadn't been Slytherin for nothing, after all. Seen and not heard was not a motto for children, but rather a warning that sometimes silence and discretion could be invaluable tools. He hadn't known that there was any creature blood among the Durmstrang students, but then again, it was to be expected. For all of it's fearsome rumours, Durmstrang students were always well turned out, strong, robust and magically proficient.

They drank most of what was on the tray before Ivan excused himself to take it up to the counter for another refill. Theo did his best to fade back even further, well aware that he could give himself away to Viktor, now that there was no Ivan at hand to distract him. Thankfully, he seemed uncaring of whether there was another presence nearby and simply pillowed his head on his arms, waiting for Ivan to return.

Theo wondered what had happened to him from the time they had last crossed paths to now. He remembered that Viktor had taken Hermione to the ball, but also that he had been casting the occasional glance in the direction of Slytherin's very own ice prince. While he certainly hadn't asked about the blond in a way that anyone could pinpoint against him, Theo had read between the lines.

A careful sniff had proved that yes, Viktor was dragel—to some degree anyway—and that he was definitely unbonded. Theo had begun to distinguish between the scent of a bonded dragel versus and unbonded one, since their arrival in Nevarah. It had been a skill he hadn't thought to perfect before, but was now finding to be invaluable.

Ivan returned, bearing a larger tray than before and setting it down on the table with ceremony. "There's the nicest looking Alpha at the counter," he hummed, setting out a line of shot glasses. "You should take a look."

"Ivan…" there was a hint of warning in Viktor's rumbling tone.

Ivan rolled his eyes and continued to line up the glasses. "I mean it, he sounds almost like that one you were going on and on about—the one with the black hair and black eyes. Nice and pale too. You should take a look. He's definitely your type."

"You should take a hint."

"Hard or soft?" Ivan inquired, ignoring the warning. His hand hovered over two of the full bottles, one a bright green, the other a deep red. "Or a mix?"

"Neither! What are you trying to do?"

"Liquid courage never hurt a soul," Ivan proclaimed. He poured a measure of green in one glass and two of the red on top of it. "Drink it straight and go take a look." Friendly brown eyes
"The devil and the devil's hag," Viktor spat. He snatched the glass away from Ivan's care and scowled as it sloshed over the edge and onto the table.

They held a staring contest for a long, tense minute, before Viktor threw it back, shuddering with a grimace before he threw the glass at his smirking friend. Obviously expecting it, Ivan simply caught it before it could hit his head and set it down, gently on the table.

"You've been like a brother to me," he proclaimed. "And you've always been a decent fellow. I won't see you doing this to yourself. Now go and take a look—the one in black by the counter. He looks the closest to your type."

Theo's brow furrowed and he ducked out of the corner, turning to find himself face-to-face with an angry, not-quite-drunk Viktor Krum.

"Did you see and hear enough?" Viktor demanded. "As if I couldn't sense you the whole time you were-"

"I didn't know you'd come to Nevarah," Theo said, politely. He didn't react at all, not much more than to draw himself up to his full height and lift his chin. He hadn't been expecting the other one to move so quickly. Perhaps he should have been more careful. "Your voice sounded familiar, so I stopped to say hello."

"Hello?" Viktor mocked. "I've no time for these sorts of games-!"

"Theodore. Theodore Nott," Theo said, holding out a hand, determined to make this encounter into something useful, if not only to leave with his pride and dignity intact. "Hogwarts."

Viktor stiffened. He looked suspiciously from Theo's hand to his face and leaned back, ever so slightly. The furrows in his brow began to grow deeper.

Theo could practically see the mental gears whirring and twirling and took pity on Viktor's obvious confusion. "Slytherin."

There was a pause.

Viktor took a step back, but reached out and grasped Theo's still extended hand. "Hello." He said, stiffly.

Theo made himself smile and inclined his head. "I did not know that you were—one of us," he gestured to the room at large with his free hand. "Welcome."

Dark eyes narrowed suspiciously. "And what of it?"

"Nothing. I was only saying hello," Theo pulled his hand free, drawing subtly on his earth element to extract his hand from Viktor's larger one.

"So you have." Viktor cast a wary look around him. "Where are the rest of your snake-friends?"

Theo couldn't help the laugh that he tried and failed to turn into a cough. "I do not have snake-friends, Mister Krum." He said. "I am an Alpha and I am bonded. I am here with my Submissive for the Hunt."

Viktor's shoulders slumped and the fight seemed to fade from his eyes. "I-I apologize." He
managed, after a moment, though it seemed to cost him to say as much.

"Viktor?" Ivan stuck his head out from behind the dark curtain sectioning off their booth. "Is everything alright?" his piercing gaze swept over Theo with deliberate meaning.

"Everything is just fine," Theo said, stressing the last word as best as he could. "I was just leaving. I wouldn't want to stop you from paying your respects to Severus."

Viktor's head snapped up. "Snape? He is here?"

"Severus," Theo repeated, keeping his smile and tone deliberately bland. "Is at the counter."

Ivan exchanged a look with Viktor and stepped out completely from the booth's privacy. "Viktor-"

"Are there more of you here?" Viktor asked, carefully.

Theo barely managed to suppress a shrug. "Your guess is as good as mine. Severus is Bonded though, his Submissive is on the balcony. Good day—happy hunting."

"Mister Nott—wait!" Viktor called after him, but Theo had already excused himself and moved away from them as fast as his long legs could take him.

"Friend of yours?" Ivan asked.


Ivan patted his shoulder, not commenting when his friend leaned into the gesture.

A mildly agitated Theo stalked out of the quieter sections and back towards the noise and bustle of the Hunt. A familiar presence tugged at the corners of his senses and Theo found himself following the gentle pull to find himself staring at an awestruck Charlie wandering barefoot through the rock gardens off to the far end of the outdoor attractions.

Fire stirred in his belly, uncoiling to sing through his veins and Theo found his careful restraint, crumbling to dust. He was thinking of the morning and their earlier…interactions. He thought that Charlie would have been with Ebony, but the closer he drew near, he could see that it most certainly was Charlie and he didn't really need to know too much more than that.

As if sensing him, brilliant blue eyes turned to fix on Theo, glittering with power, life and love.

Theo's steps faltered for a single beat, before he was stalking over the thick, black rock, uncaring of his boots and the fact that every other fire type there was barefoot. He closed the distance between himself and Charlie, in time to see those brilliant blue eyes grow wide with shock and then shutter, faintly, when Theo reached up to bring their lips together in a rough, hungry kiss.

A soft, gasping breath puffed against the side of his head as Theo reined in the emotions tangling through him and gave Charlie a moment to adjust to his arrival and the unspoken demand that came with it. Charlie's hands fluttered at his sides, before one of them came to rest on Theo's shoulder, the other settling at his waist.

"Theo?" There was a hint of caution in his voice.

"Charlie," Theo returned. "Are you free?"

"Would it matter?" Charlie asked, dryly. He was somewhat pleased that he'd accurately interpreted
the gleam in Theo's eye and the intent behind the unexpected kiss. He didn't mind—and it didn't appear that their unofficial audience minded either, because a few jealous and appreciative glances came their way from a few of the fire dragels close enough to notice the non-fire among them.

"It would matter for as long as it took me to talk you out of it," Theo growled. "Come. Now."

A smirking Charlie allowed himself to be led away to what promised to be a rather enjoyable and very thorough ravishing.

Not that he was about to complain.

Of course not.

"Theodore?" Lewis called out, tentatively. There was a dark look on the small Alpha's face, but he studiously ignored it, somehow managing to look between Theo's scowl and Charlie's encouraging nod. He was disappointed to see that Harry was nowhere with them, but he supposed that his great nephew was off hunting.

That was good, Airelle knew that Harry could use a few more Bonded to spoil him absolutely rotten. Having a larger Circle would also have the lovely side effect of keeping the prickly Theo happier, Lewis mused.

A low growl from Theo jerked Lewis's wandering thoughts back to the present. He gave a slight bow of his head, indicative of their rank in reference to his—and in hopes of keeping Theo calm enough to hear his request.

"I spoke to my Alpha who has taken the matter to our Clan head," he began. "And he had no objections at all."

"About what?" Theo demanded, suspiciously.

"Harry bears one of our seals. It must be one of our house to remove it," Lewis explained. "Specifically, it must be our Clan head."

Theo growled.

Charlie rolled his eyes and calmly draped an arm around Theo's shoulders, pressing down with more weight than necessary, waiting to see if it would work as Ebony had told him. She'd explained that sometimes a grumpy Earth Alpha could do with a bit more—firm—handling. He was curious to see exactly how that worked. "You were making arrangements?" he asked, curious.

Lewis flushed, faintly. "I—didn't meant to presume," he said, stiffly. "But these are familial seals and they can only be removed by blood family, regardless of whether—"

"That was very generous of you to take such a task upon your own shoulders," Theo interrupted, his formal speech returning to him, along with his pureblooded airs. He shrugged out from beneath Charlie's hands and stood tall, his golden-gaze fixed on Lewis. "We appreciate the trouble you have gone through on our behalf."

"It's for Harry," Lewis murmured, the flush darkening. "H-he's alright?"

"He is hunting today," Theo said, brows furrowing. "I hope."

Lewis blinked. "He's not interested?"
Golden eyes gave a spectacular roll. "Interested isn't the word I'd use to describe it," Theo muttered. "Were you heading somewhere or just looking to share the wonderful news?"

"...Lunch?" Lewis suggested.

Theo snorted.

Charlie grinned. "That would be lovely," he said, smoothly. He stepped in between of Theo and Lewis, effectively bridging the gap between the two in more ways than one. "And then you can tell us more about the seal and what's involved in the removal?"

"Of course!" Lewis brightened. "It's really a painless procedure, mostly ceremony and ritual, because of what was done to cast it in the first place, but the preparations take some time and when it's through—well, I'm sure you'll all be happier."

"Oh?"

Lewis shrugged, finally relaxing the last bit as he fell into step with them. "Sometimes seals can affect other Bonded, especially if the Circle is new and particularly if the seal was not removed before Bonding."

"Ah," Charlie nodded in understanding.

Theo scowled. "About this lunch...?"

"If you wouldn't mind joining me—I was in the middle of lunch preparations," Lewis said. "I stopped here because of a half-portal. I was heading to the marketplace to grab a few fresh things on the side. You're welcome to come with. It wouldn't take but a half minute."

"Sounds great," Charlie said, his hand brushed against Theo's, a touch warmer than it should be—but holding all the warning that he couldn't put into words. Lewis was kin to Harry and that meant that he deserved respect unless he proved himself to be unworthy of it. Charlie would not see Theo behaving badly simply because of social status or ingrained pureblooded upbringing.

As if sensing his inner resolve, Theo sniffed and turned his head to the side.

Charlie bit back a sigh and stared straight ahead. It would be an interesting day after all, he supposed. His mind wandered off as Lewis began to chatter about the lunch menu and the marketplace. He wondered what Harry was up to and whether said Harry was remembering to eat lunch sometime soon.

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**LEWIS' Traveling House : (Theo and Charlie)**

"If you'll excuse us?" Charlie smiled as politely as he could manage, before he started down the aforementioned hallway. He was both pleased and irritated to note that Theo was close behind him, but a glance over one shoulder showed that his Alpha was muddling through something scowl-worthy.

There were two things that would most likely remove said scowl and Charlie knew right away that he couldn't grant the first option—Harry—but that the second one was most certainly doable. In fact, he would definitely be looking forward to that second option. He could still cast spells, though it took some more concentration and effort to not use his wand. Ebony had immediately decided that she would break him of the habit the moment she laid eyes on his wand.
Silently wondering when he'd come to thinking of things like this, Charlie discovered the necessary bathroom and saw that it was indeed empty. It wasn't too small either, which meant there would be some allowance for what he had in mind.

Theo turned his back to the open door, arms crossed over his chest, brow still furrowed, lips pursed to complete the look of his dark glower.

Charlie didn't even want to know what he was thinking about. Sometimes it was best not to know, he mused. He stepped into the bathroom and used his height to his advantage, hooking an arm around Theo's neck and gently pulling him back.

It was enough of a surprise to make Theo stumble backwards into the small space with him and by the time he'd regained his balance—and his voice—Charlie had shut the door and begun locking it as he cast silencing charms liberally about the space.

"Something in mind?" Theo inquired, bitingly.

"Something in mind for you, not me," Charlie said, calmly. "And seeing as it's such a small space, you'll have to be creative if you want anything more."

"Excuse me?"

"Door." Charlie murmured, giving it a final pat and turning around to reverse their positions. It was easy to guide Theo to bracing against the door—mostly because his Alpha was attempting to avoid his touch, but Charlie knew that wouldn't last very long at all. "And relax, please?"

He braced both hands on the door, his arms boxing Theo in at the sides and held the annoyed golden gaze with his own vivid blue ones. When Theo merely perked a brow, Charlie sighed and shifted to kneel in front of him. "You-" he began to tug at the neatly spelled robes. "Are being-" he freed Theo's shirt from his trousers and pretended he couldn't feel Theo's eyes on him. "Difficult!"

"You're the one accosting-"

Charlie tugged Theo's trousers down in a single, swift movement.

Theo froze.

Charlie smirked. "Clear enough?" He hooked his fingers in the waistband of Theo's pants and began to shimmy them down those slender hips.

"Damn you," Theo hissed, head thrown back against the door, his hands fisted in the hem of his jumper, knees buckled and clapped to the side of Charlie's head. This was not the way he'd seen this particular encounter turning out, but he wasn't in a position to complain.

He actually wasn't in a position to do much more than he was currently doing at present. It took far more concentration than he could spare to keep from basely reacting to the pleasures that a certain wicked redhead was currently bestowing on him.

"Hmmm?" Charlie hummed around the warm, throbbing length in his mouth.

The vibrations brought another quiver from those pale thighs and Charlie simply stroked them, soothingly. He continued to suck and hum, slowly, but surely driving Theo to the edge. One hand reached out, trying to curl into Charlie's smooth locks, settling for digging his fingernails into
Charlie's available shoulder instead.

It didn't take long before Theo found release. The silent, shuddering of physical body and the invisible shattering of his mental defenses. His mouth hung open in a soundless cry.

Charlie had a way of simply reaching through their shared bonds and making sure that he bore nothing alone—now that Theo had given him that opportunity. He didn't swallow, but he was able to hold steady when Theo bucked gently into his mouth.

A moment later, he stood up, spitting into the sink and pausing to rinse his mouth.

Blissed out and limp with sudden giddiness, Theo wearily held himself up against the door. He hadn't expected *that* from Charlie. No, he hadn't expected that from Harry either. Neither of them, actually. He'd just been very, very pleasantly surprised.

The sound of running water brought him back to the present and watching Charlie there, bent over the sink, rinsing his mouth—Theo found a bit more energy to spare. He couldn't really care that he was a guest—and in someone else's bathroom. There was magic for that.

Right now, what was in front of him was far more important than long-standing dragel etiquette. He spelled the robes and trousers off and moved forward.

Charlie started faintly when he felt firm, smooth hands skimming meaningfully along his sides. He turned to throw a lazy smirk over one shoulder and braced both hands against the sink. "You'll have to be really quick," he murmured.

Theo's golden eyes darkened to a delightful shade of brown-almost-black. "I suppose I shall..."

Lewis calmly set the table, fretting over the place settings and the partial lunch he had to offer. Things were still slow-cooking and he knew better than to risk his bonded's tempers by rushing things along with magic. Some things could not be solved with magic—a certain young Alpha's temper for one.

The Pareya in him stretched and whined, thinking of Theo and how tightly strung he seemed compared to the introductions that seemed to be scarcely a breath of time before. He wished that either Charlie or Harry could do something to calm him—most Alphas could settle themselves, but new ones, with newly bonded circles and such, tended to need some time to adjust as well.

It was something that he couldn't interfere in and even the slightest of suggestions could be taken the wrong way. He knew it was something of the sort, instinct and all that, which had most likely led to the very cool reception he'd received.

He chalked up the warm welcome from Charlie to the fact that he was very much in tune with Harry, who had obviously wanted him there—wanted something to do with him and even saw him as friend, perhaps. It was enough, for now.

Lewis hoped that perhaps there could be more between their families. He honestly wanted them to be on good terms. It had never occurred to him that he would see anything of his brother again—much less a child with the same striking resemblance. He fussed over the place settings one more time and checked his watch.

He'd sent them to wash up, but perhaps they'd gotten lost...the manor was rather large. He sighed, loudly and bustled into the kitchen to check on the food again. A faint inkling of a thought scrabbled at the edge of his head and he half smiled to himself, thinking of the few times there'd
been stolen kisses and frantic gasps behind closed doors when interrupted during a hunting day.

Perhaps they were taking a moment to themselves.

Stolen kisses were often sweeter when it wasn't really stolen at all.

He couldn't begrudge them that, not when he'd had the same opportunities years ago and had been grateful for the deliberate obliviousness of their host. Fate had a sense of humor and apparently it was his turn to do the same. Chuckling to himself, Lewis raised his voice slightly and called down the hall, as airily as he could manage.

"Charlie? Theo? I'm almost done with the table…"

Several minutes later, his guests reappeared.

Charlie seemed to have a slight air of smugness radiating from him, while Theo was even haughtier than before.

Lewis pretended not to notice, but was somewhat gratified to see Charlie's occasional kick beneath the table, to keep Theo's less-subtle jabs from turning their lunch awkward.

He explained the process and how his Alpha was speaking to the Peverell Clan head about the removal of Harry's Seal and what was involved with it.

"And it'll be painless?" Theo inquired, at last.

There was something beneath his tone when he spoke and Lewis found his protective hackles slowly rising. "He may experience some discomfort," he admitted—and that did make him uneasy—but it was inevitable. "But no outright pain?"

"Define outright pain?" Theo snarked back.

Lewis clenched his hand around the steak knife in his hand. "A twinge, a pull—maybe a headache that might require a potion or blood. Maybe a sick stomach. I can't say. Some don't have any adverse effects. Some stay in bed for a day or two."


Theo answered by filling his mouth with another scoop of creamed corn pudding. He chewed slowly and deliberately, his brow still furrowed. "Harry's been through enough pain," he said, abruptly. "If there's a way to channel it into something—or someone else—find it and make it happen." He stood up from the table, chair scraping faintly against the floor. "Charlie?"

Lewis blinked up at him. "Excuse me?" That had not been the answer he'd expected. He thought that Theo would have demanded that he find a way to make the entire thing painless.

"If you need a volunteer, I'll be more like myself by the time everything is ready. I would volunteer." Theo snapped his fingers, impatiently at his tarrying Beta. He'd been polite for as long as he could possibly stand it and this was his limit. "Charles."

The redhead smirked, taking his time rising from his chair, folding the napkin and tucking it to the side of the plate. The lunch hadn't been as bad as he'd thought it would be—and at least they'd been able to eat. "Charlie," he corrected, mildly. "Always Charlie." He dipped his head in Lewis' direction. "Thank you for lunch and seeing to all this for Harry. We all appreciate it," he added,
with a meaningful glance at Theo.

Theo, of course, scowled, predictably. "Yes, yes, fine. Everything is appreciated," the words were forced through clenched teeth. "Now do you mind?"

Charlie laughed softly, moving over to stand within reach of Theo's twitchy self. He winked at Lewis as the transportation portal sprang to life between them.

Lewis understood the wink a moment too late. He stared at the now empty space where they'd stood, moments before, wondering what exactly Charlie had done to provoke his Alpha to such a state.

A slight shudder passed over him and Lewis popped up from the table, face flushing a slight red. He was suddenly of the mind to find his own Alpha—wherever he was.

Deveraine Guesthouse : NEVARAH

"You!" Theo growled, hands fisted in Charlie's collar as they tumbled out of the hastily cast transportation portal—and directly onto the master bed back at the Deveraine's guesthouse, because Theo was brilliant with that sort of attention to detail.

Charlie fairly purred, his eyes gleaming a darker, more vivid red. He was equally interested in where this encounter was headed, particularly because they now had two new components to work with—privacy and time. "Yes?" He smirked.

"What was that?"

"What was what?"

"Whatever you did-" Theo began. He stopped long enough to rid Charlie of that wicked smirk—kissing with teeth and drawing blood. There wasn't the slightest complaint from his smug Beta.

Instead, Charlie's warm hands began to wander, already busied with the task of removing Theo's robes, caressing and stroking suggestively as he stretched up into Theo's kiss.

Theo blushed fiercely, his body already betraying what promised to be a sinfully delightful and quite memorable encounter. The moment in the bathroom had only served to push every single boundary of restraint he had to his name—something that Theo was now wondering if Charlie had known and thus teased him on purpose.

It was one thing to deal with the spill over from Harry's innocent interactions and yearning urges—but entirely another thing to be so thoroughly driven out of his mind by someone who was still learning the finer points of his dragel self.

Theo growled.

Charlie rumbled back in answer, lying back contentedly now as Theo's Alpha instincts surged to the forefront and shredded Charlie's very nice dress robes—that blasted ribbon would not be making an appearance again, that was for sure—and then proceeded to continue to try and snog his face off.

The desperation tinged with a slight thread of panic had Charlie rising up again to meet the half unspoken challenge. He didn't shred Theo's outfit—simply because Theo managed to banish it away when he broke their kiss for a breath of air.
"Theo?"

"...Later." Came the quick reply.

Charlie rolled his eyes, then attempted to reverse their positions—it didn't work, because Theo immediately weighted himself with his element and a sudden gleam in his gold eyes.

"You know, I didn't have the time to really enjoy those lovely restraints this morning," Theo said, as lightly and conversationally as if he were simply mentioning that the weather would be lovely tomorrow.

Charlie gulped.

That look promised everything that made his heart and soul flip over. It promised the world with all the pain, darkness, hope and love twined throughout. It promised a forever that he thought he could handle.

A burst of warmth from Harry filtered through their shared bonds and Theo's smirk darkened even more. "I think," he began, his claws beginning to stretch out from his fingertips and score light red lines down Charlie's quivering chest. "That Harry would probably appreciate a little update on us, don't you think?"

They'd been receiving Harry's empathic feedback through their Bonds since he'd vanished from their sight that morning. He was cycling through every emotion available to him, it seemed.

Charlie had given up on trying to figure it out and resigned himself to the fact that he'd be experiencing second-hand adrenaline and muted terror mingled with giddy excitement for the remainder of the day. He could tell that Harry was fine, for the muted terror was tinged with playfulness, meaning that Harry wasn't truly in danger or afraid of something.

"Maybe," Charlie reached up with one hand, gently cupping Theo's face. He smoothed one rough thumb over Theo's cheek. He huffed softly, as Theo slid into him, seconds after a preparation spell had been murmured against his cheek. Charlie squirmed for a moment to adjust to the feeling of fullness and reached up to brace his hands on Theo's cool shoulders.

Theo stilled at the touch.

Silence stretched between them.

Theo's face said far more than anything he'd said or done for that day. Charlie's thumb skinned over his cheek once more. He knew what it took to put anguish in those bright golden eyes.

For a moment, he had a feeling he knew what Theo needed. The light grip of hands curling around his hips, turned to claws and a slightly more desperate grasp.

Ebony's words of 'firm handling' made more sense now. He recalled her words to burn bright, but steady, without a single flicker. This, he can understand, here and now. He can manage that—or something close to it.

Theo was still frozen and Charlie was still burning.

Propped up on his elbows, hands now curled the soft blanket beneath them, Charlie stretched up to put his lips to Theo's ear. "Use me..."

"Never!" came the fierce, emphatic reply. The clawed hands squeezed tighter, but more careful
now. The unspoken reason of why was left unsaid between them.

Charlie was grateful even though the prompt barely lightened those golden eyes that seem destined to darken. The earlier urgency from before had faded away to something he couldn't quite put into words.

"Then let me," Charlie murmured. He kissed Theo's neck and attempted to reverse their positions once more.

There was more give this time. Theo's elemental weight shifted again. This time, Charlie fought the resistance, feeling Theo's resolve crumbling against his persistence. It seemed like sex wasn't what they needed now.

"Charlie—I can't." Theo's murmured plea was barely loud enough to be heard.

But was loud and clear enough for Charlie to stop. His arms reached up and curled around Theo, gentle, but strong in their sure grip. He splayed his fingers along Theo's spine, feeling subtle muscle and quivering strength.

Instinct told him a lick to the cheek was a good idea.

Charlie followed that instinct without hesitation.

It worked.

Tension drained from Theo as if a switch were flipped. Charlie felt the moment Theo surrendered and he rolled them over with barely a smidgen of effort. He ignored the stiffness and rigid posture.

Theo's spirit may have given in—for the moment, but his body still betrayed his busy mind. Charlie did not mind this. He simply stretched out to cover Theo's smaller form with his larger one, wincing as Theo softened, sliding out of him. There would be time for that later—if they both still wanted it.

He curled himself around Theo as best as he could, drawing on his flames to up the warmth in his body. Charlie held him as tightly as he dared, focusing on tempering the flames that heated them both.

Theo made no protest.

Charlie nuzzled his face into Theo's neck and breathed deeply of the scent that seemed like citrus and steel.

Theo gave a single, shuddering breath and melted into the soft blankets, comfortably weighted by Charlie above. He soaked up all the comfort being gently pushed through their shared bonds. Charlie was warm, but Theo still felt cold. He wanted the warmth that surrounded him to reach deeper inside. Craved it in the way he couldn't put it into words.

As if sensing his wish, Charlie's warmth became almost unbearable. Theo didn't try to fight it, because somehow, he needed it. An ugly voice inside of him snarled and simpered of how he couldn't deserve such kindness.

But Charlie is Charlie and Theo was grateful.

They stay silent and together for a long time. Eventually, Theo's quiet breathing evened out to soft whuffles and Charlie could tell that he slept. It is only when he knew that Theo's dreams were
either nonexistent or untroubled, that Charlie could bear to allow himself to doze as well.

Perhaps when Theo woke, he'd share the things that made shadows form in his eyes. His eyes slid shut as he sent a mild burst of warmth to Harry, a silent message that they are fine—or as well as they can be.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey everyone! It seems like forever and a day since I've been able to post a new chapter. :) Thank you all for waiting so patiently. As some of you may know, my Mom's health hasn't been the best since last year and it's been crazy trying to deal with these new revelations and everything else in RL right now. I've been rather sick for the past few weeks of March, leading right up to Easter. :( I am doing somewhat better at the moment and I've finally managed to get this chapter written and revised.

I hoped you enjoyed the little moments with Theo and Charlie, as well as the fun with Quinn and Harry. I really had fun writing those little bits. We're going to get into the serious stuff soon, so hang in there.

At any rate, I figured it'd be best to post this chapter instead of trying to finish the review replies, as it's been so long since the last update. My sincerest thanks to those of you who read these notes and check the forums. Your empathy and understanding mean so much! Thanks for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel's Song. Welcome to the new readers. Thanks for reading!

REVIEW RESPONSES WILL BE POSTED as I have the time to spare.

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo-( with Charlie at the guesthouse)

Charlie-(with Theo at the guesthouse)

Harry-(with Quinn)

Deveraine Circle members-(at the hunt)
A Minor Miscalculation

Chapter Summary

Someone is scheming. Trouble is approaching and Harry, naturally, is in the center of it all.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries. -Read A/N at end and THERE'S A NEW MERROW POLL IN THE FORUMS! Stop by and vote!-(Forums are over at Fanfiction.com--https://www.fanfiction.net/forum/There_Be_Dragons_Harry_Forum/108964/

RECAP: Harry spends his day with the Kalziks-specifically, Quinn and Kyle, playing an interesting partnered game, Creeper. Theo has an important talk with Severus about Hermione's whereabouts. Viktor Krum runs into Theo and is directed to Severus. Charlie spends some time with Ebony until Theo searches him out. Theo and Charlie have a moment, but are interrupted by Lewis Peverell, who wishes to share progress on his clan's movements to have Harry's seal removed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHARLIE AND THEO: Deveraine Guesthouse : NEVARAH : THE HUNT, Day 2

Charlie woke to the feel of Theo's slender fingers stroking up and down his right arm in a rhythmic motion. It took a moment to orient himself before he realized that their positions had somehow, managed to reverse themselves without his knowing.

He was snuggled—for lack of a better term—close to Theo's side, while Theo himself, sat up in the large bed, propped by pillows, bare-chested, dragel tattoos swirling agitatedly on his pale skin.

His body may have been calm and at rest, but his mind was scheming realms away, it seemed. Theo's eyes were a rich, shimmering golden hue and he stared fixedly ahead at the blank wall opposite of them. The black had all but faded, the true gold showing through. The stroking paused, then slowed before Theo turned to look at him.

"Sleep well? I couldn't tell if it was a nightmare, but you kept mumbling all sorts of things."

"English or Romanian?" Charlie wanted to know. He stifled a yawn against Theo's midsection, and
relaxed into the soothing touches. He wasn't about to move as yet, if he could help it. This particular slice of reality was absolute heaven and Charlie was fairly certain he would live for a thousand years based on the happy feelings twining effortlessly through his magic and their shared bonds at this very minute.

"I wondered what that was," Theo hummed. "Romanian."

"Good dreams, then," Charlie said. There were some good and some bad mixed up in there, but he would stick with his story for now. He didn't remember what he had dreamed, so it was most likely something good from his days back on the Romanian dragon reserve.

Theo hummed in answer, but the petting stopped.

Charlie shifted a tad closer. He said nothing.

The gentle stroking began again.

He relaxed into the touch, sifting through his memories for a way to bring Theo out of his current funk. He didn't like it when Theo withdrew into himself—not when all three of them were something now.

A triad. His mind helpfully supplied, at least, that's what Ebony had called them, when she'd gone about the explanations of who, what and how such things worked. She'd been patient, considering that this was all new and foreign territory to him. It was about to become quite complicated, when she'd been called by her council and as a result, had cut him loose for the rest of the day.

She promised to explain the other ranks and their functions as well as the necessary reasons behind them and how to help Harry hunt, without interfering in a way that would make said Harry instinctively unhappy. Submissives were only ever pleased with their Circles when their choices were accepting of each other and working together as a cohesive whole.

Instinctively, they knew who or what to choose to create their ideal relationships and strengthen the Circle in a unique way. Harry was likely taking his time because he could and partially most likely because he wasn't sure how to start hunting.

That, Charlie had believed. But Ebony had simply shaken her head and told him to have more faith. She was sure that Harry was hunting on instinct, even if he wasn't being as obvious about it as most Submissives were.

Left to his own devices for the day, Charlie had been wandering about the section that one of the Gheyos on watch had explained as being a more fire-oriented space for those with the fire-element. It was then that Theo had found him and they'd been joined shortly after by Lewis.

Charlie's brows slowly knitted together. He didn't think that Lewis had set him off, no, Theo had been agitated since before that—so he must have been up to something that was-

"Don't ask," Theo said, mildly. "Please."

The please stopped him, the mild tone of voice did not. Charlie nuzzled the bared stomach and thought about his answer. He honestly did want to help and something told him that if he did push and prod—just a tiny bit—that perhaps his Alpha would share. "Should I guess?"

Theo huffed. "Hardly."

"Theo…I can't help you if you won't let me."
"I don't think you could help this, my dragon heart." Theo squeezed Charlie's arm, before continuing the calming motions that were keeping them halfway in their current lethargic state. He appreciated the gesture for what it was worth, but hadn't yet made up his mind whether he wanted to share the issue currently plaguing him.

"Why can't I be the judge of that?"

Theo laughed, a short, bitter sound. "Indeed."

"Please?" Charlie asked.

It must have been the way he said it, for Theo stared down at him in unexpected surprise. There was a long pause and then, a quiet sigh. "It isn't anything really, except that it is."

Charlie didn't even try to make sense of that. He simply waited. Theo would keep speaking, he was sure, once his brilliant mind figured out what he wanted to say—or not say—and then they would take it from there.

"I am trying to think of a way to word something that I don't quite want to share," Theo began, lightly. "I spoke to Severus this morning and—"

Charlie straightened up at once, ducking out from Theo's arm or rather, attempting to. He was briefly reminded of just how strong his Alpha was—and the little detail of his earthen element.

He growled faintly when Theo's arm locked tight around his neck and shoulder, pinning him back to the bed—and his stomach. There was a silent tussle as he fought the hold for a moment, irritated and annoyed—and Theo did not relent. He subsided with a huff and was rewarded for his acceptance with a cursory pat to the head.

Charlie growled again, his words not quite finding a proper outlet as yet. He knew that talking to Severus meant news about Hermione, which meant other things for their Harry and he wanted to know what had happened at once.

"I don't want your head higher than mine right now," Theo said, calmly. Too calmly. "And you had best mind your flames."

The fiery flickers beginning at the tips of Charlie's brilliant tricolour hair, died a quick death at the veiled suggestion. He tensed as Theo's free hand carded through his hair again, this time, nimble fingers playing carefully about his scalp.

Another moment of silence passed.

Charlie reluctantly settled and pressed a kiss to the arm curved up around his head as proof of his submission. The gesture paid off, because the tension in the air, wavered and eased.

"Thank you," Theo murmured. "It's more complicated than I want it to be. You see, Severus tracked her captor down to none other than the helhound, himself. The actual Lord Aiden from the house of Arythmoor in the very heart of their…court, where no one can walk without a true shadow inside of them."

Charlie blinked. "A true shadow?"

"Shadow element. Death element. Whatever is dark and terrible or cursed. Any and all of the above, any combination of it." Theo half-smiled. "That is where they have taken her and no one dares to venture there, unless, of course, they have lived there all their life."
"Cursed? Like were-creatures?"

"And vampires and."

"Lord Cunningham?"

"Yes, but he's not-"

"What about the storm types?"

"...I beg your pardon?"

Charlie resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "So if the shadowed element lives there and all the others that are with them, where does the storm element live? With the Air? In the sky?"

"Of course you would ask that," Theo muttered. His grip slackened. "No, they don't. The Air are proud and the Storm are even prouder. They are the barrier that must be crossed to move from the earth territory into the shadow."

That, Charlie mused, made more sense than he'd expected it to. Ebony had tried to explain about the elemental territories, but he'd already had his fill of information for the day and there was precious little else that he'd have been able to retain.

"What's wrong with that?"

"...One true shadow inside of them. A true shadow. Any them." Theo explained. "Not one of us have a single sliver of shadow element within or between us, my dragon heart and no one from within the shadows will speak to an outsider."

Charlie blinked. "But that's-!" He started to say and then stopped, his brows furrowing together again as he tried to puzzle his way through the very thing that had stumped his Alpha. "That's not quite fair."

"No," Theo hummed. "It's not."

The simple answer made Charlie frown. He could practically hear a novel in all that was unsaid with that single phrase. The knut dropped a scant second later and he winced. "Harry doesn't know that, does he?"

"Which part?"

"...The shadow thing."

Theo snorted. "The shadow thing as you so eloquently put it is a serious social issue. We have no connections with any shadow type and the storm connections we do have—I do not feel comfortable indebting ourselves to them at this stage of things. We cannot be poking about somewhere that we do not belong and we cannot make something out of nothing, when we do not have anything to begin with."

"What about Greta?"

"She's been in the pits for ten years. Her contacts will be limited and I could not ask her to make use of her secrets for our sake."

"Wouldn't Ilsa-?"
"Would you ask Ebony to ask her lover to do what you would ask of Greta through Ilsa?"

"Ebony has a lover?"

"She's a Royal, I expect she can have whomever she pleases whenever she likes, but that's not the point, Charlie. The point is that you wouldn't, would you?"

"I—no." Charlie sighed. "Alright, then how about Ilsa? Does she have any other—I could ask Ebony to-"

"You cannot ask her anything. The royals have no influence over the Shadow side or courts. They may be able to ask a favor or a grant some small boon every now and again, but it is very small and very far in between."

"What about the Cunninghams? They were all—shadow-like. Shadows. Whatever." Charlie squirmed, uncomfortably. He didn't like the way this sat on his chest. He didn't want to see Harry's expression when Theo told this sad story. "Can't they help?"

"They are already helping sort out the issue of Harry's missing mentor—that's a serious issue as it is on its own. I don't think they could handle two things at once and even so, the only reason I believe they are helping is because of who Harry's missing mentor is." Theo thought back to the grim, determined look on Lady Mariana's face. It made him shiver and lean forward to breathe in the woody, smoky scent of Charlie's colorful hair.

"There has to be someone we can ask—someone who would want to help?" Charlie said.

"So you would think," Theo said, softly. "So we would hope." He drew out his claws to their blunted tips and scraped them meaningfully over Charlie's bared arms. "Let's think of it later, hm?"

"And if you can't think of something?" Charlie challenged. He knew very well what thinking of it later meant—it meant that Theo would continue to agonize over a puzzle that appeared to have no solution for goodness knew how long.

"Then I'll ask Oretta." Theo shrugged—as best as he could—and then pushed forward, rolling them over, reversing their positions. "I'm sure she'll think of something or for all I know, maybe Delani knows someone or even Ithycar—he'll be back soon."

"You know him?" Charlie allowed the tumble without any protest. He purred happily when Theo began to lick and nuzzle along his neck. This line of activity he could easily work up to. "He would help?"

"He's a charming fellow. I don't remember too many serious conversations," Theo hummed. Ithycar Deveraine had been single spark of hope in the earlier years of his dragel transformation. He was looking forward to seeing him again. "I'm sure he would at least listen..."

Charlie grunted. "Can't we hire a Gheyo like the Cunninghams did? That one that was with them, Hadrian?"

"You can't hire a Gheyo for something like that. Our Circle only qualifies for a protection ranking fighter—most definitely not a Gheyo ACE like Hadrian, much less a blood title."

"Why not?"

"Because it's personal business and it wouldn't be fair to the Gheyo," Theo paused in his ministrations, satisfied at the love bite he'd left on Charlie's neck. Dragel healing wouldn't catch up
to that just yet. "Now are we still talking or do you want me to tie you up?"

Charlie huffed. "You already said you would."

"So I did." Theo said, decisively. His golden eyes glittered, his smirk turning devious. "Wonderful."

A choked gasp was all that Charlie was able to manage for quite some time.

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**HARRY, QUINN AND KALZIK FAMILY : NEVARAH**

"Harry?" Bahn stood just outside of the Kalzik's upper rooftop pavilion. "Are you still here?"

"Bahn!" Harry shifted as if to rise, but settled back when his friend shook his head and waved a hand to mean that he was on his way over. "What's wrong?"

"I'm bored," came the unexpected reply. Bahn sauntered over, reaching one hand up to tug at his fancy braids. He'd been wandering around on his own for a bit and had decided to act on the urge to find Harry. "And I was sure you'd be having fun, so I came to see what you were up to."

"Am I allowed to feed you?" Surajini teased. This was a slightly more relaxed version of the Deveraine Submissive than she'd ever seen before. It seemed that the future bonding between their children had already afforded them some familiarity now that it was public knowledge. She had always seen the entire Deveraine clan turned out with impeccable, immaculate detail, but at this moment, Bahn did not seem to care about such things.

"If you can feed two," Bahn said, lightly skimming a hand over his belly. A flicker of magic was exchanged from his hand to the strong energy of his twins.

Surajini's smile softened. "I'm sure I can. Besides, we're practically almost family."

Bahn's hopeful grin was answer enough to as she waved him on in. He chose a spot to Harry's left and settled down, comfortably on the fluffy mat. "Thank you very much," he said. "Has your day been productive?" He asked, politely.

Surajini laughed. "Define productive," she said, wryly. "I've been paying my formal respects for the greater part of the morning and I swear—if I have to meet one more person for the sake of good relations for the next ten years, I'll scream. I think we're on fine standing as it is. Anything beyond that is torture, plain and simple."

"I did the same and I don't think I even covered half of the usual crowd. It's been a strange mix this season and it was a very long morning. Then Bhindi didn't want to do some of it—so I had to make her excuses and apologies. Of course, half of these lovely faces, I haven't seen for years, so it has been a—how should I say—a measuring up of sorts? Very frustrating. Draining too. Worked up an appetite."

"Well, there's plenty to go around," Surajini said. She came to join them, balancing two new food trays in hand. "Enjoy. It always seems there's some sort of one-upping happening somewhere. I don't understand the point of it, but then again, my family clan has always been strong, so it's not something I really would have to worry about. Not to my face, anyhow."

"I'm sure it will be lovely," Bahn said, taking the food tray. He sniffed appreciatively at the delightful, spicy scents wafting upwards. Surajini was an excellent cook if that was any indicator. He shifted over to make more room for her. "And the smart ones always know when to hold their
tongues—most of the time, anyway."


"Speaking of our duties—have you seen Lord Gorgen today?"

"That depends, is your lovely Ilsla trying to avoid him?" Surajini's lips twitched. She had a few bonded with similar quirks where their parents were involved. She tried not to meddle there too much, but sometimes it was hard to keep out of it.

"She's tried and failed, I believe. He dragged her off by the ear, if I remember correctly. Her annoyance is giving me a headache," Bahn said. He twirled a finger at the side of his head to explain that he'd muted their shared bond. "She needs to spend some time with him. He won't settle until she does and she's definitely not settled."

"They're quite a pair," Surajini said. She was fond of the Clan Chief and fellow Submissive. Thomas was a good friend and he worried as all parents did when their children didn't seem to be surviving on their own two feet. "He was quite worried for her, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I don't mind," Bahn said, carefully. "But she is his child and I suppose that's the crux of it."

"Indeed," Surajini hummed. She let the matter drop, turning her attention to the meal. It wouldn't be polite to say much more, she could see him already beginning to withdraw and didn't want him to close off entirely. Their Circles would soon to be meshed into a deeper friendship on account of Dyshoka and Dahlia's public announcement and expected to play nice in both public and private arenas.

Bahn nudged Harry with one elbow, his cleaned fingers already knuckle-deep in a creamy vegetable curry. "So what have you been up to?"

"Playing Creeper, walking around, lunch," Harry ticked them off on his hand, surprised when he didn't use all five fingers. He thought he'd been busier than that. "Nothing specific, really." He'd finished eating, but Surajini was nudging a platter of sweet, fried things closer to him every time she turned.

Bahn sniffed. "You need to be making connections," he scolded, with mock superiority. "You need to be able to introduce yourself and point out that you're hunting and you're new. You need people to be used to your face."

Surajini stifled a smile, finally relaxing between the two. She could tell that their friendship, new as it was, had a vein of mentorship between them. That was good, the Deveraines were an established Circle and even though they were Elven, she knew that they would do well by Harry, even if only because of Ilsla and Theo's mentored relationship. She had worried about him, when Dyshoka had suggested that he join them for the day.

A young Submissive with a new triad ought to have been happily Hunting away, courting and being courted for at least the first three weeks of the Hunt. Instinctively, his hunting would taper off once he'd actively decided on someone and the rest of the Hunt would be bringing said courtships to a close, staking his claim and effectively bonding them to himself and his triad.

The cautious, shy way that Harry had been slipping around the Hunt had immediately drawn her to him, pulling hard on all her mothering instincts. She wanted to protect and encourage him, without smothering.

Bahn, on the other hand, didn't seem to have a single issue with whether he was being too
demanding, too blunt or overstepping any boundaries of new friendship.

"Used to my face?" Harry swallowed. He reached for the fried sweet pastries after all. He was sure there was a hint of reality in what Bahn was saying, and he really didn't want to think about that. Not yet, anyway. "How would that even help?"

The elfin submissive gave him a hard look.

"I-I-e" Harry faltered.

Bahn perked a brow. "Have you met anyone new for the day?" he challenged. "Have you seen anyone today that caught your fancy? Have you formed any new alliances between yourself and these new friends you may or may not have made?"

Harry set his pastry down, fighting the urge to curl in on himself. He'd been having a little bit of fun, if he was honest with himself—and it had been wonderful. He'd worried—a little bit—but not too much, he'd been able to enjoy himself and that had been more than he'd expected.

There had been that slight, irritating feeling that he wasn't doing enough, that perhaps he ought to try and show some interest in the very least. There had been a few unusual faces and some rather peculiar outfits, but Harry had found discerning their ranks to be an exercise in unnecessary headaches.

Bahn's observations made him want to growl, but that wouldn't help anything. It was an honest truth and as much as he disliked it, there was nothing to be done about it, seeing as the day was almost over.

In spite of all the new faces he had seen, the new friends he'd made through Quinn and Kyle's connection, there hadn't been anything spark-worthy to prompt him further than the expected politeness.

Harry drooped. Bahn was still giving him that look and it made him want to crawl inside of his lunch bowl and stay there. Sort of.

The look softened a moment later and Bahn shook his head. He didn't bother to say anything else, but he did snitch one of the untouched sauce cups from Harry's tray. A second later, he replaced one of Harry's empty ones with one of his own full ones.

"I'm sure he did his best," Surajini hummed, calmly adding two extra fried dumplings to both of their food trays without missing a beat. She turned, snapping her fingers over one shoulder to gain the attention of one of her Pareya, Lachman.

He glided over, taking the empty tray and handing down a new platter of fresh sweets in exchange. He kissed her cheek and she purred happily at the gesture, prompting smiles from the rest of her Bonded.

Licking his fingers, Bahn helped himself to more flatbread, polishing off another helping of vegetable curry and testing his magic levels afterward. He was obviously eating for two and Surajini had to smile at the methodical way he went about making sure that he'd fulfilled the necessary requirements for his body and baby.

"I did," Harry said, echoing Surajini. "There wasn't—weren't—really many people to meet. We played Creeper and that's more of a, well," he stopped. He wasn't about to explain that it was being with the one you were partnered with than making new connections.
He'd enjoyed the game because it was fun and if he was honest—because he'd been playing with Quinn. Bahn's words made him think in a whole new direction—a direction he'd pushed out of his mind because he hadn't wanted to deal with it. Not the best way to handle things—not with his track record anyway, but he'd wanted to be able to spend one day just moving about Nevarah and not worrying about things like Hunting and making connections.

"Try some of these," Surajini said, holding up another platter of roasted, lightly seasoned vegetables. When neither Harry nor Bahn paid any attention to her, she gave a slight shake of her head and began to dish it out to their respective platters. She paused when Bahn shifted, restlessly, agitatedly. His pale eyes darkening a few shades.

For a moment, it was almost as if he wasn't even seeing her, but rather, far away in his mind—caught up in something bigger than lunchtime. She snuck a glance at Harry and saw him with his head bent over his tray, mechanically nibbling at the new servings she'd put on his platter.

She frowned. That wasn't good at all.

Harry began to eat again. He managed a small smile when Quinn nudge his elbow.

Are you alright? It's fine not to be hunting every single second of the Hunt. Quinn soothed. He tried not to look in Bahn's direction. He didn't want to glare at the indifferent Submissive. Harry had enjoyed himself, relaxed for a bit and even lost the sad look in his eyes for a few blissful short hours that day.

As far as Quinn was concerned, there was no need to worry about all of the social drama and pressure that demanded he be as productive as apparently both his mother and Bahn had been all day.

There would be plenty of time for that later on. Harry was a young Submissive with decades, perhaps even centuries ahead of him. There was more than enough time, surely!

"Lord Orseno is back," Patrick announced, walking over to join them. He'd seen the flicker of emotion in Quinn's face and felt the subtle change in atmosphere as Harry's mood had changed, empathic feedback stretching out in a rather large radius.

Surajini blinked, snapping out of her own thoughts. "Back?" She echoed, dodging the teasing pull aimed for her braided bun. It didn't work—for Patrick had always been quick.

He'd stolen the center pin for her bun and swiped the others in quick succession when she tried to dodge him. She pulled a face, but gave up on holding the mass of braided hair together. It unwound to a fat, bejeweled braid that fell to her waist.

Patrick smirked and touched the fancy hairpin to his lips, before tucking it behind his own ear. It matched in the way that all of their accessories always did. "Yes, back. I have yet to see him, but he should be making an appearance soon."

"Good. I worry about him—granted, he doesn't deserve it, but I can't help it." She'd wanted to see her friend for some time, but Orseno, the idiot that he was, had probably landed himself in his usual heap of trouble again.

She hoped to see him at the hunt—the only time he dared to venture out of his protected estate. Denzel didn't care for visitors, but he would allow her. Hiram, in turn, would return the gesture of faith as their Circles allowed.

Patrick smirked. "Well, as back as he could possibly be then," he allowed, bending down to nuzzle
her cheek. "Or at least, back in terms that Denzel hasn't caught up to him yet."

Surajini winced. "Is he planning on sitting out the entire weekend feast?" She tipped her head to the side, encouraging the feather-light kisses trailing down to her neck.

"I don't think he'll be doing much sitting at all," Hiram said, mildly. He stood off to Patrick's left, watchful eyes skimming quickly over the group. It was only polite of him to stop and say hello, seeing as Bahn had joined them for the noonday meal. "He's liable to find himself collared and leashed if he keeps those antics up."

"What antics?" Bahn's head snapped up, his grey eyes fluxing black as he set down his empty tray. There was still a strange air about him, but it was decidedly muted now.

"He's challenged a few clan heads," Hiram said, shaking his head. "Almost clan heads, not quite the official clans, but those who hold power, but didn't want to hold office. It's not good or exactly bad, per se, but that's Orseno for you." He half-smiled. "Good afternoon, Lord Deveraine."

"And a pleasant day to you and yours, Head Healer Kalzik," Bahn returned, politely. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Think nothing of it. Please, help yourself to more if you like. There is plenty."

"You're very kind," Bahn said, delicately blotting at his mouth. "Exactly which clan heads has Orseno challenged?"

Hiram almost smiled. That was news that he was not keen to share. Everyone would find out, soon enough, if Denzel allowed the threats to be made public. "That would be telling, though I can't exactly complain about the ones he's challenged. I'm sure that Denzel won't be very happy about them."

"Oh?" Patrick said, interestedly. He straightened up to look Hiram straight in the eye. "What aren't you telling me?" He hadn't heard any specific names in the rumors that had passed by him, but the look on Hiram's face suggested that he had.

"And me?" Surajini added, accepting his hand to rise to her feet, bangles tinkling and jingling musically as she straightened her sari and flicked her bejeweled braid over one shoulder. Orseno was a friend and she always looked after her friends—even when they were ridiculously troublesome.

"Nothing that either of you need to worry your heads over," Hiram teased. He leaned away from Surajini's questing fingers and captured them with one hand, pulling her close with the other. "I'll tell you, if you really want to know."

"And me?" Patrick asked, hopefully. His green eyes shimmered. "I want to know."

"I think I should leave," Bahn murmured, eyes sharpening. The faraway look had vanished for good and a new determination had come over him. "I need to leave now." He rose to his feet in a single fluid motion.

"Bahn?" Harry stared up at him. "Is something-?"

"I-I just—I—thank you," Bahn said, clearly, with a hasty nod of acknowledgement to the playful triad. "Nothing to worry about, Harry. I guess we'll see you down at the beach tonight, for dinner? Maybe? Let's stick with dinner. Probably tonight. Have fun 'till then. Don't forget to mingle."
Harry set his half-eaten tray down, scrambling to his feet when Bahn hurried for the rooftop exit, without bothering to explain the sudden rush. "Bahn? Wait up—what's wrong—Bahn!"

"Harry?" Surajini pulled away from Hiram, worry creasing her pretty face. "Is something wrong—what happened?"

"I don't know," Harry said, frustrated. "I thought everything was alright. I didn't sense anything wrong." He wrestled with the borrowed golden communication bangle for a few seconds and then slid it over his wrist. Reluctantly, he pressed it into Quinn's open hand. "Thank you, for everything today. I had a fun—it was perfect." He tried to smile and hoped he succeeded.

He'd felt a single strand of pure panic from Bahn right before his friend had lurched to his feet and made a quick getaway. That flicker of panic was the only thing Harry had needed to know. With hastily mumbled apologies for the abrupt departure, Harry hurried after Bahn and gently tugging on the bonds for Theo and Charlie.

Harry spotted the head of white-blond hair, knowing it was Bahn from the way the intricate braids were still intact, courtesy of Delani's nimble fingers from earlier. Even though Bahn had tugged at them earlier, Harry had seen the hairstyle painstakingly magically correct itself as Bahn ate.

It was likely one of Delani's spells, as she liked to play with Bahn's hair and he loved to let her. Harry had seen her fussing over him earlier and adding the gleaming golden leaf clip that he was now tracking through the busy crowds of dragels.

Bahn was quick on his feet, Harry would give him that, for all that he was pregnant. He didn't think that his friend was using magic to speed his steps, but that wasn't something he bothered to puzzle through.

Harry nearly stumbled into him, when Bahn come to a complete stop, whirling around to look at him, a finger pressed to his lips.

"Shh. I didn't mean for you to follow."

Harry opened and shut his mouth. He perked a brow instead, but didn't say anything, though the questions and words building up inside of him, desperately began to clamor for answers.

Without deigning to answer, Bahn whirled around and darted off again. Harry rolled his eyes and hurried after him again. He was beginning to think that Bahn's mood swings were the absolute worst part of being pregnant.

"Bahn—we really should-!" Harry whispered.

"There. Right there," Bahn said, tugging on Harry's hand. He'd reached back and grabbed Harry's sleeve several minutes ago, before settling for holding his hand instead. "The one in blue. What do you see?"

Harry gaped at him for a moment, then followed the pointing hand. "I see—lots of blue." They were standing slightly crouched down at the corner, behind a short wall, looking down at a wide, tiled floor where various dragels glided below, mingling in polite groups.

"Not that blue, look for the blue that seems like it's hiding. Right there. Next to the table with the sweet fountain on it." Bahn gave a slight jerk of his head.
"The sweet-?" Harry stopped when he caught sight of the chocolate fountains strategically placed along the middle food table and the trays of fresh fruit slices artistically displayed around them.

There were dozens of tall dragels milling about, talking to each other, laughing and joking, some of them serious and others stuffing their faces. The height suggested a ranking that was definitely not Submissive. The entire situation seemed fairly normal, nothing particularly out of place until a flicker of dark blue caught his eye.

Standing to the side and nodding politely at his conversation partner, a tall, blond dragel helped himself to a skewer of fresh fruit slices. He held it under the chocolate fountain with an absent air as if he wasn't paying the least bit of attention—yet, the chocolate drizzled perfectly over the fruit and didn't even come close to splattering on his fine, billowing sleeves.

Bahn growled.

Harry jerked slightly, glancing at him sideways. "Bahn…" there was a warning note in his voice this time. "What's wrong? Who is that?"

"That," Bahn said, tightly. "Is Lael Guantrell. Wretch." He turned away, flipping his silky hair over one shoulder and moving away from the wall so he wouldn't be seen. His shoulders were stiff and his head held high.

"That's the-" Harry began and stopped. "You were looking for him?"

Bahn sniffed. "I don't look for anyone," he said, tightly. "You there," he nodded at someone standing in the distance, positioned carefully so as not to be facing them, but watching them just the same.

The dragel approached, slender and slight of build, with a perfectly ordinary air about him. He was clad in softer colors of grey and brown, offering a slight dip that might have been a curtsy when he was within a foot of Bahn. "Your grace," he said, quietly.

"That was quick and well done," Bahn said. He reached up to undo the golden leaf hairpin twined in his braids. "Here." He handed over the trinket.

The dragel took it, tipping his head forward. "Thank you."

"One moment," Bahn stayed him with a hand, then pulled a thread from the inside of his gown sleeve and with a shimmer of magic, transfigured a new hair ornament, identical to the one he'd given in payment. "There. Thank you."

The fellow nodded again and all but disappeared into the crowd, slipping the golden trinket into a robe pocket.

Harry lost him in the moment he looked to Bahn for an explanation and then back at the crowd. The mysterious dragel was too ordinary and now, though he could almost sense the difference, that there was someone sharper out there than the dragels milling around them, he could no longer visually identify them.

"Bahn-!" There was a low growl in Harry's voice. "Did you have someone track him?"

"And if I did?" Bahn said, lightly. He magically replaced the transfigured golden leaf back into his hair, tapping it experimentally with a few fingers.

"What are you planning to do?" Harry demanded, circling around to stand directly in front of his
friend. Things were adding up too quickly and he didn't like the answer that was starting to form. "Bahn!"

"Nothing that you need to worry about," Bahn said. He smiled crookedly. It looked odd and strange on his normally cheerful, expressive face. "I just—I needed to be sure of something." He glided back over to the wall and leaned forward, folding his arms on the ledge and resting his chin atop them. He gazed down at the busy floor, but his eyes remained dark.

"And are you sure of it?" Harry wanted to know.

"Absolutely."

"What will you do about it?" He followed Bahn back to the wall and scowled when the elfin submissive did not answer.

They trailed Lael Guantrell for nearly an hour—and then he stopped mingling and began to hurry away into the crowd. Bahn quickened his steps, keeping pace with him and easily slipping through the crowd, drawing lightly on his air element to make sure that there was no one in his way.

Harry scowled, keeping up with him and unable to shake the uneasy feeling that was now hanging over him as they chased the older dragel. He was sure now, that Lael was not an Alpha or a Beta and probably not a Pareya. Harry couldn't be sure, but he didn't think that he really wanted to know. The same way that he didn't really want to know what Bahn was up to. There was a darker gleam in Bahn's eyes that suggested he wasn't about to have a polite chat with the other dragel.

Harry was fairly certain they wouldn't fight—Bahn wouldn't risk his twins, Harry was sure of that—but anything else seemed to be fair game. He thought back to the beachside party and the furious, helpless reactions of the rest of the Deveraines when Alma had told her story.

He could clearly remember Bahn's reaction and the grim set of his jaw before Ilsa had arrived. Harry frowned more to himself and looked up in time to see Bahn darting ahead, obviously aided by his element, frantically trying not to lose their quarry.

Resisting the urge to break into a run, Harry trotted as fast as he could up the walkway and around the corner. He dodged to the side, calling apologies and excuses over one shoulder, giving in to the need to move quicker.

He was solely focused on the fancy blond hairdo bobbing just barely within sight and entirely missed the wall of ornate finery and buffet plate until he crashed into it.

The shock sent him stumbling backwards and he fell on his bum, one hand reaching up to cradle his aching head. That had been almost like slamming face first into the bottom of the Quidditch pitch—without cushioning charms.

Harry winced, silently willing the ringing in his head and ears to leave him be. He sprang up to his feet, and swiped a hand down the front of his soiled robes and stifled a groan. It simply smushed into the fabric, sticking between his fingers. Theo would kill him for this—especially as he didn't think his magic could handle the necessary spells to clean it off.

"So sorry, excuse me," he bobbed his head, straining to the side and squinting to try and catch sight of Bahn again. There wasn't a single glimpse of his friend in sight.

No blond hair with a golden leaf and judging from where they'd last seen them, Harry knew he had to
move fast. He lurched forward only to be drawn up short by a tight-fisted hand in the back of his robes. He gave a choked warble and jerked around, snatching his robes back with barely restrained, instinctive hiss.

The hand released his robes, but caught his arm instead. It was attached to a very dignified older dragel, with a very disapproving look chiseled on his face.

"Excuse me," he drawled, irritably. "But a formal apology is the least you could offer!" He gestured towards his ruined dress, a dark gleam in one eye.

Harry tugged against the hand, attempting to spark it off with his magic or pull away. He wasn't sure if his magic would really cooperate and he didn't like the fact that this grip was too tight for comfort. "Let-

"Submissive's shouldn't be anywhere near the Alpha's levels," the man continued, haughtily. "Look at what you've done."

Harry grimaced. "I am—sorry," he managed to say. "But I'm in hurry, my friend—I need to make sure he's alright. Do you mind?"

"Your friend can wait." The man huffed. "Do you have any idea how much this robe cost? I expect full reimbursement for the cost of the cleaning, repairing and restoration, as well as an-

"What?" Harry gave his arm another hard jerk. "Let go of me!" There was an angry growl to his voice. He felt his magic react, uncoiling uncomfortably inside of him like a prickly, spreading warmth with nowhere to fill.

"It is deaf and dumb," the dragel snapped. He pulled Harry closer and held his arm up, frowning at the sticky fingers. "I said, you are in social disgrace and it would behoove you, as of this present moment in time, to make some kind of verbal restitution in the form of a commitment as to the repairing of the physical damage you have caused by your carelessness."

"Oh come off it, Randall, that's hardly worth the hassle of worrying over and I know how much you paid for it," said a lighter voice, careful, but firm. It belonged to a lovely, blond-haired dragel standing off to the left of Harry's 'captor' the entire front of his cream-colored ensemble, drenched with a vivid purple liquid. "Some of us suffered a far worse fate."

Randall jerked around to protest and winced. "Oh. That's terrible." He released Harry almost at once, but caught the sleeve of his gown, before he could move out of range. "I didn't realize that you were involved."

"Loss of awareness is a strange thing, is it not?" The blond drawled. He held out his arms, surveying the full effect of the purple stain.

Randall flushed. "You're—you can press the rights," he said, with obvious reluctance.

"Ever so generous as always," The blond said, holding out a hand.

A moment passed and then Randall roughly jerked Harry forward, within range for his friend to clasp a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Thank you."

The scowl on Randall's face darkened by several shades and he turned away, pointedly casting spells over his ruined clothes. "Submissive's shouldn't be running around on these floors
unsupervised." He wrinkled his nose.

"Naturally," the blond said, his grey eyes fluxed to a silvery hue. "Do excuse the both of us." The blond cast a look at the stained robes and suppressed a smile. "You might want to have Isabella take a look at that—it will stain."

Randall glared, but didn't answer, as he stalked off towards the washroom.

"Now then, that's rid us of him, but not me of you," the blond said, cheerfully. "Shall we? He does have a point, you know. Submissive's really shouldn't be on this floor and definitely with their Alpha, should the occasion call for it."

Harry bristled inward and out. He didn't have time to deal with this—or anything to contribute. He frantically worked to break the non-verbal silencing spell that Randall had cast on him. He'd felt the magic and been unable to project an appropriate reaction with his own, sluggish magic, where it was at present.

But, he could feel the spell tearing at the edges and began to focus his intent more directly on it. The spell broke seconds after Randall had disappeared into the crowd and the blond steered them both out of the semi-private event floor and into the slightly sheltered hallway.

Harry whirled around, claws out, murder in his eyes. "Get your hands off of me!" He hissed.

The blond released Harry's shoulder at once, before catching both of Harry's wrists in his strong, smooth hands. He immediately held them away from his face, leaning out of reach as an extra precaution. "None of that, thank you," he said, firmly. "I have done absolutely nothing to you nor have I asked anything of you as of yet." His silver eyes narrowed. "Claws back in, please."

Harry growled, leaning away. He felt a light cleansing spell wash over him, the sticky remnants removing themselves from his clawed hands.

"Now." The man said, firmly.

Harry's hands clenched and unclenched. "I was following a friend," he said, as calmly as he could manage. "And I need to find him." Bahn was long gone at this point and Harry had no idea how he would track him.

One idea flickering through his head, suggested that his empathy might be useful for such a thing, but Harry wasn't sure he was willing to trust it that far. Not yet, anyway, he hardly knew much about it, much less how to use it and the last thing he wanted was to cause another scene.

His empathy roiled and his magic began to spark, silently rippling through his entire body. He had been following Bahn and feeding off of the vibrant, tightly restrained emotions of his friend. Something had been wrong, very wrong and it had been serious enough for Bahn to pay off some mysterious stranger for what appeared to have been a visual confirmation of Lael Guantrell.

"Admirable," the blond allowed. "But I would appreciate it if you would settle down and take a minute to understand your situation."

"There isn't a situation," Harry snapped and twisted again, in the blond's grasp. He struggled to see clearly to look over his own shoulder, trying to remember which direction Bahn had vanished to.

Instinct told him that the corner with the strongest emotional pull—the far left up ahead—was the best bet. His empathy confirmed it and his magic began to bubble up inside, even more fiercely
than before. It wanted out and it did not care how it came out.

"Says the one currently trying to ignore said situation," the blond said. "I would say that isn't much of a friend, if they left you here on their own."

"Bahn's not that kind of friend!" Harry snarled. "Now let go!" There was a violent burst of light and Harry gave one final jerk. He felt the flare of vicious heat surge from his very core and flare through his hands.

There was a yelp of surprise, followed by a barely muted hiss of pain, before the blond released him, cradling singed hands. The silver gleam in his eyes returned to the original grey.

"Bahn?" he repeated, eyes narrowed.

Harry didn't wait to explain. Freed from the captive grasp, he danced back a few steps, careful not to turn his back, until he knew he couldn't be caught again. Annoyed and irritated, he whirled around and darted into the crowd, this time, making use of his small size and relying on the empathic sense pulling him towards the place where he had last seen his friend.

He followed the pull through a maze of halls and down corridors with wide, fluted pillars leading out to generous balconies with private corners, hidden from view. A few flickers of movement revealed snogging couples—or worse—groups and Harry quickly refocused on the goal at hand. His face flamed, briefly, but he pushed the images away, feeling the sense of urgency growing as the walkway began to slope upward.

He could almost sense the air growing noticeably thinner, but that was the least of his concerns. He only knew that he wasn't moving as fast as he wanted, for the frantic need to find Bahn was steadily growing stronger by the minute. He wished, desperately, for a broom—or the ability to apparate.

A flicker of movement caught his eye and he dodged around the next corner, narrowly missing a cozy couple on their way down, gliding with flickers of their air magic.

Air magic.

Harry sucked in a breath and mentally reminded himself to focus and act on that focus. He needed to do this right. The pull was almost unbearable now and something made him slow and stop when he rounded the final corner.

A small, open-air balcony stretched out in front of him, with no other exits and no further levels. This was the top of the tower, it seemed and there were low, wide rails all along the sides.

Potent, rich air magic swirled lazily through the air, thick enough to breathe, elusive to the touch, lending a hazy tint to visible area.

The fantastic view wasn't what made Harry freeze at the top of the wide staircase. It wasn't even the delightful, beautiful magic that already reached out to him.

Instead, it was the terrifying scene of Bahn, backed up to the railing with five Gheyos clustered around him, wings and claws out, pulsing, angry aura permeating the entire area.

Bahn had one hand hovering protectively in front of him, but whether shielding his glamoured baby bump or preparing to cast something, was not immediately apparent.

Bahn! The name caught in his throat and Harry felt his heart flip over. Memories flashed before his
eyes. Ghost and shadows of things he wanted to forget. Moments when he’d been seconds too late. Magic sparked at his fingers.

One of the Gheyos turned to see Harry's entrance, an ugly sneer on his face, typical, glowing eyes and a lean, scarred body filling out a standard profile. He looked Harry up and down, ignoring him. Bahn's scrambling fingers managed to hike him up on the rail—a touch further out of reach of their angry claws—as he edged backwards.

"No-!" Harry started forward, stopping when two of the other Gheyos now took notice of him, altering their defensive positions to now include him as a viable threat. He had meant to draw their attention—but he hadn't decided what to do beyond that. He had only thought to take away the focus from Bahn, to buy some time, no matter how short.

Bahn was an air elemental. He was also a well-bonded Submissive with extra magic on account of his pregnancy. Harry swallowed, rapidly scrolling through the available options in his head. Bahn could also fly—but he couldn't. Even if Bahn jumped from the roof, he would be able to catch himself—but Harry would be on his own. There was also no guarantee that others wouldn't follow.

Even with extra magic at his disposal, Harry had never actually seen Bahn fly and he didn't know how well matched a Submissive dragel could be against an entire circuit of angry Gheyos. Quite frankly, Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know. Flying was out as an option—he'd have to think of something else and hope that his famous luck could fill in the blanks.

It usually did.

"Get that one," the tall, one-eyed Gheyo grunted out, lengthening his claws into even finer wicked points. He focused his eye on Harry and took a slight sniff in his direction. "This one won't be a problem."

Bahn's head jerked up and for one split-second, Harry saw pure fear reflected in those shining eyes. Fear, not for himself, Harry reasoned out, but fear for—him?

Harry gathered up his courage and his magic. He knew how to fight. Had been thrown into enough situations to know that shields were not always the best of spells. An expelliarmous would not do him any good—as the Gheyos had no wands or focus objects visible. A stunning spell depended on the breadth of his magic and realistically, he couldn't cast anything that would catch all of them. Maybe one or two—if he was quick. Harry flexed his toes, gathering himself together to move. He would have to be careful and he could not miss—but he would not stand idly by and watch this play out.

Two Gheyos had watched him and now, they broke away from the larger group. Their approach was calculated and menacing, no emotions visible in their eyes.

Something moved behind Harry and he instinctively lunged to the side, dropping to a defensive crouch, wand sliding into his hand. He’d almost forgotten his wand, in the holster on his arm. The heat in his palms still sang through his veins from the earlier fire spell—he'd cast that on instinct without a wand and out of sheer desperation. He hadn't expected it to work.

A touch of Charlie's element, apparently. The heat flickered inside of him, concentrating at his fingertips, around his wand hand as he gripped it tightly.

Desperation and a deliberate calmness enveloped him at once, his empathy being ordered to settle and calm itself, as a new presence burst onto the scene.
"Stay down," the blond dragel snapped, blowing past Harry in a billow of white, cream and gold. His height dwarfed Harry and the sheer presence of his magic demanded obedience. "Don't move!" He added, before charging straight for the two Gheyos. He pulled sharply on his element, slamming into both of them and dodging to the side. "Ilsa!" The name came out as a near scream. He headed straight for Bahn and the ledge, blurring to move even quicker.

"Ithy, no-!" Bahn cried. The Gheyo in front of him simply raised his razored hand and struck.

Magic crackled and screamed as a powerful shield flared to life, golden-white energy shimmering with the strain of absorbing the blow as the blond fellow stood between Bahn and the angry Gheyo, his sleeve torn and ripped from where the attack had almost succeeded.

The Gheyo stumbled back as the blond reared up, fire burning in pitch black eyes. Whatever he would have done, was not put to the test, because an angry screech cut through the air, making everyone shudder and wince.

Saying her name had been summons enough.

Ilsa plummeted from sky in an angry ball of golden magic. She slammed into the rooftop with her signature visible shockwave, a loud snarl announcing her presence as she straightened to show off her mangled, armored wings and glistening, pristine armor.

Stalking forward, her wings angled, she drew a crooked bladed sword from thin air, rolling her shoulders back as she approached, her eyes pitch black.

Another shrieking cry filled the air and Greta dropped onto the rooftop balcony, leaving her own crater behind as she straightened up from the kneeling position she’d landed in. Her glowing purple eyes were accented by the froth of purple smoke that seeped from her open mouth, lips curled back to show her pointed fangs. She hissed, taking in the scene. Her legendary whip crackled to life in her hand, sparking dangerously as she approached.

The rest of the Deveraine Gheyos began to appear from seemingly nowhere. Edor vaulted over the railing, massive wingspan shadowing a significant amount of space as he chirped inquisitively, already going to instinct, his own weapons materializing in his hands.

Loren appeared in a sudden burst of flame, invisible one minute and then visible the next. His angry growl drew answering hisses from his fellow Bonded as they approached the attackers.

Nathan appeared next, his curly hair shivering and moving, until two large, curled horns, burst from the twin dots on his forehead, curling into existence above his ears. He winced—just barely—at the discomfort and then rolled his shoulders back. His exposed arms showed dark hair growing even darker as he approached.

Harry stared at the entire Deveraine Gheyo defense turned out in full alert. He saw the blond dragel—Ithy, Bahn had called him?—drop to a crouch, shielding both of them with his stained robe. Protection spells woven into it, Harry figured, when he realized that the dragel hadn't even hesitated to leap into the thick of things.

He frowned. That had been an unexpected—but very lucky—turn of events.

A heavy feeling of dread and death seeped into the very air around him, stealing every possible shred of light, innocent thought in him. A killing aura, Harry realized, belatedly. Ilsa's perhaps. Darkness, it seemed, had come with her—with all of them. Thick enough to choke, it permeated the air, sealing off the rooftop, it seemed.
The Deveraine Gheyos fanned out in what seemed to be a prepared attack pattern of some sort, boxing in the Gheyos from retreating physically, with Loren immediately taking up a protective stance in front of Bahn and his rescuer.

There was the faintest flare of light and then Bahn disappeared from view as a portal sucked him down and away, along with Ithy. Harry didn't have time to react to that when his magic screamed and he stumbled back a few steps as a portal deposited two figures in front of him.

"Bahn!" Harry grabbed him in a hug as Bahn and his rescuer materialized right in front of him. Relief surged through him and he didn't hesitate to hug him tight. For one terrible moment, he'd thought that it was all over—that magic wouldn't be enough to save another friend.

"Friend of yours?" The blond inquired. "Answer later. Don't either of you fight me." His arms encircled them both and he muttered a destination beneath his breath, as a portal flared to life beneath their feet.

Harry frantically reached out to Theo and Charlie, feeling only the briefest flicker of reassurance from a pale-faced Bahn, whose trembling fingers were fisted in his sleeve.

Angry shrieks and screeches faded away as magic whisked them to safety.

The portal deposited them in the posh interior of a rather fancy upstairs apartment, with wide, ceiling-to-floor windows taking up an entire wall facing out into the wide, grassy plains of Nevarah. In the distance, the Merrow waters could be seen and below, the expected bustle of the inner city, reduced to tiny shapes and figures.

Harry tried to reorient himself after the unexpected portal. Strong arms gave a gentle squeeze and then pulled away.

Magic flared and rippled as layer over layer of protective spells and wards were called to life in short order. The window latches were reinforced and glowing runes inscribed themselves over the doorway.

There was a tense moment of silence, before short breaths evened out into a more calm rhythm. Bahn was still glued to Ithy's side, one arm linked through Harry's and he wasn't moving.

"Bahn?" Harry tried, attempting to pull away and finding that his friend did not want to move.

"Window," Ithy said, briskly. "Natural light will help." He bent and picked them both up without the slightest hesitation.

Harry bit back the squeak that caught in his throat and tamped down on the flush of embarrassment that warmed his neck and ears. "Excuse me?" He tried, when pillows floated past him at eye level, to arrange themselves on the carpeted floor in front of the tall windows.

It took a bit of maneuvering, but Harry soon found himself sitting on a pillow next to Bahn, who was safely cuddled in the arms of none other than the missing Ithycar Deveraine, Head Alpha.

Silence reigned for several minutes before Ithycar cleared his throat. "Bahn, dearest?"

There was a single hitched breath and then Bahn moved, throwing his arms around Ithycar's shoulder and snuffling into his neck. "Ithy," he said, in a low, pained voice. "What took so long?"

Ithycar sighed, tipping his head back to rest on the window. "You scared a century off of me," he
said, mildly. "Suppose I hadn't been there?"

"Not possible," came the muffled reply. Fingers fisted in the give of the fabric, trying to pull himself closer.

"Always so sure of yourself, aren't you?" Ithycar murmured. He pressed a kiss to Bahn's silken hair and began to rub a soothing hand up and down his back. "You are safe now, I swear it."

"Ilsa," Bahn whimpered, attempting to burrow closer. He shivered for a moment. "Harry?"

"Right here," Harry said, quickly, trying to catch a glimpse of the familiar face. "I'm fine." He didn't know about Ilsa, but from what he'd seen of her before they'd been whisked away, he thought that she was just fine. She'd looked ready to kill when she'd 'ported in and Harry didn't want to think about what she would do or not.

"Everyone is fine," Ithycar assured him, brows furrowed. "But you are not." He gently pried the arms loose from 'round his neck and held his submissive at arm's length, surveying his elfin features for something that only he could see. He drew Bahn back to him, casting a mild diagnostic spell just as Bahn wrenched away to vomit on the floor.

Ithycar simply moved with him, banishing the mess away and floating Harry a few inches above the ground to keep from getting covered in said vomit. "Pregnant?" He murmured, after a moment, when the spell returned a result he hadn't expected. A pleased smile settled on his face and he drew out a kerchief from one billowing sleeve.

Harry gingerly eased off of his floating cushion and hurried over to the little kitchenette at the far end of the apartment. He found a glass in the cupboards and filled it from the tap, carrying it back to a miserable Bahn.

A grateful look from both was his reward and Harry cautiously eased down to sit in front of them, still wary. "Harry," Bahn said, a few moments later. "You're alright?"

"I'm fine," Harry managed a smile. "Theo and Charlie probably had a few years scared off of them as well," he gave a nod to Ithycar. "He's yours?"

Bahn sputtered a laugh, handing the half-empty glass to Ithycar. "Very much so."

"Friend of yours?" Ithycar countered, drinking the rest of the water and banishing the glass back to the kitchenette with a flick of his fingers.

"Friend of the Circle," Bahn corrected. "We have no quarrel with him."

"I see," Ithycar paused. "We ran right into each other."

"I see," Bahn paused. "We ran right into each other."

Bahn blinked, innocently. "Really? He's Theo's."

"Theo's—our Theo?"

"We only have one Theo," Bahn said, visibly pulling himself together and beginning to sit up on his own. He paused and then elbowed Ithycar.

"Ilsa's Theo?" Ithycar tried again. He winced at the elbow and grabbed it, before the action could be repeated. "Bahn?"

"I hate portals!" Bahn said, primly. "Use Alloras, next time. Yes, Ilsa's Theo. Do we have any
other Theo's I ought to know about?" He licked his lips. "Harry—this is Ithycar, our Ithy, our Head Alpha. He was supposed to come earlier. I wanted to invite you for the welcome back dinner. He's over Delani, because of our merged Circles. Ithy, this is Harry."

"Pleasure," Ithycar said, warmly. "Though the circumstances alarm me. You were following Bahn?" He looked at Bahn. "And you were cornered on a rooftop. Whatever were you doing—and with those?"

Bahn wrinkled his nose. "A minor miscalculation."

"Minor?" Ithycar perked a brow. "That was a killing blow and you know it. I would hardly call that minor. Who did they belong to?"

"...No one important," Bahn attempted to shrug, eyes averted.

"...Then what did you say to them?"

"Nothing. I suppose they didn't like my face."

Harry made a choked sound and flinched at the emotional feedback radiating from both of them. He wondered if Theo and Charlie would 'port in soon. He was trying to feed some calmness through their bonds to make up for the panicked burst moments before. Nervous energy sparked through him in uneven bursts, adrenaline somewhat frozen in motion.

"Liar," Ithycar said, calmly. "Try again."

"It's no one you know," Bahn said, leaning away from the hand that went to rest on his shoulder.

"Which is exactly what worries me," came the quick reply. "I know many people. So enlighten me."

"It's nothing to worry about!"

"Nothing doesn't have you this worked up. Now look at me, please. Who was that and why were they trying to kill you?"

"...Wasn't trying to kill me?"

"So ending up dead would have been an unfortunate side effect?" Ithycar frowned and reached around to catch Bahn's chin and gently turn his face back to him. "That's not what it looked like to me. There are always more options if you're willing to look for them."

Something was visible in Bahn's eyes because Ithycar released him moment later, pressing a hand to his forehead. "Bahn," it was a disappointed tone of voice. "You promised."

"I didn't do anything!"

"This is not nothing."

"They deserved it!"

"That's not your choice to make."

"You weren't here!"

"I'm here now and you knew I was coming today."
Bahn didn't answer.

Ithycar leaned forward, touching his chin to Bahn's right temple. "You were scheming again, weren't you?"

Bahn squirmed, avoiding Harry's worried gaze and attempting to shift to his feet. He did not want to have this conversation now and most certainly not with Harry in the room.

"That was far from a minor miscalculation," Ithycar caught him in a hug from behind, preventing him from escaping, careful of his rounded belly. He sat back down on the plump pillows, Bahn securely on his lap. "Attacking any pregnant submissive is a sure death sentence, so whatever happens from here is in Ilsa's hands and I doubt she's inclined to be merciful right now. However, what would drive someone to that point is rather questionable. So I will only ask you once, what did you do?"

Silence stretched out once more.

Harry fidgeted, glancing at the door and tugging gently on the bonds again. He could feel the answering pulses from Theo and Charlie in turn. They were glad that he was alright, but he couldn't tell if they were on their way or not.

"…Nothing. I didn't do anything."

Harry saw Ithycar roll his eyes heavenward, out of Bahn's view. His brows furrowed together.

"Ilsa didn't come until I called," Ithycar began, lightly. "Which meant that you didn't call her, even though you were clearly in fear for your life." He tightened his grip when Bahn squirmed again. "Your friend was desperate to find you and he was crucial in seeing that I found you in time—at the top of The Pinnacle."

"He couldn't have—" Harry started and faltered when Ithycar gave him a sharp look. The words tangled in his throat and stayed there. He wanted to say that it wasn't possible for anyone to predict how something would play out, but Bahn's silence worried him.


"Fine!" Bahn crossed his arms over his chest as best as he could. He studiously avoided Harry's gaze. "Am I in trouble now? You're hardly in a place to be lecturing me about—" He winced and frowned at his belly.

"I don't think you're in a position to complain," Ithycar said, smoothly. "Shh. You've simply had too much movement too quickly." He cast a small, soothing spell, a favorite of either Submissive that often helped in lieu of a calming or stomach soother potion.

Bahn relaxed against him almost at once, lips parting in a whine. There wasn't the slightest hint of regret or guilt present on him, but his frustration was clear when he tried to move again barely stirred.

Ithycar clicked his tongue against his teeth. "You didn't take any blood today, did you?" he scolded mildly. "And with a scare like that," he loosened his hold on the newly lethargic Bahn and began to fold up one voluminous sleeve.

Bahn turned away from the proffered wrist and instead twisted around, arms reaching up for Ithycar's neck. His Alpha offered a slight smile and tipped his neck to the side in invitation. "Don't
bite.” He admonished, lengthening his fingers on one hand into neat claws. He winced when Bahn didn't wait and did exactly that—twice.

Harry felt his fangs ache and throb. He looked away from the intimate scene, feeling distinctly uncomfortable at witnessing such a private moment. He didn't want to interrupt, but it seemed too personal to be simply sitting there.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Ithycar asked, concerned eyes now a rather familiar shade of gold.

"Your eyes-!" Harry said, half to himself. He could have sworn the older dragel had silver to grey eyes just minutes ago.

Ithycar smiled. "Earth is my element," he said with a chuckle. "But I am an exception to the rule. Air is my secondary element, called out and more pronounced by the fact that I have two Air Submissives."

"You can call out a secondary element?" Harry stared. He hadn't even known such a thing was possible.

"Not really. It's not advised and it depends on your magical stability and your genetic makeup. I was simply lucky and being Bonded to this one and the other," he reached up to hold Bahn's head in place to prevent his annoyed Submissive from making a few more hard bites out of irritation.

Bahn gave an angry whine in response, but continued to greedily drink. The mating mark at the top of his shoulder began to glow a faint golden sheen, prompting a faint smile from Ithycar as their bonds began to synchronize again.

"You should take some too," Ithycar said, frowning. He gave Bahn's head a warning tap, and then stretched his arm out to Harry, wrist exposed.

"I'm fine," Harry swallowed. "Theo will be here and-"

"Your eyes say otherwise," Ithycar said, quietly. "I'm sure he won't mind."

Bahn snuffled.

Ithycar tipped his head to touch his cheek to Bahn's head. "And neither with you, my little troublemaker." He pressed his wrist against his ear and slashed it against one of the earrings there. Blood beaded at once on the jagged line and he held it out. Steady golden eyes fixed on Harry, a silent urge to take the proffered gift.

There was only the slightest hesitation before instinct won out over propriety and Harry found himself curled up to Ithycar's side, his fangs notched in the offered wrist. For the first few frantic gulps, he didn't even taste it, but was aware that the simmering, roiling chaos of magic inside of him simply calmed.

His inner hackles fluffed and stretched, before settling down. A powerful calmness washed over him and Harry leaned into Ithycar's warmth, unable to fight the pull against the security radiating from him. He was vaguely aware that Ithycar had managed to somehow offer a half-hug as well as presenting his wrist at a decent angle.

Bahn made a soft clicking sound and Harry stopped drinking, straightening up to see his friend studying him with curious eyes. "You're alright?" Bahn asked.

"No thanks to you," Ithycar rumbled from overhead. "I would ask what you were thinking, but I
believe the better option would be simply to allow Delani to make sense of your explanation."

Bahn swallowed. The first hint of guilt danced across his face. Facing Ithycar was one thing, but Delani was entirely another.

Harry found himself smiling. The smile faded when he realized that Theo hadn't arrived yet—he'd given quite a yank to their shared bonds and had expected some sort of grand entrance.

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THEO AND CHARLIE : Deveraine Gueshouse

"...You are not tying me up again," Charlie groaned. His fingers twitched feebly and he stifled a moan from where he lay on the soft bed.

Theo chuckled from somewhere off to his left, offering a slight pat of comfort to Charlie's tanned stomach. They'd exhausted themselves in the most filthy and delightful of ways.

"You didn't like it?"

"Liked it too much," Charlie growled. "Stop licking me."

Theo hummed in answer and decided to bite instead. It earned him another beautiful groan and hiss for his efforts, but Charlie didn't protest any further.

Both of them were still swimming in a pleasurable haze from the recent enjoyable high that came from bloodsharing and sex. "Are we staying in for the rest of the day?" Charlie asked.

"Do you want to?" Theo licked the bite wound closed and cuddled up to Charlie's broad, warm side. "We could still walk about, mingle a bit. Find Harry wherever he is."

Charlie mumbled in answer. He didn't think he could quite move just yet, but he did wonder what Harry had been up to for most of the day. Feedback through their bonds had been dancing from one extreme to the next, topped off with a healthy dose of sheer delight—the main ingredient that let them know Harry was alright. Of course, knowing Harry, there was most likely some ridiculous adventure underway right about now.

"I didn't hear that," Theo said, teasingly. He walked his fingers over Charlie's stomach.

Charlie huffed, twitching under the feather-light touch. "I said, what were you up to this morning?"

"Oh, that," Theo stopped his finger-walking, rousing himself enough to sit up. "Want to see it?"

"What is it?"

"Something for Harry."

"...Theo."

His Alpha smirked, sliding off the bed. He stood just out of reach of Charlie's long arms. "Come and find out."

"I can't move."

"Sure you can."

"...I don't want to move?"
Theo laughed. He moved into range and leaned down to press a kiss to Charlie's sweaty forehead. A faint spark of magic leapt between them. "Sure you do."

He purred appreciatively, when one of Charlie's hands reached up to hold his head in place for a kiss of thanks.

"An obstacle course?" Charlie stared. He crammed the blueberry pastry in his mouth and wiped his hands on Theo's proffered napkin. This was quite possibly the most useful thing he'd seen since they'd arrived in Nevarah. "When did you find the time for this?"

"Magic," Theo said, wiggling his fingers. He ignored the returned napkin. "This morning. I was up first, remember? You're welcome to use it too—I had Oretta call it back for Harry."

"Strength training?" Charlie guessed. He stuffed the napkin in his back pocket and mentally counted out the spaces and items he could see. This looked quite fun.

"Strength and agility," Theo corrected. "There's a decent balance of both and the more he uses it, the better the results."

Charlie glanced at him. "What's your best time?"

"Hmm?"

"You're feeding me sugar, I've already had blood," Charlie began to swing his arms, rolling his neck to the side. "What's your best time?"

"Why don't you join me and find out?"


"Charlie? What's the—ah." A loud hiss escaped and Theo shook himself all over. For a moment, they stared at each other.

"Harry?" Charlie suggested, cautiously.

"I hope not," Theo frowned. "It felt like him but it's not—I can't pinpoint it."

"Definitely Harry," Charlie said, a moment later. "Theo?"

"I need something more than a few isolated feelings. He's probably enjoying himself again like he was earlier with whatever it was that was making him-ugh!" Theo dropped to his knees, golden eyes wide, one hand clapped over his neck. "Harry," the name was breathed in a pained gasp.

"Harry!" Charlie buckled a second later, both hands scrabbling at his burning mating marks. "What's happening?"


It burned bright and steady, before Theo could finally speak again. "Failed summon," he said, through gritted teeth. "Something's wrong, Harry was trying to call us and—the," he grimaced.

"Do something!"
"Temptricus Ergen, my submissive, immediate vicinity," Theo gasped out. He staggered to his feet, shuddering as warring magic twisted through him.

Harry had been frantic enough to call for them, then truly fearing for his life to try and summon them. The failed summon was more telling than anything else.

It was a portal that had begun, but never completed itself, resulting in the burning, fiery marks that now plagued them both.

Charlie's eyes squeezed shut. "Won't stop burning," he said, working to stand on his own two feet. "Why isn't your portal working?"

Theo did not answer. His eyes were pitch black and he reached out to grab Charlie's shoulder to anchor them together. Forcing the portal was not good—but there were few other options available.

His only thought was for Harry and how quickly to 'port to his side—or pull Harry to them. Charlie whined softly and Theo silently steeled himself.

This would hurt.

Probably.

DEVERAINE SAFEHOUSE : NEVARAH

Bahn did not have a chance to answer any more of Ithycar's questions, after he'd sufficiently calmed.

The door to the apartment shuddered and groaned, before it burst open and the rest of the Deveraines streamed into the room in a gaggle of noise and flaring indoor wings.

"Bahn!" Delani was at the head of the group and she stopped a few steps away from Ithycar and Bahn, before her entire countenance lightened. "Ithycar!" She breathed, barely giving him a moment to stand, still tangled with Bahn, before she pushed him up against the window and did a fair job of snogging his face off.

Bahn made a disagreeable sound from his position, sandwiched between them and was silenced when Delani drew back and proceeded to snog him next.

Ithycar bit back a smirk at the dazed look on Bahn's face and reached out to touch Delani's chin, drawing her attention back to him. "It's good to see you again too," he said, warmly.

She smiled in answer and leaned up to receive his welcoming kiss. "I didn't think you'd make it in until late tonight." She took a step back, so as not to smother Bahn, reaching out to comb her fingers through his hair. "What happened? I felt—I don't even know what I felt, but I was so-" she hesitated.

"Afraid," Takar said, grimly. He came to join them, an arm around a pale Lorelei. "We were all afraid. I haven't felt anything like that since…" he faltered.

"Since Kandra," said Bu, strongly. Her face was rather pale, but there was strength and determination in her gleaming grey eyes. "Where's the rest of them?"

"The other's haven't come yet," Bahn said, from his muffled position in Delani's arms.
She'd scooped him up almost at once, and it appeared that he wasn't about to be set down anytime soon. His lack of protest was rather telling as he soaked up the offered comfort. Delani moved to one of the settees and immediately cuddled him on her lap.

He rested his head on her shoulder and silently counted the heads in the room, checking to be sure that all of his necessary bonded were there.

"They're still fighting?" Salani asked, herding the younger children around her and into the careful hands of Koury, who guided them to a playroom off to the side. "That call was so—Bahn."

"Where's Bhindi?" Ithycar asked. He seated himself beside Delani, reaching out to pull Bahn's feet into his lap. There was a brief tug-of-war, before Delani gave Bahn a look and he relented, allowing the touch.

"She's with Callistair," said Okahn, coming to greet Ithycar. He accepted the welcome kiss and circled around to stand protectively behind the settee, grey eyes sweeping the room as if to spot any threats present among them. "You know that's his default."

"The rest of the children?" Nara asked, stepping out of Alma's way as the Head Pareya bustled around, checking protective spells and wards on the safe house.

"Dahlia's with her own, Ariki is coming, Soula was with Loren, I expect if he 'ported in, then he 'ported her out elsewhere."

"Where exactly is elsewhere?" Bahn wanted to know. He squirmed to be let out of Delani's arms and stretched a hand towards Harry, who had been standing off to the side.

Alma handed Camalis over to Nara, casting a series of diagnostics over Harry, with his given permission. She could tell at once that Bahn was fine and so had turned her attention to the next Submissive present. Harry's magic levels read strongly and his instincts were soothed, but not muted. She guessed that perhaps Ithycar had given him blood to keep him calm until Theo arrived.

She frowned. There would be chaos shortly, for sure. The shared bonds thrummed fiercely through her body, instinct keeping her on high alert to know that whatever danger had been sighted, had not yet been deemed safe.

None of them would fully relax until Ilsa was among them once more—and an explanation of sort hashed out to everyone's understanding.

The worried look on Bahn's face, tugged at her bonds and Alma sighed. She waited for him to meet her gaze and then silently invited him over with a tilt of her head.

Bahn went straight to her, cuddling into her side and ducking under one arm to watch Harry. They were both scooted forward and to the side, when the room door burst open and three missing Deveraines came spilling in.

Bhindi stood protectively in front of Soula, with a glowering Callistair behind them, staff raised. He immediately pushed them in and them sealed the door, casting his own brand of magic over it.

"What happened?" he demanded at once, stretching out a reassuring hand to Bhindi, who pulled Soula back along with her. It took another second for them to recognize that only their Bonded were present, before the Pareyas present hurried to greet them.

There was a beat of silence before Bhindi spotted Ithycar rising from the settee and her pretty eyes narrowed, lips twisting into a snarl.
Her Bonded backed out of the way, leaving a clear line between Alpha and Submissive.

Aracle pulled Soula into his arms, murmuring softly to her as she hugged him back, nodding that she was alright. He gave Callistair a grateful smile.

Callistair relaxed enough to nod, a weary glance flickering to Bhindi's furious self and Ithycar's perpetually calm expression. He winced. Aracle mirrored it. There was sure to be a spectacular scene in the next few minutes.

"I hate you," Bhindi snapped, stopping just out of arm's reach of Ithycar. "You're early. You're here. I guess you couldn't be bothered to say anything?"

"I've only just arrived," Ithycar said mildly. "And what kind of greeting is that?"

"The one where I don't sever your head from your shoulders and kick it through the window!" She glared at him. "How dare you!"

"If I recall, it was with your express request," he returned. "Perhaps I ought to refresh your memory."

"It's nowhere near as rusted as yours! As if you didn't know how to shorten a deadline and parley? Years in the courts brings you to this?" She gestured to him, nose wrinkling. "Pah!"

"You are a poor actor and a terrible liar," he shot back. "You are fine—you were with Callistair," his gaze darted to Bahn.

"How would you even know-!" She lunged at him, a silver blade flashing out of one hand.

He dodged, catching the blade easily with one of his own. They paused, locked in movement, before one unspoken cue made them move.

A choreographed dance of sorts began, slashes, thrusts, parries and feints. Bhindi was a white-and-gold blur, and Ithycar was a graceful column of cream-and-white.

The sharp argument moved around the settee and over to the large windows, where Ithycar had first gone. There was a glint of silver and then a soft gasp, before Bhindi pinned his shoulder to one of the draped columns. She'd stabbed him without hesitation, her grey eyes glittering.

He twisted, but could not pull free, and so he grabbed her to him and buried his own knife in her back. There was a crackle of magic and a visible spark.

Her lips parted in a soundless scream, twin tears trickling down her cheeks. "You bastard!" She thumped his chest with closed fists. The knife in his shoulder shimmered and morphed into a light that melted into his body. "You-!"

"Shh, Yes, I know," he murmured, holding her tight to him as the knife in her back shimmered out of existence. "I gave you that to keep, not to fight me."

"You horrid, horrid man!" She cried, tugging at the collar of his robe, pulling him down to her height.

"Absolutely terrible," he agreed, kissing her as prompted. "You should have called sooner."

"You could have left sooner!" She stomped on his foot. "Brute!" She kissed him back, with a hint of bite. She'd hoped for a nice, calm, romantic reunion. This was not the way it was supposed to
He chuckled and nipped her ear, ignoring the sound of protest. "Are we through with the tantrum?"

She squirmed in his arms, unwilling to answer, but content enough to be held for the moment. She did not see his indulgent smile, but her initial fury had already worn off. She’d also returned his special knife and he'd given hers back. That said something. He was now back, in her arms and that was all that she had wanted for so very long.

A low, crooning burble formed in her throat.

Ithycar smiled sadly and turned her around, her back to his chest, leaning down to nuzzle her neck. He rubbed warm hands up and down her arms, pressing deliberately over the inked claim marks that decorated each arm.

She trembled, visibly, turning her face to hide in the voluminous sleeves of his robe. "What happened?" A twitch of her fingers cast a spell that cleaned the purple stain off the front of his robe.

"Bahn happened," Ithycar said, calmly. "And he is very lucky that he is pregnant right now or else I suspect Lani would have quite a bit to say about this latest adventure." He smiled at his robe and kissed the top of her head for the kind gesture.

Delani's pale gaze flickered over to where Bahn was studiously making himself as small as possible with Alma's arm around him. He refused to meet her eyes. A smile tugged at her face. So that’s why he'd snuck away to Alma. She went over to him again, pulling him into her arms and chirring softly to let him know how she felt.

He gave a mere squeak of protest, settling almost at once with her touch. When she methodically checked him over for injury, he made quiet purrs and warbles in answer to her questioning hums. He was fine. She was fine. That was all they needed to know at this point.

Alma smiled to herself, before casting a look around the room in search of the very necessary person that wasn't there. She waited a beat, for Delani to finish checking over Bahn—again—and for Ithycar to settle Bhindi. She twitched faintly, when her own claim mark burned. It was nice to feel the bonds clicking back into the place after the empty ache that usually occupied those particular strands.

"Where is Ilsa?" Nara asked. She swayed a sleeping Camalis in her arms, her own worried eyes fixed on Alma. "The children should be fine but-

"Room," Bu muttered, standing up as tall as she could manage, and clapping her hands for attention. "Children, Pareyas—cluster up." She gestured towards the large playroom that was towards the back, the double doors open. "In. Now." Koury had already taken the youngest ones in, but the older ones were now joining them.

"Can you sense her?" Sueh herded the children in front of her, with a murmured promise of the games that were usually kept in the stacked containers to the side. The older children exchanged uneasy glances, but allowed themselves to be shuffled along with their siblings.

"No," Bu glanced at Alma, who shook her head ever so slightly. "But you know Ilsa. She'll 'port in here with her aura flaring about the edges and everyone else right along with her."

Nara grimaced. "Bahn? Bhindi?" She looked to the twins, who had pulled away from their respective Alphas and were having a hastily whispered conversation for their own ears alone.
"Lovelings?" They would be the first to sense their prickly Ace's return.

Bhindi was the first to react. She paled almost at once, turning waxen white and straightening up, shoulders squared. Her eyes flicked from Alma to Nara and then to the closing playroom doors.

There was a split-second before Nara clutched Camalis to her chest and bolted for the playroom door. She would magically lock and ward it behind her.

Bahn turned a wary gaze to the apartment door, his shoulders hunching forward, wings rippling somewhere beneath the skin. He reached back, catching one of Harry's sleeves and subtly standing in front of him, a slight defense.

Angry screeching and growls made themselves known before the wards on the door strained and buckled. Callistair swore, his staff beginning to glow.

"Take them down!" Delani snapped, throwing out her hands to rip the wards apart in her own way. A controlled rip was always easier to repair than a forced one. There was not enough time to undo the entire thing for a proper entry—and most definitely not for Ilsa.

Ithycar touched his arm to hers, his magic streaming out in broad swathes of light and energy. The wards strained once more and gave in, as the door opened and this time, the Deveraine Gheyos spilled in.

It took Harry all of five seconds to realize that Greta, Loren and Edor were all wrestling Ilsa into the room. A very bloody, angry and powerful Ilsa.

"I'll kill him-!" she howled, straining against their bonds.

Greta winced at a flailing arm that caught her chin and her violet eyes glittered dangerously. "Don't let her move!" she hissed.

Loren shrank away from Greta, ducking one of Ilsa's bloody claws. He knew she would calm once the bloodlust ebbed, but she wasn't even at full strength and it taxed them to try and restrain her.

Brute strength was not working and he knew they would need a little extra pull. "Bahn?" he called out, not daring to turn his attention away from his Ace. Ilsa was borderline halfling and edging closer towards feral.

He didn't want to see her tip that far over. Wouldn't forgive her if she did. They were all too broken for another one of them to fall apart. Ilsa was supposed to be their rock. Delani's everpresent armor. Ithycar's chosen shield. Ilsa was something different to each of them. The look on her face when she'd ported in had promised exactly what she'd done. He only hoped that with Ithycar here, things would finally settle and smooth over.

Nathan stifled the instinctive whine in his throat. He wasn't the full dragel that the others were and drawing attention to himself with Ilsa's present state was a very, very bad idea. Edor had leapt in front of him to take a slash to the chest, when Ilsa had lashed out at him.

Fading adrenaline allowed rationality to return and relief filled him from claws to horns when he spotted Ithycar standing beside Bhindi. That was good. Perhaps they would manage this without any further bloodshed. He silently implored his Alpha to speak, it would take an Alpha's voice or a Submissive's touch to bring her back at this point. He kept to the edges of their Gheyo group as Ilsa traipsed further into the warded safe house. He didn't know how she'd even figured to 'port them here.
"Ilsa?" Ithycar spoke up when silence stretched out a bit too long for his liking. There was something off here and he only needed to know what it was and then he could make it right.

His voice was an instant trigger.

Ilsa paused in mid-step, head jerking around to look at him. Her chest heaved, wings shuddering and folding back into her body as she jerked away from the cautious helping hands around her.

"Ithycar?" She half-laughed, a strained sound in the forced atmosphere. Her near-black gaze flickered from Bahn to Bhindi and then to Ithycar. She did not look at Harry.

Silence reigned.

Greta shifted, staying within Ilsa's line of sight. Her wings had already long since vanished, but her clawed hands remained. There were a few, vivid red scratches on her formerly unmarked face, but they healed as she stood there, waiting.

Movement returned and Ilsa headed for the pristine white settee. She perched on the end, and crossed her ankles, flexed claws curled and resting atop her knees. Scales remained visible, heavily dotted along her face, neck and shoulders, while her armor was missing a few noticeable pieces.

Another moment trickled by.

Ilsa wrinkled her nose, a surreptitious glance taking stock of her immediate surroundings. "Stand down," she ground out. "All of you."

Loren's shoulders slumped in relief. He was the first to move forward, dropping to his knees when Ilsa's sharp-eyed gaze zeroed in on him. It made his inherent fire nature bristle and strain within, but the iron in Ilsa's heavy gaze quelled any thought of rebellion.

He lowered his gaze, waiting for any indication that his presence was unwelcome. When she didn't stop him, he scooted closer and took up a position sitting on the floor next to her feet, daring to rest his chin on one stained knee. Instinct demanded physical contact, but he didn't feel the slightest hint of battlelust from her.

She simply watched him, the agitation fading somewhat as he licked her knee and then frowned at the taste. "It's not mine, idiot." She flicked him lightly on the head.

His flames burst to life, a steady glow resurfacing. He whined in answer and made a teasing snap for her finger.

Ilsa tapped his nose in instead, allowing the apologetic nibble to her claw-turned-hand. He took her hand and inspected it, carefully, before sniffing at the rest of the blood on her arm.

Edor growled faintly, stalking forward to join them. He averted his gaze when Ilsa tracked his movements all the way to the settee. He didn't dare attempt to sit next to her, but took up the open position near her other side, seating himself on the floor as Loren had done-albeit gracelessly.

It took him a moment to confirm that the blood on his Ace was not hers and therefore, he could gradually relax from the thought of further threats. He fiddled with her soiled armor, noting the stains on her shin guards and the hem of her dresswear sleeve, torn and frayed. It had been a pretty
outfit for the Hunt.

Ilsa stretched her neck, a rumble building in her throat that finally soothed the others. They approached, wary as Loren had been, Greta taking the lead.

Clustering around her, they poked at her blood-covered limbs and clothes, preening her hair and chattering in a series of hisses and growls that only made sense to each other.

"Ilsa?" Delani drew near, a respectful distance away from the settee and the protective Gheyos. It'd been years since she'd seen this comforting ritual among their own. Instinct compelled them to verify that Ilsa was physically unharmed—the only reason they were now quieting. "Talk to me, love."

Miserable brown eyes stared straight through Delani, but Ilsa did not speak.

"Please?" Delani inched closer, keeping her hands hanging at her sides, her movements slow enough to track. "What happened?"

Ilsa turned away, her gaze seeking Bahn's. When she spoke, her voice was rough and tension began to show once more in the taut lines of her upper body. "Yes or no?" she asked.

Bahn simply moved to sit on the settee opposite of her. He met her gaze, steadily. Bhindi glided after him, slipping into the space on the left, scooting closer to him.

Ithycar stayed with Harry for a moment, before he nudged him forward to join the other two Submissives. It would be easier to protect all three of them if they were in one place and Ilsa had yet to honestly acknowledge him.

Harry balked. There was no way he was about to sit across from Ilsa in her current state without anyone that he felt he could completely trust by his side. That was simply asking for the kind of trouble that his ridiculous luck often gifted him.

"She's fine now," Ithycar said, calmly. "I'll be right beside you. Come on." He draped a reassuring arm around Harry's taut shoulders and inched him forward, a single step at a time.

Harry gingerly sat at the farthest end of the settee that he could manage in the empty space on the right of Bahn. His instincts and his empathy were screaming in tandem inside of him.

He wanted Theo. He wanted Charlie. He wasn't picky about which one of them reached him first. He did know that he most certainly did not want Ilsa to turn those terrifying eyes on him.

A whiff of blood made his stomach roil uneasily. He could gather that the blood wasn't hers—it didn't smell like hers anyway. But that did not mean it was alright.

Ithycar's arm remained around Harry's shoulder, offering a steady, comforting presence.

The imminent thread of danger and death was now muted, if not tightly restrained. Aura, Harry recalled. She was actively controlling it now, because he could feel it uncurling and slithering back to her.

It made his skin crawl. This was one shade of the darkness that he knew lurked within her. One single shade that he hadn't expected to ever witness.

"…so yes, then?" Ilsa clarified. Her smile was tight and she lifted her chin.
"Yes," Bahn said, simply.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tipped her head back to rest on Greta's arms. She would not say a word about his timing. It was awful, but maybe there never would have been a good time at all.

Greta stood to the side, one hand on Ilsa's shoulder. She chirred softly when Ilsa's head rested on her arm. Her two-toned hair was almost three-tones, with the wet, dark color. Greta bit back the growl building in her throat. Ilsa might be sorting through her emotions but the rest of them were fighting instinct.

To see her Ace in this state invited the kind of urges that were definitely not suitable for polite company. It took a single glance at Harry's wide green eyes and elven-pale face to stop her instincts from delving into her darker nature. He was almost frozen, partially dwarfed by Ithycar's looming figure hovering beside him. Greta mentally reigned herself in. There would be time for that later—she'd make sure of it.

"Ilsa," Ithycar spoke with a weight in his tone that hadn't been there before.

"Four of them," she said, lightly. "I've broke-winged four of them."

Bhindi clapped a hand over her mouth, but not before a muffled whimper had escaped. At this point, what wasn't being said had now begun to worry her. She trembled when Delani drew near, offering comfort with her presence.

"Four?" Bahn asked, calmly. He inspected his fingernails as if there was nothing startling about such news. "Only?"

"The Ace acknowledged my right to retaliate, but I'm sure you already know what that means. You knew how I would react." Ilsa rubbed her face. "Am I only a means to an end for you?"

Bahn's lips twisted into a grimace. "Means to an end?" he repeated. "Is that what you think you are?" His voice hardened, eyes narrowed.

"Hard to think I'm anything else when all you've done is use me since you've summoned me," Ilsa snapped. Her eyes flared with a hint of gold light. "I returned for a reason."

"A lovely reason yes, but you've also been avoiding me. Avoiding us. Causing the sorts of troubles that wouldn't have been troubles, if you'd been here to sort them out. You've been tiptoeing around as if you're afraid I'll hack your head off and granted, darling, I have been tempted, but in spite of all you've done, I am still very deeply fond of you, I do care for you and above all else, I love you."

"But not fond enough to stop using me?"

"Of course not."

Ilsa sucked in a breath. The effect of his words were more than visible on her face. "Why?"

"Because to me you are a tool. A beautiful perfect tool. I would hate for you to sit, unused, shoved in a corner, tarnishing with the passage of time." Bahn's eyes gleamed with the light of a thousand devils. "You know why I do it, loveling."

The endearment falling from his lips made a choked little sound steal past Ilsa's trembling lips. "Please…"

"Please?"
"I—I-"

"Because I want to. Because I can. Because you're mine." The fierce look on his face was tempered only by the possessive tint in his voice. "And because I know you love it. Don't you, loveling?"

Ilsa's eyes blinked open, wide, shimmering and pure gold. A hiccuped "yes" was the only word she breathed. The claim mark, barely visible on her breast, began to glow, a bright golden glow that retraced the entire mark, the bonds reaffirmed in the only way that had truly mattered to Ilsa.

Bahn's smirk widened and he rolled his shoulders back, his point made. There was a faint flash of silver on his own claim mark on his arm, but he hadn't needed the reassurance of what was already his.

"...I can't—I don't-"

He scoffed. "You will. Kindly stand up and resume the role that was never taken from you in the first place." He took one step towards her and then another.

The other Gheyos shifted away, backing out of range from the volatile pair. Ilsa's shoulders shook, but her gaze remained steady and her eyes bright.

"You are very much my Ace," Bahn murmured. He stopped moving forward only when his legs touched her knees. "By Arielle and all the celestial realms, I am your Submissive."

Ilsa swallowed. She reached one hand for him and faltered.

He caught it in his own, linking their fingers together. He leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"Show me the woman that refused to be courted and declared she was not a prize to be won. Prove to me that you belong beside me, where I've put you from the day we bonded."

Her free hand moved upwards, seeking purchase on his slender arm. Gripping hard enough to bruise when he attempted to brush his lips on her cheek, she leaned just out of reach. "...You bastard."

He laughed. "That's not the answer I want." He twisted his arm in her grip and dug pointed nails into her forearm. "But you love me anyway."

"Have I any other choice?"

"No. Especially when I don't feel very safe at all."

Ilsa's indoor wings unfurled with such force, everything fluttered and shifted within the room. She wrapped them around herself and Bahn, cocooning them at once from prying eyes and any potential threats.

She was quick and nearly soundless, the jagged cuts in her wings overlapping at just the right points to hide them both from view.

"You are," her voice was muffled. "You are safe. I swear it. I promise you are always, always safe. As long as I have breath in my body, you are safe."

"Swear it," Bahn demanded.

"I swear by Ergen and Arielle." Ilsa soothed. "I swear on my bearer's forgotten name."

"...That will do."
Delani wrapped her arms around Bhindi from behind and kissed the top of her head. The soothing gesture was accepted, but Bhindi looked to the floor, her shoulders slumping. Her tremors had stopped, but witnessing the reaffirming scene in front of her had dredged up old hurts and memories that she'd worked hard to bury.

Ithycar's arm tightened, drawing Harry closer to his side. Harry leaned into the gesture, feeling a deep ache echoing inside of him. His empathy, he knew, was hungrily feeding off of the wild mixture of emotions tangling through the room.

He tugged on the strands connected to him once more, reminding the bonds of Theo and Charlie, that he wanted them to come. He didn't understand why they hadn't come to him as yet. A brief flash of puzzlement registered, because something told him that they should have been here and more than enough time had passed.

Should have.

When Ithycar's grip bordered on painful, Harry squirmed. It slackened almost at once and a slight apologetic glance was sent his way.

Several minutes passed before Ilsa's wings finally opened. She held Bahn in her arms, his face hidden in the hollow of her neck. Her wings folded back in precise movements as she cast a glance at Ithycar and Delani.

Both Alphas were giving her identical looks that promised a long, potentially emotionally painful conversation at some point in the future. It made her stomach churn, but Bahn purred reassuringly in her arms and her instincts melted into a muddle once more.

His admission of uneasiness had brought her true feelings to the forefront. A Submissive that did not feel safe, would hunt to grow and build their Circle until they did.

Ilsa knew he didn't want to hunt any more than she wanted him to. But he did want her to grovel. To coddle him. To reassure him. To shoulder her portion of the burden upon them all because of her return.

He rested comfortably in her arms, apparently where he wanted to be, his fingers skimming over her claim mark and tracing random patterns on her skin.

"Sit," Delani said, briskly. "He's heavier now than before," she looked to Ithycar. "I have a feeling we're short on time and in need of quick actions, so if you could-"

"It depends on what exactly you did," Ithycar said. He looked to Ilsa. "I defer to you in light of the fact that I expect there is far more you have to say than time we have to listen. I will—we will—hear it all later, but for now, an abbreviated version will do."

A brief flash of emotion played across Ilsa's face, but she only offered the barest hint of what might have passed for a smile. "I've declared war," she said, quietly. "Ergen help me, but I have."

"Which clan?" Ithycar straightened up.

Harry's worried eyes now flickered back and forth between Ithycar and Ilsa. Starting a clan war seemed to deserve far more uproar than calmness that both Alphas and Submissives were displaying at present.

"Alma?" Ilsa turned towards the pull of Alma's presence. She'd sensed her there—as the Head Pareya, Alma would always stay, even when she hated the sight and scent of their injuries and
foreign blood.

Alma shifted to stand a little ways out from Callistair's protective stance. He had slipped over to her side when Ilsa had been brought into the room. She did not need his protection, for her rank was far better suited to reversing their positions, but the gesture was kind.

"Everyone comes back. I mean, everyone. Kandra, Ully, even their Intendeds if they're courting. Inside. In our wards. I was well within my rights, but Ergen help me if I give them any sort of opening." She frowned at Callistair. "You will use our house seal on every single individual. If you can't channel the magic, then cast it and give me the threads. I will tie it to the very core of this realm."

Callistair's glare upped by several degrees, but he gave a stiff nod. He would ignore the slight to his abilities, because there was a very real possibility that casting so many protective magics could drain him. Help would be welcome.

"Favors," Ilsa's smile tightened. "If you have favor with any house, call it in and ask that they stand on our behalf. This can be resolved, quite possibly with a single—motion." She forced the last word out. It was unlikely, but she would hold out hope until the last minute.

"Over four wings?" Bhindi burst out. She couldn't hold her silence anymore. She had asked Bahn for his help—but he hadn't shared everything with her. He hadn't warned her about this. "Which clan?" It hadn't escaped her notice that Ilsa had yet to name them.

Bahn snorted. The rage was back in his eyes as he shifted, sitting up from the cage of Ilsa's arms around him. "They hurt Kandra," he said, lightly. "And I couldn't touch them before."

"But now…" Bhindi breathed. Relief and rage surged through her in equal measure. "Arielle. You did it. The Vaughns? You—four of them?" She turned in Delani's arms, making no effort to hide the madness surfacing in her eyes. Four permanently injured Gheyos was a severe blow to any Circle—but still, not enough retribution for what they had done to her precious daughter. Their precious daughter. "Can we burn them?" She sing-songed. "Pretty please?"

"You have more than Theo?" Ithycar asked, suddenly. He was rubbing something on his shoulder, having finally deemed Harry calm enough to sit on his own. "Forgive me for asking so bluntly, but I cannot see your marks."

"A Beta, Charlie," Harry said. He frowned at Ithycar's twitching hands. "What are you doing?"

"And this Charlie, he's a fire type?"

"Yes."

"Ah. That explains it. Brace yourself then. My apologies for the delay."

His words made little sense to Harry until two identical cracks of sound seemed to tear apart the very fabric of the space around him. An angry Theo materialized at his right with a furious Charlie at Harry's left.

On high alert, claws, fangs and scales in full display, wings tempered—just barely. Theo's growl of displeasure was shrill and painful, as he snatched Harry up off of the settee, crushing him to his side.

Charlie echoed the harsh sound of displeasure, his wings flared out, one curving protectively
around them, the other angled as if to deflect or attack.

Harry cycled through a dozen emotions before the sheer intensity of their feelings overwhelmed him. He opened his mouth, answering their questioning screeches with a burbling warble that made absolutely no sense, apart from could-they-please-calm-down-right-now-or-else?

The spectacular entrance had the Deveraines scrambling together in surprising synchronization. Ithycar stood at the forefront, Bhindi with Delani who was behind Callistar. Alma was in front of all of them, with Bahn behind her.

Ilsa stood off to Ithycar's side, a hastily cast swapping spell trading out her battered armor for a new set. Alma threw a scent bubble over her, ignoring the glare earned. Foreign blood would rile them more before they even had a chance to trust their senses.


Theo's grip didn't loosen. Charlie growled, as if in acknowledgement that Harry had spoken, but not to what he'd actually said.

Harry sighed. He leaned forward, twining his arms around Theo's shirtless, well-scaled stomach. His fingers skimmed over the smooth warmth, touching soft, baby fine hairs and feeling the agitation that stewed out of sight.

Dredging up the carefully constructed calm inside of him, Harry deliberately pushed it through their bonds. It was only thanks to Ithycar that he had any calm at all to spare. He was still recovering from the fight-or-flight flash that had turned into a suspended decision while Bahn and Ilsa hashed out whatever was between them.

He could not mistake the obvious relief of everyone in the room when the interaction had ended on an apparently positive note. He now felt the relief flip-flop into undisguised trepidation.

A shimmer at the corner of his eye drew his attention. Ilsa. Standing just out of Theo's line of sight. Ilsa's golden eyes burned into him. Harry swallowed. He could feel Theo trembling ever so slightly in his arms.

Harry hugged him, reaching one hand blindly behind him for Charlie. He was relieved when he felt a larger, warmer hand slide into his.

Cautiously, he pressed a kiss to the side of Theo's neck, then to the edge of his chin and finally, to the pretty patch of scales near his ear. "Theo," Harry whispered. "M'fine."

"Theodore," Ilsa's voice rang out in the room.

Theo jerked around to see her. His grip tightened reflexively on Harry, before golden eyes narrowed. Charlie rumbled from behind them, both of his wings now curving forward.

Ilsa perked a brow.

Theo held her gaze.

She sniffed and then her lips curled back for a fanged hiss.

Theo blinked. He made a confused sound in his throat.
There was an answering snort from his mentor, before she stalked forward and flopped onto the settee farthest from him.

"Oretta?" Theo rasped. He stopped squeezing Harry and turned his attention downward. A short huff left his lips and he leaned down to gift a light kiss to Harry.

Charlie hummed overhead. When Harry twisted around, Charlie stole a kiss of his own. His wings folded downward, but not in, as he gradually came back to himself.

A long awkward silence stretched out. Bahn shuffled from his protected spot behind Alma, but did not step out when Delani gave him a look.

"Theodore?" Ithycar cleared his throat. His Alpha's weight was still present in his tone. "Are you back to yourself?"

"Almost," Theo said, absently. He gave himself a slight shake and continued to look Harry over. The black was fading to a medium brown, but the usual gold hue was still missing.

A very patient Harry stood still, allowing the slightly fluttering hands to feel his head, neck and shoulders. He swatted away Theo's questing hands when they ventured lower. "I am fine," he said, quietly. Thunking his head on Theo's chest, tucking it just under his chin, Harry hummed an odd, nonsensical tune. He didn't know what else to say to calm them down and everything was sort of fine now that they were here.

He was shortly sandwiched in another hug when Charlie deemed it acceptable to check him over as well. Several embarrassing minutes passed in which Alpha and Beta conversed in a series of growls and warbles, before an exasperated Harry gave in and kissed them both soundly.

That was all the reassurance that was needed, for Charlie's wings vanished and Theo's scales began to recede. Harry huffed. "Idiots," he muttered, cheeks flushing red.

Ithycar's smile turned fond and he looked away, granting them a moment of privacy. A moment later, he pursed his lips and gave a soft whistle.

The sound drew Theo's attention at once. His head snapped up and he looked at Ilsa, brows furrowed. A second later, his head turned to fix on the tall blond standing beside the settee. "Ithycar?" Theo stumbled over the name, golden eyes growing wide. "You're-?" He took two steps forward when Ithycar held out an arm.

Harry blinked back the sudden moisture in his eyes. The expression on Theo's face had been too open, too hopeful and too vulnerable, almost, for his liking. But Ithycar had simply swallowed him up in a hug that looked like it would hurt, were it anyone else.

"You've grown," Ithycar murmured, fondly.

Theo mumbled something and was rewarded with an affectionate nuzzle to the top of his head. His ears turned a faint pink, before he finally attempted to pull away.

Ithycar merely laughed and held onto him for a moment longer. Theo's smile was well-hidden by the fancy robes.

A flicker of annoyance rippled through his empathy and prompted Harry to look to his left. A scowling Bhindi now approached them, her sour glare fixed on Theo and Ithycar. It took a split-second for Harry to make the connection and inwardly, he stifled the urge to laugh as he caught Ilsa rolling her eyes.
A/N: Hey everyone! I hope you're all doing well and enjoying your summer! (or winter, wherever you are. lol). If you've been reading the Chatterbox threads in the forums, then you know how exciting things have been for me lately. Exciting and busy, as usual. I have a new job-I've been hired on at last. This has been a crazy week of getting oriented and goodness knows what else. My mom is doing a bit better. We spent the day as a family for Father's day yesterday and had SO MUCH fun. This is yet another one of my monster chapters-clocking in at about 20k, so I hope you enjoyed it, even on the sheer length of it alone. LOL.

It took a while to write and I am absolutely thrilled to finally share Ithycar Deveraine with you all! I have waited all this time just to write those introduction scenes and wrote/rewrote them until they came out as close to the idea in my head as I could manage. The main conflict in this chapter will be explained a bit in the next and we'll also see how it ties into Harry. The purpose of this is technically to get some strong dragels behind Harry and to push his courting up a bit. So just hang in there. Cause and effect and all that. Ahem.

Many thanks to brissygirl who made sense of my odd typos and suggestions for the story. :) She's having some health issues right now and I'd ask for y'all to send some good wishes/karma her way. :) 

Thanks for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel's Song. I have book 5 partially written and will be working on getting it out next. Welcome to the new readers. Thanks for reading!

REVIEW RESPONSES WILL BE POSTED as I have the time to spare. I'm working on chapter 95. Slowly. VERY SLOWLY.

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Harry, Theo, Charlie-(with Deveraines)

Deveraine Circle members-(at their private safehouse)
Gathering Shreds of Dignity

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of a proposed clan war to the Vaughns, things start moving along. Harry and Co. are caught up in the midst as the Deveraines begin to sort out the drama.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

RECAP: Harry and Co. are taken under the Deveraines wings after a desperate rooftop encounter that coincides with the return of the Deveraine Alpha, Ithycar. Old friendships are rekindled and new troubles are awakened. Ithycar is happy to help Harry and Co.-as well as seeing as they are kept out of harm's way, seeing as a clan war is about to unfold between the Deveraines and the Gauntrells.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HARRY AND CO. + DEVERAINES : Deveraine Safehouse : NEVARAH : THE HUNT, Day 2

"You have to come to for dinner," Bahn said, linking one of his arms through Harry's and the other through Ilsa's. He had yet to really allow Ilsa to leave his side. The determined look on his face suggested that Harry was best served to simply agree. "I wanted to ask you before, but I was—distracted. The beach dinner will have to wait though," he added, as an afterthought. He'd proposed the idea long before this event had taken place and now it would be time to rearrange things, appropriately.

Still, he wanted to have Harry and the others over.

Ilsa choked. "Distracted?" She sputtered. "Is that what you call this-?" She stared down at her submissive, incredulously.

"Say yes," Bahn tugged on Harry's arm. "Please? Then those two can keep talking and I can—explain?"

"Bahn, company isn't the best right now, they need to-

"Harry's not company. He's family. Besides, would you tear them apart?" Bahn nodded to where Theo and Ithycar were talking quietly between themselves. Ithycar still had a hand on Theo's shoulder and Theo had reached up to rest his hand on said arm.
"They're really close," Harry said, before he could stop himself. He felt a slight pang at seeing them there like that. It was almost as if they were a father-son pair and it made something inside of him hurt.

"Ithycar was the father he never had," Bahn said, quietly, reading something in Harry's voice, that hadn't been there before. "Bhindi thinks otherwise, but Ithy's the closest thing I think he's ever had to a real father. Or at least, a male parental figure that did not think he was a pawn to be used at will."

"How do you know?" Harry frowned at him. Yes, there were things he hadn't even spoken to Theo about—not yet, anyway—but that Bahn would know more about Theo than him in this instant—it made that ache turn into a tiny hurt.

"Hasn't he told you how I found him?" Ilsa asked. Her own voice was quiet and there was a measure of sadness in her gaze that Harry didn't know how to read.

"He said that you came when his Hogwarts letter arrived. That someone didn't like his father and poisoned him. You saved him and he turned." Harry tried to think back, remembering Theo's arms around him and the warmth of the bed after they'd shared that difficult night. The tiny hurt wavered and then faded.

"What did he tell you about the house?" Ilsa stared straight ahead, the gold in her eyes flickering as if to darken.

"That he brought it down around his ears and you— you built it back with a wave of your hand." Harry stared at her. Bahn wasn't looking at him and Ilsa's jaw clenched tight. Their lack of agreement was worrisome. "I-isn't that what happened?"

"I am no necromancer, Harry, " Ilsa said, calmly.

"I don't understand."

"If the entire house came down and I built it back—what do you suppose happened to the people?"

Harry sucked in a breath and felt his legs quiver. He could only remember the next lines when Theo said that Ilsa had pressed her hands into the red sheets and painted his face. 

**Blood.** He realized, belatedly. She had painted him with blood. Of course. Nearly all dragel magic was blood magic. That which wasn't elemental, anyway.

"They did not want to believe that he was a monster," Ilsa continued. "His mother might have, were she alive, but his father was different. I can't say I'm sorry for building the house back, he did need somewhere to live, but I never took him to task for what he believes I should."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. Theo had killed his entire family from turning too soon—like that little girl at the Healer's Clinic. He'd changed into something wonderful and terrible at the same time. It had left him terrified, scared and alone. But Ilsa had come for him. She'd found him.

No one had come for Harry.

But they were still speaking and Harry made himself focus. He couldn't keep dwelling on that detail, even though that one really did hurt.

"He wouldn't speak when she first brought him back." Bahn said. "He was in shock, I suppose. Wandering about the house like a lost little thing. He accidentally went into Ithy's study, to hide or
something, I don't know. We were in the middle of one of Bhindi's pregnancies and she wasn't in the best of moods. Ithy was terribly busy at the time and he didn't know we had a new guest. By the time Bhindi and I thought to check there, Theo had fallen asleep in front of the fire, on the rug and Ithy was sitting next to him, dictating letters. They spent days together after that, while Ilsa was busy."

"You mean while I was trying to prove I had rights and custody to him?" Ilsa snorted. "By the time I'd returned, Ithy had pulled him out of the shock and I did the rest. After that, we never spoke of it again. I offered and he refused, so we left it as is."

"His focus memory," Harry spoke, half to himself. "He said it was you, your eyes and your hands. It haunts him." Green eyes snapped up to meet Ilsa's steady golden gaze.

She merely hummed, as if she'd already known that little tidbit. "Invite him to dinner then," she said, tugging Bahn to her side and free of Harry's arm. "And hurry it up. We cannot stay here." She rolled one shoulder back, but shifted, uneasily.

"Oh?" Bahn studied her for a moment, reading something from her movement, more than her words, but wanting her to spell it out, for Harry's benefit, if nothing else.

"We may not have used this safe house, but if we want to use the main house as we have been doing, then I suggest we return home and make sure that it stays as it should." Ilsa gritted her teeth, magic sparking faintly. It was slowly fading back into her to a more acceptable manner for their current situation.

"Good point," Alma muttered. She was holding Camalis cradled on her shoulder. "We'll 'port out in ten. Circle up, gather 'round!" She called out, wading into the chattering mess of her Bonded that had finally emerged from the playroom.

It would be a mess to have everything sorted in such a short time, but it would be far worse to leave it to fate.

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**THE DEVERAINE ESTATE : ITHYCAR'S STUDY**

"...In the Shadows? The Hound's Court? Theodore, that's not..."

"I know."

"You have nothing to bargain with."

"I know—but-"

"...You haven't told him, have you?"

"Ithycar."

He laughed, clapping Theo on the shoulder, the tension melting away from the serious conversation. "I was just checking. I would have done the same. Especially with my two."

"I'm sure there's an insult in there, but I don't care to find out exactly what it is.

"That's probably because there isn't one in there after all," Ithycar made a note on the planner at the corner of his desk. "I'll see what I can do."

"I hate to ask so-

"Don't." He held up a hand, stopping Theo's polite speech. "There is no need to apologize for something as simple as a complicated favor when we are practically family." He stood up from the desk and scribbled something on a slip of paper, before twisting it up into a little knot. He tossed the scrap to Theo, who caught it, frowned and tucked into a pocket.

"Thank you."

"Any further word on the seals?"

"We're to return to the health clinic to see." Theo hesitated. "I feel as if I'm—failing him somehow. Shouldn't I have all of this sorted out?"

"I don't know," Ithycar said, mildly. "Should you?"

Theo huffed, frustrated. "He's my submissive!"

"And you're doing the best that you can. He cannot ask anything more of you."

"But-!"

"Didn't you just tell me he spent the day with the Kalziks? The reigning clan of healers in our realm? Mothered by none other than Master Healer Lady Surajini herself? Theo, you worry too much. Arielle, help me, but I swear that came from Ilsa."

Theo snorted. "That was from all of you."

Ithy barked a laugh. "We do tend to overthink and worry ourselves, don't we?" He mused. "That wasn't supposed to rub off on you."

"I'm just—worried," Theo said, at last.

"And rightly so. But keep this in mind, Theo, I'm sure you've already thought it through, but suppose all of those seals have been on Harry for a reason? The same as when we'd put one on you?"

Theo fidgeted for a long moment. Then finally, his hunched shoulders relaxed. A flicker of light returned to his golden eyes before he gave a single nod, silently acknowledging that Ithycar had logically won this round for the moment. He would still worry, but perhaps now, he wouldn't be worrying about the things that were out of his control to change.

"You're welcome," Ithycar said, fondly. "As it is, when we're through with this, I'll call the Kadels and ask about a little reading session. If your Harry does have any prophecies associated with him—important ones—then we'll take it from there. We will. All of us. Alright?"

Theo managed a smile this time.

That was enough of an answer for Ithycard. "Good. Now, I'll call Henry and make sure that Cora extends an official invitation. It will serve you well to have that mention. She'll be somewhat out of sorts because their realignment cycle is usually about now? Probably over, but I imagine with the fuss of the Hunt, she hasn't been able to settle. She's young, still learning, but kind. She'll be a good hostess. No worries."

"Thank you."
"It's nothing, really." Ithycar smiled. "And Theo?"

"Yes?"

"You couldn't reach him—but you tried. It's not a crime for trying and failing."

Theo looked away, his hands clenching briefly. Ithycar really did know him well. He'd cut to the heart of things in a matter of minutes and while it left Theo feeling a bit raw and open, he felt better overall.

It had bothered him greatly to think that he'd been spending time with Charlie, enjoying himself, only for Harry to be in the kind of dangerous situation that he'd been trying to prevent. He was a young Alpha and instincts rode close to the surface—things he hadn't yet fully learned how to use to his Circle's advantage. "I should have-"

"There's libraries to be filled with all the could have's, should haves and ought-to-haves," Ithycar said, mildly. "Do not add your stories to them. You are not at fault or to blame here. This also why I want you over at Henry's. We'll handle this—drama—for lack of a better word. It's nothing for you and yours to worry about, but I want you out of the way, just the same."

"We could help—somehow," Theo protested, but he faltered beneath the knowing gaze.

"I would not have you make use of any fledging or old connections you have yet to rekindle," Ithycar said, kindly. "Those are your connections to keep and build upon, though it is very generous of you to offer. I would only ever ask of you, that which you are able to give. Now, will you stay with Henry? Please?"

The please did the trick. Theo squirmed for a minute, warring between the instinct to prove himself as an Alpha and revenge Harry, even if only over the fright of the event. But his softer side was embarrassed and eager to please the one who had looked out for him from the very first moment they'd met.

A beat of silence passed.

"We'll stay with them," Theo said, reluctantly.

Ithycar perked a brow. "What do you have against them?"

"What? Nothing!" The answer came, quickly—a bit too quickly.

Ithycar shook his head, a smile lurking beneath the almost-stern look. "Alright then, what do you have against which one of them?"

"...That's not fair."

"I'm not trying to be fair," Ithycar said. "But I want to be sure that you are being fair. Give them a chance. Cora and Bhindi are probably fighting over some ridiculous debate of which of our names has first rights to a certain shade of gold on our Circle Crest, but that's between them. Not you. Not Charlie. Not Harry."

Theo huffed.

"Bahn is siding with Bhindi because they are twins, I promise you, he doesn't care about such trivial things. Cora is only young enough to think that her stubbornness is endearing. They'll work it out in the end, but in the meantime, they'll snipe and hiss at each other, but it's nothing for you to
worry over."

"Colors?" Theo repeated, dubiously. He couldn't quite picture that particular scenario, but there was the slightest hint that perhaps, Ithycar was giving him a ridiculous example on purpose. It made him wonder what was really causing the slight disconnection between the respective Submissives.

"Something like that. I didn't bother to keep up with their personal slights, because Henry and I were friends before we circled up. As long as our Bonded play nice, we'll let them have their moments."

Theo frowned, slowly puzzling through that, trying to decide if it mattered to him or not. He didn't think that it did, in the end, but that didn't mean that he had to like it.

Ithycar hid a smile. "It's fine to be cautious, but it is also alright to give the benefit of doubt. They have only helped, so far, haven't they?"

"Just Lewis," Theo admitted. It made his shoulders twitch. It still irritated him that Lewis had been the one to rescue Harry after the portal had fallen through. Friendly Lewis who had managed to rub his scent all over his Harry in the span of a handful of minutes. Theo scowled. "Harry likes him."

"Trust Harry's judgment. If he finds no fault with him, there is probably none to be had."

"He's an empath." Theo said, flatly. "I don't think there could be a more accurate reading of any one individual from anywhere else."

"Learning already," Ithycar praised. "Now, shall we see what our delightful terrors have cooked up?"

Theo winced. "That bad?"

Ithycar chuckled. "You have no idea," he said, lightly. "I believe at some point in time, either Bhindi asked and he obliged or Bahn was simply bored. He tends to scheme things when he's bored, though I've never known him to do such things when pregnant, which worries me."

"He won't say?"

"Oh, he's saying it in his own twisted little way. I'm sure it's his special brand of homecoming, but as far as my two are concerned, I'm most likely about to die. Very thoroughly and methodically. I'm sure they'll revive me when they're through."

"Couldn't you have visited in between?"

The shadows in Ithycar's face lifted faintly as he caught Theo's pensive stare. "I should hope," he said, starting for the door. "That small as your Circle is starting, that you would be able to figure a way around extensive long-distance stays or relations for any reason whatsoever. Simply because something is doable, does not mean that it ought to be done."

Theo's golden eyes flickered a few shades darker. "But if it is necessary?"

"Then if it is necessary, it is simply another one of those things where you must decide what has to be done and you do it, regardless of whether you honestly want to or not."

"Was it worth it?" Theo ducked under Ithycar's arm to step into the hallway.
"Bhindī specifically requested it," Ithycar explained. "Bahn demanded that I fulfill her request when he saw how badly it worried her. We needed the connections, if I'm honest. Things are bad enough as it is between Nevarah and Tsuach. If I hadn't done it—well." He gave a slight shake of his head. "You know how they are and you know that I would not refuse them when it is well within my power to grant such things."

Theo did not need to read between the lines there. He'd still felt the weight of her glare when Ithycar had invited him into his study for a chat. He also knew that the twin's royal status remained, even though they had long left the Elven realm. He was glad for the minute to collect his thoughts—though he'd lost sight of both Harry and Charlie. The Deveraine Pareyas had descended in full force and immediately set everyone to a task of some sort.

Ithycar had escaped the chaos and taken Theo along with him, both as an excuse and for a moment to catch up. Now, they dodged a set of screeching triplets playing tag.

"...And those are Tanya's, I think." Ithycar murmured, glancing over his shoulder. "Quieter and calmer, please." He called after them, his tone firm.

The triplets quieted, a few hesitant glances cast back to their grandfather, before the game continued on—albeit in considerably quieter tones. Ithycar shook his head. "Monsters," he said, affectionately. "Remember to never spoil any children you have." He told Theo. "Grandchildren included. Otherwise they never listen to a word you say."

Theo bit back a smile. There was a new fondness to Ithycar's voice and Theo could tell that he loved them dearly. It bothered him to think that someone had dared to try and threaten them. Theo listened a bit further, hearing the voices of the Deveraine's Pareya as they organized the evening meal and kept the children occupied as stragglers began to come in.

He had a feeling he would have to find Harry soon. The Deveraines had a fairly extensive family and most of the older children were already grown and Bonded, with their own children. Ilsa was recalling all of them and it meant the house would quickly become very full and very loud.

Harry's empathy was likely to run haywire with the full gamut of emotion as Ithycar had been rubbing at his Claim marks from the moment the study door had shut behind them. It was both to calm his frazzled Bonded and to keep himself together at the same time.

Theo could only guess at how difficult it was not to directly reaffirm every single bond straightaway. He was fighting the same urge, albeit in smaller doses as he could push equal measures of calmness through two bonds. Charlie and Harry would be alright and when they were fine, he would be too.

It they hadn't been invited over to the main house in such plain terms he would have taken Harry and Charlie back to the guest house and holed up there to plot and scheme. His dragel instincts wanted it and his Slytherin honor practically demanded it.

He was sure that he would be able to wrangle Charlie and Harry into his scheming. They were Gryffindors yes, but he knew their influence would keep his worst Slytherin traits from spilling out. Arielle alone knew how deep and dark those urges could run.

"Theo?" Charlie dashed by with a young girl in pink, balanced on one hip, his arm filled with an assortment of bright orange laundry. There was a handful of colorful beads straggling at the back of his tri-color ponytail. He blushed a fetching shade of red at Theo's curious stare. "Be right back."

"Charlie?" Theo managed, before Charlie disappeared into the fray once more. Theo stared after
him, deciding that he didn't want to know if it was anything as confusing as the too bright colors suggested. Charlie had siblings and therefore ought to be used to small children, so Theo figured he was fine.

"Harry's upstairs," Ithycar said, pointing towards the landing of the second-level stairway. He rubbed his arm a little harder than before, grimacing at the feedback through his claim marks. "I think he might want some time with you."

Theo nodded his thanks and headed straight for the stairs. He tugged lightly on the confusion he felt through their bond and made his way towards the answering tug.

"Harry?" Ilsa tapped on the guest bedroom door. A murmur within let her know it was alright to slip inside the darkened room.

He turned to study her for a moment, from his pensive seat on the neatly made guest bed. Green eyes were narrowed into slight points and the expression on his face did not sort itself out into any one thing.

A tentative smile flickered across Ilsa's face and she moved over to join him, easing down to sit at the foot of the bed. "You worry too much about others," she said, lightly. "You'll wind up with a headache."

"Can't help it," Harry said, mimicking her light tone. "They're my friends."

"...Family too, I hope," Ilsa twitched her fingers, checking the scent charm spell she'd cast over herself, before venturing this far up into the house. She had yet to take a shower and the scent of blood still clung fiercely to her. Wearing blood had never been an issue. Instinct did not demand that she remove it at once though in all honesty—she hadn't had the time.

Harry's pained smile filled the silence stretching between them. He gave it another second, but when she finally met his gaze, he huffed. The question that came to his lips wasn't the one on his mind. "They said...that you weren't a born Gheyo."

"Ah," Ilsa hummed. "I wondered if you would ask."

"I—sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. I have had too many regrets to keep them all, so I can only keep moving forward. Doing my best to keep from repeating the mistakes I've learned from and trying my hardest to avoid the ones I still don't understand."

"Today—you—everyone." Harry ran a hand through his hair, tugging at the ends. There was so much he was still trying to process. It seemed that he'd only made sense of one mental puzzle before another one cropped up. "And then Bahn said that—"

"He's perfectly imperfect, isn't he?" Ilsa half-laughed. "He was everything I needed when we finally met and then some." She leaned forward, hunching over her legs, arms folded atop her knees. From her tall imposing figure, she was now rather compact and nearly invisible in presence.

"You're not—you're more than that!" Harry burst out. He'd seen the state of things when Ilsa had burst through the door. He'd read the emotions as Bahn had lectured her into action. He'd felt the pain when she gasped out Ithy's name. It balled up into one giant well of commiseration and bitterness that he could not untangle.
"We are always more than we think we are," Ilsa said, quietly. "Please don't hold it against any of them. I am happy. They are happy. We fit together, in spite of our differences and that is what makes us live as one."

Harry scowled. It had seemed like a lot more than mere differences up there on the roof and then at the safe house where he'd witnessed that awful, confusing and strange little dance of dominance between Ilsa and Bahn. It was almost as if he'd been in the middle of the whole thing—even though he'd been sitting several feet away, well-protected.

Ilsa's raw emotions and Bahn's steady resolve had thrown him for a loop. There was so much pain, hope and want all mixed up that he hadn't been able to sort it out—even though he had tried.

He wasn't surprised that she had sought him out after all. He'd wanted to, but then the house had begun to fill up and he didn't want to deal with the strange new faces. Granted, they were all Deveraines in some way or another, but it'd simply been better to withdraw. The muted silence and relaxing emptiness of the guest room had done wonders for his raging empathy.

"He said—Bahn said—" Harry began and stopped, voice cracking. There was something about the way that Bahn had spoken to her, that had bothered him. It was too—something. He didn't know what, but Arielle help him, he would know.

Ilsa snorted. "Don't read into things you don't know how to read," she said, gently. "I'm sorry if we threw you for a loop—didn't mean to." She rubbed her arm, scraping fingernails over the other claim marks she sported. "Sometimes I forget how it looks to everyone else. We've come through enough of this—all of us, together—and so another little bump in the road, isn't really that big."

"He all but said that you were-!" Harry burst out.

"He said that I really was his. It made me very happy, Harry. He's never claimed me quite so openly before and you have to understand what that means."

"It doesn't mean anything," Harry said, passionately. "You're strong and brave on your own. You've done—everything. You helped Theo. You helped me. You've been there for us even when—you even—I just-" The words lodged in his throat.

"You will always have a kind heart," Ilsa said, softly. "Always. Never lose it, no matter what happens, never lose it." She leaned forward and gently kissed Harry's forehead. "I'm not trying to make you see things from my point of view or Bahn's. Goodness knows what that imp is thinking anyway. It's not perfect, but it's not horrible either. He's my imp. I'm his ACE. That's the way we both want it to be, all strings aside."

Harry stared at her for a good long minute. He watched the darkness leave her eyes and the gold return. He felt the strength of her honesty and the genuine care blossoming outward, a fierceness reserved for her own—a select group that now included him. She was right. He didn't have to understand, as long as she was alright. As long as this was where she wanted to be.

She winked. "He is a mischievous little thing though. Bhindi isn't half as troublesome. He's the one that usually waltzes right into the thick of things and I'm the one that drags him out of it." She gave a slight shake of her head, reaching up to tug at her short strands. "Still, there's usually some sort of warning, before a stunt like this."

"Warning?"

"Oh you know. He'll pull a silly stunt—like disappearing while he was shopping or saying he's
bored. But apart from the shopping, I didn't hear any other complaints. I thought he was fine. He said he was fine." She scowled. "and he'd better have an answer for that…"

"He said he was bored," Harry blurted out.

"What? When? Where?"

"On the rooftop. I was with the Kalziks, we were playing Creeper—Quinn and I. We went back to join his family for lunch. Bahn found us there. He said he was bored. He ate and then left."

Ilsa rolled her eyes. "He owes me for that." She mumbled. "Saying it where none of us can hear doesn't count. Never mind him, I'll deal with it. I came to see how you were."

Harry blinked. "Fine. Just fine. There was nothing—nothing happened to me."

She smiled, faintly. "I'm glad. I am sorry for the scare."

A slight twitch of the shoulders was the best that Harry could do for a shrug. She had honestly terrified him, showing up half-feral with that. It had been a little more than a simple shock to see her flip-flop so easily from calm, mothering and stoic to flat out vicious instinct.

Ilsa reached over and tapped his nose. "Stop thinking about it," she said, simply. "It won't make sense to you now, but one of these days, when you have your own ACE, your own Gheyos. You'll understand."

"I don't think I will," Harry said, truthfully.

"You might think that now, but even if you don't really grasp what for or how it happens—you'll know why it does."

"And you can't tell me now?"

She laughed. "Find you a Pareya or two first, then you can bag and ACE. They'll answer any question you ask them. My answers suit me and mine. Their answers will be for you and yours."

She rose from the bed. "I'll send Theo up—if he's done plotting with Ithy."

"Plotting?" Harry started. "What kind of—?"

"Planning, sorry. Plotting sounds dastardly, doesn't it? Then again, knowing Ithy, it's probably a bit of both. As much as I'd love for you to stay with us—you don't need a Clan war tagging along for your first hunt. This is our problem. I told Ithy as much. He'll help in his own way. Everything will work out. Don't worry."

"Now I'm worried." Harry said, dryly.

Ilsa laughed. It sounded lighter than Harry had ever heard her before. Her golden gaze glittered with a thread of happiness. "Don't be." She hesitated, a faint glimmer of sadness flickering over her face. "One of these days, we'll talk," she said, so quietly, that Harry thought he'd imagined it.

She was halfway to the door before Delani appeared in the doorway, two steaming cups in hand.

"Harry. Ilsa," she nodded to Harry. "Cocoa? Bu seems to think you're in shock. She sends her special blend." Delani gestured with one hand and Harry's cup floated off of her hand and over to his.

Harry carefully took the small sky-blue cup, a whiff of cinnamon wafting up to tickle his nose. His
brows arched upwards in surprise. "Hot chocolate?"

"Is that mine?" Ilsa looked to Delani's cup with interest.

"Maybe," Delani teased. "It doesn't have whipped cream. You always take yours with whipped cream."

"This is different. I haven't had this in forever." Ilsa sidled closer, her eyes locked on the frothy treat.

The cup was handed over and Delani smiled fondly, watching the first sip and the pleased expression that followed. She gave it another minute before she reached out and caught hold of Ilsa's ear. Claws peeked out from the fingertips, her timing impeccable, for Ilsa's gaze had lowered and she'd just taken a good sip of spicy cocoa.

Harry froze.

Ilsa swallowed.

Delani's eyes darkened, her Alpha's aura fanning out and filling the room to the brim. It wasn't loud and jarring, but it was steady and persistent, demanding their attention. "You will not scare us like that again," she scolded. "Twenty years? Carved wings? That is not the way we do things. Running from things we do not have the courage to face, never solves them. Do you understand?"

"...I understand."

"Good. I'm sure Ithy has an earful for you, so that's all I have to say about this." Delani sighed. She gave Ilsa's ear a slight pinch and then her hand dropped back to her side. She turned slightly to the side, no longer blocking the doorway. "I missed you."

Ilsa's head bowed. She snuck another sip of cocoa before she managed a muttered apology. "...Sorry."

"Be sorry later. Bahn was triggered—ask him what it was."

"Hm?"

"He didn't tell me and he didn't tell Ithy. Something made him snap."

Ilsa's brows furrowed together. "Harry said he said he was bored."

"That wasn't boredom. That was panic and you and I both know what that looks like. Talk to him."

"I wondered, but he..."

"He'll talk to you." Delani leaned forward, kissing her cheek. "Go. The others are arriving soon. It will be chaos."

Ilsa looked down at the cup in hand. She pulled a face and gave it back.

Delani chuckled, accepting the unspoken agreement with the drink. "Yours is in the war room."

There was a slight pause and then Ilsa bumped her head against Delani's shoulder on the way out, a quiet chirrup accenting the gesture. It earned a smile that she did not wait to see, vanishing from the doorway.
Delani turned back to Harry, whose narrowed green eyes remained pinned on her. She hadn't missed the way that Harry's hackles had all fluffed up the moment their little discussion had started.

Normally, she wouldn't have dared to have any one of her Bonded, much less an unrelated submissive as an audience for that sort of disciplinary moment. Most certainly not for Ilsa—but she'd heard a snippet of their conversation. Old thoughts confirmed by Ilsa herself. A moment that would be lost, if she'd held her tongue.

"She is fine, little one. Battered. Healing. But fine. She's ours. Thank you for worrying about her."

There was a long pause, before Harry nodded, stiffly.

Hiding her smile, Delani excused herself from the room. She silently pulled on the threads connecting her to Ithy, a reminder for him to hurry up with Theo.

Harry perched on the end of a guest bed, sipping a cup of cinnamon cocoa, a fluffy blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He sat with his back to the door, staring up at the ceiling where the only window in the room, showed a brilliant, darkening blue sky.

His gaze fixed on something that was not quite there in the bedroom and there was a faint haze of magic twined through the air. He stirred faintly at Theo's presence and made an inquisitive chirp.

Theo smiled, moving forward to stand behind him. He placed a hand on each shoulder and kissed the top of that messy head of hair. A whiff of cinnamon drifted up to him. Harry's dress robes were shucked off near the pillows at the head of the bed, along with his dress shirt.

Eyebrows danced upwards in amusement as Theo bent to nuzzle Harry's neck, nosing against the roll of blanket to reach the warm skin.

A rumbling purr was his reward for the gesture of affection. Theo rubbed at Harry's arms for a moment, then rearranged them to hug Harry from behind.

Harry burbled—an odd sound between a coo and a question mark. Theo immediately released him, taking a step to the side of the bed as Harry shrugged the blanket off.

Ah. Theo understood as Harry's shirtless self stared back at him. He reached for his own robes and stripped down, keeping his trousers on.

Harry scooted forward on the bed, patting a space beside him, which Theo remedied by half-pulling Harry onto his lap. It took a bit of rearranging, but soon they were settled.

Snuggled together, his back to Theo's chest, Harry purred again. This was better. He offered the cup of cocoa, but Theo only bumped the mug with his nose and opted to nibble on Harry's ear instead.

A reluctant whine was pulled from Harry, before he tipped his head back to rest on Theo's shoulder. They sat together, staring out the window, warmth building between them at the skin-to-skin contact.

The magical haze in the room gradually dimmed, the exposed bond marks shimmering and tingling as the moment was shared between them. Bonds reaffirming without the need for more obvious physical displays.
"Hungry?" Theo ventured, after a bit.


"That is absolutely not true, treasure," Theo murmured. "You've helped quite a bit. You always have. You do so much without even realizing it."

"Maybe—over there, but not—here." Harry squirmed.

Theo caught the mug, holding it out of reach before it could slosh over the rim and soak them. He floated it to the dresser table, where it rested. "Shall we agree to disagree for the moment?"

"Why?"

"I meant this," Theo said, presenting his wrist. "I wasn't trying to stuff your stomach. You've already had some sugar—" he nodded towards the cocoa mug.

Harry hesitated. Theo did have a point there. He'd had sugar and blood was certainly next on the list, considering that he had a slight feeling that it would help him settle down a bit better.

There was no way he wanted anything to get any more—serious—than present, in the Deveraine's guest bedroom. Harry licked at Theo's wrist, tasting the familiar things he was used to, breathing in the scent of sweetness and steel that made up his Theo. But the vivid image of Bahn drinking greedily from Ithycar's pale neck—made him cringe.

"Harry-love?" Theo prompted when his wrist was batted away. Tacking on the endearment made him smile and he liked the way it sounded.

Twisting in the loose embrace, Harry wriggled into a good position to take a drink of his own. Locking an arm around Theo's neck, he pulled himself up a bit better. A few licks to the neck conveyed his intent and Theo relaxed accordingly.

By the time Harry notched his fangs into the perfect spot, Theo had begun to rub his back in slow, gentle strokes. He drank slowly, having no reason to rush the experience or the comfort that had spilled over into him as their bonds sang together, meshing into harmony.

Theo cradled Harry's head to his neck, making soft, encouraging sounds. A tiny smile played on his lips.

"The Peverell's?" Charlie repeated. He looked from Theo to Harry—or tried to—somewhat hampered by the fact that Harry was currently in his lap, fangs buried in his neck. He'd opted to come and join them as soon as he could slip away from the younger Deveraines who had immediately latched onto him, most likely because of his inability to refuse their shy requests to play and help.

Successfully finding his way upstairs and into the guestroom where Theo and Harry were holed up, was a bonus. It hadn't helped much that Theo had been feeding Harry—or maybe it was the other way around—and then Harry's fierce green eyes had caught sight of him and Charlie was helpless to do anything other than move forward to be in reach.

Theo had traded Harry off to his capable hands, tending to the healing bite marks on his own neck and straightening up to find his clothes.
For a few brief moments, Charlie had appreciated the view and then Harry had decided that his
distraction was good enough consent, before biting. The sharpness of his fangs—and the depth of
the bite was new, but not unwelcome. Charlie had a slight itch on the other Claim mark and from
the absent way that Theo scratched at it—knew he wasn't experiencing the sensations alone.

They were somewhat out of sorts from the earlier scare and it would probably take at least a day
for it to work out of their systems.

"Ithy said that the sooner Harry's seals are off the better it will be for all of us. I told him about
Lewis and he said he'd call their Alpha, Henry." Theo frowned. "Lewis's Alpha," he amended,
giving another scratch at Charlie's tingling claim mark. He wasn't sure whether Ithycar knew the
Peverell Clan Head or not, but on an instinctive level, he was still irritated at the Pareya.

"What about—them?" Charlie flapped a hand at the door, meaning the Deveraine's. His other hand
remained firmly curled around Harry's waist, holding him close. The feel of Harry's smaller fangs
rocking in and out of his neck, sent delicious tremors dancing up and down his body. Theo's
thorough care from earlier, prevented the moment from turning into anything else.

Instead, Charlie hummed when Harry began to purr, still happily feeding. He rubbed a hand up and
down Harry's back, smiling at the tattoos that moved and swirled around his fingers.

"Stop him if he's taking too much," Theo warned, a hand reaching up to absently rub at his own
neck again. Harry had definitely taken a good amount from him, but had stopped on his own.
"They'll be fine. This isn't the first time they've had to deal with things like this."

"Really? So all of that—reaction was just what?"

"That was, short tempers and old wounds," Theo said, softly. He was repeating what Ithycar had
told him when he asked the same. "They are a fairly well established Circle. Not to mention Bahn
and Bhindi are ex-royalty. They've handled their share of scuffles in more ways than one. This is
simply their business. Ithy doesn't want us involved."

"It's fine," Charlie assured him. Harry wasn't really taking that much. He'd eaten well in the kitchen
downstairs—the Pareyas had ensured he was well-fed, fussing over him in lieu of a nonexistent
Theo and Harry. Aracle had even found a phial of pure healer's blood to spare, just to be sure that
he was alright.

Theo's words swirled through his mind. Charlie didn't particularly want to be involved, but he
didn't like the idea of leaving the Deveraines to figure things out on their own. Of course, if they
were actually fine and able to handle whatever that whole clan-war-mess was, then that was fine
too.

"Is that alright though?" he had to ask, just to be sure. He'd been raised to know that family was
everything and they always came first. Even if that truth hurt to acknowledge.

"We couldn't do much," Theo said, lightly. The faint gleam in his golden eyes suggested that in the
near future, they would do much more. Maybe even help.

Charlie allowed a brief fantasy-filled image to blossom in his mind. The thought of a full Circle
chosen, gathered and bonded to Harry. It would certainly be interesting. "Still..."

"Ithy is asking us to leave. We couldn't stay and cause more work or trouble for them. Besides, he's
helping to speed things up and the sooner we're together, the sooner the we can make our own
stand."
Charlie acquiesced with a nod. He'd been helping with the younger children—something that soothed the faint ache in his heart—when Ilsa had come by with instructions to join them upstairs whenever he could manage it. She'd mentioned that Ithycar would come when all three of them were together. Of course, she hadn't said why.

There was a light knock on the door and it opened a crack. Slivers of light and sound spilled through, breaking the magical stillness of the moment.

A twitch of his lips was the only hint of Theo's smile as he flicked a hand at the door.

"Theo?" Ithycar tapped on the door, pushing it open to join the young triad. He looked at Theo, giving Harry and Charlie a moment to disentangle themselves. "Are you ready to leave?"

Theo straightened his robes and glanced over at his Bonded. A flicker of gold washed over Charlie and Harry—fixing their rumpled robes and solving the problem of missing shirts and messy hair. "Ready."

"Did you need anything from the guesthouse?"

"We didn't really bring anything," Charlie said. "We won't return?"

"It's probably best if you don't—until I can change the wards. They're keyed to you right now, via Bahn and Ilsa. I need to make some adjustments."

"The magic isn't strong enough?"

"The first rule of hiding is to hide in plain sight." Ithycar said, lightly. "Don't you think?"

Theo smiled, even though it didn't touch his eyes. "Naturally. Thank you for hosting us."

"Always," Ithycar murmured. "Whenever you're ready, then?"

"Ready!"

"Honestly, Ithycar, you'd think that I hadn't—" Henry stopped in mid-sentence. He stood in the bedroom, taking in Ithycar's serious expression and the three solemn young dragels beside him. He could sense that something was greatly amiss and the fact that he'd been 'ported into a guest bedroom, immediately put him on guard. "Ithycar?"

"You've always been a good friend," Ithycar said, smoothly. "So please excuse me from this imposition."

Henry shuffled uncomfortably, appearing a bit too small in his large, dressy robes. His brow furrowed into crooked lines. "Are you asking me a favor, Deveraine?"

"Quite plainly, yes."

"...That's a bit tooplain," Henry muttered. He returned the clasped handshake offered, his gaze roaming over Harry and the others. The furrow in his brow deepened, extending to his expression of concern. "What is wrong?"

"We've had a disagreement of sorts." Ithycar smirked. It was said in a matter-of-fact tone as if it were simply a rote phrase to explain what was happening.

"With whom?"
"The Vaughn's. While it's sorted, I'm asking if you would kindly look after Theo and his own."

Henry paled. "The Vaughn's? Are you mad? You've only just returned." His concerned expression turned to one of complete confusion. "Why in Arielle's name would you pick them and now?"

"Yes or no?" Ithycar snapped.

"Yes, of course, yes." Henry frowned. "Theo as in your Ilsa's Theodore?"

"I wasn't sure you'd remember him, but yes." Ithycar gestured to Theo at his left. "Theo, Henry. Henry, Theo—you never formally met. The tall redhead one is their Beta, Charlie. The brave one between them is their Submissive, Harry. They are a bonded triad and actively hunting this Season. We offered them hosting rights and a formal introduction."

Henry's puzzlement grew further as he absently shook hands with all of them. He gave a slight shake of his head as if it were too much information to sort out in such a short span of time. "Theo, Charlie, Harry…" he muttered, half to himself. "You know, Lewis mentioned something about a Harry with very green eyes and a seal—what exactly am I missing here?"

"Did you ignore my memo altogether?" Ithycar asked, exasperated. "Of course Lewis should have mentioned them by now. Theo said you were setting things in motion to have Harry's seals removed. This is Harry." Ithycar placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, drawing him forward. "Harry Potter, of the Nott Circle? Harry Peverell on his father's side, apparently."

Henry brightened as if the whole encounter had finally made sense. "You want me to offer them sanctuary."

"If he's technically from your bloodline, shouldn't you be hosting him before we did?" Ithycar shot back.

"If you didn't want me to pry into your affairs, you could simply say so."

"That never stopped you before." Ithycar brushed him off, but he'd lost the formal air from before. Now, only the friendliness remained and it was clear to see that the two were good friends. "Take good care of them."

"You know I would," Henry murmured. "Should I need to reach you…?"

"I will contact you when it is safe enough. 'Port from this room and do not leave anything traceable behind. I will wrap things up as soon as we can manage it, but I expect it will not be pretty."

Henry's eyes narrowed, but the wicked gleam was not meant for any of them. "If you have any trouble—I expect to hear from you first. You know our blades are yours."

"Of course." Ithycar inclined his head. That had been one of the founding promises of their old friendship. Their Gheyos played well together and as such, in any time of need, should extra assistance be required, it would be swiftly given.

"Send an invite to Cora, would you?" Henry said, somewhat sheepishly. "She's not very fond of trying to follow all the thys and thous."

"I sent it already. She should already have it hand. There is only a single word of acknowledgement needed, should there be questions." It was more than simply asking a friend to look over another friend—it was passing the hosting rights from the Deveraine Circle to the Peverell Clan and asking for Henry's attention to that detail.
"My thanks," Henry said. Arielle knew his adorable submissive was absolute rubbish at that.

Ithycar gave Harry's shoulder a light squeeze and gifted a pat on the shoulder to Theo and Charlie in passing. "Should anything happen to them—this is on your head."

"I would never betray anything set in motion by your hand," Henry said, firmly. "Thank you for your trust. I am sure you will be victorious. As always."

Ithycar smirked. "Indeed." He turned away.

Henry motioned for Harry and the others to come closer. "I need everyone to be touching someone else," he directed. He held out his hands, clasping arms with Theo and Charlie. Harry stood between his two Bonded, directly opposite of Henry. "This may feel a bit different than a regular portal—it is because this will be your first time through our clan protections, but it is perfectly normal. Do not fight it. I assure you that as long as you do not let go, you will be alright."

Ithycar watched the portal close, his smile fading as the glow vanished. Henry would take good care of the three, but that was only one small burden off of his heavy shoulders. He tugged at his hair, silently urging his magic to do it up in the familiar style of the warrior braids his elven clan was known for.

It was a subtle detail that made him feel somewhat better as he left the guest bedroom and started down into the first floor of the house. He paused at the foot of the stairs and slowly released his Alpha's aura.

Snapping out from him in a wide arc, it fanned out, stretching down the hallway where his grandchildren were shrieking and playing as they chased each other around. He saw the moment when they sensed his presence and then caught sight of his face.

The laughter and running stopped at once and hasty murmurs and whispers filled the air. Quickly, they lined up against the wall, heads tall, hands pressed to the wall behind them. A scraggly line of recruits, young and confused. It hurt that the first time he was seeing them in the past years was because of something dangerous—a Clan war—and not something joyous and peaceful.

"Have you eaten?" He inquired, because that was the first thing the Pareya would have done. Seen that everyone was safe and fed, before turning them loose to roam the house.

Heads bobbed up and down in answer. When he gestured for them to follow, they did. He continued on down the hall and to the resting room. Here, he waited while the Pareyic parents separated themselves and their respective children.

Goodnight wishes and phrases were exchanged, before the children were readied for bed in a swirl of magic, beneath the watchful eyes of everyone present. Once dressed for bed, they collected in the center of the room, waiting as it was made up for the night.

Thick, fluffy mattresses were arranged in specific formation around the entire room, just enough to make the sleeping square comfortable enough. The Pareyas continued on until all the young ones were settled in for the night and all of those who were underage, settled in alongside them.

Once that was done, he exchanged a word with Alma—so they would be doubly connected beyond their Bonds—and continued on to the war room. He could tell that some of the Gheyos were missing, notably, Ilsa and Greta. But the others were outside on patrol and they would switch off as previously decided. For now, Bhindi, along with Delani, fell into step beside him.
Ithycar stopped in front of the door to their war room. The door opened at the touch of his hand, for he was the Alpha, but not the first one to enter.

It was almost a basement room of sorts, except for, it was the most protected room in the entire property and the magic woven into its creation was vast and dizzying.

Faint lights illuminated the wide, square room. There were several armchairs and various loveseats scattered about the corners, as the center of the room was taken up with a massive gemstone table.

Magic flared at the edges and holographic map of Nevarah popped up in true, vivid color. Ithycar ran his hand along the edge as he gravitated towards his seat of honor at the far end of the room.

The missing duo he'd sought—Ilsa and Bahn—awaited them there.

Stretched out on the sofa, cuddling Bahn to her, Ilsa spoke in soft, measured tones. Curled up enough so that his cheek was pressed to her heart—and the claim mark hidden beneath the armor—Bahn conversed in whispered elvish.

"Bahn, dearest?" Delani was the first to speak, to announce their presence. She held onto Bhindi for a beat longer, before releasing her. The two in front of them needed a moment and she didn't want to interrupt it before the balm of silence and alone time had helped.

He blinked up at her with one pale, silvery eye. Ilsa roused herself enough to sit halfway up, bracing against the arm of the couch and drawing Bahn back to her, before he could sit up and slip away.

The others gathered around, some of them sitting on the floor, Greta slipping in at the last minute. Nara was there, Loren was there. Bu appeared a moment later, looking warily over her shoulder.

Ithycar smiled at her, to let her know that if Alma came looking, it was alright for her to be there. Bu managed a slight smile in answer, before angling towards the unused fireplace.

She started it up with a flick of her hand towards Loren and his muted flames. They bickered quietly in the background for a moment and Ithycar was grateful for that note. It meant that it drew the focus away from Bahn—and that maybe, his prickly submissive would care to share.

"Bahn?" Delani repeated, more firmly this time. "Would you like to start?"

He sighed, long and loud as if it that would explain all the words he didn't wish to voice. Ilsa stifled a chuckle. "You have to actually tell one of us at some point, loveling," she reached up, smoothing back his messy hair, tugging gently on the spell that kept it neat.

"He's fine," Ilsa said, quickly. She sat up enough, to lock both arms around Bahn, preventing his squirms from allowing him to run free. This conversation would not happen if he took up pacing the length of the room. "We're all fine, but what we'd really like to know is what just happened up there."

"Language," Delani said, mildly. "Not that I don't appreciate your vocabulary, but really." She looped an arm around Bhindi's neck and ushered her towards the open half of the circular couch.

Ithycar moved to join them, slipping between the two couples and waiting for the answer that was hovering somewhere just out of sight. Something had set Bahn off and he had a few guesses as to
what—but knew better than to actually voice said guesses.

Bahn rubbed his face with one hand then huffed. "This is half your fault," he said, glaring at Bhindi. "And don't you dare tell me that it isn't." He twisted around to look at Ilsa. "You've been gone a long time." He ignored her twitch. "In that long time, there were—things. People. Proposals. Moments where propriety and all sorts of other things were thrown to the wind." He bit his lip. "And then there was—Ariki?" He leaned around Ilsa's shoulder and crooked a finger at the door.

The war room doors swung inward, depositing a red-faced Ariki, a yawning Soula and worried Dahlia. They had come at the insistence of their Dera's pulling on the familial bonds between them.

"Dera," the children greeted, together as one.

"Your turn," Bahn said, quietly, his gaze fixed on his son. "Tell them about the Guantrells."

"Ariki?" There confusion in Ilsa's voice. "What does that have to-" she was cut off when Bahn turned around and kissed her, to shut her up. He withdrew a moment later, giving her a chance to refocus, before Ariki settled on the floor in front of them.

He sat cross-legged, twiddling his fingers for a moment, trying to find a way to tell the story. Dahlia rolled her eyes and dropped to the floor beside him, leaning up against his right for moral support. Not to be left out, Soula mimicked the gesture, pressing up against his left knee with her shoulder, as she lay on her stomach, head propped up by her hands.

"When you sent me to register for our formal entrance, I was—stopped." Ariki's hands clenched together. "One of their sons—Walford, is of age and he made his intentions very clear in regards to my-"

"He proposed to you?" Ilsa stiffened. Her hands clenched in the folds of Bahn's robe, bunched at his hips.

"Propositioned," Ariki said, wearily. "I turned him down, of course. I didn't understand what house he hailed from and he wouldn't take no for an answer."

"How many times?" Ithycar asked, his voice strangely hollow.

Ariki pinched the bridge of his nose. "Four," he said, at last. "Each one more insistent than the last."

"Why you?" Ilsa wanted to know. She could think of many reasons for her children to be decent Bonded and Intendeds, but her children were not always in the center of things. They tended to keep back to the sidelines, unless absolutely necessary. Since Kandra, that is.

"He liked the color of his eyes," Dahlia said, frostily. "When he tried again, I'd come to find him. They took off when I glared at them. I didn't really see their markings or anything definitive scent-wise, I just felt that they were causing trouble and I didn't want him around them," she flicked Ariki's knee with one hand, before rolling over to sprawl out more comfortably on the floor.

"The color of his eyes?" Ithycar growled. Yes, Ariki did have a lovely shade of golden eyes, maybe with a hint of silver, but that was entirely all Ilsa. He could only take credit for his son's sleek hair and strong jawline. The most obvious traits he'd inherited, after all.

"Then after Walford couldn't have Ariki, I guess he thought I'd be—easier," Soula stammered. The carefree lilt to her voice had vanished at once, with both of her parents stern' gazes fixed on her.
Ariki patted her shoulder in support. Walford had been a well-muscled and decently-sized Alpha, with a superior, cocky hair hanging thickly about him. It was the way he'd bowled over some of the younger children on his way to Ariki that had immediately turned his mind against him—without even thinking to his background and family name.

"Easier how?" Aracle growled. He had entered the room midway between Ariki's story. Now he settled down on the floor beside the opposite couch where Ilsa and Bahn were still wrapped around each other. He'd taught his little princess to fight fang and claw—she was no helpless damsel.

"He made a crack at Shayla," Soula began, straightening up to explain. "Said that she was pretty and light, but it was too bad she was so—stubborn. That no one would want a headstrong girl who couldn't behave like a proper Submissive. She snapped that she'd claw his eyes out if he came any closer and to keep his ugly thoughts to himself. He said that her words were ugly coming from such a pretty little thing and she tried to scratch his eyes out. I grabbed her, because I didn't think—I didn't want her to fight, you know?"

"And you didn't think to tell anyone?" Aracle asked, gently. "Soula."

"Shay didn't want me to," Soula stared at her hands, before sitting up to turn and face Aracle. He extended an arm to her and she went to him at once, burrowing into his side. There had been something disturbing about Walford and just talking to him for those few scant minutes had made her feel like darkness had clung to her skin. She'd spent hours in the bath afterward. But the memory felt just as terrible as the words.

"He didn't stalk her," Loren said, quietly. He shifted uncomfortably when all eyes turned to him. "I figured something had upset her," he nodded at Soula. "So I tracked her a bit. He probably meant to try, but stopped the moment he realized I was shadowing her."

"Which day would that have been?" Nara wanted to know. She was ticking things off on her hands, frowning at whatever she was keeping score for. "Before Alma's incident at the Market?"

"Day before," Loren said, picking up on her train of thought. "So it's following a pattern?"

"There were snubs," Bhindi said, quietly. She remembered greeting familiar faces and being ignored by others. It wasn't unusual, but it was unexpected from some of the ones she'd once considered friends. "Bahn?"

"I noticed," Bahn said, trailing his fingers down the front of Ilsa's bustier. He was carefully tracing the symbols etched into her armor, reading the runes for speed, protection and healing. There were flecks of blood in the symbols. It made his claws itch. He wanted her clean and wearing only their scents. Not reeking of blood, death and revenge.

"More than usual?" Bhindi prodded. That had been the first hint that something was wrong. She hadn't been able to put her finger on it, but it had raised her usual protective hackles.

"Many more. I opted to pretend I didn't care, but I didn't feel comfortable without," he gestured to his front, the pregnant swell of his stomach. He hadn't felt safe at all in allowing anyone to know of his current state. His instincts both dragel and elven had screamed at him to hide it. So he had.

Ithycar rumbled comfortingly from his corner of the room. Everyone relaxed a fraction, Ariki and Dahlia moving over to join the growing cuddle pile with Aracle. Greta moved away from where she spoke quietly to Loren, coming to join them as well.

"They're planning something," Nara said, at last. "I don't know what, but what I can guess at—I
don't like it, Ithy. The Guantrells, they have connections. Connections to clans like," she hesitated.

"Spit it out, loveling," Ilsa said. "I doubt you could surprise me at this point."

Nara scowled. "The Doursens."

There was a ripple of hisses, growls and snarls from her Bonded as that bit of information was presented and absorbed.

Bhind scowled, darkly. "That brat that insisted that your Theodore was his?" Her eyes flashed a dangerous shade of silver. "What was his name, Yani, Yonki—something like that?"

"Yanek," Ilsa supplied. Her scales rippled along the surface of her face as old memories pushed their way free. Memories of young Theo and the high noble children who had been playmates for her own children, Dahlia, Ariki and Soula. "Yanek Doursen."

"I thought we'd squared that off years ago," Delani said, frowning. "Wasn't he required to sign a distance contract to stay away?"

"He signed. Then we had him removed when he wouldn't leave on his own. The contract never had the actual"," Takar said. He had joined them sometime between Dahlia's completion of Ariki's tale. His arms were crossed over his chest. "It was to hold until he was bonded."

"Until he was bonded…" Nara said, voice trailing off. She was silently reviewing all the recent bondings in the past years—names of note and the respective gifts that went with them. What had Yanek's element been…?

"The bonding would have rendered the contract null and void," Takar filled in, comprehension dawning. They'd insisted on the contract because Yanek had been young, angsty and hot-tempered. Definitely wrong for their quiet, brilliant and fierce little Theo.

The contract was meant to keep them apart until Yanek had given up and moved on to something—or someone—else and then Theo, of course, was free to roam about as he liked. Of course, Theo's choosing Harry was definitely a good turn of events and it should have been an obvious deterrent, even if the contract hadn't been fulfilled yet. Except that now it had.

"The Guantrells are fronting," Bahn said, slowly. Turning things over in his mind until he liked the answer that surfaced. "No, really," he said, at Ilsa's murmur of dissent. "Think about it. Suppose they were being sponsored?"

"By whom and what for?" Ithyca added, catching on. It was certainly a plausible idea.

"Someone with power, but no presence and someone with a grudge," Delani filled in, a faint glow showing through her eyes. "Bahn-!"

"What clans would dare to do such a thing?" Bahn finished, triumphantly.

There were several beats of silence as everyone thought through that particular idea, chasing down the train of thought and checking it against everything they could remember.

Nothing came to mind.

Yet.

"I'll check my contacts," Ilsa said, stiffly. She finally rose from the couch, her arms wrapped
around Bahn. She carried him over to Ithyl and handed him over, pressing a kiss to his forehead, to stop any protests. "Someone is bound to know something and all we need is a name."

Delani stopped her with a hand on her arm. "You'll be careful?"

"Always am." Ilsa said, pausing briefly. "All of you—everyone—stay inside, won't you?" It was almost pleading, but still asking. Not demanding.

Ithycar smiled. "We'll wait for your return."

She dipped her head in answer and called on Ergen himself. Tonight, there were things that needed to be taken care of.

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**THE PEVERELL MAIN ESTATE : TRANSPORTATION ROOM (Harry and Co. w/Henry)**

The portal spat them out on the pristine white carpeted floor of a very large, very empty room. There was no door or window on any of the white walls and a soft ringing sound echoed as the portal closed.

Henry waited a moment longer before he broke contact, his arms dropping down to his sides. There was still a hint of worry in his grey eyes, but he smiled warmly at his new guests. Ithycar had been worried for them and that was enough for Henry to worry as well. "Welcome to the Peverell Main Estate."

Harry started. He did not move from between Theo and Charlie—he felt more grounded between them—and the grey of Henry's eyes only served to remind him that they were moving further into the Air element's territory. He didn't realize he was still holding onto Theo's sleeve, until he felt a ripple of amusement filtering through their Bonds.

An unexpected kiss was pressed to his cheek, before Harry was effectively soothed on both sides by strong pulses of calmness. Their shared inner strength washed over him. Something stirred happily inside of him, noting that his Bonded were finally making use of the connections between them for more than the recent panic and shock they'd all shared.

Theo spoke for all of them, when he gave the room cursory once over and then held his head high, gathering his Alpha's dignity around him as if it had always been there. "Are we on land or in the air?" He knew the answer, but wanted to hear it anyway. Needed for Harry to hear it from Henry's lips, anyway. His scales shifted and rippled beneath his skin, wanting to be out.

Henry's bark of laughter echoed in the room. "Sharp. Most would not notice in a room such as this. In the air, of course. The main estate does not ever leave the skies. We are a pure Air Circle, so there is no need to venture lower. It is only for the Hunt that we were visiting the lower planes."

Charlie frowned. "Only pure elemental circles stay here?"

"Only pure air types," Henry corrected. "If you mean why the Deveraine's don't, it's because of that flighty ACE of theirs. Ithycar doesn't care either way, he's elven, after all and the others would be happy as long as those twins were happy." Henry started for a corner of the room and paused. "Seeing as neither of you have an affinity for our element, however, I'll ask our Head Pareya, Vincent, to see that your rooms have grounding charms."

"Room," Harry corrected, moving to follow him. Generous hospitality was nice, but he wanted his Bonded near him and Henry should know that from the start. "We only need one room." His green
eyes glittered. "Lewis is here?"

A section of the wall slid upwards and a pacing Lewis turned towards them. His wide smile lit up the entire room. "Harry!"

Mild growls from both Alphas made Lewis pause halfway in his route to greet Harry. He ducked his head at Henry's slight frown. He'd expected the growl from Theo—instinct told him it would fade over time, but he hadn't expected the non-verbal reprimand from his Alpha.

Henry's frown remained as he turned squarely to face Theo. This was too obvious for him to ignore. "What do you have against Lewis?"

"Henry!" Lewis sputtered. His face flamed red.

As if on cue, Harry's own cheeks matched the same pink-red blush.

Theo's jaw clenched. Charlie moved to stand between the two Alphas, a clear warning in his stance and expression. He could read enough into the situation to know that it was best for them to leave this discussion for later.

Hopefully, he could make that happen.

"Theo looks after us in his own way," Charlie said, quietly. "We thank you for your hospitality at this time. As for Lewis, I imagine he is reluctant to trust a stranger, the same as I am, but experience has taught him to be more reserved about it. I apologize if we have offended you in anyway."

With a tip of his head to Henry, Charlie strode forward. He bumped shoulders with Harry and stretched a hand out to Lewis. "Good to see you again—sooner than I expected."

"Thank you for coming," Lewis said, gratefully. He shook the proffered hand. "The same to you as well—Theo."

There was a rather undignified snort from Theo's corner, but he joined them, standing between Henry and Harry, sharp golden eyes drilling through Lewis. "The pleasure is still all yours."

"Theo!"

"Vincent will see you to your rooms," Henry said, having just introduced them to the tall, willowy Pareya.

His face was stern and unyielding, but there was a hint of kindness softening out the rough edges. Lewis had greeted him at once, accepting a slight nuzzle to his head. He'd then disappeared at something Vincent had said, with a farewell wave to Harry.

That had left a miffed Theo, uncomfortable Henry, exasperated Charlie and frustrated Harry behind.

As if picking up on the unexpected discord, Vincent had been polite and succinct. With a nod to Henry, he'd led their new guests through the lit hallways and towards the guest rooms.

"Henry has asked for grounding charms in your rooms," Vincent said, serenely. "They will appear as glowing runes in the corners of the room walls. Please do not disturb the markings."

"What happens if we do?" Harry asked. "By accident!" He added, hastily when those too-calm eyes
turned to him. "Just…wondering."

"Gravity may be affected," Vincent intoned. "This way, please."

Charlie bit back a smile, slinging an arm around Harry's shoulder and giving a light squeeze. Beside them, a disgruntled Theo perked up, ever so faintly.

After a quick tour of the light, open rooms, Vincent had taken his leave. The trio was free to explore and gather their bearings for a few minutes. The room was more like two rooms linked together, the walls soft and spongy. Everything was done in shades of white, cream and silver.

Fresh air circulated through the entire living space and there were glowing light stones ensconced near the ceiling, along the walls. The runes in question, were lit, dark blue symbols carefully traced into the corners.

Harry had sensed the usefulness almost at once. The moment he'd set foot in the room, it was as if he could breathe easier and his body relaxed. His magic had stretched out, seemingly more at peace, as he wandered around, checking out the bath, the bed, the dresser and finally coming back to where Charlie and Theo stood at the foot of the bed.

His Bonded gave him an amused look that made him want to wipe it away. "What?"

"Is the room to your liking, my treasure?" Theo teased.

Harry stepped on his foot, stretching up to bump his head against Theo's chin. "It's fine," he said, hiding the blush that threatened to resurface. "S'nice."

Charlie hummed in agreement. He was surprised to find that he could relax, in spite of himself. He hadn't expected the air element to be so kind to him, but while the earth had always felt grounding to him, the air was more—playful.

"Adequate," Theo said, sniffing. He ignored the fact that Harry was standing on his feet and it wasn't exactly—comfortable.

"It's a nice room and you know it," Harry said, turning to flop onto the bed. He wiggled his eyebrows invitingly a moment later, tugging lightly on the shared bonds in hopes that they would join him. A cuddle wouldn't be amiss, considering how their day had been.

After a moment, Theo huffed a laugh and circled around the bed to join him. Charlie, of course, took up the other side and soon, they were stretched out on the fluffy blanket, staring up at the ceiling.

The slightly sparkling ceiling.

"Constellations?" Charlie half-muttered, squinting up at them. "Not bad," he said, admiringly.

"What's wrong with Lewis?" Harry asked, at last. He had to know, even if he didn't think that Theo would actually answer him right now. Still, he'd felt happy and carefree from the moment the portal had deposited them here and he couldn't figure out why.

It was a good feeling, but he didn't want it all to come crashing down around his ears and something told him that their hosts were, perhaps, more respected and formal than the easy familiarity of the Deveraines.

Even if Henry didn't seem to think they were quite there, it hadn't escaped Harry's notice that the
entire manor, at least, what they'd been through, was very nicely put together.

The Deveraine's estate seemed ornate on the outside, but it with almost cozy on the inside and Harry had liked that little detail. Here, it didn't feel that way. Didn't even hint that way, but still felt so good.

Theo grunted.

"The-o." Harry dragged the name out because he could. "He's only trying to help."

"I don't think it's logical," Charlie offered, when Theo didn't answer. "They'll work it out."

Harry grumbled for a moment, then sighed. That was probably the best he was going to get for now.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey everyone! This chapter is so very late, I don't even know what to say. -facepalm-. whoops. I meant to post it on Christmas, but I've been practically rewriting the entire thing and it's just been a muddle. I hope this makes sense (I feel a bit rusty writing them. Yikes), but I do love the setup and I can't wait to get to more fo the fun parts. Thanks for your patience and encouragement as I've been working on this.

Many thanks to brissygirl who made sense of my odd typos and suggestions for the story. She is an absolute darling. :)

Thanks for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel's Song. I have book 5 partially written and will be working on getting it out next. Welcome to the new readers. Thanks for reading!

REVIEW RESPONSES WILL BE POSTED as I have the time to spare. I'm working on chapter 95. Slowly. VERY SLOWLY.

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Harry, Theo, Charlie-(with the Peverells)

Deveraine Circle members-(at their home by the beach)
The Peverell's : Meeting Cora

Chapter Summary

Harry and Co have arrived at the Peverell's living quarters, where they meet the infamous submissive, Cora.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

RECAP: In the aftermath of the rooftop incident, everyone is gathering themselves together. Theo asks Ithycar for help with a missing Hermione, last seen in the Hellhound's area. Harry and Co. are taken under the Peverell's protections after Ihtycar's request. A clan war has started between the Deveraines and the Guantrells. Relieved to have Ithycar back with them, the Deveraines gather themselves together for their next big move. Harry and Co. prepare to meet the Peverell Submissive, Cora.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HARRY AND CO. : PEVERELL MAIN ESTATE, GUEST ROOMS : NEVARAH : THE HUNT, Day 2

Vincent came to collect them in time for dinner. He graciously explained that it was an informal event and promised that Henry and Cora would be present. Word had already been sent to the Peverell Clan head about Harry and the requested Seal Removal Ceremony. They would now be waiting until it was approved and the Clan Head came to visit them personally. Any lingering details would be handled in-house by Henry or Lewis, depending on Harry.

This was agreeable news to the trio and Theo's irritation simmered down a few more notches, as he thanked Vincent for the news and made sure all of them were presentable for dinner.

Harry patiently endured the minor fussing, partially because it was somewhat adorable when Theo did it and also because he didn't have the eye to do it himself. Theo—and Charlie, to some degree—both seemed to at least catch a few things ahead of him when it came to turning out well-pressed and dressed.

Charlie smothered a smile when Theo's fussing turned to him, but the warmth in his eyes betrayed a fondness that had now recently surfaced.

Once satisfied that they were perfectly fine, according to his standards, Theo then took the lead. Harry fell into step behind him, with Charlie bringing up the rear.
Lewis was nowhere to be found, but Vincent, was polite enough as he led them through the corridors. He had fixed Harry with a considering glance at first, then begun to explain the different hallways and networking of their floating home.

It was a series of magically linked rooms that led back to their original home. It afforded them the privacy of being close enough to the Hunt to enjoy the social aspect, but without requiring too much interaction on land.

Finishing his explanation of the portals, Vincent asked them to be mindful of the hallways with portal stones in the doorways, signaling that they were off-limits as being personal quarters for a specific Circle or Bonded.

Charlie frowned. "So there's—more than you—here?" He faltered. "Er, that did not come out the way I wanted it to." He ducked his head, sheepishly. He'd been sensing various magical presences, but hadn't seen anywhere near enough dragels to reason it out properly.

Vincent smiled, faintly. "There are several Peverell Circles present," he said, proudly. "Our own, rather, those of us belonging to Henry and Cora, we mostly reside in the western section on this end of the estate." He hesitated. "We would have moved your guest rooms closer to our quarters, but I'm afraid on such short notice, it's a bit difficult to do so."

"The rooms are fine," Charlie said, quickly. "They're really very nice."

"The grounding runes help," Harry added. He had missed the extra feeling of security that had vanished the moment they'd exited the specially prepared guest room. It irritated him to think that he'd often felt so at home in the air—whether on his broom or that fateful flight on Buckbeak—and now, the thought of calmly existing in midair threw him off balance.

"You will grow used to it," Vincent said, simply. "You have Peverell blood in you, air agrees with you on a level that most can only dream of."

Theo scowled at that, but didn't say anything. A beat later, he was lagging behind yet another few steps so that Charlie and Harry were definitely in front of him.

Harry tried and failed to ignore that little detail. Theo's suspiciousness was putting him on edge, but it was tempered with Charlie's perpetually calm nature and that was confusing. He resolved to find a way to weasel an answer out of his Theo at the next possible opportunity. If something was wrong, then he wanted to know about it.

Particularly to know sooner than later. There was more than enough trust between them now—what few secrets they'd shared had certainly eased things in their relationship and Harry wasn't about to let it change for the worst.

They arrived at the dining room, a lovely, enclosed room with no outside windows, decorated with flowers and varying shades of blue and white. It was lit with neat rows of glowing sconces along the ceiling and in spite of the lack of visible windows, the air was fresh and clean.

At the center of the room was a formal dining table of light-colored marble and matching chairs with gently sloped backs and intricate carvings along the sides. Pale, marbled cushioned seats finished off the effect of the table appearing like a giant, cloud, against the blue of the walls.

Vincent ushered them to the chairs and tapped his hands over the table for the proper silver and tableware to surface. The table's plain surface rippled for a moment, as the place settings emerged in perfect coordination. A silvery vase of brightly colored flowers materialized in the center.
Charlie had to smile at watching everything wink into existence, almost the same way it had done at Hogwarts. Old memories. Good ones. Bad ones. Still memories. He studiously pushed them away; they needed to focus on Harry now.

Sharp golden eyes caught his and Charlie made himself smile, surprised that it was easier to do than he'd expected. Theo didn't seem fooled, but he didn't call him out on it. He had a feeling they'd be talking sometime in the future—the kind of conversation that he wasn't sure he was ready for—yet. Then again, Theo was hiding secrets of his own and Charlie wanted to know what it was.

If something had Theo on edge, then it was likely important. Theo had been far too careful and precise in the time that Charlie had known him, to think that it was an accident.

Sure, there were a few unguarded moments, but the wariness that hung around the younger man was too achingly familiar for Charlie to ignore. It was the same kind of maturity he'd discovered in Harry, shortly after their first meeting.

As if there were an old, tired man hidden behind the youthful façade of a magical teenager.

Yes. Definitely something that needed to be explained and explored. Charlie tucked those thoughts away for later, tuning into the surrounding conversation in time to hear Vincent's next words.

"Cora will be here in a minute," Vincent said, checking his watch, after another beat of silence. "She's usually on time," he muttered, half to himself. "A moment…" he excused himself, hurrying out of the dining room.

Theo made a sound in throat and shifted in his seat, almost as if he expected the room to turn against them the moment that Vincent left.

That detail touched a nerve on Harry and he rounded on Theo at once, fully intending to make the most of the moment, with what little privacy was afforded to them. "Theo—if there is something wrong that you haven't told me, now would be a good time. Whatever is setting you on edge is—"

"Walls have ears, treasure," he said, quietly. "Everything is fine."

"Everything except you!" Harry snapped. He was irritated with Theo's behavior and self-aware to know that it was annoying him on more levels than usual. His temper was sparking and he couldn't make himself calm down. "Whatever you're thinking about is affecting more than—"

The dining room door burst open and a slender, blonde-haired young woman came stalking through. She wore a frilly white nightgown that fell to her ankles and a stuffed bear tucked under her left arm. Her hair was done up in perfect ringlets and her lips were curled in a snarl.

"I'm not canceling anything, Desmond!" She said, whirling on the Pareya following her through the double-doors. "Do you have any idea how long it took me to schedule those meetings? Any idea what this will mean for our entire Circle? No! No, you don't. I do. I'm not canceling. If Henry has a problem, then Henry has a problem. That's his problem. Not mine. I've done what I needed to do and I fully intend to keep those promises, as long as I am able."

"Cora, you're not being reasonable. We're hosting guests on behalf of—"

"I'm not being reasonable? You're not being reasonable!" Cora huffed, she came to a stop at the head of the table, scowling at her chair and empty place setting. "I'm being perfectly reasonable. This is important. It's very important for our image and the social standing of our entire Circle. A united front. You have no idea how long it took me to make this happen. Who knows if this opporturnity will even be afforded to us in the future? It's highly unlikely. I know my contacts and I
know what favors are owed to us. Some exchanges are meant to be used. Now where's Lewis? He said that dinner was ready and I have yet to see him since lunch and-"

"He had something to-"

"Find him!" Cora barked. "Now! I want him. Not you. You have worn on my last nerve all day. If you have problem with that, take it up with Vincent. This is not something that I need to be discussing with you. If Henry has a problem with my itinerary, then he should come to me. I do not need your constant hovering, Desmond. It's driving me mad!" She stepped to the side of the chair, tipping her head forward.

There was a moment of stiff silence.

Desmond bowed his head and pulled the chair out, eyes respectfully lowered, but jaw clenched. Cora seated herself with an unladylike flounce, half-slapping his hand away when he went to request the tableware.

"I'm not helpless." She drummed her own fingers across the pale marble and frowned at the china and silverware that appeared for her place setting. "And have someone remove the charms on the Topekea China. You know I prefer that one for guests."

Another awkward moment passed, then Desmond left the dining room, taking most of the tension with him.

Cora thumped her head back against the high back of the chair. She groaned loudly. "I'm losing my mind, that's what I'm doing. I'm losing my mind, in neat, steady increments. There's no two ways about it," she turned bright silver eyes to Harry, an expression of mild apology flickered over her doll-like features. "Hello. It's nice to have you. Please, do excuse my terrible manners, because they're about to get worse." She leaned around the chair, eyes narrowing as a ripple of magic slithered through the room. "Henry!"

Harry winced. He could practically taste the fury rolling off her in waves.

Cora waited another minute, before she popped up from her chair. She stalked halfway to the doors before they opened to show an exasperated Henry with Desmond trailing behind. Neither of her Bonded looked happy at the apparent, incoming storm, but they did stop a few feet into the dining room.

"Did you tell him to change my schedule tomorrow—without asking me first?" Cora perked a brow.

Henry pinched the bridge of his nose. There was a flicker of remorse in his eyes before resignation took over. "Yes—and with good reason, Cora. Please, we shouldn't be discussing this in front of our guests and-"

"Your good reasons and mine aren't even in the same realm," Cora snapped. "You should have come to me first. I am not an afterthought. Outside. Both of you. We need to talk. I won't have you smothering me because you feel like it. Those last two incidents were freak accidents. Nothing deliberate in there. You can't hold them against me and I won't—" She stopped in mid-tirade and flashed a tight smile over one shoulder. "Back in minutes, guests."

Desmond and Henry exchanged a look, before both followed her outside into the hallway. A silencing spell went up within seconds, for the conversation was conspicuously absent in the following quietness after the door slammed.
"High-strung," Charlie murmured a bit later. He was still staring at the double doors, somewhat perplexed and slightly alarmed. While most of the submissives he'd met up to this point where poised and powerful, Cora was an entirely different thing.

"More of a quick temper," Theo said, absently. His shoulders relaxed a bit, almost as if witnessing the conflict had set some other worry at ease.

Harry didn't say anything to that. He was silently revising his opinion of whether he thought he'd like this new submissive after all. He didn't think he would. In fact, it was starting to seem like the only Peverell he would like was Lewis—who, incidentally, was the only one that Theo didn't like and Charlie was largely indifferent.

The door burst open a few scant minutes later and Cora came stomping through, looking even more furious than before. "You had no right." She whirled around. "And if you so much as dare—if you even try, Henry. I will veto it and don't you think that I won't! This is no longer up for discussion. Out. Now. I need to eat and I am swiftly losing what appetite I had."

Henry hesitated, a stubborn glint in his eye. "Cora, you're being unreasonable. We're only asking that—"

Desmond scowled. "This is a matter of your safety and your continued well-being and you're—"

"Safety? My safety is fine, Desmond. I have more Pareyas than I know what to do with, more contingency plans than an Heiress and I'm not the one starting a clan war, that's the Deveraine's. If they have a problem showing up in public now that I'm hosting their friends, then maybe they shouldn't have made such connections so obviously in the introductions. Now please, leave me be. I'm hungry and I don't want to talk to either of you right now."

"Cora—" Henry began.

She held up a hand to stop him. "Please, Henry. We'll fight and I don't want to fight and neither of us will settle anything in the state we're in now."

Desmond sighed. He touched Henry's arm and flicked his gaze back to the doors. "She's right," he said, wearily. "I'll send Lewis. Please eat something."

Cora scowled. "I said I was hungry, which implies I will eat something. Leave. Now." Magic sparked visibly at her shoulders, a crackling halo of energy rippling over her blonde hair.

With a grudging nod, Henry did, with Desmond trailing behind.

Only after the door had clicked shut, did Cora's shoulders droop. She stifled a sound somewhere between a whine and a groan, before trooping back to the dinner table.

Tired eyes took in Harry, Theo and Charlie, before she acknowledged them with a wan smile. The frustration trickled out of her, leaving a more mellowed, relaxed temperament in the air as she reseated herself. "I'd apologize for that, but you'll probably see more of it soon. I don't mind your being here. I'm very happy to have some company. They haven't let me out for a bit. Protective instincts and all that."

"Thank you for hosting us," Theo said, smoothly. "I apologize if our visit has come at an inopportune time."

Cora flapped a hand at him. "Don't be. There never would've been a good time, if we're taking their word for it."
"Did something happen?" Charlie asked, before he could help himself. He offered a slightly sheepish smile at Theo's sharp look.

"Something like that," Cora said, quietly. "I might have accidentally upset someone. Accidentally on purpose, mind you. Not that I can explain that to them—they think it was purely by accident."

"Accidentally on purpose?" Harry repeated. He started, when food appeared on the table, the serving dishes magically filling themselves. He hadn't seen Cora's gesture for it and he hadn't felt the magic accompanying it. Odd.

"My family is very—involved," Cora said, at last, as if gauging to see how far she could trust them. "We're known for our technological inventions and at least half of the magical tech trade. We've started an empire and we're pretty proud of it." She set the teddy bear on the table in front of her and rested her left arm on the table, stretched out with her fingers still touching it. "Our trade has expanded to fifteen realms in the past decade. Exponential growth and all that. Fun stuff, lots of travel, contract negotiations and the like." A wistful smile flittered across her face.

Theo brightened. "That's quite impressive."

"Thank you. It's a world I treasure and one that I've grown up in. I'm used to all the things I don't have now and it makes other things a bit more difficult. It makes Nevarah more difficult. My Bonded—bless them—they are too cautious. They don't trust technology the way I do," she grinned. "Which is kind of funny, but also a bit sad."

Harry found himself staring at her outstretched arm. He couldn't help feeling that the bear was somewhat out of place and that her current posture was rather odd, but he didn't know why. That detail, bothered him.

The dining room double doors opened, showing Lewis, who slipped inside, a faint smile on his face.

He started for the side of the table with Harry and then changed directions at Theo's glare. He stood to Cora's left, a hand on the back of her chair. "Desmond sent me," he said, lightly. "Must you scold them so?"

"If they insist on dancing upon my very last nerve, yes," Cora said, firmly. "I won't be babied, Lewis and you know it." She wrinkled her nose. "Could you reset the two pins? I changed the top one out to the Jade bit and it isn't moving as smoothly as I'd like. We need to catalogue that."

"I thought you said you weren't planning on changing them," Lewis said, frowning. "Cora."

"I was bored," she shot back. "And it was easy. Honestly! I said I wasn't planning on it, I didn't say I wasn't thinking about it. I thought a Ruby catalyst might be helpful, but then I'd need some gem fire to weld it in far enough and I didn't have any. Jade was next in line."

Lewis gave her a look. "Process of elimination?"

"You know me so well," she grinned. "If you have time tomorrow, maybe we could try it?"

"With gem fire?" Lewis shook his head. "You know I need a twenty-four pass before we can even use that in Nevarah."

"Before you can," Cora corrected. "I'm allowed. It's practically in my blood. I was just being nice and including you in the calculations," she nodded at Harry and his Circle. "Be nice to the guests, please. I've made terrible impressions already, I'm sure."
Lewis conceded at that, offering a polite smile at Cora's prompting. He then pulled out the chair beside her and opened the teddy bear's stomach to reveal a miniature toolkit of sorts.

Harry stared, dumbstruck in the next few minutes as Lewis removed silver and gold implements from the teddy bear.

Cora calmly rolled up her left sleeve and began pressing a careful sequence over the pale limb.

Cyborg. Harry thought, uncertainly. Wasn't that sort of thing supposed to be in books?

Sure enough, Cora's left arm, began to shift and open to reveal an entirely mechanical limb, powered by magic and machine in equal turn. She'd been talking about her elbow joint, held together with various colored pins of what appeared to be actual gemstone.

Expertly, Lewis slipped out a pale Jade pin for a standard silver one, working with quick hands and a light touch.

Cora didn't seem to be the least bit bothered. She went about eating her dinner, managing rather well with only her right hand as if this was an everyday occurrence.

Theo gave a faint nod of acknowledgement to the trust shown in the small demonstration before them. He was picking up on the present, but faint social cues that suggested that this Submissive was definitely more in command of herself and her Circle, than at first glance.

Charlie seemed to be making notes of his own, his own keen eyes studying the interaction between Lewis and Cora. He cast a glance at Harry, hiding a smile as he saw those green eyes narrow ever so faintly.

Harry silently revised his opinion of her yet again. He definitely hadn't seen that coming—an artificial limb. He could also see why Lewis had been so comfortable with his Medic's title and role.

"Henry said you were hunting," Cora said, at last. She'd eaten a good portion of her dinner, keeping up an occasional direction to Lewis in between of mouthfuls. "Have you any favors?"

Harry brightened. "I did—Theo!" he stopped. "We left them at the guesthouse-"

"They're here," Charlie interrupted. He fished something out of his trouser pocket. "Ilisa gave them to me earlier." A thin, yellowed rectangle was set on the table and nudged to Theo, who passed it to Harry. "She said to only open it when you were in a place where you could look at things. Said it would be better for you to have them near you than sitting in the guesthouse."

Harry relaxed. That was a relief. "Thanks," he said, pocketing the rectangle. "Do you have a room I could use? I mean, you've already given us guest rooms and-"

Cora's smile upped by a few watts. "I've plenty," she said, cheerfully. "You can take your pick. And I'm happy to help you set them on fire, if you need. Favors are so much fun!"

The air in the room lightened by several degrees and the first tangible wisp of magic stretched out, warming it even further.

Harry found himself laughing along with her. For the first time, he was actually looking forward to sorting through more of the dratted things.

Perhaps this stay wouldn't be so terrible after all.
Ithy smiled fondly at the patch of repaired carpet that stood out from the rest of it. He'd never answered any of his Bonded's questions as to what he'd done for that, but Loren still turned red from head to toe, every time he saw it.

Old memories rustled around in his head, settling down as he reached over to run a hand over the nightstand, feeling the ambient magic in the room still thickly twined over each thing.

The rest of the talk in the war room had gone down rather well, considering. There were names and connections made between Circles. A few refused connections, but nothing definite hammered out. He'd taken care to emphasize their intent of keeping close and staying low.

He hated that the best he could offer at present, was to keep to the shadows as they almost always had done. But, it would protect them for now.

When Loren and Greta had swapped out with Edor and Nathan, there'd been angry growls traded between them. The hisses and snarls were more specific from each Gheyo, but he'd only grasped enough to know that someone had indeed tried to breach their wards and was successfully repelled.

Neither Edor nor Nathan had managed to see who it was, but there was a sampling of magic trapped in the wards and they'd wanted Greta to isolate it and examine it more closely.

She'd readily agreed and Aracle, of course, had gone after her, having sent the children on their way.

Children, he mused. Children that were now young men and women, compared to when he'd last seen them. He wondered if they would all bond this season, as it seemed they were more than ready for that next step.
Even Ariki—who had taken after him in so many way—it made his heart ache to think of all that he'd missed in his absence. Ithycar shucked off his robe and then the over tunic, before reaching down to work on the protective leg gear he'd worn on the trek in.

He'd opted to skip a portal for the sake of scouting out the outer portions of Nevarah on his way into the city. It had shown some interesting, if not some slightly disturbing details.

From the outside, it appeared that there'd been a recent Fabrine attack and he could sense that the magical protections were newly reset. Then of course, he'd been picking his way through the upper crust sections of the Hunt, choosing the quadrants where he was most likely to run into some of his Bonded.

It was more fun than simply summoning them to his side or actively tracking them down, mostly because he knew what social circles they moved in and it was always fun to surprise them. They'd never minded before.

Unless, of course, today.

He took a breath, holding it for a beat, before blowing it out. Arielle help him, but Bahn hadn't pushed the limits like this since Kandra. Then again, there were hints that led back to that awful day and Ithycar was tired of thinking about it.

He wanted to sleep on the whole mess and sort through it tomorrow. His travels had worn him down and the elven realm was always exhausting between portals. Of course, he'd only gone to complete his usual duties. It was a small price to pay for the twins' happiness.

Rustling sounded outside of the bedroom door and he listened, carefully. The steps sounded familiar and the light brush of magic could only belong to one person.

Bhindi.

His shoulders slumped. This was not something he wanted to do, but something that was needed. Alpha's duties would always come first because of instinct.

Toeing off his socks, he rose from the bed, gliding over to the door. It opened to her uncertain, hopeful face where she stood, drowning in his borrowed nightwear. He gathered her up in a hug, strong enough to lift her feet from the floor.

She squealed, predictably and hugged him back—hard. "Ithy," she hummed.

"Princess," he returned, pepperling her face with soft kisses, amidst her giggles. "Will you actually sleep tonight?" He secretly touched to note that she'd apparently never stopped pilfering his nightshirts.

She flashed a grin with too much teeth to reflect real joy. "The thought of tearing by fang and claw is enough incentive," she said, lightly. "We'll swallow them alive and that's all I want. Well, sort of. I want—I know you've only just returned and we—I can't be with you tonight, can I?"

Ah. She always knew him so well. Ithycar touched his forehead to hers. "No," he said, regretfully. Instinct-wise, he had a few things to square up first and they would start the moment Ilsa visited him tonight.

Bhindi nodded, fiddling with the clasp on his under tunic. "I figured. Do you think—maybe—maybe it's not us?"
He studied her face for a moment, reading what was showing there, than the actual words she was saying. It didn't match. "Anything you want to share?"

"Bahn was—he doesn't do that, Ithy. You know he doesn't."

"I do, but I can't make him tell me, princess."

She bit her lower lip. "I can't either, but Ithy, if it's someone else—if it's for—if it isn't for our sake. You won't—I mean, we'll still—won't we?"

"We'll sort it out tomorrow," he said. There were too many possibilities in those incomplete questions.

"What if it's important?"

"He told Ilsa," Ithycar said, simply. Bahn was rarely predictable, but there was a special bond between those two and he'd never known it to fail. If Bahn had told Ilsa, then they would know the truth soon.

Bhindi sagged in relief, relaxing in his arms. "Oh good. I didn't want to pester it out of him. He's still brooding."

"Delani will set him to rights," Ithycar assured her. "You should join them too. Sleep well."

"You too," she said, squeezing him tight, before kissing his cheek goodnight. "Be up early, eh? I want to hear everything. Where you've been, how things went and—you were alright?"

"As long as I have you, as long as I can always come back to you," Ithycar murmured. "I will always be alright."

Her magic swirled up, rising visibly around her in chains of sparkling white and silver. It twined gently around them as she stepped back. She only smiled.

He watched her leave and then stepped back inside the room. Ilsa would return soon, he hoped. She'd left hours ago.

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**GHEYO SECTION : TRAINING ARENA : (Ilsa)**

Ilsa angrily slashed her way through the entire horde of practice dummies. She tore up the warm-up grounds with nary a care to the destruction left in her wake. Furious was an understatement and rage was stating the obvious.

She wanted more blood, but that was no longer an option. Granted, she'd chosen not to kill the all at the rooftop, but certainly not for lack of effort. Two had died at her claws, the rest had merely been injured. She'd omitted that particular detail from her verbal report—and none of her Gheyos had called her out on it.

They wouldn't.

They knew better and her half-feral state had ensured that.
Instinct for Bahn and their unborn child had spurred her to return, once the threat was subdued and revenge had been partially taken. It had been enough at the time.

Death wasn't something she cared to leave behind in her fury, but sometimes it was necessary. One didn't hold a Gheyo rank and expect to be bloodless and blameless. She'd let them off lightly, considering how her fangs had ached for more.

There was no need to pursue broken ranks, because a single death would have been nothing short of devastating. Two was simply insurance. Ilsa ground her teeth together and lashed out at the nearest statue at the end of the ring. Her blades sliced through, cleanly. Her magic pulverized it afterward.

"I beg your pardon," a deep voice said, cautiously.

Ilsa whirled to her left, claws out, blade level with the speaker's throat. She blinked a split-second later, dropping the defense and skittering a few steps away.

A familiar dark face and muscled figure—Bharin Kalzik.

They stared at each other for a long, silent moment, before Bharin offered a deep bow, gaze fixed on her face—the mark of a Gheyo aware of his status and who he was interacting with.

"I did not mean to interrupt," he said, smoothly. He'd simply meant to announce his presence, but it seemed that Ilsa had been deeper in her thoughts than he'd anticipated. "Carry on."

Ilsa glowered at him for a moment, then hiked herself up onto the low wall surrounding the practice arena. She'd almost worn herself out and had started debating what to wreck next. Perhaps it was time to stop. "I'm finished. What are you doing out here this time of night?"

Bahrain half shrugged. "Hard to find time to practice with a Hunt in full-swing and his lord and lady all busy with the official meet-and-greet every waking second of the day."

"Ah," Ilsa managed more of a smile and less of a grimace this time as she sheathed her blade and stretched her arms overhead, twisting to try and work at some of the soreness now surfacing. "I'd offer to partner up, but I'm more likely to hurt than help at this point."

"I noticed," Bharin said, dryly. "Though it would be rude of me to ask the cause."

"It would," Ilsa said, calmly. Her golden eyes were still half-black and more brown than gold from any angle. She mentally sifted through her irritation, trying to decide if it was worth attacking anything else. Her temper had worn down to a fairly manageable level and a minor distraction would be useful right then.

"Need to burn magic or something else?" Bharin asked.

There was a longer pause this time, before Ilsa inclined her head. "A bit of both. What do you have in mind?"

"Quinn asked me for a favor some time ago," Bharin fished out a little slip of paper and flicked it over at her. "Involves your favorite person."

Ilsa snatched the scrap out of the air, eyes narrowed. She unfolded the neat paper and squinted at the resulting words. Eyebrows arched clear up to her hairline and she looked from the paper to Bharin, who was calmly tying his dreadlocks into a neatly ordered ponytail with a dark strip of cloth. "Are you asking me to accompany you?"
"Witnesses are always helpful," Bharin hummed. There was merriment in his dark eyes at her affronted look. "Dear lady, I was only asking for your blade. Surely you have the magic to spare?"

Ilsa brightened considerably, slipping off the wall to stand on her own two feet. She twisted the paper in her hands. That was more like it. Being a witness was fine, but in her current state, not very likely. "Gladly."

He smiled thinly, the merriment fading to something like glee. "Shall we then?" He held out something—a Healer's Phial with a strand of golden-red shimmering inside of it.

Ilsa held out a hand.

Bharin clasped it tightly in his and bit the cork off the end of the Phial. He poured the magical scrap over their clasped hands. "Delores Umbridge, Immediate Vicinity. Claiming of Healer's Rights by authorized section twenty-nine, five-fifteen of Accepted Mage Law."

Ilsa's eyes blew from golden to pitch black, her fangs showing clearly in her smile. Some blood and terror. Yes. That sounded just right.

The portal summoned spiraled outward from their hands—fanning out on both sides to include them, stretching out to bridge the gap between Nevarah's nevermore realm and that of their destination.

There was a hissing pop, before they vanished, leaving nothing behind.

**ILSA + BHARIN : EARTH : UMBRIDGE'S FLAT**

The portal spat them out in a darkly lit flat with very pink walls and too many kitten plates. Ilsa cast a cloaking spell the moment the portal spiraled down and Bharin had reached out into the meager protections over the area.

It fizzled out at their combined touch.

Insufficient magic against two annoyed Gheyos, both without patience and neither inclined to be gentle with their handling. Not at this point, anyway.

They worked their way through the flat, checking the few rooms and noting the distinctly ridiculous decor. At one point, Ilsa wrinkled her nose, flames flickering at her fingers only for Bharin to growl softly.

She gave him a look, but retracted her flames just the same. Using her natural element to bring the entire place down around their ears would do little good and borrowing Loren's flames to torch the entire flat would be far too showy.

They found Delores peacefully sleeping in the master bedroom, swathed in multiple quilts of pink and rose hues with a matching sleep mask over her ugly face.

Ilsa perked a brow.

Bharin merely smirked. He held a hand up for Ilsa to wait, then calmly approached the bed,
checking for additional protections. There was nothing else to stop him.

Ilsa cast a look around the room, noting the lack of a wand. She clicked softly at Bharin who looked up then frowned, following her pantomime.

He cast a silencing spell a moment later—on Delores. Her loud snoring stopped abruptly as the spell took place.

"Her wand," Ilsa said, quietly now. "The ones over here always have a wand of some sort."

Bharin poked at the quilts until he could see one chubby, pink-clad arm tucked beneath one of the plump pillows.

"Under her pillow," he said, beginning to draw several long, thin strings from his pocket. "Lift it, would you?"

Ilsa rolled her eyes, but tugged lightly on the hand, the pillow and the hidden wand. It was easy to draw on the air shared by her Circle, without worrying about her earthen element. A moment later, the wand slid out—with Umbridge's pudgy hand still clenching it tightly.

Bharin frowned. He tried to pull it free from her hand, but Umbridge twisted and turned in her sleep, face scrunched up in disapproval.

At that, Ilsa cast another familiar spell from her Circle—the sleep spell used by the Pareya to keep the younger children from running them ragged.

The effect was instantaneous, Delores flopped to her side, boneless. Her fingers uncurled from the wand and Bharin snatched it up. He held it over her head, over the bed, a few feet up in the air, squinting at the distance. A moment later, he nodded. It would have to do.

"Hold this," he said, waving Ilsa closer. "Don't move it."

Mystified, Ilsa inched closer, holding the wand above Umbridge's head. She watched as Bharin separated the thin threads he'd brought with him and went about threading them on Umbridge's person.

Ilsa's breath caught in her throat as she watched him calmly stab an ultra-thin needle straight through one hand, pulling the thread through. In growing horror and fascination, she stared as he carried each thread up to the wand, tying them off, before continuing on.

The process grew more tedious as Bharin began to overlap the threads and twine a few of them through Umbridge's mousey brown hair. It was disturbing, almost, the clinical manner in which he went about, methodically piercing, sewing and threading.

Once satisfied with having used all the threads and tying them back to the wand, he took it from Ilsa's still fingers. A few murmured words kept said wand hovering on its own, before he stepped back from the bed.

The spell continued on, as he began a steady chant, and the strings pulled taut. Umbridge jerked and twitched as the strings fell into place. Tendrils of visible magic sluggishly began to climb, stretching up the strings towards the wand.

Plucking it from mid-air, Bharin now held the wand in hand, moving back and forth in slow, steady movements as if testing for something. When satisfied, he muttered a final word—and the strings vanished, along with the wand.
In a matter of minutes Ilsa realised what he was doing—just as another piece of information clicked into place.

"The Puppeteer," she murmured, half-aloud. Silently, she revised her opinion of the dark-haired giant and the rather spooky reputation associated with his title. A mysterious Gheyo with the ability to manipulate anyone of his choosing—even into death.

Bharin glanced up at her, his dark eyes a rather eerie shade of red. "Few recall that name," he said, simply. "Surprised?"

"...Impressed," Ilsa allowed. She said nothing else, watching him as he went about settling Umbridge in the original position they'd found her upon entering the room. "What now?"

"Watch," he said, simply. "You need only watch. This is always the—fun—part." His eyes glowed an eerie pearl-white, before Umbridge gave a great, heaving gasp.

There was a momentary waver before her physical body slumped to the side in the bed, free of the faintly glowing strands and a wispy, almost ethereal specter of her, remained fastened to the strings.

Ilsa gave a strangled gasp, recognizing the separation between physical body and astral form. She swallowed hard, not trusting her mouth to speak for her.

To think that the Kalziks had such a deadly Gheyo on their side was a complete shock in more ways than she'd ever considered. No wonder they could always conduct themselves in such precise fashion. With this kind of hidden power, no one would stand against them for long.

Not if Bharin had anything to say about it and Ilsa was fairly certain that he alway did. Whether they wanted him to or not. The kinship she'd felt between them seemed to slot in line with her own nature—like omitting certain gruesome details from her reports.

This new shade of darkness around him made her privately glad that Quinn had been the first Healer to lay eyes on Harry. At least, this way, the Kalziks would be on Harry's side from now on.

Proof of that was the very scene playing out before her and she could be thankful for that. Harry and his Circle needed all the help and influence they could manage. There were too many oddities surrounding them and she didn't like it. They deserved to have something far less stressful to begin their shared lives—but fate was never a kind mistress to any.

Umbrige's body began to shudder and twitch, proof of the witch trying to wake. If she had been a normal human, with no magic whatsoever, Ilsa knew that all movement and consciousness would've been completely impossible.

Her stomach twisted at the sight of the body moving in directions that a body was not meant to move. "What will you do you with her?"

Bharin smirked. "The courts can have her," he said, lightly. "I will ask for final rites, if it is an option. Beyond that, I do not care. A creature that dares distort a youngling before their inheritance is even born, to mar them with something as disgusting as a blood seal? She deserves worse than death and had I not signed that slip for Quinn, she would no longer befoul this realm by existing."

Ilsa grunted, all queasiness vanishing at once. She mentally made a note to remind Bahn to keep hold of his symptoms—for surely she wouldn't be weak-kneed at a necessary intervention as this. Now, the need for vengeance was simmering once again in her bones. "She ought to pay."
"That is all that is needed," Bharin said, simply. He directed the physical body up and standing beside the bed, before he drew out another needle. "I want this to—take some time."

Ilsa gave an odd little smile. "Suits me," she said. "The rest of it?"

He shrugged, threading another needle. He began to sew a pattern onto her skin—a symbol for the inter-realm transportation portal. "Do as you like."

Ilsa hummed, turning away. She didn't need to see how he settled the rest of that. It had been disconcerting enough to see the separation of body and soul in a mere instant.

An old-fashioned check register caught her eye and she picked it up, flipping through the pages. Eyebrows arched upwards as she read the galleons present. The key was spelled to the back of the book—with a rather nasty spell—but Ilsa plucked it free without repercussion.

The Goblins would grant her access, so as long as she had the key and that was all that mattered. The foul witch owed Harry, if not Theo, for what she'd done.

Monetary reparation would definitely be welcome. Ilsa tucked the key inside of her bustier and set about examining the rest of the flat. She cast several monitoring spells and tied them down to the earth beneath the building. It would relay information without draining her and provide a useful window into the world, if needed.

She would cause just enough headache to support Bharin's little trick. She smirked. That was one detail she hadn't seen coming though—then of course, having the last name of Kalzik did not automatically make him a healer.

Then again, having a Healer's knowledge only meant a better understanding of how a body worked and what could cause the worst sort of symptoms.

It made her smile grow wider. She would have to thank him for an interesting evening. It certainly beat hacking and slashing in a practice ring.

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**THE DEVERAINES : MAIN HOUSE : NEVERAH, Ithycar's Bedroom**

It was nearly three hours later before Ithycar heard Ilsa's footsteps in the hallway. Much as Bhindi had, she hesitated, not quite making her presence known, but there just the same.

He gave it a minute, but nothing happened.

Ithycar mentally nudged the door open, in time to see her raised hand. He perked a brow. She offered a slight shrug and entered.

He was sitting up in bed, braced against the headboard, sifting through the notes he'd taken for their current situation. It was easier to think when he could see everything in front of him and he'd already begun to draw a few parallels that he didn't like.

Ilsa closed the door behind her, golden eyes half-gold and half-black. They stared at each other for a moment, then she bent and began to remove her tall boots. It took a few minutes with the spell...
laces and charms over it for extra insurance during busy duels or fights.

"I didn't think you'd come," he said, at last.

She did not look at him. "I didn't think I would either. But here I am and it seems I don't have a choice, now do I?"

"I'm not pulling rank on you, Ilsa."

"You might as well," she threw back. Her boots were banished to her shared bedroom with Greta and Aracle, along with the travel cloak she shucked off after it.

Beneath the cloak, he could see that she was wearing the same blood-stained armor from before, cleaned with a hastily cast standard spell that hadn't even begun to remove the worst of it. She ran a finger beneath the bustier, checking the points where metal would chafe against skin, if not properly worn.

After another minute of silence between them, Ithycar sighed. "Ilsa."

"Ithycar."

He closed his book, sliding off the bed. His long, pale, blond hair fell into place after him. It was looking a bit bedraggled after the day's activities. Unlike the twins, he was not fond of spells in his hair and painstakingly took the time to tend to it himself whenever possible.

Narrowed silver eyes settled on stubborn golden ones, before he set the book on the nightstand. "Would you help me wash my hair?"

A pained look flitted over Ilsa's grim face. She had expected him to say something else. Her hands clenched and unclenched before she gave a small nod.

He moved ahead to the large master bath, undoing the buttons and clasps of his clothes as he went. The shower area was large enough to accommodate a fairly respectable wingspan, without causing too much indoor damage. It was all smooth white tile and with simple, sturdy knobs and fixtures.

Ithycar simply turned on the taps as he went, dropping his clothes into the laundry chute at one corner.

He cast a glance back to Ilsa, who had stepped inside of the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. She was already twisting and pulling at the arm guards, studiously not looking in his direction.

Stubbornness, he thought to himself. Fear. He crossed the small space between them, touching her shoulder to let her know that he would handle the clasps in the back. A Gheyo's armor was no small feat of precise workmanship and deadly promise.

But this suit of armor was familiar—he'd purchased it for her as one of the courting gifts on that fateful day so many years ago.

She froze at the touch of his hand, allowing his nimble fingers to twist, pull and open the complicated clasps that kept the armor safely over her vital areas.

When he knew she could handle the rest of it herself, he kissed the top of her right shoulder and headed for the steaming shower.

Stepping beneath the first spray of hot water, Ithycar bit back a pleased sigh. He'd been looking
forward to this particular simple pleasure the entire trek from the Elven Realm to Nevarah.

A moment later, Ilsa joined him.

The washing ritual was half-Elven and half-Gheyo. He made sure there wasn't a hint of foreign blood anywhere on her person. She handled his hair as if it were her own—an elf's preferred vanity.

They didn't speak.

There was nothing to be said between the necessary routine of taking care of each other. Eventually, they reached the point where he knew she was stalling and she waited for him to call her out on it.

He did.

They exited the bath, wrapped in fluffy towels, a bottle of lotion carried to the bed. Ithycar was first, settling himself comfortably, before squeezing out a dollop of the one body lotion they'd all been able to agree on.

Ilsa sat silently on the bed in front of him, allowing the gentle massage to her back and shoulders. She was still slightly hunched in on herself, waiting for the storm to break.

The favor was returned and soon, she sat in the middle of the bed, with Ithycar at the end, braiding his long hair into neat strands. Eventually, he turned and took it from her rough hands, quick fingers finishing up a task he'd mastered since childhood.

She watched him from beneath hooded eyes, before slowly turning her head to the side, the slightest sign of Gheyic submission—for him to take his Alpha's rights.

There was a quiet huff from beside her. Instincts and unspoken cues were fine, but words would eventually have to come forth. "Ilsa."

No answer.

"We need to talk this through."

"Then talk," she said, biting off the word.

"Well? Have I missed something?"

"...If I was only reaffirming our bonds," He frowned. "I think our bonds are fine. I can feel you very clearly and I-

"What else do you want from me?"

"I don't need anything from you, Ilsa. What I want, is the truth—what is apparently so horrible and terrible that you haven't been able to tell anyone—even yourself. It's so awful and dark that you've kept it locked up inside of yourself to the point that it's left you like this."

"I haven't done anything!"

"Didn't say that you had." Ithycar's frown deepened. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me?"
"Yes. Hurry up with it so I can at least sleep tonight." She sat up straighter, bristling faintly.

Silver eyes narrowed. "I'm not taking anything from you that you're obviously so unwilling to give."

"Unwilling?" Ilsa cried. "As if I've ever denied you what was-

"Everything about you right now is screaming so loudly, I can't hear the permission you're forcing yourself to give me." Ithycar said, quietly. "You won't even look me in the eye—I would say that's fairly-" he stopped.

Ilsa twisted to face him, fierce golden eyes swiftly bleeding to pitch black. "Like what you see?"

"I'm not the enemy," he threw back, meeting her gaze with his own steady silver eyes. "You should ask yourself what else I've seen."

Brows furrowed—predictably. She had never liked his matter-of-fact way of laying out everything she wasn't ready to hear just yet.

"Curiously enough," Ithycar began. "Your children don't feel the slightest bit neglected—even though you've been missing for nearly their entire lives—if time is to be believed."

Ilsa's hands clenched into tight fists, her body deceptively relaxed.

"They spoke very highly of your—friends—who came to visit them. Interestingly enough, I'd never even heard of them. Friends with very similar quirks. Too familiar quirks, including," Ithycar inspected his fingers. "Carved wings."

Ilsa lunged for him.

He wrestled her for a moment, before their movements were locked in a stalemate of sorts. Him refusing to give more, her refusing to push harder.

It was a pointless fight, but a meaningful gesture on both parts. He would acknowledge that he'd pushed against something that had hurt and she would admit that it had hurt.

"I saw your wings, Ilsa. They don't heal overnight. But I know where your heart lies and I know your loyalties. You couldn't help but look out for them—they are your children. But you didn't even take Greta with you. Greta, your soul bonded love."

Ilsa tried to pull free of his hands.

He held on fast. "But you let Aracle find you. Aracle who manipulates time. Who said you never even asked him to change anything. Aracle that is just as soul bonded to you—as Greta."

"I would never take advantage of that bond." Ilsa ground out.

"I didn't say you did," Ithycar released her. "Aracle who didn't have a clue about your wings. Which begs the question of when did you actually do it and what would have made you do it?"

"If you must lecture me, then hurry it up,"

"Lecture?" Ithycar snorted. "If that was all I wanted of you, Ilsa, I would have done that the moment I touched foot on this realm—make no mistake. This requires more than a mere lecture."

Ilsa blanched.
He smirked, faintly and finally released his hold on her. That was one threat that always had his Bonded straightening up in a hurry. "You loved your wings. It was one of your few vanities. But you are loyal. Something must have come up, something that would have either called me back, taken Delani and disrupted the Twins. Something that would have turned everything inside out." He tapped his chin. "Curious, you know, that we've been in the good graces of not just one, but two royal families while I've been—away. Not just the Earth Royals, as per your element, but even the Air Royals." Sharp silver eyes narrowed, meaningfully. "You're welcome to fill in any gaps, I've missed."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ilsa said.

He reached for her again, slowly, cautiously, folding his arms around her stiff, frozen figure. "The easiest answer is that you've made time to hide in the pits," he whispered. "But Greta was there, surely you would have seen her and she swears she didn't. Which means if you were there, then it must have been for something else on someone else's behalf."

Ilsa quivered. Her eyes squeezed shut.

"Keep your secrets, loveling," he touched his lips to her ear. "I have never demanded them of you before."

She came to life, pushing him away, eyes wild, tears brimming at the corners, rage pouring through her veins. "You have no idea what's happened since-!"

"I won't punish you for doing the right thing—or the wrong thing, if that's how this looks in your eyes. If that's what you're waiting for, eternity is before us. You've done nothing deserving of such treatment."

"I'm not—it's not, I can't-!"

"I can't help you, unless you let me."

"You can't help me with this!"

"I can try, loveling, I can't clear that guilt away, unless you're ready to let it go." He held out a hand to her.

She trembled, visibly, before turning away. After a long moment, she hunched forward on herself, hands cupping up to hold her own arms in a semblance of self-comfort.

Ithycar waited a moment longer, then moved to slide off the bed. He turned down the covers a few moments later, a silent prompt.

She slipped beneath them, curling up on her corner of the bed, refusing to meet his eyes.

He slid between the sheets, mentally tugging at the lights to turn them off. Shifting closer to her, he willed himself to sleep.

Morning came quicker than it should have.

Ilsa felt him wake in the way his body went from lax to firm, sleep-warmed skin pressing more deliberately against her naked form.
She didn't even remember when she'd shrugged out from the borrowed nightshirt. Her mind had taunted her with cruel memories in fits and spurts to the point that sleep was torture.

In the end, she'd given up, tears of frustration trickling into her ears as she tried to contain emotions that her body refused to hold inside.

"Thank you for keeping guard all night," Ithycar murmured, sleepily. He shifted even closer to her. She barked out a laugh and rolled onto her side, so he wouldn't see her face. Of course he would have slept soundly through the entire ordeal. Instinctively, it would have seemed quite normal of him—except that she was irritated and he was closest to her at the moment. Close enough to work out that frustration, anyway. "How kind of you to avoid the fact that I didn't sleep a wink."

Large, slender hands smoothed over her stomach and thighs, one hand moving up to squeeze her breasts, the other slipping lower.

Ithycar hummed, hazy eyes gradually brightening as he nestled closer, pressing a kiss to one bared shoulder. "Sorry you didn't sleep," he said. "Glad you're in better humors."

"I'm not!" She threw back, but it was a losing battle. It had been years since he'd touched her, after all. His familiar hands in those special places. An experience her body remembered, even if her mind couldn't conjure it straightaway.

The playful skill that had pulled her talents to the forefront, the special training that every ACE received before their title was officially bestowed.

He chuckled, teasing a bit more, before gently coaxing her to turn over to face him. They didn't have to wake the entire house just yet. There was still time.

"This is backwards," she managed to say, right before he kissed her tasting of sugar and blood. She hadn't even noticed when he'd eaten the sugar. And then her hands were curving up to pull him closer, to press herself forward, unable to deny this instinctive pull.

"Hardly," he said, between kisses. "I'd say it's very equal. Ladies first."

Pleasantly sated for the day, she lounged in his arms, basking in the warmth and afterglow. His chin hooked over her shoulder, his braided hair tangled between them. Her neck bared to his fangs—should he care for it, her hands resting atop his where they curved around her waist.

"Thanks for the welcome," he snarked.

She elbowed him.

He laughed and nosed her shoulder, where the fading bite marks lingered. It made him smile to see them there, for she could speed the healing, but had chosen not to. "Thank you," he repeated, quieter.

She turned away, avoiding those knowing eyes.

They would not speak of this again, but it had been cleared. Strange as it was. He would not hold it against her and she—well, she had not suffered in silence after all.

It was precious and uncomfortable in the same instance as she allowed herself to be held. The
experience both soothing and frustrating, as she was glad to have him back, but her inherent nature wished for their positions to be reversed.

He followed her restless movements and kissed her shoulder as the last mark faded away. "They had no right to ask you," he whispered. "You didn't have to—but you did. Thank you."

Ilsa growled, faintly and twisted around, reversing their positions, her arms locked around him from behind, her body twining easily around him as she shifted from her shorter form to a taller one.

"Don't mention my wings again and I'll accept that," she muttered. "I want new armor."

"Oh?"

She squeezed a little tighter, drawing a slight huff from him. He was good at gifts and always knew the right set of armor for her unorthodox fighting style. "Yes. Something pretty and shiny. Make it up to me."

He laughed. "I did bring you a present."

"Did you?"

"I always do."

Ilsa hummed, feeling the final threads of their bond snapping into perfect harmony. She nosed at his bite area, silently asking for the last measure of his acceptance.

Ithycar merely stretched his neck forward, baring it to her fangs. He purred softly as she drank a few token sips.

"Are you hunting today?"

"I have names to track," Ilsa said, licking her lips. She relaxed against him once more, mind whirring busily. "Check in on Theo and Harry, won't you?"

"He makes you worry still."

"Harry can't help it," Ilsa yawned. "He's a trouble magnet and he's not even trying."

Ithycar stifled a laugh. "Theo will be grey before his first century."

"As will Dahlia," Ilsa said. "Do you approve?"

"Of the Kalzik girl?"

"No, she's fallen for that Imaldis heiress, you know the one, Shayla?"

"They're a good match."

"They're fighting," Ilsa drawled. "I don't want to know how they'll make up with each other."

Ithycar stifled a laugh. "It's that bad?"

"Probably worse. Dahlia has scars from something she won't talk about and Shayla seems to think she isn't the one at fault. It's a mess."
"They'll sort it on their own." Ithycar said, easily. He knew this particular daughter tended to live her Gheyo instincts—just as Ilsa did. Like mother, like daughter. "They usually have in the past."

"Except that this has been carrying on even before the season started."

"Oh?"

"Came to a bit of a head, recently. It worries me."

"Many things worry you. How is Bahn?"

"Twins, Ithy. He's having twins. I'm terrified."

"You will both be fine."

"You know that. He knows that. I don't know that." Ilsa retorted. "Can we get up now or are we still cuddling?"

Ithycar laughed.

HARRY AND CO. : PEVERELL MAIN ESTATE, GUEST ROOMS : NEVARAH : THE HUNT, Day 3

Harry stretched, carefully, feeling his bones creaking and groaning in protest as he transitioned to wakefulness. He puzzled out that the hard softness under him was Theo and the warm wall behind him, was Charlie. That made perfect sense in his muddled head and it allowed him to wake in rather good humors.

Blearily, he peered around the room, relaxing almost at once, as familiar surroundings made themselves known.

After dinner, they'd all retired to one of the main sitting rooms, which was vaguely reminiscent of Prince Raspen's room—a nice, lightly furnished space with a large fireplace and plenty of soft rugs.

Harry had taken up a position on the floor, surrounded by a sleepy, but content Charlie and a still, mildly disgruntled Theo. Granted, Theo's mood seemed to have lifted during the dinnertime conversation with Cora and Harry had hoped it would stick.

They'd talked of pureblooded things—empires, business and inheriting necessary duties and roles. Theo's golden eyes had lit up enough for Lewis to sneak a second serving of cloud cake onto Harry's plate—without being noticed.

Of course, after dinner, the calming atmosphere had followed them to the sitting room and more fun things had begun from there. Harry had opened the magical package of favors and settled down to start sorting.

With Lewis and Cora's help, he'd started in on the daunting pile of favors, feeling infinitely more cheerful about the process since the moment he'd first received them.

They'd sorted out all of the female ones, with polite rejections and a few notices of interest for the
ones who had sought friendship and not courtship. He hadn't known that favors could request friendship instead. They asked for either an alliance between Circles or simply as a dedicated opportunity to scout each other out to see whether such an alliance was useful to both sides.

Overall, it had been an enjoyable evening that stretched into the wee hours of the morning, where they'd all eventually nodded off.

Lewis had fallen asleep curled around Cora, his wings angled forward, shadowing protectively around them.

Favors were still scattered plentifully about the floor and some of the stacks had fallen off the tables and chairs from their giggling, nighttime sorting.

Harry wiggled his toes and feet, checking each limb in turn as he attempted to move and felt Theo's half-hearted bite to his arm. A wordless attempt at communicating too many things that his Alpha wasn't quite awake to explain.

Stifling a grin, he bent to kiss Theo's warm cheek. "M'fine, Theo," he murmured, gently pushing the sleepy, contented feelings through their shared bonds. "I'm up and it's only a trip to the loo."

The bite turned into a lick and Theo's golden gaze faded as he let himself return to sleep.

Smiling fondly, Harry disentangled himself from their tangled limbs, standing up for a full body stretch this time. He watched as Theo subconsciously shifted closer to Charlie, to take up the empty space he'd cleared.

Testing his magic, Harry was relieved to find that it was still there—and strong—and that the few flashes of queasiness he'd experienced from the shift in land-to-air living, were practically nonexistent now.

He exited the room as quietly as possible and then recounted his steps from the previous night. It was easy to find the guest bedroom and a fresh change of clothes.

A shower was definitely needed and Harry took his time, appreciating the luxury of the perfectly heated water and the fluffy guest towels.

Theo's choice in clothes were still a touch too formal, but Harry was only mildly surprised to find that it was growing on him. It was hard to feel like his confused, school-boy self, when the mirror image staring back, was every inch of pureblood perfection.

That note, he did have to give Theo, Harry decided, squinting into the mirror as he attempted to flatten his hair down. It was nice not to have to wear glasses and today, it seemed that his eyes were glowing even greener than before.

Hanging the wet towel out to dry, Harry checked the room quickly, before stepping out into the hall. A flicker of a presence caught his attention and allowed his expression to remain neutral when he caught sight of Desmond waiting for him.

Sitting on the floor, deceptively relaxed, eyes bright as if they haven't slept, the Pareya looked up at Harry's approach. "Just you?" he inquired, politely.

Harry's brow furrowed, faintly. "Has something happened?"

Desmond shook his head, tugging on his hair for a moment, as if to keep from saying what he wanted to. "Are the others up?"
"...I don't know," Harry said, slowly.

Desmond managed a smile. "Breakfast then, yes?" He turned away, starting down the hall and stopping, when Harry didn't follow him at once. "For all of you?"

"Sounds good," Harry said, reluctantly trailing behind.

Some of his confusion vanished when he was escorted back to the sitting room and greeted by a yawning Lewis, who frowned at Desmond.

"She's still sleeping," Lewis said, slipping out and closing the door behind him. "Exhausted herself —last night. You shouldn't trouble her so."

Desmond hissed, eyes narrowed. "I'm not the one that is troubling her with things that she doesn't-"

"I'll pick up some of those sweet buns she likes for breakfast. You can take care of everything else, yes? The other two aren't awake as yet either, so you'll have some time."

"Lewis!"

"She's eaten them every single morning since we've been here and one of us has to pick them up," Lewis said, calmly. He rested a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'll even take Harry with me, how's that? One less thing for you to worry about, eh?"

Harry glanced between the two of them, not quite grasping the conversation-within-a-conversation. He was surprised when Desmond's shoulders slumped and he turned away with a muttered phrase.

Lewis only smiled and ruffled Harry's hair. "And that's that, eh? How about some breakfast, just the two of us?"

At that warm, wide smile, Harry could only find himself grinning back, charmed and pleased in the same moment. He'd hoped there would at least be a few minutes when he could visit with Lewis—at least, without Theo being territorial and Charlie having to keep the peace. This was the perfect opportunity.

Pushing another ball of happy contentment through his bonds, Harry tried to keep his joy from spilling over too exuberantly. Breakfast wouldn't really take that long—and Theo liked to sleep late anyway.

As did Charlie.

They wouldn't miss him for an hour or so—after all, it was the Hunt and he'd be in good company.

"Sure!"

HARRY + LEWIS : NEVERAH : AIR ELEMENT SECTION OF THE HUNT

Sweet buns, Harry discovered were a delicacy that was entirely Nevarean when he found out what went into them. The ingredient list alone had made him gag, but Lewis had coaxed him to try a few bites and now, he was hooked.

Chewy, syrupy and surprisingly filling, studded with candied nuts and bits of fruit, the breakfast
food was something best suited to a once-a-week treat, instead of daily fare.

As if reading his mind, Lewis laughed. "Cora is very particular these days," he said, still chuckling. "And it's not that sweet. There's still protein and fiber in there, but the-"

"Don't tell me," Harry said, clapping his hands over his ears. "Don't tell me again. I don't want to know what's in them. I wish I didn't know what's in them."

Lewis winked. "Yes, yes. Fine. Every Submissive has pregnancy cravings though and hers just—" and here, the smile faded.

Harry straightened up. So that's what it was. He'd wondered at the almost hints and the way the faintest tint of sorrow had wrapped around their entire Circle. It would definitely explain the dissent between Pareyas and the way that Henry had been so cautious—at least to his Submissive instincts.

"Did something happen?" he asked, gently. "I mean, I feel as if we're intruding at a bad time and-"

Lewis blew out a breath, settling back in his chair. His expression was far more solemn this time than Harry could ever recall. "A stroke of misfortune," he said, at last. "Follow the clues, because we're not to speak of it. Of course, if you know what I'm speaking of—then it's not a problem."

A careful nod was Harry's answer. It wouldn't be the first time he'd puzzled through things on his own to know what was meant to be said.

"Cravings, yes?" Lewis said, ticking it off on one finger.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Cora?"

A minute shrug.

"She is?"

No answer.

"She isn't?"

Lewis looked away.

Harry felt a stab of sympathy for the young woman, who had been so determinedly cheerful last night. Something stirred inside of him, already wishing for some sort of revenge—even though he had yet to know the full story. "What happened?"

"A freak accident. She said she was fine and—she wasn't. Not quite. At the last check-up, it was confirmed." His jaw clenched. "We should have watched her more carefully."

Harry winced. No wonder there was such discord. The underlying threads of hurt and confusion he'd been sensing could all be tied back to this. No wonder they were all on edge. Something of this magnitude would definitely affect them all—and given that he hadn't seen or heard of any children—it would have been their first child.

Silence hung between them.

Lewis added more sugar to his tea and drained the cup in a few swallows.

Harry hesitated. "I'm sorry," he said, at last.
The faintest of smiles lingered on Lewis' face. "Thank you. Last night was the happiest I've seen her in some time. I was worried about her."

They dallied for a while, talking of Harry's recent adventures since arriving in Nevarah and snippets of the Wizarding world he'd currently left behind.

Concerned, Lewis had asked about every bit of information relating to the Peverelle's and whether there had ever been any sort of contact.

Skirting the issue, Harry answered as best as he could, saved from having to answer any more personal questions, when one of the servers approached the table with a written request from a Circle across the room.

Lewis scanned the note, reluctantly agreeing, bargaining for the breakfast treat to be paid for in exchange for the following conversation that would require his medical knowledge.

"I shall inform them," the server said, cheerfully. "Thank you."

Lewis nodded, brows furrowing as the server hurried off. He cast a small smile at Harry. "Sorry. I'm always interrupted like this whenever I venture out on my own. Is there anything you wanted to do today? Anywhere you wanted to see? Something that caught your eye?" Lewis winked. "Or someone?"

Harry flushed, struggling and managing to keep the blush down to a minimum. Perhaps he could trust his luck today, the morning had started out alright after all. "It's fine. I haven't been to this section yet—maybe I'll walk around a bit."

Lewis hesitated. "By yourself? I mean-" he backpedaled at Harry's look.

"I've been fine on my own," Harry said, firmly. He would not let Lewis hover over him. "You have something important to do. I can call Theo or Charlie, if I need them. Besides, the whole point of this Hunt and my—hunting—is to walk around and feel attracted to different strangers. I think I can manage that on my own."

Lewis managed a sheepish grin at that. "I-I suppose so. Well—here," he drew out a green teardrop charm on a silver cord. "Use this if you need me. Break the gem and think of me."

Harry gave a wry smile. "Thanks." He slipped the bracelet on his left wrist and rose from the table. He headed for the exit, lingering long enough to see that Lewis had gone over to speak with the Circle requesting him.

The morning air was charged enough to deliver a faint feeling of excitement as he exited the outdoor eatery. It had been a light, airy space of white metal furniture and round tables with wispy tablecloths.

In fact, everything in this section seemed stubbornly white—or in shades of pale everything—with long wispy strips of fabric adorning every pillar. A giant, roofless castle almost. Harry wandered through the main walkway, down from the eatery sections and further out towards the grand arena that he could see in the distance.

That was some where ahead of him and they'd entered the Hunt from the other side of it the day before. He was reasonably sure of that.

He could hear music being played from various sections, contributing to a happy haze of noise. There were no familiar faces around him nor any magical pulls to any discernible directions.
Theo and Charlie's bonds were still locked into a peaceful slumber, so Harry figured he had plenty of time to explore on his own. There was bound to be something interesting somewhere.

He was partway towards one of the large, sheltered viewing spaces, when a head of forest green hair caught his eye.

A beautiful, dark-skinned woman, clad in simple robes with no visible markings, moved easily through the crowd, her gaze fixed on something ahead of her. A faint pulse of worry followed her, tugging lightly on Harry's empathy.

Harry followed the stare, surprised to find another green-haired individual moving through the crowd ahead of her. This time, this one was very familiar.

Kyle.

The Medic was staring determinedly ahead, lips pursed in thought. There was nothing unusual about it—until he half-glanced over one shoulder and veered off in a completely different direction.

Several beats later—the woman did the same.

Harry stared. That was unexpected.

Intrigued, he started after them, rubbing his chest faintly at the feelings trickling through his empathy. Fear, hope and a desperate yearning.

Odd.

The chase turned out to be more complicated and definitely more of a chase than Harry had expected. To begin with, they kept in sight of each other several times, when Harry almost lost them.

The pull on his empathy was strong enough for him to pick up the trail each time and he couldn't help the growing sense of worry as eventually, he found himself outside of a hot springs with a large waiting line.

Kyle ignored the line altogether and ducked through a rear entrance, with a nod to one of the employees there.

The woman followed him several minutes later, showing something in her hand that prompted the employee to allow her entrance as well. For a moment, Harry wondered whether he ought to continue following them, but his curiosity was piqued and he wanted to know what was happening.

He started forward, only to be caught by a hand on his shoulder, which spun him around to meet very familiar teal eyes.

"Q-quinn!" he blurted out, only to have Quinn clap a hand over his mouth.

The teal-eyed healer frowned, putting a finger to his own lips, before dropping the hand over Harry's mouth. His pale brows furrowed together and then he picked up Harry’s hand, lacing their fingers together to establish the needed mental connection.

*They won't let you in without a healer's card.*

Harry reddened. "Er-"
This way. Quinn tugged on his hand, backing into the crowd and angling for the tall, privacy fence lining the start of the hot springs.

Harry stumbled after him, alternating between mortification and giddy excitement when the hand linked with his, tightened accordingly.

They made their way through a barely visible footpath through the decorative greenery beside the tall fence, until they were hidden from view by the customers.

The path continued on 'round the fence and then veered off into various directions, each likely leading to a different hot spring section. There were signs out in the open, denoting each section by rank.

Various dragels could be seen and sensed, through the foliage.

Quinn didn't pay any attention at all, instead, moving with stealthy grace and single-minded focus.

"Quinn?" Harry whispered.

Don't talk. Use the link. As long as I'm touching you, if you think to me, I'll hear you.

Harry stifled a groan. This was worse than the game of Creeper from the previous day. His hand grew sweaty, but Quinn didn't seem to notice.

...Why are you following Kyle?

I could ask you the same.

H-he was acting—different.

So you just decided to follow him?

I was worried!

About what? He can take care of himself. He's a fully trained Medic and Fae as well. They're resilient.

...And yet you're still trailing him too! Harry thought back, fiercely.

Quinn squeezed his hand a little tighter than necessary, but didn't bother to answer that.

The little footpath ended before another length of privacy fencing. This section of the fence separated one of the employee sections from one of the bathing areas.

Intense feelings of joy and fearful gladness came swarming through Harry's open empathy. He cringed, knees buckling as the full wave of mixed emotions registered.

Quinn's quick hands caught him before he could touch the ground, dropping to a crouch beside him, half-supporting, but absently listening.

Harry clutched at the soft sleeves, head pillowed on Quinn's shoulder, as another wave of empathic feedback rocked through him. He was starting to regret this little adventure, when he heard Kyle's voice.

"...I'm sorry I couldn't before."
"...It's alright. I know it's—hard for you. I tried, but—it didn't work. I'm sorry I couldn't see you sooner. My beautiful, beautiful boy."

The conversation became more indistinct as the voices dropped lower and the dialect changed to a language that Harry had never heard before. He guessed it to be a Fae tongue, but couldn't say for sure.

Quinn's shoulders slumped and he sat, fully, on the ground, head bowed.

Harry felt his body grow slack beside him and then, a few moments later, he was gently pulled onto Quinn's lap, head cradled against the stiff collar of Quinn's over robe.

Quinn...?

...A minute. Just a minute—do you mind?

Considering that his current position wasn't exactly terrible—in fact, it was more enjoyable than anything else—and given that the alternative wasn't the least bit appealing, Harry only shifted closer.

He started, faintly, when both of Quinn's arms circled around him and sudden, fierce bolt of sadness stabbed through him.

It tore through Harry with horrifying clarity, making his magic scream and twist, as it struggled to process the feedback quickly enough. Then it faded to a tolerable throb with a desperate, aching hope that grew smaller and smaller, until there was nothing left.

Quinn, was all that Harry could think. Quinn's feelings? Over Kyle? Kyle's meeting? But the woman—and then he could hear their voices again.

"...Someone's coming. You'd better leave. Quick."

"But-!"

"Don't worry about me. I can be here. You can't. Please, mother-!"

"Kyle-!"

"I promise I'm alright. Please be the same. I love you."

A ripple of protective magic spiraled over Harry and he sat, frozen, in Quinn's lap as the sound of hurried footsteps and rustling grew louder and nearer.

Kyle burst through a section ahead on the footpath, ducking through a convenient makeshift door in the privacy fence. He did it with the ease of grace that suggested he'd done this before.

Without a backward glance, he raced off and away, having only dashed a fist against his face, to smear away any telltale tears.

Quinn-! Harry couldn't keep still anymore. What was that? What's happening?

Something that I can never fix. Quinn said, releasing him. Sorry—didn't mean to grab you like that.

Harry scowled. That wasn't what deserved an apology. He was still scowling when Quinn gently shifted him off to sit on the ground.
Several long minutes passed, the silence stretching out between them.

Eventually they gathered themselves together, brushing off dirt and grass, before making their way back through the footpath and slipping away, unnoticed, from the hot springs.

Quinn held his silence still, walking with his head down and shoulders hunched inward. There was a darkness in his face that Harry hadn't seen before.

Twice, he tried to speak up and each time, the anguished expression on Quinn's face, kept the words trapped in his throat.

They walked together for nearly an hour, until Dahlia and Dyshoka spotted them. They were greeted joyfully and Harry found himself caught up in the Kalzik family preparations once more, as he was easily included in their Circle and lead to a viewing box, much like the one the Deveraine's had.

"You look well, Harry," Surajini said, fussing over him for a minute, bangles tinkling gaily and warm, steady healing magic spilling easily from her fingertips.

Her hands fluttered about Harry's face, stroking over his forehead, eyebrows and nose, before tapping his cheeks as if testing for something. "Are you having a fun morning? Who found you this time?"

"Who?" Dyshoka echoed. "It's not a game!" she protested. "And if you're serious, it was your very own Quinn. They were wandering around with serious looks on their faces—honestly! You'd think if they were courting or something, they'd look less grim about it."

That line jolted Quinn from his thoughts and he blushed a healthy shade of red—right along with Harry.

Surajini laughed, tweaking Harry's nose. "Oho? Is there any truth to that? I cannot say that I have any complaints whatsoever, but he is a handful." She winked at Harry's red face. "He's so picky you see," she stage-whispered, before turning 'round to tease her son.

Harry didn't think his face could turn any redder, but was sadly mistaken in the following few minutes.

Thankfully, the teasing stopped as several rounds of entertainment began in the arena below. The Kalziks settled down accordingly, some of them paired off and the rest of them clustered together.

Harry was lumped together in the cluster with Dahlia and Dyshoka, closest to the viewing box railing. They shared plenty of snacks and drinks, chattering between each other about the Circles presenting and the show taking place below.

As far as he could follow, they were auditioning Submissive's from High Noble families, some of them following tradition and others simply choosing the path of a public venue for a contained heart cry. It was interesting to see the way they each took the stage, demonstrating a creative or practical skill and then ending with a dragon's screech that made his bones rattle.

Each time, there would be answering calls from the audience and individuals would come swooping down from various viewing boxes to join the Submissives on stage. A quick, but effective selection process would follow. The entire show would end with a temporary claim staked on the intendeds, while the bonded Pareyas monitoring the courtship would escort them safely off the stage to a more private setting.
It was a curious affair, by everything that Harry measured it against. He was curious and somewhat alarmed to see how the entire process played out in front of him.

As if sensing his initial aversion to it, Dyshoka calmly settled herself beside him, looping one of her arms over his and pointing out each step with helpful explanations.

The Submissives’ in question had all given full consent before participation and there were many older and experienced Bonded present to assist whenever and however needed.

So far, Harry hadn't seen anything to contradict that. It helped him to relax a bit, especially when Kyle came to join them in the viewing box and Quinn's mood had shifted to one of forced happiness.

Harry was somewhat glad that Wikhn and Mimei weren't present—but they arrived later, with exaggerated apologies to Dahlia for their apparent tardiness.

In good enough spirits to ignore it, Dahlia had simply waved them over to join the little cluster. It was that gesture that had Harry sandwiched between Quinn and Wikhn, balancing a bowl of snacks on his lap. At that, Harry had silently given up, determinedly focusing on the stage below.

Ignoring the fact that Wikhn had politely greeted him and sat pressed against him, shoulder to hip —due to the number of them crowded onto the viewing bench.

Any protest against that was effectively negated by the fact that Quinn was pressed up against him on his left side, a warm, steady presence, sadness rolling off him in tempered waves, with the occasional brush of hands as he helped himself to the shared snacks.

Yes, Harry decided. Definitely giving up.

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HERMIONE + OLIVIA. : NEVARAH : THE HUNT, Day 3

"So more than one friend?" Olivia asked, skeptically. "I don't know, that's different. Surely if they aren't native, it wouldn't be that hard to track them." She frowned at Hermione, who was busying herself over by the bookshelf, oblivious to the toddler on the floor beside her.

Hermione mumbled an answer, fingers tracing a one broad spine in the corner of the bookshelf. She tried to pry the volume free, the words only registering halfway.

Olivia's gaze narrowed faintly. She clicked her tongue against her teeth, gaining the toddler's attention and directing him out of the room, with a slight maternal pull on his instincts.

There were many things that bothered her about having an unexpected houseguest dumped in her lap. Never mind who had brought her, the last thing Olivia had needed—was another complication.

Things were troublesome enough without having to explain to her Alpha that she'd lost her position at the health clinic. Far too complicated to relate how she'd managed such a feat—given that nepotism had originally landed her there.

Oh, there were plenty of other things she would have liked to do—Arielle knew that she hadn't
cared to be dealing with another one of her family's stupid charity projects, but it had made good money.

That had been important to her Circle. Not to mention having one of the actual Kalziks listed as an official healer—that had boosted the clinic's reputation several times over.

And yet it was the same stupid Kalzik and his ridiculous fae counterpart, that had ruined everything.

Well, except for the unexpected visitors. She'd investigated on her own, after all—customers who used fancy names to earn immediate service were always on her watch list. The little wisp of an Alpha had thrown around the name of Gorgens—as if it had meant something.

Perhaps it had—in a way. There had only ever been one child granted the use of that particular name and she'd never expected to see them in her clinic. Least of all with two Bonded reeking of wizard magic and entirely too clueless for their own good. He hadn't even recognized his mentor's own daughter—a detail that Olivia had found to be quite curious.

It hadn't helped that the Kalzik duo had all but instantly adopted them—exerting themselves over their allotted contracted healing measures—and then having the nerve to blame it on her.

The little Alpha was paying for everything—it was a good bonus for the clinic. It was all fine, until that stupid Gheyo had shown up and then everything had gone to pieces.

"Excuse me?" Hermione's hesitant voice was slightly louder than her normal tone. She seemed to have one hand stuck to the bookshelf, the book desired now in her hand.

Olivia waved a hand over her shoulder, undoing the protective charm with a snap of magic that would grant access for reading the book.

And conveniently erase all knowledge of having read it once the book was returned to the shelf. Oh well. Not her problem. If the earth witch wanted to read those kinds of dragel books, it was entirely her choice.

The thin wail from the nursery drew her attention and Olivia rose from the table where she'd been sorting paperwork. She shuffled the folders and papers together, before sliding them into her work briefcase.

It locked with a basic charm, protecting the immediate information from prying eyes. She left the room, rolling her stiff shoulders back. If one twin was up, the other was sure to follow, never mind that she'd placed separate spells on them in hopes that the nap would last longer than usual.

Pity the earth witch wasn't any good with children. It would have been useful.

Hermione could not breathe the sigh of relief as Olivia left the room, heading in the direction of the quiet cry.

She was uncomfortable in a house with so many small children, most of them wanting to climb all over her or be held and sung to.

As much as she hated it, those particular things felt very far out of her realm of comfort. Her voice wasn't anything spectacular—not that she knew many songs appropriate for children—and her
body still ached from the magical ordeal she'd survived and so acting as a living climbing post was out of the question.

The most bothersome detail was the way that Olivia's disapproval fairly radiated off her in large, unavoidable waves. Hermione felt sure that the older woman had to know what she was doing, but couldn't verify it.

She hadn't been able to push away the uncanny feeling that Olivia was lying to her about something, though she couldn't yet put her finger on it.

It hadn't escaped her attention that Olivia had begun directing her children away from Hermione and that she always locked her briefcase with a charm, any time she moved further than arm's reach.

Almost as if it were a habit.

But too precise to be accurate.

If she'd had any other wits about herself, Hermione would have tried to look a little closer. But she was currently a guest in a place she knew nothing about, culture-wise or otherwise and had no desire to lose, at least, a roof over her head and a decent meal.

Those necessities were most certainly not to be overlooked.

Maybe later.

When she was ready to leave.

She didn't think Olivia would mind if she left sooner rather than later.

Their large library had eased some of Hermione's worries, mostly because books had often been some of her closest confidants through the years. There were more secrets, worlds and magic between those pages than anything else, to her, at least.

Thinking back to the lonelier days with few friends—if they were to be called that—and then discovering Hogwarts, Harry and Ron—made her hands twitch in frustration. Having her wand with her, was not, for the first time in some time—an instant solution. It would be useful, yes. But she needed a plan of action.

A good one.

Everything had been a mess since that stupid day.

There'd been no sane reason to walk out in the Forbidden Forest and try to die! Surely she had more brains than that. But then again, there had always been something off for quite some time, almost as if someone were pulling strings behind the scenes.

Something that was different now that she was—wherever she was. Things were a little clearer, a little brighter—and yet, still darker at the same time.

Things like the odd scars that seemed carved into her stomach, an intricate design of symbol and status. That same seal had been on the spine of the book that had caught her eye, thus piquing her interest.

A thin golden line that twined effortlessly into the very same seal she bore. A detail she'd
glamoured over, the first chance she had.

Somehow, she didn't think that Olivia would appreciate knowing that she was housing a Hellhound’s Consort. Particularly not if her calculations were correct—the actual main hound himself.

She stifled a shudder, trying not to think of those damning red eyes boring straight through to pierce her soul. Everything about that man—or hound—had irritated her and she did not want to run into him again.

At least, not before she found Harry.

She'd hoped there might be some information in the book about the seal, the house it belonged to—and perhaps, about dealing with hellhounds, particularly if one happened to be linked to them.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey everyone! This chapter has been a bear to edit. Ugh. You would think I've learned to write somewhat shorter, but at 16k words, I guess it isn't happening. I tried my best to keep from having another monster chapter. Sorry! I hope you enjoy it anyway. LOL. I don't think anyone can complain about length—it has grown 2k words with just the edits. Yikes.

RL Updates: I have some work-related travel coming up and it will be over the course of the next six months. This, of course, has turned work into a flurry of activity with new hours and other craziness in there. I know you all are waiting on updates and I do wish I had time to dedicate to this story, the way that it deserves. I have an hour, sometimes two, tops-most afternoons, in which to cook my lunch for the next day, take a shower, do some laundry and then bed. Wake up, rinse, repeat. Weekends are my primary time slots and I try to write as much as I can when I can.

Many thanks to brissygirl who made sense of my odd typos and suggestions for the story. She is an absolute darling and has relayed your wishes for more snippets and getting plot points tied up. In this chapter, I tackled Hermione and Revenge on Umbridge, so we'll get to see some more snippets soon. Hang in there!

Thanks for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel’s Song. Welcome to the new readers. Thanks for reading!

REVIEW RESPONSES WILL BE POSTED as I have the time to spare—and I honestly haven’t had the time for a while now. I’m truly very sorry for that, but I still treasure every review—thank you for your comments and encouragement!

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Harry, Theo, Charlie-(with the Peverells)

Deveraine Circle members-(at their home)
RECAP: Harry and Co. meet the Peverell Submissive, Cora and some of her Circle. Theo has trouble adjusting to them and Harry spends time bonding with Lewis. Harry's Peverell Seal removal process is also set into motion. He also runs into Quinn and they share a moment, when Quinn starts following Kyle to a secret meeting behind one of the public hot springs. Ithycar and Ilsa sort things out between them and Ilsa and Bharin take revenge on Umbridge in the Wizarding World.

HARRY + KALZIK FAMILY: THE HUNT: DAY 3

Contained Heartcries.

That's what it was.

Harry had finally asked Quinn for an explanation and then tentatively broached the subject of his own potential cry.

Quinn had gamely puzzled through it along with him. Harry vaguely remembered a similar conversation with Bahn on the beach that day he'd met one half of the Deveraine Circle. He'd said it was a Heartcry for Theo—and then for Charlie—but he hadn't been sure.

Not completely sure, anyway.

*The Soul Seal might have blocked a soul scream.* Quinn mused, appropriately distracted from the scene on the platform below. *Especially with the way that Theo's Caspers were so deeply intertwined with you and all that—the Soul Cast—on Theo. I wonder if I could do one for you?*

Harry almost shrugged. He didn't exactly mind, though remembering what he could from what Theo had gone through, he wasn't sure he wanted to think about it—yet. He didn't have Caspers and it seemed like they had been crucial to Theo's recovery. "What would it tell you?"

*Anything I asked of it, Quinn said, truthfully. Though I would only ask it what was needed to help remove your seals though. Demanding everything of a Soul Cast is illegal, a direct violation of the individual's privacy—and, in very poor taste.* He sniffed.

Harry hid a smile. "I'd like to know," he said, at last. "It's just that I'm never quite sure that it's alright—you know? I want to know, to be sure." He gave a decisive nod. "Sometimes I feel almost as if there's a connection and then it vanishes. It doesn't follow all the way through and—"
You think it's because of your seals? Quinn guessed.

Harry nodded. "Part of me doesn't know what to think, but the rest of me is sure that I want them off. If it's blocking something, I just—I want to do this as me. Not because something inside of me is somehow making me react."

Quinn offered an understanding smile. I'm sorry the process is so slow. I've already requested everything needed from the necessary parties to have them removed. I asked Bharin to look into it the day after. He set things in order. Mum actually took a glance at the whole thing and made a few suggestions. Everything should be underway, at least to some degree. If you haven't heard from anyone yet, it is because preparations aren't complete. Seal removals take time and the older the seal, the trickier.

Harry felt a spark of warmth at that. He was pleased to think that Quinn had already acted on his behalf to have the stupid seals removed. Even better to think that it had been for all of them and not just one. "Thanks. Even if they're tricky—they'll still take them off?"

If that's what you want, definitely. Seals are good things—tools, really, but they should never be used on any individual in the way they were used on you. Most seals wear off or lose potency over time, depending on the strength of the Caster and their magical ability. Some Seals can last a lifetime, others are meant to break on an auspicious date.

"So it is possible that I've had a—a Soul Scream?" Fractured memories of Charlie, fire and Theo's Caspers, danced through Harry's mind. He was seeing himself from the inside out and it was a strange feeling.

Quinn's teal eyes shimmered with interest. Many things are possible, especially when magic is involved, but I don't know too much about potential blocks to a Soul Scream. It was my understanding that whenever one was in effect, all soul bonded parties were aware.

Harry slowly nodded. That made some sort of sense. "Would I need to schedule that at the clinic? When would I be able to request you-?"

Ah—request it from the Kalzik Main house or the entire Kalzik Clan and address it to me, I'll receive it there.

"Not at the Clinic?"

Quinn squirmed, looking away. My darling mother lost her temper and so I lost my job, so no. Not at the Clinic. I am no longer employed as Master Healer, my official title and status has reverted to that of a Kalzik Clan Specialist. My speciality is mind-magics and dark creatures.

"You lost your job?"

Not on purpose!

Harry bit his lip. He was thinking of Matron Olivia and the way she'd treated both Quinn and Kyle. He hadn't liked her then and he was glad that he wouldn't have to see her again. At least, if he could request Quinn to be his regular Healer, then maybe he'd never have to see her again. "Can you be my Healer then?"

Not until I am cleared—until my Master Healer status is awarded to me, you'll have to see someone else in the family, if you want the Kalzik services.
"Oh. I see," Harry said, disappointed. 

*Dy's already taken you on. Quinn reminded him. She mentioned that she'd asked for your word after your transformation at the Introductions.*

Harry blushed. He did remember that. "So she's my Healer now?"

*Er—kind of? Quinn scratched his head. You have to sign things to make it legal and acknowledged, but yes, she is. Once you give her permission, she can work with you and your Circle, if needed, so you won't have to return to the Clinic.*

"Alright. I give you permission too," Harry said, decisively.

Quinn opened and shut his mouth. He stared at Harry for a long minute as if searching for the answer to his unspoken question in those earnest emerald eyes gazing steadily back. …*thank you. Dy asked first though, so she'll have to rescind her offer before you can request me.*

Harry huffed. "Why does it have to be so complicated?"

*Because we are simple creatures with complicated minds. Quinn quipped. For now, how about I write up a process check on all of the seal removal requests and send it for you. I'll also ask to handle the Soul Check with the option of a possible Soul Cast. Will that work?*

"Yeah. Thanks."

*Knowledge is power. Quinn flashed a smile. Since I'll sign off on it though, the only thing you'll need to do, is to sign your written acknowledgement and then show up on time for the appointment, whenever they contact you.*

Harry threw him a grateful smile. "That would be helpful. Theo would like that. He's worrying about everything lately."

Quinn smiled. *No problem at all. I'll check with Mama for dates and times and such. You'll have to come to the Kalzik Ancestral Home, it's the Main house where we have our best casting grounds and we have to take turns using it. Quinn wrinkled his nose. I'll include a transport portal as well, so don't sign it until you're ready to come.*

"Theo and Charlie too, right?"

*There will be accommodations for everyone. I wouldn't leave them out and I know you'll want them close for the Soul Cast.*

Harry tried to contain his relief and the sudden rush of giddiness. For a moment, he felt that he could have shown his thanks with a more physical token of affection, but his brain was on autopilot and he heard himself speaking. "Thanks Quinn."

Quinn's own smile upped a few watts and he leaned into Harry's shoulder for a moment, before returning his attention to the centre stage in the auditorium.

Harry let his eyelids flutter shut in sheer happiness. The nudge, small as it was, had set off a happy trigger of warm, contented feelings zipping through his empathy threads. It was wonderful on every level and he loved it.

Something inside shifted and twisted, but there was no prompt for anything more. No click. No confirmation—just an acknowledgement, almost.
Quinn? Harry wondered. Maybe. He couldn't be sure. But he could feel Quinn's magic spilling over into him, warm and strong. The sheer emotion of it made him shiver with delight.

Someday? Harry thought. Someday, maybe that twist and click with Quinn. With some effort, he made himself concentrate on the event taking place on the large platform. He watched as another happy submissive was escorted off to the side with her new Intendeds trailing after her. Contained Heartcries. What a strange way to plan a future, he mused.

He tried not to glance at Wikhn, the warm, steady presence beside him, who was also studying the platform. The expression on the dark fae's face, was something that Harry had never seen before. It was almost an expression of longing.

As if those pink eyes were seeing something completely different than what was actually taking place.

For one painful moment, Harry was reminded of their shared memory—dancing on a darkened club floor, pressed tightly together and the almost click.

The almost click.

Something throbbed in his chest, a dull ache almost as if a wound hadn't scabbed over and was still fresh to the touch.

He was half-reaching up a hand to touch his chest, when he realized that Wikhn was doing the same thing, the expression in his eyes saying that he was a million miles away.

In fact, his slender, pale fingers had already begun to dig into his armoured breastplate, before Dahlia had calmly reached over and pulled his hand down, lacing her fingers through his, while continuing her conversation with Dyshoka, as if nothing unusual had happened.

Harry stifled a groan and fought against the urge to bite or hit something. Base reactions, sure, but sometimes this particular brand of frustration needed a more physical outlet.

For one fateful moment, he'd worried that he was projecting his own emotions out, until he'd seen that brief flicker of anguish on Wikhn's face when Dahlia had taken his hand. Almost as if it pained him to be comforted by her, but at the same time, as if he'd die if he wasn't.

A twisted muddle of everything.

So. Not his feelings then, but Wikhn's.

Oh damn it all.

If that stupid click happened again—he'd—well, Harry wasn't quite sure what he'd do, but he was absolutely sure that he wasn't about to let it end as it had with Wikhn.

Not by a long shot.

**CENTRE STAGE, MAIN AUDITORIUM, NEVARAH**

"And as a gesture of goodwill and a fine example of the strength of our Air Elementals, our very own Shayla Imaldis, daughter of our Clan Chief, will now be presented as an available submissive for a formal, public courting. She has requested this of her own accord and we are happy to assist
her. We give our thanks and appreciation to the Imaldis Clan for this extraordinary opportunity and we look forward to seeing this talented heiress and her future Circle. May the courting be blessed and their Circle strong and unbreakable. May every good trait of our elements be reflected in the very shape of the symbolic title we claim for our Bonded." Princess Dawne ended the speech amplifying spell and turned to wait.

Shayla strolled to the centre of the stage, clad in the most elaborate finery afforded to one of her station. She was dwarfed in the traditional dancing garb of her elemental clan, with pastel-coloured wisps of fabric fluttering in the wind—a visible touch of her element. Bedecked in gold and jewels from head to toe, even her white-blonde hair shimmered, as her beautiful peach wings stretched out behind her, in full length. The silver spines gleamed in the mid-morning sun.

Cheers rose up from the entire air elemental section, growing even louder as a standing ovation began. There were whoops, whistles and shrieks of happiness filling the air.

Shayla glided down from a raised platform, her long, beautiful skirts trailing out behind her, the ceremonial robes and makeup causing her to appear much older than her mere sixteen years of age. She carried herself with dignity and grace, coming to a stop before Princess Dawne, kneeling in respect.

An attendant stood off to the left, holding a jewelry box and approached at a gesture from the Princess. From within the box, a token of acceptance—a glimmering pendant—strung on a long, golden chain, was produced.

The pendant's charm was a golden pair of feathered wings in the shape of a heart, set within a golden circle. It was symbolic and delicately wrought, showing off fine craftsmanship in the details.

Princess Dawne threaded it carefully over Shayla's head, arranging it so the charm would hang in the centre of her chest, visible to all. She smiled in approval and tipped Shayla's head forward, just enough to kiss the crown. "I wish you love and luck, my dear," she murmured, the age-old phrase of blessing granted to those who chose a public courtship.

The attendant offered a hand, which was accepted, as Princess Dawne was whisked off the stage and back to the Royal viewing area and her respective throne.

The three remaining royals nodded their assent and acceptance of the situation, before all the noise died down.

Shayla rose from her kneeling position and smoothed her skirts with a touch of her element.

A warm wind blew through the auditorium as she continued in her solitary walk. In the centre of the auditorium's concrete floor, a large, carved, casting ground awaited her. Glowing runes showing charms activated for safety, both that of her own and her potential suitors, decorated the surface.

A series of circles set inside of each other, each progressively larger to house the ones inside of it—with a small space in the very centre. Shayla moved until she stood directly on that spot. With a flicker of her hand, the voluminous skirts rippled out from her, settling on the stone stage, hiding the carved circles from view and surrounding her with the pale, pretty colours.

Deathly silence stole over the arena. Tension began to build. For several long, agonizing moments, nothing happened and nothing was said.
Then Shayla bowed her head, hands clenched at her sides, before she sucked in a breath, threw her head back and screeched a loud heartcry to the sky.

The silence broke—right along with the audience's control. The sound echoed in the aftermath of the forced silence and the reactions came quickly.

A flurry of activity and colour rippled through the viewing boxes, wings bursting out from beneath formal dress and magic sparking visibly in the air as instinct came to the surface.

Dozens of Dragel Alphas took flight, aiming straight for the protected stages. They landed, some of them squabbling amongst themselves before approaching the sectioned off circle where Shayla resided.

Some were permitted to venture closer, while others were stopped by a nearly invisible wall of shimmer that sprang to life. Whatever her requirements were, they appeared to be in proper working order as two of the Alphas who had squabbled with each other, were refused further entry.

A handful of others were permitted, to continue forward, but it was immediately clear that there was some sort of magical webbing set in the floor.

Shayla rolled her shoulders back as she eased herself down to sit on the stone floor, head held high, hands folded in her lap as she studied the approaching dragels.

Her silvery eyes were nearly pitch black, narrowed to slender points, scales visible along the sides of her cherubic face. Something off to her left made her jerk around and she snarled, before repeating the heartcry, twice, each time louder than the first.

It had nearly the same effect as the first time, but also served to rile up the dragels who had already responded to her initial call. The second wave of answering screeches and dragels came trickling down from the stands, some landing far off to the ends of the stage, others venturing closer.

None had tried to aim directly for her, a good sign, considering that it now appeared this would be an elaborate and drawn-out courting process.

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**KALZIKS AND HARRY : VIEWING BOX**

In the Kalzik viewing box, Dahlia grew unnaturally still and exceptionally pale. Scales rippled along the sides of her cheeks, fading back into her tanned skin. Her eyes had shifted to a sudden, brilliant golden hue, unlike her natural colour. They were bright and brimming with power.

Dyshoka started faintly, her mouth in a grim line as she looked from the stage to Dahlia and back. Mei and Wikhn both made sounds of obvious distress, worry in both of their faces as they moved towards their Ace and flinched back at a barely restrained wave of magic.

Emily's twin tails lashed from side to side and her own brown eyes had darkened. Kyle immediately moved out of expected range of what he knew of Dahlia's wingspan, half-shielding Emily behind him—as he tried to subtly move further away from her.

In fact, it seemed almost everyone was clearing out a respectable amount of space between Dahlia and Dyshoka.

Harry wondered what for—until he felt it. Her aura, thick and dark—cruel, almost in its pure form. It made his breath catch in his throat and it made his magic shrink back inside of him. It was
almost as if she were an emissary of Death and he wasn't worthy of a reaping.

A hint of light touched the edges and that, Harry could plainly see, was Dyshoka, attempting to reach out to her lover, with gentle hands and a careful, trembling smile.

Harry turned away from them, unable to watch and wishing he could move further away from them as well. He only knew that something important was happening right now and he wasn't sure he wanted to be this close to it. He tried to move only to find that Quinn was holding his hands and had whisked away the snack bowl at some point.

Don't move. It'll draw their attention. Don't interrupt. Just pretend that everything's alright and don't look at them. Quinn thought, fiercely. We should have moved sooner. I'm sorry. Bear with it—please. Breathe. Breathe. Pretend that you didn't notice. She can't notice you right now.

Harry squeezed the hand back—hard. How was he supposed to pretend that everything was alright and—ow. Alright. Not squishing Quinn's hand back, as he apparently had no qualms about returning the favour.

That earned him an eyeroll, before the grip gentled considerably and their position registered. Quinn had switched hands—one holding Harry's the other, wrapped around Harry's waist, drawing him closer to Quinn's side—and his warmth.

That made Harry bite back the sound in his throat that wanted to be heard. Part angry-screech and half-annoyed snarl. Being closer to Quinn was a good thing, but the timing and circumstances sucked.

He didn't like this. It was almost as if they were offering Shayla up like some kind of distinguished trinket for—

Calm down, Harry. It's alright.

Stop saying it's alright! Harry thought, fiercely.

...Shayla is fine. Everyone else is fine. This is a public courting. She's initiated it. She's doing this of her own accord—they even announced that at the start. No one is forcing her to do anything. There hasn't even been any bloodshed and no fights for-

They'll fight? Harry twisted in Quinn's embrace—he hadn't even noticed when Quinn had stopped holding his hand and started holding him.

Quinn squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he had a headache potion and trying to think of an easy way to explain this to Harry. It was perfectly ordinary by Nevarean standards, though a bit rare, considering that Shayla was a Clan Heiress.

Maybe. I don't know, Harry. Sometimes they do, not always. Usually, it's a magical test of some sort. See the circles on the ground that she first cast? The glowing ones that are hidden under her skirts? She was using them to test for magic compatibility. There's nothing wrong with that and it shows that she's giving this legitimate thought. If they're not compatible, she's not considering them and they have to retreat. Look closer.

I am looking, Quinn! But she's up there like a—like a piece of meat and she's not. She's a lady! She shouldn't have to—she could have anyone she wants. The words came streaming through the shared mental connection, before Harry could double-check them. It felt more like a public auction, with Shayla's stats displayed on one of the large screens and more dragels leaping out from their viewing boxes to fly down to the stage.
She isn't being forced into this. Quinn repeated, patiently. She has the right to choose and the right to refuse. We can't interfere with her choice. This is what she wants. If it helps, look off to the corner there—see the dragels in the shadows? The ones who are escorting those away? She's rejected them and they are leaving—peacefully. No fights.

And Harry couldn't hold his silence anymore. He was remembering the moment on the beach, after the Deveraine's little party. How his magic had reacted before Theo and Charlie had settled things between each other. How Shayla and Soula had fed their magic into him.

How it had left impressions of their cheerful, fun personalities behind.

How it didn't fit the image of Shayla on stage just then.

How it didn't seem to work at all and he knew that something else was happening—something he couldn't put his finger on.

"That doesn't make it right! She's more than this. She's a-"

"A child," Dahlia said, coldly. "And she's acting like one too."

A harsh chill washed over Harry with those angry words. He dared to look over to see Dahlia, in spite of Quinn's earlier words. She was staring fixedly at the large shimmering screen that hovered over their section of the stadium, showing Shayla's calm expression and the necklace she wore. Her eyes no longer held a hint of colour in them. They were now pitch black and her scaled arms were folded tightly across her chest, her hands already clawed.

"Dahlia—" Dyshoka tried, flinching back a few seconds later when purple magic lashed out at her. She took a step back, then cast a glance over at Harry and Quinn, her magic stretching towards them.

Quinn flinched a moment later.

Harry looked between them. Anything he could have said was unnecessary when he felt Quinn's magic traveling through him and the spell echoed in his own mind.

Ororo carmena.

Dreadful fascination settled over him as he watched Quinn lurch to his feet, protectively standing in front of him.

For one awful second, Harry loathed the feeling of those arms leaving him and then, he was sitting alone, with Quinn protectively in front of him—and Dyshoka.

"Dahlia—pull yourself together. Don't you dare take your frustration out on my sister!"

Dyshoka shot him a Look. "Quinn, that doesn't help anything. Don't interrupt this." She frowned. "And you shouldn't be using that spell." Dyshoka pressed a hand to her mouth and then one to her chest, where Dahlia's claim mark resided. She gave a pained whimper as the marks began to burn.

"Why would she-?" Dahlia's voice cracked. Twin, angry tears leaked out from the corners of her eyes. "Arielle."

Quinn's fury receded and his severe expression softened into something of understanding. He inched a tad closer, his Healer's aura fanning out around him in flickers of teal light.
"She made her choice and now it's your turn. If you want to try, you have to jump now. Before she stops the call. Three times is the final count. She won't ask again," Quinn said, firmly.

Dahlia's shoulders twitched and shuddered. "She should have asked me first," she rasped out, eyes fluxing from black to a brilliant, vivid purple, proof of her mixed elemental heritage.

Something passed between Quinn and Dyshoka once more.

Dyshoka dodged to the side, waving a hand at Harry and half-pulling him to her with a flicker of magic. "Over here," she hissed, softly. "Her wings are large enough to reach you there."

Stumbling over the benches, Harry found himself standing in a slightly shielded corner with the Kalzik triad.

Surajini looked equally grim. Hiram didn't look very happy at all. Patrick was silent, but on guard and Harry had the feeling that neither of them liked the interaction between Dahlia and Dyshoka—but that none of them would interrupt it, not when it seemed like Dyshoka was reaching her on some level.

Satisfied that Harry was safe for the moment, Dyshoka ventured forward again. "Yes—yes, she should have. I'm sorry she didn't. But that's over now. It's already happened. You need to make your own choice now, alright?"

"Someone should have stopped her," Dahlia said, pained. "She said she never would be one of them up on a stage, calling for perfect strangers—"

"She's calling you and you know it."

"Dy—I—someone should have—no one—you don't understand."

"We can't understand," Dyshoka said, carefully. "We don't know what you know. But what you should probably do—is go. Now. Before it's too late for—"

"Now, Dahlia!" Quinn's voice cut in.

There was a single flinch and then Dahlia lurched forward to the railing, eyes hooded. Magic twisted and twined around her, until her head fell back and a loud, agonized screech rent through the air.

Her wings exploded out from her in a flurry of blood and fabric, flinging tiny bits of skin and scale about the viewing box. She moved easily to perch at the railing and then launched herself downward with a powerful leap. She streaked through the air with devastating speed.

Her halfling transformation completed itself in mid-air.

She landed at the far end of the courting area with visible crater in her wake.

Much like Ilsa had done at the beach.

Harry gaped. He'd never seen her like this and now he was no longer worried for merely Shayla, but Dahlia as well. His empathy was uncertain, twining tighter around him, the earlier calmness gone.

She was morphing and changing, even as she walked, growing taller and more muscled, her wings shifting and growing more plated.
He felt when her true aura slashed out.

It was calm, dependable and authoritative. It left no room for negotiation and spoke of darkness with depth and lightness with strength. It was absolute.

Definitely nothing like what Harry had felt before. He coughed, sagging back against Surajini, who hugged him, briefly, then nudged him into another pair of arms.

Harry started, faintly, until he realized it was Quinn's arms wrapping so carefully and gently around him. He leaned into the unexpected embrace. This was one slice of heaven he would enjoy, as long as he could. Confusion caught up to him and he cocked his head to the side. "What was that?"

Dyshoka stood by the railing, her head bowed. She turned back to Harry, a half-smile visible. "That was something that needed to happen," she said, her smile sad. "It will be very busy here in the next few minutes, but Quinn can tell you what's happening." She frowned. "And turn that spell off, brother-mine. I didn't ask you to use it and I will be very disappointed if you keep it up. I only said for you to tell her to jump. You know very well I can't interfere."

"Why not?" Harry asked. He ducked at her Look.

Quinn exchanged a glance with her, before she turned away, rearranging her dupatta. She busied herself with checking over everyone. Quinn looked down at Harry, who was still half-looking up at him, as best as he could without giving up the hug.

"Don't say it's complicated," Harry warned. "I want to know what's happening and I'll know if-"

"Dyshoka has precognitive gifts," Quinn said, matter-of-factly. "But the rule for anything with future sight or precognition, is that you can't interfere. Especially in a Key Event or during an auspicious time."

"It is a gift that plagues my family," Surajini said, quietly. She stood behind them now and rested a hand on each of their shoulders. "It is nothing to worry about Harry, but I am sorry for the scare. I haven't had the chance to talk to Dyshoka lately. I didn't know she was working with a prediction." She glanced at Patrick, who shook his head.

Hiram's frown deepened. "Dyshoka," there was a hint of reprimand in his tone.

Dyshoka's shoulders slumped. "I couldn't," she said, lightly. "That was one of the turning points."

"Dy!" Surajini looked appropriately horrified. "How much of this are you-"

"She's my world, Mama. I can't lose her," Dyshoka murmured. She moved to stand at the railing once more, her sharp eyes zeroing in on the stage below where Dahlia and Shayla seemed to be speaking with each other at last.

Quinn rubbed at his throat and growled faintly, when his mother thumped him on the head.

"Turn it off, Quinten."

There was a flicker more of gold than blue-green in those teal eyes, before Quinn muttered something and the spell was abruptly cancelled.

"Something's happening!" Laxmi called, from where she half-leaned over the rail, with Alejandro beside her, a flicker of magic keeping her from falling over, while they studied the scene unfolding on the stage below.
Harry followed Quinn over to the railing himself, pleased when one of Quinn's arms remained loosely wrapped around his waist. Muttered gasps rose up from the surrounding crowd. He stared down, squinting at the stage and felt Quinn press against his shoulder.

"What's happening?"

_We missed the initial suit. Shayla has to acknowledge Dahlia's arrival, before it can progress any further. Once she does, it's back to testing magic. If the magic sticks, then they're allowed to approach._

"And after that?"

Quinn did not answer.

Apparently, in the few short minutes, Shayla had been refusing each suit until Dahlia had shown up. Now, Dahlia stood at the edge of her little stage, making no move to venture further, but speaking something that wasn't broadcasted on the screens' speakers.

Harry watched as the conversation stretched out and at one point, Shayla lunged forward, trying and failing to provoke Dahlia into a reaction.

It ended with Shayla kneeling on the ground and offering the precious token, at last.

Dahlia only knelt in response, asking one final question, before she accepted the token for what it was.

The following minutes were confusing and difficult to process—for a great shadow stretched over the entire stage and only a crackle of visible purple energy made it clear that it was Dahlia's doing an no one else's.

The Royals seemed unperturbed and by default, so did everyone else. Harry fidgeted, uncomfortable by the display of magic and the apparent acceptance.

The glimpse of Dahlia's anguish and temperament had been unexpected, but then, there had been flat out defiance on Shayla's face when she'd taken the stage.

Perhaps they were alright after all?

From within the shadowed stage, the first gasps started up and then an unearthly howl rent through the air.

For one single moment, Harry couldn't hear anything. Could only feel his heart beating erratically in his chest. Could only think that this was what it felt like to see a world building itself together, one single stitch at a time.

The sound echoed in his soul and screamed through every sense. It was as if it was reminding him that there was more to his life. That this was not it.

There was a future, there was light, there was hope and most of all—there was love.

For him.

For the light that burned inside of him, that made it so easy to reach out and help those around him.

As quickly as it had come, the feeling vanished and the magic went with it a moment later. The cry was not repeated.
But several loud cracks of sound were accented with brilliant flashes of light, streaking through the hazy air and stabbing down onto the stage.

Wikhn made a noise from beside him and Harry turned in time to see Mimei stiffen and vanish as a bolt of light snatched her up and deposited her down on stage.

Several portals of brilliant white-blue spiralled to life, circling the shadowed space that now began to clear, showing Dahlia standing tall in her transformed glory as a Gheyo Alpha. Cradled to her chest and looking as if she'd always belonged there, Shayla stood with her head tucked beneath her new Alpha's chin.

They glowed in tandem, golden and violet, watching as new dragels stepped out from the portals, each of them bearing a glowing seal of claim.

"W-what is it?" Harry asked.

_Soulscream._ Quinn projected, carefully. *I don't know how she managed it—probably a Gheyo thing, but she's managed to trigger her Alpha's transformation and it called all of their soul-bonded to come to their side.*

Harry's breath caught in his throat, coupled with a sudden, fierce sense of longing and a desperate need to have what was on the stage below.

The immediate sensations were confusing and he broke them down enough to realise that someone else was projecting. Someone close enough for his carefully guarded empathy to pick up on.

Someone like Wikhn.

Someone like Quinn.

Harry heard another crack and he choked, stumbling into Quinn, as Kyle and Emily vanished next.

Wikhn's stricken face spoke volumes, his pale pink eyes growing steadily darker, his hands clenching the railing.

Harry steadied himself—and turned to Quinn only to find the same expression of complete despair and hopelessness wrought on his expressive face.

"Quinn—Wikhn?" Harry faltered. They looked as if all light had left their world and it didn't make sense. "What—what just?"

"Give them a moment, love," Surajini was there, warmth and light, swirling around her as she descended on their little group. "Quinn, sit down. If you cannot sit, then walk it off." She cast a glance at Wikhn, her direction unspoken.

Wikhn sat without further prompting, his gaze vacant as the dragels on stage began to form a line leading up to Dahlia and Shayla. He watched, silently, as claims were made and magic was tested.

It would be a strong Circle, for there were many powerful dragels that had answered that soulscream. Only a handful of them had come from the actual auditorium, suggesting that those who had been recalled were holders of rare talents or immense magical ability.

"Surajini?" Harry tried. "What's happening?" He turned to her, allowing the gentle hands to guide him away from the railing—and Quinn—and the strange scene below. "Is everything—is it alright?"
"I believe they will all be alright, it's a bit more showy than some of us are used to, but it is alright," Surajini said, a hint of pride in her voice. "They will have a very powerful Circle."

Quinn stepped away from the railing, his face shadowed as it had been before. He turned away and left the box, the faintest of sniffs heard.

Surajini stopped Harry from reaching after him. "He needs a moment," she said, softly. "What is lost is rarely ever found in these sorts of things." She held an arm out to him, invitingly.

Harry tried to nod, but felt his capacity for confusion and mental agility fading away. He gave into her hug and sat there, soaking up the attention of her hands stroking through his hair and the warmth of her pressed against him.

He sat.

He waited while the remaining claims were staked and the union was publicly blessed. He watched when Lady Paielda made her presence known from the stands.

He sat, transfixed as Dahlia and Lady Paielda fought each other, for the right for her rank to rise higher than Ace and for her to be properly acknowledged by her fellow Gheyo-kind.

Loud cheers of joy rose up in the stands around him as the entire affair was celebrated in high fashion.

The noise grew to be too much and the lingering emotions coursing through him were becoming more difficult to push away. Harry straightened up.

"How come—Kyle?" he faltered. For both Kyle, Emily and even Mimei had vanished at the sound of the Soulscream.

Surajini's smile was kind. "That is Quinn's story to tell," she said. Her voice and manner equally soft and tempered. "It is not that long ago, after all. Still, I cannot tell it in his place, suffice to say that if you should ask him. He will tell you." She framed his face with her hands. "And Harry, if he tells you. Would you listen, dear one?"

Harry nodded, once. Of course he would. There was no reason for him not to.

Surajini rose from the bench and kissed his forehead. "That is all I could ask. Go. He likes to walk on the footpath behind the pillars near the grey rocks. Take a left after you reach the ground floor. You will see what I mean."

Harry went.

He did notice that Wikhn was nowhere in the viewing box, but he couldn't tell when the fae had left.

No matter.

He'd deal with this one step at a time.

Quinn was indeed where Surajini had said he would be. Curled up at the far end of a warm, black rock, staring out into the distance, unseeing, his teal eyes nearly vacant.

He started, faintly when he spotted Harry, a pale flush of pink dotting his face. He offered a slight grimace, which might have been some semblance of a smile, if he'd been in lighter humours.
"I'm not good company right now, Harry."

"I didn't come because you were," Harry said, honestly. "I was—worried. I guess. You alright?"

...Now? No. In a little while, probably.

"Want to talk about it?"

...No.

"Mind if I sit here then?" Harry made his way up the rock and took a seat at the top, with his own feet hanging over the edge, instead of cross-legged, like Quinn.

_Suit yourself._

They sat in silence for an unbearable five minutes before Harry had to speak. There were too many questions and he was worried for all of them. Kyle and Emily had been kind and friendly—even Mimei had been alright. But they had vanished onto the stage with Dahlia and Shayla and apparently joined the new Circle.

The entire experience had been bizarre at best and confusing no matter which way he painted it. Then again, there were still plenty of things he didn't know about dragels and Nevarah.

"Quinn?" he ventured when another agonizing beat of silence stretched too long between them.

_You're the only one who hasn't asked about the scars._ Quinn projected, lightly.

Harry froze. His gaze strayed to Quinn's high-collared formal robe and the lack of the colourful dupatta he usually had around him. In fact, now that he thought about it, Quinn always had something around his neck, or high-collared shirts, as if it had to stay hidden.

A detail that was interesting, as Harry could definitely recall how torn and scarred it had been, from the very first time he’d seen Quinn, shirtless at the Clinic.

"We all have scars," Harry said, quieter. He could see how his own life would have been different if he'd been able to hide his own scars—the more visible ones, anyway.

_Some of us have more than others._ Quinn agreed. _Even you—with all of your seals and secrets._

Harry managed a half-hearted smile.

_I wish I'd never done it, you know._

"Done what?"

_Hurt my sister._

Harry turned the phrase over and over in his head, trying to decide if Quinn meant Dyshoka or someone else.

As best as he could figure it, the only sister that fit that bill was Dyshoka—the only one he'd seen that stood out from the rest of the Kalzik women.

There was a special bond of sorts between the sibling pair and he had a feeling that there were many memories shared between them, building upon each other, to lead up to that lovely...
relationship they had now.

Which brought him back to the puzzle—as far as Harry had seen, Quinn didn't do anything to trouble her. At least, not since Harry had known him.

"When?"

Quinn laughed, silently. Only you would ask when. Anyone else would ask why. His smile was sad—a near mirror of Surajini's expression from earlier. Would you like to hear a story? I'm afraid it isn't a very happy one and it's rather—stupid.

Harry didn't hesitate. "Tell me."

Once upon ten years ago, I let my untrained-temper dictate my future. Quinn leaned back, bracing his hands on the warmed rock surface behind him. He turned his face up to the sun, eyes closed.

Did anyone tell you that I used to be an Alpha?

Harry blinked. Had he heard something like that?

I was. A very arrogant one. I thought that I was the gift to all realms and no one was stupid enough to tell me otherwise. I was absolutely unbearable. My parents didn't know what to do with me and nothing they did or said, stuck. We fought so much, now that I think about it, I wish I had those years back. The time when I didn't have to answer to a rank and was just—a child. He looked away for a moment. As far as I was concerned, they were forever wrong and I was forever right. Stupid of me, really.

Harry frowned. He had a hard time trying to picture the selfless personality and quiet temperament that he knew of Quinn, with this far-fetched idea of arrogance.

Quinn half-smiled again, as if guessing what Harry was thinking. Oh, I was terrible alright, believe me. The last Hunt was my debut to society. I was insufferable then, picking fights everywhere and causing trouble, because I could. There were a few pretty faces and I liked them. I thought I could impress them and so—I let the worst of me show, because that was what they wanted to see. I was a complete fool.

"What happened?"

You have to understand that Dy and I, we've always been—close. She looked after me the most when Mama couldn't. She just had something special. Always calming. Always smart. Always quiet—she was the only one who could sneak up on me. I never wanted to disappoint her. Even when everyone else was—irritating—she wasn't. I don't know why. I still don't know why. She's just—Dy.

Quinn shifted uncomfortably and then to let his legs hang over the side of the rock, like Harry.

We were on our way to the auditorium, waiting to be checked in and measured. A Fae clan was also waiting in line and for some reason, one of them started talking to Dy. I didn't like the look of some of them and when they started laughing and scoffing, I told them to knock it off. They didn't, but they were quieter. Then one of them said something and one of their elders overheard. I don't know what it was, but it warranted an apology that the fae wasn't willing to give.

Harry winced. He could almost see the way this would turn out. "W-was it—Kyle?"

Quinn shook his head. No. Kyle was never that sort. It was one of his brothers. At the time, they all looked alike to me. Dark skin. Green hair. Elvish tongues. I couldn't tell them apart back then. Fae wings are rarely visible and without them, they look just like the Elves. Kyle was talking to Dy later
in the day, about something or the other—he'd scraped or cut. She patched him up. They were talking and having a good time and I—I saw red. I told him that I didn't want some filthy fae grovelling around my sister, who was too good for the likes of him. Dy was quite embarrassed and I think she would have told me off, if I hadn't used my Alpha Look on her. Kyle simply looked me over and said that the choice was Dy's and I should learn to be a kinder brother and not irritate my sister.

"And that set you off," Harry said.

Oh it did more than set me off. I'm not sure how the fight started, I only remember thinking that I would be the one to finish it. But Fae always travel together and he wasn't alone. His brothers came to his aid and mine—didn't. I suppose they thought I needed to learn a lesson and since they couldn't lay hands on me, it didn't matter if someone else did. Dy panicked and tried to break us apart. Someone threw a spell and she meant to take it for me. I had enough presence of mind to stop it. To stop her, but I took the hit and it nearly killed me.

Harry swallowed. A sense of loneliness and regret washed over him, with a bone-rattling ache as if he'd been completely run-over and then pieced back together. The feelings faded as they ran their course. His empathy was hard at work, it seemed.

Quinn placed a hand over his heart, a phantom pain accompanying the old memory. 

That shocked all of them and the fighting stopped. By that time, our respective family Circles had appeared and they weren't happy. Dy was crying and I couldn't make her stop shaking. I was bleeding everywhere and pure Healer's blood—well, that's a recipe for disaster. One of them said something and I—

Quinn faltered. His hands clenched.

Harry remained still.

I attacked them and I meant to kill. I took down four of them before anyone reacted and Dy, of course, tried to stop me. I was half-feral by this time, mind you and I didn't know it was her. Kyle took the blow intended for her and we fought terribly. I didn't stop until—until—I realized that I couldn't quite breathe and I couldn't hear myself anymore. We were spelled apart and Gheyo's restrained us, so we couldn't fight. Healings were started—but it was too late. The damage was done. It was much too late for a mere healing.

"What happened then?"

Dy was furious. But I was out for about three weeks. Mama was beside herself. Papa returned from one of his trips. Father was—well, he wouldn't even look at me. I later learned that the Elves had asked a blood price of them—because of me. Mama had begged him not to give it to them. Quinn sighed. I still don't know what he gave them in exchange for it, but long story short, I didn't heal well. I'd caused a lot of trouble for our Circle and many other problems. Around that time, they discovered that my body was rejecting the healing, because of my magic, my rank and my Kalzik speciality, everything was a great muddle. I was pulled out of the healing trance and had the most confusing conversation about my rank and life. It was consequently erased in the saving of me. They brought me home and I—I had a falling out with Dy. She was so upset and I was confused. She'd never been that way with me and it was a harder blow on top of everything else. Alejandro was insufferable, because we always fought and I won—except for now, my instincts told me to run and hide. So he chased and I hid.

"How did Kyle-?" Harry bit back the rest of the words wanting to leap out. He wanted to hear Quinn's story on Quinn's terms.

I thought living was unbearable and I hated myself so much, I wanted to die. I tried. Several times.
Fate had me in hand for someone always managed to save me. The last time—it was Bharin. Unlike the others, he didn't take me home straightaway. He lectured me for a while and some of it went through my thick skull. He took me home and Mama was so relieved, she asked him to stay for dinner.

"I thought Bharin was always," Harry shook his head. He hadn't meant to interrupt. "Sorry."

Quinn's mouth twitched. He seems that way, but he's actually the last Bonded for Mama's Circle. He was a joker and roamed about as he pleased. He wasn't afraid of physically manhandling me into whatever it was that I needed to do. He was the best at it. He fell in love with Mama. They courted briefly, after they realised that I responded better to him than anyone else.

Dy had stopped speaking to me by then. A few weeks later, Bharin was making me exercise every day and I stumbled across a very awkward scene. Kyle was working for someone at a bistro near the water's edge and not doing a very good job. They reamed him out and told him he was fired. He asked about his day's wages and was told to leave or else.

We spotted each other and he turned away. I didn't. I tracked him down and he tried to run, only to find that his injuries were acting up. I convinced him that I meant no harm, but he didn't have much of a choice. I checked his wounds and panicked. He was in such a bad way and I didn't know what to do.

He didn't think there was anything wrong. His clan had dismissed him for all the trouble he'd supposedly caused and his mother had also been threatened with exile. So he'd let them cast him out and was now looking for work and a place to stay. I took him home. Just like Bharin, Mama let me keep him.

A few weeks later, Dy took over my physical therapy and when Father gave the option of having mental links established, she was the first to volunteer. Kyle became my voice and I—here I am.

Harry's heart ached with the sheer sadness twined throughout the twisted tale. He still had some trouble picturing Quinn as a cocky teenager causing trouble, but he could see how things could easily change in a blink of an eye.

So much had changed for him, after all, in a matter of minutes—seconds even.

After a moment, he reached out and rested a hand on Quinn's own.

Quinn tried to smile. I ruined his life. Because I didn't want him to talk to the one person that he's apparently soul-bonded to. That's why he has Emily, you know? Because I made a stupid comment one day and things were awkward. Next thing I know, Emily is there and Dy is off with Dahlia. I didn't mean to—it just. This wasn't how it was supposed to be!

"Nothing ever really turns out the way we usually want them to," Harry said, matter-of-factly. "Take me for example."

Quinn gave a silent chuckle, but the laughter didn't reach his teal eyes. I always hurt the people I mean to save.

"You didn't hurt me."

That's different.

"So you didn't mean to save me?" Harry countered. This thread of self-loathing was somewhat familiar. He'd gone through similar stages thinking of Sirius and Cedric. It had never helped. But
other things had.

That's not what I meant!

"Then what did you mean?"

I-It's not that simple, Harry.

"Then stop making it complicated. Haven't you talked to each other since all of this happened? It
doesn't look like Dy holds anything against you. Or Kyle. They both look as if they worry more for
you."

You can't know that and they don't—they don't. Quinn shuddered, hiding his face in his arms. They
can't.

His pain was real and fierce in that moment and Harry rubbed his own chest, trying to will the
empathy-ache away. He needed to work on some strong mental shields. "Maybe I don't," He
allowed. "But have you talked to them?"

There's nothing left to say now.

"Now that they are—together?" Harry faltered. "Or now that it all seems-"

Pointless? Quinn filled in. Doesn't seem that way, it is that way.

"It's only the way you want it to be," Harry said firmly. The Kalziks were too close-knit for it to be
anything else. He'd seen that closeness first-hand in the easy way they interacted with each other
and the way that Surajini had asked Lord Gorgen's Gheyo's for a favour—on account of Dyshoka.
The way that Bharin and Kyle had rallied around him during those dark moments at the Clinic.
The way that Dyshoka had trusted him only moments ago—knowing that he would be able to carry
out what she needed.

Yes. Definitely not the way that Quinn was seeing them through the painfully tinted lenses of his
old memories. The trick was trying to make him see otherwise.

Surajini came for Quinn.

Harry barely registered her presence, but Quinn had reacted at once, sitting straight up, eyes bright
and shimmering.

She'd approached them then, a knowing look in her pretty eyes as she folded both them into a hug
that squeezed the breath from them.

Quinn huffed and squirmed, before giving into it. Harry was too shocked to fight it. He simply let
himself be held and marvelled in the fact that she'd included him—for the second time that day.

Eventually, she released them both and checked them over in turn—before making Quinn drink a
potion and asking Harry if he was hungry.

Seizing the opportunity for the excuse it could be, Harry volunteered to find some snacks. He
skipped off before either Kalzik could stop him and waved, cheerfully, until he was out of sight.

Quinn needed some privacy and it seemed, some time with his mother.

That, Harry would never, ever begrudge him.
Ron stirred faintly, sucking in a breath of stale air and dry dust. It woke him with the coughing fit that followed and he painfully struggled up to sit with his back against the cool, brick wall.

It had been hours since they'd escorted him to the basement.

Well, prison was more like it.

The basement was much deeper than it had a right to be and there were far too many empty cells lining the walls for Ron to be anything other than absolutely terrified.

His grandmother, Cedrella, had left him a dinner plate—sliding it through the slot on the cell door. There was an indescribable look on her face that he didn't even want to try to figure out.

All of his attempts to speak had come out in a mishmash of squawks and screeches and he'd finally given up on the matter when someone had taken his wand and threatened to use it on him.

That was a surprise in itself, but it had been enough of a shock for him to hold his tongue. He'd never wished for Harry's luck or Hermione's eloquence more than he did at this point.

True despair hadn't settled until he'd heard the clang of the cell door and the great metal lock being turned by the key kept by his grandfather. He wondered, briefly if Percy would tell their father, but that had left his mind when he'd heard the ruckus at the stairs.

Fred. Good ol' Fred. Merlin bless him. He was apparently in a shouting match with someone—who had they left to guard him anyway?—and they were insisting that he couldn't come to visit.

Ron strained to sit up, against the painful aches of his changed body. He grimaced as his throbbing feet began to scream for attention. He hadn't really paid much attention beyond the fact that he'd gotten feathers for hair and a freakish claw-hand. And probably a wing too.

It was hard to tell.

He thunked his head against the cell wall, wincing when it hurt—he hadn't meant to use that much force, but it was just that—he'd been dreaming! That was all. He'd been dreaming and seeing himself drinking the potion and turning into a magnificent golden Torvak.

It had been a good dream. He'd turned into gold and flown around on the Quidditch pitch with Harry. They'd had a Seeker vs Seeker sort of match, because really, unlike Harry, Ron could play any position. He'd grown up with siblings after all and they took turns.

But this was a good dream. He'd won. He'd caught the snitch before Harry and it had been blood wonderful!

And then he'd fallen from the sky and the entire image had crumbled around his shoulders as he came to find himself standing on broken glass, immense pain rippling through his entire body. He didn't think he'd forget Cedrella's look of absolute horror as she'd witnessed his transformation.

She'd returned to the room to finish the potion and somehow, he'd been in there and managed to swallow most of it.

His stomach clenched horribly and he contemplated whether it was worth trying to stand and
hobbling to the door to retrieve his dinner tray, or if it was best to stay off his feet.

They bled sluggishly from where he'd stepped on the glass and no one had healed it. And they'd taken his wand. Still, he wasn't sure that he would've been able to speak to cast anything.

It was too quiet, almost.

The silence filled every corner of the dark, shadowed cell. There was a single white stone in a corner—a marble, almost—that glowed brightly, casting a soft glow about the stark space.

Ron wondered, idly, if they would come back for him. If it were Hogwarts, someone would have to find and bribe Snape to make a potion to turn him back to normal.

Well, probably not bribe, but they would have to do something special, he was sure. Snape hated Gryffindors, but Ron didn't think that Dumbledore would allow him to refuse to help a Hogwarts student.

Sort of.

Dumbledore had been a bit off lately. Not that Ron could put his finger on it, Hermione was the smart one of their group, after all. He was just the sounding board—of sorts. Never offering any actual ideas of his own, simply trying to prod both Harry or Hermione towards some sort of compromise.

Sort of.

Ron sighed. His stomach growled loudly in protest and he glared down at it. Walking was such a chore right now and he didn't—oh Merlin save him!

Right before his eyes, a floating spectre of flowy white peered down at him. A short, thin figure with sharp, angular features and pretty, dark eyes.

There were ghosts down here! Ron scrabbled in the dirty floor, wishing for a weapon and nearly fainting in relief when the apparition faded away.

What was that?

A chill swept through the cells and somewhere, out of sight, a cell door creaked open. Ominous in its grating, squeaky sound, followed right by the sudden white glow of light that seemed to fill the entire corridor, or at least more than illuminate the entire block that Ron could see through his cell door. Soft, careful footsteps echoed.

A white face peeked around the corner, glowing bright.

Ron yelped.

The face jerked back, out of sight. The sound of feathers ruffling and stretching, filled the air before the face peeked around again.

Ron sucked in a breath.

"Please don't," the face said, sweetly. "I really don't like loud noises. It gives me headaches."

Ron squeaked.

"I'm not a ghost." The face said, after a long moment. "I'm just as real as you are."
"My Circle is on the veranda," Severus said. He gauged the measure of his words by the way that Viktor Krum's fingers tightened around his drinking glass. He had purposely omitted the names and ranks, wondering if the stoic young man would dare to ask.

The rank was a bit tricky to tell, but Severus had liked the way that Viktor hadn't flinched. The way that he'd walked up and introduced himself. The straightforward manner in which he'd attempted to navigate the conversation.

Granted, there were many reasons to dislike him—but not enough to turn him away. In fact, seeing him now, after time had passed from that wretched tournament, there was finally something else in his eyes.

With Igor taking a vested interest in his special student, Severus hadn't put much stock in him. In fact, it'd seemed that Viktor was definitely a more physical being than an intellectual one and there'd never been any evidence to suggest otherwise.

Then of course, he'd taken out Hermione Granger to the Yule Ball and if that hadn't been worthy of a raised eyebrow, Severus would forever hold his tongue on the matter.

It was rare and surprising enough that Weasley hadn't taken Granger himself, but Severus had chalked that up to youthful stupidity—and Viktor's eye for pretty things.

Now that he didn't consider that, there had been moments. A few fleeting glances where something hadn't quite aligned with the public's opinion of a talented Seeker. Times like when he'd watched Krum face down the dragon in the tournament.

Then the stricken expression on his face when someone had finally broken the news about Cedric. Severus had made it a point to be everywhere during that troublesome year.

In that case, he'd been busy trying to keep eyes everywhere. It hadn't helped that his Snakes had been restless and Dumbledore's golden boy—Severus stopped himself before he could travel down that terrible train of thought.

There were moments where he wondered if perhaps, he'd been able, in some way to save Cedric. Yes, Merlin help him, he hadn't cared about any other student—save for making sure that Potter lived and his Snakes did too—as long as they wished to. Then everything was alright.

"...May I join you?" Viktor asked.

Severus swirled his drink in his glass. He watched the way that Viktor's shoulders squared, but the rest of his body remained relaxed. A sign of control and a detail that the younger man was testing his magic in the way that it didn't seep out and reach to him.

That was an excellent gesture and it was worth noting.

"This way," Severus said, abruptly. He didn't feel a very strong connection, but it was enough of a spark that he'd take notice of it.

Particularly since he hadn't noticed any other sparks anywhere else. For a moment, he wondered
what sort of element that Viktor would be—as the soft brown eyes didn't hold the usual hint of the Earth element, but they weren't pale enough to be Air.

Curious.

Viktor held up a hand for a full bottle of Shamsah—a spicy, but intoxicating brew that gave a boost to the magical energies of the consumer.

Severus doubled it and asked for a nonalcoholic beverage and a platter of assorted appetizers. Draco would likely need something and if he didn't then Calida was sure to. They'd decide about a meal as a group.

Or Calida would, anyway. She was the one with cravings and they were all suffering from the dubious pleasure of sharing them right along with her.

He led the way out to the private balcony. It was down a ways towards the back of the restaurant and there were thick dark curtains over the entryway.

A spell pulled it aside for Severus to enter. Viktor stepped in after him. The curtains fell back into place and the muted sound of the restaurant faded away with the contained silencing spell over the private dining area.

Draco was draped over the comfortable lounge seating that circled the hardwood table. His robes were open and splayed to the side, his usual, superior look on his face. His silver eyes gleamed, a smirk playing about his lips that suggested he'd just told a joke and was enjoying the reactions of his captive audience.

Cuddled up to Terius' side, Calida leaned against him, snuggled into his indulgent embrace, as he whispered in her ear. She had one hand resting lightly on her baby bump and her shoes were off and resting on the lounge on Terius' other side. Her pretty dark eyes were wide with amazement as she listened to Draco's unbelievable tale.

Terius surveyed both of them, a fond look on his face. There wasn't a single flicker of worry on his face, but the way that his eyes were more black than silver was the only giveaway.

Severus tipped his head to Viktor. "Draco," he drawled, the faintest hint of iron in his voice—an unspoken request for his submissive to sit up and display a more professional appearance. He didn't mind if they were more casual around each other, but first impressions were always important. "Viktor Krum has asked to join us."

Almost at once, Draco straightened up, his silvery eyes narrowing faintly as they lit on Viktor. He didn't speak right away, but his first words came streaming into Severus' head.

The silent conversation took mere seconds, the pause of a breath and a smile. A moment later, Draco waved towards the unoccupied side of the lounge. "You may join us, if you like," he said, a hint of the Malfoy superiority teasing at corners. His shimmering gaze flicked up to Severus' and away again. "I was starting to worry, Severus."

Viktor twitched faintly. A glimmer of disapproval surfaced at Draco's tone, but a sharp glance between the Alpha and Submissive showed none of the reaction Viktor had expected. From his own family Circle, there had always been absolute respect and now, as he thought of it, a constant tension. This sort of interaction was different.

Not unwelcome, just different. He could sense that something else was taking place other than what he could see, but he couldn't make out what it was. His stomach roiled in uneasiness, but he
tamped it down with a healthy dose of curiosity and want.

This was definitely something he wanted and he doubted such an opportunity would ever present itself again, if he didn't snatch it up this instant.

There was no answer to Draco's statement, Severus simply ignored it. "Did you want lunch here or is somewhere else more suitable?" He spoke to Draco, but his gaze flicked to Calida who stirred, looking rather sleepy from her corner.

"She'll be fine here," Terius said, feeling her forehead, his hand lingering against the soft wispy bangs that escaped her braid. "The more she can rest, the better."

"…Your Carrier?" Viktor asked, surprised. He couldn't help it. That was the very last thing he'd imagined from Severus or Draco.

Draco straightened, looking mildly offended at Viktor's reaction. He looked to Severus once more —another silent conversation—then, with a twitch of his fingers had his robe floating over to cover Calida. Half in modesty and half in affront. Calida was his Carrier and he didn't care for her to be visually examined by anyone who wasn't a part of their Circle.

Calida murmured something drowsily and pillowed her head on Terius' shoulder. A hazy ripple of magic stretched out from her, a Carrier's protection while she rested. She pulled Draco's robe a bit closer, enough for a good-sized handful and near enough for her to breathe his scent.

"Our first," Severus said, shortly. The last thing he needed was questions in the wrong order and Draco's pride surfacing. Heavens alone knew how offended a Malfoy could be at the smallest of perceived slights. He sent a deliberate mental prod through their shared bonds, a reminder to act with some decorum. He then seated himself beside Draco, trusting that Terius would be fine with Viktor.

"My apologies," Viktor said, quietly, sensing that he had somehow upset them without meaning to. He made sure to direct his gaze to Draco, who sniffed, but didn't acknowledge nor refuse the apology.

Severus pretended not to hear. He began to pour drinks into the glasses that materialized onto the dining table. "You're here alone?"

Viktor flushed. He seated himself with care and deliberately turned his gaze away from the napping Calida and the all-too-aware Terius. "I have no next of kin here," he said. "If that is what you mean. A friend brought me to the realm. I have roots here, but we haven't had to use them."

"Your parents?" Severus tapped the glowing pearl stone at the centre of the table. It would call one of the wait staff to their veranda booth. The appetizers would be arriving soon and a meal would help to ease some of the awkwardness between them. "Extended family?"

"I don't know beyond my own," Viktor said, honestly. "There was a great deal of confusion—things have become—worse," he allowed. "I stayed at Durmstrang as long as I could, but there are stirrings of evil things and deaths have become very frequent." He did not add the disturbing note of his near assassination. That could wait. Sort of. It would be pointless, unless he returned to the Wizarding World and perhaps, with luck, he never would.

Severus nodded, as if expecting that very answer. "There was tremendous confusion everywhere," he allowed. "Who came with you?"

"Ivan," Viktor settled back into the comfortable lounge seat. He was forcing himself to relax, but
his instincts were already riding close to the surface and he didn't feel the least bit threatened. He would be safe with them, for now. "We are roommates. His family is known by the name of Volkov."

"Impressive," Terius said, speaking up from his corner. "I know of them. I have heard tales. They are known for their work amongst the werewolves."

Severus manfully willed back a shudder, managing to suppress any reaction save for the curling of his toes inside of his boots. He despised all dark creatures, largely linked back to the unfortunate encounter with a certain Remus Lupin, so many years ago—but most recently—with the wretched Vampires and the cursed hounds that Voldemort had sought to ally with.

Not to mention his own damned luck that seemed to draw dark things to every new path he chanced to try. Werewolves were his own special brand of personal dislike, however, and he would have to swallow that to some degree—if he intended for his evening to continue on to a fruitful end.

He was grateful for the detail that no one but Death's Hound could control a Hellhound and by default, that meant that Voldemort couldn't enslave or recruit them. He supposed that small mercies were good.

At least, in this case.

"Not those," Viktor said, shaking his head, a moue of distaste on his own face. "The Ice Wolves. They live amongst their caves and breed, train and keep them as guardians. They are Realmwalkers. Those wolves. They do not shift, to my knowledge, but they do share magic and the wolves are quite intelligent."

The quiet pride in his voice stopped Severus's dark memories from spiraling too far out of control. There was a glimmer of respect stirring inside of him for that, as what little he knew of the Ice Wolves didn't register in the Wizarding World.

He really did need to visit the Nevarean library. Soon.

Terius had promised to take him, as it wasn't exactly in the centre of the Hunt, but more along the outskirts of the main city. He had yet to venture too far into the natural city itself, as there were too many things weighing on his mind. Still, he was looking forward to some busy days with more information than his brain could comfortably process.

A terrifying prospect to any normal, average soul—but he was Severus Snape and it would be a minor challenge. He would enjoy the excursion in more ways than one. Perhaps that was what had sparked his interest. There had seemed to be something more to Viktor than first glance and this was very telling.

"How long have you been with them?" Draco asked. His voice was deceptively light and he smiled up at the waiter who appeared between the curtains with a large tray of assorted appetizers arranged in an artful display.

Severus leaned back, holding his tongue as the table was magically set and the portioned servings set into small plates for easy dining. He gently nudged Calida's mental link, sifting through her surface memories for a hint of her current cravings.

He rather hoped it was something savory and not sweet. Her last sugar craving had nearly given him a toothache.
Drinks were refilled and full menus were distributed to each of them. The waiter promised to return in several minutes and disappeared back into the heart of the restaurant.

Draco ordered a light round of finger foods and another set of suitable appetizers in addition to the current platter. He'd done so in a wager that dinner would be a long, drawn out affair.

Severus sent a faint bolt of approval through their shared bonds, specifically to Draco. He hadn't realized that Draco had been paying attention to these sorts of details. But he did appreciate it—the longer he could spend with Viktor, the better he could verify whether the stocky Beta was worthy of them.

"A month," Viktor said, when attention had returned to him. "Neverean time. The equivalent of a week at Durmstrang. It has been a tremendous relief to reside here for the time being."

Draco nodded. He was quite relieved himself, given how much they'd been through before arriving at Nevarah's troubled gates. Correction, his In-Law's troubled doorstep, Nevarah was alright—so far.

Viktor took a tentative bite of a crispy salted pastry. His bushy eyebrows arched up to his hairline as he chewed and swallowed, before inhaling the rest of it.

Draco almost smiled. He liked that particular one too. It was nice and spicy. "Any news?"

"Nothing useful," Severus said, smoothly. He didn't care to hear a repeat of what he'd already asked for, at the counter. Draco should know better than to ask for one. As it was, there were some things he wanted to confirm before sharing his suspicions with his Circle. He most certainly would tell them—keeping secrets at a time like this was likely to end with multiple deaths.

Terius coaxed Calida awake, tempting her with different items from the little line of plates he'd made in front of them. She reclined comfortably in his arms, indulging his instinctive need to hold and feed her. Contentment sang through their shared bonds as she sampled each appetizer in turn.

The effect was visible in the way that Severus finally straightened and relaxed—in his own way. His considerable height no longer seemed to be curling in on itself, but rather, calculatingly stretched out as he nursed a glass of the Shamsah. Viktor had good taste.

"Are you hunting?" Draco asked, bluntly. He couldn't help it. It didn't appear that he was, but Viktor was a rank he couldn't make out and it irritated him on a level he couldn't place. It looked almost as if Severus had figured it out, but he hadn't so much as deigned to share it with the rest of them and Draco wanted to know.

Viktor stared at him for a long minute, his expression a mixture of muted surprise and veiled interest. "I am," he said, at last. "Beta rank," he added, before Draco could ask.

Terius hid a smile.

Severus took a long drink.

Draco perked up. Ah. So that's why he hadn't been able to place it. Good. Viktor was an interesting sort—though there was one specific thing to keep in mind, as far as Circle politics. "That's good. Curious. How are you with vampires?"

"Vampires?" Viktor looked from Draco to Severus—who was studiously pouring a fresh drink, this time of a strong Bloodroot Cocktail. "They are not my favourite sort."
Terius chuckled. "It looks like you'll fit right in then," he said, smirking. "Welcome to the Snape Circle, Mister Krum. We're a bit mad, but I promise it isn't catching." He held out his free hand. "Councilman Terius Baronsworth, the Pareya."

"Pleasure," Viktor said, formally. He shook the proffered hand, surprised at the strength of the magic behind the gesture. It seemed he was about to be properly welcomed.

"Our Carrier, Calida," Terius said, nodding to the young woman. She flashed a smile that was all fang and no bite, even as her dark eyes glittered with interest. "And you seem to know Draco and Severus already."

"From the Wizarding world," Draco supplied. "But not our school, from Durmstrang one of the three that participated in the Triwizard Tournament."

"Ah," Terius said. He remembered reading something about that in Hogwarts, A History. There were notes about the famed tournament, including the notice that all participants had to be aged seventeen or older, due to the danger level of the challenges.

Viktor's tight smile turned pained. He was spared having to answer any further to that, when the waiter reappeared, prepared to take their orders.

"...And that's how we wound up here," Draco finished. He inched a little closer to Severus—had been doing so since he'd officially finished his dinner.

Severus was sure to have noticed, he was certain, but the dour man hadn't so much as acknowledged him and Draco figured he could stand to push his luck a little further. After the initial awkward questions had been laid to rest, they'd been able to have a somewhat interesting conversation with Viktor Krum.

Interesting to the point where Draco was definitely curious to know whether the Beta was still as fit and well-muscled beneath those elegant robes as he'd been since the last time he'd seen him.

In fact, the longer they sat, talking, the more restless Draco could feel himself becoming. It had started as a faint tickle in the back of his mind, but now it had grown to an annoying, buzzing presence that he wasn't sure he wanted to ignore.

It was equally hard to ignore the fact that he was fairly certain Viktor and Severus were flirting.

At least, that's what he wanted to read between the lines of their sarcastic barbs—given that Viktor was smirking over his drink and Severus's dark eyes were fairly shining.

Oh yes.

Definitely flirting, Draco decided. He could count the number of times he'd made that particular expression appear on Severus' face and it had usually ended on rather enjoyable notes for both of them. He sincerely hoped Severus wasn't about to change his pattern now.

Then again, the man was a creature of habit wherever he could possibly manage it.

Calida only watched, occasionally stuffing her mouth as if to keep from saying something, her occasional smothered giggle hidden in Terius' shoulder.

Terius seemed rather amused at the entire exchange, only helping along their conversation when it had first started and now, he sat back—much like Draco had—watching it unfold.
This was certainly a first for all of them, watching a Bonded Alpha testing a potential Beta.

Not that Draco really minded. He'd already made up his mind that he liked Viktor well-enough for the open rank and now, he was interested in furthering that interest. Instinctively, he could tell that all Severus had needed was his approval and he would take care of the rest.

That was fine by him. Personally, Draco would have preferred if they were somewhat more physical about the little dance of dominance taking place, but he supposed he couldn't have everything given that—oh. Severus had moved out of range.

Again.

Damn the man.

Refusing to pout, but dearly wishing to, Draco sat back, tucking his hands beneath his thighs. He was definitely restless and he was sure that it was the thickness of the potent magic in the air.

Severus's pheromones, probably—and maybe some of Viktor's? That was hard to tell. He'd never had to sort more than Severus or Terius' before.

Someone said something and Severus rose to his feet with all of his lovely height and deadly grace. He slipped out between the curtains and Draco stared after him.

There was another beat before Viktor's eyes narrowed and he slid out from the table to hurry after him without a single word.

Draco looked to Terius, who seemed to be trying his best not to laugh. He'd missed the exchange of who had said what. "Do I want to know?" he drawled, unable to hide the spark of irritation at potential secrets being formed out of his reach.

He liked secrets. Liked them even better when he was a part of them. This looked like one in the making. At least, given the face that Severus had made and the glint in Viktor's eye. There wasn't too much to read between the lines there and Draco was curious enough to know if it fit right. He could almost picture it and it had been driving him mad to try and stay still—and keep his hands off of Viktor for the entire evening. That was one reason why he'd kept on inching closer to Severus. His Alpha's strong presence had helped to curb some of his immediate impulses.

"You like him?" Terius queried, instead. He had a fairly good idea of where this evening was headed and quite frankly, it was a huge relief to him. They had needed more than the mere three of himself, Draco and Severus. A triad was meant to be a cornerstone of a Circle.

"Do you?" Draco countered, a hint of knowing in his silvery eyes. It would shift their rankings just a bit if he were to accept where this was headed. Terius wouldn't be demoted, but it would certainly ease a load of responsibility off of him.

Terius sniffed, nose in the air—half for show than actual attitude. Sometimes Draco could be rather perceptive. "He's easy enough in personality. Magic seems decent."

Draco hummed in answer. Viktor was not conventionally handsome by any means—specifically, Malfoy means—but there was a rugged quality to him that somehow managed to even out the scales.

Good-looking enough, Draco supposed. Pureblooded, at least, it seemed. He'd listened with half an ear, but it hadn't really registered. He was more interested in knowing things.
Like what kind of element Viktor had and whether he enjoyed his rank as a Beta—and if—if he would let him watch.

Draco couldn't hide his smirk. Oh yes. That was a definite one. He wanted to see that, for sure. It must have shown on his face, for he was pulled from his daydream by the muffled snickers of Terius.

"Go on then," Terius said, between chuckles. "You'll only sit here and wonder if you don't. I'll see if I can wake Calida. Be ready to port when I find you."

Draco made a sound of agreement and slipped from his chair. He paused long enough to press his Circle charm into the payment square at the corner of the table. They would charge it to their account, tip included.

With that out of the way, he was now free to move. He'd been dying to follow the pair and having Terius' approval only made it better. He slipped through the curtains and tracked the thread of Severus's bond all the way toward the shadowy alcoves.

Terius said to be ready for a portal, so he would make sure to convey that message. Eventually.

The little darkened spaces in the back of the restaurant that had caught his eye and Terius' open disapproval. Calida had surreptitiously explained that it was a semi-private place for Intendeds to place a claim mark on each other, but that sometimes, it went a little further there, hence Terius' well-cultured disapproval.

Personally, Draco was inclined to agree—that is, except for the present moment, which, by all standards, was far more entertaining and since it was mostly hidden from public view—completely acceptable.

Severus had backed Viktor right up to the wall, whispering something in his velvety tones that had Viktor's magic flaring out around him a deliberate aura.

Draco didn't really care what Severus had said, he trusted the man to know a good thing when he saw it and was interested in how the evening would turn out. It was quite clear that Viktor had no problems with such advances when the talking turned into a rather aggressive make-out session.

Oh yes. Definitely acceptable, Draco noted. He took up a position in the half-hidden doorway of the chosen alcove, both as a deterrent for any other possible dragels seeking privacy and also because it was definitely enjoyable to watch this dance of dominance play out.

This was nothing like how it'd been with Terius. Though, granted, when his Pareya had joined them it was under less than stellar circumstances—but he'd grown fond of him already. A fondness that was slowly turning into a well-tempered love, in spite of the rocky start.

It was that thought which allowed Draco to fold his arms over his chest and lounge against the doorway, more relaxed than he'd been since they'd come to Nevarah.

There were a few moments where he'd interacted with Viktor during the fateful Triwizard Tournament, but he'd been somewhat soured upon the act of Viktor asking one Hermione Granger to the Yule Ball.

Not that Draco had expected to be asked, but Granger, of all people? That had been something of a blow to his pureblooded self, especially having heard so much about Viktor and his interesting past.
A fresh wave of magic rippled out from the alcove.

Draco smirked. There was a hint of blood in there and he knew without looking that Severus had taken the first bite—staking his claim in the acceptable, age-old way of their kind.

There were robes rustling, a few strained gasps and then Viktor's breathless voice.

"...Only as long as it is...acceptable...for-

"Terius will not mind. He will be glad. Calida is only our Carrier, she is not bonded to us. If you mean Draco, then your answer awaits you there," and here, Severus stepped aside, his head tipped towards the doorway.

A flushed and panting Viktor peered over that darkened shoulder to where Draco stood, braced against the doorway, looking every inch of smug, impeccable pureblood perfection.

Draco smirked. "By all means, carry on," he said, lightly. "But if you need a specific invitation—will you join us for the night?"

Viktor swallowed. "The night?"

"And the rest of our lives, however long or short they may be?"

Something flickered through Viktor's dark eyes, but he only pondered the words for a split-second before he grunted. That was satisfactory enough. "As you wish."

Severus growled from his position where he had Viktor pinned against the wall. "Satisfied?" he rumbled. "Or will you require more convincing?"

A spark flared in Viktor's hooded eyes. "More—convincing..." he murmured, leaning forward to meet Severus halfway. They kissed for another, long moment. "But so we are all aware-

"Wait until Terius comes," Draco interrupted. "He'll bring Calida and said to be ready for a portal."

"You're all air types," Viktor muttered, bristling faintly as Severus began to pay attention to his neck with warm, biting kisses—a contrast of soft lips and sharp fangs. He was torn between allowing such ministrations or pulling away from the vulnerable position. He winced at one particular bite. "I'm not—air." He said, recognizing the non-verbal reprimand for what it was.

"No," Severus said, softly. "You're not."

"Is that a problem?" Draco asked, his voice equally soft.

"Only if it's a problem to you," Viktor countered.

"Draco?" Severus prompted.

There was a quiet sniff and then Draco opened his mouth as if in a yawn, before the quietest high-pitched heartcry filled the small, shared space. It was quiet enough for the dignity of the moment and loud enough for all dragel instincts to come rushing to the surface for all of them.

Viktor swallowed hard, a murmuring burble building in his throat. He managed to give an answering chirrup, before Severus captured his attention once more, speaking in those delightful, smooth tones.

"I am a difficult man to live with, much less to be bound to," Severus purred, his dark eyes seemed
to glow. "But such as I am, I would judge you on your merits and not your element, whatever it may be."

"And Draco is young and I am short-tempered," Terius said, materializing out from the shadows with a sleeping Calida cradled in his arms. He'd come at once, at the sound of Draco's heartcry. "Calida is Calida. We are expecting our first child and my protective instincts are not always easily explainable. Severus speaks for us all—I do not dislike your element."

Viktor half-laughed, a near desperate sound as if caught between laughter and tears. "We all have secrets," he whispered. "We all have scars."

Severus gave his own dark smirk. "That'll do," he approved. "Terius?"

There was afriission of white-grey magic and then a portal soundlessly sprang to life beneath their feet. It swallowed them whole and left nothing behind, only the alcove, as empty as it had always been.

Terius had managed a decent portal as they were all deposited, standing, near the bed in Severus' Alpha's quarters.

It was decorated in muted shades of black, forest green and navy blue, with the occasional hint of gold, lurking at the corners. Not the least bit welcoming or inviting, but somehow suiting Severus just the same.

Terius was the first to move, setting Calida down on the bed and swapping out her dress robes for more comfortable nightwear with a snap of his fingers.

She stirred faintly and turned sleepy brown eyes towards all of them.

Viktor caught the glance between Pareya and Carrier, brows furrowed. "You said the Carrier was not yours," he said, quietly.

Severus regarded him silently for a moment, then inclined his head at the noted observation. It was a detail he'd planned to remedy as soon as the opportunity presented itself, but he hadn't made the time, given how hectic things had been since their arrival. It certainly hadn't escaped his notice how close Terius was to the pretty, dark-haired Carrier and how easily she had managed to slip into their lives.

Personally, he didn't care to put too much thought into whether she would suit them or not. She either did or didn't.

As far as he'd seen and noticed—she had. In fact, she'd rather grown on him, just a touch. Her easy way of handling Draco, her knowledge of languages and Nevarean culture—and her innate sense of authority whenever Terius seemed likely to put his foot in his mouth.

Yes.

A good thing.

Too good for the likes of them.

But fate had already granted him one speck of light and Severus was grateful. If it deigned to grant him two more, he would certainly take it. Never, ever, would he refuse it. Not any more.
Viktor's words had caused the pair on the bed to freeze, almost as if caught, their expressions nearly identical. But it was Calida's clear brown eyes that sought Severus' dark gaze.

Draco snorted, breaking the moment. "She's ours well enough," he said, stiffly. It had bothered him at first that Terius hadn't thought he could carry their first child—not that he'd known the first thing about it, but a Malfoy could do anything and he'd been upset at the lost chance. But seeing all that Calida had gone through on his behalf, it had eased any of that discord—and he'd learned just how unprepared he'd been for that sort of responsibility.

It hadn't helped that she'd quickly proven to be a smart, capable woman, resilient in the face of the few things they'd faced together and unperturbed by Severus's grumpiness or Terius's worrying.

Even his self-loathing.

She'd taken it all in stride.

So Draco had automatically deemed her worthy. She fit their awkward little Circle of sorts and he liked her enough to wonder whether it was something done.

Asking a Carrier to join.

He'd meant to ask Severus about it, but the time had never quite been right.

Calida stared at him now, her rich brown eyes softening into unspoken emotions. Terius stood protectively by her, one arm wrapped around her shoulders, the other supporting her in front. She turned enough to kiss his hand.

Draco let himself smile—briefly—and gave a tiny nod. This would be up to Severus, but he had no objections.

"Is that your condition?" Severus asked. He moved away from the door—and Viktor—to begin removing his layered robes. He accepted Draco's questing fingers to undoing the cufflinks and the charmed arm guards he'd worn beneath them.

Viktor blinked. "Condition?" he repeated. "No—merely an observation. I—it seems that," he faltered, frustrated. There were so many jagged, broken pieces to the four dragels before him, that he didn't know which one of them to help first.

Calida smiled, warmly, taking pity on his sudden confusion. "Many things are not what they seem," she said, kindly. "We are not broken—only bent, no matter how it appears on the outside. This is, however, what you are asking to join."

"And you are happy with this?" Viktor countered, locking pitch-black eyes with her still brown ones.

She smiled. Her eyes lightened to a brilliant shade of gold as she rested a hand atop her small baby bump. "I am well-cared for," she said, repeating the familiar, rote phrase of every Carrier.

Terius started, faintly. "Shadow," he murmured, before he could stop himself. For he'd just seen the floor move and to his knowledge, such things did not happen. Not when he was sober, anyway.

Viktor scowled, his cheeks coloring with a healthy flush.

Draco leaned around Severus, trying to see what had already been revealed when he hadn't been looking. "Shadow?" his brow furrowed. "That's your element?"
Viktor began to undo the myriad of clasps along the front of his own dress robes. He avoided their gaze, a sliver of embarrassment slipping through. He would have liked to hold onto that detail for a little longer. "And what of it?"

"Nothing." Silver eyes glimmered with mischief incarnate.

Severus flicked him, lightly, upside the head. He ignored Draco's deliberate tread on his foot in retaliation. "It suits you," he said, carefully. He moved towards the bath. "We are all Air as you noted, but Calida is Earth."

Terius made a sound in his throat. He'd come from Earth and Air parents. His affinity for Air was natural and prevalent, but the underlying connection to Earth was what had drawn him to Calida all those years ago.

Severus disappeared for his nightly shower and Draco threw up his hands in exasperation. "We're in the middle of—this-!" he gestured between them and the frozen Viktor. "And he's off to take a-?"

"He needs privacy, Draco," Terius said, wearily. "And it will take a minute for him to gather his thoughts into something that he-"

Viktor's eyes narrowed. He slipped out of his robe and dropped it over Draco's gesturing hands. He ignored the indignant squeak, bending to kiss the top of Draco's head, as he strode towards the door.

Terius opened and shut his mouth with a click, when Viktor didn't hesitate to open the door and step in after Severus, locking it behind him. He looked down where Calida shook, silently on the bed.

Laughing eyes met his and she gave a slight shake of her head. "Let them sort it out," she said, turning to Draco. "And put that in the closet with the others—come join us."

Soothed by the offer, Draco sniffed and waved the robes aside to the closet, effectively undressing with a few handy spells as he strolled to the bed.

Terius stepped aside to allow him to climb up onto the soft space, turning to tend to his own needs of less formal clothing.

Calida accepted Draco's help in settling into the corner of the bed where the two walls met. She braced against it, surrounded by fluffy pillows and soft blankets. When she patted the space beside her, he managed to blush and slipped in beside her.

A few minutes later, they were kissing, softly, unhurriedly before Terius joined them, the bed dipping under his weight as he crawled over to their corner.

"I think," Calida said, breaking away. "It will be an interesting night."

Draco smothered a laugh. He almost wished he was in the shower with Severus, just to hear and see what was happening in there. All sound had vanished once Viktor had entered—a standard silencing spell, of course.

Terius smirked. There were some lovely sparks there, he knew. And they would certainly burn bright, if given half a chance. "Very interesting," he agreed, settling onto Calida's other side and twining an arm about her silk-covered waist. "In the meantime, I think we can amuse ourselves."
"Oh?" Calida perked a brow. "Can we?"

"Yes," Draco said, leaning across her for another kiss. "Let's."

"Draco?" Her smile wavered, for once, precious second.

His gaze softened, silvery eyes gleaming with infinite understanding in spite of his youth. He leaned in close and let the rising heartcry leave his lips.

Calida's eyes slid shut, a single tear slipping out of one corner. She murmured something indragel and turned to the side to kiss his cheek. "Yes. My answer is yes."

NEVARAH : DAY 4 : SNAPE CIRCLE, Private quarters

Severus awoke with a silent groan that he barely managed to keep from filtering through the shared bonds.

Including the two new ones he sported besides Terius' initial claim mark. Draco's mark almost looked lonely now. He had a faint itch to prompt Draco to find another Intended for them, if only to even the marks out.

Damned Viktor.

Something shifted to his right and Severus counted off the first dozen potion ingredients at the start of the alphabet to keep his composure intact.

Last night should have been calm and enjoyable.

Or something like that.

Instead, he'd been stripped down, laid bare and pieced back together by a wisp of a young man that shouldn't have known any of the darkness that he did.

He was consequently rewarded for whatever had passed between them in the following hours, on a level he hadn't seen coming either.

Then again, he hadn't seen a double-bonding either.

Calida's mark on his bicep throbbed faintly and he grimaced, mentally resolving to make sure the potion regimen he'd assigned her was doing what it ought to be. Perhaps he could tailor it a bit more for her needs or now, that they were bonded, he could blood spike it for her. It was odd to feel the two new connections inside of his mental barriers, but he supposed he'd grow used to it in time.

He certainly hadn't intended to reject them—if they were willing to take a chance with him, then he would do his best to protect them. Even love them, if his heart would allow it.

As if on cue, Calida stirred faintly from where she cuddled into his right side, her head pillowed on his shoulder, her body warm and soft, compared to his lean muscle.

He cast a glance at her, noting that her face was relaxed in sleep. Her thick black hair had escaped the neat plait she'd made the night before. Now the shiny strands feathered over both of them with only glimpses of his pale skin to her darker tones.
To his left, Viktor was pressed up against a sleeping, half-sprawled out Draco, who hadn't taken any kind of care for his fellow bedmates, once given in to the clutches of sweet sleep. On Draco's other side, Terius had taken up his usual position, half draped, half-snuggled into him.

That drew a faint smirk from Severus. Just watching Draco being half-smothered by the attention had turned him on to a few quirks of his own that he'd never acknowledged.

Last night had been very enjoyable.

It had been the kind of evening they'd all needed in some way or another. It was surprising, really, the difference it made having Viktor there.

Severus hadn't even had the time to really draw out his personality, but his presence and his magic had made such a notable impact that it hadn't even mattered.

He was almost sure that they'd find ways to manage and would, in time, grow properly accustomed to each other. Arielle knew that it would take time for their sharpness to dull in the right places and grow deadlier in other ways.

"Stop scheming," Viktor slurred, sleepily. He'd been pulled from his comfortable, dreamless sleep by the annoying niggle in the back of his head of his Alpha being awake and alert. The bond was too new for him to leave it be, so he roused himself enough to determine whether there was any sort of threat or not.

There wasn't.

Severus nearly snorted. As it was, he didn't deign to answer that, but tightened his grip on the sleeping Calida and focused on dredging up a few mental exercises for his—

"Severus?" Calida's voice was rough and hoarse. She yawned and pouted, transitioning easily from sleeping to wakefulness. A split-second later, she pulled a face and sat up, beginning to untangle herself and her hair.

He rose easily, with her, holding up the covers for her to slide out and bolt to the loo. He followed her at a more leisurely pace, pausing to fish out a clean pair of pants from the dresser. He found her dry heaving over the toilet bowl, attempting to hold her hair back from her face.

A minute of privacy was all he felt that was needed as he filled a small cup with clean, cool water from the sink.

She accepted it with a grateful glance, sipping on it in tiny mouthfuls, one hand spinning a golden glow about her queasy stomach.

He joined her then, snatching up a comb from the sink to help sweep her hair back. He let her sit back on the floor, braced against his legs, as he combed her hair into some semblance of smoothness, to twist it into a suitable braid. He could feel her unease through the fledgling bond and attributed it to a too-late breakfast.

"Potion?"

She glanced up at him, golden eyes shifting a few shades darker. "Blood." She countered.

He took the cup from her hand and helped her up, one hand automatically curling around her bare waist. They stared at each other for a moment, then he sighed and stretched down, shortening the gap between them.
She stood on tip-toe, hands reaching up to pull on his neck. Her drinking etiquette was by far the most formal. She kissed the chosen spot once, twice and a third time, sucking lightly, teasing with her fangs.

He felt the touch of her magic, rendering it painless before she actually bit, her fangs sinking easily into the skin. Here, he couldn't help but note that her fangs were larger and shorter than Draco's—providing a sharp, blunt bite. She remained perfectly still, drinking at a steady, respectable rate, punctuated by quiet chirrs.

He almost smiled, turning his head as best as he could, to breathe in the scent of her honey-sweet hair.

Something inside of him shifted and twisted, settling into place. His free hand slipped up to cradle her head, encouraging her to take more.

Draco yawned, waking up to the enjoyably confusing sensation of two mouths and two pairs of hands playing in tandem with his sensitive body.

The night had been vigorous and memorable in more ways than he cared to relive right then. He could feel the twinges of soreness where his magic had yet to catch up. His new Claim marks ached and burned with the sensation of foreign magic etching itself into his very being. A feeling that would fade in time, but still lingered, uncomfortably as his dragel settled into the new reality.

He stifled a whimper, biting his lip when he felt a rough, warm tongue laving at one nipple. From the sturdy warmth to his right, Draco could make an educated guess that it was Viktor and that would put Terius on his left.

The barely-there claws scraping down his stomach and left thigh made him quiver. Yes. Definitely Terius. He was always precise with his claws.

Viktor bit, lightly.

Draco shuddered, pleasurably. His body woke to the most delightful greeting and he finally let the first sound escape.

"Oho," Terius murmured. "I think he's awake."

Viktor chuckled, darkly. "Not completely awake," he said. "I think he could use a bit more convincing."

Draco groaned.

It was a bit longer than he'd wanted it to be before Severus stood in the kitchen, stirring a pot of bland breakfast cereal. A simple breakfast seemed like the best. He stirred the creamy mixture in neat figure eights.

Wrapped in a fluffy white robe, feet tucked up beside her, hands wrapped around a steaming cup of ginger tea, Calida watched him with bright eyes from her perch on the countertop. He'd wanted her to sit at the table. She'd wanted to stand beside him.

They'd compromised.

She enjoyed the sight before her now, tracking his movements between sips of tea. These moments were precious now.
He moved with quiet efficiency and deadly grace, starting up the preparations for an omelette, chopping and dicing vegetables with an expert hand. She'd had a sudden craving for a breakfast burrito of sorts and so he was doing his best to make it happen.

As far as he could recall, the only time she'd tried such a thing, hadn't been in their company and she couldn't remember who or where she'd acquired the taste from.

Her description had been detailed though and he had enough of his quick-thinking to figure out what he could whip up in the kitchen. Potions were recipes after all and he could work with that.

Considering how he was sure the remaining three of his growing Circle were busily exhausting themselves, he guessed they would likely to turn up equally famished to the breakfast table.

Severus continued about his cooking, falling into a familiar, comfortable routine. He'd always felt at his best among potion ingredients and simmering cauldrons. Chopped vegetables and a boiling pot were close enough.

"Kiss for your thoughts, Severus?" Calida asked, sliding off of the counter to stand on her own feet. She came to stand beside him, and took over stirring the breakfast cereal, adding in a dash of cinnamon and a scoop of sugar.

"They aren't worth that much," he countered, but accepted the brush of lips to his cheek.

"You're worrying about that girl, aren't you?"

"If The Hound came and took her, then it is now the Hound's business." Severus said.

"Are you convincing me or yourself?" Calida asked. She tasted the cereal and added another scoop of sugar.

He nearly smiled. "We need to establish a few more connections—I'm not—we're not in a stable position right now."

Calida nodded. She could understand that and she definitely did not want to return to the strange wizarding world. "Will we—we will stay?"

"Definitely," Severus said, without hesitation. "There is no reason for me to return any more." He was surprised how easy it was to say the words and the lack of guilt that accompanied it. There was absolutely no regret about staying in Nevarah now—not anymore.

Calida relaxed a fraction more. That was good. She didn't know that there would be any peace for them in that confusing Wizarding World they'd left behind. "So that leaves what we will do here? You are very good at brewing things," she mused. "Have you considered opening a brewery or an apothecary? You could also work in contract with a Healer's Clinic."

Severus tipped his head in acknowledgement. He'd considered a good chunk of that—and matched it against their current finances. Granted, they weren't dirt-poor by any means and all currency that had pooled together upon their bonding was now within his grasp, but he had no desire to act hastily.

This would be done right, this time.

There was no use in worrying over Hermione. She had Harry Potter's luck, when it came down to things. Fate would treat her well, as long as she was alive. Whenever their paths crossed again, he would see if there was any help he could offer and the debt would be settled between them—
unspoken as it was.

"There are places in the shopping district," Calida ventured, when she sensed he was slipping into his usual thoughts once more. "You could tour them, if you like. See if something catches your eye. It is busy enough and the rent is not too much. My sister has a dress shop there. She's good with her hands and has an eye for colour. Been in business for about, ah, seven years? Says the place is better than she first thought."

He made a sound of encouragement, bustling around from the counter to the range, adding a handful of dried fruit and nuts to the pot.

They would also have to make contact with the Vampires here and establish the same threads of communication and authority as they had in the woods, that fateful day.

Soon though.

For now, Severus thought, he was almost content and that was good enough.

"There are also open seats on the Councils," Terius said, shuffling into the kitchen with a half-open robe draped around him. He accepted Calida's good morning kiss, returning one of his own.

A cup was found and tea to fill it, along with a refill for Calida, before he made his way to the table, nudging Severus ever so gently on his way over.

The prompt was almost expected, for Severus paused in mid-step and leaned the slightest fraction forward for the nuzzle that Terius had to give. It was a very welcome gesture to Terius, who fairly glowed at the minute acknowledgment.

"What kind of Council?" Severus asked, returning to his current task.

Terius sighed, the moment lost. "I know you do not like them," he began, holding up a hand to stay the words he felt coming on. "But the Vampires are very happy to deal with you for whatever reason they have yet to divulge to the others they have come into contact with. You have their protection, whether you want it or not and they respect your opinion. It is not something that is easily earned among blood and fangs."

"I have no desire to become a Councilman with a legion of-"

Terius shook his head. "I don't think that would suit you either, however, there are other options. You could always be an independent advisor or hold a social status as a High Lord on a general council with dark creature inter-realm-relations."

Severus hummed, faintly. That was more along his lines. It wasn't that he particularly minded the Vampires, it was simply that as of late, they'd done nothing but make his existence rather miserable. He squared his shoulders and let his thoughts settle. He didn't have to decide on anything, but it wouldn't hurt to listen to what his Pareya had to say.

Terius relaxed and began to outline what he had in mind. There were options available for all of them—if they were willing to step forward and try.
A/N: Hey everyone! This chapter has been taking its own sweet time in spite of my attempts to hurry it up. LOL. I hoped to get it posted sooner but time is so scarce right now. Urgh. I'm home safe from my travels, so thank you for all the well wishes there! I'm glad to be home and I think I need a vacation from the whole thing. :P Traveling is exhausting and I've been trying to catch up on a lot of sleep.

Anyway, so now Dahlia and Shayla are a 'thing'! yay for any of my femxfem shippers out there. I love this little pairing a lot and really had to pare down the amount I actually put into this story. (hopefully I'll have a short novella to release on them, maybe when I'm getting out the 5th part of the Dragel's Song...). So-what'd you think of Quinn's story? How he got those scars? What about the Quinn x Harry moments? Let me know what you think-and as always, thank you all so very much for reading and reviewing!

Your encouragement makes my day (and yes, I will post chapter 100 soon. I just have to make Brissy's changes and add in a snippet. Any particular snippets you all want to see next? I've added Ron in this one and I'm planning to hop back to the action with the Cunningham's, Voldysnort and Fred in the next one.

Many thanks to brissygirl who made sense of my odd typos and suggestions for the story. She is an absolute darling and has relayed your wishes for more snippets and getting plot points tied up. In this chapter, I tackled Hermione and Revenge on Umbridge, so we'll get to see some more snippets soon. Hang in there!

Thanks for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel's Song. Welcome to the new readers. Thanks for reading!

REVIEW RESPONSES WILL BE POSTED as I have the time to spare-and I honestly haven't had the time for a while now. I'm truly very sorry for that, but I still treasure every review-thank you for your comments and encouragement!

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo, Charlie-(with the Peverells)

Harry (with the Kalziks)

Snape Circle (in a new apartment, courtesy of Terius)

Deveraine Circle members-(at their home)
What Is Love?

Chapter Summary

It's TBDH. More stuff happens.

Oh. and there's a surprise.

You might want to read this chapter slowly.
Really slowly.
and then go back and reread it again.
Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

it is also dedicated for every special reader who has taken the time to read and review-EVERY. SINGLE. CHAPTER. in their re-read. I am in awe and truly humbled by the incredible support you've shown this fic. It made my week. Thank you! You are truly appreciated!

RECAP: Harry and Quinn learn more about each other while Dahlia and Shayla publicly court each other. After a successful Soulscream, Harry and Quinn deal with the after effects. Ron finds himself puzzling over his weird transformation in a prison cell in the Weasley’s Basement and faints after seeing a ghostly apparition. The Snape Circle gains Viktor Krum as a Beta and Calida as their Bonded Carrier.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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A rather sleepy, grumpy Theo eventually roused himself from the entire tangle of Charlie and soft blankets thrown on the floor.

There was a crick in his neck and one in his back, followed by a throbbing ache in his fangs. Theo stifled a groan, sitting up with some difficulty.

He really did have to remember to stop sleeping on floors and such. Beds were present for a reason. He sat up straight, stretching his arms up overhead in careful arcs, testing his tired limbs to be sure they were in perfect, working condition.

It didn't escape his notice that Charlie was peacefully snoring beside him, looking much younger, his face relaxed in sleep. Theo hesitated, before gently skimming a hand over that tanned face, brushing back a few wisps of fiery hair.

He smiled at the barely imperceptible twitch, before Charlie leaned into the caress.

There was one very obvious brunet missing—Harry—but Theo could feel their shared bond happily thrumming away and knew that he was alright, for the time being.

That was good.

He would probably turn up in the next few minutes or so.

Theo stifled a yawn.

He really didn't like being this high up in the air—it set his fangs on edge—along with every protective instinct he had. The element was simply too—different—considering that Charlie was Fire and Harry was Nameless.

It didn't help that Cora had a pure Air Circle.

Theo tugged on his hair, before his fangs throbbed again. Right. Blood. He would need to wake Charlie after all.

Charlie let his head fall back against the settee, where he sat with a lapful of half-growling Theo. The bite was strong and purposeful, for nothing other than a necessary feed.

He wasn't about to complain, though some context would have been nice. He'd been dreaming something or the other about the twins—a strange sort of dream. Fred had sprouted feathers and George had caught on fire.

Not necessarily a bad dream, considering what schemers the twins were, but the vividness had caught him off guard and in spite of the growing ache at his neck, Theo's bite was very welcome.

It reminded him that he was awake and that dreams were simply that. Dreams.

Charlie sighed, shifting again.

Now that he thought about it, he couldn't see Harry anywhere. The bond between them was humming with happiness, a welcome, but somewhat unexpected feeling, considering the past few days.
Charlie almost smiled. He felt Theo's draw slow and then gentle, almost apologetic licks to the sensitive bite area on his neck. "Theo," he acknowledged, with a wince.

"Sorry," Theo muttered, head nestled slightly in the hollow of Charlie's neck, his body trustingly draped over him.

"S'fine," Charlie said, yawning. He tentatively reached a hand around to rest on Theo's back, inching up towards his shoulder.

Theo huffed a laugh, allowing the warm weight to settle around his shoulders. "Harry's off somewhere?"

"Think so. He feels happy." Charlie snuck his other arm up and around to finally hold his Alpha, pleased when it wasn't shrugged off.

"Good. He needs something happier than all of this depressing nonsense."

Charlie hummed. "And your stoic Alpha act," he nuzzled the top of Theo's head, calling lightly on the magic that Ebony had taught him. It took a minute longer than he wanted, but the privacy ward soon shimmered to life, locking them into their own little bubble. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong?"

Theo growled. Irritated, but not annoyed enough to ruin his current level of comfort. Charlie was warm and even if their elements were complimentary, he still felt protective.

"You're worrying Harry," Charlie said, quietly. "And me. You know more about this world, its customs and what's expected of—us." He took a deep breath. "We rely on your reactions to let us know if things are alright."

One golden eye stared up at him, curious, but guarded.

Charlie bit back a smile. "So when you're not yourself, we worry too. What's wrong, Theo?"

Silence for a long moment. Then another, quieter huff. "I can't help it," he said, at last. "I don't feel grounded up here—even with the runes in the room, though that probably would've helped. Everything's—off. If it's off then I can't be—I need to know that you're safe."

"We are," Charlie said, simply.

Theo squirmed for a moment, then reached up to tug on his hair again. "It doesn't matter if I logically know that," he said, at last. "Instinctively, I only know that I can't—that I need to be in control of everything or something bad could happen."

Charlie tried not to smile. This side of Theo was different—softer, almost. "You wouldn't let that happen though."

"No," Theo said, slowly. "No matter what, I wouldn't."

"So—you're instinctively on edge because of—elements?"

"When we went to the Council Hall that day—when we were heading to the Clinic—I, well," Theo pushed against the embrace.

Charlie hummed, loosening his grip, but not removing it entirely.

"I requested a blood trace," Theo said, quietly. "I asked for all known living connections to be
noted and sent to me. I wanted to—I needed to know what we were up against."

"And?"

"You have family here. Harry has family here. I traced the Peverell's, the Evanson's, and the Prewitt's."

It took two seconds for Charlie to work out what wasn't said. "What was wrong with them?"

"Many people make claims to the Peverell Clan—it's a regular occurrence."

"Oh?" Charlie frowned. "To Lewis?"

"He is the one with a missing brother—the most potential for lost connections tie back to him."

Theo explained. "Which means that it falls to him to handle any claim that does not—prove itself."

Charlie sighed. "How many?"

"Too many," Theo turned away. "Some of them rejected to the point of ruin. I was—thinking—of a way that we might submit Harry's possible connection to them and then, he shows up. Right there—looking like—and Harry just—Charlie, I can't. I cannot help what I am or the way I think and—"

"What exactly are you?" Charlie interrupted. Blue eyes narrowed. "What exactly do you think is wrong with what you are or how you're thinking? You care about Harry, yes. You obviously think much further ahead in regards to all of us and our present circumstance, so what exactly is the problem?"

Theo groaned. He pushed away, stretching his own magic out to expand the privacy ward. He slid off Charlie's lap and moved to the settee.—his head now higher than Charlie's. "The problem is that there isn't one yet."

"What?"

"He's being nice now. We can't be sure until the seal's removed and even so, they're all being so—nice. I don't think—I can't—for Harry's sake, if no one else's. I cannot…" Theo faltered.

Charlie patted his knee—the only part he could comfortably reach from where he lounged on the floor. "It's fine. I understand." He paused. "You should tell Harry anyway."

"I know," Theo rubbed his eyes. "Believe me, I know. But he's much kinder than I am. He'll likely ignore everything and one day, see the slightest inference and believe that it was all a lie in the end."

"As opposed to you snapping and snarling and him starting to feel like he's on two sides of the same battle?" Charlie countered. "You know he can't fight the instinctive pull he'll have for you versus Lewis. There isn't any comparison there."

Theo gave him a Look. "At least award me some credit," he said, irritably. "I simply have no intention of ever being anything beyond the barest threads of formal acknowledgment."

"In other words, you don't have like him, you merely have to tolerate him." Charlie shook his head. "Are you sure that's the best route? Harry won't like that." Blue eyes narrowed faintly. "Or would you say that Harry doesn't have to like that, he simply has to—"

"At least until the seal is off," Theo said, briskly. "We have no leverage. We're at the mercy of their
element. They hold a significant amount of power, both magically and socially. They're all on edge because of some personal matter and we're currently in their debt because Ithycar has called in a favour. This is far from an ideal situation, so yes. I will tolerate him. I do not have to do anything else beyond that. We are at a distinct disadvantage."

Charlie winced. He turned that nugget of information over and over in his head until he arrived at the conclusion of their current situation. "You will tolerate him," he repeated. "But Harry and I?"

Theo perked a brow. "Your point?"

"You don't—it doesn't matter," Charlie breathed, finally catching on. "We can—but you won't because of—politics?"

"We have not lost all our social graces," Theo sniped. "I do not have to do anything, I do not wish to. Neither do you nor Harry." Theo sniffed. "I was only saying, you are expecting more of me than I am currently willing to give, due to our current-

"Circumstances," Charlie said, cheerfully. "I know. It makes sense now." He stretched for a moment, tipping his head back to ask for a kiss. There was a moment of pause while his grumpy Alpha considered it.

With a huff, Theo leaned down, pressing the barest of kisses to those full, dusky lips. "Explain it to Harry, when you have a minute. I have things to take care of today."


"On the contrary, there's something—something in the air and it makes my scales crawl."

Anything Charlie could have said to that was interrupted by the arrival of Desmond and Henry. The older men were talking quietly amongst themselves when they entered, waking a sleepy Cora from her comfortable makeshift nest on the floor.

"Henry!" Cora chirped. She sat up, looking adorable and sleep-ruffled, as she rubbed at her eyes. "Are you mad at me?"

"And straight for the jugular," Henry murmured, lips twitching. He crossed the room to help her up from the floor, pulling her into a warm hug. "A little—when you didn't turn up in my bed."

She beamed up at him. "We were sorting Harry's favours. He's got loads of them! Very nice names and connections on several of them as well."

"Oh?"

"Mmhm," Cora hummed. She leaned into the hug, stretching up on tip-toe to rub her face on the smooth section of Henry's dress robes. Fancy embroidery accented the shoulders and centre folds, but the rest was plain, dark brown silk.

"Sleep well?" Henry asked. He feathered a hand through her half-twisted-knotted hair. "I thought Lewis was with you."

Cora twisted around to survey the empty nest of blankets and pillows. "He was," she said, puzzled. "He's probably with Harry."

"Ah. I thought we were missing one," Henry said, dryly. "Good morning, Theo, Charlie."
"Morning," Theo said, stiffly. "I think we'll excuse ourselves for the morning. Where would Harry and Lewis be?"

"I'll worry about that," Charlie interrupted. He rose to his feet, standing behind Theo. "You worry about everything else."

Theo grunted in answer, but he was particularly in need of a good hot shower and chose to base his precarious mood on that. Then again, if Charlie was with Harry, then that would mean less interactions with Lewis.

That was good.

Good enough, anyway.

Something was off and he couldn't put his finger on it. The last time he'd felt this unsettled—well—things had not been good.

It wasn't until breakfast that the first stirrings of unease really took root. Theo hadn't received any word from Harry, but Lewis had actually returned and that had set all his guards up once more.

Charlie had spoken to Lewis for a few minutes, before returning to say that Harry was hunting.

Which was good—on one hand—and bad, because Theo still couldn't shake this feeling and now, it was starting to make him twitchy.

He listened with half an ear as Cora and Henry outlined their Circle expectations for the day. They would attend the Hunt, as Princess Dawne had sent a private missive to all major supporting Clans of the Air element, asking for their support in a certain event.

He wondered whether the Deveraines' would show, as Elven Royalty did not answer to Dragel Royalty, but was expected to play nicely within the same field.

Then again, it would take them time to settle affairs. He would have to ask Ilsa what they decided on. It would be worth noting who had been placed on the Deveraines' persona-non-grata list. It would also be interesting to know how they'd settled it.

Though as far as settled went, Cora and Henry were perfectly happy and cosy with each other, considering the argument from the previous day.

Desmond and Vincent had prepared breakfast and provided updates on how the rest of the Circle was faring as they readied for the day.

With only a few notes of concern for all of them to be wearing Circle colours, Cora had launched into a discussion of which famous Circle was expected to show in the same auditorium section and what she planned on asking for.

Henry listened and offered suggestions, occasionally pausing to touch her—small spells sliding off his hands and slowly smoothing over her ruffled appearance.

From a sleepy, mussed figure, Cora was gradually turned into a wide-awake, well-dressed Submissive.

Switching spells brought out her matching formal wear and she scarcely spared a minute for her own makeup spells.
The entire little routine took a mere thirty minutes at best, which, at that point, Theo was well on his way to becoming truly irritated.

"Theo?" Charlie murmured, beckoning to him from the doorway. He'd returned from his shower, dressed in the outfit that Theo had laid out for him.

It seemed that breakfast was over and he'd met a few of Cora's Circle standing out in the hallway, finishing last minute preparations. Charlie held up a small, folded favour.

It worked. Theo was out of his chair and gliding across the floor to take it from him. He unfolded the shimmery, square piece, skimmed the note and then handed it back.

Three lines stated that Harry was currently with the Kalziks and they would be happy to provide a central transportation point, if needed, as well as the necessary chaperoned benefits, if Harry saw someone who struck his fancy.

A generous offer and very precisely worded—enough of a gesture to soothe some of his irritation. Theo took the favour back, after Charlie had skimmed it and tucked it inside the folds of his robe. The card was imbued with Kalzik magic and would guide him to the best spot for a transportation circle, should it be needed.

"Theo, Charlie?" Henry joined them in the hallway. His sharp eyes caught the motion of Theo hiding the card. "Everything alright?"

"Perfect," Theo said, lightly. "About the preparations for Harry's seal removal—is there anything else required from us before?"

"You have to sign something. I think," Cora said, stifling a yawn as she trailed out from the dining room, allowing Desmond to fuss over her spell-curled hair. "And a blood sample, I think?"

"Yes to both," Henry said, thoughtfully. "The paperwork is a legal release."

"And the blood is insurance that the ritual will work," Lewis said, smoothly. "It must be tested on a golem before the actual subject."

"The actual subject being Harry, correct?" Theo said, tightly. "If there is anything else required beyond that, do let us know. Harry does not appreciate surprises."

Cora blinked. "Good point." She elbowed Henry. "I thought you and Lewis normally handled this. Shouldn't they have already had a scheduled meeting for the preparations and viewing the casting grounds?"

Lewis winked. "Of course. There's simply been so much happening that—"

"Make it happen, Lewis," Cora said, quietly. Her eyes flickered a few shades darker. "Harry doesn't deserve to be walking around with a million seals on him. How's he supposed to even hunt if half of his magic is tied up in seals that are probably blocking a good chunk of his natural instincts? It's barbaric. Seals were invented for protective and guardian purposes."

Lewis had the grace to blush, bowing in answer. "I'll take some time to see that they are properly set in motion. If you'll excuse me from the entrance?"

"No," Henry said, before Cora could answer. "You skipped out on the last two—you can't keep doing that. You know you have to give your current measurements—your wingspan is at least an additional five inches from the last time."
Lewis whined, softly. He hated being measured and feeling like he was put on display. He'd been excused from it the last time and had hoped to escape the rest of the Hunting season without having to actually submit to the requirement.

Vincent rumbled in answer, an authoritative gleam in his silvery eyes. He'd noticed the reluctance and knew there was nothing wrong beyond personal preference. "Lewis."

There was a muttered grumble before Lewis conceded.

"Alright, Circle up!" Henry called out. "Everyone present?"

They arrived at the Main Entrance to the Hunt, with the usual festivities taking place within earshot. Colourful banners and streamers decorated the skies, with several large floats sailing overhead, amidst the floating residences for the Air Circles who were venturing to lower altitudes, likely by request of their lovely Princess Dawne.  

Theo and Charlie fell into some sort of position beside Henry and Cora. The Peverell Beta, a tall, silent, dark fellow, stood behind them.  

An official statement was given and Lewis suffered through having his wings measured.

Theo observed the Circle's interactions through the entire scene. At one point, he thought he saw Ilsa slipping through the crowd, her short height allowing her squeeze through.

A flicker of familiar magic brushed against him, coaxing him, almost unwillingly, to relax. That perhaps it was not all bad—but the feeling was fleeting and it vanished almost as quickly as it had come.

"...Names please!" the dragel requested, hand poised over her tablet. "Or Circle Name, if you prefer."

"The Nott Circle," Theo said, quietly. "Are there any messages?"

The dragel keyed in the names, handing the tablet to Theo, to check the spelling. He pressed his thumb to a scan reader and a new screen opened up.

"There are two available messages at this time, please tap the screen here to see them." The dragel gestured to the upper right corner of the tablet, before turning to attend to the next Circle in line.

Theo dutifully followed the instructions, relieved to see the two senders.

One message for Charlie, from Ebony, requesting that he join her family's private viewing box for the Hunt, if he could manage it. That was good—at least, as far as Theo was concerned. There were a few more things he wanted to check out and if Charlie was with Ebony, then he wouldn't have to worry about his Beta for a little while.

The second message was from Ilsa—short and to the point that the Deveraines would attend, but in closed ranks. That was enough for now—at least, for him to know that they were close at hand.

The tablet was handed off to another dragel as the line progressed and Theo fell into step beside Charlie once more.

"Ebony would like to see you in the Royal's private viewing area," He said.

Charlie frowned. "Now?"
"She didn't say when, but I assume she'll expect you sometime soon, seeing as we've received her message."

Charlie nodded absently. He was still trying to puzzle out one detail. "There wasn't any of—that. When we came through on the first day."

"Yes, but we're with Cora's Circle," Theo said, nodding towards the cheerful blonde. "What is she known for?"

"Magical Technology," Charlie filled in. "Interesting. You wouldn't know that it's there unless you're looking for it."

"Something like that," Theo half-smiled. "I don't know if Ebony will send someone for you or-"

"I can 'port," Charlie tugged on his ponytail, smoothing it back, almost by reflex. "She showed me a specific portal. I can only cast it in private. I'll wait a bit."

Theo nodded. He started faintly when he felt Charlie's rough hand curling around his own. A sidelong glance showed Charlie to be staring straight ahead.

At last, Theo smiled.

Henry found the designated viewing box several sections into the upper wings of the Great Arena. It was on the opposite end of the stadium where the Deveraines' had been.

Clean and simple, with padded benches and chairs for comfort, along with a smooth, wooden-topped stone table in the centre. Reinforced stone, bearing runes and magical sigils, framed the entire seating area quite nicely, giving off an air of luxury.

Charlie's eyebrows arched upwards. The Deveraines' had brought their own things—chairs, cushions and blankets. Someone had also transfigured a table, if he remembered correctly.

The Circle began to choose their respective seats and Charlie quickly picked a spot on the corner, where Theo was likely to feel less stressed in such close quarters.

"Oh lovely, they used Arkos and Tsuneh," Desmond said, moving to stand near the edge of the viewing box, tracing a finger over the glowing blue runes. "It's only taken them how long to do it correctly?"

"Not everyone has your precision, Des," Cora said, lightly. "I call dibs on the corner chair," she immediately slung her little shoulder bag over the back and patted the area on the outside. "Henry?"

"I'll sit with you," he said, kissing the top of her head. "Once everyone's settled—the Kadel's have requested an audience, I'll be a minute, alright?"

"You don't need me?"

"I'll spare you this once," Henry said, lips twitching.

Cora fairly beamed. "I do so love you," she hummed. "Don't take too long, we're supposed to stand and Spell Raise before the start of the main ceremony."

"I know," Henry said, indulgently. "I won't be but a minute," he checked his watch. "Call me if I linger."
"The Kadels?" Theo stood up. "Would you mind if I accompanied you?"

Henry hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. "I would be glad to make the introduction, if that is what you seek."

"It is, thank you," Theo said, quickly. He nudged Charlie, pulling him along as well.

A puzzled look flickered over Henry's face, but he didn't bother to think it through. It was common enough to broker simple introductions between well-established Circles and newer, smaller ones.

For Theo, it was a good move, even if Henry didn't see the point in Charlie joining them. Still, it was no issue for him. They exited the Peverell viewing box and moved across the aisle where a larger, rectangular viewing section was neatly cordoned off.

Lightly frosted panes of magic shimmered and twisted in the morning light, as Henry knocked twice on the panel over the gated entrance.

From within the viewing box, a tall, imposing figure could be seen, with several smaller ones running about.

"Beware of the children," Henry murmured, pushing the gate open and passing through the protective barrier.

Theo and Charlie followed, albeit a tad more cautiously.

They found themselves standing in a viewing section about three times the size of the Peverell box. The tall, imposing figure, turned out to be a stern-faced woman, clad in shrouding robes of white and grey, with a long, thin pipe held in one bony hand.

"Henry," she said, grimly. "I was unaware you were entertaining guests."

"Maia," Henry smiled, offering a half-bow. "As a favour to a good friend," he said, smoothly. "They are a new Circle and have yet to establish themselves. I did promise an introduction, if you do not mind-?"

"Mama!" Eight-year-old Meg Kadel came up to her mother, holding a broken sandal in hand.

The woman regarded her with unimpressed eyes, before her rheumy gaze settled on Charlie with a heavy weight. She blinked once, twice and then took a long drag on her pipe. It floated beside her as she clicked her fingers for the broken sandal.

It was handed over, to be magically mended without ceremony.

A slow plume of forest green smoke wafted from her lips. She looked from Charlie to Henry, then to Theo and back to Henry. "Come in," she gestured to the lounge and table at the far end of the viewing box. "Mind your step."

They were seated. Maia called out something and shadow stole over the table before refreshments blinked into existence.

Charlie shifted uneasily. He could see about five young children—likely between the ages of eight and twelve, playing various card games on the floor of the viewing box. All the seating appeared to have been pushed to the side. There wasn't a single other dragel in sight.

"You won't see them," Maia drawled. She took another slow drag from her pipe, and leaned away,
leaving it floating there beside her. "When they chose their vices, it was for something less visible on this plane. I thought one of us ought to be visible, so bear that burden alone." Her eyes clouded over, one glowing a brilliant blue and the other a bright silver. "Introductions, Henry?"

Henry bowed over the small teacup in hand. "This is Theo, the Alpha, of the Nott Circle and his Beta, Charlie. Their Submissive, Harry, is currently Hunting."

"A small Circle then," Maia said, appraisingly. "What exactly is your Submissive looking for?"

Charlie froze.

"Harry is unusual," Theo said, smoothly. "I'm not quite sure who he has his eye on at the moment."

"Mmm," Maia's eyes narrowed. "Clever answer, I will give you that," she sighed. "Thank you, by the way, for looking after my little Meg." She nodded at Charlie. "She says it was much easier to focus on changing back, while you were talking to her."

Charlie's jaw dropped. He started, faintly, when Theo nudged him beneath the table. "I—it—glad to have helped," he snuck a glance over at the group of playing children. "How is she?"

"She's fine. I think she'll give up her wings," Maia sniffed. "Not my choice, but she seems set on it. She tells me she would rather remain visible as well, so I expect there will be a higher price to pay."

Henry cleared his throat. "Er. Yes. You wanted to see me?"

Maia snorted. "Always to the point, aren't you? And here I was thinking I could have a nice, long conversation, but I suppose you can't leave your little bit alone for too long, eh? She has a habit of attracting trouble for one so young."

Henry's grip tightened on the small teacup, a faint furrow making itself known on his forehead. There were rumours about Cora—had been since the day they'd Bonded. It was irritating him as of late, to ignore them.

"If you intend to ask a favour, might I suggest doing so without insulting me beforehand?"

"An insult? And here I thought it to be a compliment. Your life is surely never boring." Maia laughed, showing gleaming rows of sharp, pointed teeth. "That would be a real pity if it were," she said, lightly. "You though," she plucked the floating pipe out of the air and jabbed it at Charlie's direction. "We'll owe you one for saving Meg. Call it in, if you ever need to." She levelled her gaze on Theo. "I expect it to be used. I hate having them hang out in the open."

Henry muttered something beneath his breath. "Who did what this time?"

"May I speak freely in their presence? For this is your business."

"Speak."

"You've heard tell that the Immortals are waking?"

Henry's teacup cracked. He set it down on the saucer before him. "Now I have. What of it?"

"No reason. I simply thought I would inquire as to the current safety measures and whether you were planning on crafting any true Bloodstones?"

Henry frowned. It was their responsibility as assigned to them through their reigning elemental
Royal. The Peverell's were tasked with seeing to any necessary magical stone crafting, particularly bloodstones where the Vampires were concerned.

It was odd that Maia would remind him of such a thing.

Henry's heart sank at the immediate connection of why she would deliberately mention it. Still, he couldn't help it. He had to ask. "And why would you be asking me that?"

"We must do our duty as we always do." Maia said. "However, at present, word has reached me that the Vampires, have decided to grace the Hunt. It has been eighteen Hunting seasons since they have ventured to our beautiful capital city. I thought safety measures were in order."

Henry's frown deepened. "There's been no word from the Shadow Court, nor have the Royals mentioned anything of the-"

Maia's cloudy eyes grew paler, before she shook her herself, suddenly. "They are coming. I only thought we should be prepared."

"Bloodstones?" Charlie spoke up. "You make those—here?" He remembered the various packages that Bill had sent for him. He'd been cataloguing them in the Burrow, when Harry had arrived. There had been a Bloodstone among them, now that he thought about it. He'd intended to mention that to Bill straightaway, as The Order was trying to win the Vampires over to their side in the war against Voldemort.

"Specifically, The Peverells' make them. They are expert stone crafters, at least in that branch of imbued magic," Maia said, loftily. "They are not good planners, however, which is why I take it upon myself to help them, every now and again." Her gaze wandered to where Meg and the other children played. "At least, for the sake of a brighter future."

"How many?" Henry ground out. He'd gone rather pale. "How many stones are we talking?"

Maia smirked. "Several hundred—at least."

"Henry?" Cora held out a hand to him. The trio had returned, each of them looking decidedly more grim than when they'd left. "What's the matter? Did she ask for a Nightstone again?"

Henry sank into the seat beside her and after a moment, reached over and pulled her onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her, his face buried in her hair.

"H-henry?" Cora quieted. "Is everything alright?" She wriggled for a moment, then settled down, leaning into the impromptu cuddle. After a moment, she reached a hand up to cup Henry's cheek, whispering softly.

They conversed for a moment, then Cora shook her head. "She shouldn't have sprung something like that on you. Remind me not to invite her over for our annual-"

Henry kissed her, sweetly. "Don't make promises that end in bad business deals, hm?"

Cora sniffed, her cheeks pink. "Then we're doubling that contract. If they're asking for that sort of thing then they'd best be able to pay for it." She scowled. "Crafting Bloodstones is hard work!"

"Shh," their Beta hushed, settling down behind them. "The main ceremony is about to begin and Princess Dawne is giving the opening."
"Theo?"

"Later," Theo promised, twining his own fingers around Charlie's tanned ones. "She agreed and that's all we need to worry about. When we see Harry again, we can pick a time and have his prophecy retold."

"You think it'll change anything?"

Theo half-smiled. "Who can say? We can only hope. At least, this way, I don't have to worry about when Oretta would find the time to make an introduction."

"They were talking about Bloodstones and Immortals though—Kyle and Quinn—they mentioned those back at the Clinic. That day with Meg. It's all—I don't understand how this is all related."

"I don't either, but information is always good and when it's properly sorted, I'm sure we'll have a better understanding."

"Of what?"

"Well, for one, there was that mention of a Night of a Thousand something or the other," Theo tapped his chin. "Then of course, there was the Fabrine the other day. Hermione had a Hellhound's seal imprinted on her, then word is that she's in the shadow sections. Everything hints that there's something dark happening or about to happen."

Charlie leaned closer, allowing his warmth to spill over a touch more than usual. "Later," he said, repeating Theo's earlier promise. "We'll handle it later."

"With Harry too. He needs to know this," Theo squeezed Charlie's hand. "We all should be on the same page."

Charlie choked, jerking forward his hands over his ears, doubled over to his knees. His face twisted in a grimace of pain. "W-what is that?" he managed to say, between gritted teeth.

Theo's expression closely matched his own, as a sound ward sprang to life beneath his fingers. He saw the other Peverell's throwing up their own barriers and wondered why there hadn't been one around the viewing box.

He'd worry about that later. There were twin pangs of pain stabbing through his shared bonds and the closest one, he could pinpoint as Charlie.

The other had to be Harry.

Theo mentally summoned up what reassurance he could and funneled it down through Harry's bond. His next thought was for Charlie and he drew on his Caspers to force his body to relax enough for necessary movement.

"It's a Soul Scream," he said, tightly. "I didn't know Dahlia would call one out. That's—it was—breathe, Charlie. Breathe, come on." Theo leaned against him, one hand still pressed against his aching ear.

He had not been expecting that and it had caught him off guard. Then again, there'd been little to no warning. By the time he'd realised what was happening, it was much too late.

The faint shimmers of various magical shields were glittering in the daylight—proof that other
Circles were in the same situation. Some had managed to throw up a shield, others had not.

Magic sparked visibly off of both Theo and Charlie. Their claim marks throbbed viciously, in sync with Harry's shared feelings.

Theo clenched his jaw, working to force the feelings of pain into a mental box where he could deal with it later.

Pain was distracting.

Always distracting. He needed to focus. His Caspers finally took over, bearing the worst of the physical sensations and feeding a blissful, much-needed coolness into his panicking body.

Better. Much better, Theo thought, darkly. He was glad that Harry was with the Kalziks—as Healers, it meant Harry was in good hands.

"I thought—I didn't know that was possible," Charlie gasped out, sitting up with some difficulty.

"It isn't always," Lewis said, from where he was crouched beside them. "Are you alright?"

Theo made an annoyed sound, but waved a hand at Charlie. "Help him."

Lewis didn't answer, but immediately began to cast a series of basic diagnostic spells over him. "You're Soulbonded to Harry, aren't you?"

Charlie gave a wry smile. "It seems that way."

Lewis cocked his head to the side. "Odd, then. It's almost as if your soul never properly responded to the call. You'll probably need to try reactivating it as soon as you possibly can."

"Reactivating?"

"We both knew Harry before his inheritance," Theo said, slicing open his thumb on one fang to paint the runes for healing on his own arm. "I'm fairly certain he didn't use a Soul Cry on me."

Lewis nodded, politely. He would not question the fact that Theo had also reacted to the Soul Scream—which would only be possible if he was also soul bonded. Instead, he cast a mild healing spell on Charlie and watched as it took effect.

"Harry?" Charlie looked to Theo.

Theo's eyes were half-closed, his lips twisted into a near-smile. "He's fine. He's relaxing a bit—but worrying. For us, I think. He is fine."

Charlie slumped in relief. "Why did that affect us? What do you mean—soul bonds and all that?"

"An incomplete soul bond," Cora said, wandering over to examine them. "Sorry about that, we don't usually have shields on our box. Sometimes it makes my arm itchy and really, I don't think there's been a Soul Scream in front of a public audience for at least a few centuries."

"At least a few centuries," Henry grumbled. "Are you alright?"

"They're fine," Lewis proclaimed. "But the Soul Scream—"

"It's probably the seals," Cora said, quietly. "If he's had so many of them and they've been removed after the initial claim, the actual bond was likely never correctly settled."
"How?" Charlie smoothed his hair back, retying his ponytail.

"Soul magic is not something that you can manipulate," Henry explained. "It's almost as unpredictable as Wild Magic. It exists. It is good, but it isn't something you can control."

"Harry's an empath though," Cora said. "That probably puts him a bit closer to that wild magic spectrum. He's probably more powerful than he knows. I would bet all those seals were to restrict his growth." She sighed. "Henry—how long do we have to stay?"

"Hm?" Henry blinked.

"A message came while you were with the Kadels—it's from Tauria. They've been working on the Casting Grounds and they'll need Harry for some measurements and such. We shouldn't make them wait."

HARRY : NEVARAH : DINING COURT SECTION

Eventually, Harry found himself standing in line, waiting for snacks. The thought of returning to the Kalziks for the rest of the day, didn't quite sit well with them. It looked like they would need some time to deal with the recent changes or at least, some semblance of privacy without him being there to witness however it was they would piece themselves together.

It was easier to wander about on his own, though he did wonder how Theo and Charlie had fared. The Soulscream had unsettled him, but it wasn't as bad as he'd expected. It had felt more welcome than destructive and that was such a strange feeling, he couldn't dredge up the energy to be concerned about it.

Theo and Charlie felt find through their shared bonds and he tried to send a few bursts of his current emotional state to them. He was fine. He was safe enough and there were plenty of things happening, enough to keep him busy for the time being.

There were bound to be dozens of places he'd yet to explore and here, in Nevarah, it didn't feel as it had in the Wizarding World. He didn't think that anyone would bother him nor stop him from blindly exploring on his own.

They probably wouldn't even notice.

Harry sighed and pushed away those particular thoughts. He wondered for a moment, what would be the best course of action, before he realised that he'd only met the Kalziks by chance.

He hadn't intended to seek them out and he certainly hadn't promised to return. Perhaps they wouldn't expect him back. Perhaps they wouldn't mind if he was out on his own for a bit.

An almost smile touched the corners of his mouth. For a split-second, he wished Theo was close enough to hold him. To feel those familiar, strong arms wrapped around him, that would be the best reassurance of the sudden sadness he'd felt at hearing Quinn's story.

Quinn.

There was another puzzle he really wasn't sure about. It was nice to think that maybe there could be something more, but at the same time, it almost felt as if Quinn wasn't exactly interested.

Even if his actions said otherwise, Harry mused.
Delicious smells wafted through the air, teasing at his nose and making his stomach rumble. Harry sniffed a few times, trying to separate the smells. There were new scents in the air and some of them made his stomach curl, while others made his nose twitch. Definitely something good, he just had no idea what.

He had no idea what he actually felt like trying, but it was harder than he'd expected to make up his mind. He found himself in the main food court section, with dozens of meal booths and small eateries scattered from one end of the massive open area, to the other.

It was almost like a great field stretched out, with the luxury of a smooth, marbled floor and a shimmering twist of magic overhead to keep the natural light from being too harsh. Dozens of tables and chairs with elegant settings were crowded into the middle of the strip, allowing customers to purchase their meals from any vendor and seat themselves wherever they liked.

A curious, but interesting custom, Harry thought. There were some large tables and smaller ones towards the far end. He was sure he could find any empty space there to enjoy his snacks.

Maybe an idea would come to him on a full stomach.

He was glad Surajini hadn't pressed him for any further details. He'd just wanted to give them some privacy and he'd sensed that Quinn needed something that only his mother could offer. It hurt to think that his own mother would never have that sort of opportunity, but Harry tried not to think of that.

Not now, anyway. He was glad no one was accompanying him, mostly because things worked better when he was on his own. Unexpected mishaps aside, of course.

Now that he stood in line, he wondered how Dahlia had managed to escape to spend the day with Dyshoka. Not that she didn't belong, but he'd thought that a clan war was a big deal.

He hadn't thought that Ilsa would let anyone venture out. Not when Ithycar had seemed to agree with her idea of calling everyone home for the time being. Including the mysterious daughter, Kandra, who had supposedly been the centre of such scandal at the previous Hunt.

He had noticed that Dyshoka had been staying rather close to Dahlia and at times, they were whispering furiously between themselves. Details that he couldn't help but notice.

Their magic was tightly reigned in around them, which was good for his empathy and bad for his curiosity. It hadn't escaped his notice that none of the Kalziks' had questioned her presence there nor her capabilities.

He wanted to know what was happening, but didn't dare ask. Not after the very public scene with Shayla. Still, he wished them well.

Shayla had been nice to him and Dahlia, he supposed, was alright. Dyshoka was in a category all by herself and that led his thoughts full circle back to Quinn.

A low groan escaped. Harry shook his head, trying to focus. A delicious scent wafted out on the air and he sniffed appreciatively, stepping out of the current ordering line to follow his nose.

It was a false trail that he traced back to one of the assisting stalls further down in the food courts. He retracted his steps only to find that the line had grown longer in his absence and he would now have to wait all over again.

A disgruntled chirp escaped before he could help himself.
It was answered by a soothing rumble a few paces off to his left.

It took a moment for the non-verbal exchange to fully register. Harry traced it back to a dark-skinned young man with a kind smile. There was almost something familiar about him, but nothing came to mind as he sifted through the recent interactions he’d had at the Hunt.

The young man leaned back, deliberately making a space in front of him. "You can cut," he said, gesturing. "I don't mind."

Harry hesitated. He glanced, uncertainly at the others waiting in line. He was surprised to see encouraging nods from some of the younger dragels and indulgent looks from the older ones. It didn't seem that anyone minded, from the look of things.

"They don't mind either, it's practically expected," the young man coaxed. He said something over his shoulder and the dragels in front and behind of him, shifted accordingly, allowing even more room.

A tendril of magic stretched out, tentative and curious, almost, in its way.

Harry shuffled closer and then finally stepped into the space.

The young man was dressed in black and gold, with fancy embroidery along the sleeves and collar, with slender white pants and black slippered feet. He had two golden ear cuffs on each ear and a single strand necklace. Muted elegance, but well-dressed and rather pleasing to look at.

Definitely pleasing to look at.

A small smile played about Harry's lips and he took a moment to gather his thoughts.

"Thanks." He waited a beat, then stuck out his hand. He wanted to know more and there was something about that smile that made him warm inside. "I'm Harry."

"Ethan," came the answer. He reached for Harry's hand and they both leapt back with muffled exclamations at the first touch.

A bright crackle of magic leapt between them, leaving Ethan nursing singed fingers and Harry cradling his shocked hand. They stared at each other with wide eyes and matching ripples of instinctive agitation.

Harry opened his mouth and shut it with an audible click. His magic rose up inside of him, insistent and demanding, but an entirely too familiar feeling accompanied it.

Sheer terror overwhelmed him for one awful moment, before Harry stubbornly tamped those feelings away. This was different. It was. This wasn't Wikhn. This wasn't Quinn.

This was just—different. It hadn't hurt, it was more like a static shock that he hadn't expected. Jarring, but not unwelcome. A request for his attention, but not an outright demand.

It was new and hopeful and maybe—if he could just manage to not make a mess of—and then Ethan was tapping gently on his arm, speaking to him in calm tones and Harry zoned out.

"...I can honestly say that's never happened before, but it is nice to know that I was right. I thought you felt special, but I couldn't place it. Are you alright? How's your hand? It doesn't look burned from here, can I see it?"
The words continued on at an even, measured pace, tempered by Ethan's bright golden eyes.

Gold eyes.

Harry stared up into them, mesmerized—noting every single detail that made them different from Theo's. They were so lovely to look at and Ethan really had a nice voice…

When Ethan laughed, at last, Harry tore his gaze away from those fascinating eyes and focused on those thick, dusky lips. He gave himself a slight shake. His mind was dancing around too many thoughts and he had a feeling it didn't want to stop any time soon.

He couldn't think of why he'd really want it to stop either.

"I—you," Harry fumbled for a word. More words. Something, anything, he needed to say something and yet, he couldn't think of anything interesting to say. Everything that wanted to be said, had yet to string itself into coherent sentences in his brain.

Ethan's warm laughter washed over him again, brighter and warmer than before. "It's alright. I didn't know what it would feel like either, but it's—it's wonderful, isn't it?"

The hopeful, tentative feeling in Harry's chest blossomed into a fierce ache. It was very wonderful. The sudden haze melted away and he was relieved to find that he hadn't somehow managed to do anything stupid—no crazy wild magic—at least, not that he could see.

And Ethan was still smiling at him—which had to be a good thing, right?

Standing there all tall, dark and perfect.

Rich, deep skin with pitch black hair cut in a tight crop close to his head—looking very soft. For a moment, Harry wondered what it felt like and it was as soft as it looked.

He swallowed, feeling the new magic stretching out to him again, tentatively still—but present.

Ethan's magic?

Harry wasn't sure, but it felt nice and it didn't seem like it was a rejection. He opened his mouth to try and say something, but the only sound that did come out was a squeak.

A mere whistle of sound that made absolutely no sense to him whatsoever, yet, somehow, that made up all the words he wanted to say. A spark of irritation registered—briefly—before fading. This had happened with Theo before, the lack of human speech, right before—and here, Harry blushed.

Yes. Right before that.

Harry tried again and failed to speak—resorting to gestures. He wanted words, but this would have to do for now. Surely, Ethan would understand. He would know—wouldn't he?

He held out a hand, questioning and uncertain, but wanting to know—needing to know the answer to the question suddenly twining around in his head.

Soulmate?

He didn't dare ask it aloud, though it weighed heavily in his mind, taking front and centre stage. If there was any sort of bond to be had by them, surely this would be heard, one way or another.
The look of fragile wonder on Ethan's face was mirrored in the way his hand shook, ever so slightly as he reached out to take Harry's.

A single, breathless moment, when they both waited for the spark to repeat and joyous surprise, when it didn't.

They laughed, hands clasped, sharing a private moment between them as warmth began to spill over into each other in steady, calming streams.

"Harry," Ethan said, at last. "Harry." He seemed to be trying the name out and liking how it fit.

Harry made a frustrated sound. His words were still stuck and—oh. Ethan had kissed the back of his hand and touched it to his brown cheek, an expression of utter contentment revealed in the way his eyelids slid halfway shut.

A cautious chirrup came out instead.

Ethan smiled. "I had sent you a favour after your introduction," he said, softly. "Since it was not—rejected—I'm hoping that means you're open to this."

Harry inched even closer. He was definitely open to this. Whatever it was.

"It feels like—a soul bond," Ethan said, carefully. Wonderment and worry reflected in his glimmering eyes, his magic still tempered, his expression still kind. "And I am very—open to this."

A beat passed.

Harry didn't even have to consider it. Sure, soulbonded sounded nice, but this felt as if it went beyond that. It certainly explained what he was currently feeling and why his empathy was singing with joy. He looked at their joined hands and wondered, briefly, what it felt like to touch the rest of Ethan.

That sounded like a good idea and he was stepping forward and reaching out with his other hand, before his common sense could talk him out of it.

A spark of happiness ignited in Ethan's golden gaze and he met Harry halfway, managing a one-armed hug that seemed to convey the depth of physical closeness that Harry was angling towards. Harry nestled his head beneath Ethan's chin, his ear pressed over his heart, his cheek pressed against the satiny finish of Ethan's formalwear.

A kiss seemed like too much, but those arms wrapped around him was heaven itself, Harry was sure and it didn't need more. It soothed an ache he hadn't noticed before, feeling an empty spot that seemed as if it had only just been created.

To top it all off, Ethan was soft in all the right spots and that made the hug even better. It was a balm of peace and contentment, the likes of which he had never felt before. Harry felt as if he could stay there for ages, never moving and barely breathing.

It felt right.

Magic rose again, twining about them, settling something inside of Harry and coaxing his own dragel instincts further out to the surface. It whispered words of admiration for the lovely specimen in front of him and teased at the idea of making Ethan his.

Permanently.
Several minutes later, speech returned. Harry licked his lips and coughed. He mumbled something into Ethan's chest and perked up when he heard the actual words.

"Ethan!" the name came tumbling out. Harry beamed. He could speak again.

"I hoped that would do it," Ethan said, the smile on his face trembled, then brightened by a few more watts. His hand flexed on Harry's back. "Do you—did you feel that?"

There was too much to feel and no way to properly put it into words. Harry could only smile back.

"I think the line moved," he said, a second later, for lack of something sensible to say.

Someone beside them burst into laughter and a smattering of applause and congratulations trickled their way.

Harry's face grew warm.

Ethan grinned, but the slight duck of his head suggested the same degree of embarrassment. Their own little world was already forming and there didn't seem to be a reason to stop it.

Harry's brow furrowed. An audience was alright for the current situation, but he wanted more out of this encounter—a lifetime more, if it was his to have. If Ethan would agree.

For one awful moment, a shiver of doubt flickered through him and he couldn't think of a way to phrase such an important question, but then Ethan was still holding him and the inner demons of his mind, fled to darker corners.

"Would you like to—talk?" Ethan ventured. "I'm sure you have questions and I would love to know more about you."

Another wave of emotion washed over Harry. So that's how he could phrase it. He'd remember that for next time.

"Here," someone said, handing over a wrapped bundle. An older dragel, with an indulgent look on his weathered face. "I took a main platter for two—enjoy yourselves." He nodded at Harry.

"You're very lucky—this one's a good catch."

More applause sounded out.

Harry blushed fiercely and buried his face in Ethan's chest. He'd always hated being the centre of attention—even if it was for a good reason. Nothing good ever seemed to come of his fame and fortune.

"That is very kind of you. We appreciate it," Ethan said, smoothly. He released Harry's hand to take the proffered takeout container, but didn't break away from the one-armed hug.

"Is there somewhere that we could—?" Harry prompted. He tried to think of a place where they could talk quietly, but his choices were limited and neither option sounded particularly appealing at the moment.

"May I 'port you?" Ethan asked.

Harry nodded.

He felt the rush of magic as Ethan called out "Temptrificus ergen!"
Golden light flared up around them and the enchanted portal sprang to life beneath their feet. Familiar sensations and familiar magic—Harry let himself fall into it.

The marketplace walkway glowed briefly—then everything vanished.

Harry found himself standing on a plain, grassy bank with the water's edge off to the side. There were a few lone trees stretching up to the sky and not a single soul in sight. He wondered how much of the grassy shore he'd actually seen, given how many times he'd randomly arrived there, seeking solitude.

A near laugh sputtered out. He really did have a twisted kind of luck, but at least it had some kind of taste. This would be a good space for talking, as long as he didn't think about Alec.

Stupid, stupid, Alec.

Harry stubbornly pushed the thought of the blue-haired annoyance out of his mind. There was something much better to occupy his thoughts. Something special.

Ethan still had an arm around him—one that dropped when Harry pulled away. The smile dimmed a bit, but his expression softened.

Harry winced internally. Alec that done the same thing—though his own reaction had been a bit more physical. He couldn't help flinching away, it was practically instinct, there were too many things always after him, trying to kill him or attack him. It was easier to keep to his own, but still.

He would make it up—at least to Ethan.

"It's quiet here," Harry said, softly. "Thank you." He looked down at the wrapped takeout containers they'd been gifted.

"You're welcome. Allow me to introduce myself properly." Ethan's smile remained. "I'm Ethan Hartwood," he said. "I used to spend my afternoons here—it's always so peaceful. The shores are almost always unoccupied during the Hunt." He paused, "I sent a favour after your introduction walk. Seeing you triggered something almost like that spark a few minutes ago."

"Really?"

"Mmhm. I've been dreaming about you for awhile and I didn't know why. I didn't realize until I saw you at the introductions."

"D-dreaming?" Harry stammered. "About me?" He couldn't stop the blush that began to surface. He hoped it wasn't too obvious.

Ethan nodded. "I kept seeing your eyes and feeling your magic, but it was almost like you were always out of reach. As if you were too far away and no matter what I did, I couldn't come close enough."

Harry swallowed. There wasn't exactly anything he could say to that. He hesitated. "I felt something—sort of. When we first came here, to Nevarah. I don't—it doesn't feel—I don't feel."

He stopped.

Ethan tipped his head forward. He wouldn't press him for details. "Would you like to sit over by the trees? We can talk for as long as you like."
"Yeah. That'd be great."

Harry fell into step as Ethan headed for the little grove of trees.

It was a small cluster that seemed rather out of place, considering how open and treeless the rest of the plains were, but Harry figured that everything was like that, at least in this area of Nevarah.

At least, it seemed like there was always plenty of openness near the water's area, perhaps so the Merrows could see if anyone approached them, well in advance.

Ethan choose a partially shaded spot beneath two trees, to set down his own takeout container. His movements were graceful and fluid, his expression thoughtful as he squinted up at the trees.

Harry set his own down as well and fumbled in his pockets for something to transfigure. A picnic blanket would be good and maybe a few pillows. He fingered the pretty buttons on his overshirt. Theo probably wouldn't be happy if he took them off—but a simple reparo would fix that.

Later. Sort of.

Harry started to tug on the buttons when he caught sight of Ethan still staring up at the trees. That was curious enough to draw his attention and he watched as Ethan seemed to be gauging something, before placing a hand flat against the trunk.

He pressed, leaning into it, feeding his magic into the gesture. His eyes glowed brightly and when he was finished, Harry found himself staring up into a fashioned nest of sorts. The thick vines twisted back and forth, gradually becoming sturdier with the overlap as they wove themselves together.

Harry perked a brow. That was unexpected. "Your element is earth, right?"

Ethan chuckled. "Earth isn't limited to just earthquakes and grounding spells." He patted the tree. "Need a boost? The view's worth it. Promise."

Harry looked from his hand to the woven nest. "...I can climb."

Ethan grinned.

They made their way up the tree and into the makeshift nest—which somehow managed to be more like a viewing platform of sorts, suspended between three trees in a sort of triangular shape. There was a slight give in the middle and it swayed gently in the air with their movements.

"Button?" Harry offered, when Ethan began to bite a thread free from the fancy cuffs of his shirt. He popped off one of the fancy specimens and held it out.

Ethan looked from him to the button and stifled a laugh. "Thanks." He held it up to his lips and whispered something that sounded like a several voices muttering to each other, before a muted flash of gold produced the desired result.

Harry waited, perched on a branch while Ethan spread a thick fluffy picnic blanket over the twisty branches. Not a bad transfiguration, he thought to himself. "Want another one?"

"Two, if you can spare them." Ethan hummed.

Harry twisted them off and handed them over. Two more blankets joined the first as Ethan levitated the takeout containers up to their new space.
"You sent a favour?" Harry asked, at last. He tried to remember the line of potential suitors that had shown up at the Deveraine's viewing box after that eventful introduction walk. He eased down from his chosen branch to cautiously test the strength of the platform.

The blankets were soft and he felt a tad guilty about tromping over the pretty patterned surfaces with his fancy boots. The transfiguration held nicely though and Harry chose a spot to settle into.

Ethan had been right—the view was gorgeous from here. He could see beautiful blue waters for as far as his gaze could reach. They darkened just a touch, a bit out of reach, but visible if he squinted.

The air was a touch cooler, but still warm and the natural warmth of the daylight was offset by the faintest breeze as the leaves rustled around them, adding a gentle constant song in the background.

Harry smiled. He watched as Ethan made his way opposite to him, walking carefully along the squishy blankets and settling down within arm's reach.

That was nice.

"I did—I started the moment I saw you across the walkway. Actually, I could only think that you weren't a dragon, but you were the one with the green eyes. It was a bit much and I—well, I passed out. When I woke, it didn't seem right to barge on over to your viewing box without any sort of context, so I sent you a favour instead." Ethan paused. "I'm guessing you didn't have a chance to open it?"

"Probably not," Harry admitted. "It's been—daunting. Lots of them. This is—all new to me."

"Ah," Ethan said, knowingly. "You caught everyone's eye. They have good taste."

Harry smiled. "So do you."

"Bonded?" Ethan asked. He gestured to the takeout container and it floated over to him.

"Yeah. You?" Harry inched a bit closer, near enough that the faint magical pull growing between them didn't ask for more. This definitely felt like it would end in a good place, his empathy was currently composing symphonies to accompany it.

"No. I'm usually the chosen," Ethan joked.

Harry perked up. "W-what are you?" he asked, wincing inwardly at stumbling over the question. He hadn't meant for it to come out like that.

"Pareya," Ethan said, cheerfully. "I guess it isn't as obvious as I thought. You really didn't see my favour?"

Harry gave him a Look. "If I'd seen it, I wouldn't have-"

Ethan held up a hand. "Sorry, sorry, but by the rules of the Hunt, I'm not even allowed to do this-" he gestured to the blanket and their current surroundings. "If I've sent a favour and you haven't accepted it."

"And if we're soul bonded?" Harry challenged.

Ethan's smile morphed into something of a smirk. "Good catch," he said, lightly. "There are loopholes for that, but to be on the safe side—do you mind if I recall it?"
Harry frowned. "What will that do?"

"It returns to me and I give it to you in person. If you accept, everything continues."

Harry thought about that for a moment. His magic was humming with interest. His empathy was still happily making its acceptance known and he really didn't see a reason to be stalling. Everything about the situation seemed—decent. "Sure—go ahead."

"Thanks," Ethan stretched out a hand into the distance, eyes closed.

Harry felt his own eyes closing as the weight of the powerful magic stretched and sang around them. He'd never felt this kind of blatant power before—a lazy, but vast expanse of energy that was loyal to the one it belonged.

That was nice.

It was also a silent point he awarded to the handsome dragel, for his manner was kind and his manners were sweet—his magic was simply sugar on top of everything else.

For once, maybe he was lucky.

He heard a slight thwap and then Ethan was holding a folded favour of pale green in hand, the white seal unbroken. He offered it to Harry with exaggerated ceremony.

Harry made a successful grab for it and automatically elbowed Ethan to stop the playful attempt to grab it back. He didn't hesitate to break the seal and scan the contents.

They were very straightforward. Name, Ethan Hartwood, male, twenty years old. Element, Earth. Rank, Pareya. Social ranking, lower nobility. Bonded, no. Comments—and here, Harry nearly dropped the favour.

Ethan had told the truth.

It was a handwritten note detailing a recent dream and shift in magic, suggesting that it was very possible they had a soul-bonded connection of some sort and asking whether Harry would be willing to meet to discuss it.

Somehow, seeing it written in such simple script and feeling the sincerity of the magic enclosed with said favour, made it even better. It was a relief and the permission to acknowledge the sudden yearning that blossomed inside of him.

"Harry?" Ethan's thin brows furrowed together.

"You really heard me…?" Harry faltered. Memories and emotions clashed into a muddle as he remembered the strange fight, Theo's capers and the scream that had torn something inside of himself. So that's what it was. "You—I can't-"

He felt his chest tighten and for a moment, he had to look away. How many more potential Bonded were walking around Nevarah, waiting for a chance encounter with him? He definitely needed to go through those favours at the earliest opportunity and—

Ethan touched his shoulder. "Just one chance," he whispered, huskily. "Please?"

Harry twisted around to look at him, alarmed. "I wasn't refusing. I just-"

"Look at me, for a minute," Ethan murmured. "Just a moment—please?"
Hesitant green eyes focused on beautiful golden ones.

Something sparked inside both of them, deeper and more meaningfully than before. Deliberately and with renewed purpose.

Harry sucked in a shaky breath as he finally felt the elusive feeling that had teased him before.

A simple shift and twist.

Shift. Twist. Click.

He clutched the favour to his chest, huddling over it as he felt the activated soul-bond reach out—followed by Ethan's immediate acceptance. It began to settle into place with startling ease.

New feelings rushed to the surface, a need to be closer with each other. To draw closer and mingle in every intimate way afforded to them.

A faint itching all over their skin, as if magic were searching for a claim mark that had yet to be placed. Visible wisps of magic shimmered at the surface—dragel tattoos making themselves known on any patch of uncovered skin.

When Ethan's smooth brown hand slipped into his own, small, pale one, Harry turned straight toward him.

He couldn't tell which one of them moved first, but it only took a few seconds to be wrapped around each other, clinging, tightly as magic continued to work in and through them.

Harry's soundless cry was muffled in Ethan's neck as he clung to the larger figure, desperately soaking up the rush of happiness, relief and best of all—acceptance.

As if there'd never been any question at all, that Ethan would have wanted anything or anyone other than Harry.

It made the awful ache in his chest die a slow death as Harry focused on breathing. He trembled as the magic between and around them, grew even stronger and more potent. Pulsing, vibrating and—celebrating?

As if it was glad they were finally together.

He felt hot tears splashing down his shirt collar and pulled away enough to see the happy tears streaming down Ethan's face.

Embarrassed, Ethan tried to wipe his face with one sleeved arm without releasing his hold on Harry.

Harry caught him before he could, tugging the arm back around himself and twisting to sit properly in Ethan's lap. There were faint threads of worry, but a touch of his mind allowed his empathy to verify the feelings present.

It reflected back that there was only stubborn gladness present. Nothing more. Only happiness and a deep sense of relief and wonder mixed together.

This time, the smile that Harry allowed, fairly shone from his soul. Cradling Ethan's face in his hand, he let his fingers smooth over the high cheekbones and strong jawline. The lightly scaled skin of grey and black, with a few faint flecks of gold, as the creamy dark skin melted away to even
darker scales.

Ears sharpened upwards into points, eyes morphed and the prominent nose narrowed into slender, more dragonesque features. Harry gave a short laugh of delight.

He found himself filled with giddy laughter as twin tears trickled over his own, unsteady hands. He smoothed them away and patted at Ethan's pretty scaled face and then his hair.

Pleased to find that it did feel just as interesting as it looked. Sort of soft, sort of wiry. Textured. Fitting. Too short to run his fingers through, but just right, somehow, for Ethan.

The arms wrapped around him were strong and steady, a hint of lean muscle beneath the fancy shirt—even if there were a few cuff buttons missing. There was a quiet sniffle and then Ethan was smiling again, blinking back the steady tears of happiness.

All Harry could think was how adorable that was. His own eyes burned with unshed tears from the full strength of their shared emotions. He leaned in, movements slow, hands braced on Ethan's shoulder.

Ethan tilted his head to the side, allowing Harry to make the first move.

The first kiss was awkward, but sweet. The second one was better. The third was just right.

They broke apart, trying not to smile and failing as they snuck glances at each other, the solemnness of the moment broken with renewed lightness.

Harry relaxed, thinking that he could definitely grow used to that handsome face and warm laugh.

"I can't believe I found you," Ethan murmured. He bumped noses, drinking in Harry's expressive reactions to each of their interactions.

"I can't believe you want me," Harry whispered back. He squeezed his eyes shut, unable to believe he'd just blurted out the question he hadn't planned to ask.

"You are all that I need," Ethan whispered back. He kissed each eyelid in turn and then Harry's trembling lips. "I am honoured that you would accept me."

"Can I see your wings?" the question came out, idly, as Harry continued to play with Ethan's earrings. They were fancier than Theo's, with little dangling pieces and they made pretty sounds—to him at least.

Ethan didn't seem to mind and given that they were resting in each other's company, content with the closeness currently afforded in their present situation. Harry had already traced over the swirling tattoos along Ethan's scaled face and he wanted to see more.

He also wanted to talk a little more—something, anything—before instinct took over completely.

Not that he had a problem with where this was headed, but simply because he wanted more. So much more. It felt as if there was so much time to make up for and the amazement of Ethan's acceptance had yet to wear off.

Harry didn't care.

This sweet, private little moment was the healing he'd craved to soothe the two disasters he'd experienced. To think that he had the rest of his life to spend with someone this special, who had
regarded their own chance meeting as something wonderful—was exhilarating.

All Harry could think of was more.

So much more.

"They're very ordinary wings," Ethan said, lazily. "Very ordinary, but if you get me out of this shirt, I'll show you."

"You just want to take your shirt off first," Harry accused, leaning back enough to stare up at Ethan's scaled face.

"Maybe I do," Ethan teased. "There are so many buttons, after all. You might beat me to it."

Harry snorted. But that was enough of an answer, enough of a dare. He wriggled free enough to move freely.

Hands explored, patting and searching at buttons and collars to expose a bit more skin. Harry lost his robe and two more buttons—that became two thick, fluffy pillows to add to their makeshift nest of sorts.

Ethan surrendered his over shirt and undershirt, revealing even more, beautifully dark skin and swirling black tattoos along his entire torso.

Harry tried and failed to keep his hands to himself. He stroked and touched every where that he could reach, chasing the tattoos almost, searching, instinctively, for the right spot to place his claim mark. There were so many good ones and he couldn't make up his mind.

"What?" Ethan asked, when Harry's hands lingered on his chest, palms flat, as if trying to sense something.

"Claim mark?" Harry asked, slowly.

"Neck is good," Ethan said, shoulders twitching as he called his wings to the surface. "Whichever side you like. I'd like to show it off, if you don't mind it being seen."

"Hmm." Harry slid his hands upwards, brushing lightly over those dusky nipples, before curving up around Ethan's neck. He ignored the minute shudder, for it matched the one he manfully willed back.

Ethan's eyelids fluttered in pleasure before he leaned forward, touching their foreheads together once more. His wings came bursting out in terrific shudder, stretching out around them both.

Harry laughed in sheer delight.

They were gorgeous. Massive, compared even to Charlie's wings, it seemed. Rich black ombre, bleeding to a very light beige with abstract slashes of gold along the spines and thicker webbed folds.

Tri-color wings.

What a lovely detail.

That was all he needed before he jerked away to tug at his own shirt. He froze when Ethan's hands brushed over his, taking over the task. They were quick and efficient—spelling him free in time for his own silvery-peach wings to stretch out from his achy shoulders.
A breath of awe passed between them.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He rolled his neck to the side, trying to work out one of the kinks. Sleeping on the floor of the Peverell sitting room had not been the best of ideas—not when there’d been a perfectly decent guest bed in their guest room, but he would make up for that tonight.

Sort of.

"They're wonderful," Ethan praised, gazing up at them in admiration. "They suit you so well—and they look even better up close."

"Really?" Harry rubbed his arms, self-consciously. They were rather small compared to Ethan's impressive wingspan—large enough to enclose them in a semi-private space—even with Harry's wings open, but not stretched.

"Mine have always been freakishly oversized," Ethan said, dryly. "They say it comes from my grandfather's side, but no one else in my family has wings like these. I can't help the size or the colours—they sort of—bled in and stayed that way. I thought there would only be black and gold, but then it changed."

"I like them," Harry said, straightening up. "I think they're wonderful. They suit you just fine."

"Really?" Ethan echoed.

Harry felt a smile tugging at his lips. "I like the colours. It seems right."

There was a beat of silence and then Ethan's stomach growled—loudly.

And then they were laughing, the serious mood broken.

"How about we eat that," Harry pointed to the takeout container. "And continue the wing stuff later?"

"Eating first, kissing later?" Ethan suggested, innocently.

Harry flicked him on the shoulder. They traded smiles and continued to steal glances at each other as they moved to sit closer to the centre of the viewing platform. They sat, shoulder to shoulder, sorting out the fried treats.

Every so often, they would feed each other, occasionally nibbling on the fingers offering said morsel. The takeout container was emptied rather slowly, but to the complete satisfaction of the new couple.

Harry took a deep breath. "I-is this how it's supposed to feel?" he asked, hating how small his voice sounded. He didn't want this little moment to end, but it was so wonderful, so dream-like almost, that he was afraid it wasn't real.

Ethan was quiet for a moment. They'd been talking about the Hunt and what they'd seen for the day. This question had come from nowhere, yet fit just perfectly. "It feels different for everyone," he said, honestly.

"How is it supposed to feel?"

Ethan's wings rippled, as they seemed to have a habit of doing, when he was thinking a bit harder. "Some say it feels like peace. Like something that was missing has returned and everything's
alright again. Other's say it feels like being ripped in two and stitched back together, but somehow being better than you were before."

Harry made a face. That sounded painful. He would much rather have the peaceful version. "How could that be?"

Ethan shrugged. He drew his knees up to his chest, resting his arms atop them. His wings remained curved around both of them, blocking the sun and wind from making their little hideaway too uncomfortable in the open air.

"It depends on the person. Some people say it's like putting a puzzle piece in the right spot. It clicks." 

Harry stiffened. "W-what if it doesn't?"

"Depends on the person," Ethan said, voice considerably softer now as he studied Harry. "Sometimes, there's something wrong with the soul cry or the soul scream and only one end of the bond is activated."

"Can the other end ever be activated—or is it just never there?"

"That's what magic is for—and dreams. Usually, if you've any sort of soul connection, they say you'll dream about each other. If you don't, then your magic will call out. When you meet—it'll be like today. Sparks flying. Magic reacting. Everything just—different." He paused. "Different for all the right reasons."

Harry swallowed. He let his hand turn over, palm facing up from where it had been tracing patterns on the fluffy blanket. "It clicked," he said, half to himself.

Ethan's hand slipped into his own, fingers interlaced. He squeezed, gently. "Yeah. So did mine."

Harry leaned to the side, head resting on Ethan's bared shoulder.

They stared off into the distance for a while.

". . . his name's Theo," Harry said, tracing shapes on Ethan's arm that was loosely curled around his waist. They were sitting together again, Harry on Ethan's lap. They were talking about Theo and Charlie, how they'd met and what had seemed right about them.

"That's a nice name. Short for Theodore?"

"Yeah. A junior. His father was a senior. It's a fancy pureblooded name," Harry said. "But, he's what I needed. Stubborn though. Secretive, kind of. Sometimes I don't understand him."

"Oh?"

"We're staying with the Peverell's right now," Harry explained. "We don't—have a place of our own just yet and I have a lot of," he huffed. "Seals. I have a lot and we're trying to have them removed."

Ethan's wings twitched again. "When you say seals—how many are we talking about?"

"I'll explain later, but right now, one of them is a Peverell seal, so we've been staying with them instead of the Deveraines'. They're currently hosting us until the Peverell seal is removed. We don't exactly have our own place yet. We were staying at the Deveraines' but things were complicated."
"What happened to the Deveraines?"

"Clan war. The Vaughns."

Ethan shuddered. "Lucky draw?" There was a sad note to his voice.

"You know them?"

"I know of them. I know to stay out of their way and never give them a reason to think that I have a problem with them."

Harry frowned. "They're that bad?"

"Power requires responsibility, however not everyone thinks that way. There are some that believe having power means they can lord it over others. It isn't the expected or common way of thinking, but there are always a select few. So the Peverell's won't host you for the remainder of the Hunt?"

"I don't think so—I'm not sure. Even if they were, I don't think Theo would like it."

"Oh?"

"He says the element is bothering him, but I think it's something else. He won't tell me. I don't know why. His mentor is Ilsa Deveraine, which you probably already know, but she asked her Alpha to help us. He knows Henry Peverell, so he asked Henry to host us."

"I am sure we could occupy a few rooms at my family's Main Estate, if needed. They wouldn't mind much, considering that it is the Hunt." Ethan frowned. He tucked away the detail of Theo and resolved to puzzle over it later. "What about your Beta? Does he mind it? What's he like?"

"Charlie? I don't think so. He hasn't said anything, in fact he's been spending a lot of time with Theo. I think they needed each other. He's a fire type. Taller than Theo. Has nice hair and a nice—"

Harry stopped, feeling his face warm.

Ethan poked him to continue.

Harry groaned. "Nice hair and a nice arse."

The rumbling laughter prompted an elbow to the stomach, but Ethan couldn't help it. "He sounds fun," he said, at last.

"He's the oldest, I think. Theo has two years on me, but I didn't know that until we came here."

"Anyone else?"

Harry shrugged. "Almost, but no."

"Oh?"

And the stories came tumbling out. Alec. Wikhn. The shock of transitioning from the Wizarding world to Nevarah. The lack of magic. Visiting the Clinic. Learning about the seals. The many seals still on him. Staying with the Deveraines. More about the Wizarding World. Things. All the things that had been bothering him so far.

Harry finally stopped for a breath. He couldn't believe he'd said so much in such a short time— granted there had been a few information transfers for the sake of brevity, but still.
Ethan was so easy to talk to. It felt like he was truly listening and that he cared about everything that Harry shared, no matter how big or insignificant.

Like how Theo didn't like Lewis and how he'd left that morning without leaving a note—but somehow had never gotten back to them. How Quinn had prompted him to send a note and then how he'd watched the strange courtship on stage of Dahlia and Shayla.

Still, his frustrated thoughts returned to Theo and how things had been since they'd met Lewis. "... And I don't know what to do about it!"

"Have you asked him why?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes. I have. At least twice and in two different places and without an audience, even. I don't understand. If there's something I should know about Lewis, can't he tell me? What is so horrible that he has to act like they're our enemies when we're their guests and definitely not in a place to be-"

"Don't hold it against him. Alphas can be like that sometimes," Ethan said, soothingly. "It's not their best trait, but they do tend to hoard knowledge and certainly little tidbits of gossip about families or individuals that catch their fancy. I'd wager he's found something and doesn't want to tell you, because he thinks it'll change something."

"If it's that important, he should tell me anyway!" Harry burst out. "I'd rather know than not."

"Would you?" Ethan asked, mildly. He held up a hand to stop Harry's expected protest. "Let me put it this way, if he knew something bad about Lewis, something really rather disconcerting, say —oh, I don't know. Think of something. I don't like thinking about bad things. They tend to happen when I do, but for arguments sake, suppose he's soul-bonded and had a child with a non-bonded dragel and has been hiding them for all these years."

Harry blinked. "Dragels can do that?"

Ethan bit back a laugh. Of course Harry would pick up on that, rather than the idea of a theoretical problem. "Realistically, no. It would depend on how unloved the dragel felt. Most soul-bonds are very receptive and reactive. You feel and then you feel some more. If you were feeling neglected, then the one soul-bonded to you would feel compelled to move out of their way to try and help or fix whatever caused that feeling. The same for children. It's highly unlikely there would be any child out of wedlock, because the instant you wanted a child, your body would comply—with that particular Bonded. It's why some Circles have no children at all, save for one or two between whatever soul-bonded ranks they have."

"Ranks?"

"Pareya are the most common soul-bonded in a Circle. Sometimes a Beta. Or an Alpha and Sub, but usually a Pareya in there somewhere."

"And there's nothing else that would cause that?"

"Well, sometimes, there's a stronger soul-bond in a pair that desperately needs each other, but they haven't met. For whatever reason, they Bond apart from each other and when they meet, it's an explosive meeting. Often times, those two will remove themselves from their respective Circles, if permitted and claim Solitary."

Harry pulled a face. He didn't see how that would really work out. He hoped that wasn't a possibility for him. If there were more soulbonded out there—and it seemed quite likely—he
hoped they would wait. He would find them. He would do his best to find them.

"Sometimes they return to their Circles after a time, sometimes they don't. Depending on the Circle, they might take turns sharing spaces and Bonded. It's different for each instance and depends on the bond and the dragel."

At that, Harry rearranged himself to move from Ethan's lap to twist around and face him. He bit back a smile when Ethan refused to release his hand and they wound up thumb wrestling instead.

"So you're saying that Theo must be hiding some deep dark secret about Lewis and that's why he's been all high and mighty little Alpha?"

Ethan nearly choked. "I wouldn't put it that bluntly, but probably." His golden eyes danced merrily. "There has to be something that's tipped him off, based on what you've told me. He sounds like the kind that would suffer in silence if it makes everyone else alright."

Harry scowled. That did sort of sound like Theo, but then again, that was very Slytherin.

"Has anyone else caught your eye? It sounds like you've been all about the Air section. I'm surprised you didn't turn a few heads."

Harry flushed. "If I did, they didn't react."

"Their loss," Ethan said, humming. "Have you visited the The Dive? There's usually more interested ones there."

"What's that?"

"A point where there's a very large and deep crevice that is so far down you can't see the bottom. It's at a peak point with good drafts and the Air types like to practice falls and dives there. They'll usually show off during the Hunt. Any spectators that show up there are expected to be Hunting or interested in hunting. The ones that are interested as well, will usually come on over."

Harry mentally tucked that bit of information away. That was yet another thing he hadn't known. "Is it far from here?"

"It's closer to the Air territories, but not impossible to reach. We could go there, if you like."

"Later," Harry said, dismissively. Preferably after he'd had Ethan to himself and introduced him to Charlie and Theo. He wanted to spend as much time with Ethan before dragging him into the thick of his complicated life.

Ethan's lips twitched into a near smile. "Has there been any progress on finding your mentor? Anything in the library's hall of records or so?"

"Theo checked some kind of record," Harry said, thinking back to their first day. Theo had taken them to register for something or the other, before they could visit the Clinic. He'd remembered that. "We've never been to the library, but it was brought to the Royals' attention and Lord Cunningham took over."

Ethan whistled. "The Cunningham's are nasty pieces of work. Every single one of them has a kill-count that would make a Hellhound envious. It's high. Abnormally so. They're a bloodthirsty bunch and their Submissive, the Lady Cunningham, is known for taking feral Gheyos and taming them down. She's Bonded with nearly every one that she brought back."
"Really?"

Ethan shuddered. "Really. The gifts on some of them are as dark as they come. It's even said that they have a rune master among them, but it's never been confirmed."

"How does that work? Runes, I mean? Over here?"

"It's a type of magic, I suppose. It's kind of in addition to our native magic. It's older and more arcane. You can't fully use it, unless you're born with an affinity for it. Good runes glow blue. Secondary runes are red. Bad ones or ones burning out, are black."

"You know rune magic?"

Ethan shook his head. "Arielle, no! That's a bit much for me, but it kind of comes with being a Pareya. You have to understand types of magic and how they can affect you or your Bonded." He fluttered his right wing. "Look closer at the middle spine—here." The wing curved closer to be in Harry's view. "See that tiny little black mark there, near the gold stripe? That's a rune for protection. It means that beyond my natural abilities and wingspan, if I use my wings like this—" and they both curved inward, creating a private little bubble, with a tiny circle of light streaming in from above. "It would allow me to use them as a shield without draining my physical or magical reserves."

Harry half-smiled, staring up at them and marvelling to himself how wonderful magic was, to think that Ethan could walk around with these magnificent wings always hidden. "Is your element fully earth?"

Ethan chuckled. "One of my Da's is an Air type," he explained. "But he hates flying. It's almost comical. He bonded to an Earth Circle, because he wanted to stay on the ground not hear people laughing about his lack of flying."

A broad grin stretched over Harry's face as he tried to picture a dignified air dragel who couldn't fly. The smile faded.

"Harry?"

"I can't fly either. I—when I met Lewis. A portal broke. I was falling and I couldn't fly. I thought that I would-"

And then Ethan was pulling him forward into a hug that was so tight, it made the tiny splintered pieces of that memory fit together again.

"It's not a crime to be unable to fly," he said, quietly. "You will learn. It isn't something you manage overnight, unless you have an affinity for air. Removing your seal might help with that and even so, it takes a lot of skill and effort to be more than good. Breaking a portal is very impressive. It speaks to your magic."

"But you can fly, can't you?" Harry challenged. He pushed against the embrace, glad when it didn't give. "My magic's been haywire since I've come here."

"I had a special flying tutor," Ethan countered. "My wingspan was larger and longer than average, so I couldn't attend the usual classes. That particular Da, irritated Mera for something or the other that week and so she announced that he would teach me how to fly—or apologise to her."

Harry choked back a giggle. "He taught you to fly?"
"He did and he never apologized." Ethan said, chuckling. "I still don't know what it's over, but every once in awhile, he'll bring it up when they want him to do something he doesn't want to do." The fondness in his voice betrayed the smile on his face. "You'll have to meet them, whenever you're ready. They'll love you."

"Will they?"

"At the fact that you think my wings are wonderful and you don't care that I'm—well," Ethan touched his forehead to Harry's. They stared into each other's eyes for a long, quiet moment. "That you don't care. That you'll take me exactly as I am."

"I like you already, exactly as you are," Harry said, truthfully. "There's nothing to dislike."

"Yet," Ethan quipped.

Harry snorted. "Sure. If that's what you want to tell yourself."

Ethan laughed. "So tell me more—you had that look on your face when you were talking about the Cunningham's."

Predictably, Harry blushed. "What look?"

"The one that says, I think I'm sort of interested in something, but I'm not one-hundred-percent-sure-of-myself, so I'll wait a bit. That look. You were talking about one of their Gheyos."

Harry brightened. "Hadrian. But, he's—contracted or something. He's not available for courting."

"You don't know that for sure," Ethan said, sensibly. "What are the terms of his contract?"

"He never had the chance to tell me."

"And you're writing him off already?" Ethan perked a brow. "Harry, Harry—you can't write him off before you've even given him a chance."

"I'm not, he just—we haven't."

"Have you attended any of his fights?"

"No. I don't know how."

"That's easily fixed," Ethan announced. He shifted his wings, allowing them fall back into the open air once more. "First, we need to see a Hunt fighting schedule. That's where all the Gheyos of every rank put in for the chance to either publicly spar with each other or to take down elemental golems."

"What's a golem?"

"Like an elemental robot of sorts. It's made entirely from the chosen element, usually over clay or rock and it moves as if it's alive. Golem fights are used to show off a signature move or a partnership between two Gheyos of complimentary ranks. Sometimes for new Gheyos who aren't sure about sparring with someone else. Usually for the experienced ones though."

"Complimentary rank?"

"Pairs that fit together," Ethan finally pulled his hand free, so he could tick them off on his fingers. "See, Ace and King. That's the most important pair of all."
"Why?"

"Well, the Ace is usually very powerful, but controlled and they oversee the wellbeing of all the Gheyos, as a whole, while also making sure the entire Circle is protected. A King, is more—well, personal. He is concerned with the individual wellbeing of all the Gheyos, the Ace included, and wields a significant amount of authority himself. Or herself. It's an important position. They're also supportive of the Ace."

"Supportive how?" Harry found himself playing with Ethan's fingers, tugging on the ends and pairing them off in twos. He half-heartedly dodged the flick to his forehead, grinning to himself.

"Well, if the Ace wanted to do something that all the Gheyos disagreed with, if the King backed him, they would all have to be in agreement. If the Ace had a moment where they were at fault for whatever reason, the King would be the only one able to stand in for them. Either to shoulder the punishment or disgrace or to mete out disciplinary action of their own. It's a unique and complicated relationship."

Harry wrinkled his nose. "Definitely complicated."

"Any pairs you know?"

"Ilsa Gorgens and Greta," Harry said, absently. "But they—Ilsa's been gone for a while." He trailed off, thinking back to the varied reactions in the Deveraine's viewing box. "Is it a bad thing to have your wings carved?"

Ethan blinked. "Depends," he said, slowly. "Sometimes, in certain fights, wing injuries don't heal properly. The webbing has too much scar tissue or a tendon wasn't properly aligned or something—and either, you can deliberately fix it. Say, like rebreaking a bone to set correctly, or you can magically repair it. The magical repair is more painful. Some Gheyos have opted to have unsightly scars or heavily marked portions of their wings carved out. It's not a good thing, but it does have a purpose."

"But it would hurt, wouldn't it?"

"Like you couldn't believe," Ethan said, softly. "Some Gheyos have opted for certain cuts or designs, instead of taking a single hole in their wings and being done with it, they have it matched up on the other side, almost like a design. Over time, their bodies eventually attempt to regrow skin and scale. A thin, clear film might grow over it. Sometimes it turns cloudy and that makes it a bit sturdier for flight. It's said that the ones who have it done right, can fly faster and sharper than those who haven't. It also eliminates blind spots, to some degree, because not everyone can sense things outside of their wings. Being hyperaware is a good skill for a Gheyo to have, but the results of a carving are rarely pretty. To have them carved in the first place, there's more blood and magic involved than most could stomach. Depending on the Gheyo, they would also need to be heavily restrained."

Harry nodded, feeling chills rushing up and down his arms. He thought of Greta's reaction and how Aracle had soothed and comforted her. Now that muted horror made more sense, as he thought back to how her massive, plated wings seemed almost impenetrable.

"So which do I need first?" he said, pushing the darker thoughts away. He could puzzle through them later. Ethan was answering his questions without any hesitation and Harry wanted to keep talking for as long as his new Pareya would let him.

"Ace. Typically the Ace. Sometimes you can take a Joker on first, but usually, you need the Ace."
The other ranks won't fall in, if they don't have someone to follow. That's why they're usually the last additions to a Circle. It's usually Alpha, Beta or Beta, Alpha, then Pareya—as many as you like—a Rheyo, if you wind up with too many before you find an Ace. Then you fill the Gheyo ranks."

"Aren't there other ranks in between?"

"Like what?"

"The Deaveraines' have an Advisor."

"Ah. That's more of a special rank, like how you can have a Royal or so in there. You can have a Consort, if that Bonded is underage—and if they agree to it and they'll hold that as their rank and grow into it, instead of something else. There's Advisor, Healer and Carrier as well."

"Which is?" Harry prompted.

"Advisor is usually older and fairly well-versed in politics or trading. They know names and connections. They like seeing and being seen," Ethan said, ticking them off on his fingers. "Healer is a personal healer for the Circle and they have to keep up their status even when Bonded. Carrier is the one who will bear the children—or help with pregnancy symptoms."

Harry pinked. "How does that even work?"

"With a great deal of magic and buckets of communication," Ethan said, seriously. "It depends on the Submissive and the Carrier, but it's usually beneficial to both sides, especially if it's a Circle's first child."

"What about a Royal? Is it even possible to have one?"

"Depends on the Royal," Ethan said, holding up a hand. "Yes, yes, I know I'm saying everything depends on something, but it does. That's the way this works. It's a give and take between two parties that reach a mutually satisfying agreement. Royals are tricky and it doesn't necessarily mean a crown royal, it can simply be someone of a royal bloodline. They'll have the highest social standing in your Circle and be equal to the Alpha, but are not expected to wield that authority unless there is a very difficult situation of sorts. They might take the lead in a social situation, but they aren't the Alpha. Does that make sense?"

Harry scowled.

It sort of did and it sort of didn't. It sounded like more trouble than it was worth. He silently hoped his own Circle wouldn't be so large that he'd have to keep all of that straight. It sounded like too much of a headache!  

"How do you know if you're courting one? Is it a big deal?"

"It's the royal's duty to share their status and from what I've heard and seen of the last instances with that, they were very private affairs. Rather normal, I mean, royals are dragels too, simply with a different title attached to them."

Harry nodded, at last. He supposed that made some sort of sense. "What about Aces, then? Is it that hard to court an Ace?"

"Oh no. You can try to court an Ace, but they always court back," Ethan brightened. "It's not one-sided in the least, so if you are courting and something doesn't click right, they will politely excuse themselves and usually you won't know what you did."
"That doesn't help."

"No, it doesn't. They are a somewhat secretive bunch though. They're very particular about things and they can be downright vicious, whenever needed. An Ace usually has to to feel a connection with you first, before they'll even consider accepting a suit. If it isn't there, they won't accept your court. More often than not, you will feel a connection that they've already felt—so it's rare to have a courtship broken off for incompatibility."

"What about the King? What next?"

"Aces usually have a preferred King or type of King. There's different kinds. You know, dark and broody, light and funny, traditional or nontraditional, sensual and vibrant. A preferred element or creature type—it's very popular to have mixed-dragel type the past century or so." Ethan was silent for a moment. "They're also the Alpha of a Gheyic triad. There's the Ace, the King and the Queen. The King supports the Ace in their handling of their affairs and people. The Queen supports the King. They are all, in turn, supported by the Ace. Very reciprocal. While handing the King ranking off to the next higher rank, is an option, if both the King and the Ace are unavailable, it's not the same as a natural born and trained King."

Slowly, Harry nodded. He was thinking of Loren and Edor, the way that Bahn had effectively cut that down before anything had started. Now it made more sense.

"So I would have to court them all in order?" He frowned. "That's—hard."

"It's tricky," Ethan admitted. "But not in that way. Once you find an Ace, they have a preferred King. You just have to decide if you like that one or not. If they don't have one, then you can search for Kings, specifically and explain you're looking for compatibility. They'll kind of pick for you and usually, they're a good match—so you would feel a connection as well. From there, the Queen will usually gravitate towards you and then you'll have your Gheyic triad. Once you have those three, it doesn't matter which Gheyo shows up next. If you like them for their hair, their charming wit, the way they look in heels or the strength of their magic—they'll fit in. You'll instinctively know who will work and the ranks assemble as you add them."

A sigh of relief came from Harry and his shoulders slumped in relaxation. He'd expected it to be much more troublesome than that. Compared to the rest of his adventures since arriving in Nevarah, that was almost easy. "That's all?"

Ethan kissed the back of his hand. "No so complicated, now is it?"

Harry couldn't help it. He laughed. "When you put it that way, no." He admitted. "It's sounded like a very—difficult thing."

"An Ace's favour is hard to gain, but think of it this way. If they don't like you for who or what you are, then you're probably nowhere near a good match. If you keep that in mind, then you're alright." Ethan paused. "Now that one you seem to have in mind…"

"Hadrian," Harry supplied. "His name is Hadrian. He has a blood title. He wears a mask and—"

"And he's with the Cunningham's, I know. You've said it at least twice," Ethan teased. "He sounds wonderful. I bet he has a combat contract with them—probably for some bet or the other that he might have lost. You can ask him again, when you see him and in the meantime, we can visit him on the sidelines and watch a few of his fights."

"Can we?" Harry perked up. "How does that work?"
"When you attend a fight, that's showing your interest. At the end, you can send a drink down. Knowing their favourite drink is a plus and if you attend more than three fights, you can send a favour down with the drink, the fourth time. You can send an energy snack or a trinket too. But you have to know what they like or they won't even touch it." He winked. "It's fun to watch."

"Is there a limit?"

"A limit?"

"On what you send or how?"

"Quick study. You are expected to make your mind up between five to ten viewings," Ethan recited. "Usually, most figure out what they want by the fourth viewing, so it doesn't matter. But after the fifth and up to the tenth, if you haven't sent a drink or a token of interest, you're asked to withdraw and not attend any more private fights with that particular Gheyo. Especially if the sentiment isn't returned."

Harry nodded. That would make sense, he supposed. So he changed the subject. He skipped the bits with Quinn—but mentioned that he'd been staying with the Kalziks for the day.

"They are very good people," Ethan hummed. "Lady Kalzik once sewed my head shut." His eyes glimmered with mischief. "A sporting accident. I took the brunt of a fall to save someone else and nearly split my skull in two from colliding with a magical barrier."

Harry squinted at him. "Did she make sure your entire brain was inside before she started sewing it up?"

Ethan playfully tackled him in answer.

They wrestled around—very carefully—on the viewing platform, until Harry gained the upper hand, due to Ethan's wings making it a bit difficult for quick manoeuvres in small spaces.

"Ah, uncle, I give!" Ethan relented at last. "You're a quick one, aren't you?" He'd folded in his wings at the last second, but it hadn't given him an advantage. His words earned him another tickling jab before Harry settled down beside him.

Together they stared up at the blue sky. Harry's wings had folded in as well and now the fluffy blankets felt nice against his shirtless self.

"What about Merrow? Do you know anything about them? Their courting and all that?"

"Everyone knows about them, but some know more than others. It really depends on the Merrow. Some of them are rather stuck up, but that's just how they are, or so I'm told."

"Some of them are worse," Harry muttered, thinking back to Alec and the hurtful words on the pier. The way none of their interactions seemed to mesh well, beyond the fact that they were both apparently annoying each other in equal measure.

"Sounds like you like him," Ethan countered. "Merrow are said to have the uncanny ability to make anyone hate them, that's a feat in itself. They're sensitive—according to folklore—at least, to their respective Bonded."

"I doubt that," Harry said. And the full story of Alec came tumbling on out.

Ethan listened, patiently, with few interruptions. When Harry finished, Ethan sighed. "Sounds like
he's all shards of sharp things. Cuts himself when he's cutting others down."

"Don't know. Seems pretty tough to me," Harry snapped. He looked away, thinking of how Alcandor had ordered Alec away. Of how Kieran and Alec had interacted in their twisted, strange sort of way. Still, a sliver of hurt lingered, for he hadn't meant any harm. Not in the least.

"Sounds more like he's hurting and you are too," Ethan said, calmly. "Merrow blush purple, you know. The next time you meet, I would suggest you watch his face very closely. If he's blushing. He probably likes you and hasn't a single clue what to do about it."

Harry jerked around to stare at him. He scowled. "What makes you think I want to even see or--"

"He's turning up when you're around—by yourself. He hasn't physically attacked you. He has helped you twice, once in your drigel form and another when you blacked out on the beach. He probably wants to talk to you and can't do so in a civilized manner," Ethan's lips twitched. "If you're interested, that is. If you aren't, then just avoid him. He'll pick up on that sooner than you can imagine."

Harry hesitated. That seemed a little harsh. It made him think of Dumbledore and those moments when he couldn't even speak to him, because Dumbledore had thought it was better to ignore him—for his own safety.

"Merrow would rather save face than have to confront you about whether you like them back. The ones that usually surface for courtship are more—tactful." Ethan hummed. "But in the past, there have been a few renegades that surfaced and broke the rules a bit. They mellow out as they age and are often very competent and protective."

"I don't know," Harry said. "Charlie's a fire type. They don't like fire types."

"They don't have to like them," Ethan countered. "They simply have to tolerate them. They have to like you." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively. "Everything else can work out from there."

Harry sputtered and the tickle war started again. He squirmed with Ethan's quick hands and then it went downhill from there.

They wrestled and tickled until, at last, Ethan was over Harry, braced on his arms, faces close together.

Harry felt his breathing quicken and realized that he wanted to continue further. Not to stop here. Not to wait for the night. To continue on, where kisses turned to touches and something more.

Now he could see how Dahlia and Shayla had worked out. Sure, they had known each other, but not closely and they hadn't been courting, but this time, it made a bit more sense.

"You're thinking loud enough for me to hear you," Ethan hummed, placing a kiss on Harry's left ear. "You have to mark me first."

"Neck?" Harry double-checked.

Ethan tipped his head to the side.

No other invitation was needed. Harry called out his fangs and bit at the spot that seemed the most appealing.

He felt magic stretching out of him and into Ethan, working to make the claim mark as he held his
fangs in there.

A faint twinge of pain registered as he felt Ethan's own fangs notching into his shoulder, somewhere below Theo's own mark.

His body trembled in anticipation and Ethan's hands stroked soothingly along his sides. His blood tasted a little lighter than Charlie's and almost familiar.

When Ethan pulled back, he cradled Harry as the familiar burn of magic flared around the bite, forming the claim mark that would now mark their relationship forever.

Harry squirmed faintly, feeling the old burn that was now proof of another claim mark etched into his very being. A minute later, it still burned, a faint sheen of sweat settling on his skin.

Ethan kissed the ear closest to him, a short gasp of his own as the marks continued to solidify.

A cry of relief came when it was over and Harry rocked forward to rest his damp forehead on Ethan's sweat-slicked shoulder.

"Ow," he said, after a moment.

Ethan laughed. "What you said."

"Have you ever traced names through the library records?" Ethan asked. He slipped his shirt on, magically doing up the buttons. He began to dismantle the transfigurations, repairing his sleeve cuffs. "Your robe's over here."

Harry caught it, slipping it on over his shirt. It was definitely more rumpled than Theo would've liked, but that was the least of his worries. That was what magic was for, after all. "Never been to the library here," he said, voice muffled as he tried to untangle himself from the mass of fabric.

"Never?" Ethan repeated, incredulous.

Harry gave him a look.

Ethan held out his hand. "Want to go?"

Harry looked from the hand to the eager golden eyes. Ethan had suggesting checking out The Dive, but the Library sounded fund as well. "To look up records?"

"Family trees," Ethan said, wiggling his fingers. "It'd explain some connections and you could even look up something on your mother's side, the Evanson's?"

It took a half-second for Harry to lurch to his feet, pulling Ethan up with him. "Let's."

Ethan grinned. "It's a good place to start, since you don't know anyone here in Nevarah. There's bound to be a family tapestry of sorts and we could find something out from that."

"How far is it?"

"Not far. Portal?"

"I thought you could fly."

"…You will regret that," Ethan said, cheerfully. He bent to swoop Harry up in his arms.
Laughing, Harry locked his arms around his neck, a content curiosity feathering through him. "I'll judge that myself." He bit back a startled yelp when Ethan simply stepped off the edge of their little platform.

There was no room for any kind of—whoa! Harry's thoughts stuttered out to a happy fusion of disbelief and rapturous joy.

Ethan's wings were very powerful and he was definitely more aware of them, regardless of their massive size. They were airborne and climbing higher in a matter of seconds, it seemed.

Harry relaxed in those capable arms, head pillowed against Ethan's neck, as he timed his breathing with the steady beat of those beautiful wings.

"There's the library," Ethan announced, several minutes later. "Isn't it marvellous?"

Harry squinted at the fancy stone roof gradually growing larger. He blinked a few times, unable to reconcile himself with the fact that while there was a roof, there didn't seem to be walls.

In fact, it looked as if there were four massive black dragons, each holding up a corner of the ornate roof—sleeping peacefully with their heads pillowed atop their feet.

"T-that's not a library!" Harry squeaked, before he could stop himself. His grip tightened around Ethan's neck, because this was a bit too close to the memory of hurtling towards that Horntail on his broom.

Except that the massive black dragons were sleeping and Ethan only looked mildly concerned at his reaction. "Don't tell me you've never seen a Nytura before? I thought you said you had one."

"That's a Nytura?!"

They touched down on the outside walkway of the library and Ethan kept an arm around Harry, who was still somewhat in denial at the large, slumbering Nyturas.

More dragon-like than little Shadow had ever seemed, Harry was speechless as Ethan finally released him and shrugged back into his fancy over shirt, his massive wings safely hidden away.

"How is that a Nytura?" he demanded. "It doesn't look anything like Shadow and he's barely bigger than Crookshanks!"

"The more knowledge they consume the larger they grow. These four are the keepers of the library," Ethan said, calmly. "What's a Crookshanks?"

"Hermione's cat—my—my friend's familiar."

"Ah. I didn't mean to shock you." Ethan said, softly. "But I thought you know. They're lovely creatures. Very loyal."

"But they—but Shadow?" Harry tried to show the size with his hands.

"They start off awfully small and test a few shapes before they settle into one," Ethan said, thoughtfully. "Yours is probably just a baby, but if you let it learn things, it'll grow faster. They also like to hunt."

"Hunt?" Harry squawked. "So if these four—these four—decided to hunt and-"
"They would trade off with another one of their own or possibly one at a time. Taking turns or something. You know. They are very intelligent."

Harry made another sound in his throat. It took a moment for him to calm down—and then recall the previous conversations he'd had with every single individual who had seemed absolutely amazed at the fact that he had a Nytura. "What am I supposed to do with-?"

"When they're that large, they'll usually settle down at home and guard your estate," Ethan said, calmly. "They like to be useful like that and if you travel a lot, then they'll hang onto a useful shape as long as they can, so they can travel with you. Beyond that, they become protective guardians."

"Why can't you people ever speak plainly?" Harry burst out.

Ethan stifled a laugh. "Because we are simple creatures with complicated problems? Don't worry about it," he said, lightly. "Coming in?" He gestured to the wide open section of the library.

In spite of the fact that there were no outer walls—seemingly only a roof and a floor, with endless rows of bookshelves in between, Harry still couldn't see the natural light on the other side.

"It's anchored in the centre," Ethan said, as if guessing his mental puzzle. "Some of it is underground. To protect it, just in case of an attack. Knowledge is power, after all. Come on, it's a nice library."

"Right," Harry said, faintly. He let himself be pulled on into the stacks of shiny, colourful books.

For a moment, he could only help thinking that Hermione would dearly love to be here with him.

"I think I've found something!" Ethan crowed. "Come look at this—it's a family tapestry."

Harry slipped the yellow book back on the shelf, hurrying on over. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually enjoyed himself in the library, but there were all sorts of interesting books and he'd already found several he wished he could read.

True to his word, Ethan held up a large roll of aged cloth with a few metal hangers at the top, several inches revealed to show names and faded faces, along with a scripted heading.

It reminded Harry very much of the Black Family Tapestry at Grimmauld Place.

Except for this one read, *The Full Heritage of the Esteemed house of Evanson.*

"Why would they leave their family tapestry here?" Harry wanted to know. He helped Ethan carry the large roll over to one of the viewing tables in the corner.

"Most families have copies sent to the library," Ethan said, setting his side of the tapestry on one corner of the table. "In case of a fire or accidental magic or something, there'll always be another copy of that record somewhere. They have the original, of course, but some things shouldn't be one of a kind."

Harry didn't comment on that, but he dutifully helped to unroll the massive cloth, eyes widening as he saw the wealth of names before him. This was even bigger than the Black Family Tapestry.

"It mirrors the original," Ethan said, noticing Harry frowning when he couldn't sense any ambient magic from the actual tapestry. "Which is why it's an accurate record. Come over here, you'll probably want to start from the bottom and work your way up. The names might be more familiar here."
Harry moved over to check, marveling at how the names were grouped into Circles and still managed to show children and deceased in a neat and orderly fashion.

It wasn't until he stared at the very bottom of the tapestry that his heart clenched in his chest. His mouth grew dry and his hands hung uselessly at his side.

From the very bottom of the tapestry, his own name stared up at him. It showed his parents marked off as deceased and his own name below theirs, now linked in a Circle's formation, showing Theo, Charlie—and Ethan, as he watched it script into place.

The unnerving part was more so the names to the left—the one of Petunia, Vernon and Dudley Dursley.

Names that were unmistakable in their presence, but muddled and blurred—almost like his parents. As if—as if they weren't alive.

"Harry?" Ethan prompted from the other end of the table. "Is everything alright—Harry!"

Harry took a step backward, eyes fixed on the name of Vernon Dursley as the tapestry continued to update itself and completely blurred out the fat faced man. A skull and cross-bones appeared to the lower right of the picture, but the deceased tag did not appear.

Something he had once wished for and now, did not understand whether it was true or not.

"It's alright, it's alright, it's alright," Ethan chanted, pulling Harry away from the table and straight into his arms. He held tight even as Harry stumbled, knees buckling. "Shh. It's alright. I promise you, everything is alright. Talk to me, Harry. What's wrong?"

"W—what does that mean?" Harry croaked, clutching at Ethan's shirt, unable to deny that he felt infinitely safer and stronger in those arms than away from them. "The skull and crossbones?"

Ethan stilled, searching out the very symbol that had made Harry ask him in the first place. He swallowed. "It means the individual has not yet died—because someone has placed a death seal on them before they could pass on. If they are no longer among the living, then they are marked as such."

Harry's choked cry was muffled in Ethan's shoulder. He barely felt when Ethan walked them away from the table or the kiss atop his head.

"How would a muggle wind up with a Death Seal?" Harry wanted to know. He fisted his hands in Ethan's robes, a sinking feeling working its way into his stomach. "That's not possible, tell me that's not possible."

Ethan hesitated. "If someone dragec cast it on them or someone with a significant creature heritage and a knowledge of sealing spells. There's different types of Death Seals." He rubbed one hand up and down Harry's arm and back, trying to soothe him.

Harry burrowed deeper, pressing against the arms holding him tight. The despair that had seized him was irrational, almost, in it's sheer expression, but he pulled himself together with the same quiet efficiency he'd always afforded himself.

"Is it—someone you know?" Ethan faltered, as if unsure of how to phrase the question, based on Harry's unexpected reaction. He'd picked out Harry's parents, noted the deceased tag—and then realized there were still somewhat living relatives, albeit without a dragec Circle.
Harry nodded, once. He didn't really want to talk about this now—and if he had to, then he wanted
to do it when Theo and Charlie were around as well. There was very little chance of him ever
repeating this horrible mess again.

Quiet footsteps seemed to echo in the room and Ethan growled faintly. He straightened, turning to
angle his body so Harry was half-hidden in the shadowy corner that they'd chosen.

Harry sniffed once, twice and frowned. That scent was almost familiar. He leaned to the side,
trying to catch a glimpse of the approaching stranger. Surely it couldn't be-?

"You are intruding on a private matter," Ethan said, carefully. He patted Harry's shoulder to keep
him still. AGheyo was approaching, wearing an elegantly plumed face mask. "Might I suggest that
you return to the archives at a later time?"

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**EVANSON MANOR : JUN, BRIAR, REGULUS AND GEORGE : NEVARAH**

Jun glided down the empty hallways, sticking to the farthest ends of the corridors, the rear
hallways that her Bonded rarely traversed. She'd seen that they'd built their house into the cliff,
with plenty of room and passageways for children to run and play.

It had been her special touch to their new home and now, it made it easier for her to make her way
to her study without attracting the attention of anyone else. They would still sense her, yes, but she
wanted some semblance of privacy.

Their reunion had been difficult and stressful, no matter how grateful they were for each other's
presence. She had left to pay her respects to her late mother in the Hall of Remembrance.

She had gone alone.

Briar was still sleeping—she could feel that through their shared bonds. Rian had offered to
accompany her, but she had declined. The sadness in his eyes had said that he understood her
refusal, but hadn't liked it.

She'd kissed him goodbye and left, cloaked in the dark, depressing blackness of her mourning garb.
It was strange and sad in the same instance. Standing in front of the marbled square that bore her
mother's name and watching the shimmering, eternal flame that would celebrate the life lived.

It had taken a great deal of control to keep her empathy in check—and to hold it together until she
was far away enough to dig a hold and ground her emotions and magic.

Her mother had been dear to her. So very dear.

Her father had been that way up until she'd met Briar.

The broody rebellious Submissive that had earned himself such a reputation that even her father
had refused to allow her to court him. There had been talk of admitting him to a Pareyic Coven for
a season, to see if it would remedy his personality.

Jun sighed. Ha. As if that would've done any good. She'd fallen for him in the same breath that he'd
fallen for her. Hard and fast, with enough stubbornness and soul to know they belonged to each
other.

Enough.
She pressed a hand to her forehead and started faintly when strong arms curled around her waist. "I thought you were sleeping."

"How could I?" Briar murmured. He hugged her tight from behind, his face pressed to her back. "I'm sorry I didn't join you."

"...you didn't have to."

"I wanted to. She was kind to me when no one else was and she cared for you." He released his hold, allowing Jun to turn in his arms. He met her sorrowful gaze with all the openness he could muster. "She was a good mother and I am—sorry for your loss."

Jun's green eyes grew impossibly wide. They shimmered, until the tears welling within, spilled down her cheeks. She pressed one hand to her mouth, her magic warring inside of her, before she crumpled forward, clutching at his head.

He held her as best as she could, his hands fisting in the give of her dress fabric. He sighed, softly, tamping down his own emotions. They weren't settled, not by a long shot, but she would always be his Alpha an he would always be her Submissive.

She cried for a long while.

Eventually, they transitioned from standing to sitting in the corridor, with Briar braced against the wall and Jun half-curled in his arms and lap, her face buried in his shoulder, her fiery hair splayed over them both.

He stroked her hair and held his silence.

Her clawed hands made holes in the fabric of his shirt.

They sat together, the lack of interruptions allowing the reconnection from the previous night, to continue.

Briar sighed. He leaned down to touch his forehead to hers, as she stretched up to meet him. Her hand tangled in his hair, holding him to her, as memories flowed between them.

The shared connection was broken with the approach of two pairs of feet. Jun was the first to move, her grip in Briar's hair, slackening enough to allow him to turn.

He started to move, but she stayed put—in turn, keeping him in place, beneath her. He glared at the rather physical direction, but couldn't comment as Regulus and George came into focus.

"Jun!" Regulus was the first to speak—and blush—when he caught sight of them.

George mirrored his reaction seconds later, when his sharp eyes caught up to the scene on the floor in front of them. He opened and shut his mouth, apparently thinking better of whatever comment he'd been about to make. The expression that briefly flickered across his face, was one of fond exasperation.

"George, Reg," Jun greeted.
Briar growled faintly from his position half-wedged under her, pinned against the wall. He didn't like it and his instincts were starting to stir, but Jun had yet to release him and he knew better than to push right away.

Jun stared up at them for a moment, before her emerald eyes narrowed. Her lip curled back and a sharp hiss had both newcomers immediately dropping to a crouch on the floor. Their heads were higher than hers and in her present state with her empathy still curling at the edges, it was best for them to be on guard. Briar, she knew and would instinctively trust.

George angled more to stay behind Regulus, who eased himself down to sit fully on the ground. A beat later, George did the same. For several long minutes, no one moved.

Jun sniffed and then pushed away from Briar, reseating herself on the floor with her back to the wall. When Briar made to stand, she caught his wrist and pulled gently. Her green eyes flicked up to him and then to her empty lap.

He held her gaze with his own angry one for a few seconds, then sighed, shoulders slumping before he gave into it. Cuddled onto her lap, minutes later, he let her tuck his head beneath her chin. It was an old, familiar position for both of them and he didn't realise how much he'd missed it until now.

"Jun?" Regulus ventured, after a while.

"I'm bored and staying indoors is giving me a headache," Jun said, flatly. "Why don't we all take a breather and visit the Hunt for a bit?"

Briar started, his eyes glowing red. The last thing he wanted was to visit the Hunt and most certainly not in the state of—

"Some fresh air would be nice, don't you think? I'd also like to pay a visit to my father and George, darling, you need to be registered. We should also see about whether you have available family roots here in Nevarah. Would you like that?"

George perked up at that. He'd been curious about that on his own, but considering the circumstances, there hadn't been a good time to ask about Jun's promise. The dull ache in his chest, throbbed faintly. He reached up to rub at it. It had grown worse since their arrival in Nevarah and he had yet to know why.

"I don't want to attend the Hunt," Briar grumbled, squirming in Jun's hold. "It's too much fuss and I don't like any of the-"

"Behave," Jun said, lightly. "You know fully well that my return will be made public and out of courtesy, we are obligated to greet the Royals first—before they request a formal audience of us?"

"They've never requested it of you earlier than five years at most," Briar began. "There's no reason for you to be so accommodating to them when-"

Jun bit him, calmly.

He froze, eyes flaring bright red. The bite served its purpose and he settled, faintly, but bristling at the unspoken reprimand.

"You haven't explained to Lord Aiden that I've returned, have you?"

Briar stiffened. He gave her a Look and then twisted, quick enough that she couldn't stop him,
before he bit back, digging his fangs harshly into her neck. His thoughts streamed through her mind, their heartbeats synchronizing as if it simply couldn't be helped.

Jun laughed, wincing at the minute movement that jostled his bite. "You'll have to tell him and we'll retrieve Zephy while we're at it."

An angry whine came from Briar, but it was muffled, half by the fact that his mouth was full and because he was only protesting for the principle of it. Things were always interesting with Jun around and whether he wanted to admit it or not, he was glad she was back.

Oh it would take time—a great deal of time—before any sort of normality returned to them and their daily lives. But until then, this was a start and he would take it.

Yes, he would definitely take it.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I am not happy with this chapter, I had typed up another 5k words to go with it and did a copy paste into my chapter 101 file...and lost it. all 5k. -facepalm-. I've retyped what I could remember, but it doesn't sound as good as the first time around. SIGH. I hope you all enjoyed it! The long-awaited chapter 100 and the first of Harry's Pareya.

How do you like Ethan? Yes, he did "come from nowhere". Sort of. There are hints. If you look in the snippets, you might sorta kinda find them. Let me know what you think-and as always, thank you all so very much for reading and reviewing!

Your encouragement makes my day and I've added in hints of the Kadels, the Immortals the whole Prophecy thing, along with Jun and George. Yay! Progress! LOL. Chapter 101 is going to be a WHILE in coming now though, so please enjoy until then.

Many thanks to brissygirl who made sense of my odd typos and suggestions for the story. She is an absolute darling and has relayed your wishes for more snippets and getting plot points tied up.

Thanks for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel's Song. Welcome to the new readers. Thanks for reading!

REVIEW RESPONSES WILL BE POSTED as I have the time to spare-and I honestly haven't had the time for a while now. I'm truly very sorry for that, but I still treasure every review-thank you for your comments and encouragement!

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Theo, Charlie-(with the Peverells)

Harry (with Ethan in the Library)

Snape Circle (in a new apartment, courtesy of Terius)
Deveraine Circle members-(at the Hunt)

George (with Jun and the Evansons)
Previously on TBDH: Harry acquired his first Pareya, a handsome Earth elemental named Ethan Hartwood, hailing from an esteemed line of scholars. After a surreal, soul-fueled bonding, Ethan and Harry venture down to the Nevarean library to look up Harry's history along the Evanson bloodline.

In the meantime, Theo and Charlie learn some disturbing news after meeting the famous Seer, Maia Kadel, who remembers Charlie for saving her daughter Megan, back at the Healer's Clinic. Henry and Cora work out a few things. Meanwhile, Jun, Briar and George have a few things to work out as well...

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

This chapter is dedicated to all my readers who have a March birthday. :P Happy birthday, you guys! I hope it's a fabulous one. Best wishes for the year ahead.

RECAP: Harry acquires his first Pareya, a handsome Earth elemental named Ethan Hartwood, hailing from a scholarly clan. After an exciting bonding, Ethan and Harry venture down to the Nevarean library to look up Harry's history along the Evanson bloodline. In the meantime, Theo and Charlie learn some disturbing news after meeting the famous Seer, Maia Kadel, who remembers Charlie for saving her daughter Megan, back at the Healer's Clinic. Henry and Cora work out a few things. Meanwhile, Jun, Briar and George have a few things to work out as well...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A sweet, warm scent tickled at Prince Raspen's nose. It was familiar, almost, dredging up old, forgotten memories of childhood and simpler times. Images flickered through his mind's eye and he stirred, faintly.

The logical reasoning behind the half-hearted trip down memory lane, sparked a bit harder than his fading dream, just enough for Raspen to jerk upright and wide awake. He froze at the sight of Alcandor's smirking face so close to his and realised, that the King's muted aura had startled him awake.
"Tea?" The Merrow King inquired, innocently. Dark blue eyes shimmered with open amusement, the same shade of the glittering sapphires that adorned his fluted ears.

Raspen glowered at him. He cast a hasty glance around himself and settled, as he realised that the day's activities were mostly over and they had retired to his personal quarters. He'd forgotten that.

A soft puff of air left him. The Hunt's activities for the day had been incredibly draining. He vaguely remembered walking through the doors and waving away his personal guard.

The transition to the settee and the current state of his rooms was an entirely different story. His fellow Royals were comfortably sprawled out between the luxurious furniture and the fluffy rug before the fireplace. They were sifting through the large file of digitized histories, backtracking through all that they could access for more information on one Maurice Elswood and the restricted files on the Immortals.

Raspen groaned inwardly. He really didn't want to think about those on top of everything else that had begun with the start of the Hunt. His mother had been right after all; he'd been borne into a wonderful year.

A hot cup of tea was pushed into Raspen's unresisting hands and the Merrow King gracefully seated himself beside him, instead of towering from his perch on the padded armrest of the settee. "What—no thanks? After all that effort? I don't make tea for everyone, you know."

"Shut up," came the grumpy, slightly childish reply, but Raspen didn't refuse the tea.

Alcandor made wonderful tea, when he was generous enough to share. It was sure to properly revive his good humours.

Raspen cradled it in his hands for a moment, allowing the warmth to seep through and further pull him away from the dreamland. He'd had such a confusing tangle of a dream, that it was taking longer for the current reality to register, now that he was awake. "How long was I-?"

"You passed out right after we settled in. I asked you whether you'd heard from the Cairothes' and you'd already left for the land of the dreaming. I'm guessing you have a soulbonded somewhere in your future," Dawne teased.

Raspen blushed bright red and hid his face behind his teacup. The implication was not anything he wanted to think about just yet. "Not funny."

Ebony chuckled. "So as long as they don't mind your snoring, it's nowhere near as adorable as it used to be."

Alcandor suppressed a laugh. He nudged the cup of tea up again, prompting his friend to take a sip—and allowing him to use the gesture to continue to hide his embarrassment. "Did you dream? I tried to wake you once, but you wouldn't respond."

Raspen's hand tightened on the cup. The dream had been bittersweet. Filled with longing and a deep sense of dread, as if some greater force would prevent the dream's reality from manifesting.

The mental struggle made his head hurt. He tried to push the thoughts away for later. He had to focus now. There were too many things to be dealt with. His own needs could wait—they had waited for a while after all. "...No. Nothing. Blackness." He lied. It wouldn't do for them to be thinking of him now, they needed to focus on the people.

Besides, some things were meant solely for the receiver.
Alcandor frowned, the expression seeming genuine. "I am sorry," he said, feelingly. "I haven't slept since I've surfaced, so I know nothing of such luxuries. Still, I would have hoped it would be some measure of comfort."

"It would seem I am the only one," Ebony said, with forced cheer. "I suppose I am more in need of support than I expected."

"Oh Ebony, no-!" Dawne hurried to soothe at once. "I simply—I don't dream much these days, you know that. It's—difficult. You're lucky to have such dreams." She threw a look to Raspen.

Belatedly, he attempted to school his features into some semblance of sympathy. So he hadn't been the only one to dream of such things—Ebony had dreamed as well, and she'd been brave enough to share with all of them.

"Dawne is right, Eby." He said, using her nickname.

Her smile was wan, but her shoulders relaxed a bit as she drew strength from deeper inside of herself. "Still. I cannot think of them this minute. Perhaps later."

"Definitely later," Dawne said, patting her arm with a knowing smile. "Call me, if you need to. I will always listen, you know that."

"Listen to me wax poetic of eyes I've yet to see and pretty smiles that I cannot match to a face?" There was a hint of dry humour in her tone now. Ebony managed a laugh, though strained. "You are a dear friend," she murmured.

They clasped hands then, a friendship promising to continue on and even past into adulthood and whatever would lie beyond.

"The Soulscream-?" Raspen faltered, having given them their moment. He could feel the tell-tale echo of emptiness hovering somewhere in his chest. It meant that the moment he was ready to call out for his own Circle, there were soulbonded somewhere out there, who would respond. He didn't dare give into that temptation—not yet anyway. "I didn't expect that. You could have warned us."

"No one expected it," Dawne said, easily. She settled back into her corner of the settee. "I would have said something, if I'd suspected, but I didn't see it coming any more than you did. Dahlia has ever been her mother's daughter. Lady Paieldra has always brought me good reports of her talent and ever-growing skills."

"She's an heiress, you mean," Ebony corrected. "I was surprised. I expected her to take after Lady Ilsa. I didn't realize she had mixed heritage through Lady Greta. I thought the earth element was dominant."

"She doesn't hold a Casper like Lady Ilsa, though. I couldn't sense one at all." Alcandor said, quietly. "Most heirs would lay claim to one or at least a secondary."

"Ergen belongs to the youngest one then? What was her name—ah, Soula? That would make sense, I suppose." Dawne crooked a finger at a messy stack of paper. It floated over to her ready hands and she flicked through them, her eyes narrowing. This really wasn't the sort of encouraging material she wanted to feed into her brain. She'd been hoping for something useful when she started the task.

"Greta Deveraine doesn't hold a Casper?" Ebony looked startled. "But she's so powerful—I thought she did—"
"You are not asking me that question and I am not answering it," Dawne grumbled. There were some secrets that came with her Royal title and that was one of them. Greta had requested it of her Queen and it had been granted. Dawne was now held to that same oath. There were simply some things the Storm element did differently than the rest.

Greta Deveraine technically fell under the official responsibility of Lady Bianca, as far as Storm elemental ranks went, but in lieu of that, Greta would belong to the Air element. A detail that now niggled in the back of Dawne's mind, as if she were somehow missing something important.

"Would you exit that file if you're not actual reading it? It links to this one. Give it a skim." Dawne flicked her fingers across the glowing screen and the file flew across the main display, vanishing out of view.

Ebony hummed and did as requested. She was tired of reading them herself and had about given up. They needed more information and Raspen was the one they'd been waiting on. His deep sleep had concerned her—but he'd awakened on his own, minutes later. "Fair enough. I am fond of my own as well. Still, with that much power behind a Storm element, she's in good company. I do wager Lady Bianca will request Royal status soon."

"It would only be fair and fitting," Raspen drawled. "Which means someone for the Shadow clans will come forward next."

"Probably the Cunningham's," Ebony mused. "They seem to be the most powerful among their element."

"Aren't there any others?" Dawne asked. But even as she asked, there were no names that came to mind. The Cunningham's were ruthless and dominant, with their word carrying more weight in the past decades than expected. Her own parents had warned her against interactions, before allowing her to shoulder the royal duties and responsibilities for her first time as Crown Princess for the Hunt.

Raspen made a sound in answer. The Cunningham's as Royals felt—dangerous. But still, they had never caused any real trouble, beyond the occasional bloody incident—usually off-world somewhere. He sipped at his tea and tried to backtrack.

He'd been completely unprepared for the possibility of a Soulscream—after all, it really had been before his time since the last one was called on a public stage—and the resulting magical backlash had sent him straight into his mental storm.

Like Ebony had realized, Raspen had agonized over the decision to give the Cunningham's free will. Lady Bianca was in an equal position and it was only a matter of time until they were powerful and of high enough regard among the other elements, to request a Royal status. He wasn't sure whether anyone was ready to handle that kind of darkness on the same level as Royal authority.

It was a bit much.

Just a bit.

"Stop it," Alcandor said, calmly. He flicked Raspen upside the head, still facing forward, his bland look fixed on his face as if he were reading some invisible script before him. The only hint of his good spirits was the nearly cruel gleam in his deep blue eyes. When Alcandor meant to hide it, he would—when it showed, he trusted.
Raspen hid his scowl in the cup of tea. It was really starting to be a handy thing to hold today. Trust Alcandor to be the only one to realise that his mind was a million miles away. He drained the cup, swallowing the sweet, scalding mess and waited. His mind was still busily whirling and here, in the privacy of his rooms, he could indulge for a moment.

Alcandor magically refilled the cup, pretending not to notice the unspoken request in the first place.

With a nod of thanks, Raspen drained it again, feeling fresh warmth curling through his body as the warm liquid revived him.

"Better?"

"Worse." Raspen threw back. He tried not to sulk and somewhat succeeded. Lately, sleeping was a chore and with his element, it felt as if he'd been crushed beneath the weight of the world and then roughly shaken awake.

Alcandor smirked. The tea would work the rest of its magic in a few minutes. He could live with that. There were simply some things friends did for each other, royalty notwithstanding. "Report came when you were out," he nodded towards the opened missive that rested on a floating platter, just out of reach of the settee. "Hope you don't mind."

A rumbling grumble was the answer to that, but Raspen plucked it from the hovering tray and scanned the few lines quickly. His eyebrows arched clear up to his hairline, before he burnt it to a crisp. He sat back, his gaze slightly unfocused.

"Ras?" Ebony prompted, leaning in a bit toward him. "Everything alright?" She'd felt the slight tug on her fire element, right before her magic had answered Raspen's unspoken request to destroy the information contained within the missive.

"Perfect," Raspen said, as calmly as he could manage. "Absolutely perfect."

"Oh?" Dawne turned her penetrating gaze on him. "Care to share? Al's been sniggering away since he read it."

"The Cunningham's have found some very interesting things," Raspen said, slowly. He reinforced their privacy shield with a flicker of his magic. Better safe than sorry. "And they've found a nest of Torvaks in an unpalatable location."

"Torvaks?" Dawne repeated. She sat up ramrod straight. The air in the room thinned. "Raspen!"

"I know." He said, stiffly. His mind whirled, slotting possible outcomes into place and producing what options were his to manipulate. This would require some finesse.

"There hasn't been a discovery like that in decades..." Ebony trailed off, her mind putting the pieces together faster than words could leave her lips. "Ras—you don't mean the—she's—they'll."

With Lady Mariana at the helm, Ebony had no doubts as to the possible bloodshed ahead—in fact, she was even more certain that there would be no prisoners and far too much blood. It was almost too much to hope that perhaps, Lady Mariana might be discreet. She could be, when she had a mind to, but Arielle help them all, she'd yet to do so within their lifetimes and even before.

"I know," Raspen said, a bit louder than before. He'd already managed to reason up to the same degree as his fellow royal. "I know. I'll handle it."

"It's not something you can handle, if you hear it after the fact." Ebony shot back. A frisson of fear
stabbed through her. They didn't need a war now and she could feel that something was brewing on the horizon. Something dark and sinister that would threaten the peace contained within Nevarah.

"I can't blame them for reacting," Raspen countered. "If Maurice was all that to them, there are bonds that aren't broken, even in death. You know that."

"Recall her." Ebony threw back, unable to keep the worry from her voice. "Ras—it won't end well. It can't."

"I can't." Raspen said, firmly. "What is done, is done."

"Raspen!"

"I gave them my word and I trust that they will—handle the matter appropriately." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Lord Cunningham came to me personally—to me. Not to my parents. Not any of you in the room. He gave his allegiance to me and he asked for my permission. He didn't have to and he asked."

"You shouldn't have agreed," Dawne murmured, head bowed, hands tangled in her lap in worry, her emotions changing and playing off of the radiating distress from Ebony. "There must have been another—"

"What would you have me do? What would either of you have done, were you in my place?" Raspen asked.

"Carte blanche," Alcandor said, cheerfully. The expression of near merriment was almost eerie on his pretty features. The wicked gleam in his eyes showed that he agreed wholeheartedly with what had taken place and how it would play out. "You did very well, Ras. I applaud you. It would seem you need only to show your support and I am sure that they will listen, if you speak."

"And what's put you in such a good mood?" Raspen growled. He hadn't agreed in order to manipulate the Cunningham's; he'd simply understood what was at stake. It was unsettling though, to have Alcandor agree with him. The Merrow King's natural penchant for bloodshed made it hard to ascertain when he was joking and when he truly meant for heads to roll.

"Absolutely nothing," Alcandor said, sweetly.

Raspen glowered. "Don't tell me you've finally figured out what to do with your little troublemaker?"

"Alec?" Alcandor stifled a laugh. "I took care of him last night. He has since repented of his wrongdoings and will not put another scale out of line for the duration of the Hunt." Alcandor paused. "Or else, of course."

Ebony eyed him, warily. "What did you do to him?"

"Ebony!" Dawne hissed. "Don't ask." She cast a glance at Alcandor's decidedly gleeful expression. "Definitely don't ask." She stifled a shudder. "And don't tell me either. I'd really rather not know."

Alcandor laughed. "Not even for the sake of your Lady Baronsworth? It might inspire you."

Dawne grimaced. "Don't remind me. I still haven't decided exactly how to repay her for that embarrassment."

"Keep thinking," Alcandor hummed. "Do keep thinking. I am sure you could be half as creative as
I, given half the chance."

There was a knock on the door and Raspen straightened. "Enter!"

The door swung open to reveal a slender, pale man with limp white hair barely brushing his elbows, stray strands having escaped the fancy knot atop his head to frame his gaunt face.

Clad in an assortment of ragged black and silver layers, belted twice around his skinny waist, a large metal belt was slung across his torso, holding tiny phials of shimmering liquids.

In his left hand, he held a tall, abnormally shaped staff—a blackened, scaled stick that grew into a bulbous shaped eye at the top. The heavy-lidded eye, yellow and ominous, blinked once and twice, before closing. The pale yellow glow on the newcomer's feet, faded away.

He shuffled into the room, his face downcast his expression one of torment. He glanced at the seat that Princess Dawne gestured to, then dropped to one unsteady knee, head turned toward Raspen.

"My prince," he said, hoarsely. "It is done."

"Riven!" Raspen was out of his chair and heading straight for him. "Arielle—What in Ergen's name happened?"

It was nearly an hour before Riven Cairothe was calm enough to explain his return and share the news he had brought. He was huddled close to the fire, hunched miserably towards the heat, in spite of Ebony's warming spells.

Dawne had sent for a Healer, but Riven had immediately quashed that idea. He didn't want anyone unnecessary knowing of his presence and the fewer who knew, the better. He'd threatened to leave when Dawne had threatened to insist.

Ebony had separated them and offered a spare vial of Healer's blood usually kept on her person. Reluctantly, Riven had taken it. When he'd recovered enough to share his news, they'd gathered around, worry and agitation growing together in equal measure.

"...So we'll have to wait for them to gather?" Raspen said, at last. "That is troublesome."

Alcandor sniffed. "If troublesome is the only word that to comes to mind after such a revelation, I think you slept too deeply this afternoon." He wrinkled his nose in disgust. "They may be Immortals, but they are only guardians on a pedestal. They cannot save us. They are incapable of doing so. They will aid us to the best of their abilities and then Nevarah will be on its own—"

"Then it is up to us," Dawne finished, quietly. "We know, Al. We've all thought about it, haven't we? How to survive a never-ending onslaught of Fabrine? How to protect our people without sacrificing too much in the process?"

"A pyrrhic victory has graced our history before." Ebony murmured.

"And the years that followed were hopelessly bleak," Raspen said. "Torvaks. Then Prophecies. The Immortals and even Death, herself. It was—bad."

Riven grunted. "There's been better and worse," he said, brusquely. "I don't care how you handle it, so as long as it is handled." He tugged at his ragged outer tunic. Exhaustion was settling in, the deep-bone-aching sort of tiredness that he'd been warding since completing his requested mission.
Realm-walking was harder than he'd expected.

"It will be handled," Alcandor said, imperiously. "But there will be some other matters that must be taken care of first." He paused. "Is the blood helping?"

"It's fine." Riven glanced at the Merrow King, eyes narrowed. "Don't offer. I'd hate to refuse."

"I'd hate to be refused and so, I must decline to offer." Alcandor said, smoothly. "But if your health is faring well enough—"

"It's nothing I cannot handle, as soon as my energies are up to par," Riven muttered. "I knew Nevarah was on lockdown, but I didn't realize you'd locked everything."

 Ebony stifled a snort. "That is what a lockdown implies." She said, dryly.

Riven shrugged at that. "Dare I ask why I have been summoned? You know I would have reported when I passed through this realm."

The summons had been expected at some point, but the summoner was not. Princess Dawne had endorsed the request—so it would be politically correct, but the one who had requested him had been none other than Prince Raspen himself.

Such a thing was curious enough for Riven to wrap up his affairs as quickly as possible and turn his steps toward Nevarah. He'd worried—and was still worried. There was something troublesome lurking beneath the surface of the polite façade the Royals were currently maintaining.

While he could understand their reluctance to place the same trust in him as their parents had, there was blind trust and absolute trust. He wasn't asking either of those—only that they give him the same benefit of doubt that he was affording them.

After all young Royals were still young.

Raspen's lips twitched, faintly. "I know," he acknowledged. "But I actually had two favours to ask of you and I appreciate your timely arrival."

Riven blinked. Two requests? That was unexpected. He'd already guessed what the first request would be, the moment he'd entered the room and seen the magic swirling around the Earth Prince. He'd expected to leave that detail out of things and attend to whatever matter had been their reason for requesting his presence. "I can guess the first," he said, slowly. "But the second?"

"Oh?" Alcandor perked up. "Ras?"

"Yes to the first," Raspen said. "And please to the second."

"...What exactly are you asking me to do?" Riven needed to ask. Deep violet eyes grew wide in a mixture of surprise.

"Dawne, would you please have Harry and the others brought here?" Raspen stood to his full height. "And if I could trouble the rest of you to allow a moment's privacy?"

"I can reach Charlie and Theo," Ebony offered. "He'll feel my request sooner, through our mentored bond."

Raspen nodded. "That will work." He nodded toward the files. "Are you almost through with those? I'll need to bring him up to date with what's happened since his last check-in."
"I'll finish sorting through these, then," Dawne scooped up a hefty armful of files. "You can keep the rest, if you need them. There's something that's bothering me with these, but I can't put my finger on it—yet."

"In that case, perhaps I can help," Alcandor offered, flashing a charming smile. "I do still have some interesting tidbits to share."

"My war room," Ebony suggested. "It'll be clear for now, unless the flames will bother you?"

"I'll drench them," Alcandor said, cheerfully. It would be stupid to convene in the private quarters of his elemental nemesis—neither of them would able to concentrate or relax and the resulting warring energies was sure to grant anyone present, a terrible headache.

Ebony gave him a look. "Fine. Dawne?"

"My quarters," Dawne agreed, easily. "My parents are touring The Dive, they won't interrupt. Ras, join us when you're done, alright?"

Raspen offered a smile, that seemed a bit too bright and a touch too sharp. "As soon as we possibly can." He agreed.

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**ETHAN AND HARRY : NEVARAH PUBLIC LIBRARY : THE HUNT : DAY 3**

"Hadrian?" Harry stared at the dragel that had interrupted their private moment. The plumed mask and familiar set of those shoulders suggested that it was indeed, the Cunningham's hired Gheyo. No wonder the scent was familiar—he did know it after all.

"Harry," Hadrian acknowledged, a beat later. He had stopped, respectfully, several paces away, his stance relaxed.

Too relaxed, Harry thought. He'd seen enough of Gheyos at this point, to believe that Hadrian wasn't on guard. It was hard to judge any further than that, thanks to the elaborate, plumed mask that hid Hadrian's features from view.

For a moment, Harry wondered what he looked like without it. The mask didn't offer much of a hint, beyond the fact that Harry was reasonably sure that Hadrian didn't have feathered plumes sprouting from his head or ears.

"You know him?" Ethan glanced between the two, his Pareyic instincts somewhat roused, before he brightened, connecting the dots. "Ahhh. That Hadrian?" He looked to Harry for confirmation—and found it in the faint blush that touched Harry's cheeks.

So this was what Harry had meant when he was talking about a masked Gheyo. How curious. It was certainly unusual, but it also put things into perspective. Harry hadn't been talking about any old masked Gheyo—he'd meant the Blood Title holder, Lord Hadrian Maruke.

"Well. That's different, then." Ethan said, lightly.

Harry gave him a tortured look—torn between embarrassment and amusement. It never failed to amaze him how fate tangled with his strings. He supposed though, that this was some stroke of good luck—somehow.

Ethan suppressed a grin.
They stared at each other for a minute, stretching long into another, before Harry's lips twitched and Ethan chuckled. Then they were laughing and the awkwardness vanished.

Hadrian cleared his throat, drawing their attention once more.

"Has something happened?" Harry stepped back from Ethan, allowing the arm around his shoulders to stay. He could only think of two things that would have someone like Hadrian out and looking for him. Still, he hadn't felt anything amiss. "Is everyone alright? Theo and Charlie? My—mentor?"

"Several things," Hadrian acknowledged. "There's been word from Lady Mariana and I've been sent to retrieve you. Your Bonded are waiting at the Prince Raspen's quarters."

Harry took a deep breath and slowly blew it out. From the sound of it, they'd found something. He leaned into Ethan, grateful for the comfort offered by their physical closeness. He'd never realized how much strength could pour into him from such a simple thing.

"Is there a time limit?" Ethan asked, briskly. He couldn't help but take notice of the way that Harry was subtly leaning into him, his magic pressing up against their fledgling bond.

Hadrian's gaze flickered from Ethan to Harry, a question in their dark depths. He wouldn't ask, but his instructions had only included Harry. "There is no exact limit," he said, carefully. "But I have been instructed to escort you."

"This is Ethan, my new Pareya," Harry said, surprised at how easily that rolled off of his tongue.

"Congratulations," Hadrian said, politely, "To both of you on your Bonding." He offered a short bow to mask his surprise. He hadn't expected to pick up Harry and a new Bonded. He wondered how well that would be received.

Harry's face warmed. He hadn't expected that, but it also reminded him of one necessary detail. Right. He'd have to introduce Ethan to Theo and Charlie. A low whine slipped out. That would be fabulous.

Ethan's low chuckle in his ear, made Harry's face warm even more. "Second thoughts?" he inquired, innocently.

Harry gave him a sideways look, then twisted around to pull him down into a challenging kiss. "No," he panted, when they parted. His ears were warm now and Harry was keenly aware of the fact that he must have resembled a living tomato at this point. "Stop that." He mumbled, elbowing Ethan.

"You started it," Ethan hummed, breath tickling Harry's blushing ears. His strong arms slid around Harry's waist, drawing him even closer once more. "Are you sure you don't need some time? If there's no limit, there's no reason for us to rush."

Harry stared up at him, confused and somehow relieved. "B-but Hadrian—"

"Is a messenger. Gheyos often carry messages during the Hunt, because they are a neutral sort of rank." Ethan explained. "Unlike an Alpha that may be provoked into a power play or a Submissive that could be manipulative or manipulated—a Gheyo is simply there. They exist. They are confident in what they are, so they have no pressing desire to show off and as they are usually the ones making all sorts of deals, they catch on pretty quick if someone's trying to pull something over them. They also move around quite a bit and so you would see them more often than other ranks. You know enough of Hadrian to recognize him, so it's a safe bet that a message sent through
him, will likely be heard, because you'll trust him enough to hear him out."

Hadrian's lips pressed together in a thin line, as if he wanted to say something, but wasn't sure if he ought to. He offered no verbal protest, but merely waited. Ethan was right, after all. There had been no urgent summons according to Princess Ebony, who had stopped him in the hallway on his way out.

It wasn't any trouble to deliver a message or provide an escort—most certainly not where this charming submissive was concerned, though his new companion had been a recent development that Hadrian hadn't even expected.

As if sensing where Hadrian's thoughts dared to venture, Ethan glanced up, vivid golden eyes locking onto those pitch black ones. Holding that gaze, Ethan drew Harry even closer to him.

Harry nibbled on his lower lip, brow furrowed in thought. That made sense, if he thought about it the way Ethan was explaining it. Huh.

"You are too adorable," Ethan muttered, shivering. He bent his head and captured those bitten lips in another sweet kiss. "We could be here forever at this rate."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, hands grasping at Ethan's arms, feeling the taut muscles beneath his palms. He had to return the kiss—just had to. It was so nice. "Sounds…good." He managed to gasp out.

"Mmhmm. I agree. Now tell Hadrian we're done." Ethan nuzzled his chin into Harry's head, unable to resist the urge to press his scent into his new Bonded.

Dazed, Harry turned to the side, still basking in the happy vibes sparking through the new connection forming inside of him. Bonded. His first Pareya. He wanted to shout the news to the world and yet, at the same time, he was hoping Theo's reaction would be manageable.

He hadn't expected things to progress so quickly, but one thing had led to another and there they were. Harry knew he wouldn't trade it for anything, he'd just have to be careful when making the first introductions.

Hopefully, Theo and Charlie would both feel the intense happiness flowing through their shared Bond and wouldn't have any objections. Harry looked to Hadrian. "Can you—would you take us? I mean, you'll have to take us both?" He asked.

Hadrian merely nodded, relieved that they would be leaving now. Magic sparked at his fingertips, a broad transportation medallion springing to life on the floor beneath their feet. "As you like. This will take us directly to the Royal's Quarters."

Ethan straightened up at that, a flicker of magic leaping between him and Harry. It gently twined around them, smoothing Harry's messy hair and straightening up their clothes—a neating spell to make them presentable.

"Wait—the tapestry—" Harry twisted around to look at Ethan. "We were looking at—a copy? Can we get a copy? How does that work?"

"We request one and they send it to our current living quarters, the cost is deducted from our Circle vault." Ethan cocked his head to the side. "Or a duplication charm. There's a fee for that, but if you'd rather it right now, that usually is the quickest option."

"Yes please," Harry said, fervently. He wanted to show the tapestry to Theo and Charlie. To be
able to spend more time poring over what possible secrets it held in relation to his heritage.

"Will do," Ethan murmured. He kissed the top of Harry's head once more, then gently tested whether he could step away or not.

Harry released him then, hugging his own arms to himself and missing the wall of warmth. Ethan was just—calm. And warm. And kind.

Ethan approached the table, fishing out a fat golden coin from his own money belt, hidden beneath his formal robe. He set it inside a carved square at the bottom left corner of the table. Then, he clapped his hands twice, before tracing the outline of the tapestry with his hands.

The golden coin vanished. There was a shimmer of white-green magic, before an identical copy of the tapestry popped into existence. It rolled itself up, knotted with a thread that Ethan had tugged free from the inside hem of one of his over tunics.

He slung it over one shoulder, then held a hand out to Harry once more, smiling when it was taken. "To the Royals then?" Ethan prompted.

Harry nodded, tugging down the sleeve of his robe over the slender cord and charm that Theo and given him. He didn't even know how to request actual currency like Ethan had used. He'd have to ask, when there was time. "Thanks."

"Anytime," Ethan said, simply.

"Hadrian?" Harry turned to the Gheyo, still standing there silent and proud.

The transportation medallion flared to life and Hadrian rolled his shoulders back. He reached up to reposition his mask and released a little more power into the medallion. "Hold your breath," he warned.

Ethan sucked in a breath. Harry copied him.

The shadows rose up to meet them—and they vanished.

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**ETHAN, HARRY AND HADRIAN : ROYALS RECEIVING HALL**

Harry was vaguely aware of the sensation of the floor falling out from under him and then walking into nothingness, before the floor was back under his feet, where it ought to stay.

Rapidly blinking, brought some things into focus, but there were still dark spots dancing in front of his eyes, as the transportation medallion faded away into nothing.

He was grateful for Ethan's warm arms wrapped around him, a constant in the midst of the unexpected change.

"Alright there?" Ethan whispered, shielding him, partially from Hadrian and partially from anyone else that could be present.

That gesture meant more than Harry could put into words. He snuggled close—because he could—and squeezed his left eye shut, as Ethan kissed the corner of his temple. "Yeah."

Standing a few feet away, as before, Hadrian waited for them, his gaze fixed on the blank wall in front of them. He wouldn't begrudge them the privacy, though it made something inside of him
ache, just a little.

Harry felt a slight twinge at that. It somehow seemed distant and impersonal. Not at all like the friendly moment they’d shared that night at the dinner with Lady Baronsworth. He reached out, blindly—and Ethan's hand slipped into his.

The question welled up in his throat, held back by fear of rejection, uncertainty and every emotion he couldn't put into words.

Ethan squeezed his hand, gently. "Lead the way, Lord Maruke."

Hadrian started, faintly. He couldn't place Ethan, just yet. It hadn't escaped his notice that Harry had happily introduced him—without a surname. A detail that did not sit well with Hadrian, but one that he would simply have to bear with, for the time being. His dark eyed gaze flickered from Ethan to Harry, before he turned on his heel, leading the way down the softly lit halls.

Ethan only smiled, falling into step, matching his pace to Harry's. That was good, perhaps there would be time to ask a few more questions.

A beat later, Hadrian's steps slowed accordingly.

"Harry tells me that you're a contracted Gheyo," Ethan began, conversationally. "You're contracted to—?"

Harry made a sound in his throat. He wasn't sure he wanted this conversation to start. Surely he'd mentioned the Cunningham's, hadn't he?

"The Cunningham's," Hadrian said, smoothly.

"Quite a Circle," Ethan hummed. "Are you on contract with them for the Hunting season and beyond?"

Hadrian stopped. "Are you asking whether I am available for the Hunt?"

Ethan closed the gap between them, pulling Harry around to face Hadrian. "Harry would like to know."

"Harry is standing beside you and can ask himself." Hadrian said, briskly. His eyes narrowed. His aura flared, softly. Pareya were tricky when it came to newly bonded Circles, especially the first Pareya. "If Harry honestly wishes to know."

"I do." Harry said, surprised at how quickly the words had come. "I wanted to ask before, but I couldn't. We—ran out of time."

Hadrian tipped his head to the side, the feathered plume somehow looking more ominous than ridiculous in their current circumstance. "Ask." He said, simply.

Harry sucked in a deep breath. "Are you available for t-the Hunt?"

"I am not." Hadrian answered.

The words hung in the air. Harry froze. It took one beat, two beats and a third, before he could consciously tell himself not to react too visibly. He didn't know what to say to that.

"But you are on contract," Ethan hummed. "And all contracts come to an end." He pulled his hand free from Harry's to drape it around Harry's shoulders instead. He gently nudged a bit of his
elemental strength through their fledgling bond, a silent plea for Harry to remain strong. "Ask him when the contract ends."

"When does your contract end?" Harry asked, relieved. He hadn't been sure what to say to that statement, but Ethan was certainly turning out to be more than helpful.

A ghost of a smile flickered over Hadrian's face. "If you should be asking, it would depend on what you are offering."

"And if—if I wanted to see one of your, um," Harry twisted to look at Ethan. "One of his—?"

"Demonstrations. A live match or otherwise," Ethan supplied.

"One of your demonstrations," Harry repeated, looking back to Hadrian.

"There's a schedule in the pits and it's posted in the lower floor near the general information booths in the fire section." Hadrian paused. "Why would you ask?"

"Because I'd like to see you fight." Harry said, honestly. There was more he'd like to see, but to watch him fight—that would be a good start.

As if sensing that it was half an answer, Hadrian gave a slight shake of his head. "They are not public fights. They are scheduled demonstrations and they are only open to those who are open with their intentions."

"I want to—court you." Harry managed to say. His face warmed. "If I can. Is that open enough?"

"I'm not available," Hadrian repeated, but there was a renewed warmth to his features that hadn't been there before—what little of his face that could be seen. "I am not to be courting or courted without the express permission of the one who has taken me in, namely, Lady Mariana."

"Ah." Ethan murmured. So that was the catch. He'd wondered.

Harry frowned. He didn't know how that worked, but perhaps it was something written into the whole contract business. "She has to give you permission?"

Hadrian's lips twitched. "She has to approve of you," he explained. "And I am not currently on the—circuit—at the moment. As such, I am only giving private demonstrations, with specific weapons I am rated to use."

"Oh." Harry's face fell. "But if I asked her—?"

"Then she would give you an answer—so as long as we are both present."

Harry nodded, slowly and then more decisively. "Alright. Thank you. I-I will ask her when I see her again."

A flicker of surprise danced over Hadrian's face. "I am flattered by your interest and your honesty," he said, simply. He gestured to the hall. "Shall we—?"

Harry gave him a look. "It was a simple question," he huffed. "You didn't have to stop walking!"

Ethan stifled a laugh, his face the picture of innocence.

Hadrian ignored them, but began to lead the way.
"Hadrian?" Harry ventured, several steps later. He saw the Gheyo twitch and knew he'd been heard. "What kind of weapons are you demonstrating?"

There was a pause and then a muted groan. "The kinds of weapons that I'd have to show you a picture," Hadrian said. "Because words won't do it justice."

"Shadow type," Ethan whispered in Harry's ear. "They're likely one-of-a-kind shadow weapons."

Harry smiled. That sounded very interesting. He couldn't wait to see Lady Mariana again.

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**THEO AND CHARLIE + PEVERELL'S : PEVERELL' VIEWING BOX : THE HUNT : DAY 3**

"Is Tauria the Clan Chief for the Peverell's?" Charlie asked, standing tall beside Theo, one hand on the small of Theo's back.

There was a quiet huff, though whether for the distraction or the change of subject, Charlie wasn't sure.

Cora and Henry had been ill-at-ease since returning from the strange meeting with Maia Kadel. They were whispering between each other, every so often, the words 'bloodstone' and 'gathering' and 'prophecy' mingled together.

Their oddness seemed to have put Theo even more on edge and Charlie hadn't liked that at all. He wished they had their own place to call home and enough time to split between Theo and Harry. They both needed him—as he needed them—and he felt stretched thin between both instinctive pulls.

It was easier to focus on Theo—when Harry wasn't there—and natural to fuss over Harry, when Theo wasn't there. Charlie gave himself a slight shake.

These awkward, but precious days would be few, he was sure. Especially, given Theo's primary worry for Harry and the Hunt. It would likely be a few weeks before everything changed.

"Clan Chief," Theo confirmed. "According to the Hall of Records, anyway. I believe she's held the position for a century or so." He pressed back into the touch of Charlie's hand on his back, surprised at himself for the needy gesture.

There had been a myriad of emotions dancing through Harry's bonds, before they'd settled into a deep sense of contentment and warmth. Something had happened—and he didn't know what it was.

In typical Slytherin fashion, Theo could feel his hackles stretching and raising. He did not like not knowing when something important was taking place—and he liked their current situation even less.

Given Charlie's efforts to calm and soothe him, however, he'd found himself becoming more aware of his prickly tendencies. Even if it was a bit belated to curb them, at least, Harry wasn't here to scold him about it.

Yet.

Theo stifled a yawn. Even with all the sleep he'd managed to snatch here and there, he couldn't fight the bone-deep exhaustion that lingered in the background.
Ilsa's words of speeding through Harry's resting period, teased at the back of his mind. A remembrance that they were all probably feeling the same way, as skipping such a natural dragel function, wasn't something that should be done.

At least, not without good reason.

Charlie stiffened.

Theo glanced up at him. He caught sight of the faraway gaze and the ripple of emotion in the dark blue eyes. Silently, he counted to ten—giving the chance for Charlie to ask on his own.

"...Theo?"

"Mm?"

"Ebony wants us." Charlie faltered, brow furrowed. "And I can't make out Harry."

"What?"

"I-I don't know. It feels muddled. How does it feel when Ilsa calls you?"

"...Like a headache," Theo deadpanned. "You're sure it's Ebony?" he shook his head. "What am I saying, of course you're sure. You'd have the connection to her." Theo ran a hand through his hair. Everything felt so complicated and it seemed as if it was destined to continue on that way, without even allowing a single pause for them to catch their breath. He wished, fervently, that they had time to regroup—at least enough for him to gather his thoughts together, to be sure about their next moves. There was so much happening and he could feel the mental and physical strain of struggling to make sure his Circle wouldn't be caught up in the midst of something troublesome.

Charlie nearly smiled. "Do we need to—?" He nodded towards Cora and Henry.

"They were likely staying for our sake," Theo said, quietly. His gaze remained fixed ahead at a general point on the stage below. "I think they'd rather be at one of their laboratories right now. Cora, at least. She's been on edge since we returned." Theo turned, tugging lightly on Charlie's sleeve.

It had the desired effect, as Charlie glanced down, angling himself to be close enough to hear whatever Theo intended for him to hear. He was completely caught off guard when a soft kiss was pressed to the corner of his mouth.

He blinked, speechless—blushing when Theo's troubled expression smoothed out to show a young, sweet face. As quickly as it had appeared—the expression vanished, replaced with a bland look of indifference as Theo pulled away, to approach Henry.

Charlie's aura flared protectively, settling into a steady pulse that surrounded their corner of the box and he understood, a second later, when Henry's arms tightened around Cora, before he cast a look to see what was the matter.

They conversed for a moment, with Theo nodding and smiling, before returning to Charlie.

"Good?"

"Perfect." Theo hummed. "Let's go. You can cast out in the hallway."

"Me?" Charlie asked, moving after him. "Why me?"
"Practice." Theo said, lightly. "You know you need it."

"Theo!"

The portal spat them out in one of the general receiving rooms. White-walled and brightly lit, Charlie winced against the unexpected shock. Theo grasped his arm, his own golden magic flickering at his fingertips.

Charlie was almost sure that Theo had helped him in casting the transportation portal, but he wasn't about to call him out on it. Theo was mostly right anyway. He did need to practice.

Now what? He wondered.

Theo straightened from his slight crouch and released his grip on Charlie's arm. "This way," he said, a moment later—starting towards a faintly lined section of the white room.

Seconds later, they stepped out into rather familiarly decorated halls and Charlie knew that he'd succeeded. At the end of the hall, a young girl in a flame-detailed tunic, over a simple black bodysuit, beckoned to them.

"Princess Ebony has asked me to escort you," she said, in a clear, sweet voice. "Would you accompany me?"

"Gladly," Theo said. He fell into step beside her and started, faintly, when Charlie's hand slipped into his.

If a tiny flush of pink touched his cheeks—briefly—Charlie didn't say anything.

Several minutes later, they were admitted to a light, airy room. Brighter and more open than Prince Raspen's study, with wispy drapes lending a nearly ethereal feel to the room. The Royals themselves, were seated on three out of the four long cushioned benches, bordering a massive, low table with dozens of documents scattered about the surface.

Theo wasn't sure if he was relieved not to note a certain, blue-haired Merrow Royal as present, or whether he was annoyed not to have the opportunity to comment on the irritating spell-removal from the last time.

Charlie's gaze had been immediately drawn to Ebony, who had sat facing the door and looked up at once, at their entrance. He smiled in answer to her beckoning wave.

"Has something come up?" Charlie asked, automatically moving to sit on the floor.

Theo made a noise in his throat and with a slight bow to Ebony, eased into the empty space on the large settee beside her.

Ebony chuckled. "Move between us," she suggested, lightly. "Spare your Alpha the headache."

Charlie glanced between them and felt his ears warm. He shifted to sit with his back against the settee—with Ebony's left leg braced against his right elbow and Theo on his left side.

Sandwiched.

His face warmed.

It had been instinct that made him think the floor was the most comfortable spot, in spite of the
available space on any of the settees in the room.

He could remember sitting by her feet before and that it had been a good place to be. He hadn't even thought further than that.

"Hello to you too," Ebony teased. "Did you have a good time at the Hunt today?"

"It was different." Charlie allowed. "I didn't know—realise—that there could be bonding's like that."

"Thought you'd have a few questions about that. Dahlia, right? She's special. What you saw was very rare. Not a lot of folks can do that. I think your Harry did though—a variation of it, at least," she said, absently. "At least, from what you've told me anyway. It sounds very likely."

"Quinn Kalzik said something about that," Theo offered. "That having a Soul Seal might mean that his initial call was—muted."

"Speaking of him—where is he? Out Hunting? I expected all three of you."

"Er—in a fashion," Theo hedged. "He was with the Kalzik's for part of the day."

Ebony laughed, a delighted sound. "He's in good hands then. I would say he has quite an unusual sort of luck. Would I be correct in guessing that he probably witnessed a more personal side of the Deveraine-Imaldis Circle bonding today?"

Theo managed a half-grimace. "Probably." He said, carefully. "I haven't asked him yet."

Ebony stifled another laugh. "He certainly is in the thick of things. To answer your question, yes, something has come up—can you 'port him in?"

Theo hesitated. The last time he had—it hadn't gone so well. It was probably best if someone went to fetch him personally—then again, it was Harry. His Harry wouldn't agree to travel with some random stranger, not without some kind of proof and the easiest thing would be if he went, but then that would mean leaving Charlie and-

"May I send someone for him?" Ebony asked.

"Harry doesn't trust—" Theo began, worried.

Ebony's smile softened. "You needn't worry. I know a few familiar faces he would at least, listen to."

Theo held himself perfectly still for a long moment.

Ebony's smile remained in place, her gaze firm. She was asking him for a degree of trust that he had yet to grant to her. She wouldn't force it from him, but it would be needed for future interactions, as it seemed their paths were destined to cross.

Silence stretched out and then Charlie shifted, uncomfortably—and the silent match was ended.

Thankfully, it seemed that the others, Raspen and Dawne, didn't even seem to notice the private interaction. Instead, they were discussing something with a newcomer that Charlie had never seen before. Raspen perched on the edge of the settee, leaning forward to look over his shoulder from the right, while Dawne mirrored him on the left.

They were reading over the newcomer's shoulder, conversing in low whispers that were too neatly
muffled to be anything other than a privacy spell.

It didn't escape Charlie's notice that even though he was openly staring—the stranger had yet to meet his gaze.

He was striking, as far as looks went. Sharp, angular features—almost hawk-like in appearance. Pointed, violet eyes, set deep in his face. Snowy-white hair that pooled on the ground around him, where he sat on a low stool. Hair that was twisted into a dozen neat plaits, each of them adorned with various glittering trinkets. Ridiculously pale skin, appearing almost translucent. The oddest detail, however, was his shabby clothes.

A series of black and grey robes that seemed to have been carefully layered over each other to hide the most obvious rips and tears from the one beneath it. Still—jewellery dripped from his ears and neck—a bejewelled collar, large, dangling earrings and several ornate cuffs on his wrists. Even his bare feet sported toe-rings, and delicate ankle chains.

"Whenever you're done," Ebony said, projecting her voice, enough to draw their attention. "Two out of three have arrived."

Raspen's head snapped up. "Two out of—oh." He said something and Dawne looked up, brightening.

"We have some information," she said, forcing a smile. "But I think it would be best to wait on Harry. Ebony?"

"I've sent someone," Ebony said, lips twitching. "I'm sure they'll be here shortly."

It was a familiar Gheyo that entered Dawne's personal quarters. The ornate mask and pitch black armour was almost something of a uniform.

The Cunningham's hired Gheyo—and a Blood Title holder—Theo recalled. That was a relief. He'd wondered who Ebony would send and this considerably soothed his ruffled scales. Hadrian had been useful before and friendly enough—at least, as far as Gheyos went, Theo would trust him enough to bring Harry here. After all, Ilsa and Greta had been friendly with him and as a Blood Title, there was a certain degree of trustworthiness, the Cunningham's Circle set aside.

Then again, the Cunningham's were currently helping with the searching for Maurice Elswood, so Theo decided that it was alright after all. Everything had worked out and he hadn't needed to send a portal.

Now, if they could simply start in on whatever it was that had prompted the Royals to summon them in the first place…

Hadrian moved to the side and Theo brightened at once, spotting Harry standing between the Gheyo and a tall, dark-skinned dragel—who happened to have his arm around Harry.

Harry.

Arm around Harry.

Theo couldn't stop the growl that left his lips—even if he wanted to.

It had the unfortunate effect of silencing the entire room.
To his credit, Harry didn't look the least bit worried, only a touch sheepish. He ignored the other occupants of the room, his rich green eyes fixed solely on Theo, as if silently entreating his Alpha to listen. "Theo—I can explain," he began, his face flushing a definite shade of red. "Just—um—hear me out?"

Theo bristled, faintly. Scales rippled and surfaced along the sides of his face, and up his neck. His hands ached, claws itching to come to the surface, but held back by the barest threads of control. "I'm listening…"

"Right, um, alright." Harry gave a nervous laugh, then looked to the side and casually leaned into the stranger. "This is Ethan Hartwood—he's our new Pareya."

It took Theo all of five seconds to silently lose his mind and piece it back together. Yes, he had been nudging Harry to hunt and find a new Bonded. Yes, he had stressed the importance of it. Yes, he'd tried to share what he knew about the actual Nevarean hunting process—however limited that was.

But he hadn't expected this.

Correction—he knew Harry was more than capable of reaching out with his heart and magic, but he'd expected to at least meet the stranger on private terms before it ever reached this point.

An introduction even, before it came to this. There was no way that Harry would introduce the newcomer as anything other than 'our Pareya' unless there was something already sealed and promised between them.

Sealed and promised. Marked or Bonded or both.

A dull roaring seemed to fill his ears and Theo was vaguely aware that silence—however awkward—was filling the room and that he had yet to speak or move. He wasn't sure what he could possibly say to that—he'd never rehearsed anything for this particular scenario.

Never expected to have an audience for it either.

Charlie shifted uncomfortably on the floor beside him, waiting for a cue that would signal how to set the tone for this crucial first interaction.

Right. Crucial.

Theo swallowed. He could do this. He would've had to do it anyway—it was simply happening sooner than he'd expected. He broke the stare, casting a quick look about the room—annoyed to notice that all of the Royals were most certainly being polite with their bland smiles and averted eyes.

"I think twenty minutes wouldn't put us too off track," Raspen said, pleasantly. His voice seemed to fill the airy room at once. "Is that enough?"

The way it was phrased meant that it would have to be enough, but considering who was offering and the current circumstance, Theo made himself respond. It was a kind offer, after all.

"That is very generous—thank you." He managed to say.

Raspen rose, offering a fluid half-bow. "But of course. Congratulations on your new Pareya."
"Hartwood—from the scholars, eh?" Ebony hummed. She patted Charlie's head, as she moved to stand as well. "That's a lucky catch for your lot. They're well-known for being living archives—both of the useful and useless information. Congratulations, Harry." She waved a hand at her personal guards. "Shall we?"

Dawne simply produced a pretty glass-like bauble, with a handful of shimmering sand. A temporary hourglass timer that she set atop the stacks of papers on the low coffee table. "Twenty minutes," she said, lightly. "Congratulations to you and yours." She smiled brightly at Harry on her way to the door. "The Hartwoods are a wonderful clan. Very nicely done."

Harry blushed a bright, brilliant red.

The remaining royal guards filed out in careful synchronization behind their respective Royals. A minute later, the door clicked shut and the locks turned automatically—Dawne's private security system obeying her wishes to be sure the young Circle wouldn't be interrupted.

More silence stretched out.

Harry bit his lip.

Theo shifted to stand from the settee—only for the newcomer—Ethan, Harry had called him?—to move.

"No—don't. Please." The request came quickly—softly—and then Ethan was there, standing. Taller than Theo—maybe even as tall as Charlie and—kneeling?

Theo blinked.

Yes. Ethan was kneeling—within arm's reach—his expression earnest and open. His rich dark skin highlighted his gorgeous gold eyes—bright, pure gold—without the slightest hint of black.

**Honest eyes**... Theo thought to himself. He opened his mouth to speak.

Ethan wet his lips, eyes immediately focused on Theo's chest. "My name is Ethan Hartwood—as the Princesses said, my family clan belongs to the trade of historical record and scientific research. We are scholars." Ethan dipped his head. "I had sent a favour to Harry, after the introductions. We met while standing in line—I—we—please, may I?"

Something in the way he was asking, soothed the last of Theo's ruffled hackles. He gathered himself together, turning the entire bit of news over in his head. From Harry's bonds, he could feel the earlier delight, shifting to a worried concern. Still, Harry was happy, beneath all of the emotions and that was what mattered most.

Theo studied him for a moment longer—because he could—and then huffed. It wouldn't be like this was the first time Harry's luck had thrown him into a surprising situation and he was sure it wouldn't be the last.

Oh well.

Who was he kidding? It wasn't that he minded. It was simply unexpected and he couldn't help the years of ingrained hyper-cautiousness all but carved into his psyche. Slytherin he was, but a loner, he'd been.

For far too long.
"Welcome," he said, at last. "I am Theo—as you seem to know—Theodore Gorgens Nott, using my mentor's name, Lady Ilsa of the Gorgen's Clan for social leverage during the Hunt. My element is Earth and I am renewing connections I have not seen in years, since my recent return to Nevarah."

The bowed head tipped to the side, to show that Ethan was listening.

Theo made a soft clicking sound in his mouth.

Ethan's head snapped up at once, those pretty golden eyes fixed on him once more.

Reaching out—slowly—Theo gave him time to pull away, if needed, before gently tipping his chin up. His thumb stroked ever-so-lightly over those full, dusky lips.

Ethan quivered.

Harry sucked in a breath.

Charlie froze.

A long, slow inhale—his magic surging inside of him—Theo breathed out and allowed his aura to run free.

It snapped out from him like a boomerang, relieved and ecstatic to run wild and unchecked, before settling into a powerful simmer, crackling through the air around him.

"I have heard of the Hartwood's," Theo allowed, leaning forward. Ethan was smart—he'd put himself in the right place for easy access. Nice, Theo thought.

Tilting Ethan's head further to the side, Theo reached over and kissed him.

Simple and direct.

Ethan gave a little sigh and all but melted into the kiss. Leaning forward, hands coming up to rest on Theo's knees, his own magic began to pour out of him, mixing with Theo's and filling the room.

Beside them, Charlie relaxed and Harry huffed. "Too dramatic," he muttered. He'd crossed the room to slip into Charlie's lap, wanting to be on hand if something went wrong—and also, having the sudden urge to feel up his good-looking Beta.

His hands had found their way under Charlie's robes—before Charlie had caught them—and they were now watching Theo and Ethan's little session.

Harry licked his lips. He knew exactly what that felt like—from both ends.

They broke apart, Ethan panting and Theo a bit pink-cheeked.

"Neck?" Theo breathed, touching their foreheads together.

Ethan half-laughed. "Harry took the left side."

"Right it is..." Theo mumbled. His hands slid up Ethan's arms—one to cradle his neck and the other to tug at the shirt collar.

Ethan allowed the movements, neck bared without complaint. He pressed his lips together when Theo's fangs pierced his neck, digging deep into the softness there.
A quiet hiss was the only proof of the bond latching on until Theo withdrew, mouth bloody.

"Where?" Ethan rasped out, shuddering as the bond began to throb—seeking completion.

"Wrist," Theo said, quickly. He ripped open the right sleeve of his robes and shirt, to present his wrist.

Ethan hesitated, then pushed the sleeve higher, selecting a spot closer to the elbow. He glanced up—once—for confirmation, then bit down.

Theo curled forward, his head almost touching Ethan's. He took a deep breath when the magic took root and the bond called out.

Harry whimpered from somewhere beside him and they both turned as one, crooning to soothe him. Charlie purred louder, hugging Harry tightly to his chest.

Theo blinked, surprised and mildly curious at the instinctive reaction. Now that Ethan had finished placing his mark, some of the mental haze was fading and he was finding it easier to talk himself out of kissing that enticing mouth.

Feeling his gaze, Ethan turned. He stretched up at the same time that Theo leaned forward and they met in the middle again for another round of contented, satisfied kisses.

"Pureblood?" Theo inquired, when they parted for air once more.

Ethan flashed a smile that was nearly more fang than grin. "Yes."

"Charlie's a half-blood. I'm a pureblood. Harry's a pureblood as well."

Ethan's eyes widened, but he smiled. That was a useful tidbit of information and it said more about his new Alpha, that he'd shared such things so quickly. It meant that trust was there and could be grown into something strong and loyal.

"Are you done?" Harry wanted to know. He was cuddled up to Charlie and quite fine being there, but the pretty hourglass timer had caught his eye and he'd realized that time was ticking away.

"Yes, we're done for now." Theo said, fondly. "Some warning would be nice next time."

Harry sniffed. "You were the one who told me to hunt." He pretended to stick his nose in the air.

It worked.

Theo laughed.

The last lingering bit of tension vanished, as if it had never been there at all.

They joined in after that—the laughter easing everything between them. Ethan swapped with Harry—and Charlie had his own turn at tasting and marking their new Pareya.

Cuddled on Theo's lap, Harry wiggled closer, determined to bask in the happy moment for as long as he possibly could.

Things would certainly be chaotic as soon as that timer was up, but for now, he could sit here—feeling Theo's hand skimming up and down his back, his breath whuffling through his hair and his aura wrapped protectively around him.
For now, he could simply enjoy the sight of Ethan cradled in Charlie's tanned arms and both of them learning their way about each other, between soft bites and warm kisses.

It didn't surprise him when Charlie's hair burst into happy flames and Ethan's dark fingers combed lazily through the flickering locks.

Harry smiled.

Perfect.

GEORGE : EVANSON MANOR : NEVARAH

George stood in front of the mirror in the shared bedroom with Chris. The light fae had been very generous in allowing him to share living quarters, while the Circle adjusted to their arrival and Jun's return.

Jun had simply said that she didn't want anyone in a guest room and so, her Circle had done as requested. Chris had volunteered with a little sigh, mentioning that it wouldn't be good for George to room with Gheyos.

The women had laughed and promptly brought a variety of blankets, pillows, and clean pyjamas to share. He was instructed to pick his favourite colour out of the available choices.

Colour, Ivy had explained, made it easy to know what belonged to who. George had filed that away for later remembrance, surprised and amazed to see how the Pareya bustled about, taking care of everyone—and themselves.

Sure, at first, things were awkward, but not bad. Not the way that George had known that things could get. This warmth and easy acceptance, though a bit hesitant, was something he hadn't even known could be craved.

There were still many things plaguing his mind at night and since Jun's recent preoccupation with her Circle, he hadn't the chance to talk to her lately. Of all the things he'd missed from their strange little time together as a family of Regulus-Jun-George, it was the easy access to both of them.

Jun had spent time with each one of her Bonded, talking, hugging, crying and sharing magic and memories in equal measure. He couldn't begin to imagine how exhausting it would be for her as an empath.

He'd seen her practically throw herself into the deep pit carved out in the backyard. The ground shaking, then stilling as she forcefully calmed and centred herself.

It still awed him how none of them seemed to think it was strange. They'd simply waited for the ground to stop shaking, then ventured forth with warmed, wet towels and bottles of water.

Strange and yet, somehow beautiful.

George hadn't known how to handle witnessing those moments. He'd found it easier to slip away and stay by himself for a bit, allowing his thoughts to sort out.


Since arriving on Nevarah, he'd felt incredibly tired and lacking energy both physical, mental and
magical. Then there'd been the dreams. Strange, vivid dreams with only one person.

The one person that he couldn't be absolutely sure about anymore.

Harry.

Only Harry.


Harry—as he'd never seen him before.

It haunted him on a level he'd never experienced before. Vivid dreams of Harry laughing, talking and—snuggling?—with him. Simply being close and never straying far. Not wanting to travel where George couldn't go.

Sharing the warmth, laughter and even love, that George had never even dared to hope could be his. This dream Harry held power, but never abused it—the dreams were always electrically charged.

He would wake from a short nap and find the magic singing through his body, laughing through his veins as if it were alive.

In a way, he supposed it was.

But Harry?

It was confusing. So confusing, except for—he couldn't help it. He wanted it. He—dare he consider it—craved it. The touch of a hand he'd never felt in that way. The press of lips on his skin—when he couldn't even recall how a kiss was supposed to feel. Soft, fluffy hair that shouldn't even be that way, given how messy he'd seen it could be.

Then the dreams would clash with reality and George would find himself scrambling for some sort of mental anchor. For he was only seeing Harry's return at the beginning of the school year and wondering about the dull look in those frantic green eyes. Remembering the lack of food on his plate and the absence during mealtimes. Hearing the odd whispered rumours about a possible collapse in Snape's class of all places.

And then there was Fred. His other half. His missing half, as it were. Fred who had chosen the opposite. Fred who was no longer like him.

George shook his head, slightly, to clear it. This was no time to be reminiscing of such things. There were new opportunities in front of him and it was best to take them on, one at a time.

The ache in his chest throbbed again. A painful spike that seemed to hammer itself deeper into his very being, with each pulsing beat. He pressed a hand to his chest, staring unseeing into the floor length mirror set in the corner of the room near the vanity.

Something moved at the corner of his eye and he blinked, seeing a familiar face joining his reflection.

Jun...he hadn't meant to call her, but the look of concern on her face, meant that he had.

"George?" Jun was beside him, a hand on his shoulder, her face near to his. She nuzzled his cheek,
gently and breathed into his hair, scenting him.

In the background, a worried Chris peeked around the corner, a slight flush of embarrassment on his face. He'd gone to retrieve Jun, apparently.

George blinked.

The pain eased as Jun's hand smoothed over his heart, her fingers lacing through his own hand and simply holding it there, as her magic spilled over into him.

"Oretta…"

"Why didn't you say something sooner?" She scolded, lightly. "If you don't tell me these things, I don't know. I can't read your mind, darling."

"I didn't think you could do anything—it hurts." He gasped out, clutching her hand tightly to him. "It hurts so much—why?"

"Shhh," Jun murmured. She pressed a kiss to the side of his head and gently hugged him to her. Magic rose up, wrapping deliberately around both of them, pushing away the pain and easing the fierce ache until it was nothing more than a dull throb.

George heaved a gasp. He shuddered, even as the hug tightened, grounding him in the moment. Warmth flickered inside of him, his element confused, but still striving to be strong.

"Better?" Jun murmured. "Don't fight it. Just—feel."

He took a shaky breath, eyes half-closed, trying to do as instructed. "What's—wrong with me? Is it the soulmate thing?"

Jun sighed. "It's more a matter of time and a change in location."

She held him for a moment longer, allowing him the comfort of physical contact. She made a mental note to remind her Bonded to do the same—random hugs were always good for young dragels. It reminded them that they were loved and cared for, along with providing any tactile comfort needed.

"I don't understand."

"You're dreaming of him, aren't you? That's proof. See, he called for you, before your seals were off and your transformation was even a possibility. You're feeling the incompleteness of the bond and he probably is too. You couldn't have answered him, properly, because of your blood and because of a dozen other factors, but mainly the situation as it was in that moment. You weren't in any condition to accept and he wasn't equipped to help you past that. It takes years to develop that kind of power and the concentration needed to handle what you went through."

George squeezed his eyes shut. He felt warmth burst out from his hands, flickering at his fingertips. He didn't have to look to know that black flames licked at the ends. Flames that still terrified him.

"What about now?"

"Now…" Jun brushed a hand along his arm. "I would say that you are—ready enough."

"Really?" He twisted around to look at her, searching for anything in her expression that would
contradict what she was saying.

"You'll know when you see him." She said, softly. "It will feel like everything coming together and everything falling apart, all at the same time. Then it will be alright. I promise you, he won't refuse you. Your souls are already searching for each other."

George shuddered. That sounded like a terrible contradiction of things to feel. But if it meant that rejection wasn't likely—then maybe, it would be alright.

"Shh. Enough brooding now." Jun dropped a kiss atop his head, effectively smothering out the flickering dark flames. "Come along—we're all ready to leave. Some fresh air will do everyone good."

Any protest to that was swallowed down as George drew himself up and fell into step. Jun's fingers brushed lightly against his hand, before she quickened her step.

Outside the door, Chris smiled and fell into step behind him.

They were outside of the protective wards, before Jun threw up a massive magical barrier of her own. It covered the entire estate, glowing with fierce gold and red threads of visible energy as she backed away from the house, her face grim.

"Stay back—all of you."

"Jun?" Rian ventured. "Talk to me, love."

"Back—everyone back," Jun called out, waving a hand at them for emphasis. She wouldn't have them staying so close to a house that was now, no longer theirs. "When is the last time we checked for compulsions, bugs or sets inside of the house? Before or after I left?"

Briar froze. His horrified look matched that of several of his Bonded. There were some things he simply hadn't done, because Jun always took care of it and so he'd never bothered to worry about them.

"At least—two years?" he looked to Rian for confirmation. They'd kept to some things, purely out of habit. Jun, for all that they had teased her about her tendency to be hyper-cautious, they'd always indulged her and her hunches often proved right.

Including when she'd willingly paid nearly two-thirds of their entire savings for the sake of a living web of protective enchantments around the house. Enchantments that were made to glow the same green as her eyes or purple, when Briar chose to activate it.

Now, the sickly red colour seemed far too ominous as they stood outside of the far corner wards, staring up at the massive estate.

Silence stretched out for a minute.

Rian stirred, faintly. He'd been sifting through the memories and determining when and why. He'd checked, personally, the first year or two—and then things had gotten busy.

"Four," he confirmed, when Briar perked a brow, waiting. "We checked a few times, but—nothing ever came of it. Did you feel something?"

Jun shivered, rubbing her hands up and down her arms, shakily. Her eyes were wide and the
slightest sliver of horror was visible. Her magic was tightly coiled inside of her, wrapped too close to her empathy for a decent read for what she wanted to know. "Felt more than I should have, I think. Didn't register until the last grounding and then—I figured it would be best to have everyone out of the house."

Gardenia, the ACE, was the first one to draw near, easily pulling her tall Alpha into her arms and rubbing briskly along those pale arms to impart some semblance of warmth. The fact that Jun let her, spoke volumes about the threat now looming overhead. "Jun—what did you sense? Did you see something? Have you heard something?"

Jun made a distressed sound in her throat.

Gardenia frowned and turned to catch Jasmine's eye. Her King straightened up at once and whispered something that had all of their Gheyos circling up around them.

An agitated ripple fluttered through them as the Pareyas began to display their protective instincts. Wings bursting forth, that stretched up to the sky, kept close together, meant to shield—rather than to fly. They were easily feeding off of the rising tension of their Gheyos and knew that it was time to bare fangs.

"We shouldn't talk here," Orchid said. Her fairy wings fluttered, growing larger as she cracked her neck, rolling it to the side. The faint shimmer of fairy dust was the hint of a privacy spell being silently invoked. "Jun—lovey, have you anywhere we can—?"

Jun hesitated. "You would know our contacts better than I would at this point. I'll try whoever you believe we should trust the most."

Chris fluttered closer, hovering protectively near George and Regulus. As the newest ones in the group, he would feel compelled to shadow them, even through Regulus was now bonded into them. "Have they any connections?" he asked, nodding towards them.

George gave a wan smile. He didn't shrug off the protective arm that settled around his shoulders. There was a soft, continuous warmth that trickled out from the nearly always glowing fae. It brought every good feeling and memory of his family to the surface, smoothing it over the recent emotional wounds.

"Family on his mother's side," Jun murmured. "But we couldn't impose. Not with them completely unaware of his existence and no public announcement of my return. It would be too rude and goodness knows what kind of social upset we could cause." She scowled. "I'd hate to do it without a cause, anyway."

"Point," Chris allowed. He thought it through and came to the same conclusion, mildly irritated that Jun had reasoned it out so quickly. He should have caught that first—then again, it had been a while since he'd had to focus on making use of their presence rather than hiding it.

Another bout of silence stole through their solemn group.

"We could chance your father," Rian suggested, gauging her reaction. "He'll likely let you in and I'm sure you can handle it from there." He held out an arm, nearly smiling when Briar all but burrowed into his side at once.

Instinctively seeking comfort, Briar went to him—as Gardenia was still wrapped around Jun. It would take time before they could form new patterns or fall back on old habits.

Jun took a deep breath, her shoulders still curled forward, Gardenia's arms still locked around her,
protectively—but lightly, giving her the chance to break free if she wished. "We could try…" she allowed, slowly.

Her family was set in their ways, but they were still dragel. And family, amongst dragels, was always and forever, family. At least, the way that her mother had seen her raised. She could at least try to speak to him, even if part of her largely wanted to rant and rave at him, to demand how he could have left her Circle alone for so long, to fend for themselves. Not even to check in with them or even to send word that her mother had passed.

Yes. She had a great deal to ask of him. As he likely had much to ask of her. She'd never intended for this whole mess to come about and there was still so much to process.

She drew away from Gardenia, turning to offer a thin smile. Her ACE had always been the one to stand so strongly besides her, whenever needed—with one exception that she intended to remedy quite soon. "We'll do that, but first, we need to find Zeph."

Predictably, Gardenia scowled. She hadn't been averse to the Joker joining their ranks—she did trust Jun—but it had been too close to her sudden disappearance. Instinct had demanded that she close ranks—and Rian had supported her.

It hadn't helped that she'd never seen the Joker fight, had spoken less than five words and then had to charm his way out of a rather public altercation, two months after Jun's disappearance. Furious and overworked, she'd ordered him to the pits—without sticking around to see if he'd obeyed. Several months later, she'd confirmed it, but was still too irritated to bother retrieving him.

"Anything you'd like to say?" Jun prompted.

Gardenia struggled to hold that knowing gaze. "I haven't heard from him since he's been in the pits."

It was unspoken that she hadn't bothered after Jun's disappearance.

"Alright, I'll request him then." Jun crooked a finger at Regulus. "You and him—formally—with us." She gestured at her Bonded. "As soon as we can manage it. If there are any objections—let me know before then." She tugged on her hair. That was the basics for now—everything else should be covered. "The children?"

"Leave them to me," Heather murmured. The children had automatically gathered around her as they always did. The older ones shielding the younger ones, faint lines of worry visible, but not overwhelming.

Jun wrinkled her nose. "Circle up!"

Her Bonded shuffled closer.

Rich, red-gold magic flared out and around them, spanning several feet further than the size of their actual Circle. It chimed and soared as power built within it.

Jun sniffed. "Temptrificus Saurenth!"

They appeared outside of the Gheyo Training Pits, in one of the public receiving areas. It was hidden into one of the slightly sheltered and shadowed corners off to the side, to allow extra privacy during the Hunt, without diminishing the functionality of 'porting in large Circles.
A glance from Jun to Ivy, communicated that all was well and that they would be fine. Gardenia shuffled forward to take stock of the new surroundings and to pick out if there were any familiar faces.

She was able to pinpoint a few and beckoned to Leif to accompany her to speak with them. The Pareya tightened ranks once more, drawing closer to each other and striving to maintain an outwardly indifferent appearance, should any stray eyes fall in their direction.

"How long do you think it'll take?" Ivy wanted to know. She preened her fingernails, frowning at the ragged tips. Taking care of herself hadn't been as important since Jun had left—she'd opted to focus on her Circle instead. Maybe now that would change. It had only been the small details she'd let slip, after all.

"As long as it needs to," Jun said, briskly. Her sharp eyes were still cataloguing everything around them, noting what had changed since her last visit to this particular place.

"We probably shouldn't linger here," Ivy said, carefully. It always made her antsy to be anywhere near the Gheyos' training grounds and this was close enough to make her skin crawl. It didn't matter that their Circle was all but military in power, given Briar's—unusual—tendencies.

"Here is safer," Azalea said, mildly. She was relieved to be closer to her fellow Gheyos in general—if something were to happen, she could rally any available acquaintances—if needed.

Ivy made a sound of disagreement, looking as if she wanted to say something more, but was visibly holding her tongue.

Azalea frowned. "Where did you have in mind?"

"Food courts—even some clothes. If you're not keen on us returning from where we've come, the first thing we'll need is appropriate clothes to be calling on any available contacts," Ivy looked to Jun. "Some of us have valuables stashed in the vaults, but that's mostly jewellery and weaponry. Not clothes."

"Weren't my accounts open to you?" Jun asked. A shadow settled on her face, jaw clenched. "Or have they been frozen?"

Rian's sharp-eyed gaze found her first. He slipped over to her side, hand half-raised as if wanting to reach out and comfort her, stopping when her gaze pinned him in place. "Frozen after the first year," he said, quietly. "That's when we figured something was wrong. We tried to contact you and couldn't."

Jun stiffened. "Even my emergency accounts?" her voice was hollow.

Rian shifted, uncomfortably. "Briar makes more than enough with his Reaping and Arielle knows our lot can rack up enough in the Pits, if they have to. With everyone chipping in, we managed well enough."

Jun swore softly in answer. Her talent—Runes—was often in high demand across more realms than merely Nevarah. She was paid quite well for her services and it had been a matter of principle to provide for her Circle.

"They'd best be unfrozen now." She held out a hand to Ivy, who immediately handed over her Circle token. A fresh bead of blood would ensure that it was correctly honoured wherever presented. The Royals should have confirmed her return to Nevarah and any unnecessary holds would have been lifted. "Anything else I need to activate?"
"Our duelling rights and excuses to the usual," Azalea offered. "We've gone anyway, but weren't able to participate in the branded tournaments because we didn't have the kind of waivers needed. They pay more for those you know. Nice winnings for the flashy ones."

Jun stifled a laugh. She had fond memories of *those* particular duels—overly dramatic, but well-executed in terms of a visual pleasure to witness.

Beside her, Briar flushed a soft pink.

Inwardly, Jun stifled a smile. She hadn't meant to project that, but if their minds were in sync—all the better. "If you didn't have the kind of waivers needed, then it would be due to the tournament likely to result in loss of limb or life."

Azalea shrugged, unperturbed by the explanation. "It looked like fun."

"Death defying stunts for the sake of shiny new armour?" Briar snorted. "No." He said, firmly.

"I'll sign them—after I check with Gardenia," Jun promised. She trusted Gardenia—who knew exactly what limits that Briar had in relation to their public duels. If her ACE said it was fine, then it would be. Briar would accept that and their Gheyos would be happy.

As if on cue, Briar sniffed, arms crossed over his chest—near pout almost visible.

Azalea grinned, impishly. "Great. I want at least three rounds with that Snowflake Drake they brought in from Kyrago."

"Absolutely not," Briar huffed, twisting around to look at her. "They have venomous ice fangs. Venomous. Ice. Fangs."

"I heard you the first time," Azalea teased. "But seriously, how can that even be real? I'd think the venom would melt any kind of fang, even if you used magic, that would just make it a glaring weak spot. How would it even be practical?"

"Real?" Rian echoed. "Practical? Arielle, woman! Have you a death wish?"

"Clothes," Ivy interrupted. She nudged Regulus. "You need to be outfitted in our colours. You too." She said, nodding at George. "What are your sizes? We generally order things to be crafted and specifically tailored. It looks better when we have to present."

George looked to Jun. "I'm good with a fitting or two." He said, quickly. What he had to wear at present, were all magically sized or his original outfit from the Wizarding World. Nothing that he felt particularly comfortable wearing in Nevarah.

Regulus hesitated. His winged arms would mean some creative options were needed. "Wings," he said, simply. "I don't care about the colours."

"Of course," Ivy said, briskly. "That's no problem at all. If you have no preferences, once I have your sizes, I'll select everything you'd need for a season. You'll still need to be wearing our Circle colours." She frowned. "Full outfits for both of you and filling in the gaps for the rest of us, I suppose."

Rian hid a smile. Ivy could be ferocious when she was like this. Perhaps he'd better join them to keep the peace. "Briar?" he glanced at his Submissive.

Briar was staring at the entrance to the pits, his eyes flickering a steadily darker shade than their
expected hue. He tore his gaze away at Rian's voice and shook himself, as if to break an invisible trance. "I'll come." He said, simply. Clothes shopping was marginally more interesting than setting foot in the pits. His submissive status would be a headache in there, anyway. "Jun?"

"We won't be long," Jun said, quietly.

"I'll hold you to that," Briar said, evenly. "Jasmine?"

Azalea drooped, but Jasmine straightened up, her pretty eyes fixed on him.

"Go with her." Briar said, simply. "Rian?"

Rian stepped forward, bending to nuzzle the top of Briar's head.

"Jas?" Jun glanced over at her. She wouldn't require it, but it would be easier on all of them if at least one of her Gheyos were willing to accompany her into the Pits. Her Alpha status would allow her to duck in and retrieve Zephyr, but there were still some things that only a Gheyo would know.

She knew better than to ask it of Gardenia, who had instantly scampered off before such a difficult question could be posed. She'd also, of course, taken Leif with her—the one who likely would've volunteered.

Jun didn't have to wait though, because Briar had made the decision for all of them.

Jasmine shrugged and stepped forward. If that was what Briar wanted, then she would do as requested. Her golden eyes flared, briefly as they skittered over George. "You should come too, youngling," she tipped her head invitingly. "You might never find another chance after this. Alpha?"

Jun glanced at him thoughtfully. Jasmine had a point. Exposure to such things would be good for him, considering what he'd witnessed of dragel culture so far—too little.

The hesitancy she could read in his eyes, seemed to be in the way he looked to her for approval. He'd be curious, but holding his questions back until he could be sure he could ask them and hear the answers that she would give. It was a habit that was now endearing to her.

"You're welcome to," Jun said, carefully. "So as long as you do exactly as you're told."

George seemed relieved. He could do that. "I will."

"Good," Jasmine hummed. "Both of you will be perfectly fine, as long as you do exactly as you're told."

Jun didn't comment on that definition, but she allowed Jasmine to take the lead, as George came to join them.

Azalea stepped up to fill in the gap, her smile a bit bland, her sharp blue eyes cataloguing everything around them as they moved away. By default, she was now accompanying the rest of them to see to the vaults and new clothes.

Maybe after Ivy's shopping spree she'd have some time to poke about on her own.

"Why is it called the Pit?" George had to ask as they joined a fast-moving line, leading up to the massive wall of pitch black rock.

Jasmine snorted. "Because it's the pits when you're in there." She said, sweeping her hair up in a
high ponytail and spelling it to stay there. She tested the grips on her knives and frowned, loosening the clasp on the left one for better access. "I want you to hold onto me or Jun the entire time you're in here. Do not let go."

George nodded, quickly. He wanted to ask why, but the words caught in his throat when his eyes met hers.

Her golden gaze darkened, meaningfully. "Time is irrelevant in the Pits and the standard offering is ten minutes for ten years. If you do not wish to age unduly and be scarred from the experience-" she started, faintly when Jun reached out and grasped her hand and then George's, her grip firm.

"I won't." George said, tightly.

Jun smiled.

The line moved forward until it was their turn.

Jasmine held out her right arm, wrist bared.

The ACE on duty, flipped it over and seared the current timestamp into the tender flesh of her inner wrist. "Admitting three." He rumbled.

They were shuffled toward the large, dark opening. It wasn't lit anywhere. Dark enough that each individual entering, gradually vanished from sight—even as the line continued moving.

George felt the floor ripple and shift beneath his feet as they stepped into the suffocating darkness. It was as if there were many hands tearing at him, all at once, attempting to pull him in every direction imaginable.

The strongest connection was the steady warmth from Jun's hand clasped to his, pulling him along at a decent pace—and firm in its grip, as if it had no intention of ever releasing him.

He wondered, briefly, why Jasmine had even thought to extend the offer.

It was odd.

He barely knew her. Though she had been kind enough, he supposed. It was still difficult to wrap his head around the different ranks and the distinctions between Pareya and Gheyo.

It had bothered him, just a bit, to leave everyone there, but he knew that Ivy was strong and that Azalea had a wicked way with the curved blades strapped to her thighs. They would be safe and protected—Merlin, he knew that they were dangerous.

The Reaping night had proved that in spades. They were vicious and efficient, protecting each other while effectively letting off a great deal of pent-up aggression. If he hadn't been doing the same himself, he would have been concerned.

In spite of their flowery names, there was very little that was dainty and floral—if at all—about them. He wondered, briefly, how come Jun's Circle didn't have any special classification. She'd explained the different types to him and he was fairly certain that hers was not normal.

George swallowed hard.

Definitely not normal.

Darkness began to lighten up ahead and he squinted, trying to pinpoint the pale blue slashes of light
that gradually grew brighter and bigger as they drew near.

"It'll be loud," Jasmine warned.

George didn't know if he answered her or not, because a thick wall of glowing, rich blue light was now directly in front of them and before he could process whether he wanted to enter it or not—the very floor, it seemed,—picked them up and propelled them forward.

From absolute silence to loud, raucous cheering—he jerked and stumbled, grabbing at Jun's shoulder, in case he'd somehow managed to wrench their hands apart.

She simply tucked his arm under hers, squeezing his hand reassuringly.

They were surrounded by hundreds of Gheyos, at his best guess, standing outside of a massive duelling ring somewhere in the centre stage below.

Happy cheers and ugly jeers filled the air, thick with the stench of blood, sweat and various bodily fluids.

George swallowed. His stomach churned, unhappily. Several pressing magical auras flared up around him, warring between each other for dominance. He tried to pinpoint them and managed to place a few of the taller, darker Gheyos.

Possible ACE's, he thought to himself, suppressing a shudder at the very visible scars on the Gheyos they passed.

He didn't want to know what would make those kinds of scars. Didn't want to know why someone would wear them. Didn't think he could handle knowing.

Something rippled through the rough stadium. The ground trembled. George stumbled, trying to stay on his feet as he felt Jun's grasp on his hand—strain against the sudden shift.

He caught his balance with a hand that reached out to steady him with a tight grasp on his robe's sleeve. It was sharp enough to hurt, but strong enough to keep him upright.

For a split-second, he was frozen, staring up into gorgeous pink eyes, set in an impossibly pale face, framed by short, choppy, pitch-black hair. Pointed ears not quite hidden by the inky locks was proof of the Gheyo's fae nature. A black-and-red sword hilt was visible over one slender, well-armoured shoulder.

Magic strained inside of George, a spark sputtering out before it could even begin to surface. His breath caught in his throat and words failed him.

The pink-eyed fae regarded him with some measure of disinterest, mingled with disdain, before the gentle hand keeping him upright, was abruptly withdrawn. The fae turned back to his companion—a slender, four-armed man, with long, white bandages wrapped around the upper-half of his face, trailing down to his waist.

Bewildered, George twisted around, turning to try and memorize their faces, even as words swelled up in his throat. He felt as if he ought to say something—do something!—before the chance was lost, but nothing would come.

"Eyes down," Jasmine muttered—her voice magically carried to his ear. "And for Golgmar's sake, don't look at anything. You're unbonded."
He started, faintly, but ducked his head at once, eyes trained on the barely visible floor. The image of the lovely Gheyo lingered in his mind, more emotions surfacing as he turned the image over, trying to decide if it was pain in those pink eyes or something more.

The lack of red, had him dismissing the thought of the stranger being a Vampire. At least, he'd yet to meet a Vampire since his introduction to the dragel world. Besides, Jun's fae Bonded had all sported the same type of pointed ears.

It had to be a Fae. He was sure of it.

Alright. Reasonably sure of it.

George shook his head. He'd think of it later, for now, he'd do as Jasmine suggested and keep his head down. It was probably safer that way for all of them. Even if the floor was just as messy as the weird smells and sweaty bodies jostling for space around them.

Jasmine led them quickly through the crowd and through equally crowded hallways—all of them built with the same strange, purple-black, shimmering substance, that seemed to change every time that George tried to focus on it.

"Ten-year contract, right?" Jasmine muttered, half to herself.

"Renewable if no one retrieved him after the first ten," Jun supplied. "It's breakable if it's beyond the first ten. There's no outside prompt."

Jasmine growled, faintly.

The corridor opened out into a wide, circling balcony, that ringed a floating platform in the centre of the massive dome. There were dozens of Gheyos stretching, bending and twisting as they went through their warm-up exercises.

A few of them were balancing precariously on the wire railings of the floating platform, testing their wings and focusing on proper posture during each extension.

The atmosphere was slightly more relaxed here and each aura seemed to be deliberately muted.

"What did he look like again?" Jasmine wanted to know, sharp eyes scanning the group. She drew them over to the high, metal railing of the circular balcony.

It was to her own dismay, that she realised the current disadvantage to her actions so many years before. She hadn't spent any time with the estranged Joker at all. Instead, she'd nodded at him from a distance and immediately directed her attention elsewhere. She hadn't wanted to think of another Bonded entering their Circle as Jun was leaving for her latest assignment. So she'd tuned it out.

But Jun silently fed an image through their Bonds without delay. It was a flash of laughter and the short memory of Jun's first meeting with him.

Jasmine flinched. She hadn't expected that. The silent rebuke stung, but she forcefully pushed the emotions away. She could deal with that. Later. Maybe.

George shifted uncomfortably as the memory was shared with him as well. It wasn't the first time he'd received a mental image from her, but it was the first time he'd ever seen one with that sort of powerful emotion behind it.

He was the first one to spot him though, as he scanned the floating platform and finally laid eyes
on a well-braided head of russet-hued hair. When the large man turned to the side to speak, George could almost make out his face.

"There?" he said, lifting his free hand to point.

"Don't point," Jasmine said, quickly. She reached over to smack his hand down, but Jun was quicker and did it for her. "Don't. Trust me. That can come off like a challenge and right now, I don't know how well I'd do if there's more than eight of them against us. We'll be gravely outnumbered and who knows what they'll require of you two?"

"How are we supposed to-" George wanted to know.

Jun pursed her lips and whistled.

Both Jasmine and George flinched in tandem. They each pulled sharply on her hands, to gain her attention, but she wasn't even looking at them.

Instead, she only had eyes for the slowly smiling giant who had turned at once and was now making his way toward them with increasing speed.

His wings—massive forest-green appendages—bled away to a dull cream colour as he approached. His thick red hair was braided into several thick braids, twisted into one. His beard was braided and there were jewels woven into the ties. He hovered over them, wings beating effortlessly before he dropped the few feet to stand on the balcony walkway before them.

"Don't you dare," Jasmine snapped, when Jun tugged lightly on her hands—both occupied, one side with George and one with her. There was no way she was about to break the time-bond—not yet. "He can wait."

A broad smile spread over Zephyr's face and he inclined his head with an air of seriousness. "I can." He said, simply. "But it is very good to see you again. I—I was not sure if you would come."

Jun perked a brow.

His smile dimmed by a few watts. "Your presence vanished some time ago and I only just felt it return this morning. I feared for the very worst for quite some time."

Jasmine made a soft sound in her throat. "We all did. It's sort of fine now. Talk later—we need to move now. I don't like how it feels in here. How easy is your release? Do I need to sign anything? Or is it ACE or Alpha signatures only?"

He shook his head. "I volunteered to stay back after the first ten were up. I've been granted an assistant teaching position."

"With your rank?" Jasmine winced, even as the words left her lips. "Sorry. I didn't mean that."

His smile eased, a fraction—noticeable because George was looking for a reaction.

"You did. But I don't see the point in commenting on that. For now, I'm glad to be remembered. This way," he said, simply. "And do tell me if you've come because we are in some sort of trouble?"

"Trouble is relative," Jun said, quietly. "I'll catch you up as soon as we're out. I did not mean to be away for so long."
He merely nodded, focusing on George. "Hello there."

"George, my mentored student" Jun said, quickly. "George—darling, this is Zephyranth. Zephyr or Zeph for short. He doesn't have a preference—that I know of."

"I answer to anything that vaguely resembles my name," the Joker said, lightly. "Nice to meet you, George."

George couldn't pinpoint the exact time they were out of The Pits, only that they were out and he was very relieved. It was nice to have solid ground under his feet.

The first question he swallowed whole, grateful for Jasmine's hand on his arm as she swiftly spun him around and walked him a few paces off.

His face warmed. "Thanks." He muttered.

Her face was equally flushed, her dark eyes flickering out to see their new surroundings. They'd scarcely cleared out from the entrance to the Pits and discovered that Jun and Zeph had stopped right there.

George didn't fathom that they were actually speaking, given that the liplock didn't look like it would be stopping any time soon. But he could see a thin thread of magic shimmering around them and he supposed they were mentally connecting.

At least, he wanted to think that.

It looked more like they intended to devour each other right there, without a single care to any possible public audience.

Jasmine rubbed her forehead, then cast a sideways glance at him. She couldn't begrudge him that, Joker and all, but it didn't mean she had to like it. She was annoyed at the small power play between Gardenia and Jun, more so when she felt caught in the middle of it.

"You alright?" she asked, looking over George with some degree of concern. "You don't look too bad for one that survived that."

"Great." George said, rubbing his face. "Fantastic, really." His ears warmed.

She smirked. "Quick study, aren't you?" She squinted up at the sky. "For Pareya like yourself, it's important to remember how different you are from us—the Gheyos. You will find yourself with the urge to protect us and you will need to fight that. There is a time for it—during our Resting Period—but apart from that, it can complicate things in a dangerous situation. Always remember that you protect all, but we protect you."

George made a quiet sound of disagreement in his throat. He didn't like that definition, but Jasmine's gaze was steady and unyielding.

"Listen to me," she said, firmly. "Because when you join your Circle, you'll be torn between wanting to look after all of them and then realizing that in the midst of it, you're between us and your Submissive. You can't do it all. You won't be able to. No matter how hard you try. As for us, we can't help what we do—it's different. The battle and bloodlust—it sings beneath our skin. We answer it, because it gives us the strength to shield and support you."

George studied her for a minute. 'So we won't ever be—?' He hesitated.
Jasmine offered a crooked smile. "You will. Everyone finds what works for them. In our case, as you've seen, we're Pareya heavy—but we have a full suite of Gheyos, which means we balance out enough that we're not a Pareyic Coven and we aren't Military. We're just—normal."

"What's the difference?" George bit his lip. "How will I know what I'll end up in?"

"Depends on your Submissive." Jasmine shrugged, carelessly. "Briar's a bloodthirsty sort, but Jun tempers him out. She's a stubborn bit and he wears her down when he has to. They compliment each other well and they were careful when building. Careful that the balance wouldn't tip one way or another."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you've looked like a lost, kicked puppy since Jun brought you home. As if you're afraid we won't let you stay and as if you're not sure you'll ever belong."

"I don't know that I will," George said, honestly. He still thought about Fred and hated that he couldn't feel his twin-connection anymore. A whole half of himself was missing and even though he was moving, breathing and living—it felt pale and grey.

"Say that after we find that pretty Sub of yours." Jasmine said, lightly. "He must be something special if he means that much to you before you're even Bonded. What was his name?"


"If you're dreaming of him and feeling like a good chunk of you is missing, then it's him."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Dreams are the biggest hints for soul-bonded dragels to find each other. So when you meet, you already sort of have a connection, see? And if you're having dreams, then you must be soul-bonded and you'll feel the absence of your soul-bonded partner rather keenly."

"Are they done yet?" George shoved his hands further into his robe pockets. He'd normally never cared, but the knowing looks sent their way from passers-by, were beginning to irritate him.

Jasmine glanced over her shoulder. "Still at it. Best to let them work it out of their system."

George rolled his eyes. He didn't think ten plus years could be 'worked out of their system' in a handful of minutes. "So where are we headed next? To find Regulus and everyone else?"

"Probably," Jasmine stretched, rocking forward on her toes, arms reaching over head. It was half a display of laziness and dominance rolled into one. It would hint at her wingspan and flexibility, suggesting that any gawkers move right along, instead of lingering. She eyed him. "You do know that Ivy will insist on more than just a new set of dress robes."

George groaned. It hadn't escaped him that nearly everyone's idea of dress wear was ten times fancier than anything he'd ever owned in his life.

Jasmine laughed.

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**LORD AIDEN + MELACOR : HOUSE OF ARYTHMOOR, AIDEN'S QUARTERS**

Melacor crept around the corner of the door leading to Aiden's office. He really didn't want to
enter, but in spite of the barely visible tremors, he knew he had to face his Lord had some point or another.

Aiden had been extremely upset to learn about Hermione's disappearance. His howl of rage had made the entire estate shake. A few vases had shattered from the resulting magical pulse and a tapestry was shredded when two young pups attempted to hide behind it.

In fact, two of the three of Aiden's most trusted betas had reported at once, to verify that everything was alright. Melacor had backtracked on his original intent at that point, darting away, tail between his legs.

Now, several hours had passed and what little courage had resurfaced, now waned to nothing as Melacor cautiously stepped into the one room he desperately didn't want to. Hiding any longer only delayed the inevitable and he didn't want to chance the reality that Aiden's temper would grow even more terrible with the passing time.

"Melacor?" Aiden's sharp voice echoed eerily in the office. The faintest flicker of the shadows along the walls, suggested that the entire room was entrenched firmly in the grip of the shadow master of the manor. Aiden's eyes glowed a fierce, pulsing red as he zeroed in on Melacor's slight, trembling form in the doorway.

He had been waiting after all.

Melacor gulped.

"Shift." Came the instant command.

The muffled sound turned into a low whine as Melacor blurred from human to Hellhound puppy. He slunk over to the desk and was caught up by the scruff of his neck in slender, pale hands, that were surprisingly gentle, in spite of his compliance.

Aiden settled him on the desk, burning red eyes studying him with care, before cupping the drooping head and lifting it up to meet his gaze.

Reluctantly, Melacor met his gaze. He was surprised to see a hint of dark humour present and the wry turn of his Lord's lips.

"You are, but a child," Aiden said, quietly. "I often expect more from you than I should—and in turn, you multiply that and shoulder a burden you shouldn't," he kissed the silky fur, gathering the pup into his arms as he reclined in his chair.

For one confusing, bewildering moment, Melacor froze. He didn't know what to answer to that—and his answers were quite limited in his current form. He was vaguely aware of the thin, slender fingers stroking over his furry head and still cradling him with the utmost of care.

"Did you honestly do all that you could?" Aiden asked, meaningfully.

Melacor yipped in answer. He had—he'd been called away from his post for one of his official duties. Keeping watch over his lordship's consort hadn't exactly been in his list of instructions.

Lord Aiden had only said to 'feed it' and 'amuse it' which was what Melacor had done. He'd had a dinner tray of simple food—for humans, anyway—sent to the room. He'd also included one of the board games with the jade marbles and the first volume of Hellhound lore from the manor's private library.
As an afterthought, he'd also included a handful of hairpins, as most females he knew, tended to always be in need of them for one reason or another.

"So by your own admission, there was little else for you to do," Aiden concluded.

Melacor tipped his head to the side in silent question. One part of him was still waiting for the scythe to drop, while the other part suggested that perhaps, he'd been right all along—and in spite of his lordship's long absence, he hadn't changed at all. He attempted a playful lick to the pale chin almost in range.

Aiden easily leaned out of reach, his grip tightening on the squirming armful. It was never easy to scold a pup and sometimes, words failed him.

This particular pup was different. A harsh word would wound him for weeks and Aiden had no wish to hurt him, but rather to convey that all actions had consequences.

It wasn't like Melacor to be distracted from the specific tasks he appointed him. This had been an unexpected development.

"There is no reason for me to be upset or disappointed with you." Aiden paused. That sounded suitably soothing. Now for the important part. "That does not mean, however, that you aren't in trouble."

Melacor drooped.

"You gave her these?" Aiden held up a slender hairpin.

Melacor whined. So he had been right after all. The new Consort's hair had been a tangled, untidy mess and he'd only thought to try He had a feeling he knew what was coming next.

"She apparently picked the lock—without magic—and it opened, because the ward was not set for that sort of clause."

If it was possible to curl even further in on himself, Melacor tried. He didn't like the disapproving expression, but knew he deserved it.

"She isn't a typical human witch," Aiden explained. "Something about her, caught our Lady's eye. It stands to reason, that typical measures would not keep her secure. In the future, should I place her in your care, you are to keep that in mind—understood?"

Melacor yipped again.

"Good." Aiden said, simply. "However, I do not appreciate having to wait half-a-day to hear that from you. Next time, I expect you to answer when I call. Tonight, you will sleep in your own room and I have a few specific tasks, I wish for you to see to. I will count your speediness in completing them as your honest repentance on this oversight."

Soulful puppy eyes stared up at him, mournfully, as Melacor held still, despite how much he hated the words currently leaving his Lord's mouth. It was always better—no safer—to spend his nights in Aiden's room.

It was a treat reserved for a select few and he'd always been lucky enough that Aiden indulged him on a fairly regular basis. For such a thing to be revoked—given Aiden's recent return—Melacor didn't think he could bear it.
The low whine that left him, was interrupted by the same, gentle hands that kept on stroking his head and scratching at his ears.

"I want a full report of Lord Rasputin's movements since my absence-"

Melacor couldn't help it. He shifted back, confusion showing plainly on his young face. "But your lordship, he hasn't done anything that you can-

Aiden's lips twitched into a dark smirk. "You said he's done nothing that I could kill him for. However, from what I have heard, his behaviours and recent actions have been far from excusable. I will need something suitable to excuse disciplinary measures, so I'll trust that you're able to list everything that went on while I was away."

Melacor paled. This was far worse than being banished to his own bedroom. Lord Rasputin had never thought of him as anything other than a greedy orphaned child, leeching off of Lord Aiden's goodwill. He was the main dissenter among the Hellhound ranks, once causing such unrest in the lower and middle ranks, that it had only been settled through a great deal of death and bloodshed.

An unwilling shudder rippled through him.

It was those darkened days he didn't like to think about.

The days when he'd been under Lord Rasputin, forced to do whatever was asked of him and treated as little more than a slave-turned-pet.

Lord Aiden, upon discovering the truth, had put an absolute stop on everything. However, his court—angry with him at the time—had refused to vote in favour of execution. Humouring them for the sake of peace in his courts, Lord Rasputin had been allowed to live.

"Shhh." Aiden murmured, the smirk morphing into a bland smile—and therefore a less threatening expression overall. "The courts will see it my way at one point and if they don't—well, it's been a while since I've cleaned house." He leaned forward, wrapping his arms around the shivering boy. "You need not fear him, under this roof nor within my care." He sighed. "I know you see him for what he is, so I ask you to leave nothing out."

Melacor curled closer, his eyes downcast in misery. Lord Aiden was certainly smart. He'd picked the most useful, irritating and sufficiently disagreeable method of punishment. There were several moments he didn't care to relive, from his Lord's absence, but if it would bring about the end of a specific tyrant, he'd obey.

As he always ever would.

"Melacor—can you do this?"

"…Yes, your lordship."

"Good boy."

LUNA + ROLF : SOMEWHERE OUTSIDE OF THE REALM OF THE LIGHT FAERIES

Luna slipped to the ground with a grateful sigh. She rolled her neck and shoulders, working out the kinks in each muscle group. "Thank you for that," she murmured, tugging on her Fae powers to revive her body.
Rolf had carried them quite some ways, until his strength had begun to wane. He'd warned her, then, that he was growing tired and that they ought to stop off and rest.

"We're so close," she said, wistfully.

They'd stopped atop another rocky plateau, staring out into the vast expanse of tree-covered ground and faraway mountain tops.

"How much further?" Rolf wanted to know. He flopped on the rocky surface, uncaring of how hard and rough it was. His body ached with the near overuse of his wings and with the additional weight of carrying Luna.

Not that he'd ever complain.

It'd been something of a tortuous dream to carry the one he loved in his arms, so safely and securely for all this time.

"Those woods over there—" Luna said, pointing. She stopped, lips twitching as she caught sight of Rolf's large yawn. They were close, indeed and she didn't want to push him, but the last vision she'd seen meant that timing was everything.

"Five minutes?" he asked, opening one eye to squint up at her.

She stood over him, hands on her hips, a dreamy smile plastered on her face. "I could fly on ahead —"

"NO!" He bolted upright, already half reaching for her.

She caught his hand in hers, lacing their fingers together. Her smile softened. "Two minutes. We can't be late or they'll take the wrong portal."

Rolf's gave her hand a squeeze and then eased back to the ground.

Luna sighed, softly and knelt behind him, patting her lap.

Their eyes met, a silent, wordless conversation, before he settled down, his head lightly resting on her lap.

She breathed in the clear, crisp air and exhaled with the growing energy inside of her. A thin fine, glittering mist left her lips, floating on the air, fading off.

"Beacons?" He murmured, tiredly.

"Star mist." She hummed, repeating the action twice more. "These are not Fae woods, so we must be careful."

"Two minutes?" He checked.

"A few more seconds," she soothed, stroking her free hand through his softly tangled hair. "We'll make it."

"This is good." He shuffled up, reluctantly moving away from her caring hands. He held out a hand to her.

She took it, easily and started up into the sky, pulling him along with her, as he called out his own wings and settled into flight.
The woods grew larger and darker as they approached, the occasional magical tremor rippling through the air.

"What are we expecting?" Rolf asked.

"Friends." She said, simply. "We'll have to drop straight down." She let go of his hand and shot up several feet into the air. Her eyes glowed with a steady light as she narrowed her focus to a specific clump of trees.

"Here?" Rolf called from above, where he hovered, one hand on the short knives tucked into his leg holster.

"Straight down!" Luna repeated.

He winked. "As. You. Wish!" He dropped with surprising speed, hurtling towards the pointy branches and glistening leaves. In the instant where it would have been too late, the knives flashed in his hands and a short, compact burst of air—sliced straight down, severing everything in it's path.

Luna tipped her face up to the sky and opened her mouth. She gave a long, warbling trill and then dropped from the sky as Rolf had, golden light streaming from her fingertips. It sliced through the ragged debris from Rolf's initial attack.

When the dust cleared, they stood inside a hollowed out crater on the floor of the dense forest. The only light streaming in, was from the hole they'd cut overhead. Beneath the trees protective canopy, it was dark and almost suffocating.

"You're sure it's here?" Rolf asked, tossing her one of his knives.

She caught it, without looking and immediately crouched at the corner of the crater they'd made. "They'll come. This is the safest point."

Rolf grunted. He cast a wary glance around at the trees, fingers itching to cast another spell.

"Don't." Luna warned him, sweetly. "This is not our forest."

He didn't answer, but a slight scowl registered. He watched as she pricked her thumb and squeezed a few droplets of blood onto the shapes she'd carved with his knife. The dirt soaked it up and a sharp wind rattled through. It tore around them, before shrieking off into the woods.

"Boreas?" Rolf murmured, thinking of the strange wind creatures that somehow walked the line between living spirt and not-quite-evil spirit, but could be bonded to a magical creature, as an elemental familiar.

"They are free to roam here," Luna said. She smoothed over the dirt and sucked on her thumb, the knife balanced on her knee as she traced a new set of shapes with her fingers. "Let me know if anything's coming."

Rolf perked a brow, but after a moment's pause, he leaned against the nearest tree, loosely folding his arms over his chest. The approaching tremor seemed a bit off and he cocked his head, trying to focus on it. He was better at grasping the general intent behind such magical vibes—more so than the average fae.

"Rolf?" Luna glanced up at him. One eye still glowed a pale, silvery hue.
"You could've warned me you were hijacking a portal." He grumbled. "Why'd we have to travel all the way here for them?"

"Because I didn't want to lose any of them. There are laws for these sorts of things."

"…And that's stopped you when?" Rolf wanted to know.

Luna giggled. "Never!" She said, cheerfully.

Rolf groaned. The giggle meant that she wasn't about to tell him the real reason, but that she trusted him to stick with her long enough to find out. Oh stars and starlings. Why'd he have to fall for her?

The ground began to churn and crack, heaving upwards in big chunks, prompting both fae to leap into the air, to stay well out of the way.

A brilliant pillar of golden light erupted from the ground, streaming upwards into the sky, as if it would never end. Every shade of yellow and gold, spreading with a frantic, eager pulse.

"Rolf!" Luna tackled him out of the air and to the forest floor. She whispered the words that would throw up a shield and huddled protectively over him, as the broken portal deposited its occupants in the temporary holding spot she'd created.

"Luna? I'm alright. I'm fine." Rolf soothed. His hand trembled as he reached up to touch her cheek.

She leaned into his hand. "It's a dryad's portal," she explained. "Not Nevarean, but headed for Nevarah."

He frowned. "Aren't they on lockdown right now? Since it's in the midst of their hunt and there's that great prophecy thing?"

She smiled, sadly.

Understanding dawned like a hurricane. Rolf couldn't stop himself from working it out, aloud. "It would've absorbed them, wouldn't it? The protections would have seen them as a threat and simply —"

"Mmhm."

He snatched her to him in a hug, uncaring that it drew them even closer than before. A slight shudder ran through him. That would've been a terrible way to die.

Luna didn't protest though and after a moment, she placed her cheek on his chest.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: WHEW! So how did you like that for a chapter 101? LOL. I swear, I didn't mean for it to take so long, but as you can see, there were a lot of different parts to wrestle with. To answer a few questions (because I know you guys are gonna ask)-YES, George ran into Wikhn when he went in the Pits with Jun. Yes, Luna is doing something here-remember who was a dryad...? Yeah. Oh and yes, how did you like Riven? He's a darling grump. :P I can't wait to show more of him.
Many, many thanks to brissygirl who always does a fabulous job of beta-ing these monster chapters. She is an absolute darling!

Thanks for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel's Song. I do actually have some work to do before the next installment on that as well. Welcome to the new readers. Thanks for reading!

REVIEW RESPONSES WILL BE POSTED as I have the time to spare-and I honestly haven't had the time for a while now. I'm truly very sorry for that, but I still treasure every review-thank you for your comments and encouragement!

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Harry, Ethan, Theo, Charlie-(with the Royals)

Snape Circle (in a new apartment, courtesy of Terius)

Deveraine Circle members-(at the Hunt)

George (with Jun and the Evansons)
From One Point To Another

Chapter Summary

After Harry acquires his first Pareya, a handsome Earth elemental named Ethan Hartwood, hailing from a scholarly clan—things get busy and angsty. Hadrian arrives at the library to take him back to see the Royals, who have some disturbing news. Theo isn't prepared to meet Ethan and sparks fly. In the meantime, Jun, Briar and George have a few things to work out as well, including picking up a Gheyo Joker from the pits, where George runs into Wikhn. The stage is nearly set as things start to come together...

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own, especially since I forgot to send the character snippet. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

This chapter is dedicated to all my readers who have a June birthday and have devised their own delightful headcanons for these characters! :P Happy birthday, you guys! I hope it's a fabulous one. Best wishes for the year ahead and thanks for your support!

RECAP: Harry acquires his first Pareya, a handsome Earth elemental named Ethan Hartwood, hailing from a scholarly clan. Hadrian arrives at the library to take him back to see the Royals, who have some disturbing news. Theo isn't prepared to meet Ethan and sparks fly. In the meantime, Jun, Briar and George have a few things to work out as well, including picking up a Gheyo Joker from the pits, where George runs into Wikhn. The stage is nearly set...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE ROYAL QUARTERS : RASPEN, EBONY, DAWNE & ALCANDOR : THE HUNT : DAY 3

Raspen tugged at his collar, feeling the strange magic in his body, literally crawling beneath his skin. He'd been on edge since Riven had arrived and it had only grown worse when Harry and Ethan had joined them in the room.

It made him want to claw his arms off. He was barely restraining the impulse as it was. He was relieved when Dawne had suggested a twenty-minute break. One, because there were certainly more tactful ways to introduce a new Bonded and two, at this point any break was more than fine with him.

Riven's barely concealed look of concern, had Raspen slipping away as soon as he could manage it.
For once, he was glad that Ebony and Dawne kept their guards so close on hand. It was easy for him to disappear to the privacy of a near-empty hallway so as long as they were occupied.

He didn't have to wait long.

Riven materialized almost seconds later. "I warned you," he scolded, lightly. "I'm surprised you aren't climbing the walls yet. You were too close to that Soulscream."

Raspen only glared at him. By the time he'd connected the dots, it was too late to do anything. "I didn't see your message until later—much later and then, I didn't have time to—"

" Doesn't have time, he says," Riven muttered, rolling his eyes skyward. "Yes, yes, I'm sure you were so busy, there was absolutely no chance of taking a moment to read a message from—"

Golden eyes fluxed to a deeper, darker brown. "I didn't have time. It came late."

"Next time I'll try to send it sooner," Riven snapped. The sarcasm fairly dripped from his words. "I'll make sure to key it directly to your personal aura, to activate within your immediate—"

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Mm. Read it next time. You know I'd have sent it sooner if I could have. I was a bit busy."

"You're always busy."

"And I still find the time for you." Riven said, tartly. "You'd best not be asking for what I think you're about to. Didn't you have shields in place?"

In spite of his princely manner, Raspen cringed. The shields were all he'd been able to manage. "They were late. We had them open for the morning blessing and it—well." He hesitated. "Another suppression would be too much, wouldn't it?"

Riven's glower softened. "If I didn't care a whit for your continued good health—yes." He scolded. "Honestly—what would your parents say if they knew what you—"

"They don't," Raspen said, wearily. "And I don't want them to, Oret."

There was a long pause, punctuated by an equally long sigh, before Riven eased down to join Raspen on the cool floor. He tapped the pointed tip of his staff, lightly on the ground.

"I still don't deserve that title," Riven said, quietly. "But thank you. Come. Sit. I've missed you."

"And I, you." Raspen said, simply. He moved to sit beside Riven, angling so that his head could rest on the taller dragel's shoulder. He barely twitched when Riven's arm curled around his shoulder, squeezing gently in comfort.

"You've been keeping things to yourself again, haven't you?"

"Prince is a lonely title. Especially when it becomes a kingship."

"Life is meant to be shared, not hoarded," Riven scolded. "Now," he paused, flicking his fingers at his staff to cast an unspoken spell.

A soft slurping sound seemed to echo, before the Riven's special-brand of privacy wards went up. As if on cue, Raspen finally relaxed. Of all the privacy shields and wards he'd known and cast, Riven's were still the ones he trusted the most.
"I did not jump through nineteen realms and twenty-nine star spaces, to cast another suppression seal to mute your reaction to a soul cry, because you don't want your parents to meddle in it. Talk to me. You have the same twenty minutes you gave them."

Raspen half-smiled, feeling his magic stretching out around them, aura strengthening from the sheer bliss of being comfortably contained, by the proximity of Riven's personal stasis field. He'd forgotten how stern the solemn spell crafter could be, but it felt oddly reassuring to return to that familiarity.

Riven was the unofficial mentor his parents had never approved—largely due to their elemental differences. They'd wanted him to have someone else and eventually, had given up on that, choosing to appoint a general court of older dragels as consultants.

But Riven had frequented the earth elemental courts for a few years here and there. During that short time, they'd met and clicked in a way that only a mentored-student pair could. In spite of his roaming ways, he'd managed to keep in touch, with little messages and the occasional inter-realm video conference.

"In twenty-minutes? Now?"

"Raspen."

"His name is Harry," Raspen began. "And there's something about him that I can't seem to leave alone."

"Oh?" Riven hummed.

Raspen ignored him. "It's on behalf of his Alpha, Theodore—the one sponsored by Lady Gorgens all those years ago? He found Harry on Earth and Harry's mentor never showed."

"Send a hunting party," Riven said, sensibly. "It's nothing to be too worked up over, sometimes there are difficult circumstances—if he's on Earth, there would have been long-distance, inter-realm portals to set in place. Permissions take time."

"...His missing mentor is Maurice Elswood." Raspen said, quietly.

"Ryker's Bane?" Riven stiffened. "Mad Maury?"

"He's been found on Earth." Raspen toyed with the frayed fabric on the sleeve of Riven's odd casting robe. "Lady Cunningham has gone to hunt him—with her entire Circle."

"Sharp woman," Riven allowed. Her reputation was dark and devastating in the best sort of way for dragel Military Circle. "Always catches her prey—but, that's not what you mean, is it? Did she find him?"

"She's found something—a massive magical beacon on Harry's Earth residence. Something of a magical lure, continuously summoning all manner of creatures and beings—which were subsequently destroyed, thanks to an equally powerful seal on said residence."

"Maury?"

"It's a death seal." Raspen said, "I want you to handle it." If there was even a sliver of a chance of saving Mad Maury, he wanted Riven to be the one to have it. Sometimes, there was a special kind of luck that followed the lone spellcaster and Raspen had long learned to make use of it.
"Of course," Riven said, immediately. He frowned. "That's not what's bothering you, is it?"

"Harry—this Harry—before he even met Theo, he had several seals placed on him."

"Multiple seals?" Riven shifted. "How many?"

"...a dozen, I think?"

Riven stiffened.

There was nothing good about that, not amongst their kind. Two or three was typical, a death seal, if someone was anxious or stupid enough to wind up in fights, or a power seal until the physical body could handle the strain of immense power—and, occasionally, a heritage seal, that was meant to be more of a formality and that would unravel when a dragel reached their maturity.

Raspen gave a low growl, but settled when Riven locked an arm around his neck and drew him closer for a nuzzle. "According to the Kalzik's and several other interesting encounters with Harry and his—things from a Blood Seal, to a Suppression Seal and-"

"And a Death Seal." Riven finished, finally fitting the mental puzzle pieces together. "Ras-"

Raspen curled towards him, miserably. "I know. I know, Oret. I just—he's so young. Hasn't even finished building his Circle—and you saw his first Pareya, right there. A Hartwood. They're soulbonded and he's been through more than anyone should have to. You can see it in his eyes and now we've found his mentor and I have to tell him that I don't think—I don't think that-"

"Don't think the worst."

"It's Lady Mariana,"Raspen said, softly. "If by some miracle, he isn't dead, she'll kill him herself."

"...And they've disappeared again," Dawne murmured, with a fond shake of her head. She'd honestly expected it, given how Raspen had awakened from his troubled nap. "Convenient."

"Leave them be," Ebony said, leaning against the wall. She didn't see the point in relocating any further than the hallway for a mere twenty minutes. Her mind was full enough with all the things she was struggling to keep straight. It would be best not to add more stress by attempting cram more things into her already busy thought stream.

"And you're not the least bit curious?" Dawne teased. "I know you, Eby. You're dying to know what's been bothering him since he'd followed us back here with that faraway look in his eyes as if he was here in everything but-"

"True, but I also know well enough to leave them alone. Ras looked positively ill." Ebony shifted, uncomfortably.

"He's looked like that since this morning," Dawne said, thoughtfully. "Riven didn't look much better though, when you think of it. Weren't they rather close years back?"

"I don't remember," Ebony mused. "We didn't frequent the Earth courts much. Mother was not very fond of their penchant for formalities and proper turnouts."

Dawne smiled. "Mine wasn't either, but we sort of had the habit started at an early age. Helps a bit now. I don't mind all the fuss and flare the way I once would have." She paused. "Good for Harry though—nice to see some development there. He's a cute little thing. His first Pareya and a
"Definitely good for him," Ebony agreed. "I wouldn't mind one of those for my own."

"You've met the Hartwoods," Dawne said, twitching her fingers to craft something soft to float on. "Charming people, but I can't stand to listen to all of that history and archaic knowledge of things I don't yet need to know."

Ebony laughed. "They're interesting. They read. A lot. It makes good conversation, as long as they don't have a book in their hands when you're having said conversation."

Dawne found herself laughing along. "True," she admitted. "Very true. How much longer?"

"Not too long," Ebony stifled a yawn. "Three guesses that Raspen will try to keep us out of the mess that he's engineering himself?"

Dawne rolled her eyes. She loved him like a brother—and Ebony, as a sister—but sometimes, she wanted to smack some sense into both of them. Each stubborn in their own way, but still, somehow—hers. "We'll help him anyway."

"Mmhmm," Ebony hummed. "But it wouldn't hurt for him to trust us, every once in awhile."

"He rarely ever does." Dawne said, softly. "But I think it's because he's always had to hide so much of himself, he doesn't know how to share it yet."

"He'll have to learn then," Ebony mused. "He'll have to learn."

"Strength in numbers," Dawn agreed.

"Stop breathing," Riven muttered, irritated. His magic twisted and fizzled out in his hands, the spell incomplete. "I can't cast if you keep-"

Raspen stifled a laugh and straightened. He didn't dare apologise, though he was reasonably sure Riven hadn't even realised what he'd said.

A beat later, Riven scowled. "You know what I mean," he corrected. "You keep moving. I can't touch the seal unless you're completely frozen."

"Immobilization spell?" Raspen prompted.

"Can't. Your father has a trip on that."

"Puppeteer?"

"Your mother has a trip on that."

Raspen rolled his eyes. He loved his parents, dearly, but sometimes, he felt that they would keep him under lock and key, simply so he would be safe. "You'd think they don't trust me."

"I don't trust you and I know you," Riven said. He rapped him smartly on the head. "Stop trying to see what I'm doing. You're moving too much and you know how precise this needs to be-!"

"Of course, Oret. Anything you say, Oret."

Riven tapped him on the head again, annoyed. "On count of two—breathe out—one and two!"
Magic flared briefly, a warm golden glow, immediately followed by a burst of vivid violet.

Raspen trembled, eyes squeezed shut as he felt the seal squeeze and shrivel into him, properly renewed. He coughed, feeling Riven's magic retreating. The weary feeling returned and the clamouring instincts in his mind, faded away to dull background noise. He breathed easier, relieved. "Thank you."

"Who exactly are you running from?"

"…That obvious?"

"You've never called me back for a favour like this," Riven said. "Not that I mind, but you know you'll have to break that sooner or later."

"Later. Much later."

Riven snorted. "It won't be that bad you know," he reached for his staff, stepping back to check the protections he'd inscribed on them a few minutes before he'd begun the spellwork. "It might be more beneficial than you're thinking."

"It's a Circle," Raspen said, lightly. "And it's too good of a thing to be muddled by the mess that I've been saddled with right now."

"You were born into it. Responsibility. Duty. Power. It's not your fault, Raspen."

"I've had time to understand that. I know what it is expected of me. Others don't. It isn't fair to them."

"Protecting them at the expense of yourself, when you don't even know each other—is hardly useful or helpful to either of you."

"I don't need a lecture, Oret."

"A Circle is reciprocal. They share the burden." Riven held his gaze, meaningfully. "Running from things rarely ever turn out well."

Raspen squared his shoulders, his head bowed. "I know that just as well as you do," he said, softly. "But I couldn't ask anyone to shoulder this sort of thing. The Night of a Thousand Prophecies?"

"That is not a burden for you to bear alone," Riven said, sternly. "Speaking of which—and we will speak of it later—I completed my objective. As you well know."

"Hard to miss, seeing as it was the first thing you said." Raspen teased. He didn't dodge the incoming flick to his shoulder. "That's one down then, nineteen left."

"I don't think it's all nineteen," Riven said, carefully. "I think some of them are already up—I think someone else has been poking about in places where they ought not to be." He did not add that the Immortals were their own beings and not puppets to be controlled—they both knew that already.

Raspen's lips pressed into a thin line. "Lady Kalzik said something like that," he said, slowly. "Said that her son—the mute one, Quinten? That there'd been an incident in the city and something possessed a little girl. One of the Kadel children, incidentally. The message he sent with her was—that the Immortals were waking."

"They're already up," Riven said, stilled irritated. He thumped his staff on the floor, his scowl
deepening as the bulbous eye atop the staff, remained stubbornly shut. He needed to gather more energy from Nevarah, while he was still on its native soil. The magic stored in his staff was collected from the various places he'd been traveling through and it made the staff less responsive on home soil. "You should check with the others and say something."

Raspen didn't answer.

"...You have heard from the others?"

No answer.

"Raspen!"

"What do you want me to tell you? Even my parents have nothing to share. It was before their time and all that's left is the notices of deployment—yours excluded, of course, but with a mark that it was taken care of."

"A mark?"

"Whoever was in charge, insisted on absolute secrecy and the sorts of spells that aren't safe to experiment with." Raspen rubbed his face. "It's—it's a mess."

"A mess that we'll deal with, one issue at a time," Riven said. "It's about twenty minutes now, isn't it?" He gave a grunt of satisfaction when the great yellow eye blinked open. "I'll leave as soon as I've the next destination—but first, let's square up what you've found."

"Nice of you to show up," Ebony teased, watching the duo walk down the hall. She knew enough of Riven to show the dragel the respect he deserved. The Cairothe name came with certain talents and secrets.

The ugly yellow eye on his staff was still as unnerving as the first dozen times she'd seen it, but Raspen didn't seem the least bit bothered by it, as he walked on the other side of the staff talking about something muffled by a flexible privacy spell.

"Something new?" Dawne wanted to know. "Ras?"

"Later," he promised. "I'm sure you've already made the same connections that I have, but-"

"You didn't have to run off for that," Ebony said, stretching her arms out and wishing for a more comfortable outfit than her formalwear.

"Apologies," Raspen said, easily. "Have you found anything?"

"The kinds of things I don't want to find," Ebony grumbled. "I don't suppose either of you received notice of the Vampires attending the Hunt? Officially, I mean, seeing as their Lord still sleeps and the Elder Council hasn't mobilized in decades."

Dawne snorted and then blushed. "Never mind that, tell me later. Twenty minutes ran out two minutes ago."

The three Royals and Riven, returned to the room, to find an amusing, if somewhat private moment taking place. Harry, safely cuddled on Theo's lap was giving some sort of direction to Ethan—safely cuddled on Charlie's lap.
Predictably, Harry blushed upon seeing them and made to sit on his own, only for Theo to shake his head and whisper something in his ear.

Face flaming, Harry stayed put.

Ethan stifled a laugh and settled comfortably enough in Charlie's arms. If Theo was still that on edge, he wouldn't aggravate him, by moving around. Even though the bonds were taking, the need to draw closer would take considerable time to fade.

"The news we have to share, is disturbing," Raspen said, without preamble. "Please understand that I have asked you here to inform you of what is happening, but that it is all being taken care of."

Theo's golden gaze flickered, but remained bright. Harry blush faded as his mouth set into a grim line. Charlie shifted from his seat on the floor and Ethan turned just enough to nuzzle him, instinctively, in reassurance.

"Lady Cunningham has discovered an interesting situation at your Earth residence," Raspen began. "Specifically, Harry's home."

"She's found Maurice?" Theo asked, eyes narrowed. The vagueness of the statement did not sit well with him and he knew Harry wouldn't care for it either.

"She's found a Death Seal," Raspen said. "Whether Maurice is contained within it, I do not know and she did not say."

"You're saying he's—dead?" Harry stared. The hairs on his arms stood up. Scales rippled along his face, accenting his claws. His initial emotionally-fuelled outburst in relation to a crazed mentor he'd never known had gradually settled into a mixture of emotion that he had yet to unpack. Sympathy, worry, concern and heartache seemed to stand out the most and at Raspen's word, a deep ache settled in his chest.

"We don't know," Dawne said, gently. "And we can't say, because we don't know for sure. It's best not to guess about this sort of thing, but at the same time, it's hard to send messages from disjointed timelines. Perhaps Lady Cunningham meant to send—"

"We don't know what she meant to send or not," Ebony cut in. "And it's pointless to guess. For now, leave it at that. As you were saying, Raspen—?"

"The situation involves the occupants of the house," Raspen said, awkwardly. "Specifically, your family?"

Harry froze. He barely felt Theo's hands rubbing soothingly along his arms. "W-what about them?"

He asked, hating the way his voice sounded so small.

The sharpened gaze of the tall dragel beside Raspen, flickered up, focusing on Harry.

For a moment, they stared in silence. Harry's green eyes locked on the dragel's powerful violet ones. The connection was broken as the dragel looked away.

The sense of emptiness grew deeper, twisting as it anchored itself inside of Harry. His hands clenched in the give of Theo's robe, the room seeming to fade away into a dull, grey.

He could hear that Raspen was still talking, but all that replayed in his mind, were things that he didn't want to remember.
"...I love you," Theo whispered in one ear. He kissed Harry's cheek, worry seeping through their shared bond. He’d felt a sudden, fierce jolt of coldness between them and leaned forward in time to see that awful, faraway look taking root in Harry's eyes.

Harry startled, feeling warmth creeping up his neck and face once more. He pressed back into Theo's arms, silently forcing himself to focus on what was being said. From the sudden silence, he knew Raspen had paused and he struggled to backtrack.

"I'm sorry—I didn't catch that—?"

"There were three occupants in the house. One is dead. One is severely injured. The other is feral."

Raspen said, briskly. "I don't know which is which and the one that is—dead. Will require identification, as what remains will likely be severely damaged in the removal of the Death Seal on the house. It is, specifically, on the house—not an individual. I cannot say what the effects will be or how it will affect that particular place. It is also why I have requested Riven Cairothe to join us."

Raspen paused. "He is partially answering my summons and that of the Kalziks, due to your seals, Harry. He will assist with the Death Seal and also with your seal removals, so as long as you are willing." He gestured to Riven, who dipped his head in acknowledgement.

Ethan's brow knitted into a neat furrow. He made a soft sound of distress and Charlie released him at once. He carefully moved to stand and paused long enough to pull Charlie up with him, before moving to sit with Harry and Theo.

"Are you asking for his permission or am I missing something?"

"Permission," Raspen said, readily. "Death Seals are serious, depending on context, depth and strength."

"He means that having one on Earth is different than having one here," Hadrian offered. He'd kept his silence and his distance, since entering the room. But at the look of bewilderment on Harry's face, he'd felt compelled to speak. "It's different because here, Nevarah, its practically made of magic. It's everywhere. Earth is a bit—different."

"It's your family," Ethan clarified. "Prince Raspen is saying that he cannot guarantee that in trying to undo it, that it will not cause unnecessary harm or damage to the survivors in the house, given that one is already—deceased." He frowned. "The tapestry—that's what was wrong with it."

"Tapestry?" Theo looked from Ethan to Harry. "I feel as if I'm missing something here."

"We were in the library," Ethan said, reaching out for one of Harry's hands, the one closest to him. He gently uncurled each claw from Theo's robe and threaded his own fingers through it, squeezing gently. "To try and trace back his mother's side of things, the Evanson's."

Raspen twitched. His golden eyes narrowed faintly, but he didn't interrupt.

"We bought a copy," Ethan explained. "Charlie?" he nodded towards the canister that had fallen to the floor in the midst of the earlier confusion.

Charlie retrieved it, handing it over.

"We can look at it later," Harry said, quickly. He pulled his hand free from Ethan's to grab the canister before it could be passed over. "And it's—fine. Do whatever you need to. I-I just—leaving it on there, isn't good, right? I mean, it's not like you could leave it there and—"

"We could contain it," Hadrian explained. "But that's basically the same as activating it, because of
where it is. I haven't seen it, so I can't say for sure, but it would likely mean a sudden and unpleasant death for all involved."

Harry grimaced.

"A Death Seal is not meant to be nice," Hadrian said. "It is meant to be destructive and combative, depending on the caster and the type."

"All magic works with intent," Riven said, his voice low and deep. "And it's pure speculation to say what it will or won't do, without seeing it in person. I'll leave to take a look as soon as possible to-"

"When?" Harry twisted, carefully pulling away from Theo, ignoring the questioning rumble. "I'm not staying behind," he turned to Theo. "I won't."

Charlie looked from Theo to Harry. "You want to-?" He stopped. He wasn't sure what to fill in there. Not when stories from the twins were swirling around in his head—stories of the twins rescuing him from a house where there were bars on the window. Something must have shown on his face, because Ethan's gold eyes fluxed to pitch black. Charlie winced. That couldn't be good.

"Traveling inter-realm takes time," Ethan said, calmly. "Harry—it is probably a-"

"I want to go." Harry said, steadily. "I don't want to stay here."

Theo drew a slow breath. "What is the purpose of going?" He asked, carefully. "You know I'd rather not rush back to Earth right now."

"It's—" Harry paused. Complicated. "—Important."

Theo didn't answer. He simply studied him, silently, taking note of how every single line in Harry's body, seemed to be screaming the opposite. Still, it was Harry and Harry was asking.

"You should have warned them, Ras." Ebony grumbled. "Don't spring that sort of news on people without some kind of warning." She crossed the room, her hazy aura of warmth following along. It spilled over into the awkward staring match between Harry and Theo, dispersing some of the tension. She nudged Charlie and stood beside him. "Whoever decides on going wherever, can do so tomorrow. It's a time-jump anyway, so there's no real rush. I suggest taking some time to yourselves—tonight, at the very least—before venturing off-realm. We are on a realm-wide shutdown and I'd personally prefer not to sign off on something like this, knowing the stability of your Circle." She paused. "No offense, Scholar Hartwood, but your addition brings-"

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"None taken, Princess." Ethan said, smoothly. "I am well-aware. My instincts, as they are now—would require some time to settle and at present, they are—shall we say, not exactly geared for the current circumstance?"

"That's a polite way to put it," Ebony agreed. "Raspen, tell them it can wait." Her eyes glowed a rich, warm orange. "I say this, not only as a Royal, but as a mentor out of concern for my mentee."

Charlie twitched, a flicker of relief dancing across his face. His grateful smile said what he didn't
dare voice aloud just yet.

"That will be fine," Theo said, breaking the staring game.

"Of course," Raspen agreed. "That would be best." He paused, turning to Hadrian. "Please take word to your lady to expect visitors."

Hadrian looked away. "I have not been-"

"She asked you to stay or ordered you?" Raspen said, briskly. "It doesn't matter which, as I am ordering you in my official capacity to deliver this message. She can complain to me, if she likes."

"But-!"

Raspen's gaze darkened. "Riven could cast the necessary spellwork to take the message himself, but if others intend to accompany him—then we will need him here and not there. Go. Now."

Hadrian bowed his head.

Seconds later, he faded into nothing, his shadow—the last part of him to vanish.

Annoyed, but obedient—Hadrian hovered above the Shadow's edge, watching where his element blended into nothingness.

Sure, there were a million different ways for a Shadow user to meld into time or a specific place, without the use of directed magic or portals, but that didn't mean he had to like doing it.

The Shadows answered to their own and the authorities they had defined there of their own choosing. Lord Aiden of the Hellhound's Courts, for one and the Cunninghams where the Hellhounds did not walk. It had been something of a relief and a curse, when the Cunninghams had picked him up.

Specifically, to catch Lady Mariana's eye was no small feat and her firm handling of her Circle and those included, hired or otherwise, had been a bit of a welcome shock.

Not that he agreed with all of it, but it was nice to be appreciated and looked after in a traditional sense that did not affect a Gheyo's pride.

Hadrian stretched, gathering his shadows around him. No matter what Prince Raspen had said, he knew better than to simply throw himself through time and space to reach the Cunninghams.

Not that they would turn him away, for he would be able to relay the message, but it was sure to earn him another scolding and quite possibly the refusal to allow participation in upcoming public duels.

It hadn't helped that Ethan had been encouraging Harry. A detail that hadn't mattered until a certain green-eyed brunet had been bold enough to ask for specifics and things that Hadrian hadn't thought about for a long while.

No one cared how he fought—the Cunninghams' aside—or what techniques were used. He'd simply refined his natural style in the past few years and dropped other, flashier techniques in favour of subtly and elemental specialty.

Hadrian scowled, rubbing the back of his head. If any dragel had dared to suggest that one day, he would be deciding between a lady's temper and a Royal's order, he would have laughed, before he
stabbed them.

Now, he wondered if stabbing something would help.

An irritated growl left his lips and he floated upwards instead. Ethan had been about to point out something on the Evanson tapestry, before Harry had conveniently changed the subject.

Too conveniently.

Hadrian stretched, allowing the shadows to reach out and melt into him. The renewed sense of power filled him to the very core, radiating out with a steady, humming energy.

Perhaps he ought to check on the tapestry himself.

Before joining the Cunninghams.

It wasn't like it could hurt.

And it certainly wasn't like anyone was there to stop him. Hadrian began to weave a silent, shadowed portal for the last 'ported position of Harry.

Having brought him to the Royal's quarters, he could make use of the past portal's exact location. And perhaps he'd find out what set Harry on edge.

Even if everyone else was tiptoeing around it, Hadrian couldn't help but notice that Harry had given the exact opposite reaction than what he'd originally expected.

Curious.

The portal set him down atop the middle row of bookshelves that bracketed the Map table where Ethan had requested a copy.

Hadrian slipped down from the shelves, shadow-quiet and barely visible. He moved along the edges of the bookshelves, angling towards the muted light that made it easier to view the archived materials.

Whispery strands of magic, flickered in the air and alerted him to a new presence. Hadrian shifted back into the shadows, allowing his corporeal body to half-fade. He completed the shift, when the magic lightened—whover it was, knew shadow magic.

The figure came into view, only seconds later. Tall, thin and rather composed looking. The typical pale-skin and not-quite-red eyes of a vampire were the first details to register.

Hadrian frowned, but did not move. Those were typical traits, but not necessarily accurate. He could not sense a definite shadow element from the individual—nor the expected bloodlust, from a real vampire.

Nameless, he thought, irritated. Probably a true shadow in his Bearer or Sire.

The man moved quickly to the table, checking the tags of the rolled materials resting on the side cart, waiting to be magically returned. He drew something out from the pile and set it on the table, snapping his fingers to have it unrolled.

He checked something on the lower half, his shoulders growing tense. After a moment, he requested a viewing history of the tapestry and frowned.
"...A Hartwood? Since when were we on their radar? Jun is going to love this." Muttering to himself, the man rolled the tapestry up and cast a tracking spell atop it, requesting all future activity to be forwarded to him.

Once satisfied, he spun a small portal on one hand and faded out, pausing to look over his shoulder—the space where Hadrian had lingered only seconds before.

Hadrian perked a brow, silently impressed and amused in equal measure. He hadn't been trying to hide in earnest, he'd simply preferred not to be noticed by anyone who was likely to mention his whereabouts.

Stepping out into his solidified form, Hadrian glided over to the table, verifying that yes, it was the Evanson tapestry and that the visitor had to be someone from the Evanson bloodline, as only those could actively cast spells on the tapestries.

"He didn't return it to the shelves," Hadrian muttered. That was an interesting detail he'd think about—later. Now, he focused on using his shadows to unroll the tapestry. He'd seen the protective spells cast over it and simply overrode them with his own magic.

The shadows would forever answer him, after all and they did as he bid them, sliding out the tapestry from the cart and floating over to the examination table. He took care not to touch it in any way, knowing that his magic wouldn't be traceable, if there truly was someone capable of recognising his actual magical signature.

One unrolled, he stared down at the large spread of moving portraits of dragels he knew nothing about. His attention was drawn to the lower half and then to the bottom section, which had undoubtedly caught the man's attention—and likely Harry's as well.

It was the faded, smudged section depicting one Harry James Potter as the only living child for the deceased Lily Evanson.

Hadrian drew a sharp breath. The Evansons were well-known enough to the point that he was reasonably sure he'd have known if there'd been a death in their family line.

Maybe.

He had been off-realm for a significant amount of time, but still. Names and news travelled far. He hadn't been that far and something of that sort of significance surely would have caught Mariana's eye.

His brow furrowed as he continued to inspect the traceable lines and found himself staring at the names of a Petunia and Vernon Dursley. Something about seeing their pinched, perfect faces, made his skin crawl. He bristled, but continued to study them, taking note of the skull and crossbones symbol near Vernon—ah. That was telling.

Vernon was definitely dead and it didn't matter how powerful Riven Cairothe was, he wouldn't be able to unravel that. Petunia, probably, Hadrian mused and maybe Dudley. There were no symbols beside their images and that meant there was a small possibility for survival.

Except that Harry's reaction to them—and Prince Raspen's news—hadn't been very promising at all. Hadrian floated up and away, taking care, as an afterthought, to erase his magical signature after all.

It wouldn't do for the mystery man to return and find that someone else had indeed been looking at the tapestry. He began to shadow walk out of the library, his mind filled with new, confusing
thoughts. Phasing through the roof and gliding on up into the evening sky, Hadrian silently willed himself to move towards the Shadow's Edge.

He could make his way towards the Cunninghams' now. His mind had plenty of things to work through—starting with Harry, ending with the tapestry.

Shaking his head, Hadrian approached the final melding of the shadows at the edge of the realm. He rolled his head to the side and walked straight through the flickering, purple-blackness without flinching.

The pain hadn't bothered him for years.

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**HARRY AND CO : PEVERELLE GUEST HOME**

The portal deposited them in the main receiving room of the Peverell's traveling house, in time for dinner. They were sorting themselves out, when Vincent arrived to verify their identities and invite them in.

"New Pareya," Theo said, quickly—correctly spotting the narrowed eyes and barely restrained defensiveness hidden behind a thin veneer of politeness.

"Ethan Hartwood," Ethan said, calmly. He sketched a formal bow, golden eyes remaining locked on Vincent's silvery ones the entire time.

"Pleasure," Vincent said, crisply. "I hadn't seen any notice of an-"

"I'm sure Theo will register it, officially, when he has the time to spare," Ethan said. "Silver eyes, blue markings and no visible runes around the ears or neck—you must be a Kilbourne."

Vincent's gaze hardened.

Silence reigned.

A tiny twitch at the corner of his mouth, gave away the stern expression. Vincent inclined his head. He could read the crest on Ethan's buttons, from the neatly pressed formal robe. "Correctly read, Hartwood."

"But of course. Safety is our primary concern and knowledge is our weapon," Ethan said, cheerfully. They clasped arms then, glowing runes lighting up upon contact.

Blue along Vincent's arms and gold on Ethan's. The magic flared brightly, illuminating colourfully on the plain, white walls of the receiving room. They faded back to nothing as the greeting was broken.

"As I am sure you are aware, this is a travel home and we prefer to keep it at a certain altitude." Vincent said. "Do you require additional comforts?"

"There's only a handful of grounding runes," Ethan said, looking to Harry. "If I could be permitted to add a few more, but in our space? I would not dream of disturbing the elemental balance you have in place; I simply wish to make it more comfortable."

Theo pretended not to hear the little power play taking place. Instead, he stepped off of the glowing white circle and started toward the door. Charlie automatically fell into step behind him.
"Theo?"

"I need to speak to Henry," Theo said, quietly.

"Henry—or Ilsa?" Charlie said, knowingly. "If you need to contact her-"

"I can't." Theo glanced over one shoulder. Ethan and Harry were still with Vincent and he didn't want to leave them there.

"She'll make time for you."

"She's answering at the courts." Theo murmured, a privacy spell already spiralling from his fingertips. He was fairly certain that Ethan was making a big deal about the grounding runes—because he'd also sensed the massive disconnect for his own earth element upon arriving in the Peverell's floating travel home.

"The courts?" Charlie echoed. "I thought-" he faltered. He had no idea what was really involved with a Clan War, but he'd expected something more serious than Ilsa flitting through the social circles at the fancy courts of the Hunt.

"Not those courts," Theo said, catching himself. "A council. A legal court of law. It's different here in Nevarah. They have to file a grievance and declare that there is bad blood between them—so no charges will be pressed for what Ilsa did. Since she was the one to do—it. She is the one who must file it." Theo hesitated. "She's also the ACE and will likely request a blood price. Basically, that she can exact whatever will ease the suffering of her Submissive."

Charlie felt his stomach clench. That wasn't exactly knowledge he was sure he wanted to know—yet. But it made sense now, that Theo would not want to disturb her. "Is there—do you know anyone else?"

"Besides Severus?" Theo gave a wry smile. "I've hardly made the kinds of connections that we can impose upon, considering our current standing, but—maybe soon."

The two Pareya seemed to have reached an agreement, for Vincent soon appeared, with Ethan trailing behind, Harry's hand tucked in the crook of his elbow.

It was a testament to Harry being 'off' by the fact that he allowed it. Theo frowned. There was so much to keep up with and he knew it would only become more complicated in the coming hours.

"Hey—hey," Charlie interrupted with a warm arm that settled cautiously across Theo's stiff shoulders. "I'm here, Theo. Don't forget I'm here."

Theo gave a self-deprecating chuckle. He turned enough to bump his head against Charlie's chin. "Hard to forget, dragonheart."

Charlie found himself smiling at that. He relaxed, waiting as the others caught up and began to lead them through the maze of halls and back to the familiar rooms.

Vincent led them to the sitting room where his Circle had gathered. Cora and Henry sat together, their heads close enough to touch, marking and sketching something on a shared digital tablet between them. The other Bonded, lounged about the room, paired up, but alert.

All eyes turned to them.

"Ethan Hartwood—Harry's new Pareya," Vincent said, calmly.
No one moved.

Cora stared, mouth open before her face brightened. There was genuine warmth and absolute delight radiating from her features. "Hartwood? Oh, Harry that's lovely! Henry—look—are't they adorable?"

The room seemed to relax as Cora's bubbly personality spilled over, coupled with her excited movements. She all but bounced over to Harry, pulling him into a happy hug.

"Congratulations! That's so—sweet!" She bounced on her toes, turning to Ethan. "Hello—Cora Peverell."

"Give them a bit of space, love," Vincent said, fondly. He drew her back with a gentle tug.

"A definite pleasure," Ethan said. His smile touched his eyes, as he bowed formally in deference to their first official meeting.

Cora beamed. "I'm so glad you have a Pareya now," she turned to Harry. "Do come in and sit down—was everything alright? Theo and Charlie left in such a hurry and—"

"Everything is fine." Theo said, carefully. "For us." He didn't miss the way the room had reacted to their arrival, nor how Vincent had still pulled Cora away from them. They were on edge, whether they meant to acknowledge it or not.

Cora faltered. The cheeriness dimmed a bit and then she half-smiled, as if resigned. "Of course. Do come in—this will likely, affect you as well."

"What happened?" Harry heard himself speak.

"You know that we craft things, yes?" Cora moved back towards Henry, holding out a hand. "Maia Kadel—the head of the Kadel Clan, she made an interesting suggestion today. Henry and I have been trying to see how to make it come to fruition."

"You don't have to worry so. It is only Maia, she cannot insist that we bend to her latest vision because of—" Lewis began.

"Maia is a friend," Henry said, firmly. "Regardless of whether we see eye to fang is not necessary."

Lewis rolled his eyes, but joined them on the opposite lounge. His sharp eyes tracked Ethan's movements—in relation to Harry—but he said nothing. Vincent had introduced him, after all.

"What does that mean for you?" Theo asked, plainly. He chose the lounge that afforded them the shortest path to the door—a habit he'd never been able to break. He was surprised to find that Ethan simply flopped onto the floor, patting the area beside it.

Harry settled next to him without complaint and a beat later, Cora sat on the floor, across from them.

"We're trying to boost production of the Bloodstones to accommodate a high volume of vampires. According to Maia, it'll be triple the highest count we've ever seen in Nevarah." She shivered. 

"Whether I believe that isn't exactly the question. Worst-case-scenario is that we don't have enough to satisfy them or we have to turn some away. Refusing entry is not necessarily a problem, but it becomes tricky, politically and otherwise, when you can't admit a Sire without a Childe and a family leader, without the family. It's best to simply make enough Bloodstones for everyone."
"Bloodstones—?" Harry twisted to look at Charlie. He distinctly remembered the time he'd spent in Charlie's bedroom, surrounded by wooden crates and the various artefacts contained inside of them. "Didn't you have one?"

"You do?" Cora perked up. "Oh that's good. Keep it on your person at all times. Do you only have that one or more than one?"

"Just one." Charlie said. Mentally, he tried to backtrack and think of whether it had come to Nevarah with him. Maybe. Maybe not.

"That's fine. They were in low demand for so long, we haven't bothered to keep up with production—so acquiring the material is taking more time than we'd like and then of course, there's all the logistics and such that come with these sorts of things." Her lip curled into a pout and she leaned back to catch her Alpha in her line of sight. "Hen-ry, I told you we should have bought that factory in quad fourteen."

"Indeed you did and I should have listened," Henry said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"You should always listen to me."

"As I am still learning," came the teasing comeback. "But if we can't have that, then you'll have to adjust production of the other factories for-"

"What do you normally make?" Harry wanted to know.

"Gems," Cora said, proudly. "All sorts of fabricated gemstones—different types, styles and strengths, of course. But that's what Henry's family is known for. Mine's for the tech." She took the tablet that was finally handed over. "We feed the Nyturas of this realm, we trade and of course, we supply gemstone mages across several realms."

Harry stared. He was seeing the massive Nyturas holding up the library roof and he'd wondered how they could stay there. He also had a sudden thought. "Shadow!"

"In your room," Lewis said, without looking up. He'd enjoyed the little Nytur's company—it had helped him to sleep in relative peace for the nights that he'd had it. He'd taken it to the guest room earlier—when Shadow had decided that on its own. He wasn't about to mention such things though, not at Theo's predictable scowl and Vincent's unhappy look.

"You feed them—?" Harry faltered. He wasn't sure he wanted to wrap his head around that.

Ethan stifled a laugh. "Don't think so hard on it," he said, pulling him close for a kiss to the cheek. "They have to eat and they love gems."

"We'll probably be scarce in the Hunt from now," Henry said, apologetically. "I'd be happy to make a few more connections for you, if you like, but a full turnout like today is not likely to happen again."

"That's fine," Theo said. "Thank you for all that you've done. We do appreciate it."

Henry smiled, but the gesture was overshadowed by the obvious shadow of worry etched at the corners of his eyes. "I appreciate your saying so—my apologies for the lack of—structure."

The tablet chimed and Cora made an annoyed sound.
"What?" Henry motioned for her to lean closer.

"They said we don't have the right sort of presses for all of the factories." Cora scowled. "We should. I ordered them three years ago."

"Three years ago?" Lewis repeated. This time, he looked up. There was only one production factory that had three custom-built presses for a certain type of crafted gem. "You mean that time in the-"

"Yes." Cora said, impatiently. "That time. We did receive them, didn't we? They were supposed to be crafting those six-sided rubies with the-"

"I'll check," Desmond said, rising to his feet from where he'd been sitting beside their Gheyo Prince. He was familiar with her fretting and knew the best way to set her mind at ease, was to personally verify whatever was troubling her. This was an easy enough fix for the moment. "Come with?"

The Gheyo yawned and rolled up to his feet in unspoken agreement. Short and stocky, he was nearly dwarfed behind Desmond's bulk, but his dark eyes flickered through the room, silently taking stock of everything before his departure.

"I'll send word as soon as I've verified everything," Desmond said. He held out a hand, waiting. The Gheyo took it, already beginning the first threads of a mild transportation portal. They could opt for something stronger, when they were in mid-air. It would have more power then.

Cora nodded, absently. That would be one thing off of her mind and a million more at stake. "Good—make sure you've laid hands on all of them…"

"Perhaps we should call this an early night?" Ethan suggested. "Theo?" He couldn't help thinking they were somehow in the way of the Peverell's. In spite of the effort to be mildly welcoming, he could clearly see that they were all preoccupied with something he had yet to know.

"Dinner," Vincent said, belatedly. "I'm sure we—"

"We'll order something out," Ethan said, quickly. He softened the statement with a smile, so the older Pareya wouldn't take it as a slight against their hospitality. "Please don't trouble yourself—I was rather hoping for something—more private."

Vincent relaxed, a fraction. He found himself able to nod and smile. "Of course—if there's anything you need?"

"I will be sure to ask," Ethan said, smoothly. "I'm hoping I can look after them with minimal amount of fuss. Thank you for hosting us." He stood, holding out a hand to Harry, who took it almost instantly.

"Lewis—their rooms," Vincent prompted, a beat later. "It may need some adjusting."

"I'll take them," Lewis said. He could read between the lines—the room had been prepared for three and would need to be expanded for Ethan. He was on his feet and holding open the door, careful to keep his distance from Theo. "Congratulations," he murmured, softly—as Harry and Ethan passed him.

Harry smiled, wanly. "Thanks."
Ethan waited until Lewis had left, retreating down the hallway and back to his Circle. It had taken a bit more convincing than he'd expected, for Lewis to believe that he could alter the room himself. He rubbed his face and pulled on one pointed ear, when his instincts still didn't settle straightaway.

"Ethan?" Theo's voice was measured. It was hard to miss the fact that Ethan had yet to allow any of them to enter the room—even Lewis. He could easily guess that it was a Pareyic thing, but standing in the hallway while Ethan figured out a polite way to explain that, was not on his list of things to do.

"Instinct," Ethan said, quickly—sheepishly, almost. "I need to—check the room."

"The room?" Charlie paused in mid-step of attempting to shuffle around Ethan again. He'd only stopped when Theo had caught his arm. "What's wrong with the room?"

"Instinct." Ethan repeated, cheerfully. His eyes fluxed from gold to a rich, honeyed hue. "I need to verify that everything is—safe and suitable. Pareyic thing."

"What do you need from us?" Theo asked, carefully. Besides standing out here in an empty hallway...

Ethan flinched, an audible crack of magic sparking in the air beside him. He could see why Theo was a bit rough around the edges. There was far too much air elemental magic swirling around them. "Just—stay?" He asked, carefully. He could fix the air magic-balancing it out with some earth magic—but it would take a bit of care. "The runes are really—not as grounding as they should be." He frowned. "No wonder you've been on edge."

"I am not on edge," Theo growled.

"Of course," Ethan muttered. "Of course. But I am." He toed off his shoes with a barely visible spell—thin strands of gold and teal spiralling around his feet—a faint glow remaining around them. "Excuse me."

He stepped into the room and released his hold on the raging magic stretching inside of him. It burst out in a happy, vibrant glow, swelling to fill the entire room in brightness. Air seemed to rush from the room, straining to push through the doorway and something, somehow, calmed.

Harry's soft gasp was telling.

Ethan nearly smiled to himself. He'd expected as much. He floated into the room, noting that his magic was already keeping him from touching the floor—due to the mix of the air elemental magic and the grounding runes.

Oh this would be fun.

"It'll only take a minute," he called over one shoulder.

A minute, Harry thought annoyed. It wasn't exactly productive to watch Ethan gliding through the room and touching—everything.

"Instinct?" He repeated, looking to Theo for answers. He was not quite sure how he felt about Ethan inspecting his clothes—from trousers down to pants—with precise, deliberate hands. Shadow, he was worried to note—was definitely not in the room anywhere that he could see. "I don't see Shadow."
"Pareyas protect," Theo reminded him. His impatience lingered, but he worked to temper it.

"I don't see him either," Charlie said, quietly. "I don't sense him and I know I could—before."

"Lewis said he was here," Harry leaned into the room.

"Stay-!" Ethan called out, automatically.

Harry pulled a face, but obediently leaned back into place. Ethan had nearly turned everything inside out and still—no Shadow. Surely Lewis hadn't made a mistake somewhere?

Theo watched Harry—noting the different expressions and eventually, the look of resignation. Harry would worry about the little Nytura, but not want to bother anyone by asking about it. Theo frowned.

Watching Ethan was interesting enough for the time being—as was Harry. It had taken a significant amount of willpower to remain silent at the absolutely bewildered look on Harry's face when Ethan had begun rummaging through their clothes.

"I'm sure it's here somewhere," Theo said, as soothingly as he could manage. "He's probably napping somewhere."

Harry sighed. Loudly. "So—this?" He gestured to the room.

"Ethan needs to know that nothing we currently have, is dangerous or will cause some sort of detrimental effect in the long-term. He also wants to know what we have, so if we're missing anything important, we can pick it up as soon as possible." Theo explained.

"Our clothes?" Harry threw back, helplessly. "What's wrong with our clothes?"

"Most Pareyas help with a full turnout," Theo braced in the doorway, Charlie opposite of him and Harry between them. "They usually make sure everyone's wearing the right outfits and they help with wardrobe upkeep, depending on the type of Pareya. Each one is different." His brow furrowed. "Ethan could be one of those-Ethan?"

"Connections," Ethan's reply floated back. He'd been listening to their conversation with half an ear. At present, he'd finished examining their respective sets of clothing, appalled at the meagre selection. Clothes shopping was definitely necessary for all of them.

"Connections?" Harry looked to Theo. It was easier to wait for Theo to answer, then attempting to hear what Ethan was saying from halfway under the bed.

"I've made dozens of useful connections from researching several things for my academic essays." Ethan answered, without missing a beat. He disappeared further under the bed. "Social connections, if you must be precise. Social and scholarly." He wriggled out from under the bed, popping up to scowl at it from his seat on the floor.

"Social and scholarly?" Theo said, wryly. "Isn't that the same?"

"Social as in the Hunt and high society," Ethan mumbled. He frowned at the bed, then gave a slight jump onto it, bouncing in the middle. "Scholarly as—well, scholarly. The schools and such. We do have quite an impressive academic history you know."

Charlie's eyebrows arched upward. He said nothing, but his face cycled through expressions of confusion, surprise and exasperation. He didn't see how jumping on the bed was solving anything,
but it did make him want to laugh and he supposed that was a good thing, considering how serious the day had been.

"Essays?" Theo prompted. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Ethan said, bouncing to a stop. His frown deepened. "I can't find the bloody-" He rolled over to lie on his stomach, leaning forward, half-off of the bed. He braced his hands on the floor to peer under the bed, head not-quite-touching the floor. "Connections." He repeated, voice muffled. "I like history, so I know all of the Clan Chiefs from the previous royal reign—and about three more above that. It was a project on improvements and integration of magical technology as opposed to pure magic." Ethan gave a grunt and managed to move from half-folded over the edge of the bed, to a calculated tumble that resulted in a crouch beside the bed, where he stayed—still frowning.

"Not to your liking?" Theo asked, amused.

"No grounding runes," Ethan said, at last. "They should have put something on it, but I can't find a thing! I should be able to feel it and I can't feel the slightest hint of a—" he stopped, glancing over to see if they were all following him. The look of confusion on Harry's face, prompted him to explain more. "If you can't sleep in a stable space in a secondary element, it's usually because something is missing. There's something missing here, so it's no wonder that you've been so on edge—" he gestured and the bed levitated upward.

"You know runes?" Charlie asked, impressed.

"Arielle, no. I know enough of them." Ethan said. "And I'm a decent hand at manipulating them, once they're already in place."

"...So you're fixing those?" Harry's eyes tracked him as he moved around the floating bed and began to trace shapes into the air.

"Something like that," Ethan paused, long enough to flash a smile. "I know what should be here, so I'm casting them and anchoring them. The ones in the corner of the room are fine, but they don't actually touch the bed." He nodded to Charlie. "How's the air for you? No issues or anything off?"

Charlie shrugged. "Nothing that I've noticed, I guess."

"Tell me if you notice something," Ethan said. "Harry?"

"It's Theo," Harry said, simply. "I'm fine."

"It's not Theo," Theo retorted. "It's nothing to worry abo—" he hissed, stumbling from the threshold into the room.

Ethan ducked his head to hide a smile. He walked out from under the bed and it lowered, softly behind him. A quick neatening spell rippled through the room, fixing everything he'd been rifling through. He'd thought the runes would do the trick, but it was nice see that he'd been right in the first place.

"What was that?" Theo demanded, eyes fluxed to a deep, dark brown. Not quite black, but definitely not gold.

Ethan met his gaze squarely, then, before it could turn into a staredown, he opened his mouth and trilled—a series of beautiful, musical sounds that made Theo's jaw snap shut, with an audible click of his teeth.
Charlie cautiously stepped into the room, with Harry already behind him and heading to Theo's side.

"Ethan!" Harry looked anxiously between him and Theo. His hands fluttered at Theo's shoulders. "What did you just-?"

"Earth runes activated." Ethan said, calmly. "You had grounding runes. Not necessarily earth grounding runes. Better?"

Theo made a grumbling noise.

Ethan laughed, approaching in slow movements. He held out his hands, giving Theo plenty of time to refuse him, before he entered his personal space. He purred and nuzzled at Theo's neck and along his jaw.

After a few minutes, Theo huffed and turned away, cheeks a faint pink. "A little warning..." he trailed off.

Ethan's smiled softened. "I didn't realise it would affect you so deeply. I was guessing at whether it was that or something else."

"Something else?" Theo's eyes narrowed. He hated other people trying to figure him out—especially when he knew so little of them.

"Harry's worried about you," Ethan said, bluntly. "So I need to make sure he's not worrying for nothing."

Theo's gaze snapped to Harry, who shrugged, apologetically.

"You don't like Lewis, you're on edge whether you're admitting it or not and you're not—you're not you."

Harry said, shrinking in on himself. "I don't like that and I—I don't know what to do about it." He started, faintly, when Charlie wrapped his long arms around him, searing warmth offering a strong sense of security and stability. Instinctively, he leaned back.

"You don't have to do anything about it," Ethan said, briskly. "Those are things a Circle works out— together."

"What did you do?" Charlie asked, wonderingly. Even though he'd heard the explanation, the change was so vastly different, it felt like a different room. He'd felt it the moment he'd stumbled in after Harry. A surprising sense of peace and stability—as if the ground was truly solid beneath his feet.

Now that it was there, he could understand Theo's earlier irritability in their morning conversation. He almost laughed, but bit it back. His Alpha still looked rather disgruntled and Charlie wanted to see him relax a bit more.

"Noticed it, now?" Ethan teased. He waved them towards the bed. "I'll order out something when you want to eat, but for now—I think we have a lot to discuss."

Theo didn't answer, but he ushered Harry and Charlie to the bed, his shoulders relaxing a fraction.

Food could wait. Ethan was right—they did have to talk and maybe, this refreshing way of simply speaking what was on their mind would be good for them.
In the centre of the crater—a large, gnarled root burst through the ground, furiously burrowing into the forest floor. Luna waited for the incoming magic to fully settle into the forest. She knew to read it as people and not as an intruder.

"They're here," she announced, because Rolf was still holding her and he didn't seem like he intended to stop anytime soon.

Not that she was protesting.

But still.

There were things to do.

Luna hummed a bit until his arms gradually slackened and allowed her to sit up. She tapped his nose with one finger—because she could—then delicately fluttered up and above him.

She could sense familiar auras and magic, just within reach. It was such a relief; she could hardly believe it. Sometimes she wondered if she could make a mistake—because it was so hard to tell when she was right.

Or could be right, anyway.

Rolf stood beside her, his wings tucked in from the earlier impact.

Gliding closer, Luna smiled to herself as she watched Molly Weasley stand protectively at the farthest edge of their little group, her brilliant red wings stretched out to encompass them.

A lovely picture—a mother sheltering her children—or better yet, a dragel submissive displaying all protective instincts for the ones they travel with.

Strikingly lovely, Luna thought to herself.

A new thought settled in her head as she stepped out from behind the tree. "Hello!" she called out.

Rolf made a strangled sound behind her, but hurried out into the open, his magic swirling around him as they drew the attention of the newcomers.

"Luna!" Ginny was the first to react, her eyes wide—shock and disbelief showing plainly on her face. "Are you—what—what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," Luna said, simply. "Hello." She said, again. She looked at all of them in turn, silently cataloguing their magical states and respective bonds. Her smile softened as she looked over at Neville and Lavender, then Dean and Seamus.

"You're a fae," Augusta said, grumpily. She could see the fine wisps of fairy dust fluttering through the air—fairy dust that was not native to the wooded area they'd just crashed through. "Did you break the portal?"

"You couldn't have entered," Luna explained. "The barriers are up."

"Barriers are always up," Molly said. Her warm gaze narrowed, faintly. "We would've been fine—" she hesitated. "Luna, yes?" She was sure she'd seen the young witch a time or two before, Ginny had mentioned her.
"Mrs. Weasley," Luna answered, politely. "The forest barrier, maybe. But not the other ones." Her eyes took on a faraway look. "Definitely not the other ones. Nevarah is on a lockdown. There are no outside entries. This was the safest point to reach you. Any further and it would be too dangerous, any sooner and someone would be left behind." She sighed, dreamily. "The forest is good tonight though. We can leave in the morning."

"The morning?" Ginny exclaimed. "Luna-!"

"In the morning?" Rolf echoed. He was not looking forward to that in the least. There was no telling what was beyond their little protected space.

All eyes turned to him.

Luna smiled, a sad tinge to it. "This is Rolf," she said, dropping down to stand on her own two feet. Her wings melted away. "He's a friend. Rolf, these are the ones from the wizarding world. The one's I've told you about." She listed their names and pointed them out, one at a time.

A few awkward greetings were exchanged, until a heavy silence settled over all of them. There was little to say, considering the strange circumstances.

"Please don't be alarmed," Luna said, cheerfully. The dreamy look faded from her eyes and she managed to hold her smile. A new piece of her little puzzle had clicked into place and they would definitely need to stay here for the night. "It's really alright now."

Augusta gave a slow, moaning groan. "Your definition of alright seems to be a bit off," she said, tartly. "But if you've come all this way—then there must be a reason."

"Many reasons," Luna said. "But most of them would take too long to explain to you all." She reached up to a tuck a stray curl behind one ear. "How was it, when you left?"

The older women exchanged a glance.

Molly sighed. Even if Luna had broken the portal and brought them all there—safely, she couldn't bring herself to tell her how the Wizarding World was devolving into strange, dark days. Couldn't tell her how she'd lost so much—too much—and was barely standing, because of Ginny. "It's not—good," she said, at last. "Not good at all. But, we were leaving and now, here we are!"

If you think we should stay here for the night, we should set up a camp of sorts." She shivered. "It doesn't feel very safe—"

"We'll stay right here," Luna said, quickly. "Here is safest." Something roared and groaned in the distance. Luna winced. "Definitely safest."

Molly gave her a look, but didn't comment. She could see the tired lines around her eyes and the weariness in Rolf. They'd likely pushed themselves all day, traveling, to meet them there. Maybe. Possibly. "Here then," she agreed, reluctantly.

"How?" Lavender wanted to know, eyes narrowed. She had yet to release her death grip on Neville's arm. When she'd awkwardly waded into the strange portal, the last thing she'd expected was to end up in some creepy forest with Loony Lovegood of all people, waiting to greet them. "How do you know it's safest?"

"Blood offering," Rolf said. Now he understood what she'd been doing on the ground, with his knife and the runes. "Here will be safest, because she's made it that way. The trees tend to listen to her." He sighed and produced his travel pack out of thin air. "We have basic provisions," he began.
"But since there's so many of us, we'll need to take a bit of care."

"We'll help," Dean said, glancing at Seamus. "Right?"

Seamus mustered up a smile. "Sure." He said. "What do we need?"

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**EVANSONS : JUN, BRIAR, GEORGE AND REGULUS**

"It's kind of long," George said, fingerling the silky wrist-cuffs. "And isn't this too fancy?"

"It's plain," Ivy corrected. "Very plain. There's nothing fancy about it." She twirled her finger, motioning for him to mirror the action.

George sighed, but obediently turned so she could see the full outfit. They'd been at it for nearly two hours now. Jun had dropped them off, collected Gardenia and Rian, then disappeared once more.

Ivy had taken one look at both of them, before incorporating George and the hulking Zephyr into her shopping entourage.

To his credit, Zephyr merely ducked his head and allowed the excessive fussing. He did speak up to explain why he preferred shorter sleeves and loose collars, as a Gheyo Joker, but said nothing else. Ivy listened, nodded and made a few adjustments.

Regulus was the hardest one to shop for, because of his wings, a detail where Briar had finally spoken up—suggesting they all take a late lunch. Any protests his Pareya would have had at that, were immediately stayed on account of the topic. He planned to remedy those wings soon and had hoped he'd be able to do so, before the shopping spree had become too extravagant. Then again, it was Ivy.

Lunch—specifically, food for their respective Bonded—was a suitably distracting option compared to clothes shopping. Avoiding the inner tiers of the Hunt, the entire Evanson Circle made their way to the less crowded family restaurants on the outskirts of the main city.

They were greeted effusively at the door, a round of happy conversation following them all the way to a large horseshoe-shaped table, with chairs on both sides. The Pareya took charge, rattling off available entrees and collecting the votes as to what to order.

Once orders were placed, everyone settled in and quieted down. The Pareya were scattered throughout the chairs, allowing them to be within easy access of the appetizers—and well-within arm's reach for refilling their Bonded's empty plates.

The children were allowed their own little group—near the end of the table, flanked by their respective parents—as the remaining Gheyos took up the rear, alert, but relaxed.

It was curious to see how they'd done it, George noted. He'd seen Jun and Briar gravitate towards the centre of the table, speaking to each other in low tones—not paying the least bit of attention to the seating arrangements and shuffling by the rest of their Bonded.

George couldn't help but notice that Regulus had been seated to Briar's left and Jun on his right. Zephyr was by Jun's right. He'd been shuffled to sit directly across from Jun—with Rian across from Briar.
Sneaky, George thought. Because with the two 'newest' Bonded so close to Jun and Briar, he had a feeling it was a subtle statement of sorts for the rest of them to take note of. He couldn't help noticing that Gardenia was missing.

The other Gheyos were present, but Gardenia had paused long enough to listen to Jun when they'd first arrived and then vanished as if by direction. He wondered what that was about.

"Alright?" Rian prompted, leaning back so Orchid could add another breadstick to his and George's plates, respectively. He loved the food here and was glad to be able to add a new memory to the musty old ones in the back of his mind.

George managed a smile. "Great."

"Jun—is Gardenia coming back?" Heather wanted to know. She bustled around the outer section of their chosen table, pushing chairs closer and making sure the children were settled. "I thought we were on a schedule. Doesn't your father always spend the majority of his day out in the thick of the Hunt? We'll miss him if we linger too long."

"She's checking on something." Jun said, her hands hovered around Briar for a moment, before settling on smoothing down his collar.

Briar sniffed, but leaned into the touch, not refusing the connection. "We were hardly presentable," he said. "Now that we have something to present properly—we should eat first, before turning up on his doorstep."

"Food could wait," Leif began, uncertainly. "If we're going to miss him, then maybe we should-"

"Says the one who is always hungry," Briar interrupted. "We'll see him after everyone's been fed and watered. I won't have you all turning up there whining like a bunch of-

"We know," Jun said, smoothly. She could sense a Briar-rant in the making and given their current frayed nerves, preferred if it didn't take place just yet. "That was very good thinking, darling."

"And normally it isn't?" Briar huffed.

"Normally, it's spectacular," Jun kissed the top of his head. He really was adorable when he made that face. "I'm simply readjusting to it. Order for me, would you?" she turned to her left. "Flora, I need you check on something else for me. It shouldn't take long."

The pink-haired Fae slipped over to Jun's side. She leaned in close, nodding once at the barely audible murmurs. "As you like," she said, nuzzling Jun's cheek.

"Thank you," Jun pulled her close, gifting her a bite to one delicately pointed air.

It prompted a shower of shimmering fairy dust, before Flora sucked in a breath and shrank to the size of kitten. She shook herself all over, before a flash of pink-gold energy swirled up.

Seconds later, she'd vanished.

George stared. He hadn't realized that she could alter her size.

"George?" Rian waved a hand in front of his face. "Do you want juice or something stronger?" He held up a pitcher.

"He doesn't want anything stronger," Regulus answered for him, levelling a stern look in George's
direction. "I don't know how his element reacts with it—and I don't think he does either."

"My element?" George looked to Jun. He knew of Firewhiskey and other Wizarding World drinks, but he'd never been much of a fan. Sure, he'd tried it—as had Fred, but he hadn't seen the point of it.

"Give him the berry-fizz," Heather offered. She sent the sparkling blue-purple drink floating down the table. "Try some of the fruit ones or a vegetable one, if you'd prefer something less sweet."

"Fire elements have a tendency to react to anything that has the possibility of being—flammable," Jun explained. "As most drinks are. Which, in turn, is largely because you can use it to boost your flames. Not a bad thing, in a serious situation, but not helpful in a social setting."

"Fizz," George said, quickly. The last thing he needed was to set the table on fire for choking on a breadstick or something. He took the glass offered. "Thanks."

"Keep it in mind," Rian said, cheerfully. "Other elements have different reactions to things, but fire types need to be careful of hot springs, flammable drinks and stormy weather."

It took a second for the information to click and when it did, George groaned. He set the glass down, untouched and buried his face in his arms. He silently prayed that Harry was a compatible element and then that Theo was someone he could live with.

From what he'd seen of Harry at the Burrow, that was—fine. Mostly. He had no idea what kind of element Harry could have, much less Theo.

"It's not that bad. You'll learn." Regulus poured himself a small glass of the orange-carrot juice. "Besides, having an affinity for an element, versus actually having it, are two different things."

George only whined in answer.

There was a smattering of good-natured laughter down the length of the table, with a few sympathetic clucks thrown in.

"I see Ivy wore you out." Rian teased. "Didn't Jasmine warn you?"

"I did," Jasmine's reply floated across the table. "Not my fault if he thought I was joking."

"Neither of you have any stamina at all," Ivy huffed. Her face was a bright pink. "I was rushing! We've barely gotten anything suitable for any sort of respectable function of good standing!"

"Suitable, she says," Chris rolled his eyes upward. "Says the Queen's champion of the Clan-"

"Oh hush you!" Ivy's quick hands snapped out, launching a breadstick with startling accuracy.

Chris leaned back, catching it with one hand and grimacing at the buttery garlic spread now smeared on his hand. "Ivy!" He tore it half and threw one half back, before taking an oversized bite of the other.

Leif snatched the half before it reached Ivy. "Stop it, you two." He rumbled. "What are you, five? This is why I can't take you anywhere."

"You never take me anywhere," Ivy countered. "You're always saying that you're too tired and you'd rather eat my cooking." Her lips twitched in a barely hidden smirk. She knew exactly what he would say next.
"I took you out to the Siren Ba-"

"That doesn't count." She said, tartly. "Give me back my breadstick."

"That was one time!" Leif said, irritated. He ate the breadstick in two contrary bites. "And I said I'd make it up to you."

Ivy sniffed. "That was five years ago and I'm still waiting," she said, primly. "This doesn't count either. This is Briar's idea." She looked to George. "When you find your lovely Submissive, make sure you're both on the same page. A written contract is a thing of beauty."

"Written…contract?" George stared. That was a first to him. "There's different kinds?"

Leif, Rian and Ivy stared back in varying degrees of worry. The conversation dimmed a bit. The Pareya continued settling everyone down with the various appetizers set on the table.

"There's many different kinds," Ivy said at last, her brows furrowed in thought. "Jun's probably forgotten to mention it." She gave a slight shake of her head. "This is why Alphas aren't usually mentors, you know. The most common kind is unspoken, but it's usually done in the vein of lifelong love, loyalty and respect. You mean to love the one you've chosen, you will be loyal to them, no matter what and you'll respect them as you wish to be respected. In turn, it is mirrored back to you."

"And you just—know?" George asked, dubiously. That didn't sound very official at all.

"Your magic asks it." Orchid added another spinach puff to George's plate. She'd noticed he was avoiding some of the vegetables, but cheese always helped to hide nutritional value. "When you're marking each other, the mark won't take unless both sides are willing and compatible. You both have to wish for the same thing and it's rather common. You want love, that's one part of it. You want that love to be loyal and you are pledging your loyalty, right?"

George nodded, slowly.

"Then of course, love can be many different things to many different people. Respect is important. When we respect each other, our differences or boundaries, we become who we are and not mindless creatures of devotion." She rolled her eyes. "Some races have trouble understanding that when it comes to us dragels. They think there's no way you could love more than one person or even that so many of us could co-exist in such blissful harmony. Sure, there are moments—but isn't life full of those?"

"Very full," Leif chimed in. He held out his plate for an extra serving of the dipping sauce being passed around him. "It's being able to share everything with those around you, who really care. And at the same time you are loving, you are being loved. That's the idea behind a Circle, anyway. Or part of it. I never paid much attention when they tried to explain it."

"Let me guess, you were the student that always fell asleep while they were taking the general exams, yes?" Ivy teased.

Leif blushed. "That's not fair," He floated the sauce out of her reaching hands. "At least I didn't pass out from lack of—Oof!" He grunted. The sauce dropped.

Ivy summoned it to her side, cleaning up any stray droplets on the way with another flicker of magic. She added a generous serving to her plate and sent it floating on down the table.

"Alright, you two—really!" Chris scolded. "Leif—stop it. Ivy, behave. George, don't think about it
in those sorts of terms. Think about it the way Orchid was saying. Your magic responds. That's the most common, but there's also informal contracts—and those are done verbally. Sometimes, physically, but the physical one won't take unless there's verbal and magical consent. See, your Sub—prospective or otherwise—has to call out to you. They have to want you. If they don't respond to your favour or they aren't receptive to more than polite conversation, then you should back off. When they want you, they'll cry for you—and you'll feel an instinctive urge to go to them. If you follow your instincts at that point, everything will work out. I promise.”

"Listen to Chris," Orchid hummed. "Ivy—stop kicking him under the table and Leif, if you wanted to sit next to her, you should have done so."

Ivy turned as red as Jun's hair.

Leif rubbed his face—but it didn't hide the mirroring blush. "Switch?" he asked, looking at Chris.

Chris didn't even hesitate. He merely held up one hand and snapped his fingers—his own magic taking care of the request.

George blinked. They'd swapped seats and plates in a heartbeat. He looked back to Ivy and then immediately back at his plate. Ivy was already half in Leif's lap, the following kiss hidden from the fact that Ivy's long hair hid most of it from view.

"Ivy?" Rian prompted, worriedly. The bonds were fine, as far as he could tell and there were no outside threats within range. But Leif wasn't exactly one for public displays of affection and he wasn't even protesting as Ivy took charge of the moment.

"They're fine," Chris said, slowly. "I think something upset her in the shopping district though. You know she's sensitive to outside energies." He nudged Rian. "You had a formal contract though, didn't you? Share."

Rian nudged him back. "Briar's father is very traditional. Particularly because of our element," and here, his eyes fluxed from their typical reddish-brown hue to something darker and much deeper. "It has age-old tradition, steeped in the very best traits that the Shadow element offers. He asked if I would be willing to sign and agree to a formal contract. A very simple one, mind you, but still binding. I didn't see why not. It made him happy enough to approve of our Bonding."

"My father didn't approve of Briar," Jun said, quietly. She looked from her plate to Briar and held out a hand. He took it at once, tugging her closer. She leaned down for the kiss to her cheek and the nuzzle to her jawline. "I signed the contract anyway. I didn't care that he didn't approve. My mother adored him. She thought he was perfect."

"I am perfect," Briar said, amused. He held up their joined hands and kissed the back of hers. A happy thrum of magic rippled out through the room, with several strong pulses of joy singing through the shared bonds.

George watched, amazed, as every Bonded—even the children—froze and reacted as the empathic feedback reached them. It took a split-second longer, before the feedback crashed into him as well. Their mentored bond sang merrily with renewed emotion. Magic roared through his veins. His ears and neck warmed.

Jun flushed a light pink. "Sorry," she muttered, visibly reigning her empathy in. The raging magical aura dropped to an acceptably tolerable level.

Rian smiled, broadly. He had missed this so much. "Nothing to apologize for," he said, calmly.
"We're glad to have you back—and I have missed that, awkward as it can be in a full house." He hid his blush behind the pretence of dabbing his mouth with a napkin.

Jun perked a brow.

Briar helpfully bit off half of his breadstick. He offered the remaining piece.

Jun threw it at Rian.

George caught it as it bounced off of the Beta's quick shield. He couldn't help it. He laughed.

"A Hartwood?" Jun repeated, staring at Rian. "Why would they ask after our Circle? We've been out of the public eye since—well, decades since anyone has bothered to dig up anything on us."

Briar leaned into her, his hand twining around hers. "When was it checked out?"

"That's the problem," Rian said, sighing heavily. "A few hours before."

"Hours?" Jun straightened up, lowering her voice. The rest of her Bonded were fussing over George and Regulus—the other half of their shopping trip, now nearly at an end. They'd finished the meal and ventured out into the shopping district once more. She'd guessed that they needed the distraction and figured that they were also buying necessities for when she'd request guest quarters at the main house.

Rian's latest bit of news was significantly disturbing. From everything she'd heard at this point, no one had bothered them too much in her absence and they'd been largely keeping out of sight.

"Hours," Rian confirmed. "I've spelled something on it—so we should have some sort of notice, if anyone checks it out again. But, it was a young Hartwood too—an Ethan? I can't place him at all. I don't remember anyone with-"

"He was a royal examiner," Briar said, quietly. "There was a brief mention of him, some time ago. He was one of the appointed exam monitors during the last Royal testing to rotate the students of court."

"That's it?" Rian said, incredulously. "That doesn't tell us anything!"

"It tells us that he's smart and he probably has royal connections from that," Briar said, thoughtfully. "That's interesting." He frowned at his Beta. "Calm down. There's no need to panic."

"Calm? Panic? Briar—I'm being serious and you're not even-"

"Stop it, both of you." Jun scolded, she rubbed at her forehead. "That won't help. Rian—I know you're worried and we're all worrying right along with you, but I don't believe we had any issues with any Hartwood—at least before I left. Unless I've missed something, we're fine. Briar, darling—"

He stared up at her, the picture of innocence.

Jun snorted. "Not working," she muttered, kissing him anyway. "We will sort this out. Don't take your frustrations out on Rian, alright?"

Briar snuck another kiss. He didn't answer.

She didn't push him. He would listen, if only because he wanted to make her happy.
Rian looked away—not quite sulking.

Jun reached out and pulled him closer, as she turned away from Briar. It took a minute of nuzzling and a few, soft kisses, before Rian melted back into her one-armed embrace.

Briar chirped softly, drawing a smile from both of them.

"There's also been a request," Rian said, at last. "For a seal removal."

"A what?" Jun stared at him.

"I'm not repeating everything just because you didn't believe me the first time." Rian gave her a look. "Let me finish. A small Circle—they don't have an official Circle name as yet and I couldn't request any information without giving away that I was inquiring into them. Given that I thought we were attempting to stay in the shadows for the time being, I didn't request it. The formal request is probably with your father, though I can't think why he hasn't accepted it."

Jun's face smoothed out into a carefully blank expression.

Briar frowned, a flicker of alarm beginning to register as he felt their bonds turn a bit too calm for his tastes. She'd realised something and was blocking her empathy, in order to mentally sort it out. "Jun?"

"The tapestry," Rian began. He looked away, his voice low. "It's correct—except that, well, there's—one is deceased. Long time ago. Years. The other is—greyed out, but with markings."

"Markings?" Briar repeated. "What kind?"

"Well, both are partnered—and their names were registered. They show as Lily and Petunia—" Rian swallowed, ignoring the small sound of distress from Jun. "They each have a child, Harry for Lily and Dudley for Petunia."

"Which one—?" Briar faltered.

"Lily and her partner, James, are dead." Rian said, steadily. "Some time back. Not sure how or why. Harry's alive. Probably lives with Petunia and hers, I'd expect. They'd want to stay close together, I'd think. Doesn't look anything like dragel-life, if the solitary is to be believed. There's only the one for each of them."

Coolness crept into Jun's veins, the words rattling around in her head as she heard Rian continue. Her mind was tortured with the thought of a young baby passing through a portal and somehow, now a grown woman with children and a solitary Bonded. What an odd, lonely life.

"And it's greyed out?" Briar confirmed.

"All three of them," Rian said. "The partner, Vernon—dead, but the skull and crossbones suggests a Death Seal."

"A Death Seal?" Jun started, violently. Her magic swirled viciously around her. "Someone put a Death Seal on my daughter?"

"Shhh—" Briar said, at once, reaching up to pull Jun to him. He dug his fingers into her side, blunting his claws to add some pressure. "Shhh—Jun, please. Focus. Come on—look at me." He held her gaze until she visibly calmed. "Look at me. Don't—don't do that. Rian-!" He ground out.
"I've inquired after the Death Seal and permissions to leave the realm," Rian said, quickly. He shouldn't have stopped in mid-story, but retelling it had somehow made it more real than mere research. "It'll take some time, you know how slow everything is in the Hunt, but we'll have answers and we'll find them."

Jun took a slow breath and nodded. She leaned heavily into Briar, clutching at him for comfort and grounding. "I know. Sorry. It's just-"

"I know." Briar murmured. "I know. It's alright." He held her as close as he could and and nearly smiled when Rian's arms wrapped around them both. They were managing. Not quite broken, but repairing just the same.

"I need to speak to my father." Jun said, at last. "There's something we're missing here and I can't—I don't know what it is."

"I'll tell them to hurry," Rian said, quietly. "Briar?"

"Hm?"

"Regulus—stop stalling, eh?"

Briar half-smiled. "Not stalling at all. Just waiting for an uninterrupted night."

Rian snorted. "Try tonight, regardless of interruptions. The sooner, the better—you could even try a time-alteration if you're that worried."

"I'm not worried, but he's a skittish sort."

Jun stifled a laugh. "He is, isn't he? But he's adorable. You'll love him. Both of you," she added, when Rian gave her a look.

"True," Briar agreed. His dark eyes tracked the feathered Regulus, dutifully turning twice, for Ivy to inspect the new outfit. "Very true."

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**EVANSON ANCESTRAL HOME : (RESIDENCE OF JUN'S FATHER)**

The transportation spell set them down outside of the wards of main house in the Evanson estate. Once the shopping had been settled, Jun had skipped straight to the next pressing matter-visiting her Father and his Circle.

"Shields up!" Jun snapped, as the portal faded. Her empathy roiled and shifted, a deep, terrible feeling of wrongness settling over her. "Briar—Rian!"

"With you," Rian grunted, flanking her left as Briar took her right. He tried to make sense of what he was seeing, but it was hard with the fierce, empathic feedback streaking through the shared bonds. "Jun—talk to me."

Everything looked too peaceful, too perfect—and a half-second later, the stasis shattered.

From the bright, cheerful image of a pristine estate, to a vision of crumbling stone, rampant thorns and a distinctly oppressive aura. Jun hissed. That was the wrongness she'd sensed.

"Fabrine!" Gardenia called out. There were flickers at the corners and she was not looking forward to what was about to follow. "Circle up—guards out!"
The Pareyas had already cast protective shields at Jun's order and now, they moved into a
defensive formation. The children gathered in the centre and the Pareyas circled them, with the
Gheyos flanking along the front and left, with Jun, Rian and Briar on the right and centre. George
found himself guarding on the left side.

Jun was the first one to move, her brows furrowed into a deep crease. "Briar?"

Briar edged closer to her, his eyes flaring a faint shade of red, overriding the usual hazel hue.
"Smells…old." He muttered, stretching a hand out towards the thin, wavering wards. They were
visible to his naked eye and he could see countless, jagged tears through them. They'd nearly failed
—it was a miracle they were still standing.

Jun made a soft sound in her throat, but didn't stop him.

The wards crumbled at his touch.

"Leif—Jasmine?" Gardenia called out, squaring up her shoulders, drawing her twin-edged sword.
"Third and fifth formation—the rest of you, be ready!"

"As if we're lounging about," Ivy grumbled. But it was more for the need to speak, than an actual
complaint. She'd gathered her long hair into a magical braid and was now, calmly hooking
sharpened spikes into certain, leather-wrapped sections. "I can't sense anything beyond the Fabrine
and they haven't come out, so it's probably settled into the structure. Rian?"

"I think we'd better enter quickly—and move as fast as we can," Rian muttered. "On three?"

"Three," Jun agreed. "Gardenia?"

Gardenia rolled her shoulders back. "One, two, three!"

Rian cast three spells in rapid succession. He moved forward—unflinching as Briar simply
dropped to all fours and blurred into his hound form.

Jun reached out, fisting a hand in his thick fur. Her eyes glowed an eerie green as they advanced. "I
can't sense anyone," she muttered. "Not a single—living—soul."

Moving as a group, they entered the grounds.

Like an enchanted castle that had been left to ruins, the massive estate was covered in hundreds of
overlapping, creeping vines on most surfaces. The beauty of it was marred by the darkened,
blackened vines with an ominous aura surrounding certain patches.

"Poison!" Ivy called out. Her magic crackled at her fingertips.

"I can sense it," Chris answered. His wings fluttered, a sprinkle of golden fairy-dust wafting
towards the patch. If they were lucky, it would reverse whatever dark enchantment had turned it.

Leif jerked forward, slashing out and down—as the patch came to life, throwing out thorned vines
to snatch them. The fairy dust littered the ground, fading almost at once-useless. "Sentient!"

"Noted," Gardenia threw back. "Steer clear—we want to make it inside."

Jun poured her magic into the threads of her Pareya, feeding the shield that was protecting them.
She pushed a bit of calm through George's mentored bond as well, adding a bit for Regulus through
their own connection.
The Estate's various state of disrepair and disarray, was disturbing. In some places, the walkways were smooth and well-cared for, with patches of barren, tilled earth along the green squares of lawn, denoting gardens. In others, it looked as if some great evil had befallen it.

The sense of wrongness grew stronger, as they approached the main house and Jun loathed to think of what they would find there.

She hoped her family had left long before whatever had happened here. She could see massive chunks of overturned stone and evidence of a one-sided battle taking place, with the spell-residue still lingering, thanks to the stasis spell.

The main house was something of a statement, with massive curved steps leading up to giant double-doors. There were torches that magically lit as Jun and her Circle moved forward.

"None of the security is active," Gardenia muttered. She cut another slash in front of her, sending a crescent-shaped flare of magic on head, cutting through whatever was not yet visible to the naked eye. "Jas?"

"Nothing that I can sense," Jasmine sniffed, cautiously. "Can't smell anything either—something's not right here."

"Whatever gave it away?" Leif grumbled. He twitched at her look, but his sharp eyes gave away his alertness.

"Chris?" Azalea nudged him. "Try it a bit higher?"

Christ nodded, fluttering up, as prompted, his golden fairy dust sprinkling liberally over them—and the estate grounds—as they continued on.

The lack of magical protections was evidenced in the way that what few spells had held over time, now flickered out as they passed.

"Gardenia, I love you dearly and I trust your judgement," Jun said, through gritted teeth. "But if this turns out to be what I—"

"Go. Take Briar." Gardenia said, tersely. "Rian?"

"With them." The beta said, quickly. He blurred between them, an arm around Jun's waist and one hand reaching up to grab a handful of Briar's fur. "Breathe." He reminded, automatically.

Both Alpha and Sub gave him an exasperated look, but he didn't notice. The short jump from his nod to Gardenia—and the blur to their sides, was the only warning for the shadow shift that followed.

One minute they were there and the next, they weren't.

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CHARACTER SNIPPET | CEDRELLA AND SEPTIMUS WEASLEY & Co. | TORVAK ESTATE OF SEPTIMUS WEASLEY

"You're feeding it?" Primus wrinkled his nose. "You know it could be feral."

"It?" Cedrella mocked. "Could it? Well, aren't you a close-minded little wretch-"
"I'd watch that mouth of yours." Primus said, calmly. Too calmly. His eyes tracked her every movement down the hallway, away from the basement stairs where she'd just taken a dinner tray down for her grandson.

The grandson that was now half-something or the other and apparently still coherent enough to call out for his family members.

"He's my grandson and I'll thank you to keep your prejudices to yourself," Cedrella shot back. "Better yet, don't you have more important things to do than lurking near stairwells?"

His gaze hardened to icy blue chips, the air growing decidedly cooler as he brushed past her. "One of these days, you'll find that your mask has crumbled and fallen," he hissed. "And you'll realise, too soon, that you've been seen for what you are!"

"And what am I, Primus?" She called after him, stopping in the midst of the hall. Her own uneasiness kept her from following him—an instinctive urge to retreat, as if somehow, her brother-in-law, was now the threat she'd always known him to be.

He didn't answer. He vanished around the corner, his footsteps fading away.

She stood, silently for a long moment. "...Not a monster," she whispered, half to herself. "Not a monster as you are."

Another presence approached and she drew upon her gifts to melt into the shadows of the darkened hallway. To her surprise, it was none other than the remaining twin, Fred, who made his way down, looking only marginally uneasy.

She smiled to herself, silently awarding him some merit for the brave act she had a feeling, he meant to commit. That was good.

She checked the time. Perhaps she could run back and help them a bit.

The uneasy feeling deepened. She stepped out from the shadows, watching as Fred disappeared around the corner and towards the basement stairs. That was fine. Ron could use the company.

Maybe it was best that they were together.

She paused. "Elric?" her voice was a mere whisper. He was her sworn familiar for life—particularly because she'd saved his life, but she'd never tried to force any sort of compliance from him.

He did as he pleased and she occasionally suggested he haunt certain annoying family members, to make her feel better.

Pettiness was childish, but still, there was some satisfaction from knowing that any guests beneath her watch, were also within her grasp.

She'd seen him hovering a few cells down when she'd taken Ron's food tray. She knew he would have attempted to speak to Ron on his own.

Then again, from what she'd seen of her flighty grandchild, he was certainly a bit of an overdramatic sort and there was always the slight possibility that he'd fainted.

"Elric, I know you can hear me—guard them. Pain of death upon your head should any foreign hand steal their lives before yours."
A flicker of white light at the corner of her eyes, flared brightly, as if in silent acknowledgment. She nearly smiled.

Loyalty was something to be treasured.

It was good to know some things still worked the way they ought to. The message in her pocket seemed to burn fiercely and she smoothed a hand over said pocket, silently willing it to remain hidden.

There was no time to properly dispose of it. Not now. She had a feeling it would be best to pay a visit to Bill and Fleur…

They were sitting on the bed.

Or, more correctly, Bill was sitting on the edge of the bed and Fleur was securely in his lap, her hands gently patting at his scarred face. They were conversing in a low murmur of French, that instantly stopped the moment Bill spotted her in the doorway.

"…Grandmother," he said, evenly.

Cedrella made herself smile, even though her heart ached to see the mistrust there. She'd worked hard though, very hard to keep up the facade that this damned game existed on.

In a different time—perhaps, back home—things would've been different.

Her smile wavered, turning into a grimace. The note in her pocket—burned. She leaned back from the door, checking that the hallway was still safe.

There were spells masking her movements and even her very presence.

"Were you happy before you came here?" she asked, abruptly.

Bill's stare hardened.

Ah, that was good enough, she mused. It wouldn't matter if he didn't want to tell her—it would matter if he wasn't alive to enjoy it anymore.

"Take Fleur and leave now," Cedrella said, briskly. She fished out the note from her pocket and held it out. Her magic silently twined over the paper scrap, turning it into something more useful. The message was smeared and half-faded. "This is a portkey—you're used to that method of travel, yes?"

"Leave-?" Bill exchanged a glance with Fleur. The mixture of confusion and barely concealed mistrust was visible in his eyes.

"It is not safe here and this—house," Cedrella stopped. Wasting time on explanations wouldn't do either of them any good. "It is not safe," she repeated. "You must leave."

"Without any kind of warning?" Fleur exclaimed. "What is it you have against us? Why don't you-"

Cedrella growled in frustration, she stalked into the room and caught Bill's arm when he meant to block a blow that never came.

There was a silent, vicious moment—and then, her eyes burned black. Dark, darker than black, it seemed, as Cedrella stood tall and menacing. Her magic filled the room with a terrible aura, but
Bill and Fleur were caught in a trance.

Both of them had reached out to stop her—and instead, they'd ended up all grasping each other—connected as one, in the strangest of ways. Images, places, memories—everything streamed through them.

Secrets and horrors shared in a burst of knowledge that had definitely been intentional.

Fleur gasped and shuddered when the memories began to settle. She was the first to yank her hand back, her pale eyes wide, but fierce. Bill held her close to him.

For a long moment, no one moved.

Bill's gaze dropped. He held out his hand.

Cedrella placed the portkey on his palm. She flicked it, lightly, and silently intoned the words that would remove him from the house.

There was a soft, pop and a sudden blur, before they were no more.

She stood there, a half-second longer, staring at the empty bed, before she made to leave the room. It was only the approaching voices, down the hallway, that made her stop and silently shut the door.

Lord Heron and Lady Amanda.

That was odd. She was sure Septimus had escorted them into the mansion with some sort of injuries upon their person. Something about how things had gone wrong in returning to Arthur's burrow-house.

"...She'll lose her mind. She's as dark as they come."

"And we've known for years that there's something off about her," Lord Heron grumbled. "I don't care what it is, Amanda. If that's what the council agreed on, then that's what we have to do. It doesn't matter what we think."

"You're not disagreeing though," Lady Amanda said, haughtily. "You think they deserve it."

"I think he's grown weak," Lord Heron snapped. "Calling in for that mess of a Torvak—that pathetic feathered fool and his little dragon-mistress. Who knows what that woman did to those children? Turned one of them into one of those filthy beasts—and they let them leave! Just like that!"

Lady Amanda snorted. "That's not why we're here. You know why we're here. Now, I'll head to the basement and you—start it."

There was an answering grunt and a burst of fiery light that flared visibly in the gap between the bedroom door and the floor.

Cedrella, pressed against the wall, held her breath. Frozen and silent, as the confirmation she'd been waiting for, was so clearly laid out.

She swore, silently.

She'd been right after all.
"Ceddy?" Septimus studied his wife, uneasily. He'd entered their bedroom to find her standing by the dark, dreary window, her posture stiff, her back to him. She hadn't even turned at his entrance. He'd felt a sharp yank on their shared connection, coupled with a sudden urge to seek her out. "Everything alright?"

"He's fading. He's not eating." Cedrella said, stiffly. She'd stopped, briefly, to see him-and to order Bilius and Felix to stay close. Her precious sons, thankfully, had done as requested.

Septimus sighed. Lately, everything had been about Arthur and he'd grown tired of it. "He's not fading," he said, calmly. "He's simply lovesick and-

"He didn't eat more than two bites," Cedrella interrupted. She'd had to see Arthur before coming to Septimus. Had to know that she would be making the right choice now—after all this time. "I watched him. The entire day. He's not eating. His magic is fading and he looks as if he's in pain every single waking moment."

Septimus gave an awkward laugh. "Come now, that's hardly accurate, wife."

"He needs her."

"He doesn't. She wasn't any good for him anyway and-

"That is what you believe or that is what you know?"

"Cedrella."

"I've been too complacent," she said, softly. "I knew I was doing it, but I thought that—I thought we had time. I wanted that time." Her head bowed. "We've run out of time, Septimus. It's run out a long time ago."

He cautiously shut the door, silently casting the privacy wards up in the room. He had a feeling he wouldn't like where this was headed—there was something almost ominous in the way she spoke. "What are you-?"

She turned away from the window, to reveal a small, red-eyed blackbird. Her expression was one of complete, utter sadness and magic had begun to fill the room.

"I gave you all the time I could, Septimus," she murmured. The window shut by itself, the raven vanishing in a flash of black feathers. "You know I told you I would."

He felt his mouth dry. His feet rooted to the floor. He'd known this day would come. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying the time is up," Cedrella held out a hand, a scrap of paper offered. "Read it, Septimus—and understand this—I will not let this be. I gave him up once, just as I did the others and now that they are all back, I will not give them up!"

He inched forward, gingerly easing the scrap of paper from her reluctant fingers. There was only a single imprint—a timestamp. An icy chill crept over him. "We're not alone," he ventured. "There's the—the children and Heron—we're not-!"

"You promised." Her voice cracked. Her eyes flashed, pitch-black. "You promised."
He shrank away from her, instinctively. There was something darker and stronger, raging inside, waiting to break free.

Still.

After all this time.

He swallowed. "I'm not breaking that. I'm not. I just—we have to think this through and-"

"You promised!"

"Ceddy!" He caught her as she listed forward, swaying into his arms. "Cedrella—please, love-!"

"She's close," Cedrella groaned, her voice taking on a higher pitch. Her body twitched and shuddered, before her eyes rolled back in her head. "And I owe her."

Magic strained at the corners of the room.

Septimus eased her to the floor, cradling her in his shaking arms. He'd known that day would come. Known in the way he'd agreed to everything after all. His eyes ached, burning with emotion that would never show. "You're right," he agreed. "You're right. I promised. We'll work this out. Somehow. What do you want me to do?"

"Home," she garbled, slowly coming back to herself. Her body shuddered, magic rippling through every limb. "We need to go home."

He bit his lip, then hugged her to his chest, pressing a kiss to her feathered hair. It was more feathers than hair at this point, a testament to how distraught she truly was. He felt the chill sink into his bones, his magic warring with the inherent nature of his being.

Fire and ice in the same body never went well, after all. He sat on the floor and held her, as her body writhed and creaked into a transformation long hidden.

Eventually, the magic took hold and he felt the dampeners activate. It was almost something of a relief, to feel the icy magic shrinking back where it belonged and the raging fires, calming to near nothing.

Yes.

This was better after all. He never should have tried to change her mind. He should have just gone with her. Never should have tried to force himself to be something he hadn't wanted.

She growled, faintly from his lap, pushing against his arms.

He released her, waiting-watching.

And the transformation came, feathers instead of scales, but a dragonesque body. A dragel in torvak clothing.

Her fangs gleamed white in the shadowed light of their small bedroom. She rolled her shoulders back, indoor wings shuddering into an even more compact form. Her clawed feet had shredded a good pair of house slippers, but they curled neatly under at the tips, not hindering her balance in the least.

She stood with slow, measured movements and then shook herself out, all over.
He saw the moment when the steel entered her eyes, the unmistakable aura of authority and the quiet determination that radiated out-the feminine presence both powerful and mesmerising—that he'd never been able to mistake.

Eyes morphed, the transformation complete-as they were now pitch black, a fine smattering of scales along the side of her face.

His breath caught in his throat, because unlike his kind and the standard upbringing he'd endured-she was still every bit of a goddess. Radiating a calm, ethereal presence, she merely stared.

Old feelings stirred up, rising to the surface and he found himself reaching up, fumbling with the buttons of his high-necked shirt. It took a moment to bare one glamoured shoulder.

When she arched one ridged brow, he smiled and tipped his head to the side. He would never fight her. Never fight this. Not this. It was far too precious. Sharp fangs pierced skin-directly over the hidden claim mark there. He felt the instant their bonds snapped into place and the answering call of magic within.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: OH MY FREAKIN' WORD. This chapter has been a bear. Ya'll reading the chatterbox thread know what I'm talking about. (and on my tumblr. GAH. Spacing was a nightmare and I kept losing my scene headings. UGH.) Anyway, I think I've done it. um, the character snippet was not betaed by Brissy, bc I'm an absent-minded snugglefluff and completely forgot to write it until this weekend. so yes. That. I'm fixed all the typos I caught--and I'm exhausted.

Um...explanations?

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter! I had so much taken take out and put into chapter 103, largely because two groups of characters are about to meet up and I needed to move them from their current space to another one. Whew. Sorry for all the scene jumping! On the other hand, I do have at least 3k words for chapter 103 so maybe it'll get written a bit faster? Yes? Maybe?

Clarification points-YES. Cedrella Black is a Dragel. I have wrestled with this point for a while and since it works out in the long run, she's a dragel. Also, it explains Regulus. A little bit. Kind of. Yes. Septimus knows. This is why things are getting screwy for them...and why he banished Arthur, rather than killing him, as is typically done for the Torvaks. Whew. Weighty stuff here. Ok. Thanks for reading! Thanks for always brightening my day with your support, fun comments and randomness. I love it and I wish you a fabulous week!

Many, many thanks to brissygirl who always does a fabulous job of beta-ing these monster chapters. She is an absolute darling!

Thanks for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel's Song. I do actually have some work to do before the next installment on that as well. Welcome to the new readers. Thanks for reading!
REVIEW RESPONSES WILL BE POSTED as I have the time to spare-and I honestly haven't had the time for a while now. I'm truly very sorry for that, but I still treasure every review-thank you for your comments and encouragement!

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Harry, Ethan, Theo, Charlie-(with each other, back at the guest room in the Peverell's traveling house)

Snape Circle (in a new apartment, courtesy of Terius)

Deveraine Circle members-(at the Hunt)

George (with Jun and the Evansons)
Conversations and Other Complications

Chapter Summary

The Cunninghams get down to business while Harry and Co. tackle a few tough conversations. Things are getting tricky for Jun Evanson and her Circle, while the Merrow King Alcandor, seems to be gathering information for a secret reason.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience (and this chapter's title!). All remaining mistakes are my own, especially since I forgot to send the character snippet. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

This chapter is dedicated to all my loyal readers, who have read and re-read this fic over and over again, since my last update. Your reviews made me work harder to get this chapter together!

Don't forget! Info on updates and other TBDH story bits are discussed in the TBDH Forum on FF.net. Find out when the next chapter is coming, talk spoilers/fan theories and connect with other TBDH fans! ^_^ https://www.fanfiction.net/forum/There_Be_Dragons_Harry_Forum/108964/ and my tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EARTH : THE DURSLEY'S : CUNNINGHAM CIRCLE, DEATH SEAL

Mariana stood unnaturally still atop the shimmering sky-blue energy medallion cast directly over the house. She hugged her arms to herself, a renewed blackness in her eyes. She hadn't moved in nearly five minutes—an unnatural stillness having claimed her upon learning the disturbing news of the Death Seal. "Milord?"

Lord Cunningham glanced down.

"If the seal wouldn't kill them, I think I'd remedy that myself."

There was a slight pause and then he moved to pull her into his arms. He'd let her be for a minute, but perhaps it had been a minute too long. "I'd let you." he said, simply. The magical replay of the events that had taken place at the house, had prompted deeper investigation. Having a Rune Master helped, for they'd simply requested a rapid time-lapse from the first day Harry had arrived at that residence.

It had started out strangely and ended—terribly.
From the musty, cramped cupboard beneath the stairs—to the distinct lack of food as Harry grew older. From the sharp words and slaps from an Aunt—to the angry tirades and swinging belt of his Uncle. Dudley's lies that resulted in Harry's new punishments and the occasional burst of magic—that wasn't always Harry.

Unfair. Uneven. Wrong.

Small instances. Fractured memories. Each building upon the last. The cooking and cleaning, as if he were a servant. The reaction for when the Hogwarts Letter had arrived. The bars on the window. The hurtful rumours circulating about his 'questionable' parentage and current education. Hurtful at best, abusive at the worst.

Now, both lord and lady were torn between barely concealed rage and measured concern. Neither of them were particularly inclined to have the traumatic history replayed among more eyes than present, but it also begged the question of proper retribution, now that it had been acknowledged. And of course, the detail of what would happen to the occupants of the house.

"He was only a child." Mariana said, at last.

"Not everyone sees it that way." Lord Cunningham soothed, but the underlying hint of pain his own voice, spoke of the shared secrets between them.

Mariana trembled. "...if they didn't want him, couldn't they have given him to someone who would have? Children are not-things. They are-precious."

He pressed his cheek atop her head, squeezing gently to offer warmth to her stiff, cold form. He could sense the roiling shadows trapped inside of her, magic beginning to blister and burn beneath a surface that was nothing more than a mere shield. "That's how we think. It's what we would have done. Humans are-not bad creatures, but for every good one, sometimes it seems they are hopelessly outnumbered."

Mariana made a noise of disagreement. "He was a baby—how can you leave a baby on a doorstep?"

"I know." Lord Cunningham said, simply. "I know. And I doubt he wants the entire realm to know any of this."

She half-laughed. "He can't hide it. Any of it."

"Perhaps not, but he thinks he can. He thinks he must, at any rate. He hasn't thought of what would happen, if it came out."

"Nothing would happen." Mariana said, fiercely. "He'd be—smothered, a bit, granted. We can't help that and it'd probably do him good."

"Ah, but he doesn't know that. He's only thinking the worst."

"We'll be discreet then."

"Mariana, when someone trips and falls, what is the first thing they do?"

"...look to see who noticed." Her shoulders slumped. "Milord—they should know."

"It explains a little bit," Lord Cunningham offered. "It is not our secret to tell. Perhaps he will tell
them in his own time. You cannot force these things."

"It only says why his eyes are so dark when you look into them," Mariana threw back. Her hands clenched and unclenched, the clawed tips finally showing through. She scowled. "I still don't like him."

He laughed, a warm sound in the emptiness around them. "You don't have to like him. You don't like anybody."

"Except you," she corrected.

"Except me," he agreed. "Maybe a few others."

"Maybe." She shivered again, as her scales surfaced. "It will haunt him." The shadows inside of her twisted again, straining to be free of her control.

"Until he confronts it, yes."

"They don't always do that. Sometimes, they try to bury it." Mariana twisted, testing the strength of his embrace. ".I cannot leave this alone."

"I would never ask that of you, dear lady."

She nearly smiled. "But you would ask me for something?"

"Ask your blood price," he whispered, leaning forward to touch his lips to her ear. "And see that it is paid in full." He released her. "But, as you've said—this is not something that can be hidden away."

"I don't want to spare them."

"I don't want you to spare them," he countered. "The choice is not ours."

She grimaced. He was right, of course. Blood relatives. The natural order of the courts. True dragel justice—in the way of bringing closure to all involved. A quiet, but vicious death here, would do nothing but pique her bloodlust.

"I should."

"And I should let you," he hummed.

She did smile, this time. Their expressions mirrored each other.

The medallion flared and burned, time stopped in their small bubble.

To the far corner, studiously not looking in their direction, Scout's fangs clicked together. They'd all seen the replay and now, they all wanted blood for the sorrowful history of Harry's childhood. It wouldn't be paid straightaway, but Scout had seen that look before. Lady Mariana always had her way.

Always

"Will he send someone?" their Gheyo Prince stood tall over Mariana's left shoulder. The message had gone through to Prince Raspen—they'd all watched it vanish into nothingness. Now it was
simply a matter of waiting. Undoing a Death Seal would mean bracing for future impact.

Especially with Mad Maury as the caster and the key sacrifice beneath it all, Healers would have to be on hand, regardless of whether the price was paid or not. The remains would have to be handled, or the body set into a secondary stasis for proper burial rites.

And of course, healing the brave ones who dared to unravel such a thing.

"He'll do something," Lord Cunningham said, carefully. "What he will do, I have no idea."

"Speculating won't help anyone or anything," Mariana murmured. She began to twist her hair into a functional braid, preferring to do it herself than to ask it of her Bonded. It gave her hands something to do, lest the dark spells burning inside of her, dared to break free before she allowed them.

Their ACE appeared between them, hand over heart in a mock bow.

She barely glanced over. "Did you trace everything I asked for?"

"I know better than that," the ACE said, wryly. "I prefer not to guess at what will be and yes, milady, we have. It's definitely an unplottable location. Take a look at these coordinates, I think you'll find they're familiar."

"Oh?"

"Scout's checking on the seal's depth as well, she'll be here in a moment." He handed over the paper and waited.

His lady was nothing, if not thorough and they'd done exactly as she'd requested and then some. It was why he was hoping she would at least allow him to accompany her. He was definitely looking forward to the revenge and destruction sure to rain on certain unfortunate souls.

Mariana didn't answer, but she studied the fading coordinates for a long moment. There was a pause of silence before the scrap of paper burst into flame and disintegrated at her fingertips.

"Mariana?"

"An old friend, Milord," Mariana said, quietly. "And perhaps old wounds that may come with it. Send a warning, I would not come to them unaware."

Lord Cunningham made no comment, but he did move closer.

Their ACE bowed once more, skipping back a step to do as requested. A hand held to the sky, summoned a shadowy bird of their kind. A message was whispered over the featured thing, before it was released, with a destination in mind.

Mariana watched until it vanished from sight, gone to where it needed to be. She clicked her tongue, twice—beckoning for their ranks to shore up a bit closer.

*There's definitely four trapped in the seal.* Scout said, approaching Mariana at a gesture from their ACE. She'd investigated the Death Seal more closely and now; her own shadows were agitated beyond simple measures. This was much worse than what she'd expected for the sad-eyed brunet in the Royal's room.

"You've verified?"
Every way possible. Scout agreed. There is a child, he seems Halfling and feral-judging by appearance. I'd wager his parents are the two around him, which means that the body we can't set eyes on below-is Maurice. We can extract the three of them, but it's a layered seal. The levels are too tightly stacked to read anything clearly out of it.

"Of course," Mariana said, half to herself. "Only he would think nothing of dropping a hundred feet below ground to activate a layered seal at the expense of his own short life. The stupid man."

Lord Cunningham hid a smile.

Annoyance flickered across her face and she shuffled, restlessly. A magical ripple swapped out her current set of armour, calling her preferred traveling set into existence. "Hadrian's coming."

"Is he?"

"I told him to stay. He doesn't listen."

"Maybe he has a message." Lord Cunningham suggested. He'd figured that was what would happen, once the message had been sent. The little Earth prince had been suitably understanding of what they were—for the time being and given their current status, he hadn't wanted to break that fragile trust.

Not yet, anyway.

"Maybe that's Raspen's answer," Mariana shot back. "Stay meant stay. He's too dark to be crossing realms and times as he is right now. Arielle knows what kind of tear in the fabric of reality he's leaving in his wake."

"Barring him from the arenas won't help that."

"It's not meant to help it," Mariana huffed. "It's meant to drive him mad, until he stops focusing so much on the outward and thinks a bit inward. It won't register unless he stops moving long enough for his demons to catch up and I'm tired of explaining that to him. If he can't learn from words, then Arielle help me, I'll beat it into his thick skull."

"He's running from them for a reason."

"And he won't be fit for anything until he deals with them!" Mariana bristled. "Remind me to take the fines out of his allowance. Better yet, don't tell me which Realmwalker will catch him when he comes gallivanting through on his way here!"

Lord Cunningham hummed in answer. Hadrian was Mariana's project, this time around. The last few temporaries had been his choices and therefore his responsibility. He was mildly amused at their interactions, for Hadrian was recently taking great care not to offend or irritate his lovely lady in any way—and somehow managing to do so anyway.

"Portal incoming-!" Their Rune Master called out.

"Brace!" their ACE barked. A fierce chill signalled the breach and the portal opened up to devour him.

"Raspen sent me," were the first words that came tumbling out of Hadrian's mouth as he materialized before them. He didn't resist as he was tackled to the ground and held there.

The ACE darted forward to seal and mend the rip in the portal, while fortifying the protections in
their little bubble.

Lord Cunningham swallowed back the irrational burst of laughter that threatened to emerge. Mariana looked like a veritable thundercloud of wrath and fury wrapped into one. He mentally counted Hadrian as lucky that the rest of his Bonded had leapt forward to cushion his arrival-sort of. If it wasn't for the time and circumstance, he was fairly certain that Mariana meant to have her way with something before the end of the night.

"I don't think it matters who sent you," said the Gheyo King, readjusting his arm for the headlock. He'd been pleased that Hadrian hadn't fought. It was standard procedure, given that the time-bubble they occupied, was carefully measured. Unauthorized portals were dangerous for both parties.

Strong magic on both sides, helped a great deal.

Hadrian resisted the urge to roll his eyes. It wouldn't help, given that neither lord nor lady had said a word as yet, but he could tell that crossing the realms had been just as much of a headache as he'd expected.

And also equally troublesome in that he was sure he'd landed himself in another spot of trouble all over again. His shoulders slumped in defeat. There wasn't much more that could be restricted at this point—once he'd been barred from the arenas.

Mariana's glare didn't let up, as she gave a jerk of her head for the Rune Master to mark him into their respective time. Hadrian had been smart enough to ‘port to her side and accept that it wouldn't be a complete portal, but he would still need to be brought to the same time as the rest of them. She rolled her shoulders back. Her armour creaked and glittered with the movement.

"Complete," the Rune Master muttered, stepping back, the blue runes glowing on Hadrian's cheek and forehead.

Hadrian gritted his teeth against the influx of pain, the time-runes needed a skin contact point and he was too heavily armoured for them to bother with anything else than his face. It wasn't worth the hassle.

"Visor next time," the Gheyo King said, amused. They could mark other places, if a visor was too tricky to remove. He'd done this hundreds of times. "Hurts less."

This time, Hadrian did roll his eyes. The movement was not worth it. Now it did hurt. He ignored the laugh it prompted.

"He sent a message?" Lord Cunningham prompted. "Raspen?"

"He's sending Riven Cairothe," Hadrian explained, gingerly easing up as he was allowed. The Gheyo Princess hauled him up to his feet. "He'll unravel the seal. Raspen's asked him to."

"Any others?" Mariana asked, tersely. Cairothe, she could deal with it—their family, though eccentric—had always honoured the friendship bonds between their Circles.

That aside, the last thing she needed was an entire royal posse descending on their marked off section of Surrey. The hesitant look on Hadrian's face meant that he had more to share and thought that she wouldn't like it.

A well-timed glare made him swallow and continue his report. "Harry wants to come. Which means the he won't come alone, if allowed." Hadrian paused. "They also have a new Bonded as of
a few hours ago-first Pareya, an Ethan Hartwood."

"Inter-realm travel with a newly bonded?" Lord Cunningham shook his head. "Not—the wisest of
moves. Tell me they tried to dissuade him?"

Hadrian resisted the urge to shrug. "They were still speaking of it when I left. That's all I have to
report."

"You said a Hartwood?" Mariana checked her clawed hands, frowning. "Which one?"

"...The archive scholar. He was with Harry in the Library archives and they were referencing one
of his family tapestries. Harry's side." Hadrian clarified.

"Evansons?" Mariana muttered, half to herself. She wasn't particularly fond of the Peverells, but
their own Advisor had taken a few hours for necessary research so there wouldn't be any
unexpected social faux pas between them.

"...Yes."

"Lovely." Mariana spun on her heel. Now the rest of it clicked into place. The Peverells would be
the Sire's side and the Evansons—well. No wonder her Alpha had subtly suggested she leave them
alive.

His knowing smile suggested that he knew she'd finally reasoned out what he'd already pieced
together.

She ignored him. "Scout—?" She'd wondered how long it would take Harry to find the first Pareya.
The sooner his fledgling Circle filled in a few more Pareyic slots, the sooner they could attract a
few useful ranks—namely, Gheyos. Arielle knew the little brunet could use them...

*Milady, they've discovered a fresher trail on the East side of the house.* Scout said, appearing at her
elbow. *We should follow as soon as possible—it ends too abruptly, but there's an energy trail.
Others have been here, recently—and masked themselves out of the replay.*

"Can you track it?"

*I can track anything you ask of me, Milady.*

"I ask it."

*As you wish.*

"...thank you, Scout. Round up a good hunting party. We'll split straight down the middle."

*Yes, milady.* Scout shimmered, not quite phasing out.

"Anything else?"

*The seal?*

Mariana wrinkled her nose. It took all of two-seconds to decide, for she'd already made her mind
up since they'd first arrived. *Raise the Seal!* She snapped out. *If we break it, we break it. I'm not
waiting on some Cairoth and a little royal to crash this site.*

Lord Cunningham's brow furrowed. He could hear the unspoken question to handle the three in the
house. Mariana's sole focus was Maurice. *Will you have enough time? I can manipulate it if you'd
rather leave with some sort of-

"Doesn't matter if we do or not. We'd have to raise it anyway," Mariana said, critically. "They'd have to raise it to break it and the more people we drag through time and space, the bigger the chance of something going wrong."

"Oh?" A smirk settled on Lord Cunningham's face. "No other reason?"

Her lips twitched. "Fine. You can raise it." She leaned over to kiss his upturned cheek. "It's just what you like, anyway. Raise it and break it. I do not care. Might as well do it without an audience. It's probably best to disrupt the beacon after we've set off."

"I intend to. I highly doubt you'd have the patience to spare, if you wait around." His dark eyes glittered, meaningfully.

"Point," Mariana allowed. "Tell Maury I would have stayed, if I could. He'll understand—if—if it's not too late."

"I will. What's been done here should never have happened." Lord Cunningham cast an appraising glance to the two forming groups of his Bonded before him.

He would have suggested a split of his own if Mariana hadn't. They were all present and that meant there were enough hands to do the work. There was no sense in red tape and royal formalities complicating an already complicated mess. He could already guess the ones on the left were those who weren't yet caught up in the battlelust. Those that were, would follow Mariana, as they always did.

"Make it worth your while," he said, lightly. "I expect a full report."

She snorted. "Burn the house. We'll be even."

Hadrian looked between them, a growing sense of dread pooling in the pit of his stomach. He had a feeling he'd come in on the tail end of an important conversation and was somehow missing the vital bits that would help it all make sense. "…what's wrong with the house?" he asked, before he could help himself.

Mariana smirked. The blackness grew in her eyes, wiping away the earlier hint of sadness. "See the window up there? The one with the bars?" she asked, lightly.

Too lightly, Hadrian thought. He followed the tilt of her head to the window in question. His stomach twisted. The darkness he kept bottled in the darkest corner of his soul—rattled. "What am I looking for?"


Strange as the request was, Hadrian tried. He stretched his shadows to the door and allowed them to climb up the brick walls and slither past the odd bars on the window and into a small, cramped bedroom. He could see through their eyes and felt the first stirrings of horror-register.

"Happy hunting," Lord Cunningham said, simply.

She turned to him for the expected, farewell kiss. A pleased hum sent a ripple of cheer through their shared bonds, as the kiss deepened to something more. "The house?" she asked, pulling away. If she could not have blood, she would settle for fire.
For now, anyway.

"I will not leave it standing.,” He stroked her cheek with one, gentle hand. "Shadows be with you."

"And mine with yours," she murmured, touching their foreheads together.

A moment of silence passed, before they broke apart, turning away, eyes averted. There would be plenty of time for this—later.

"Circle up!" Mariana growled.

"Guard in front!" the ACE barked. The chosen group settled into formation and Scout unravelled the magical beacon.

Like a slipknot, coming free—the magic screamed and screeched, before streaking off into the darkened sky.

Mariana's group moved as one, leaping after it.

Hadrian yanked his shadows back, bracing himself as the wild magic tore out of the confined form and continued to stream through the area.

He was troubled and furious—so when the pulsing blue strand of ice magic came rushing straight to him—he threw up his shadows and watched them devour it whole. The taste of Torvak magic was filthy and twisted—the intent unforgivably warped.

"This is the Death Seal?" Hadrian growled. He didn't bother to temper the irritation rising to the surface. Anger was barely contained by a thin veneer of respect for the man he knew could bring him to heel, if need be.

Darkness and death lurked at the edges of his fingertips and for once, he didn't see the reason in holding it back—it wanted to be free and he wanted to release it, if only to ease the sense of wrongness that grew larger by the minute. The magical replay set on the house, began to swirl and rewind, as if to start over from the beginning.

Hadrian didn't want to see it. He turned away, to a far more disturbing sight.

Lord Cunningham wore a truly terrifying smile, all darkness and pure fang. "Hadrian, seeing as you're staying with us—why don't you raise the seal? I'm sure you'd enjoy it and it'd be a good way to burn off that excess magic..."

Raising a seal was exactly as difficult as it sounded.

At least, to anyone who wasn't Hadrian.

As it was, Hadrian had raised plenty of seals in his lifetime and at this point, currently had enough emotion and magic twisted up inside of him to make a fantastical mess of the entire thing.

Sheer luck kept disaster at bay.

His hands shook with the effort and magnitude of probing the Death Seal. There was something more beneath the surface that lurked out of reach. He had yet to actually touch on it and something told him that he wouldn't like the way it would pan out.

There was something that was simply too—easy—about the whole thing.
From the smirk on Lord Cunningham's face, he knew there was something important that he would miss if he'd simply dived straight into pulling the magic up to the surface. He'd stood back, as they'd extracted three cocooned bodies, set into stasis and prepped for a return portal.

And then it was his turn and he'd found himself at a loss.

Death Magic as a whole, ought not to be cast about so liberally and definitely was not something that was easily manipulated. He held a healthy respect for any Military Circle that had earned a name for themselves, and the thought of Ryker's Bane and Maurice himself, was enough to give him pause.

What he knew of Ryker's Bane, was not a pleasant sort of history.

At least, not the kind of a history that was told over tea cups and at dinner parties. It was the sharp, fierce tales the Gheyos traded amongst each other at night, bathed in a glow of a watchful campfire, with short, barks of laughter to punctuate each twist and turn of the tale.

Known for their stealth and their poison, there was one precious detail that made Ryker's Bane so famous. Maurice Elswood held the right and power of a singular Immortal blade, forged by one of the twenty Immortals themselves.

A brilliant blade with a sickly green glow as deadly as the wielder himself.

With that in his hands, many had come to a grisly and painful end.

Legend proclaimed that only Maurice could summon the blade and make use of its full potential.

Hadrian willed the irritating thoughts away and made himself focus on the matter at hand. The Seal's reading was almost complete. There were important things at stake here. Important things and important people.

Harry, for one.

And the rest of his little Circle, for others.

They were curious enough, at least, to him, on the outside looking in. He couldn't help wondering if they'd make it through a full Hunting Season and if they'd actually stay in Nevarah. The little Alpha looked like the easily stressed sort, with their clueless Beta being a bit too clueless, but then now they had a Hartwood on their side and if Harry's tenacity was anything to be aware of, Hadrian wagered that it wouldn't be long before they were all tightly knitted together and on the same page.

Empathy went a long way.

Magic made up the rest of the distance.

The shadows swirled mightily around him as Hadrian threw his head back, rolling his shoulders to allow better range of movement. He breathed in the thick, night air and summoned his element to the very veins of his body.

It filled him like liquid darkness, pooling in his mouth, dribbling down to his belly and dripping down to his fingertips. He felt it as pure ice on his feet, working its way to the crown of his head until everything was a solid mass of sensation.

"Need an anchor?" Lord Cunningham's voice was sharp and too close.

Hadrian twitched, resisting the urge to flinch, even as his body betrayed him. He'd missed the detail of the older dragel drawing closer to him. Too close, almost. "Anchored enough," he muttered, thickly.

Speech was harder in this form, especially as his fangs grew in and the second row of teeth emerged. A grating, grinding sound was unpleasant enough, but proof that the rest of his physique was changing as it ought to. Stretching up to the sky, spine lengthening, limbs double-jointing, jaw dropping, unhinged.

This was the ugly part.

The hidden side of the shadow.

The darkened face that would reflect in a cursed mirror, if he ever chose to show it.

He smiled as the Seal quivered beneath his feet.

"Perimeter secured. Pillars in place," The Rune Master said, coming to stand beside Lord Cunningham. There was a quiet whistle of appreciation at Hadrian's shadows gathering around him, preparing for the task at hand. It was rare to see such calm control of such an unpredictable element.

"How are you monitoring them?" Lord Cunningham glanced around the marked off section. Now he could see the barely-there shimmers of a tell-tale magical barrier set in place. Isolating their little section from the rest of the world and holding it tight in a time-secured space.

"Joker at every pillar," came the immediate reply. "All of them linked to each other. I'll be up there," the Rune Master tilted his head back, squinting up where the pillar's magic collected and gathered. "If something shatters-"

"If Hadrian shatters this, I'll shatter him," Lord Cunningham said, pleasantly. "Do hold it together until he's through?" Scales rippled up and down the sides of his face. His clawed hands hidden inside the oversized sleeves of his casting robe—unlike the rest of them, he did not wear armour. Not for this. Not tonight.

There was an answering snort, before the Rune Master leapt into the air, his wings carrying him soundlessly upwards and nearly out of view. He would regulate the massive amounts of magic needed to keep this little hiccupping timeline from a disastrous end. He always had, after all.

Hadrian twitched, faintly, at the sideways scold.

Personally, he'd rather nothing was shattered, but there were things he'd agreed to when he'd joined the Cunningham's' and this was one of them.

His shadows danced around him, merrily. Ready and waiting to do his bidding. They were excited to destroy. To grab hold of something dark and wretched, to swallow it whole.

And now, they gathered him up, carrying him over to the small house, directly overhead. For a moment, it was a solid structure. Brick and mortar and all that.

And then, it became translucent.
Placeholders of silvery-white outlined where walls, doors and floors would be.

Instead, the Death Seal shone outwards and upwards.

A writhing dark mass of tainted energy, continually locked into existence by a pure, heavenly light surrounding Maurice Elswood.

Hadrian felt his chest tighten. From the lifeless glimpse of the figure, the man was dead.

A living sacrifice given to ensure that one Harry Potter, would live to see a brighter future—somehow.

Sorrow wrought its cruel touch, making his hands quiver once, as Hadrian gathered his shadows tightly around him, preparing for the work below.

He took three quick breaths and dropped.

Straight down from the sky to the seven stories below ground.

There was no dirt or coldness here. Just magic. The silvery white specks that let him know he was underground and of course, the massive, sprawling seal itself.

It was a beautiful thing to behold, in spite of its ugly reason for existence.

Maurice had been an extremely talented Gheyo and it showed in the delicately wrought anchoring of the seal itself. A giant, spinning circle of rich purples and whites, tangled together in an ever-present spinning circle. There were symbols and swirls, inscribed in various places—the seal itself was seven layers—or seven circles, nested together, each spinning in a different direction than the ones surrounding it.

The inscriptions made his heart clench, as Hadrian gingerly touched down to stand on the seal. He shuddered, violently, as the magical backlash rippled through him. This seal had been set with permanence. It was not to be unravelled.

Perhaps Lord Cunningham was right.

Something would have to be shattered.

His shadows went to work.

Picking and plucking at the topmost inscriptions. Hadrian pressed his hands together, palm to palm, head bowed. He began the first string of chants that would undo the customary holdings of the seal itself.

It would be foolish to try and unravel the seal below ground. Best to raise it to ground level first.

The scream that tore from his lips, did the trick.

Arms outstretched, shadows streaking around his face, Hadrian brought it up.

In all of its magnificent, dark glory, the Death Seal did as it was bid.

The first level nearly encompassed the two houses next-door and those across the street.

Hadrian was silently grateful that their Rune Master had taken such expansions into consideration
and extended their time-measured barrier well beyond it.

Angry whispers streamed through his ears and he silently forced himself to focus.

It was a good layered seal.

A lesser Gheyo would fall prey to such poisonous things. The Seal did not want to be broken or disturbed and the protections wrought over it meant to kill anyone who dared otherwise.

Such a thought brought a wicked grin to his face.

For a Blood Title was forged in blood and he meant to make full use of his.

He began to chant once more, even as the house began to reform around him. Perhaps they should have torn the structure down from the start, but it was much too late for that now.

The first circular layer screeched and screamed, spinning wildly and viciously—but unable to claim any additional lives, as Hadrian's magic overpowered it, holding fast.

It took a few minutes to catch his breath, before the Seal spun about, reorienting itself.

The ground trembled.

Hadrian hissed. "Don't you dare!" He snarled at the shadows creeping along the edge of the seal. He knew which ones were his and those were not his.

Those were not welcome here.

Not yet.

The temperature dropped.

Ice crackled at the edges of the second Seal layer.

Hadrian trembled.

But he bowed his head and put his hands together once more, summoning magic between them.

Like a breath of spring, the light sprang from his hands, silvery and fierce. It streaked about the Seal, melting the crackling ice and forcefully unravelling the blocks holding the second layer in place.

More screaming. More screeching.

Something dark had gone into the Seal.

Something far less—honourable—than Maurice.

Hadrian paid no mind to the new shadows that twined playfully around him. Some were darker than his own and others were more vicious. Unfettered, they sought a new victim or master, whichever would have them.

Lord Cunningham had thrown up a secondary barrier of his own, his magic rich and potent, in the way that it kept all of the Seal's influence contained and with Hadrian.

A detail, though irritating, was not entirely unwelcome.
It wasn't hard to force them into his service. Hadrian rolled his neck to the side. And broke open the second layer.

The third layer was far easier than the previous two. Almost as if it had been crafted out of necessity than practicality. Wind lashed and blew about, tearing at his face and clothes.

Minute slashes and scrapes covered him as he stood, unmoving.

Now, he could feel it.

The pulsing, gasping beat of the Seal itself.

Damn Maurice.

Hadrian sucked in a breath and dropped to one knee. Pressing one hand to the still-glimmering surface, he continued to pull the shadows to him, forcing them into his service, before pouring them back into the seal. It was time-consuming and mentally-exhausting.

The Seal throbbed and hummed.

With a brilliant rush of scarlet fire, the third level of Seal, burned away.

The fourth layer was almost more golden than the expected, vivid purple. But it was angrier and pricklier than the previous ones. Hadrian stripped off his armoured gloves and pressed his bare hands flat against the seal. He strained, mightily, to keep them from melding directly into the swirling depths and only barely succeeded.

This was harder than he'd expected.

An image of Harry's soulful green eyes flickered through his mind.

For one split-second, his concentration wavered.

Hadrian hissed, feeling the skin peeling from his hands as he drew on every ounce of his strength to pull himself back from the seal. He toppled over on his rear, as the seal released him and cracked down the middle.

Layer four was gone.

It crumbled beneath him and pain sang in its wake.

He scrabbled at his ears, even though it was much too late.

The echoing, awful sound rattled around in his head.

And then, he couldn't hear anything else.

Like a vacuum.

Empty silence. And angry visuals.

He could see the fifth layer of the Seal and in his fury, tore it to shreds without a single care.

Blood trickled down his mangled hands and busted eardrums.

Dragel healing had yet to catch up.
It splattered, unevenly on the sixth layer of the seal and demanded that it open.

The seventh layer roared to life as the sixth faded away in a fury of scorching water—leaving him soaked and battered. The original intent had been to drown the one who dared to break the Seal. To drown in a landlocked place where there was no body of water for miles.

And then, there he was.

Hadrian gasped and choked, heaving himself forward to stand, a bit unsteadily on his own two feet.

There, several feet in front of him, lay the unseeing, frozen figure of Maurice Elswood. Partially still embedded in the seal, his face and hands were visible, but unseeing and unmoving.

A closer look showed that his eyes were white and unblinking, glowing the same eerie purple as the Seal itself. Purple fire—ancient magic—crackled at his upturned palms.

It didn't take an expert to see that Maurice had used himself for the Seal's anchor. No wonder it'd been so troublesome to unravel.

Hadrian swore.

There was no way the man was alive.

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**NEVARAH : HARRY AND Co. : DAY 3 : PEVERELL GUESTHOUSE**

"Why?" Theo asked, simply. "They can be brought here—there's no need for us to return to Earth for this. We'd likely be in the way and you're still hunting—"

"You said we'd go back." Harry's eyes narrowed. "You said so, Theo."

"I also said 'within reason'," Theo's voice remained perfectly calm. "Harry, telling a Royal that you'll be—"

"Why do you want to go?" Charlie interrupted, he held up a hand to still Theo's scold. It'd be easier to sort this out if they were all on the same page. "Harry—I'm with Theo on this. I don't think there's a reason for us to return to Earth right this very second. Especially with the lockdown and everything—and you still hunting—it probably won't be easy to come back."

"And if I don't want to come back?" Harry asked, in a small voice. He tried not to twist his hands together in his lap, but he needed to do something—anything—other than not look at Theo.

"You don't want to come back?" Theo asked, quietly.

Harry swallowed. The pause meant that Theo was waiting for his answer—and to meet his gaze—something that he simply couldn't do. Yet. "It's-family." He said, lamely. And not, what he wanted to say—which was something along the lines of 'no-don't bring them into this good place' and if that meant returning to Earth to deal with them, then he would.

Every good thing in his life had come anywhere else but from the Dursleys and the last thing he wanted, was to see them brought to this realm. They'd ruin it. Somehow. Just like they'd always done for him.

Harry didn't know what would change with his being there at Privet drive, but the thought of someone poking through the house—and seeing how he'd lived—or rather, how he hadn't, made his
skin crawl.

There was a soft sigh before Ethan came into Harry's line of sight. His movements, as usual, were careful and measured as if he was making an extra effort to be as welcoming and non-threatening as possible "Alright, you three. That's enough questions with everyone on different sides. Come here, Harry," Ethan coaxed, reaching out to him. "Charlie-over here. Theo-would you?" He moved to sit at the head of the bed and placed a fluffy pillow on his lap. "Harry?"

He didn't want to—but the pillow was inviting and this was Ethan. Harry swallowed. Ethan who had listened patiently and without judging, offering advice and simply being there. And there was a wall of warmth—Charlie—who was always there, steady, warm and alive. Listening to him and also puzzling his way through the whole dragel thing. And of course, Theo. His precious, precious Theo.

"Harry-love," Theo's soft voice had dropped to a near whisper as he stretched over to nuzzle Harry's shoulder. It was all the encouragement he needed.

Slowly, Harry inched over Ethan and gingerly settled, curling up against the fat fluffy pillow in Ethan's lap.

"There we are," Ethan murmured. He gave Harry plenty of time to move away if he wanted, but when Harry didn't budge, it earned him a smile. Combing his fingers through Harry's sweat-dampened mop, Ethan waited as Charlie and Theo found their places, bracketing Harry.

"I-I just-I-" Harry's voice cracked. He startled when Theo's arms slipped around him from behind, followed almost instantly by Charlie's from in front. There was warmth and near silence.

"You're worrying," Ethan said, simply. "And you're worrying about something you don't want to share, because either it will worry us or you'd simply rather we didn't know." He paused. "Either option isn't exactly ideal—but, I-we-respect your privacy."

Harry swallowed again. His eyes burned, but no tears came. He felt tired, frustrated and hot all over as his mind whirled a million-miles a minute without any chance of—oh.

Ethan cast a cooling charm.

Harry went limp with relief. The simple fact that all of his Bonded where there and with him, calmed the frantic, sparking spirals of his magic. Gradually, his empathy settled as well, his instincts simmering along the surface.

"I wouldn't push you on this," Theo said, carefully. He caught one of Harry's hands in his, then held it over Harry's heart. "Except that it's making you so miserable to the point that you're like this."

Harry squirmed. "What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing's wrong with you," Charlie cut in. "You're just being you—and stubborn." He took Harry's other hand, holding it between his own, cool blue flames dancing around them.

"M'not-!" Harry protested.

"You know," Charlie began, conversationally. "The Twins once told me an interesting story."

Harry stilled.
"About how they'd rescued you from your relatives—because there were bars on your window. They'd gone with Ron, to pick you up. Flying Dad's magic car to Surrey and back."

"T—that's not—it's not what you think it is," Harry said, quickly. "It was just—"

"The interesting thing is, it bothered George so much that he had Mum send you snacks every year—on your birthday—because he couldn't think of any other excuse to send food."

Harry's tiny squeak of distress was answered by Theo's deep rumble of reassurance.

Charlie pushed on, never releasing Harry's hand. "George later told me he hated feeling so helpless that he couldn't do anything good for you. Fred, also, once said the same. Coming from the twins, that's the closest you'll ever see them to wearing their hearts on their sleeves," Charlie said, wryly. "But Harry—they never would've told me this, if—"

"It's not true. Whatever they said—it's not. That's not why—it's—!" The words tangled together and Harry jerked upright, pulling hard to move away from them. "They weren't—they weren't…" he faltered.

Fabric scraps exploded out onto the bed and Ethan's massive wings snapped open with a leathery rustle. They circled around the bed, adding privacy, blocking light and changing the atmosphere at once.

Theo shot halfway up, his eyes pitched to near black, as Charlie also jolted into into protective mode, on full-alert. A vaguely apologetic expression flickered across Ethan's face, before he bared his teeth, making a soft clicking sound with his tongue.

Harry flinched. Scales rippled up and down his face, eyes darting to search for the nearest escape—only for the sound to repeat itself. He hissed.

Ethan trilled in answer.

Claws came out. Harry's shoulders twitched, agitatedly. His gaze darted around the makeshift space, trying to map out a quick way to the door. "Stop trying to—"

"It's meant to calm, not control." Ethan said, firmly. "I know you can think this through, without running away, Harry. Running doesn't fix anything."

"I'm not running!"

"No, you just look ready to bolt."

"You don't know me—!"

"I don't know you well enough—yet." Ethan corrected. "We're both starting from the same place, Harry. You don't know me any more than I know you—at this point. There's so much more ahead of us and I want to see it all the way through—so please. Stay."

"I'm not—!"

"Please, Harry?" Theo added. His own scales rippled along the sides of his face, disappearing behind his shirt collar.

"...I can't." The words choked. Harry hugged his arms to himself, curling forward only to find that Charlie was right there. With his steady, ever-present warmth—he was there, reaching out and
folding Harry into arms that were infinitely stronger and warmer than anything Harry could've hoped for, at that point. "Charlie-!"

Rubbing his cheek atop Harry's head, Charlie struggled to focus and push the shaky calmness he'd cobbled together, back through their shared bonds. He started, faintly, when one of Ethan's beautiful wings, circled around his left shoulder.

Theo half-smiled. He could feel the other wing, behind him, hovering close, but not touching—respecting his space. Ethan was certainly a fast learner; he'd give him that. He watched as Harry all but burrowed into the embrace Charlie offered, looking so lost and miserable that it made him want to tear his hair out.

From Charlie's story, he could piece the rest together. That was what his lovely mentor had hinted at that day when she'd sent Charlie and Harry off to complete their bonding. Her words—that she'd never asked his secrets of him, but the pain behind such a promise—now registered.

She'd nearly lost her famous temper over the fact that someone had sealed Harry—tempered only by the fact that she meant to assist them first and scold later. Theo felt his heart burn and ache. Badgering Harry wouldn't produce any good results whatsoever, but maybe, being there and staying there, would help. He knew Harry would only open up when he was ready to and that made the ache even worse.

Ilsa once said that Harry flinched, for no good reason—but Theo, himself, knew what that meant. After all, hadn't he done the same? When his drunken father would decide that it wasn't enough to torture his wife, but that perhaps, he ought to ensure that Theo would turn out as twisted as he was.

Ethan's right wing curled around Theo's shoulder and he startled-faintly. He couldn't avoid Ethan's knowing gaze and gave into what was offered, when Ethan carefully eased close enough to reach him. He turned, burying his face in that warm neck and simply breathing.

"Empathy," Ethan murmured, voice barely audible for Theo's ears. "Just feel it and release it."

Theo gave a small nod and focused on pushing the memories away. He dredged up the earliest days he could remember—days with Ithycar and Ilsa. Meeting Bahn and Bhindi, playing with Dahlia, Ariki and Soula, learning to fly and receiving his three caspers.

It worked. The familiar light of the good memories served to remind him of all the good that had come out of the mess that had once seemed so impossible.

"...they never wanted me," Harry said, softly. "Not once."

That, Theo thought, was a good place to start.

"He's exhausted," Theo commented, smoothing a hand down Harry's side, where he lay, curled up between Charlie and Ethan. At one point, he'd had to leave the bed and take up pacing to manage the absolute rage that had coiled inside of him, to think of those miserable muggles and what they'd done to his Harry.

Well, their Harry.

Theo gave him a look, mollified when it prompted a slight duck of the head in deference. He was starting to understand that a lot of Harry's emotional spillover was translating into the perpetual headaches that he hadn't quite been able to shake off since arriving in Nevarah. Perhaps Charlie had been right. Maybe he was taking too much of it on his own shoulders, it was just hard to trust. Period.
Not that he didn't want to trust them—he did, but it was still hard. Theo scowled again. *That* was why he had a headache.

Ethan gave a wry smile. "Calmer now?"

"They just—all this time. I—he-why would—?" Theo wished the words would string themselves together properly.

"He's Harry. He thinks of everyone else, before himself," Ethan said. "Or so I'm starting to see. Has he always been this way?"

Theo smiled, the scowl vanishing. "Always," he said, fondly. "I have to say, nearly everything I knew of him—before we were anything to each other—he was always looking out for someone else. Standing up for someone who couldn't manage it on his own."

"Ah," Ethan smiled down at the napping Harry in his lap. "Then there must be some other reason he wants to return to Earth? Specifically, to the house? I would think he wouldn't want to return at all. Ever. Unless there's something else."

"Like what?" Charlie stretched, carefully. "Harry cares about people, not things."

"Maybe he wants to be there for Maury?" Ethan suggested.

"He doesn't know him. Never even saw him," Theo said. "And we don't even know if he's alive, he's more likely dead at this point. There's no reason for Harry to be there—even if by some miracle, he's alive, it's not likely to be an instant connection. There's things required of both of them—they'd have to take the vow of mentorship, and with all the seals on Harry, they probably won't react well, not to mention if Maury is in his right mind, I can't imagine that he'll be happy about how anything has happened since Harry's inheritance."

"He won't mind you, if that's what you're thinking," Ethan said. "Empaths do not force-bond with people. You're exactly what Harry needs. Someone he can push against, without breaking himself or you—and still be there for him."

Theo sighed, heavily. "It doesn't always feel like that." He eyed the Pareya, noting that Ethan's eyes were a steady shade of amber-brown—they'd never changed since the entire issue had begun. That was certainly worth noting. "Any Nameless talents, I should know about?"

Ethan stifled a laugh. "No. Not an empath, if that's what you're asking. I'm simply—it's a Pareya thing. We can't leave well enough alone, when we're reasonably sure we can fix or alleviate the problem."

"You thought you could fix it?" Theo made his way back to the bed, easing down to sit on the far end, where he wouldn't jostle Harry.

"No, I thought it'd be best for all of you, if Harry had the chance to speak his mind."

"...I don't want him back on Earth." Theo admitted. "I don't think it's safe and I know him—he'll want to stay and help. To check up on all his friends. To make sure that everything's alright and then he won't be able to leave it alone. He'll want to do more than help and it'll all—"

"His saving people thing," Charlie supplied. "That's what Fred called it, once, when he heard from Ron, what all they were up to when they were at Hogwarts." He shuddered. "It makes what they were up to—look like child's play."
"Really?" Ethan frowned. "How?" He'd heard bits and pieces from Harry, but not much of anything before Nevarah.

Theo and Charlie exchanged a glance, then both held their hands out, for a mind transfer. After a brief hesitation, Ethan took them.

He was painfully silent for several long minutes afterward, before he leaned forward and kissed the top of Harry's head—the easiest part of him, he could reach. "No one should have to endure all of that," Ethan said, quietly. "Knowing that, I'd rather he didn't return either."

"Maybe it's not that he wants to return," Charlie suggested. "Maybe he just has a feeling."

"Empaths wouldn't follow that sort of feeling off-world," Theo said, slowly. "Not that I know of."

"Yes, but none of us are empaths and none of us know empaths," Charlie said. "We're not giving him the full benefit of the doubt."

"Are you worried you can't protect him or that he'll want to stay?" Ethan asked. "Pick one or the other," he added, when it looked as if Theo was about to answer otherwise.

"That he'll stay."

"Then ask him to return," Ethan said, calmly. "Harry, you don't mind returning after the seal is broken, right?"

"He's awake?" Theo was torn between glaring and looking concerned. "Stop that."

"He never fell asleep," Harry muttered, face red. He'd feigned sleep and figured he'd done a decent job if Theo was too distracted to notice that he was faking it. He sat up, ignoring Ethan's attempt to hide a smile. "I don't want to stay there. I like it. I like-everyone. I like not having this-pressure. I mean, I'm still-I don't want to-do you mind?"

"That's good enough for now," Theo said. "I don't mind at all."

"Great," Harry slumped back into the pillows. "Can we sleep now?"

Charlie laughed. He curled an arm around Harry and pulled him over for a cuddle. "We can sleep now," he agreed.

Ethan's expression softened. He held a hand out to Theo, relieved when it was taken, before they rearranged themselves together, to surround Harry as they'd done before.

A short nap couldn't hurt, really…

NEVARAH : EVANSON ANCESTRAL MANOR : JUN AND CIRCLE : DAY 3

"Father?" Jun called out. The entire interior was completely deserted, as far as she could tell. There was no sign of life and no stable sense of magic. Only the wispy, ugly sensation of Fabrine crawling about the place, even as Rian cut down everything that darted in front of them.

Briar was doing his share, swallowing them whole as they slipped past Rian.

"Focus, Jun!" Rian snapped. "You're leaving yourself wide-" he stopped when she viciously hacked a sizeable slash of energy straight into an oncoming enemy to her left. "On the other hand…"
"I don't sense anyone," Briar growled out. "There's nothing here."

"I can feel something up ahead, but I can't pinpoint it," Jun muttered. "It's almost as if..." she stumbled, catching her balance with Rian's hand on her arm and Briar's teeth in her shoulder. "Ow. I'm fine."

Briar growled, but carefully released her shoulder.

All three flinched at the collective snap of magic that sparked outward from nothingness in front of them, to a hazy, wavering image of former earth Clan Chief, Evanson Senior.

"J-Juniper-i-if you're seeing this message then-it's-all-all gone-wrong. I've set a-a-a t-timer for f-five y-years-with an automatic trigger if something t-trips it a-afterward."

The audio garbled, the images twisting viciously.

Jun took a deep breath. "Briar-Rian."

Briar whined. Rian growled. Neither complained at her stabilization spell that forcefully rippled out within seconds of her warning. The flickering images stilled. The interior walls began to repair itself. A swirling golden bubble came to life around them, keeping the final vestiges of Fabrine, at bay.

"...you shouldn't have left." Evanson Senior said, gruffly. "...should not have left and I-I apologize if I had any part in forcing you to feel as if you had no other choice, but to leave. You're a bright girl. Take too much after your mother, but there's nothing wrong with that. Anyway, it's a trap. I think. Or a trick of some sort. It's not real. I've been trying to contact you and nothing is going through. I don't understand. Your mother will try something-her own kind of magic. However, it works. It's always worked better for you two than the rest of us. If it reaches you, good. If it doesn't...I'm sorry. I love you. Take care of yourself-and your rascal of Submissive. He's a sneaky slippery thing, but you fit together well enough and that's what matters. We're dispersing in about twenty minutes from the time of this recording. We're headed to-" the audio garbled again. "-which is probably marked as an unplottable location. If you didn't hear that, it means the location is active and I can't tell you, where we are or where we went, as it is, when you see this. I only hope that we return-before this message is necessary." He hesitated. "It's early. Too early. If we don't make it back-tell the Royals-the Immortals are waking."

The message ended.

A pressing wave of sadness flared through their shared bonds as Jun pressed a hand to her mouth, her green eyes shimmering with unshed tears. Her free hand twitched, calling up a multitude of spells as she cast them one after another, trying to determine the authenticity of the message.

"Hey," Rian caught her hand, gently. "I'm sure he's-

"He's not fine." Jun allowed him to pull her into a one-armed hug. The awful emptiness burrowing into her, now made sense. She could not possibly imagine a way for them to have survived. Magic did as magic was bid and this message, was a final, parting note. "You said that you haven't had any interaction with them, all these past years. No notice. Just word that my mother had passed and she was buried in the hall of remembrance."

"Shhh-there has to be an explanation beyond-"

"There should be enough for a replay," Briar said, shaking himself out, a rumbling growl working up in his belly. "Cover your ears."
The warning was scarcely given, when he threw his head back and howled. The anguished sound echoed eerily throughout the empty halls, shaking the magical bubble and freezing all the Fabrine in their tracks.

Colour and light swirled to life around them.

"Briar?" Gardenia's voice could be heard, faintly, from somewhere behind them. "Think you could do that again?"

He howled in answer.

The lights continued swirling and magic rose.

His summoning magic gave enough pause for their Gheyos to come through, swinging. It took mere minutes to tear and shred the final Fabrine to nothing. The protective bubble faded away as the swirling came to a stop.

Rian didn't protest when Jun pulled away, stumbling a few feet further. He was staring too.

The magical replay of the last time life was within the estate halls, was achingly familiar-and old. It showed Evanson Senior recording the message and setting it to play, should the need arise. It showed his late wife, Lady Evanson, with her famous, flame-coloured robes and the fancy golden jewellery of her station. Cupped in her hands was the eternal flame she guarded, one of the active keys for waking the Immortal their Clan was destined to guard.

The hazy images flickered and blurred, as time sped up in the replay, showing a vicious and frantic fight. There were plenty of Fabrine present and a handful of indistinguishable figures.

"Seriously?" Leif growled, his armour rippled, morphing into a heavier set.

"...it's enough," Jun said, quietly. "Turn it off." she twitched when Briar nosed at her. "Turn it off, Briar. Now. Gardenia, call someone. Whoever you think can handle this discreetly. I'm tired of this. All this stupid running and selflessness. It's cost me more than I've wanted to pay. Than I've ever agreed to."

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**MERROW'S ROYALQUARTERS : ALCANDOR : DAY 3**

"Alcandor?" Kieran hovered just within the doorway to the Merrow King's private quarters. "A word?"

A disinterested glance was thrown his way before Alcandor handed off the glittering shell, with his signed signature at the bottom, in glowing, golden script. He murmured something, softly, in their native Merrow tongue, before gliding over to Kieran. "Something important? Or may I have your head this evening?"

"You may have it whenever it so pleases you, your majesty," Kieran snapped, irritated. "If you don't mind—?" He gestured into the room.

Alcandor sighed, but moved on through with a twitch of his fingers to call his assigned bodyguards through.

Kieran growled at the slight, but ignored it. If Alcandor wanted to be petty, he could. He was the King after all and this was the sort of news that would require quick action. Sort of.
"Whatever is it now?" Alcandor watched as his advisor locked and barred the door, casting up several additional spells to his private chamber. "Don't tell me you've discovered some awful and terrible secret about an assassin that means to take my life and make it into a—"

"They've found blood," Kieran said, abruptly. He turned, dark eyes glittering with barely concealed excitement. "They've found a scale and blood. There's a trace. The very faintest of traces, but—"

"But they found it." Alcandor said, finishing the sentence. The feral smirk that settled over his face was unnerving, coupled with the sudden paleness that stole over his features. "How quick of them. I'd thought it would take longer."

Kieran didn't answer. He only folded his hands and gave a little bow of acknowledgement.

"Delightful," Alcandor drawled. "Absolutely delightful." He tapped his chin with one bejewelled finger. "Hm. Send Alec to take a look, would you?"

"Oh?" Kieran's voice was deceptively light. "You would entrust that to him?"

Alcandor laughed. "…let us merely say that I—trust—that he has learned his lesson and that he will be more careful this time around." He moved over to the glowing, underwater window and watched as Goonter swam lazily by, keeping close to his quarters. "Mischief, when well-executed, is always—amusing to those of us who are watching."

"Of course," Kieran murmured. "Any specifics?"

"If I should have to tell him what I need, then I daresay he doesn't actually need the head sitting upon his cowardly shoulders."

Kieran remained silent, but his folded hands clenched, briefly.

"…he will know what to do. Send him quickly. I want a report as soon as there is one to be had and—oh, Kieran?"

"Yes?"

Alcandor stifled a laugh. "Ever so respectful, aren't you?" He muttered, half to himself. "I suspect our dear Prince Raspen is about to involve himself in the kind of situation that a Royal ought not to be so close to. Should he decide to step off-realm for a spell, let me know."

"…of course, your highness." Kieran's brow furrowed, delicately. "Would you wish to be alerted if there were any other—activities?"

"I do not care what Raspen does in his spare time. I do care if he ventures out of Nevarah while we are on lockdown because he is running away from something he doesn't wish to acknowledge," Alcandor hummed. "So yes, I do wish to be alerted. In any way possible at whatever time you should learn something of importance. If at all possible, keep him here and if he must, if he absolutely must venture off-realm, then ease his passage."

"Your highness?" Kieran's surprise was too genuine to mask.

"He is first and foremost a friend, Kieran. First and foremost a friend. I owe him enough that I should keep my hands out of his business, except that he is a friend and for his own sake I would wish to spare him unnecessary anguish at his own, confused hands."

"…as you wish."
"Mmm. I wish. You may leave me. Send in the Messenger from the Pearl Capital. I have a message for my Night Council."

"He will be in shortly," Kieran said. He inclined his hand, hands unfolding and dropping to his side. He glided to the door and stepped through.

Alcandor's shoulders slumped, his head bowed. He crooked a finger to draw the attention of one of his Eight bodyguards. "Eyes and ears," he murmured, faintly. "Be quick about it."

That was enough, he knew, for the stealthy Merrow to phase at once to the Royal's quarters and gather as much information as possible.

"An hour and a half or until it disperses," he instructed. The wave of dismissal was unnecessary, but also habit. He didn't turn to see when and how the guard vanished. He simply glanced at the timepiece on the wall and then at the window, where Goonter was settling down for a nap.

Kieran was fast, he'd give him that. For if Goonter was settling down, then it meant Alec was out and about…

ROYAL QUARTERS : PRINCE RASPEN'S GUESTROOM : RIVEN

Riven stifled a shudder. He was grateful for the borrowed guestroom and the hot bath, as Raspen had promised.

But his magic tore viciously at him, inside and out, staining the bathwater a tell-tale pink. The bloodied bandages were wadded up into a ball, at the corner of the floor near the sink.

He shouldn't have come so hastily.

A single breath allowed him to duck beneath the water and hold himself together there, working on forcing out another healing and coaxing his body to accept it.

Inter-realm travel and future-time-travel, was still in his immediate future and it would take its toll as it always had. He surfaced with a slight sputter and shook his wet braids as a gentle hair-cleaning spell rippled over them. He took another minute longer, before rising and exiting the bath.

The tub drained behind him, and a twitch of his fingers had a slight scrubbing set about to remove any trace of his presence. He slung a towel about his hips and went about slathering on the usual healing lotions on his person. He grimaced at a few of the scars that remained and wouldn't fade, in spite of his careful attention to them. He'd have to make time to visit a Healer soon, perhaps even one of the Kalzik ones, else what little attractiveness he possessed would be marred beyond all hope.

With a sigh, he set about drying and rebraiding his hair, when a flicker of magical presence drew his awareness.

Ah. Raspen. He thought, grumpily. It was still something of a shock and a tad disconcerting to have a Royal for his mentored student, but, somehow, in spite of them, it worked. He tapped on the door, to announce his exit and stepped through to find that he'd been right.

Perched in the centre of his borrowed bed, was one worried Prince Raspen and his favourite pillow. Riven sighed. Loudly.
Prince Raspen ducked his head. "Sorry."

"Better to ask forgiveness than permission?" Riven countered. He dressed himself in the appropriate sleepwear with a single gesture. His hair was still setting itself to rights as he moved over to the bed. His grimorie came flying to his outstretched hand and he held it out to Raspen.

"But Oret-!"

"Study," came the flat reply. "Two pages before anything else."

Prince Raspen huffed, but after a moment, scooted back up to the pile of pillows at the head of the bed. He settled in comfortably and cracked open the book, searching for where he’d last left off. It was few and far in between, the times that he was gifted this particular privilege.

A well-battered book, the size of two respectable dinner plates, with well-oiled bindings, and no two-pages looking alike. The words were all handwritten. Some pages were made of natural parchment, others from various skins and wings. The magic itself was raw and potent, straining almost, within its confines.

Prince Raspen read silently for near a half-hour, before he’d finally completed the requested two pages. He handed the book over to Riven's expectant hand and watched as it was absorbed back into the Spellcaster.

"Now then?" Riven prompted. "Why are you here and not…elsewhere?"

"Father," Prince Raspen said, simply. "He's—upset."

"Ah. About the Cunningham's?"

"I don't know. I don't think so, but probably."

"Are we still speaking to him?"

"He's my father, I can't not speak to him."

Riven snorted. "He's the King and I still manage to not see him or speak to him, unless I absolutely have to. So I repeat—are we still-?"

"Only as the King. He's—too busy these days."

"Too busy? He hasn't handed over the crown to you yet."

"No, just every single duty that I can perform without."

"Resentful?"

Prince Raspen coloured. "…perhaps?"

"A little then," Riven allowed. "You should speak to him. He was once a wise man."

"And now?"

"…now he irritates me." Riven said, abruptly. "What was it you needed?"

"Lady Evanson is back."
Riven twisted around to stare at him, uncomprehending. "...and?"

"Her Sire and his Circle have been gone for some time."

"Ah."

"No, Oret. They've been gone for years. At least two Gheyo seasons and one Hunt."

"Fifteen years?"

"Maybe. I don't know exactly. I can't ask things without other things becoming all tangled up in it."

"You think your father-?"

"I don't know, I-" Prince Raspen's voice cracked. He drew his knees up to his chest, his head pillowed atop them. "She was happy to be back. Told me all these things I'd never even known was happening behind the scenes and-" he stopped again.

Riven gave a long sigh. He turned out the lights and moved around to settle on the bed, beside Raspen. He allowed the cuddle, for what it was, feeling the very war taking place inside. Royals didn't necessarily cry.

At least, not before an audience.

"She was headed off to see her father—and her Circle."

Riven twitched.

"You know. I have so much to worry about and really, they belong to Ebony, sort of. Lady Evanson—her mother—was a fire heiress. They've graced Ebony's courts, but when I asked her—you know—when they'd last seen them." His words caught in his throat.

"Raspen, you're not responsible for-"

"Don't. Please don't tell me that. I should-"

"They are one of the twenty, yes?"

Prince Raspen hiccupped.

"Ah. So out of all the Immortals, are there any left to wake?"

Another hiccup.

Riven grimaced. "Shall I speak to your father?"

"...shouting won't help."

There as a short bark of laughter. "I will endeavour not to shout, then."

Prince Raspen managed a half-laugh of his own.

"Honestly, what is he thinking? He's supposed to be helping and supporting you, unless-" Riven frowned.

"Unless?"
"...how is the state of everything else?" Riven gave a slight squeeze to the arm he had around Prince Raspen's shoulders. "Do not tell me anything other than what you actually can. I ask as to, our treaties with the neighbouring realms, our standings with the Fae, the Elves and of course, the Vampires."

There was a long pause. Prince Raspen was quiet in thought before he finally wriggled a bit, beneath the warm arm keeping him close. "I think we're fine with the Fae, I mean, they're coming for the Hunt. The Elves are—proud—as ever, but the Deveraines, they still wish for peace and so peace is had. Their people will not cross them."

Riven smiled to himself at that. The Deveraine twins had given up Royal titles to accept the Nevarean citizenship, but they were still Royalty in every way and the Air Royals had always taken care to that fact.

"And the Vampires?"

Prince Raspen hesitated. "Father was upset about something, a couple months ago. I was busy for the Hunt—all the preparations you know—and he wasn't happy, but I didn't know what about. I thought that perhaps—"

"Shh. Don't tell me." Riven said, calmly. "Speak to him as soon as you can manage it. He cares for you a great deal you know."

"...I know." Prince Raspen nestled closer. "I just wish he'd stop hinting that a Circle would fix everything. It won't."

Riven laughed, softly. "All fathers are alike there," he said, cheerfully. "Mine still thinks that will fix my wandering habits."

Prince Raspen shook with silent laughter. "As if."

"True. Very true. Now then. Sleep? Tomorrow is to be a very busy day."

"...thank you, Oret."

Riven nuzzled the top of his head in acknowledgment.

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**DAY4 : PEVERELL'S GUEST QUARTERS : NEVARAH : HARRY & Co.**

Ethan stirred, eyelids fluttering open as he registered a faint spike of surprise and hope along the fledgling shared Bonds he now had. This particular emotion he could trace down the line that went to Harry and upon opening his eyes fully, he could make out the adorable, sleepy face within reach.

Hazy emerald eyes were blinking at him in slow-motion, as the rest of Harry tried to reason out the fact of the new face in their shared bed.

It was sweet and heart-warming, in a way.

Just enough that Ethan wanted to wipe the uncertainty away and replace it with something better. He wanted this to be a familiar occurrence—not something to worry over.

"Morning," Ethan hummed. Taking his time, he stretched out one arm to curl around Harry's waist.
He didn't pull him closer straight away, but rather let his arm rest, stroking up and down on Harry's side, attempting to settle and soothe.

It worked nicely, because Harry burrowed closer of his own accord, muffling a yawn into the now-shared pillow.

"Hi."

Ethan grinned at the simple greeting. He'd wondered how Harry woke—quietly or noisily. Or even, perhaps—fully articulate. It seemed to be the opposite, if the single word was to be believed. "Hi." He returned, moving enough to nuzzle the side of Harry's temple. "Sleep well?"

Harry attempted a shrug. It was hard to answer that question, but he didn't think of it too much. He was happy to be asked the question in the first place—not that Theo and Charlie didn't ask, but this was Ethan. It was a first.

A first of many, Harry hoped.

"I guess," he offered, after a pause. His dreams had been hazy and somewhat tormented. It was almost as if he couldn't have a single, peaceful night's rest, because of some shadowy spectre hanging just out of sight somewhere.

"No dreams then?"

"Kind of." Harry hedged. He didn't want to talk about the shadowed darker-than-darkness. The piercing feelings of hopelessness and abandonment. The agonized, muffled cries. And definitely not the glowing, blood-red eyes. Nope. Not today. He snuggled closer instead. At one point, he could have sworn that it was Hadrian in his dreams. Hadrian in great pain and surrounded by very dark, very powerful magic. Disturbing dreams and strange emotions he couldn't put into words just yet.

"That's good then," Ethan said, simply. He gathered Harry fully into his arms, tangling their legs together for a proper snuggle.

It took a second, but then they all felt it.

The sudden, fierce pulse of love and belonging that fairly radiated out of Harry, surging through their shared bonds. He was happy, for the moment and grateful.

They stayed like that, enjoying each other's company and the closeness of their other Bonded. Sharing warmth and the quietness of the morning that was only there when newly awakened.

"You sleep well?" Harry prompted, after a moment's thought.

Ethan nuzzled his face, silently asking for a kiss. When it was given, he hummed in answer. "Good enough. Restless. Think I was too wired to sleep."

That was good enough, so Harry left it alone. When he yawned again, he squirmed, twisting over in Ethan's arms to look at Theo. Their cuddle opportunities had been rather sparse, since they'd been shuffled around upon arriving in Nevarah.

He liked waking up like this—feeling Ethan's smooth, warm hands slipping under his shirt and stroking his belly. A comforting touch that remained just that.

Theo's face, though slack in sleep, still somehow retained the aura of solemnity and the creases of
worry on his pale brow.

Harry bit his lip. His empathy flip-flopped, tamping down on the earlier outburst of warmth and happiness, to finely tuned worry and carefully contained insecurity. Last night had been a long-overdue conversation about all sorts of things. Now, in the daylight, he could see it for the good it had done him and yet, still. Some things lingered.

"He worries a lot, doesn't he?" Ethan asked, rubbing his chin atop Harry's bedhead. Harry wriggled a bit, but pushed back into the still-there embrace. Ethan's arms were long enough to let him move around a bit, but still secure. "About me." He said, quietly.

"About everyone and everything," Ethan corrected. "He will always worry for you, the same as you will always worry for him. Do not hold yourself responsible for things that are out of your control. It is not your fault that he's stressing."

Harry snuffled, turning that thought over in his head. It sounded right, but it was hard to believe. "He just—he looks—tired. He didn't always look like that—before—this. Me. Everything."

"You've been through quite a bit. We've been through a lot and I say that lightly, because if you all have been through what I've witnessed in such a short time, I doubt either of you have taken time for appropriate self-care—or of each other."

"We've managed alright." Harry reminded him, but it was a half-hearted protest. They'd managed, if that was what he could call their present state. Ethan was a different sort of energy in their exhausted dynamic.

"And I'm glad for that. Because I know I can be absent-minded when something's caught my attention—a new book or another dissertation, but with what you told me about your Alignment and the non-existent Resting Period—if you're not resting enough. All of you—then you'll have less energy, feel greater physical strain and will likely double your Alignment Cycle by the time it comes around again."

Harry frowned. "I don't think we can afford that."

"You won't have a choice," Ethan explained. "Your body will react. You can't have all of this massive power and magic, without some sort of catch. That's not the way the universe works."

"Universe?" Harry gave him a look.

Ethan laughed. "It's my favourite dissertation topic, so don't start me off unless you'd like to hear all about it. Anyhow, keeping track of your resting period is always a good starting point. It'll let you know when your magic is at a natural high, so you can use it for something specific—raising power, rebuilding things or crafting certain spells—loads of things. But it's always a good idea to chart it and make sure that you're taking care of yourself. Short periods of disruption or changes like a new Bonded will certainly shuffle things a bit, but it usually settles down within a Cycle or two."

"Too complicated," Harry huffed. But his mind danced back to when this topic had last come up. "...Terius sort of figured mine out for me. Him and Theo."

"Theo, who is awake and can hear everything you're not whispering about," came Theo's sleepy grumble. "If we're awake, then we're awake, but if we're sleeping, then I'd rather be sleeping without all of the—"
"Morning," Harry chirped, breaking free of Ethan's nice hands to reach for his Alpha and draw him closer. "The-o."

There was an unintelligible murmur in answer, followed by a disgruntled chirr. Harry ignored it, opting to rearrange the Sleepy Theo into a more likable position, mimicking what Ethan had done a few minutes before.

Theo roused himself enough, exhausted golden eyes focusing on his two, wide-awake Bonded. He seemed to melt even further into the soft bed, the lines on his face growing a bit sharper. His body grew pliant in Harry's arms and he sighed.

"Are we up?" Charlie asked, his voice raspy. He stretched languidly beneath the covers, shifting a bit closer to Ethan. They'd opted to have Harry and Ethan in the middle of the bed last night, so he'd settled behind Ethan and allowed Theo to slip in behind Harry. Now, his warmth simmered and spilled over, blanketing all of them at once. "I'm almost worried to be awake."

"Hmm?" Ethan prompted. He rolled over enough to reach for him, exchanging morning greetings in much the same way he had with Harry.

"If today is anything like yesterday..." Charlie let his words trail off. He squinted over at Harry and Theo, who seemed to be communicating in grunts and whispers. His lips quirked into a smile, that turned into a full-fledged grin when Ethan nuzzled at his shoulder. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"I've survived half of one," Ethan said, amused. "I'm curious to see how the rest of it plays out." He purred softly when Charlie returned the nuzzle with an open-mouthed bite, offering the pressure but no fangs. "You can bite, if you like."

A look of surprise flickered on Charlie's face. He hesitated.

Ethan grinned. He tugged down the collar of his pyjama jacket and pressed himself a little closer.

Charlie hummed. He didn't hesitate to bite. It took a split-second to feel their new bonds snap into place with a slight quiver. Joy and contentment rippled through their connection, renewed now, apparently by the act between them. He drank easily, but slowly, until he felt the slight tip of bloodlust, fading away. Ethan hadn't stopped him and the luxury of a longer drink had sated him in a way he hadn't thought possible.

Hazy, but now almost giddy, Charlie withdrew, licking his lips.

Ethan's look was nearly indulgent now. He slid one hand out from the covers to cup Charlie's cheek, smoothing a thumb over his blood-flecked lips. "Messy drinker?" he teased, stretching up to remedy that.

Charlie blinked, lazily. He purred into the kisses and held Ethan close, marvelling at the ease and connection. He'd never expected it to simply—work.

Ethan gifted him one more nibbling kiss, before he snuggled close, tucking his head beneath Charlie's chin. Almost as if reading his thoughts, he purred again. "It's supposed to work. That's where the instinct comes in, that's where the magic works. It's gaps and puzzle pieces."

"Fitting together?" Harry wanted to know. He sidled closer, drawing Theo with him. He liked this. All four of them cuddled up together.

And he wanted more, but didn't know exactly how to request it.
Theo pinched his stomach, drawing a squeak and a squirm. A definite strand of absolute want streamed through their shared bonds. Theo's golden eyes burned brightly. Charlie's hair flickered into soft flames. Harry wriggled again, unable to contain the cheerful sensations filtering through him. He'd never felt this light before.

Ethan chuckled, softly. "Is that what we're up for?"

It was, apparently.

From teasing kisses to testing bites, the morning progressed quite pleasurably.

Harry was pleasantly surprised to learn that Ethan didn't care who topped or who didn't. In fact, he gave Harry every possible choice and consideration. His long, elegant hands, made beautiful work and left Harry in a gasping, pleasured mess within a matter of minutes.

Instead of wondering how it would work, Harry was amazed to discover that it simply did.

Almost, without words—if the occasional rumbling burr or contented purr—could be called words, they took turns.

Theo, of course, assumed his Alpha's rights and Ethan whole-heartedly gave into them.

It was impossible to be anything other than happy and proud of each other, as Charlie took over and then it was Harry's turn.

Surrounded by them and smothered in the best of ways, by their loving attention and protective magic, he could only bask. It was perfect.

Their kind of perfect.

Looping his arms over Ethan's dark shoulders, Harry pulled him close for another mind-blowing kiss. He gasped softly, as Theo's magic hands toyed with him and Charlie's flames danced over his skin. It was just the right amount of heat and just a touch too much magic.

If this was what he had to wake up to, every morning—he was definitely going to bed on time forever and ever.

Two brisk knocks on the door, alerted them to the fact that their Hosts were up and awake.

Ethan untangled himself from the bed, clothing himself in one of the fat dressing robes, as he went to answer it. He stepped out into the hallway, barely opening the door wide enough to slip out.

Theo caught a glimpse of Vincent, before the Pareya had focused on Ethan.

Charlie yawned, cracking his jaw. He sat up in bed, scrubbing a clawed hand carefully through his still-flaming locks. "Shower?" He prompted, nudging Harry with one knee.

Peacefully blissed out, Harry mimicked the yawn, stretching luxuriously with a slight squeak as dragel healing caught up to a few important points. It had been a very delightful morning.

"Good?" Theo asked, leaning over, one clawed hand poised over Harry's stomach.

"Yeah." Harry tilted his face to the side for the expected kiss. It eased the slight twinge of pain as Theo's claws sliced into the softness of his stomach, drawing blood for the rune healings he'd used so many times before. It healed over almost at once, with the last evidence of their lovemaking
fading away to a pleasant memory.

Charlie's stomach growled. He grimaced and gave it a commiserating pat. Breakfast was likely to be somewhere long off in the future.

Ethan appeared a few seconds later, materializing inside of the room, rather than walking through the door. A glowing blue orb was in one open hand and a fat paper bag in the other. "Breakfast and news," he announced. "Time to be up, sleepyheads."

Harry wriggled out from the covers almost at once, sitting up expectantly. He happily took the large bag of food and Theo received the message.

A gesture had Ethan dressed in a hurry, the fluffy dressing robe replaced in its usual spot. The soft scent of coconut and citrus filled the room. Touches to his ears, neck and wrists, brought out the jewellery he'd worn the previous day.

"If I may take the liberty?" he asked, grandly.

Harry shrugged. He couldn't hold back the delighted laugh at Ethan's magic tickling around him and bringing out a new suit of clothes and some bits and bobs of finery, he hadn't seen before. He chirred and preened at the sight of the glittering golden cuffs and the matching necklace. Almost automatically, he reached up to touch his bare ears, brows furrowed together.

"No earrings," Ethan hummed. "Your ears aren't pierced." He circled around the bed, hands outstretched to Harry.

Happily handing over the bag to Charlie, Harry went to him. He was vaguely aware of Ethan's magic continuing on beyond and around him, the bed making itself up and Charlie and Theo dressed in matching outfits. That, he decided, was a good thing and that he definitely liked having a Pareya.

"Breakfast in the bag, I figured you'd want to be in a hurry." Ethan fussed over Harry's hair and clothes for a moment. Tugging things straight and smoothing them back in alternate motions. "Vincent says that's a note from Henry and Cora. They've gone off to Hunt, something about a few connections that needed to be renewed. There's no other messages, so either we can simply show up at the Royal's receiving hall or Prince Raspen will send for us."

"No crumbs on the bed," Theo mumbled, half to himself, as Charlie continued to unpack the carryout bag on the fluffy, pristine duvet. "That's about what it says. Henry's heading off to the Alpha courts to take care of some other business and Cora's checking out their factories. Says that the rest of their Circle, save for Vincent and Lewis, will be present here."

Ethan stifled a snicker at Charlie's exasperated expression and answering spell that would indeed keep the bed crumb-free. "Lewis is already gone. Cora's called for him and Vincent, I believe, is waiting on us to leave, before he reports to wherever he's supposed to be."

"Is it that serious?" Harry asked. He scooted back to sit more comfortably on the bed.

Ethan moved to help Charlie, opening the food containers and checking the contents. He started to fix plates for each of them, occasionally pausing to feed Charlie a mouthful or two. "I'd think it is. It's fairly rare that a Circle isn't attending the Hunt. Either they don't want to be bothered and then, they won't attend the ceremonies, but they'll visit the markets, and attend a few things, concerts and the cage matches with the Gheyos. That sort of thing. There's a reason it happens every ten years, not to mention that there's a lot of new Circles being made and formed. New relationships and all
that. If they're choosing to avoid it—"

"But can't they skip, since they aren't Hunting?" Harry accepted his plate, balancing Theo's own as well.

"This isn't that kind of skipping," Theo explained. He slid out from the bed and patted the covers behind him. The message orb had vanished and he was halfway circling around the room, before another one popped into existence.

Message for Theodore Gorgens-Nott, immediate vicinity. Prince Raspen requests your presence as soon as convenient. Thank you.

It fizzled out before asking for a return reply.

Theo frowned. "Breakfast and then business." He said. "Good?"

Charlie and Harry nodded.

"I'll tell Vincent," Ethan offered. He took Theo's plate from Harry and offered it to him. "I'll cast the 'portal too, so no need to worry of that. I'd think we'd have plenty of time though. Aren't we having to step back into time, because of the realm-difference?"

Theo hesitated. "Yes. I'm hoping we can merge them at some point."

"Harry needs to be older," Ethan said, at once. "No offence." He softened the words with a smile.

"Why?" Harry accepted a cup of tea, pulling a face when Ethan added a potion to it. "What's that?"

"Vitamins. It tastes like Vanilla and you won't even know it's in there. Drink up." Ethan nudged the cup upwards. "And growing. You're still growing. I'm sure you'll be taller, if you keep up your nutrients. At least until you've settled into your majority, it isn't a good idea to merge timelines."

"Can you merge more than one?" Charlie asked. He obediently accepted another tidbit, nibbling on Ethan's fingers.

It prompted a warm smile and a slight poke. "Only if you intend to travel back and forth between them on a regular basis," Ethan explained. "It's really not worth the trouble, and if you eat and sleep well before leaping between two timelines, you won't really notice the price of it."

"Exhaustion and confusion?" Harry joked.

Ethan grinned. "Exactly—times it about ten or twenty and you'll have what it feels like."

"I've been feeling tired and confused since I've arrived in Nevarah."

"Hopefully a little less so, now?"

"A little," Harry allowed. His smile wavered. "We should still hurry though; I mean—we don't want to keep Prince Raspen waiting. He's been—really nice to us. He didn't have to."

"Royals take care of their own," Theo said, kindly. He took a sip of Harry's tea and made a complicated face. "Sweet."

Harry perked up and tested it for himself. He fairly beamed a mouthful later. "Vanilla."

"Told you." Ethan teased. "Now hurry up and eat up you three. If it's alright with everyone, I need
to send a message to my family to let them know of our Bonding."

Harry stilled. "…w-will they be happy?"

"Ecstatic," Ethan reminded him. "They'd love to meet you and I'm sure they'll lend a hand, should you ask it of them, Theo."

A regal nod confirmed that Theo understood. He added another slice of toast to his plate and moved to sit in the chair with the vanity set, besides the bed.

"Anything else on your mind?" Ethan prompted.

Theo hesitated. This time, he wanted to do this right. No waiting to be absolutely sure, but rather, trusting the strength and depth of emotion that was singing through his newest Bond. This was something he could trust. Something he should trust. Instinct told him it was right and the tiny tinge of uncertainty let him know that it was alright. He turned away from the vanity set and held out a hand.

Ethan went to him at once, both hands outstretched. He knelt when prompted and gave a happy sigh when Theo produced a shimmering scale. "Thank you, Alpha." He murmured. For a moment, his golden eyes were just as bright as Theo's, glimmering with emotion.

"I am happy to give it," Theo said, simply. He leaned forward and kissed Ethan's temple. "Thank you for joining us." This time, there was a definite sincerity behind his words and from the not-quite-a-tear in Ethan's eye, Theo knew he'd said the right thing at the right time.

"Mine too!" Harry exclaimed, hurrying to set his plate down and finish his drink. "I mean—just now."

Charlie sputtered a laugh, even as he focused to produce a scale of his own.

Ethan's warm chuckle set them all at ease. There was plenty of time to exchange scales all the way around. Ethan's beautiful tri-coloured scales were two shades on one side and one shade on the other.

"We owe you a ring too," Charlie observed, as Ethan added his scale to the spun cord around his neck. "Right Theo?"

"We'll commission it today if we pass through that way," Theo agreed.

Harry couldn't help the smile that stayed on his face. In spite of the shadow of the previous day, he could only feel unbearably excited for what was to come. Even as Ethan's arms wrapped around him in a tight hug, with Charlie's laughing face beside him and Theo's knowing look from the vanity—somehow, it came together.

And it felt, just right.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This chapter has been SO long in coming. I've written and rewritten and I think half of the headers are wrong. lol. I'll poke at it tomorrow, bc I want to post this chapter before I head off to bed. Typos will be corrected before this is posted on AO3,
but I'll try to do that this weekend. Firstly, thank you for your patience and for still reading this monster of a fic after all this time. Welcome to the new readers and thank you for the warm wishes.

I am currently doing a little bit better this week, though I've come down with an ear infection and a headache that won't go away. As some of you know from my forum posts, I've dealt with several recent deaths in the family, coworkers I was close to and an extremely stressful series of holidays, between the funerals and various family visits. I am slowly settling into my new year, with hopes for more writing being a focus point this year (and taking better care of myself, as being sick has given me renewed motivation to take better care of myself. Whew.

Anyhow, this chapter is for everyone who has kept reading this fic throughout all these years. I'm glad it has meant so much to you and I hope this chapter was worth the wait! ~Scion

Many, many thanks to brissygirl who always does a fabulous job of beta-ing these monster chapters. She is an absolute darling! (and had a birthday this past week-everyone wish her happy birthday! :))

Thanks for your support and kind reviews here on TBDH and my indie project, The Dragel's Song! I am still working on Book 5 and plan to release it this year, time permitting.

REVIEW RESPONSES WILL BE POSTED as I have the time to spare-and I honestly haven't had the time for a while now. I'm truly very sorry for that, but I still treasure every review-thank you for your comments and encouragement!

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Harry, Ethan, Theo, Charlie-(with each other, back at the guest room in the Peverell's traveling house)

Royals (Alcandor, Raspen, etc), in their personal quarters.

Cunninghams and Hadrian, (On earth, and dispersing to take care of business)

Snape Circle (in a new apartment, courtesy of Terius)

Deveraine Circle members-(at the Hunt)

George (with Jun and the Evansons)
Of Death Darkness and Disaster

Chapter Summary

Harry and Co. are recalled to Raspen's quarters for updates on the situation with the Cunningham's on Earth. Things get complicated when Riven prepares to 'port out to Earth, while Hadrian raises the Death Seal with Maurice Elswood.

Complications and Drama abound.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience (and this chapter's title!). All remaining mistakes are my own, especially since I forgot to send the character snippet. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

This chapter is dedicated all my readers with June birthdays. Happy Birthday!! May the year ahead be fabulous!

RECAP: Harry and Co. have some difficult conversations, while the Cunningham's run rampant on Earth, raising the famed Death Seal to reveal the body of Maurice Elswood. Things get complicated, when Lady Mariana Cunningham pieces together the way the Dursleys treated Harry at Privet 4 Drive. Riven Cairothe also makes an appearance, surprisingly turning out to be Prince Raspen's chosen Mentor, while the Merrow King appears to know a secret that might help them all..keep reading more fun and plenty of drama! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EARTH ROYAL QUARTERS : MORNING, DAY FOUR OF THE HUNT

The Earth King startled when Riven 'ported into his private quarters. He was almost finished the last set of treaty reviews and the hour was much later than he'd expected. It'd be a tight schedule to fit in a visit, plus another fitting and the breakfast meeting with the ambassador he'd been dodging the past few evenings.

"Cairothe." he acknowledged, grumpily. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" He scribbled another signature along the edge of the document, authorizing the exchange of funds for his Queen to finalize the extravagant outfits they would wear for the next week.

"The displeasure is entirely mutual, Edgar," Riven snarked. His gaze skittered across the cluttered desk and darted about the room. He couldn't see nor sense any of the Earth King's respective Bonded, which was what he'd been hoping for. "Finishing up paperwork at this hour?"
The Earth King scowled. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing of consequence, I'm sure." Riven moved away from the doorway, gravitating towards the ever-present warmth of the large fireplace that took up the far wall. He seated himself on the floor in the warmth and light of the flames, for that had never bothered him—Fire and Shadow elements aside. His staff stood beside him, the great big eye, closed.

The Earth King studied him for a moment, golden eyes fluxing to darker and deeper hues of brown, yet not quite reaching the tell-tale black that hinted his famous temper was about to explode.

Riven waited. Like father, like son. If he'd only wait long enough, he was sure the Earth King would speak.

The Earth King pinched the bridge of his nose, shoulders slumping. "...what do you want?"

Ah. That was unexpected. Riven swallowed back his surprise and grabbed for the first topic that came to mind. "You should talk to him. He's your son."

The deep brown-gaze darkened a few shades more. "...I do not need parenting advice from a wandering nomad who cannot be bothered to visit his own father when he drops in from wherever the cosmos have deigned to position him-"

"I can't visit Father because of the depths of our powers," Riven scowled. "As you very well know. I sent word that I was coming and to let him know my time of arrival, so he'd have plenty of time to move out of range. The same courtesy, I might add, I extended to my sister—who also took the warning for what it was meant to be."

The Earth King grunted. "Yes, yes, fine. You're the only Cairothe in Nevarah—are you content now?"

Riven sighed. "Every time we have this conversation, I swear, I do believe you become somewhat stupid-"

"Your Father asked if you had acquired any Bonded and gave his blessing if you had, with instructions, that if you have yet to do so, then I was to remind you, that you are not growing any younger by stalling. He insists that you acquire a companion at some point in the next decade, or though it would trouble him, he'll find one for you."

Riven winced. He'd guessed as much. If his Father had that to say, he doubted his sister was any better. He was the second to youngest among their family—and the only one unattached, at present.

A gleam of gold trickled back into the Earth King's eyes, as the air in the room considerably lightened. "Your sister says hello and wishes you well. I told her I was sure you'd say the same, if you had the brains to think it."

"She's always doing well and I don't wish things on her that I can't predict for myself. It's bad luck." Riven scowled. "And stop looking like that. I don't plan to stay long. You know I never do. This Realm has seldom agreed with me and I cannot stay when it keeps them away. She'll be back by your side before you know it."

"I don't want to hear that from you."

"Suit yourself. I won't explain away pointless things, if you've the mind to think of it yourself." He reached out to squeeze his magical staff. It hummed, faintly, a whispering of words, that assured
him that all was well for the time being. He shouldn't linger, but a few minutes would not be amiss. He could still sense his sister's presence, after all—the room was practically drenched in her magic.

The Earth King shifted, uneasily.

"Raspen thinks you don't have time for him anymore and that you don't trust him."

The Earth King stared. His face grew steadily redder as his mind caught up to Riven's words. Of all the things he'd expected to hear, that was not one of them. "Why in Arielle's sacred name, would he think such a ridiculous-!"

"I can't possibly imagine why," Riven drawled. "Though, answer me this. How bad is he?"

"What?"

"How bad is he? How many events or responsibilities have slipped past his notice?"

"Three," The Earth King said, testily. "and they were complete and utter disasters that-"

"Were never repeated again, yes?"

"What are you saying? What do you want?"

"You know why I'm here." Riven made a show of rolling up the sleeves of his ragged casting robes. "I can spell it out, if you've forgotten."

Silence reigned. The Earth King huffed. "Come sit over here." He snapped. "I'm not sitting on the floor like a-"

"Like a what?" Riven's eyes glittered.

"And take those rags off-!"

"Rags? Really? Do you know what I paid for these?"

"Too much." A grim set came to his jaw, as the Earth King crossed the room to meet Riven halfway to the settee. He carried four rolls of pristine white fabric bandages that he'd retrieved from a hidden drawer in the desk.

Riven shucked off his casting robes, showing off a long, lean torso, littered with scars and very non-drageil smoky tattoos, surfacing from pale grey, gradually turning darker. Some patches of skin were so scarred and marked, the tattoos were jagged and disjointed. Newer tattoos nearly hid some of the worst scarring, but the ridged lines were still visible in some places.

The Earth King pressed his lips together in a tight line, but made no comment. There were dozens more scars since the last time he'd had to do this. Up close, he didn't want to know what sorts of things would cause those kinds of injuries. Then again, it wasn't as if the secretive Riven would ever tell him. Every Cairothe he'd known had been that way.

Riven held out his left hand.

Three bandage rolls were dropped into his lap, the fourth one was opened and tied to his wrist. With expert movements, the Earth King wrapped Riven's arm, from wrist to elbow in quick, crisp movements. From the ease of handling, it was clear that he'd done this dozens of times before.

Enough times to know how to handle the joints and work quickly. The second bandage was above
the elbow joint and almost up to the shoulder. It glowed a rich, vibrant purple, nearly melding into
the skin, as Riven's magic absorbed it for the protection it was.

The right hand was next and trickier, as the bandage refused to wrap neatly and it took twice
as long, before the magical suppression was complete. It moulded to his body, almost like a second
skin, hiding the evidence of his experience from prying eyes. Riven breathed a shaky sigh of relief
as it was finally complete.

The Earth King gave him a look.

"Not a word," Riven rasped, unable to hide the tremors as his body was forced to acclimate itself to
the new magical frequency running through him. The process was not painful, but it had never
been comfortable and every instance left him feeling significantly disturbed.

"Of course not, it wouldn't do any good." the Earth King moved away, running a hand through his
hair. He'd seen the aftermath almost as many times as he'd helped with the bandaging. He'd learned
not to stare. "You're twice as stubborn as your sister and Arielle knows, it's worse now, isn't it?"

"...it's better than it has been," Riven said, crisply. The tremors had already begun to ease and he
could straighten up with little difficulty. "And I've already told you my reasons. I've no desire to
regurgitate them every single time you're forced to actually fulfil the duty between our clans-

"Your father would worry too, if he knew how you were."

"If you tell him-

"I will not." The King snapped. "Have I ever?" He sighed. "We were friends once."

"Once was enough."

"How is he—Raspen?"

Riven tested the bandages, stretching his arms and examining his exposed fingertips. His range of
movement was decent, a nice detail to note. He was relieved the Earth King wasn't out of practice
for this particular skill. "You should ask him yourself. Make the time."

"There's too much to be done, it's Hunting season, thought that might have escaped you?"

"And?"

"And-time is of the essence! There is plenty to do and not enough time to see that necessary
arrangements are in place for the-"

"Then take an energy potion of some sort and stay awake for a day or two." Riven shot back. "You
owe him that much. He's your son-your favourite son, I might add."

"I don't pick favourites."

"Says every parent ever and I still know my father prefers my sister over me, because she at least,
has a Bonded triad in spite of her wandering habits." Riven scowled. A sister whose wanderings
had considerably reduced in the past decade, if the strength of her residual magic in the room, was
anything to go by.

"You know it's not that simple."

"A crown is a heavy burden to bear. Regret is ten times the cross."
"Spoken from experience, I take it?" The Earth King's smile was tinged with sadness. "...I'll speak to him tomorrow—somehow. Will that suffice?"

"Sufficiently." Riven flashed a grim smile. "Wasn't that almost painless? We didn't even shout."

The Earth King shuddered. "Raspen would be proud."

"He would, wouldn't he?" Riven held out a hand. His staff, resting by the fireplace, zipped across the room to his hand. "...Are there problems?"

"You know better than to ask, Riven."

"Yes or no?"

"...yes."

"Do you require my assistance?"

"I don't know what you could do this time around."

"Yes or no?"

Another grimace, this time, more pronounced than the first. "The Vampires will be a problem. The data—the reports we've received. Something's riled them up and set them loose. I can't think what."

"An event or some mastermind?"

"If I knew, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Have they joined the Hunt as yet?"

"Their Ambassador has yet to send notice."

"But they will come?"

"They always come. Nevarah is neutral ground for them." The Earth King rubbed his forehead. "However, I do not like when they are not settled in their ranks. The unrest leads to bloodshed and now—at a time like this."

"Indeed," Riven agreed. "Perhaps a direct letter to the Clan Leaders themselves?"

"You've dealt with them recently?"

"Some time ago. I know their Empress sleeps. She has mourned the loss of one of her own."

"Her childe?"

"I can't say. I didn't venture that far into their territory."

"If she sleeps then they have none to answer to. That would explain the lack of a letter, but we have no ill-relations with them. Though her generals rarely step forward to bring any of their clans to heel, we have treaties with them and there would be no just cause to refuse them entry."

"Surely the hounds will curb them?"

"...the hounds are not active outside of Nevarah, but Lord Aiden will do his worst as he always
"I cannot ask until they arrive. They are en route. I know they will aide us, should we ask it of them."
"Have we made any contact whatsoever? Surely the Ambassador would maintain relations?"
"Within the Vampire's territory? Everything has vanished or not returned. There has been no word whatsoever. I personally signed and sealed the last missive."
Riven grimaced. "You've sent Gheyos?"
"I am old. Not decrepit." The Earth King snapped. "Of course I sent Gheyos. What else would I send?"
"Singular. Not in groups?"
"...we've never needed groups. The ones I sent were well trained. Besides, Lord Cunningham and his lovely lady are off-realm. I cannot contract them to take care of this, though I doubt they would complain about reassignment."
Riven swallowed. They would complain. He knew both of them well enough to know exactly how that complaint would pan out. "The last one you sent?"
"He volunteered. I made a private request through The Pit. A Dark Fae answered—that feral one trained by the Black Dahlia. He should've been capable enough. He had every qualification and his rating was high enough. I cannot personally inspect every Gheyo for all possible cracks in their psyches—"
"...and you've had no word?"
The Earth King glowered at him.
Riven drew a deep breath. "I will look into it."
"I am not asking it of you."
"And I, your majesty, would never deign to presume." Riven bowed, formally. The great yellow eye blinked open. A portal flared beneath his feet.
A flash of light and a rich wave of magic, swept through the room. Riven vanished.
From the doorway, the Earth Queen moved to enter the room. She'd stood outside in the hallway, allowing a moment, before knocking on the connecting door between her Alpha's private office and their Circle's resting room. "Relentless as ever, isn't he?" She asked, her voice soft.
"He's a damn storm. They do whatever they please whenever they like, regardless of the circumstances."
Her lips twitched, her golden eyes alight with amusement. "And that's what makes us love their prickly little hearts all the more. Come to bed, dearest. Scheme as you like after the opening ceremonies."
"I'm not scheming," he protested, but willingly went to her, the scowl shifting to something more of
general disgruntlement as he took her in his arms.

"Of course not," she agreed, stepping on tip-toe to kiss his cheek. "Kings never scheme. They plan intricately."

He gave her a look. The same could be said of Queens and she knew it quite well. "The sooner someone makes a motion to promote their element to royalty, he's no longer my responsibility!"

Her laughter filled the room. "I'm sure Lady Bianca will be happy to take him on."

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PEVERELL GUESTROOM: HARRY AND CO.

"Vincent's gone," Ethan reported, stepping back into their room. "The house will lock down in ten minutes, so we'd best be headed out in five."

Theo took his turn at fussing over all of them, as he had for the past few days. Ethan had done a lovely job. Everyone was neatly coordinated and all the usual matching details for a Circle—from the way Charlie's ornate cuffs matched the embroidered patterns on the collar of Harry's robe—it was nice.

He was surprised to find it was such a relief to have someone else to worry about these things for a change. It had lifted a burden he hadn't even realized he'd been carrying. Now, he finished checking over Charlie and gave him a nudge to join Harry.

Alpha's Pride demanded he confirm their Pareyas competence, even as the rest of him couldn't deny the first stirrings of appreciation. Ethan was definitely a welcome addition.

Harry waited in the centre of the room, ready to 'port out at Ethan's return. He wasn't fussing over his fancy outfit—not the way he'd done before, when Theo had insisted on the new wardrobe. Ethan hadn't fussed with the same fretfulness that Theo often did, when they were in a hurry to be ready.

Theo smiled. He checked the rest of the room, pleased that everything seemed to be in order, before he moved to join the rest of his Bonded.

Ethan cast a mild protection spell about the room, securing their belongings and leaving a bit of magic on it, so they would know of anyone had meddled in things that they ought not to.

It was another nice detail, at least, to Theo. It soothed a protective instinct that he hadn't realized was so deeply ruffled. He held out a hand, waiting as Ethan came to take it.

Accepting Theo's hand, Ethan stepped forward to complete the little 'square' they made up in the centre of the room. He had a slight frown on his face, however and seemed to be mentally working through something.

Theo gave him a minute, before he squeezed the hand in his. "Ethan…?"

"We should—at least—visit the Hunt before we see Prince Raspen?" Ethan suggested, carefully. "I mean, it's bound to be a long day and I doubt that we'll be anywhere in the mood to mix and mingle, but to completely ignore the opportunity would be a waste."

Theo took a deep breath. He let it out. The suggestion turned over and over in his mind, checked against their sparse schedule and the current emotional and instinctive weights between all of them.
Ethan was certainly showing his skills. That was a very good detail to notice and one that was still troublesome. As much as Harry wanted to be returning to Earth and dealing with the Death Seal, Theo had complete faith in Prince Raspen's ability as a Royal and the simple fact that said Prince had declared he would handle everything.

Even the summons, unexpected as they were—did not have a timestamp on them. The Earth Royals, as a general rule, did not rush into things. They were slow, steady and formidable. There would be time, if a quick stop remained just that—quick.

From the careful way in which Ethan spoke, Theo could guess that the Pareya had already thought of a good place.

*How reliable.* Theo bit back a smile. "Somewhere you have in mind?"

"...The Dive is a good place." Ethan rocked back on his feet, settling into his stance. "There's plenty of eligible Air elementals there. I think Harry could use the change of pace and it's good exposure."

"An air type?" Charlie mused.

"Between myself and Theo—there's enough grounding in the Earth," Ethan explained. "Your fire lends itself a bit more to the calmness of the earth element as well, and less to the spiritedness of the actual fire element. You'll probably feel a bit on edge, if another Earth is added. An Air element would be good balance—not to mention, Harry should have an affinity for the Air element as well."

"Because of the Peverells?" Harry asked. "But the Seal hasn't been removed yet."

"I'm sure the Peverells are working on it," Ethan said, calmly. "It sounds like they have a lot happening right now, so it is best to be understanding until they are ready for us. As for the Death Seal—it's been active for a while, I doubt a few hours on this side would affect anything."

Harry hesitated. He hadn't expected Theo to pick up on that, at least, not to pick up on it and then say something in return. Ethan had a good point and even though the thought of the Death Seal, the Cunningham's' and everything else in the whole mess, seemed to hang overhead—there was a small part of him that wanted it to vanish. For everything to fade away, for there to be some freedom in his life—the chance to attend the Hunt, like they'd done with the Deveraines.

Having fun, meeting people and occasionally, some of the drama from Bahn or Bhindi. As awkward and confusing as those few days had been, he missed it. All of it. The way the Deveraines had simply fit around him—around all of them—and how fun it had been. Not having to worry so much about himself or details like what to eat, where to sit and how to make it work.

It just had.

Harry bit his lip. Another minute passed. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad if they didn't rush straight back to Earth? At least, maybe an hour or so? He'd always been in the middle of picking up the pieces, no matter what the issue was. Sitting on the fringes felt odd. Strange.


"If it's fine with Harry," Charlie said, simply. "Ethan's right. If we head straight to Prince Raspen, we're probably not setting foot anywhere near the Hunt until tomorrow and that, even—"

"Is it alright?" Harry had to know. "The message said as soon as—"
"Time-difference," Ethan reminded him. "Nothing that we can't make up later. You should at least put in an appearance, especially if there's been any more favours or such, sent to your name. I have a feeling the Peverell guest house isn't really ah, conducive to outside touches."

"Alright." Harry nodded. A flicker of relief settled in him. It was easier to give in this way—at least, he could trust Ethan's words and Theo's judgement. If they thought, it was fine—then it probably was. For now, that was good enough.

"Thank you," Ethan said, softly. His eyes flared gold and his grip tightened on Charlie and Harry's shoulders. "Temprificus Ergen!"

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**DAY FOUR : THE HUNT, AIR ELEMENTAL SECTION. THEDIVE : HARRY & Co.**

The portal deposited them within the gates, with the usual moseying check-in with semi-crowded lines and various Circles chattering happily amongst themselves.

It didn't take long, though Theo made the necessary changes to reflect that Ethan was now theirs and part of their Circle. The young dragel updating their records, congratulated them and offered fifty-percent off dinner-tickets, should they care to use them that week.

Charlie perked up at that. He was excited to note that it spoke of a seaside dinner—the ability to fish and take their catch to chefs along the water's edge that would turn it into a meal. A relaxing evening like that, sounded like quite a bit of fun.

For a moment, he wondered if Ethan could cook.

As far as he'd seen, Ethan was good at making sure they were well-fed, in terms of ordering out and making sure everyone had a plate, but perhaps it was too soon to tell. Given that most of the familiar faces they ran into, were often trying to feed them or otherwise take care of them, Charlie guessed they wouldn't starve, at least.

Not while the Hunt was in play, anyway.

Tucking that thought away for later, Charlie broke into a trot to keep up with his Bonded. Ethan was leading them through the crowd and to a slightly different corner than their usual wandering through the main pathway of the Hunt. He nudged Theo, slipping a half-step back, so he could bring up the rear.

"Favours," Theo said, by way of explanation. He twitched, faintly, when Charlie stepped closer to avoid being jostled by a passing Circle. "Something on your mind?"

"…would it really put me on edge?"

"Another Earth type?" Theo's golden gaze shimmered, but retained their current hue. "Possibly. You have far more patience than any of your siblings—at least, to my knowledge. Given your element, that's unusual. Most fire types, tend to have short tempers and quick reflexes. You might be alright at first, but you could grow to resent an elemental imbalance unless you had a secondary element or inclination to help you along. You'd feel as if you were somehow isolated."

"An inclination? Like Harry?"

"Yes."
"Do I?"

"…probably. I mean, he's Air and Earth—I think? That's where the Nameless bit comes from. Didn't that Quinn Kalzik say something about it?"

"Probably." Charlie shrugged. "I don't feel out of place now."

"Ethan's a soft touch." Theo nearly smiled. "You can feel it, can't you? His magic is softer than mine."

Charlie's brow furrowed, predictably. He could understand the explanation, though the magic had felt the same to him. "You can feel a difference?"

Theo laughed. "I'm an Alpha—and I'm hyper-aware of the other Alphas around me. It's a ranking thing. Part instinct. I can tell who is new, who isn't and who we ought to stay away from. Pareyas tend to have softer, subtler magic—sometimes even more so than a Submissive. It's what makes them so good at protecting."

"Because you wouldn't mind it?" Charlie guessed.

"Exactly. If it's soft and light, and you're always used to feeling it around you, there's no reason to resist."

"I see." Charlie focused, carefully on the bond connecting him to Ethan. It was, as Theo had said, rather soft and light—yet still strong. Just like Harry and Theo's bonds. That was interesting.

"Now you feel it?"

"Yeah. I didn't—I wasn't paying attention to that before."

"That's how you can tell a Pareya in a group," Theo offered. "They rarely show their auras or their magic, unless they are threatened."

"And that would also vary by element."

"Exactly!" Theo said, pleased.

"Think he'll have one of each?"

"Every element?" Theo tried to keep the surprise from his voice. From the wry expression on Charlie's face, he hadn't quite succeeded. "It's possible."

Charlie stifled a laugh. "Possible, but you're thinking the same way I am—it's too much to wrap my head around it right now."

Theo couldn't muster up a smile. "I want him to be happy but-"

"But you're growing and changing, right along with the rest of us," Charlie filled in. "For what it's worth, I think you'd do fine."

"I'm still young."

"…as if I'm old," Charlie shot back. He tentatively shuffled closer.

Theo didn't move away.
"It'd probably be fun though."

Theo's lips twitched. His imagination had provided him with a rather vivid picture of a large Circle and conflicting elements and ranks. "Of that, I have no doubt," he said. "Looks like they're coming out now—must've been quite a stack."

Sure enough, Ethan emerged from the Favour collection booth, with a pink-cheeked Harry trailing behind him. Set in the corner away from the general hustle and bustle, it held a white glow, with a simple sign of teal and silver in front, proclaiming that all favours being held, could be retrieved there, with proper ID and verification.

It'd been well over fifteen minutes, before Ethan and Harry had reappeared, arms overflowing with a spell-bundled armful of shimmering favours of all sizes and colours.

"Theo," Ethan hummed, leaning to the side to see around the armful.

"Need a hand?" Charlie looked from the bulging stacks to them.

"Yes please. They said we'd have to shrink them out here, someone had a magical mishap and spells aren't working right in there." Ethan leaned back, as Charlie's shrinking spell began.

"Ah—let me," Theo offered, gesturing at Harry, to do the same.

When they were both small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, Ethan sent them back to the guestroom for later perusal. "Looks like someone's popular," he teased, ruffling Harry's hair with gentle hands.

Harry's blush intensified, but he didn't duck away from the warm hand. It felt nice. Very nice. And the thought of sitting and sorting those favours with Ethan around to help—well.

That was even nicer.

Ethan led the way out from the favour collection corner and turned their steps to the Air Elemental sections. He kept up a fairly steady stream of chatter, talking about the Hunt, the different elemental sections and the expected weather for the rest of the day.

Normal things.

Easy to follow things.

It was easy to follow what Ethan was saying and Theo occasionally chimed in, answering a few of Charlie's questions as well. Harry couldn't help feeling himself lift a bit in spirit and magic, as they drew nearer. He remembered here. It was somewhat familiar, with the tall pillars and the winding blue stone walkway.

Charlie's curious gaze roamed about the place, as he fell back to walk with Theo. Ethan and Harry moved ahead of them, with Harry occasionally veering off to one side or another, awe reflecting on his face.

The air elementals knew how to highlight the beautiful, glittering pieces of themselves that lent an ethereal flow and atmosphere to the space. Everything was clean, light and pure.

Energy fairly crackled through the air, reaching out to brush against every receptive dragel that passed through. Harry twitched and startled, a few times, before he reconciled the magical
sensation with the barely visible wisps of white magic twining around him.

"It likes you," Ethan said, amused. "You definitely have an affinity for the element."

Harry could only nod, as he held up one arm, watching as a happy tendril of white-energy slithered along his arm with a calming, soothing warmth that made him think of a pet.

"The Dive is over there," Ethan explained, pointing to a large drop-off somewhere in the distance. "Don't dawdle, they'll keep you there forever."

Reluctantly, Harry hurried to catch up. The magical tendril melted away as the connection broke with the distance. The light, cheerful feeling remained. "It's so—different."

"It's Air. It's always different and it's always changing. You can see the Dive from here though, if you squint a bit."

"I thought you said it was closer to the Air territories." Harry's brow furrowed as he followed Ethan's pointing hand. "That looks awfully close."

"Magic." Ethan said, simply. "It's an illusion, but if you've been watching where you're walking—take a look back at how far we've come."

Harry threw a glance over one shoulder and wobbled in place. No wonder the magical tendril hadn't stayed—there was no way it could have.

Ethan's hand flashed out, steadying him. "I meant a careful glance," he said, wryly. "Don't try to look at one specific place, just look at everything in general. Like a big picture. It won't seem so disorienting that way."

That tip worked and soon, Harry found himself smiling. He now looked back on the floor and could pick out a few glimmering strands here and there ahead of them—without losing his balance.

"We're walking through—gates or something?"

"Or something," Ethan agreed. "Basically, it makes it within walking distance."

"What are those, then?" Harry pointed at the large pillars of blue light streaking down from somewhere up high and pooling into a neat circle on the stone floors.

"General transportation pillars." Ethan pointed to the illuminated names carved on the floor around them. "The destination is noted there and the coordinates are in the centre. They usually take you to specific places around the main city and outskirts. Say, to the water's edge, to popular restaurants and so on. They're temporary. We only activate them during The Hunt, to help with the traffic flow."

"...how do they work?" Harry squinted up at the light, until it vanished from view. "Where's it coming from?"

"They are cast by the Air Royals. It's a type of light magic. Generally, they raise the power and anchor them to this section. It makes it much easier to move about."


"That's Air for you," Theo said, fondly. "It's invisible mischief."

"As opposed to the visible kind?" Ethan teased.
Theo grinned. "Something like that. It's always welcoming though."

"You've been here before?" Harry wanted to know. "With Bahn?"

"Bahn and Bhindi," Theo corrected. "And Ithy and Delani. The Deveraines spend most of their time over this way, once the usual formalities and ceremonies are out of the way. They love it here and it is their element."

Harry grinned. He could sort of picture that. The Dive now looked to be much closer now and he couldn't stop the excited spring in his step. It was almost as if there was something, precious and strong welcoming him in and beckoning to take a closer look.

The Dive was exactly what Ethan had said.

A place for Air Dragels to practice dives and falls. As far up as he could see, there were shimmering, glittering wings—every colour of bright pastel imaginable. They streaked up into the sky until they were nearly out of sight and then plummeted down below the ground and almost to the very bottom of the well-worn abyss that produced the delightful air currents allowing their athletic feats to be possible.

Safety measures were in place, of course, with magical barriers erected in front and above the viewing public. A visible ripple of blue current suggested that it would provide a healthy jolt to anyone who happened to make it past the general barriers.

"Mostly for the Gheyos," Ethan explained, when he noticed Harry's uncomfortable twitch. The barrier gave off a barely noticeable sharpness to the surrounding air, enough to be detected by magic-sensitive dragels. "It won't bother us at all. Trust me. They are daredevils and they love to show it off. My uncle tells me that before we had any sort of barriers erected, they were originally set up, to keep trinkets from being flung into the Dive by over-excited suitors. Apparently it became a hazard of sorts, so this was built instead and the magic is sharp enough to register even if you're in an instinctive haze."

Harry winced. "That would hurt," he agreed, picturing fancy, beribboned favours sailing through the air to pelt unsuspecting dragels.

"It did. A quick healing factor is irrelevant, because it still hurts. Some people forget that. Mostly Halflings though or rather, quarters. Full-blooded Halflings are still quite instinctive and know what to pay attention to." Ethan grinned. "In this case, I guess they were paying too much attention to certain cues. The Air types tend to be slightly less flashy than the Fire types."

Charlie hummed. "Exactly how flashy?"

"There's some old replays of it in the library archives. Rather funny to watch at first, but exasperating near the end." Ethan said. "Fire types though, well, they have an entire ah—tanning station."

"Tanning?" Harry's brow furrowed, predictably.

"The black rocks?" Charlie mumbled, half-aloud.

Ethan's lips twitched. "Yes! It's actually called the Melting Square. Most fire types will ignite on principle, the moment they set foot on the rock."

"What black rock?" Harry looked between them.
"It's kind of like a resting place?" Charlie offered. "I met Theo there, when you were out—Hunting. It's a very big—field—and it's all black rock."

Harry cocked his head sideways. He could picture it, but it didn't make sense.

"Flat rock on the ground, big rocks to sit on," Ethan explained. "They like to sit on them with their wings out—taking in the natural warmth and light. The more warmth a fire dragel absorbs, the shinier their scales will appear."

"Tanning," Harry said, as the connection clicked. He snuck a glance at a rather red-faced Charlie. "Was it nice?"

"Very," Charlie admitted. "It didn't feel too different, but it was nice to be there."

"Then you were probably in the shared area and not the actual square," Ethan observed. "I'd bet if you were, then your hair was on fire."

"It's not on fire now," Harry soothed, when Charlie twitched, restlessly. "It's fine. It's all nice and —" he stopped.

"Nice and-?" Ethan prompted, nudging him a tad closer to Charlie.

"...pretty." Harry mumbled, face warming. That was what he'd thought, but not what he'd exactly meant to say. At least not to Charlie's face, exactly.

Sure enough, Charlie flushed a pleased pink, a proud gleam settling in his deep gaze. His Mum had fussed at him for ages for having the long hair, after she'd managed to get the Twins to cut theirs and even Bill to trim his long locks down. And yet, he'd simply liked it and hadn't been able to help growing it out. "I have pretty hair?" he teased, reaching out to pull Harry into his arms. "Very pretty hair?"

Harry only squeezed his eyes shut for the very lovely kiss that followed. If Charlie didn't mind such compliments, he'd have to think of fluffier things later. Especially if it led to this. A soft sound escaped when Ethan hugged Harry from behind, sandwiching him against Charlie.

That felt so nice, Harry could practically feel himself melting into a puddle of contentment.

A light kiss was pressed to the corner of Harry's temple and Ethan's large, smooth hands, twined effortlessly around his waist. "It is very pretty hair," Ethan agreed, with an appreciative glance at Charlie's lovely, faintly flickering, hair. "Very distracting too."

Harry's eyes popped open. He turned to protest, when a flash of shimmery, white-silver scales caught his eye. A beautiful, dragel with flowing, pale-blond hair, twirled in mid-air, a shimmer of showy sparkles showering down into The Dive.

The dragels around him, were zipping over and under, collecting the shimmers on their own wings and continuing their series of aerial tricks.

A contented sigh registered, as Harry's shoulders finally relaxed, his curious gaze roving from one dragel to the next. At one point, he strained forward, attempting to gain a better view.

"Want to move closer?" Ethan offered. "There's plenty of room down there—unless you want to buy a favour?"

"I wouldn't know what to buy." Harry fidgeted. "What kind of favour do I buy?"
"Only if you want to and the one that you like the most," Ethan answered, at once. "It has to be something you like, so the one receiving it can decide if there's something about it—and by extension you—that they like enough to respond." Ethan's eyes twinkled merrily. "You can buy a couple if you like, but don't throw them."

"I'm not throwing anything," Harry declared, stuffing his hands into his pockets. He didn't have anything to throw though and that registered a few seconds later. He turned to find Ethan still grinning at him. "What?"

"You can throw them on the secondary landing platform. That's perfectly acceptable and allowed. They land on the primary ledge and walk into the secondary one. There's just enough of a pause between them that if you want to throw something, you can." Ethan's gaze softened. "Come on—I'll show you." He began to lead the way.

Charlie shuffled along beside them, occasionally squinting up into the sky. "There's a lot of them," he said, reaching out to keep a hand on Harry's shoulder—so he wouldn't trip over anyone.

Harry bit back a smile and twisted around to take his hand instead, guiding him along the crowded walkway. The Dive was quite popular, it seemed. There was just enough chatter for sound-dampening spells to be in liberal use.

There were several sections where they'd walked past and the noise level had dropped considerably.

"Like the dance floors?" Harry guessed, keeping his other hand twined with Ethan's. "I don't really need a favour."

Ethan glanced back, gaze narrowed. He seemed to read something, before allowing a slight shrug. "We don't have to buy any if you don't want to," he said. "It's pointless to buy one if you don't mean it—and yes, it's exactly like that. Sensory overload isn't a pretty thing," Ethan said. "What about watching from the railings over there? I think there's a clear spot up ahead."

"There's fine," Harry said, twisting around to see if Theo was still there. He'd been lagging behind since they'd made their way from the upper ends, to the lower halls. "Wasn't Theo behind us?" There were plenty of dragels around them, but somewhere in the midst of it all, he'd lost sight of Theo. Their shared bond still thrummed with contentment though.

"I'm sure Theo's somewhere behind us," Ethan said, cheerfully. "He likes to take his time—and I can still feel him, so he's probably just out of sight."

Harry's brow furrowed, but he turned back in front, allowing Ethan to guide him towards a barely visible gap in the long string of chattering Submissives eagerly observing The Dive. He felt Charlie draw nearer and hug him again, gently, from behind.

Their lack of obvious concern and open trust, was enough to set him at ease. Theo felt fine, so he must be. That meant it was fine to enjoy everything swirling around him now.

With that thought fixed in his head, Harry didn't notice much else.

He was caught up in the same magic as the rest of them, eyes glued to the whistling winds of the cavernous abyss, and the shrieking, delighted dragels, that whooped and hollered as they zipped through the sky. His jaw dropped.

Glittering scales upon glittering scales, every single size and build of dragel was there. Tall and slender, well-muscled or well-rounded. Some were Gheyos, but some weren't. He could tell by
the armour or the lack thereof.

And the wings!

Dozens of gorgeous pairs of wings, large, small, four-span, two-colour and even tri-colour. There were even a few with clearly repaired wings—visible through a slight glamour that shimmered at the edges. Or scarred patches here and there. Some were a bit uneven or even bulky, but there was only a cheerful, contented vibe filtering through the air.

Magic swelled and rose, reaching out, gently, to the spectators.

Harry's breath caught in his throat as he stared. He couldn't narrow it down to any single dragel, but simply being there, made his heart flutter and ache—in the best of ways.

A familiar flutter, almost.

He rolled his shoulders forward and back, unable to shake the odd feeling, but equally unable to tear his eyes away from the sight. He couldn't pick out anyone, but felt as if he ought to. As if someone was reaching for him and he couldn't see them yet—but somehow, knew that they were there and only there for him.

Then, quietly and almost barely noticeable—he felt it.

A shift, a twist—an almost click.

The resulting whiplash of sharp, compacted magic seemed to yank him forward.

Harry choked.

He jerked around, pushing and shoving, only to realize that Ethan was behind him and Charlie wasn't. The imprint of the magic—the almost-click—was so bright and vivid, it stole his breath. For several moments, everything seemed too bright, too loud and too-sad?

Harry choked again, as his empathy tried to reach out and recoiled at once, fizzling out into nothing, as if it couldn't process his reaction, because he couldn't process what had just happened. He licked his lips, forcing himself to breathe, calm down and think it through.

It was almost as if there'd been a spell there—some kind of spell!

"Hey—hey, shhh." Ethan soothed at once, his golden gaze flaring two shades darker. Magic flared at his fingertips, melting into Harry at every point where they touched. "Harry? Talk to me—please!"

Harry twitched, feeling the protective spells rippling over him. It smoothed some of his prickliness away, but There was still something off though and he couldn't pinpoint it. "Did you feel that? Tell me you felt that!" Harry stood on tip-toe, craning his neck to see up and down the bustling walkway. He couldn't make out a thing and the frission of panic multiplied. "Ethan!"

"What did you feel?" Ethan followed his gaze, eyes narrowed. "Where did it come from?"

"It—it was like—a spell? Something had—something had just—stabbed me!" Harry pressed a hand to his chest, rubbing at the dulled ache. There was no burning, physical sensation—no, this went deeper—somewhere inside that he couldn't reach and it made his fangs ache.

"Stabbed-?" Ethan trailed off in a growl. He cast another, more careful glance around them, his
instincts seeking any hint of danger. He reached out to tug on Charlie's sleeve. "Stay close, please." He silently sent a jolt to Theo's bond, beckoning their Alpha to hurry up.

Charlie moved closer at once, pressing up against both of them. "Stabbed you where? I didn't—no one was near you, Harry. Just me and Ethan."

"I felt it—here-!" Harry rubbed at his chest again.

Charlie straightened. "If it was a spell—did you feel anything before that?" His blue-eyed gaze darkened, settling on Ethan's own worried golden ones.

"Nothing dangerous." Ethan allowed. "I don't sense anything either right now, either. Everything's fine. As if nothing's happened."

"I felt it," Harry repeated. He twisted, trying to look through the crowd, frustrated at his lack of height.

"What did it feel like? From which direction? Are you feeling alright? You're physically fine, but—the magic-?"

"Like—like with you!" Harry gripped Ethan's arms in lieu of darting out into the crowd. Logically, he knew that dashing into the churning flow of people with the feeling long gone—was not the least bit useful. But now that the ache was fading, there was a definite hint of nervous energy. An urge to be moving, quickly, lightly—anywhere but where he presently was.

"Like with—you mean—?" Ethan pulled him closer, turning to the side to survey the passing dragels. His Pareyic hackles were up, but swiftly relaxing. Harry's words clicked in place with a surprising deduction. "A soulbond? Someone reached out to you?"

"Is that what it was?" Harry's brow furrowed. "You didn't do that-?"

"No, but there was a spark, remember?" Ethan held up his hand. "When you went to shake my hand."

"Oh," Harry chewed on his lower lip. "It sort of felt like that? And sort of not?"

"I didn't feel anything and I didn't hear anything odd or different that would suggest—" Ethan stopped. "Then again—this would likely be your soul bonded, not mine. You'll be the only one feeling it, I suppose. Charlie, what about you? Feel anything—good?"

Charlie shook his head, ponytail swaying. "Sorry. I just—I think I felt Harry's surprise, and your reaction, but nothing else. I didn't see anyone running or shouting, really. I mean—apart from this."
He gestured around them as another loud cheer came from the appreciative crowd for another well-performed aerial stunt.

"Harry?" Theo appeared behind Ethan, his gaze darker than before. "Did something happen?"

"Where were you?" Charlie murmured, pressing back against the dragel behind him, to jostle for some more room for all of them.

"Taking my time," Theo pointed to the walkway overhead. "You went left and I went right. Habit. By the time I caught sight of you, it was easier to come the other way around. What's the matter? I didn't see anything unusual on the way down."

"Harry felt something," Ethan said, steering Harry away from the rail. "Let's move along. I'd rather
we didn't linger here—there's too many people. How about we move somewhere warmer?"

As if on cue, Harry shivered. It had passed so quickly, and yet—it was almost as if—as if-! He gave himself a shake to clear the frantic thoughts in his head. He'd almost had it. Something. Whatever it was supposed to be.

Another soul bonded?

But he'd just found Ethan! They were still getting used to each other—even Theo was only finally relaxing now.

"Shhh. Let's head off to where we ought to be, eh?" Ethan rubbed Harry's arms. "You're freezing."

He frowned, surprised that he hadn't picked up on that detail. Harry felt fine seconds ago. Definitely a soul bond, then, he decided. "Charlie?"

Flames dancing around his neat ponytail, Charlie obliged. He pushed his warmth through Harry, until the shivering stopped. "That's—that's not—" he hesitated.

"I don't know. We don't know." Theo pronounced. "But the expression on your faces is not promising, therefore, I agree with Ethan. We should leave. Now." He added, when it seemed like Harry was about to dissolve into another round of shivers.

ROYALS' SECTION : PRINCE RASPEN'S FLOOR : HARRY AND CO.

Ethan's portal deposited them in the receiving room that Harry was now beginning to recognize. A few minutes were spent with Theo and Ethan conversing quietly, while Charlie smothered Harry with his flames, to bring his temperature back up to normal.

"D-does this mean my next—soulbonded—is ice?" Harry shivered, gasping in relief when Charlie's warmth washed over him once more. He burrowed further into the hug, rubbing his face against the soft texture of Charlie's dress robes.

"There isn't an ice element," Charlie said, rubbing along Harry's shoulders. "I mean; I don't think so? Maybe it's a side-effect from something else?"

Harry's despairing laugh was muffled. "Definitely something else," he agreed. "Unless it's Air or Water? Why would Air be cold?"

"It's probably the magic," Ethan suggested. "You're magic sensitive and something that close—or with that sort of potential—especially at a distance, it's probably quite a shock for you. Soulbond magic is intense." He winked. "As I'm sure you remember."

Harry blushed, extracting himself from Charlie's suddenly too-warm embrace. "R-right. Um, I'm warm now. We should-

"Cute." Ethan said, simply. He leaned forward, kissing Harry's forehead. "Theo?"

"Found one," Theo drawled, from the far end of the hallway, where one of the waiting attendants, stood beside him. "She'll take us to Raspen's floor."

They were escorted by the young dragel, and guided up to Prince Raspen's personal quarters, after admittance by his personal guard.
Upon entering the room, it was clear to see that only Riven and Prince Raspen were present. They conversed quietly between themselves, in much the same positions as the previous day. Prince Raspen standing by the fireplace and Riven seated on the floor beside him.

"Harry—Theo!" Prince Raspen greeted. He nodded to Charlie and Ethan, beckoning them forward. "Ah, you didn't have to rush over here first thing. There's plenty of time, if you wanted to attend the Hunt. Riven was still preparing—"

"I said I was done preparing an hour ago," Riven grumbled. "You're the one that took an extra half hour to—"

"We've already toured The Dive," Theo said, smoothly. The entire room was filled with a pulsing, almost magnetic aura—and he couldn't pinpoint whether it was from the Prince or Riven. Both dragels seemed to be in high spirits and magic.

"Ah," Prince Raspen brightened. "Did you enjoy it?"

"It was very—fun," Harry allowed. "Lots of dragels—of all kinds."

"It is," Prince Raspen agreed. "Princess Dawne visits it every evening, as part of her Royal routine during the Hunt. You should attend one of the closing ceremonies. They are very beautiful."

"Closing ceremonies?"

"Have you not attended one yet?" Prince Raspen waved them towards the lounges, with an off-handed motion to the prepared refreshments on the table. "It is usually a sunset ceremony. Lots of food. Fire. Shadow. The magic and elements mix. It's held near The Dive and there's plenty to do and see."

"Ebony?" Charlie perked up. "I think she mentioned something about it, but that I wasn't required to attend, since this is our first Hunt and all."

"It sounds like fun," Harry agreed. "I-I liked watching them. There were lots of good fliers."

"And it seemed like a good time for a break," Theo said. "Which brings us here now. Has there been any news?"

"Nothing more to tell than what we already know," Prince Raspen said, regretfully. "There is, however, a mention of—" and here, his golden gaze darkened to a medium brown, as he fixed a steady gaze on Harry. "A formal complaint has been filed against two of the three members of your family. It is my duty to inform you of such developments, given the pending investigation of your mentor's disappearance. In the event that such claims prove to be true, your guardianship passes from them, to your mentor and from your mentor to his surviving family lines, if they are living. If there is none accepting, you become a ward of your respective element or that of which you show the greatest affinity."

"Complaints?" Harry looked between Prince Raspen and Theo. The sinking feeling his stomach, grew considerably worse. There was an almost stern look on Prince Raspen's face. "What kind of complaints? A-and I thought that once I was Bonded that er-""

"Once you are Bonded, of course, you are a free and consenting adult," Prince Raspen explained. "However, family bonds are still important. If you cannot reliably trace your lineage through your parents, we wish for you to still remain and reside in Nevarah, having familial roots is part of this. We take care of our own."
Theo nearly smiled. He leaned back, just enough to be out of Harry's line of sight. Prince Raspen was speaking directly to him, and Theo had a feeling the Royal wanted to clear up a few things, given the renewed air of authority in the room.

"I'm already working with the Peverells to have the Seal removed," Harry said, chin lifted. "And I only asked to-

"What's so—bad about it?" Charlie wanted to know. He rested a hand on Harry's shoulder, to stop the anxious words. "They found something else? Or is still about the Death Seal?"

"A formal complaint is registered in a court of law," Ethan answered. "And it typically travels back to the root cause, which usually brings about a lawsuit. Simply, someone—or someones—are taking them to court for personal reasons undisclosed, but not limited to, some grievous infraction to their person or on behalf of another person."

"There are different variants to those complaints as well," Prince Raspen said, calmly. "Closed complaints are politely worded missives to explain that a particular matter is of some importance to those involved. It is used to seal files of juvenile indiscretion or specific lapses in judgment as well as the darker side of certain magics, personal histories and abuse. Now, if you truly wish to know what is contained in those missives, I could pry, if you liked. They would give way, with the reason of my inquiring on your behalf, as long as I have your express permission to do so."

Harry was at a loss for words. He opened and shut his mouth, twice—trapped in thought. He twitched, faintly, when Theo's smooth hand slipped into his own. Theo wasn't answering for him and it made the situation more obvious that this was a choice he would have to make for himself. "But how would someone even know them? How could they file a complaint and—" Harry paled. "I-is it the Cunningham's?"

A formal complaint sounded like bad news. A closed complaint also sounded like bad news.

Very bad news.

None of it was good.

But contesting it wasn't something Harry was sure he wanted to think about just yet. Doubly so, if it was by the Cunningham's. It was probably easier to simply let it be.

Maybe.

Then again, if they'd filed that sort of complaint, then there was no point in returning to Earth now. It'd all come out anyway.

Prince Raspen straightened. "It's very likely. At this time, there's been no actual notice of who filed it. I was alerted, simply because I've requested that anything pertaining to you, pass through my hands before moving forward in an effort to speed things along, given that such matters tend to move slowly during the Hunt."

Theo inclined his head. "That is very generous of you."

The nod was returned. "Lady Mariana is not one for secrecy when she believes someone has been done wrong. She will find the evidence. She will present her case. And should the jury disagree with her, a second sentence will be carried out—after another trial."

A small smile played at the corners of Riven's mouth. "There's always a second trial and as blood-stained as her record is, there's been no real reason to fault her for it."
"More along the lines I don't think anyone dares to," Prince Raspen said, mildly.

Riven shrugged. He wouldn't contest the Prince, not on that note. But Mariana was something different altogether and he could guess that something had displeased the little lady. Enough for her to take action on Harry's behalf.

Mentally, he filed the thought away for later use, as he called his staff to him.

From where it'd been resting, propped up in a corner of the room—it flew to his hand, landing with a solid thwack. The great big bulbous eye, blinked sleepily at him, almost prompting a look of fondness.

"Whatever it is to be, I'm sure your only note was to inform them," Riven said, smoothly. He waved the Prince out of the way, half-heartedly.

With a good-natured grin, Prince Raspen stepped to the side.

Riven's staff began to glow and hover a few inches off of the ground, on its own. He moved to stand in front of Harry, his violet eyes sparking. "I have some questions for you," He said, quietly. "And I expect you to answer them truthfully.

Harry straightened.

"Regardless of Royal and your little Alpha, I want you to answer this, honestly. If you can do so, then I will not object to your accompanying me through the 'portal to the Cunningham's."

"Riven-!" Prince Raspen protested.

One pale hand was held high, to stay any further protests. "This is entirely between the two of us," Riven said, sternly. "And I expect you to treat it with the same respect I am affording to you. Is that clear?"

"Very." Harry answered.

Riven frowned. "Yes or no answers then. You entered Nevarah before the lockdown?"

"Yes."

"And you came through only with your Alpha and Beta?"

"Yes."

"And you've been here at least three days?"

"…yes."

"You are in less than stellar physical condition?"

Theo started. Charlie bristled.

Harry swallowed. "Yes."

"You have recently acquired a new Bonded?"

"Yes."
"You expect to offer some sort of magical or physical aid, by journeying back to Earth?"

"…no."

"You have spent a natural resting cycle in Nevarah?"

"No." Harry squared his shoulders.

There was a slight pause, as Riven studied him, silently. The great big eye on his staff seemed to mimic the piercing stare, unblinking as the silence stretched.

Ethan shifted restlessly in the background.

It was enough to break the silent staring match. Riven sighed, as if put-upon. "With all that you've answered, tell me now—do you believe it is a good idea to accompany me?"

Harry clenched his jaw.

More silence stretched out and then, it broke.

Harry gave a short, resigned huff. "No, it isn't."

Riven nodded. "So, that said—of your own admission. Will you be accompanying me?"

"…no."

"Thank you for your honesty," Riven sketched a bow. "It is extremely foolish to travel inter-realm, particularly when time-shifts are involved, especially with a new Bonded, when there hasn't been a natural resting period." His lips twitched, an approving gaze on his sharp-featured face. "Quick of you to put that together."

Harry's almost-smile, held a hint of ruefulness. "Hard to miss."

Riven made a sound that might have been a laugh, were he any less dignified. "Perhaps." He spun the staff so that the great yellowed eye stared back at him. "Is there anything specific you would wish for me to take care of?"

"…no."

"I will return as soon as I am able." Riven turned to Prince Raspen. He ignored the Prince's unhappy look. "It will not take long. Don't worry about it."

"That's not what I'm worrying about." Prince Raspen hesitated. "Do you have an anchor for the return spell?"

"An Anchor?" Ethan asked. His brow furrowed into neat little rows, a distinct measure of confusion visible at once. "You are a Realmwalker and a-

"I won't be needing an anchor," Riven said smoothly. His gaze sharpened. "You need not worry."

"Is that—dangerous?" Harry looked to Theo.

Ethan looked between them and then back at Harry. "An anchor would prevent anyone moving between timelines from being ripped apart by the reality of it."

"One more question for you, Harry," Riven breathed a long, deep breath.
Time in the room seemed to slow and still, as if everything were seconds away from being frozen in place. A slight fog—a mist, even—began to form from nothing, gradually dampening visibility and raising the depth of magic in the room.

"What?"

"If I should find Maurice—would you want him to live?"

Harry started. "What?"

"Do you wish for him to live?"

"What kind of a—of course I want him to live!"

Riven's considering hum offered no explanation at all.

The mist parted.

The great yellow eye blinked ominously, as if it took every single ounce of effort to complete the action.

"I mean," he began. "A Death Seal is used to put Death off, for a time. It does not erase the reality that you may very well be dead already."

"Then what are you asking me?" Harry demanded.

"If he was dead and casting another seal would make him live—would you wish that?" Riven asked, bluntly. "If the Death Seal released him in exchange for a sacrifice—would you wish that? Could you live with it? Knowing something of equal value was surrendered in exchange for his life?"

A chill settled in the air. Harry resisted the urge to rub his arms. Instead, his shoulders squared, his chin lifted and a slight scowl settled on his face. "You can't judge someone's life as being worth more than anyone else. A life is a life!"

"You can, actually," Riven said, amused. "But if it pains you to see—"

"It. Isn't."

"Ah. See, that's what I'm asking. Do you think you could live with yourself, if I should carry out your wish? To bring him back alive?"

"You can't raise the dead," Harry said, darkly. "When you're dead-you're dead."

"True." Riven admitted. "I can't. That's what Necromancers are for."

Theo hissed.

Harry edged closer to him, silently sending a pulse of reassurance through their shared bonds. He didn't know what Riven was playing at, but he didn't want Theo to worry. It didn't matter. It couldn't.

Because Sirius was dead.

And so was his mother. And his father.
Any so many innocent others.

"The price of necromancy," Ethan said, unsteadily. "That is not something—that had best not be what I think you're asking of him." He folded his arms across his chest, wishing he could see Harry's face clearer in the misty room. It was hard to make out anything quite as clearly as he'd liked.

"I'm saying if he's alive, save him." Harry said, strongly. "If you can save him. Then save him. I'm not asking you for anything else. Or anything more."

The great yellow eye blinked once more.

"As you wish," Riven murmured.

"Why would you ask?" Theo's sharp voice cut through the room.

For a moment, there was no answer.

The mist lifted, a fraction.

"Maurice Elswood was not a stupid submissive. If he cast a Death Seal and linked it to Harry, it's quite likely that he won't be alive—or salvageable in any way, so as long as Harry is alive. One does not unravel a Death Seal without paying Death some sort of due."

"What kind of due?" Charlie demanded.

"The piper must be paid," Riven said, ignoring him. "A life for a life, isn't that how it is?"

"Riven-!" Prince Raspen sounded torn between admonishment and worry. "I—I should not have-"

"You are free to ask me anything you like, your highness." Riven waved a hand. The mist blurred from white to grey, and then faded almost to a black. As if night crept softly upon them. "You are not, however, to dictate how you wish for me to solve your problems. Had you wished for such an easy solution, then you would not have sent for me in the first place." He paused, meeting Prince Raspen's golden gaze with his own violet eyes. "Would you?"

"What will Harry feel?" Ethan moved forward to join the rest of his Bonded, relieved as the darkened mist condensed and returned to Riven.

It swirled in the palm of his hand like a singular mass. "A sense of disconnect." Riven said, abruptly. "With me, however, he won't feel a thing?"

Prince Raspen nearly smiled. Riven had always been so sure of himself, never mind how strange and disturbing things became. "And if he does, because of the distance and his being magic-sensitive?"

Riven paused. He turned to look Harry over with appraising eyes, the corners of his mouth twitching as if he'd like to smile. "The same. He won't feel a thing, so as long as I am doing the unravelling. It's called blocking. Well. You should try it sometime."

"Not everyone has your penchant for sitting motionless for sixty days in a sensory blackout," Prince Raspen threw back. "At least explain what you're doing?"

"There are three gates of time," Riven said, smoothly. "Past, present and future. The past can be altered like a sketchbook. Lines will remain and may eventually fade, but there will always be an
imprint and of course, the future will be forever altered. The present is empty, but malleable. It is why change is always possible no matter what age or level you may be at in life or mind. The future, in it's glorious indecision, is open to interpretation and endless possibility, as such—there are no definites and it is not to be travelled through." He paused. "Unless of course, you have a very good reason."

Theo snorted. Harry elbowed him. "So you're—traveling to the past?"

Riven shrugged. "I am traveling between, as I always do, when I walk alone." His grip on the staff tightened and his shoulders seemed to droop, just a fraction.

Prince Raspen bowed his head. A Realmwalker rarely lived a peaceful life. There were too many prices to pay.

"I am traveling to Earth and the time difference, yes, will put this in the past. However, timelines and other—boring things—it'll be taken care of." Riven said briskly.

The mist in his hand fanned out, nearly half the side of the room, before it shrank back.

"What is that?" Harry flinched.

"Shadow dust." Riven spun it on his finger tips. "There is only one thing that slips between time and reality itself." He smiled, fondly.

As if on cue, sparks of light began to flicker within the sphere of gritty blackness. Enough to show that it was still not as solidly dark as it could be.

Holding out his staff, Riven brought the two together. The eye groaned and rolled back, somehow, inside of its wooden case. The shadow slithered in around it, until the yellowness was now entirely black.

Hefting it in hand, Riven turned away from all of them, contemplating the room. It was best to use it as a formal return point, seeing as he'd spent the most time here so far. He shifted the staff from hand to hand, checking the weight.

The shadow was almost settled, when he spun it in a large circle—effortlessly.

Directly before him, a perfect circle of shadow appeared.

The eye grew less black and more yellow, with each successive spin. Riven paused every third turn, to do something with his hands and the purple fire at his fingertips, that shaped the shadow into a visible gateway.

A gate, to the past.

Harry squirmed inside, unable to keep the inward feeling from manifesting as an outward twitch. Something bothered him about this whole situation and he couldn't even put his finger on it yet. It made him want to throw something and at present, he didn't have anything to throw.

Theo seemed to notice his frustration and though the arm around his shoulder was meant to be comforting, Harry didn't dare bear it for longer than a few minutes. He felt as if he were brimming with electricity and could spark afire without warning.

He shrugged out from beneath Theo's touch and sidled over to Charlie, taking care not to touch
him. Ethan hovered on the other side of Charlie, his golden gaze patient, but not questioning.

Harry nibbled on his lower lip. He wanted to see what exactly it was that Riven was doing—curiosity and all that. It was fascinating just watching the way the shadow dust had reacted and the way that Riven was currently manipulating it.

Even if Prince Raspen was looking on with a nearly sour look on his face.

There was something between them that Harry wasn't sure he wanted to figure out. But when he danced around to the other side of Charlie—just sort of carefully edging and shuffling his way around the room, in an absent-minded sort of way, a distinct feeling of complete sorrow nearly overwhelmed him.

It was enough to make him reach out and grab Ethan's arm, as his balance was nearly thrown off entirely as his body struggled to regain an equilibrium that suddenly, didn't feel like his own.

*Deep breaths.* He reminded himself, tentatively feeling out his Bonded in turn and satisfying himself that the emotion, strong as it was, hadn't come from them.

Ha. Riven then? Or Prince Raspen? Maybe Raspen, Harry mused. After all, he had been thinking about him only minutes before. He turned curious eyes to the handsome Earth elemental prince and waited.

A minute passed.

Riven's gate grew bigger and more ornate.

Prince Raspen didn't even seem to notice. Or if he did, he certainly gave no indication.

Harry tried not make the face that was currently wanting to come out. He darted another look at Riven, then shifted around to watch him fully again. The magical manipulation was mesmerizing in the best of ways and—**OHH.**

There it was again.

Harry rolled his shoulders back. He released Ethan's sleeve. That jolt of emotion had been too strong to ignore.

A fierce stab of complete, utter loneliness.

It made his heart ache and his head throb. It was a feeling he was all too used to knowing. A feeling that sometimes, still lingered, harbouring the ugly emotions beneath layers of protection that his Bonded were only just barely beginning to scrape the surface.

Harry inched forward.

Ethan cleared his throat.

Riven cast a backward glance over his shoulder, a faint smile playing on his lips. "It's only keyed to one person," he said, lightly. "You can't follow."

Harry shot him a look. "*I know.*" He snapped, even though he didn't. "I just wanted to see."

"Ah." Riven turned then, giving him a better view. "It's nothing fancy. Just woven runes. If they aren't made this way, they won't hold."
"They'll hold longer because you're making them though, right?" Harry guessed.

A pleased gleam flickered through those lovely violet eyes. "Indeed they will." Riven murmured. "As they always have."

Harry nodded, as if he understood and stared at the pretty purple flames, twisting and darting about, as Riven's skinny hands made quick work of the strangely malleable shadow dust.

It scarcely took a few minutes more, and then it was done.

The gate sprang to life and Riven took a step back.

Harry stumbled back, stretching out a hand to catch himself. For one awful moment, his eyes met that great yellow one.

Breath caught in his throat and with a choking rasp, his eyes rolled up in his head and Harry crumpled to the ground.

"Harry!" his Bonded leapt forward at once.

Ethan was the first to reach him, even as Theo's warning growl had Prince Raspen moving out of the way, so they could reach Harry.

"What happened?" Charlie glanced at Riven, eyes narrowed. He was fairly certain the Realmwalker hadn't cast anything on Harry, but magic could be subtle. And Harry hadn't been in the best of health lately.

"It was not me," Riven said, correctly reading the accusatory glance. He held up his hands, the staff floating off to the left of him. "I didn't even touch him—as you all could clearly see."

"He didn't." Prince Raspen echoed. "Theodore—stop that. I do not intend him any harm. I was only attempting a healing spell—Scholar Hartwood?"

"Er—yes, that would be helpful," Ethan said, gratefully. He winced when Theo growled again. "And maybe not. He's on edge. I think the—" he winced again. "Yes, Alpha. I know. But he does not mean any harm, he's helped up to this point and—"

"It could be the magic?" Prince Raspen reasoned. "Perhaps he should have waited in another room—"

"The choice was his to make," Riven said, dryly. "You are not his Keeper, Raspen."

The Prince did not answer.

Ethan was feeling for a pulse, and casting magic that would check Harry's vitals. Their bond felt alright, so he knew nothing serious was taking place.

Theo half-cradled him in his lap, worry radiating quite openly from his young self.

"He's fine—" Ethan said, slowly. "I don't know what could have caused it though, he's just—he's here. I mean, it's as if he's—sleeping?"

Riven jerked around. His already pale face grew several shades whiter, to an eerie, almost-grey. He'd never lost a connection before and he would not let this be his first loss.
"Something's wrong," the Vega Twin shifted, uneasily. A mental jolt shared through the twin-bond to their answering Twin.

Another spike of uncertainty rippled through the ranks.

Lord Cunningham threw a sharp glance at him. "Spit it out."

The words, and their lack of formality in spite of the harshness, were enough of a trigger. The Twin shuddered. "He's going to break."

"Here?"

"Now," the Twin countered. Their eyes flashed and then rolled back, before simultaneously synchronizing. Instead of the standard heterochromia they shared, one golden and one blue—it was two gold and two blue. Past and future.

"If he—" the words were never finished, for Lord Cunningham had no time to actually finish them. He found himself darting forward from their designated safe point, as Hadrian surfaced with the final layer of the seal.

"By Kanto's Claim, he's done it," the Gheyo King swore. "He's gone and raised the bloody thing to eye level!"

"He had to, it wasn't as if he could unravel it underground," Lord Cunningham muttered, half to himself. If he'd raised it underground, it would mark all of this land as Necromancing plots. Rich and fertile to raise whatever horrors they felt like summoning. That was equally not good, along with the thought of Mariana actually raising and breaking the Seal herself. He rubbed his forehead.

Micromanaging. It always came down to micromanaging. He growled out a few terse orders for them to close ranks and draw near.

If the Seal wanted to devour more, then it would have a harder time focusing on multiple subjects.

Obediently, his Bonded did as they were bid.

Hadrian's earth-shattering scream made them all wince.

"He's layered the bloody thing," Lord Cunningham noted, reluctantly admiring of Maurice's ingenuity. A layered Death Seal was a lovely thing to cast—but generally only with the intent that it would never actually be invoked. Basic Death Seals or a Standard Death Seals, were nothing of this level.

A powerful, magical shockwave blew out from the Seal, prompting cracks in the pavement and stripping any sign of living greenery where it existed.

The ACE scowled. That would be a pain to clean up. "Will he feed it or bleed it?"

"How about he just unravels it?" the other Vega Twin suggested, edging closer together and trying not to leave too obvious a gap in their attempted circling.

Lord Cunningham pretended not to notice. The Twins were always uneasy before disaster struck and he'd learned to pay attention to such details. It was easy to look away, for his gaze was fixed on
the lone figure struggling to extract himself from the hungry magic.

Every last hope he'd had for Maurice's survival, had gone out like a light.

Unless there was a living, breathing sacrifice—there was no way the Seal would give him up.

No way at all.

The sheer power suggested that it might require more than one living soul to pacify it, much less to bargain with whatever shadow of Death and darkness would come for him.

And shadows take him, if he should let Mariana's precious little pet project be devoured by it.

He didn't spoil her, but it was hard not to want to. She so rarely ever asked anything of him and whatever she asked, he was delighted to give. Hadrian had been one of those rare requests. The best of the most recent gifts, if he was honest. Amusing and interesting, with a hint of darkness just rich enough to be worth the effort. He'd seen to it, because he'd trusted her judgement.

And now, there was plenty of proof for Hadrian's potential.

Hadrian knelt in the middle of the glowing, magical circle, his eyes alight and burning with pure, white fire. In that instant, he was nothing more than an avenging angel.

The Death Seal began to churn and shift, struggling against his control, desperate to swallow him whole and keep its sworn sacrifice within its clutches.

"Milord!" the ACE said, testily. Hands flexed around the short sword hilts, ready to move at a moment's notice. Cursed flames danced along the blade lengths, begging for blood not yet spilled.

"I ask-"

"Not yet."

"Milord!"

"The Seal needs something to feed on."

The ACE froze. "Surely, you don't-"

"It needs something."

"Something. Not someone."

"At my mark—and mind your head-" Lord Cunningham snapped. His shadows rose up around him, just as the Seal tried to burn Hadrian alive.

Any interference was cut short at once.

Because instead of dissolving into the Seal, as expected—or viciously fighting back, as hoped—Hadrian did something entirely different.

Every shadow in the vicinity raced to meet him.

As if the night could not be black enough, the darkness wasn't dark enough and Death—as if Death herself walked there.

With a ferocious cry, the Gheyo was no more.
Instead, a massive, hooded form hung over the Death Seal, a blood-red scythe clenched in bony hands.

A Grim Reaper.

Lord Cunningham swore.

He threw himself forward, summoning his own shadows up, seconds before his feet touched the Seal.

It worked. He morphed.

His pristine armour shifting to the tattered, rags of a Reaper as well. His own scythe swung up in tandem, gold glimmering along the inside edge as he blocked Hadrian's intended swing for the body of Maurice Elswood.

Monstrous, red eyes glowed out at him, from the barely visible visage of the massive hood. A terrible, raspy voice croaked out.

"You dare-!"

PRINCE RASPEN'S QUARTERS: HARRY AND CO.

Dropping to a crouch beside Harry's resting form, Riven did something between his hands that produced a glowing replica of purple, webbed strands.

Theo growled—the third time. Something about having the older dragel beside Harry, touched on a nerve that he wasn't quite sure how to handle.

Charlie huffed. He shuffled close enough to stand, so that Theo's back rested against one of his legs, the protective stance unmistakable. "Let him help, Theo."

Ethan chirruped encouragingly to both of them, even though his own golden gaze darkened by several telling shades. "What do you intend?"

"To help and not harm?" The phrase was somewhat sarcastic, but the tone was wasted on the fact that there was nothing but an expression of absolute concentration on his pale face, as Riven cast and re-cast the magical webbing, reading something from the energetic feedback each time.

"What's wrong with it?" Ethan prompted, when Riven cast it again for the fifth time. "What are you reading?"

"Nothing good. It's Mariana," Riven said, half-laughing. "Would you like to bet on the fact that Hadrian must have carried his message well and they've decided to raise the bloody seal before anyone arrives?"

"What?" Charlie burst out. "Can they do that?"

"Seems like it," Theo said, darkly. "Of all the times for—is that what they've done? Is that it?"

"I'll know, once I meld with him," Riven grumbled, but the edge to his voice couldn't be tempered. This had already begun to morph into the kind of problem that he preferred to avoid. "Stop growling and hissing."
Theo bared his fangs in answer.

Ethan rolled his eyes. He dropped down to Riven's level, his demeanour deliberately careless. "Stop griping and grumbling," he offered. He casually slipped between Theo and Riven, effectively ending the stare-off. "And if you are of a mind to help, then we'd appreciate it."

There was a pause and then a huff, before Riven shrugged. "As you like."

"We like," Ethan said, softly. "Harry, particularly, would like it. Whatever is happening right now—if you can help, please do so."

"There isn't much I can do yet. If they're unravelling the Death Seal, he'll probably be out of it until it's completed. I don't have any control over that and I don't want to have any hands in that—"

Charlie brightened. "So that's why you didn't want him to return to Earth—"

"That has nothing to do with this," Riven snarked. "It's bad practice to time-travel and realm-walk when you're this newly Bonded." His ears warmed. He gestured between Harry and Ethan. "A blind man could see the connection forming between these two and you'd have it torn apart because he's too young to know better?"

Theo bristled. There was far too much unsaid beneath that phrase and it rankled in a way that he didn't like. It'd hurt to try and think of a way to coax Harry to stay and in the end, he'd been lucky. An honest conversation—thanks to Ethan—had done wonders. Riven's own reasoning had done wonders.

And it'd left his Alpha's pride feeling a bit battered.

Didn't Harry trust him? Even after everything they'd been through?

Riven huffed. "You're young, yes. But that doesn't mean that you give him his own way whenever he likes it. Not for something like this. I don't care how you spoil him or what he asks for, a good Alpha always weighs the risks of his Submissive against the overall health of the entire Circle and—"

"-and whatever the calculated result is, if it isn't worth the risk, then the request is not granted."

Theo finished. "I know, Master Realmwalker. I am well aware."

Riven pursed his lips. That was an easier acknowledgement than he'd expected. It threw his sparking temper for a loop. "...then perhaps you should build up an immunity to his manipulations?"

"...he's not doing it on purpose," Theo said, heavily. "He was genuinely asking for something that was within my power to grant, because it was of significant importance." Golden eyes flickered, viciously. He started to test the aura filling the room, trying to make out the rank. This was too neat. Too—simple. "I suppose I should be thankful that my youth keeps me from having to indulge my temper over something as trivial as—"

"Questioning your authority?" Riven wrinkled his nose. "Perhaps. But maybe that just means you're not as little of an Alpha as you pretend to be."

Theo inclined his head, preferring not to answer. He cast another glance at Harry, as a modicum of feedback travelled back through their bonds. Harry was alive and in acceptable health, but there was a degree of distress that was slowly fading away. The fact that it faded, rather than grew, was the first hint that something was wrong.
"What did he do? What's happening?" Riven leaned forward, trying to catch Theo's eye. "What is it?"

"The bonds," Theo rubbed at his chest, turning to see that Charlie and Ethan were mimicking the same movements, each of them with identical grimaces on their faces. "It feels as if—as if Harry's fading away."

"As if everything's fading away," Ethan corrected, his voice turned hoarse as his words trailed off into a hiss.

"Ethan?" Charlie winced. "It's kind of—sharp."

"Do I have your permission to heal him, if it is within my ability to do so?" Riven barked, reaching back to tear at the braids neatly tied behind his head. He yanked two of them over his shoulder and magically undid the ties, hastily unravelling the neat strands. "Yes or no?"

Theo shuddered. He shrank back from the powerful magical aura that began to swell and grow, overpowering every presence in the room. The ache in his chest grew worse and Harry's bond flickered.

"Theo!" Ethan cried.

"Yes—yes, help him!" Theo snapped out.

Riven's eyes glowed bright, vivid violet and his magic exploded. He hated forcing mind melds, but this required some finesse, because if Harry was fading as quickly as he could feel—then a mind meld would be the only thing to anchor him in Nevarah.

*Kesmar grant me the subtlety this will demand…*

---

Dark, but soft.

A strange contradiction, Harry thought to himself.

He couldn't make out a thing.

It was all so shapeless and formless and yet, he had no desire to sort through any of it. Instead, he was lulled to a state of pure, quiet calm.

*You're so peaceful—and adorable.* A voice said, amused. *You have no idea the kind of havoc you're causing right now.*

Harry froze. He tried to look all around him, but nothing would focus and—!

*Shh. Shh. There isn't much to see here, because this is all I have the energy for—it's a bit difficult to be stretched between realms and times, but I do manage.*

*...Riven?*

*Correct.*

*...where are we?*

*Your head. Not mine. Yours was easier.*
...why are you in my head?

Simple questions. That's good. I hoped you wouldn't be panicking.

How about answers for the questions?

You blacked out—I didn't want to lose you.

...you didn't want to lose—me?

Correction, I've never lost an innocent bystander by opening an inter-realm time-shifting portal, so yes. I can't lose you to something as ridiculous as that, because I do have a reputation to uphold.

Right. Harry tried not to feel disappointed, but he couldn't help it.

You don't have to look so happy about it.

Kind of hard not to. Harry bit his lip. All I ever do is faint at the flicker of a spell and-

Would you rather burn out your entire physical body instead?

I don't have that much magic.

Riven chuckled. That's adorable. You know how they always say that you don't know what kind of power you have, until you need it? You shut yourself down—every time there's a chance that you might not make it back, you're instinctively quick enough to shut down your physical body—as quickly as you possibly can—and let your subconscious do the rest of the work. It's pretty advanced for someone who thinks that all he does is faint at a flicker of a spell-

Even if I believed you-

You don't have to believe me. I'm only stating the facts as I see them.

Right...so why did I black out this time?

You don't know?

Harry rolled his eyes, even though he was fairly certain Riven couldn't see him.

He was rewarded with a light flick to his forehead.

Do not roll your eyes at me. I don't have to help you.

I didn't ask you to help me!

No, but your little Alpha did. He's all bark and no bite.

Hey!

Stating the facts. Just the facts.

Harry tried not to growl....why can't I see you?

We're in your head and you're conserving energy. I can see you just fine. Riven huffed. And if you'd stop asking questions, I could give you some answers.

I'm listening.
Wonderful. Your Death Seal is unravelling.

My what is doing WHAT?!

Riven swore in three different languages as he jerked back from the mind meld with Harry.

Definitely not doing that sober again. He thought, darkly. Better yet, perhaps I shouldn't do it at all when it comes to-!

He scrabbled frantically for a moment, trying to think of the quickest and least-likely-to-blow-up-in-his-face option. There were lives at stake here and multiple timelines. Too many possibilities and not enough specifics.

That left one very convenient option.

Riven silently threw a prayer upwards—and reached out into the bonds and vows he'd made throughout his lifetime. There was one connection he could call without repercussion. One that would answer without fail and listen, at least, to his request.

"Tavit, you wretched creature—where are you when I need you?"

A mocking laugh twined through the air and then, a sobered face materialized in front of all of them. A misty, hazy form, of none other than Tavit the Necromancer. His position was not stable, evidenced by the twisting and jerking shadows behind him, for he had yet to step through to the current realm—but his face was that of unbridled glee.

"What is it now, oh great Realmwalker? What heinous crime do you seek to pin upon me?"

"Of all the debts between us—" Riven hissed. "Go! NOW!"

The misty form twisted and reformed, before it flickered out with a vicious twist.

Emptiness seemed to hang in the air.

Riven silently sent another barrage of prayers upwards to the cosmos. Whatever should hear him, he asked for time. Enough time for Tavit to think on his feet whenever and wherever he landed.

And enough grace that no lives would be lost in the bargaining that was sure to follow.

No calm returned to him, however, and Riven was filled only with a fierce, desperate will to live—an odd emotional wish that he could not pinpoint and didn't dare try to sort.

He could guess at it, anyway.

There was only one unconscious empath in the room, after all. A newly realm-anchored one at that.

"What is it? What's happening?" Prince Raspen demanded. "Riven—please!"

"You can't help," Riven said, brusquely. "And there's no time." There was no time—and also no chance of deliberately involving his mentored student in this mess—royal or not.

"Then make time!" Theo shot back. "In case you've forgotten—Harry's magic sensitive and not in the kind of state that would-"

"Someone's tampered with the bloody seal," Riven rolled up his sleeves, his staff hovering and
glowing before him. He'd have to use the magic he'd been raising for the 'portal back, to save Harry. It was lucky that he'd stored it.

"We've already established that," Theo ground out.

"—I wasn't finished. The Seal is trying to do what it's supposed to do. It wants Harry and it can tell that there's a link between the times—probably because of Hadrian. One passageway between time and realms is easily lost, but two? That narrows it down significantly." Riven began to glow again. Another snowy white braid unravelled, refilling the room with the same awful, potent magic as before.

Prince Raspen grew exceptionally pale. A very soft, very quiet exclamation left his lips. Horrified golden eyes flew to Harry's prone figure on the floor. "Tell me it isn't—not Harry. It can't have-!"

Theo's angry growl interrupted them, as he pushed through to grab Harry, cradling him protectively in his arms.

Charlie's anxious chirp did nothing to settle him.

"Send for the Kadels—any one of them," Riven said. He flexed his hands, the violet-hued magic collecting into perfect spheres in each hand.

"The Kalziks' would be better," Prince Raspen said, tentatively. "They've worked with Harry and-

"They don't work with me," Riven said, sharply. They never had, if he was honest. Except for that one blond—the mute one. They'd interacted enough on a professional level, though generally it was long-distance and never in the same room.

"His current Healer is Dyshoka," Theo said. "She accepted Healer's rites when he transformed before the introductions." He hesitated. "She's a…Deveraine now? Or an Imaldis. Wouldn't that work?"

"No! Find one of the Kadels—Maia, even. She's decent enough at what she does. I need a Healer to stabilize him—before the casting is complete. One that won't make it harder because they can. Now, go! The longer you wait, the worse this will be for him!"

Prince Raspen hesitated. His golden gaze landed on Ethan, and he gave a slight jerk of his head. He wouldn't give orders for this. He'd let their Pareya make the choice.

Ethan gave a short bow and 'ported out without delay.

Riven muttered to himself, merging the two spheres in his hand, and frowning at the end result. It wasn't as perfect as he wanted, but it would have to do. He couldn't afford to keep recasting, when Harry was in such close proximity. The raised magic was almost depleted and he couldn't let it exhaust itself completely. He'd managed the mind meld, through sheer luck and determination.

Skill and talent had taken over when Harry, thankfully, responded well to the meld. He'd taken Riven's advice and formed the mental anchor to stay in Nevarah, and not be pulled into any neighbouring realm. It had been quick and dirty—but it'd worked.

It was the simplest solution for the current problem.

Death still loomed somewhere in the background and he hadn't heard back from Tavit. The lack of communication meant the entire situation was far worse than he'd anticipated. The Cunninghams being involved with the whole mess was merely adding insult to injury.
Riven wished he had the energy to spare to split himself in two and exist at double points, if only so he could force this to play out with as little damage as possible to either side. Visiting in Harry's mind had been more illuminating than he'd expected.

A Submissive with so many scars and Seals, had triggered protective instincts that Riven could have sworn he'd buried deep, years ago. A guarded, but hopeful demeanour had sealed the deal and Riven had broken the connection to return to himself, knowing deep down that he would do whatever was within his power to keep Harry there.

Alive.

EARTH : PRIVET 4 DRIVE : CUNNINGHAMS + TAVIT

Tavit materialized between the meeting points of two large reaper scythes and a sudden, desperate wish that he'd chosen a different line of work than that which he'd been born into. He grimaced and tentatively reached up to put a hand on each blade, in hopes of keeping them away from his throat, though he had little hope that they would actually not harm him.

"Niko?" He called, working to make his voice as light and carefree as possible. The desperation in Riven's voice had set the sort of tone that Tavit was dearly hoping to avoid. If they were lucky, perhaps, they'd be able to head the whole thing off before the situation devolved into something torrid and hopeless.

Niko didn't answer.

Tavit rolled his eyes. He cleared his throat and tugged sharply on their shared link. "Niko, my charming little angel-?"

"Am I an angel today?" Niko materialized beside him, hovering the customary few feet into the air, clad in her pitch black dress, with her long hair rippling out behind her. Her piercing gaze seemed to freeze time in place, as she reached out to pull Tavit away from the blades.

"You are always an angel," he praised, following her sharp tug. It was her hands that allowed him the freedom to move and he was grateful that she'd always thought quickly on her feet—at least, when it served them both. "Did you do that? Freeze them?"

"It's harder to work when they're all moving, isn't it?" Niko tucked a curl behind one ear. She eyed them, uneasily. Her powers would hold them back—for a few minutes. "Do you wish me to undo the-"

"No—no, no, no. Frozen is fine. Frozen is very—fine," Tavit said, quickly. "Don't unfreeze them. I'm—it'll—take a moment with this." He circled the two dragels, taking note that one was quite clearly an Alpha and the other was very, very dark in magic and soul. He couldn't even determine the rank clearly.

Tavit scowled.

Niko mimicked him.

"They should have waited for Riven," he muttered. This was all sorts of problems waiting to happen, the moment that Niko would undo her spell. He'd have to hope and pray that his luck held better than this. "Niko?"
She floated further into view, her hands folded in front of her. "Yes?"

"Flute."

She reached inside of her dress and drew out a golden chain, with a flute charm on the end. Snapping it free of the chain, she held it out in her hand as it morphed to full-size. "Here."

He took it with a sad smile and closed his eyes, putting the flute to his lips. The first few notes were lively and light. The next were sombre and slow.

The song started, as if it were a bird in flight, struggling to move higher in the sky, even as night pulled it down.

Gradually a darkened haze began to gather and pool about the area, until a sheer, silvery mist spiralled down from the heavens. Tavit stopped playing long enough to enchant the flute to continue its song.

It did.

He reached into his own shirt, drawing out a necklace with a miniature glimmering black staff. It snapped off into his hand, resizing into a full casting staff, showing off an agitated purple diamond set at the top and crackling red energy.

"By the powers that answer to my hand, I call deeper than that which walks among the living," Tavit intoned. "By the title that I have claimed as my own, I summon to my side, the one who would end this conflict. Answer me—DEATH!"

The ground shook.

Death appeared in simple form.

Ominous and towering, clad in the expected colours of mourning and darkness. Despair and hopelessness rattled in the wavelengths surrounding her.

"You have called, child of darkness?"

Tavit bowed deeply. "I am unworthy of that which I seek," he said, flatly. The words were expected, ancient ritual.

"And I have come, unworthy as you are."

"I ask but one favour of your barren hand."

"That which I have is not what mortals may request."

"I would never take from what is yours without paying your price."

"…ask away, child of darkness."

"Behind us lies the soul of one who has more good than harm in his life. I ask that you spare him at this time."

"You would ask this of me?"

"…I ask it."
"Knowing and accepting the consequences?"

"I have only asked. I have not demanded."

Death looked between them, to Hadrian and Lord Cunningham, then back to Tavit. The whispeery robes seemed to flutter in the silence. "…for what price?"

"The price of a soul is only another soul."

"Indeed, for I have bargained with you before."

Tavit nearly smiled. Sometimes, Death felt more like a friend and less like an enemy. "I never ask for that which cannot be given."

"For what harm is there in asking?" Death intoned. "Who are they to you, that you would bargain for their soul?"

"…no one to me," Tavit said, lightly. "No one that is—known to me."

"You ask on behalf of a friend?"

"I am, but a jack of all trades."

"Indeed, Master of one."

Tavit did smile, this time, head bowed in deference. Death always quibbled over that point. It usually meant it was the right time to offer his usual currency. "Perhaps I could offer some poor, trifling souls in exchange for this one, suspended in time?"

"Oh?" Death perked up. "How many?"

"Enough." Tavit held out a hand. Niko materialized beside him, hovering in mid-air, a silvery box cradled against her chest. Her arms strained as if simply holding the box drained her of all energy.

Death groaned, the sound rattling through the air, before shattering against the magical barriers thrown up in place. Everything, still frozen as it was.

Fear dripped into the atmosphere, settling along the ground as if it had been there all the time. Darkness drew nearer, silence seemed to echo.

"And are those your souls to give?"

"They are in my hand," Tavit said, evenly. "I think you understand ownership as well as I do."

Niko heaved the cube into his outstretched hand, dancing back to hide behind him, her face barely visible from over his shoulder.

Death paid her no heed, but instead, continued to stare at the cube. "And this soul that you would bargain for—" she rasped. "Come to me, my darling—"

From the prone body of Maurice Elswood, a fragile sphere of purest light, slipped out from beneath his lips.

Tavit's smile wavered, but he forced himself to hold it in place. Bargaining was always worse after a soul retrieval—and he knew, without checking—that Riven had not sent that many souls.
This was already too high a price to pay and yet—Tavit started, faintly, when he felt Niko poke his side.

It helped to ease some tension, because he could always stand up for her—his adorable familiar and helper in one. If she was afraid, then she could be scared for both of them, so he could be brave in her place.

Maurice's soul glided up and over to Death's hand, shivering in the gnarled, bony palm that would decide his fate.

A fierce chill exploded outward, the impossible cold radiating from Death as her great, hooded head lifted.

"This soul belongs to one who has mortgaged it to me before. I cannot allow you to redeem it."

Tavit swallowed. There was nothing obvious about the soul, but the wording was suggestive in exactly one way. His heart throbbed, painfully. This entire situation was swiftly deteriorating in the worst of ways.

*Mortgaged to—a seal? A Death Seal? Damn it, Riven—you seriously owe me for this!*

Niko whimpered.

"...surely a great Immortal, such as yourself, could undo a mere seal?" Tavit leaned back, slightly, into Niko's trembling form. He felt her thin arms sneak around his waist, seeking comfort, even as the bond they shared, demanded that she stay beside him.

The cold grew worse. Death shook her head from side to side. The grating movement of bone upon bone, drew a collective shudder from all who could offer up such reactions.

Death blew gently on the quivering soul. It flickered within her palm, as she gestured with her free hand, coaxing dark tendrils of magic to wrench apart what honest hands had put into play.

The magic strained and screeched, beneath the forceful removal—stretching almost to the breaking point, before snapping back into place.

Death stopped.

The soul sputtered feebly, but did not fade.

"What kind of seal is upon this soul?" Death demanded.

The chill in the air, finally touched Tavit. He felt it straight down to his bones, even as his own magic surged up inside him, a survival instinct he could not suppress. "Only one that would bring them to you."

"Do not play your games with me, Necromancer!" Death roared.

The cold exchanged itself for fire.

Raging, scorching flames that meant to devour—vanishing as quickly as they were summoned—the blistering cold returning.

Tavit flinched.

Death thrust her bony hand beneath his nose, showing the sputtering soul. "The chains wrought
upon this pitiful creature tie to one that has yet to answer for cheating me—twice."

"T-twice?" Tavit licked his lips. He tried not to scoff. Death would never suffer any soul to deceive her more than once—twice was—unheard of!

"Twice." Death repeated, icily. "Once by some dark child, such as yourself—who fancied themselves able to outwit me—their destined end. Second by the hand of three who reside beneath my care and begged for his life, against their erasure."

Niko squeezed him tight, her silence kept only by the spell she'd cast upon herself. Tavit didn't dare speak.

Death's terrible red-eyed gaze burned with rage. "Tell me, Necromancer, what business do you have with Harry James Potter?"

"You'll register it?" Ithycar checked, drawing Bhindi closer to him. He checked her hair, tugging at a few small loops here and there, to balance out the style.

"It'll be more of a formality," Ilsa explained, lounging against the entryway wall, while Delani fussied over Bahn.

They were turning out in closed ranks for the Hunt.

In spite of her disapproval.

Ithycar was willing to humour her, but Delani had flatly refused. She'd explained the need for keeping up a strong public appearance, but had agreed on merely her, and the Twins. The Pareyas had refused to attend, preferring instead to guard the home, as their instincts demanded. The Betas had protested.

Neither Okahn, Takar or Aracle had liked that detail—Ithycar's reasoning hadn't helped and neither had Delani's explanation. Irritated, Ilsa had growled and the three had subsided. She hadn't wanted to leave her Gheyos behind, any more than the Betas, but strategically, it was the better option.

It would also possibly allow the right atmosphere for a few overdue conversations.

"You've already done the paperwork?" Delani asked. She examined Bahn's hand and the delicate golden chains twined around it. Personally, she'd prefer that the chain morphed into a poisoned weapon instead of a cursed one, but her darling Bahn had always taken a shine to darker things.

"Paielda did it for me," Ilsa shrugged, moving away from the wall. She was somewhat relieved to see the subtle precautions they were taking. It was better for everyone to be outfitted with some sort of weapon, than not. "She knows what to do and how to word it."

"And you trusted her with this?" Bhindi wrinkled her nose.

"I trust her with my life—and yours," Ilsa retorted. "So yes. I did. She said it was filed in accordance, but I would need to witness and sign the document."

"What are you asking for?" Bahn wanted to know. He flexed his fingers and obediently turned around for Delani to continue casting her Alpha's protections over him.
"Blood price." Ilsa checked her claws, pleased that there were no bloodstains. Her instincts still clamoured for more blood, but for now, she could keep that in check. Even if everything else still made her twitchy.

Both Alphas gave identical nods of approval. They hadn't expected anything less.

"Anything or anyone in particular you need to see?" Ilsa's gaze darkened several shades. "Anything in particular you should actually warn me about, before we step out there?" she gave a jerk of her head towards their front yard, where the Pareyas had begun to cast a transportation portal.

"I have two Circles I need to check in on," Delani mused. "We need to be sure of their stance in relation to now. Nothing else apart from that. Ithy?"

"I need to speak to the Orsenos and the Kadels."

"The Kadels? Whatever for?" Delani gave Bahn a light pat, her fussing complete. He turned around to hug her, pressing close. "The Orsenos haven't graced The Hunt yet. There's been no announcement. Ilsa?"

Bhindi scowled. "I am not dealing with them."

"They're friends and they mean well," Ithycar countered. "Don't tell me you're still upset over-"

"I'm not upset over anything!"

Ilsa stifled a laugh. "You're upset," she said, lightly. "But now's not the time, alright?"

Bhindi's scowl grew deeper. "Alonso is a-"

"Is the same kind of Submissive as you," Ithycar said, cheerfully. "He walks right into trouble, before he'll ever dream of acknowledging that perhaps, he could have used some help in the first place."

Bahn winced. "We're not that bad, Ithy."

"Of course not," Delani soothed. "You're perfect." She kissed his forehead. He smiled, relaxing.

"We're nowhere near that bad," Bhindi huffed. She flounced away from Ithycar, expertly dodging the hand that meant to grab for her.

Ilsa rolled her eyes, moving forward, to pull Bhindi close with an arm around her shoulders, surprised when it was allowed. "Right. You're worse. I've got wrinkles from the stress."

"I refuse to comment on something so ridiculous," Bhindi sniffed, even as she leaned into Ilsa's one-armed embrace. "Are we ready yet?"

"That depends," Ilsa's gaze softened. "Have both of you relaxed enough?"

The Twins' exchanged a look. Identical smiles sharpened in turn.

Bahn pulled away from Delani to join Bhindi and Ilsa. "We're ready," he hummed, eyes flashing. "So very ready."

Ilsa's own lazy grin, showed a hint of fang. "Then shall we?"
"Comfortable?" Delani asked, setting the large tote of snacks and refreshments on the row of seats in the narrow viewing box. They'd opted to forgo their usual box, choosing one a bit higher up and further away from the public view.

"Casting," Ithycar warned, throwing his magic out to fill the space. "Bahn? Bhindi?"

The Twins rose as one, their hands intertwined. They moved to stand in the centre of the box, before turning to face each other. Clasped hands were raised and both of them whispered the spell for a small bead of blood to appear.

Their hands flexed together, minor discomfort as blood was extracted without a visible wound. Heads bowed, they murmured softly in Elvish, an ancient spell from Elven Royalty, to make any room sealed and safe for conversations of any kind.

"It's done," Delani murmured, when she felt the spell take. It was still breath-taking to watch them cast it, even after so many years. The faint glow of the Elven magic, kept them glowing for several minutes longer, lending a wispy, dream-like feel to both Submissives'.

"…and sealed," Ithycar added, a beat later. He dropped Ilsa's hand, where both of them had cast a secondary set of protections over the entire viewing box. "Good enough?"

Bhindi gave a short, stiff nod.

"Alright then," Delani took a seat, waving them in. "We can't linger here, so let's make the most of it, eh?"

Bahn sighed. "Something salty," he mumbled, reaching out to snag Ilsa's hand, towing her towards the seat he wanted. "Sit." He nudged her.

Her lips twitched, but she sat, settling herself carefully. He didn't climb into her lap—it would hinder her movement in case of an emergency, but he wanted her close—instinctively, if nothing else.

Bhindi tossed a packet of salted vegetable crisps over.

Content, Bahn snuggled up to her side, crunching on the salty treat.

Silence spread out in their viewing box, even as cheers and whistles sounded outside. The Hunt was already in full swing and the morning's entertainment had begun.

Ilsa waited until he'd worked his way through half of the bag, before she spoke. "Bahn, loveling?"

"Light of my life?" he quipped.

She ate the crispy strip in his hand, allowing him a pause to swallow properly. "What was it?"

He hesitated. Their Bonded, shifted closer, pressing together. Bahn leaned into her, hands twisting in the edge of his robe. "…it wasn't a miscalculation."

"…I know."

"We've been out of everything for so long and they won't leave us alone-!" He stopped, at Bhindi's worried look. "They keep—Kandra wasn't enough for them. They won't even—" his voice
hardened. "They wanted Theo too and Harry. I can't do that."

"Theo?" Ithycar bristled. "And Harry? He's barely even set foot in the realm. What would they even want-?"

"They have enough people—unsettled ranks. They want more power, but they don't want to earn it. They're seeking the kinds of control that would give them what they want, without the work."

Bahn's hands clenched into fists. He didn't protest, when Ilsa rescued the bag of crisps and set it aside, one arm protectively curled around him.

"Why us?" Bhindi wanted to know. "Why—why Theo?"

"Because he's Ilsa's." Bahn twitched. "And Ilsa is ours."

A grim look settled on both Alpha's faces.

"Which means if you wanted a bargaining point, you could start there and work your way in-"

"That's why Kandra-?" Bhindi gasped, a hand to her mouth. "Bahn!"

"Because she's Bu and Salani's. The first child from our merged Circles. We would do anything for her. For them. Especially because of who she was."

"We don't favour them," Ilsa began, but her voice cracked.

Kandra had once been a bright, shining light of a girl. The one they all loved to dote on, because she earnestly radiated every single touch of kindness given to her. A true gift of a child from the two gentlest Pareya between their Circles.

"We don't," Bahn said, half-laughing. "But we are all a bit partial to the ones that simply need a bit more love. More hugs. More laughter. More—soul."

"To strike at the heart of a Circle, you need the most vulnerable connection with the largest potential impact." Ithycar murmured. "So Kandra…" his body quivered with suppressed rage. News had reached him much too late for any sort of proper retribution and though he'd tried—long distance—it hadn't amounted to much.

"Ilsa," Delani breathed. "They waited and then tried again-!"

"All those times—with Theo?" Ithycar said. Horror reflected plainly in his face. Theo had been far too quiet a child, and upon arriving in Nevarah, had a bad habit of wandering off to hide in small spaces by himself. It had taken some figuring to discover that something was deliberately stalking him and their little Theo—in an attempt to keep them safe—had tried to lead it away, even though it had nearly ended him twice.

"We never found out who was behind that," Delani said, half-to herself. "But then that Doursen kid—"

"Mmm. He took a liking to Theo and things stopped—until I saw what a little brat he was being," Bhindi hissed. "And then we had to file a restraining order. His whole—Circle—is just—?"

"Something like that," Bahn explained. "They've kept at it. Subtle jabs in social functions. Harassing our Pareya. Keeping their filthy paws as clean as the law will let them. We have nothing to pin on them."
"Had." Bhindi correctly, absently. Her eyes had darkened from pale silver to near grey. "We have
them now."

"Definitely," Bahn smirked. "Have them for attacking a pregnant submissive, have them for
ordering Ilsa's wing's carved-"

Ilsa started, faintly.

He pinched her arm. "Don't. "You were very proud of your wings and I was pleased for you."

Ilsa looked away, face warming. "….it was…necessary."

"You are far too selfless," Bahn scolded, faintly. He nuzzled her jaw. "I don't pretend to know the
reasons why you went ahead with it anyway, but I will say that there were other options in this
situation. The things—what I've heard—you were chosen, because they knew you would not
refuse. Not because there were no other options."

Ithycar rumbled, unhappily. Delani's eyes flickered closer to black.

"Then that would take out—" Bahn ticked them off on his fingers. "The connection between our
Circles, the link to our ACE and-
"

Ilsa whined.

Both Alphas brightened. Ithycar patted her shoulder. Delani sent a small bubble of calm through
their shared bonds. Both gestures had the effect of turning Ilsa several shades of red.

The Twins snickered.

"An unhappy ACE isn't looking out for their Circle, at least, not on the level they should be, but—
they didn't count on you, loveling. Your sense of duty—who you are—would never let you shirk
something this important. Your dynamic is well ingrained. So that didn't work. They had to try
other means. Divide and conquer."

Ithycar drooped. "I thought it was too—clean."

"Indeed." Bhindi inspected her fingernails. "That's why I expected you sooner. I thought you'd fix
it from that angle, not the one you chased around until just now."

"Then Theo came back—with Harry." Ilsa said, slowly. "And I came with him—and we closed
ranks. Sort of."

"Mnhm," Bahn hummed. "And during the Hunt as well. There's always the possibility that we
could grow stronger or even court a new Bonded—we're not—" he added, hastily at both Ithycar
and Delani's combined expressions. "But, there's the option that we could."

"And that would pose a threat," Ilsa finished. "But why would this even—oh." Her shoulders
slumped.

The Twins exchanged glances.

"Elven royalty is still royalty," Bhindi said, softly. "We might have temporarily renounced that,
while we live in Nevarah, but off-realm…?"

"Off-realm, you're both still-"
"Indeed. Which means a tremendous amount of power and the influence that comes with it." Bahn rubbed his face. "Do you remember the conversations we had with all of the Royals?"

"...yes. They were willing, but unsettled, until we claimed titles as Elven Ambassadors."

"Socially, it's easier that way. Clearer lines between who and what. We know they don't treat us like ambassadors. They treat us as if we are royalty, it's simply that we do not exercise our powers within their realm." Bahn wrinkled his nose.

"Out of courtesy," Bhindi sniffed. "Courtesy that we do not have to extend."

"Ah—no scheming against Nevarean Royals," Ithycar said, quickly. "That's a headache I don't want to deal with right now. Save it for later. Stick to the—regular scheming."

The Twins pouted in answer.

"But why now?" Delani asked. "After all this time? We've lived here for decades. Peaceably, I might add—for the most part."

"You know it's because of that." Ithycar said, quietly. He started, faintly, when Bhindi climbed into his lap, her worried expression saying more than her fluttering hands, about his face. "I'm alright," he assured her. "It's just—the prophecy is a significant milestone here. It is set in stone. It cannot be rescheduled or unravelled. So the preparations in place, must be set in motion. The whole—everything, shrouded in secrecy and taboo as it is," his gaze flickered to Ilsa. "The Immortals must be revived."

Her hands clenched, briefly.

"One for you," Ithycar nodded to Ilsa. "One for me. Both awake."

She met his stare, steadily.

"Perhaps it was a test to see if we would give in to our Elven instincts to leave them and run, but—"

"But the magic in our veins is our birth right," Bhindi said, darkly. "It isn't something you steal or trade for. There is no currency that could purchase this—" light danced in the palm of her hand. Her eyes glowed bright.

"But if they can't have it, then of course, they'd try to control it, wouldn't they?" Bahn said, lightly. "So—let me ask it this way. What is it, you think we should do?"

Ilsa drew him closer, pressing her face to his, inhaling his scent. She had a few ideas, but most of them were simply knee-jerk reactions from pure instinct. This situation required more finesse. More planning. More deliberation. Or simply following whatever their Alphas decided on. She trusted them, after all. Trusted them to know how extract a pound of flesh for wrongs done to the innocent.

"Destroy them," Delani said, calmly. She looked to Ithycar. "Objections?"

His smile curled up, a hint of fang showing. "Absolute destruction."
A/N: This Chapter has a lot packed into it. I suggest you read it slowly. :P VERY slowly. There were a lot of moving parts to shuffle for this and I hope it came together in a fun way for everyone to read! :) How did you like Riven? I had such fun writing him and of course more of our precious Harry and Ethan and Theo and Charlie--I hope it was just as much fun to read as it was to write.

My health was not good the past few months, hence a lot of the delay from my initial estimate of March/April to get this out, but I'm doing a bit better now and working on taking better care of myself. The Snippet was not written until this morning, so apologies for any roughness, but I wanted to show what the Deveraines were up to, as we're going to start see some shuffling of power/dragels in the upcoming chapters.

Also, if you read the Snape Circle fic--I've gotten about three new chapters up over there. Thank you for your patience! Thank you for your support! I love you guys!!

~Scion

As always, updates for this FIC are in the TBDH Forum. (link my bio!) and on my tumblr page!

Many, many thanks to brissygirl who always does a fabulous job of beta-ing these monster chapters. She is an absolute darling! (and worked really, really hard on this chapter!!)

STATE OF CHARACTERS:

Harry, Ethan, Theo, Charlie-(with each other, in Prince Raspen's Royal Quarters)

Cunninghams and Hadrian, (On earth, and dispersing to take care of business. Half with Lord Cunningham, Half with Mariana to track down the beacon from Ch 103)

Snape Circle (in a new apartment, courtesy of Terius)

Deveraine Circle members-(Alphas/Subs and Ilsa at the Hunt, All others in the Deveraine Main House)

George (with Jun and the Evansons)
Stand Beside Me In The Darkness

Chapter Summary

In which Death is not happy, Riven is not happy, Ethan is useful, Mariana is the warpath and Harry gets a hug.

OR...

Stuff happens as dramatically as possible, with a heavy dose of feels sprinkled in.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

!TRIGGERS FOR: mentions of death/suicide/gore/implied torture! (basically, there is Death, Mariana and Alec involved)

RECAP: Harry blacks out from the interference of Hadrian raising the Death Seal on Earth. This forces Riven Cairothe to join in helping to keep Harry alive, and from being pulled through the realms and back through time. Lord Cunningham and Mariana, split their Circle in half, to continue on their mission. Mariana separates to chase down the ones responsible for casting the Beacon on Harry's house, while Lord Cunningham discovers the awful truth that Hadrian is a grim reaper! Death is not happy, forcing Tavit, The Necromancer, to join the chaos in bargaining for the life of Maurice Elswood. Keep reading more fun and plenty of drama! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEVARAH : PRINCE RASPEN'S QUARTERS : HARRY AND CO + RIVEN, PRINCE RASPEN. : Day Four

Harry lay on the ground, with neither pillow nor blanket, his arms crossed over his chest and the scaled necklace hovering overhead, shimmering ever so faintly. The gleaming Earthstone, a token from his first time using Theo's element, was now, finally of use. It glowed brilliantly, spinning in a lazy circle at Riven's bidding.

Standing, grimly, within reach and yet, not close enough, Theo watched. He silently channelled every shred of calmness he could muster, through their shared bonds. Charlie stood beside him, solemnly, both of them poised to move at a moment's notice.
Riven's outstretched hands, one over Harry's heart—and the necklace—and the other, over his stomach, the centre of Harry's magical core. His eyes continued to burn with brilliant violet fire that demanded the tense silence that filled the room. Magic crackled and snapped, visible in some instances and invisible in others.

It gathered, pooling in the cracks of time and space, pulling away in slivers to twine around the one who had called them. Riven's hands moved, slowly, robotically, almost, as if he were not quite in control of his own movements. One hand extracted the glowing earth stone from Harry's necklace, while the other began radiate a soft glow, that formed into a steady, solid beam of light.

From the palm of his hand, to Harry's stomach, the beam of energy began to fill Harry with light, from head to toe. The air in the room lightened as the pure magic itself, came into bloom.

"For all that he has been and all that he is, great realm, we ask of you to grant him sanctuary. He is one of your own lost children and wanders, between the worlds, not knowing where he may step without remorse." Riven intoned. "I ask on his behalf—grant him sanctuary. Give him shelter."

The room seemed to quiver.

Time breathed.

The air lightened, a flicker of warmth bleeding into it.

Riven's shoulders relaxed. His breathing matched Harry's. His head bowed. The request had been acknowledged, now it simply needed to be accepted.

"I ask you, Great Realm, to keep him and comfort him. Cradle him in the unending flow of your existence and guard him from the unseen forces that would end his life too soon."

The air warmed even more.

Charlie shifted, nervously. His hair burst into flame, with a flicker of panic. Magic rose and sang within his veins, with a strength he hadn't felt in days. He wished Ebony was there. The fire coursing through him felt as if it would devour him alive, if he so much as breathed funny.

Theo leaned into him, gently. A steady calming presence, that kept the flames from continuing down to emerge from his not-quite-shaking hands. The calmness bled through their shared bonds, with Theo pressing a little harder to make sure the intent behind it, registered.

"Theo, I didn't-" Charlie began, even as he found himself drawing closer.

"Magic," Theo murmured, as softly as he dared. He pressed even harder into Charlie's side. "Don't fight it."

Whatever Riven was doing—whoever he conversed with—that spirit had deigned to answer by way of filling the room with an unmistakable aura of love.

Charlie swallowed. His eyes prickled with tears, as if his body could no longer contain the emotions that welled up inside of him, struggling to claw their way out of his his throat. He started when Theo's warm, solid hand, threaded through his own lax one.

There was strength there and support. It was offered, given freely.

He took it.
Theo's own worry seemed to recede for a moment then. He stared straight ahead, watching as Prince Raspen maintained the protective shield on the room.

Royal magic seemed to be holding well, though it was unnerving to see Prince Raspen's corporeal form fluxing in and out. He was not quite fully there, evidenced by the nearly transparent arms and legs, from where he stood in the far corner of the room.

"...we offer you this token—take it as his anchor..." Riven whispered. He brought his hands together, cupping the Earthstone in offering. "And keep him as yours!"

Light flared to blinding, whiting out the room with a powerful surge of energy.

The walls rattled. The room shook. Everything groaned.

And then it stopped, settled.

When he could see again, Charlie didn't even try to stop the tears that flowed down his cheeks. He didn't think he could explain the experience with words—they were too paltry a medium to express what he'd felt.

Theo squeezed his hand, gently—but a slight quiver ran through him. The second-hand magical feedback was illuminating at best and deeply revealing at the worst. He felt as if he witnessed something private and sacred, but had no words or strength of soul to process it.

Head bowed, shoulders relaxed, Riven's eyes fell shut as he reached out to dance along the edge of the mind meld once more. The proof of the anchoring was now visible for everyone to see.

Delicate golden scrolls decorated Harry's forehead and limbs, glowing through his clothes with a pure light. They faded away, disappearing into his skin, as soon as they'd activated.

"Riven-!" Prince Raspen said, hoarsely. The light in the room began to stutter and flicker. "I cannot hold this for much longer-!

"It is complete," Riven ground out, breaking the meld. He heaved forward, sucking in several unburdened breaths. Perspiration dotted his flushed forehead. "Let it fall, Raspen. Let it fall. He is no longer—a pawn. Nevarah has accepted his claim."

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Death : Earth : Unmerged Timelines : (Tavit and Niko)

Death loomed overhead, darkness dripping from every corner of the void that had swallowed the sky. The blackness twisted into a murky violet hue, somehow lighter and darker than the night itself—all at the same time. The houses of Privet Drive remained visible and seemingly intact, while the Death Seal itself, continued to glow, the last layer nearly unravelled entirely.

Realmshift... Tavit thought, darkly. He only ever saw that colour overhead, when the current reality was warped beyond individual control. It meant a fifty-fifty chance of operating on earth, in his mind, in Death's realm, someone else's mind or Immortal's forbid—Niko's mind. These kinds of complications made his head hurt, before he even bothered to think too deeply of it.

Now that he considered it, in line with Death's most recent question, Tavit was fairly certain he wasn't being paid enough for this.

To anger Death was beyond foolish and the warning signs for treading upon thin ground, were few
and far in between. It was so much worse than what he'd originally anticipated. Few lived to take
note of such things after all.

Very few, if history was to be known.

But this wasn't the first time he'd bargained for souls not his own.

And it wasn't the first time Riven had asked a favour either.

Tavit drew a shallow breath and willed himself to remain as calm as he dared. He gripped his staff
tightly in one hand, silently checking the reserves of his magic. They were there, accessible, should
he need to draw on them, but the chances of successfully casting anything useful was practically
nil.

And it was hard to breathe again.

"I have no business with Harry James Potter," Tavit choked out. "I have only come for the shadow
of Maurice Elswood."

"You lie!"

"I do not." Tavit said, as calmly as he dared.

"Yes—yes—you lie!" Death snarled. Her bony hand reached out, a tendril of life slipping between
her fingers as she pulled enough to make him wobble.

"Not to you, dark lady, never to you," Tavit rasped. He shuddered as the tendril of life left his body
and floated over to Death's bony hand.

"Never?"

"Never to you," he repeated.

"Then why would you come for this one?" Death thrust Maurice's soul beneath Tavit's nose. "You
share no connection to him—I know you do not. I know everything of you. You have no secrets."

Tavit shuddered.

"I know your every truth—I know your every lie. So tell me, child of darkness—who is this
creature, to you? Do you not know he has cast this seal to save himself?"

"To save himself?" Tavit echoed, unwillingly. He hadn't the time to examine the seal, exactly.
Riven had called and so he'd come. That was all there was to it. That was what was between them,
after all. There were few things that could last through time and space. The ability to call a
Necromancer on demand, was on par with the ability to dismantle a killing spell, seconds before
impact.

This wasn't the first time he'd suffered for one of Riven's rescue projects. Though he'd just as soon
have it be the last, there were rules to be followed and even though he hadn't seen anything out of
the ordinary about the seal itself—at least not at first glance—he was starting to think a second
look might be worth it.

He'd just gone off of the initial reading from the precarious situation that he'd 'ported into. The
initial glimpse hadn't revealed anything amiss.

Niko's arms tightened around his waist. Tavit swallowed hard. If Death was right—and he knew
her to be so—then this would be a high price to pay. Thinking of it, made his teeth ache.

Death hissed. "To save himself!" She clenched the sputtering, feeble soul in her skeletal hand. "He cast it to prevent the harvest of yet another."

Tavit's brow furrowed together. That didn't make any sense at all. That was the whole point of a Death Seal. To swap the current life for another—basically, trading time. Countless Gheyos in Nevarah used such seals all the time.

It was a means of satisfying wounded pride and bruised egos—along with easing painful conversations between unsettling encounters. If dying would solve a problem—but also cause a similar problem—then a Death Seal was commonly employed to resolve the issue.

"...I do not understand."

"Then bring me the other soul."

"What?"

"If you wish for Maurice Elswood—then bring me the one who caused this. Bring me Harry James Potter."

Niko's arms tightened significantly, enough to draw a slight sideways glance at her.

Tavit trembled. He'd never seen her that shade of pale before, with such thin, trembling lips—as if she didn't dare think about some horrible secret lurking in the back of her mind. A faint memory teased in the back of his mind, as to the last scolding he'd given her, when she'd wandered off to cause trouble, while he'd been otherwise occupied.

She'd always had a knack for being in the wrong place at the right time. This seemed like one of those times. How troublesome. He trusted her reactions and judgements—they were usually quite sound—but caught between her instincts and Death's demands was not a safe place to be.

Death gave a wheezing, rattling breath.

It made his bones ache. He licked his lips, searching for words that would not come easily. "...I cannot bargain for a life that has not been given to me."

"And this one was?" Death twirled Maurice's soul upon her pointed fingertips. "How arrogant of you to claim ownership."

"...I claim nothing. It is the only reason I have come here. I would not seek you otherwise, for such trivial matters."

"Trivial, you say—and yet, you still trouble me." Death said. "Very well then, Shall I take them both? That would solve this problem quite nicely, I think."

"Both? No—!" The protest tumbled from his lips before he could help himself.

Death laughed, softly. A dull, grating sound. Her free hand stretched out, gently tipping Tavit's horrified face to meet her own hooded face. Darkened eyes glittered. "No? And who are you to presume that your words mean anything to me?"

"Please—not Maurice. I can—I will—"

"You will what?" Death squeezed Maurice's soul, until it quivered in her palm. "You have nothing
else to bargain with—unless…” Her hollowed gaze settled on Niko's frightened form.

Niko shrank further behind him, pressing up against his back, her trembling fingers digging into his stomach. She hid her face in the roughness of his shirt, even as her lips moved to whisper the starting incantation of an inter-realm shield.

Bless her, Tavit thought, darkly. At least one of them had their heads on straight there…

He pressed his lips together as the horrifying realization dawned from Death's declaration. He'd wondered what kind of connection was between the two souls, but there was only one reason for Death to claim both. Intertwined souls. Either through some wicked twist of fate or something stupid, like a SoulBond—two souls could be moulded together and fused into one shared existence.

And that was why Riven had called for him. Tavit resisted the urge to scream in frustration.

Damn Realmwalkers.

Riven owed him so much for this. No one had told him anything about intertwined souls. It was far too late to back out of anything now. There were rules for things like this. Regulations to keep stupid things from happening—stupid things like dying from pointless accidents.

"…you have nothing to bargain with," Death repeated, the gleam grew stronger in her hollow eyes. "Nothing whatsoever."

Tavit croaked, feeling the moisture leave the air. He could already feel the price being sucked from him even as he struggled to think of what assets remained within in his possession. To come to bargain with nothing—it was not the first time—but he had sworn it would be the last.

His hand skittered lightly over Niko's trembling ones locked around his waist. He'd promised her that she would forever be his and therefore, no longer Death's. He'd made a promise that only he could keep.

This was merely an obstacle.

A temporary obstacle.

He could not concede defeat here. Would not.

"What will you do now, child of darkness?" Death smirked.

"…I have only come for Maurice." Tavit said, lowly. His free hand clenched. They'd have to do this the hard way, after all. "That is all I have come for."

"And yet, you cannot have him—for his soul is joined to this one and I would have you remedy this."

Tavit glanced away. He could hear the taunt beneath the words. The unspoken challenge. He took the dare. "…How?"

Death tipped her great head to the side, rolling Maurice's soul between her fingers, as if it were a toy. "Then let us make a deal."

"What kind of a deal?"

"I have what you want. You have—the ability to give me what I want."
"Oh?"

"I want him," Death groaned. "I want what has been denied to me—I want Harry James Potter. Do you understand this?"

Tavit shrugged. It was too early to answer.

"Bring it to me."

Niko flinched.

"Bring you…?" Tavit prompted.

"Bring me the soul of Harry James Potter. In exchange, I will return Maurice Elswood."

"…why not claim him now and give me what I have paid for?"

"You assume too much of yourself."

"…as do you. Surely you could take back what is already yours?" Tavit heard himself say, before he could check the words. Given the state of the Death Seal upon his arrival and the Reapers he'd interrupted; it should have been easier for Death to intervene than him.

Death fixed him with a look that could melt bones. "If such things were done so easily, do you not think I would have him already by my side? I want them both. I want the one with his precious, untainted light. I want the one with his hopeless, desperation. I want them both."

"…then why me?" He threw back.

Death laughed. "You would have me cross lines that you, yourself, Necromancer, would not cross and yet—" one bony hand reached out, a thin, razor-sharp claw slicing down his cheek from ear to chin. "I want him. The more he struggles so beautifully—the more I know he must be mine."

Like fire, burning its way through him, the wound began to carve itself deeper, even as Tavit made himself smile through the pain.

Death exhaled. The violet sky trembled. "Just like you. I cannot have you, but I can have all that you offer me. I cannot take him—yet. But you can—and you will."

Tavit willed his mouth to open, for words to emerge. He needed to say something, to do something—to protest—anything, but nothing came out. He choked again, as the air grew thin and the pressure around his throat increased.

Death's empty gaze roved to Niko, who shrank even further behind Tavit. "I will not ask you for what you would not give," she taunted, for Niko would have been a welcome sacrifice, but one that Tavit would never offer. "Save Maurice, if you are so inclined, but Harry will be mine. You do not know him—so what does it matter? Save the one you have come for…"

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**HARRY POTTER, HIS MINDSCAPE : BODY IN NEVARAH**

Harry floated in the darkness of his mind, wondering if Riven would return. No matter what he'd said, as far as Harry was concerned, there was little point in being trapped in his own head, when there was the slightest inkling that he could be useful, if he was up and functioning.
Strangely, the darkness was comforting. It cradled him gently, as if he were something precious to be adored and protected.

In fact, the more he thought about it, the more it did feel that way. As if there was someone wrapped around him both soul and magic. He'd felt something slither along the sides of his face and his head, before it had sunk deep into him.

There was no actual distinction beyond the fact that it simply felt as if he now belonged. Tracing wondering fingers along the edges of his scalp, didn't produce any useful results.

He couldn't see if something had changed. He could only feel.

And it felt good.

Harry yawned, stretching into the darkness and marvelling at how free everything felt. He couldn't see anything, except for his own body. There were no lights and also, no limits.

He couldn't see to the end or the edge of wherever his mind was—and the lack of boundaries was singularly freeing. It was as if he'd stumbled into every possibility known to his existence.

And then a spot of light seemed to form somewhere off in the distance.

Another yawn escaped. Harry rolled his neck to the side, but began to shuffle towards the pale spot. Maybe it was Riven again.

Odd dragel that he was, Harry hadn't been able to mask his admiration for the high-scale spellwork he'd seen.

He'd never witnessed such a thing before.

Even during the Triwizard Tournament, or Dumbledore's occasional displays at Hogwarts and such—it was different.

Riven's calm, collected air had only emphasized the fact that his magic, rich, vibrant and dangerous—was well controlled. The display, though it hadn't been meant that way, had felt almost oddly seductive. Harry had found himself drawn to the shimmering energy and contradictory Riven.

Gates to the future, past or whatever, he didn't quite care. It was interesting in theory, but watching it—to see something of that calibre and depth, had sparked a curiosity he hadn't expected. Beautiful to look at and intriguing to watch it settle into form.

It made him think of when he'd first invoked Theo's password and the handful of instances from then, where he'd spoken words to give form to the feelings of his magic coursing through him.

As it had reawakened and made its presence known, he'd learned that using his wand, though functional, had left him longing to be able to cast the way that Theo did.

Even Ethan.

With their hands and thoughts. No wands.

As if directing their magic was nothing more than afterthought.

"Like breathing…" Harry muttered to himself. He could almost swear that the pale spot of light was somehow moving further away from him and that prompted enough irritation for faster action.
He broke into a light sprint, angling towards the brightness only to find that he was much closer than he'd anticipated.

Slivers of light poured into his mindscape.

Harry skidded to a stop at the edge of a gaping hole. He could make out a pit so deep that the dark seemed to yawn up at him. A circle wide enough that he couldn't make out how to move around it, even though he could see the actual edges.

A dark, murky purple seemed to paint the edges of the circular pit, dripping down into the unfathomable nothingness.

Yet, the more he squinted at the odd, glowing ball of purple hovering just over the middle, the more it began to take shape.

In fact, now it looked as if there was a ball—no, wait—a person.

Harry stared. A slight chill washed over him.

It was definitely a person.

Someone—all curled up.

In chains.

The darkness seemed to crackle and spark, showing Harry that the chains were not static, as he had first thought—but illuminated by a twisting, choking energy, that seemed to contort the chained figure even more.


The emotions tangled up inside of him, followed by a deep, immense sadness. Harry choked, as the feelings overtook him. He could only watch the figure twist and jerk according to the tightening of the chains.

The burning ache in his arms and throat, grew worse as he watched. As if he were somehow a part of the tragedy playing out before him. He didn't want to think of the pain it had to cause, even as the sheer depth of sorrowful emotion overtook him.

His thoughts smoothed out into a single realization.

This was someone who had given up all hope.

Oh.

So that's why it hurt.

Hands clenched at his sides, Harry inched closer to the edge of the pit. He peered down into the gaping void and then back up at the person floating over it. This was his mind—so surely the same laws of reality didn't actually exist there, he mused.

So how to help?

It took some effort to lift a hand and reach out—trying to see how far away the figure actually was. Very far, actually.
Harry frowned. There wasn't much to go on at all. He'd never seen this person before—at least, not that he could recall.

"Hello? Hello! Can you hear me? Please—answer me!"

The chain grew tighter, slowly drawing the figure deeper into the blackened void.

Panic exploded. Harry scrambled as close to the edge as he could manage, flexing his fingers, carefully. He couldn't transfigure something—or summon something to his aid—but there was still one other option.

Wings. Wings. Wings. Come out now...I need you...

A familiar twist and shift. Sharp, clear pains that vanished almost as soon as they registered. Harry's wings burst out with a wet sound, mixed with the ripped fabric of his shirt.

Ah. That was troublesome.

He wondered why it was harder to direct his wings, even as the left one finally curved around to his front, so he could examine it. He had better control of his wings than this, didn't he?

The right wing curved after a bit more concentration. Harry inspected what he could, with careful, skimming fingers. There were a few bloody bits here and there, along with several patches of dull scales.

Not good, he thought, annoyed. Quinn had mentioned something about better wing care, but he'd yet to give it any actual attention. In between of attending the Hunt, meeting too many news faces and trying not to read too much into each heart-wrenching ache in his chest, there'd simply been no time.

Harry sighed. Dull scales though—that meant he wasn't taking care of them. He made a mental note to mention it to Ethan at some point. Given that Ethan seemed to have more experience with his wings, than Theo or Charlie, Harry was sure that he'd think of something.

The chains rattled again, drawing his attention. Harry squinted back to the void and the figure dropping several feet lower into the blackness.

He gritted his teeth. His wings were in lousy condition and he'd never even flown with them—but still, perhaps they'd hold up. Maybe.

They twitched and shuddered, as he tried to coax them to move properly. Hadn't Quinn said he had an affinity for Air? Surely that would help?

The chains began to glow and grow, lavender-white links ripping up from the earthen ground.

Harry wobbled on the edge of the pit—and fell in.

He flailed in the darkness, unable to keep from screeching at the icy cold hands that seemed to paw at him. This darkness was dangerous!

His agitated screech echoed weirdly in the pit.

A single lavender chain shot up, wrapping around his ankle and drawing him up short. Harry came to an abrupt stop with a muffled yelp, as his left wing smacked into his face.
"Ow-" he muttered, twisting and turning, before he realized his predicament. Hanging upside
down, dangling from his right ankle, he swayed back and forth.

And then the chain began to move.

It slowly drew him up, back to the surface. Back to where the violet sky seemed to beckon.

Closer, also, to the chain figure that hovered overhead.

Ah. So he'd fallen that far.

Harry continued to sway back and forth, as the chain moved further up him—from his ankle to his
knee, as if trying to get a better grip. He was relieved to have been saved—until he realized that the
chain meant to throw him back to the edge of the pit.

To the safety of the surrounding ground.

"No—wait, please!" His cry made the chain shudder. "Please—why—he—I can't."

The chain threw him.

Harry braced for the impact and caught himself with less damage to his wings, than he'd expected.
That was good. He stood tall, shaking himself off as best as he could.

Another shudder rippled through him. The icy hands that had clutched at his skin, made everything
hurt and burn.

He glanced down to see darkened handprints littering his wrists and arms.

No.

No, no, no!

Not this time.

Always trying to help and never quite being good enough?

What a joke.

*Magic, magic, magic—something—it's there—I can feel it—*

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and tried. He felt his wings shudder and vanish, disappearing back
inside of him. His spirit lifted and twisted.

He tried to clear his mind. To make everything as empty as possible. To believe that wherever he
was—inside of his head or in some other weird realm—that he could do it. That he could reach out.

That someone would take that hand.

Warmth bubbled up inside of him.

The air shifted.

A gentle wind blew the chill away.

Chains rattled.
When the choked gasp escaped his throat, Harry's eyes popped open. He found himself staring out into the void, both hands outstretched.

Soft green tendrils of energy spiralled out from his hands—vines—that spanned the yawning chasm before him, that shot clearly across the blackness and directly to the thing that he wanted.

Yes.

He could do this.

The chained figure was now closer—the magical vines twining carefully about the chains—and slowly pulling them closer to the edge, to Harry.

His arms shook with the effort, but the magic didn't waver. The vines trembled, but did not break.

And then, they were there.

To big to hold, but still—so cold—Harry guided the chained figure to the ground. His hands fluttered, uncertainly. The figure—a man—was naked as a babe. The chains cut cruelly into his flesh. Branding pink, red and black. Each mark more damaging than the previous.

But breathing. Shallow, laborious breaths. A lightly muscled chest, heaving with each wheezing inhale and exhale. Hair made bloody by the chains that cut into his scalp. Dried cracked lips with a crooked slant to one side.

And eyes tightly screwed shut.

Harry swallowed. He gently touched the only square of unmarked skin on the man's left shoulder. "...you're alright." His voice broke. "You're alright—I've—I've—you'll be alright. I'll—I'm working on the chains. You'll be alright."

He tugged at one chain, experimentally. It was no surprise to see that it tightened elsewhere, and tangled expertly with the rest of them.

Spells, healing spells of some sort, Harry mused.

The man shivered.

Harry glanced down at his plain shirt and trousers. He stripped the shirt off and tore it down the side, a thin, makeshift blanket. It took a bit of concentration to transfigure the shirt into a serviceable duvet.

It would do for now.

He wrapped it around the man's shoulders and began to trace the chains back from the void. He grasped one thin strand and gave it a good yank. It rattled and pulled back, making as if to drag him to the void.

Panicking, Harry grabbed it with both hands and wrenched them apart.

It gave.

Tearing apart with an unearthly groan, the chain shattered as the links separated.

Harry stared in shock. He hadn't expected that. He cast another glance at the unresponsive man.
And took up the next chain.

Tearing them apart, even as his own hands grew cold, blistered and then bloody—as the freezing metal seared into this hands, biting back in the only way they could.

He held his ground, putting his weight into keeping the chains from dragging either of them back to the gaping void. And it worked.

Except for the last two chains, the biggest ones of all, Harry had succeeded in separating the other strands. Eleven of them in all.

He hurried back to the man's side, carefully pulling the broken chains away. The only reaction was a tremor every now and then, when careful fingers brushed against chilled skin.

Harry tugged the duvet a bit tighter around the shoulders, when he'd cast off the shattered strands of metal. "There's two left," he said, quietly. "I don't know how to break them. I-I tore the other ones off. They were—not hard." His hands shook. He blew softly on them, wondering why his healing was taking so long to take over.

His bloodied palms and stiff fingers were unexpected, but not a problem. Something like this couldn't possibly be easy, after all.

"My name's Harry," he offered, after a bit. "And I don't know who you are or what you're doing here—I—well, we're supposed to be in my head, but you feel too real to be just in my head."

Swollen eyelids cracked open. Sharp, dark eyes glinted up at Harry.

He froze.

The man shuddered, violently. The duvet fell away.

A hiss of pain echoed sharply in Harry's ears.

Rich, dark wings, emerged from the stranger's back. Unfolding with a leathery snap, they spanned a great distance, curving forward to shield both of them.

Black wings, scarred, but healed over to the point that the scars were nearly as dark as the wings themselves. A rich, deep blackness, but tall, arching upward as if to blend in with the strange, violet-blackness overhead.

Harry shut his mouth with an audible click of his fangs. He could only stare as the wounds began to shrink and close, the body rapidly healing. He knew at once, why the final two chains wouldn't come out.

They were anchored to the body—one through the heart, it seemed—and another through the stomach. As if they'd been buried there ages ago and left to fester and destroy.

And yet—the man healed around them as if they were simply not there at all. His eyes, dark and piercing, held Harry's confused gaze with nothing but absolute warmth. The duvet morphed and twisted, becoming a rough pair of shirt and trousers, which moulded onto the man.

He raised two fingers to his lips and reached out with his free hand.

Harry had no time to dodge. The warm palm connected with his forehead, long fingers tangling easily in his messy hair. And magic.
Oh the magic.

It shot straight through him.

Like a breath of pure life.

Spring, summer, joy, peace—all of that, rolled into a single struggling breath—and channelled through his mind. Forcing out all the darkness, all the gloom, all the insecurity, loneliness and desperation.

Leaving behind warmth, hope and so much love.

The emotions grew and swelled to overbearing proportions.

Harry's eyes burned as hot, heavy tears dribbled down his cheeks, unchecked. There were no words for these kinds of feelings. No way to express what it felt like to experience this weight of emotion. 

Whatever oaths belongs to me; I call upon them to undo all that I have done. Spare this child. Spare this life. Grant him whatever happiness he seeks. Return to me. Leave him. Free. All that I ask, make it be. To that which exists in this space between life and death. I implore you—grant me this wish—give him my chance.

The powerful voice echoed in the odd darkness. The sound resonating through Harry's entire body, though he could swear that the man wasn't speaking at all.

Light. So much light.

Brilliant medallions sprang to life, swirling on the ground beneath them. Layered upon each other, one after another. An endless show of beautiful light and vibrant, humming magic.

The seal I have cast in good faith and strength of heart, I revoke. The duty is complete. The price is paid. Return to me. Chains of binding, I release you from the weight of his life.

Harry shuddered. The hairs on his arms stood up. The magic singing through his veins made him giddy. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from his body and he was light—lighter than air.

And still, the man continued to speak.

The seal I have cast from sheer necessity, to protect what was not mine to fully claim—I revoke. The duty is complete. The price is paid. Chains of honour, I release you from the weight of his existence.

The singing magic grew to a loud, buzzing thrum. It made his teeth chatter, as Harry trembled beneath the hand that held his head up and refused to let him hide.

It was like tearing blinders off, so the light would spill in. Fear and worry shrank away, then disappeared altogether.

New feelings, new thoughts, came pouring in to replace them. Memories of Theo, Charlie and even Ethan.

Moments where Theo looked at him, as if he were the universe itself. Moments where Charlie wrapped him in arms so warm and caring, it pressed all of his brokenness back together. And even still, the memory of waking up to see Ethan’s softly smiling face and equally precious morning kiss.

Oh.
Is this what it felt like to simply be loved?

_The seal I have cast from worry for a child not my own, to ease the wealth of experiences that none should suffer alone—I revoke. The duty is complete. The price is paid. Chains of sorrow, I release you from the weight of his emotions._

The last weight fell from his shoulders.

As if a final burden had been released, at long last. Lightness that could not be compared to anything. A deep sense of knowing that gently tainted the memories from moments before.

Understanding that when Theo looked at him, it was with warmth, love and respect. Knowing that Charlie loved deeply and fiercely—and that he was the recipient of such things. Recognizing that Ethan that entrusted him with his heart—his very heart and soul—and trusted him to take good care of both.

Harry's mouth opened in a soundless cry, a hand coming up to his mouth, only to be caught.

Caught.

What a thought.

And then—oh.

Those arms.

Drawing him closer and holding him so gently.

"Harry, Harry, Harry—my Harry." The man whispered, his voice hoarse. The casting had drawn much power from him and it showed. He shook, faintly, in the aftermath.

Even as magic continued to do his bidding. Unravelling each of the three seals in turn. His magic returned to him, lightening every burden that Harry had shouldered on his own.

"Shhh. It's alright. It's alright."

Harry grasped at those scarred shoulders. His hands tangled in the transfigured shirt. He trembled and ached, even as that gentle, long-fingered hand, pressed his face to that safe place.

Soft puffs of warmed breath feathered over his burning hands, easing the pain and possibly healing them, if the fading numbness was to be believed.

Harry wiggled his fingers.

They moved, smoothly.

Just like they were supposed to.

And then, he knew.

Knew exactly who it was.

And why it hurt. And why it was alright. Even if it wasn't real.

Face buried in Maurice's neck, Harry cried.
"Is he still sulking?" Hiram juggled three mugs of chai, as he magically shut the door behind him, with a tip of his head to the protective wards within Surajini's private sitting room. This was where she came to rest and replenish the soul and joy that sang in her magic. Because she was here, he would come—as would Patrick. They were always drawn to her after days like this.

"I wouldn't call it sulking," Patrick said, beckoning him over to where they sat on the floor, half in the house and half outside from the open door of the balcony. Surajini lay with her head in his lap, her thick, dark hair splayed out on the floor. They were simply indulging in each other's presence, offering comfort and soaking up the support given in turn. The day had been trying for all of them.

No one had expected Dyshoka's very public, very dramatic and extremely high-profile courtship in a matter of minutes.

"He's not sulking," Surajini said. "He's just—in a mood. This isn't as if he's upset over something not going his way."

"Perhaps," Patrick allowed. "But he hasn't come out and it's been a few hours now."

"Sulking," Hiram repeated. "He's old enough to know better now. He can't control everything—no one can. Most things are out of the realm of anyone's control. We can only do what we can do and nothing more."

"It's more than that and you both know it," Surajini murmured.

"Chai?" Hiram offered, gazing down at her.

She wrinkled her nose. "Later."

He set her cup aside and handed over the other mug to Patrick. She scooted her feet out of the way and he chose a spot at the other side of the door, where he could brace against the wall, without giving up the indoor shade and the outside breeze.

"...did he talk to you?"

"Very little talking. Lots of sadness." Surajini said, quietly. "I could only hold him and even then, he did not—he would not allow himself that much."

"It's such a change, isn't it?" Patrick said, softly. "When I remember him as he was and now—I don't miss the arrogance—but it's such a—"

"As if you didn't have a healthy dose of it yourself when we first met," Surajini sniffed. "You're lucky I gave you a chance with that attitude. All of that is entirely from you."

Both of her Bonded fixed her with identical looks.

Her face warmed. "Alright, fine. The product of all three of our delightful—temperaments."

Collectively, they shuddered.

"I sincerely hope not," Hiram muttered. "I wouldn't wish that on any of our beloved children, no matter how frustrating they may be."

"Still—it's not the way that he—he's not, it's almost as if he's holding himself back. As if he doesn't
trust himself to go for—what could be. The strength, his own—it's not there."

"He gave it up, as though he couldn't have it or didn't have a right to it," Surajini said. "As if he doesn't deserve it somehow and I don't know why he'd think such a thing but it's hurting him whether he wants to acknowledge it or not-"

"Renouncing his rank was not an easy thing to do," Hiram said, softly. "There are repercussions for such things."

Surajini bit her lip. She would never have anything to say on this detail, for she'd begged him to save her son. In the face of a requested blood price, there had been little room for negotiation, given the nature of their Circle.

Hiram had done the one thing that would grant her request and spare Quinn's life. An option that had felt more like a curse than a blessing to Quinn, who had raged deliriously through the renouncing of his rank and barely survived the rewiring of his body, along with his magic and instincts.

"You gave him every option, Hiram," Patrick said. He sent two steady pulses of calm and adoration through the shared bonds between them. It hadn't been any easy choice and they'd all suffered as Quinn had—for such things were not done lightly nor alone. "He made the choice himself."

Surajini twitched, faintly, when the bubble of warmth touched her. The sad smile that she sent his way, was reflected in the flicker of gentleness that echoed in her bond.

"Still—today must have brought out all the memories he's hidden away." Hiram gazed across the rich garden below them, the private casting grounds that were shared between all occupants of this wing of the house.

At the far end of the garden, there were sliding doors of all colours, nestled between the maze of thickly twined trees, growing tall, offering shelter and privacy with their multi-hued leaves. It was their own private meditation rooms—and incidentally, the safe haven where Quinn had hidden himself away, immediately after their return home.

"Alejandro still holds his grudge," Hiram said. "And as long as he believes Quinn to be the only deciding factor in that, they won't move past it."

"That is about as likely as—"

"Whichever one of them Bonds first, will be the one to give in," Patrick predicted.

"Oho?"

"That's what it would take. Alejandro would be forced to set a higher example. His own principles will not allow him to be so—petty, if you would—when he shoulders the responsibilities of his rank. I think he believes that Quinn does not quite understand the depth of what happened, but—they were always at each other's throats too much to look past that. He doesn't see that perhaps, the only one still suffering, is our Quinn."

"And Quinn?"

"It would be Alejandro," Hiram said, with a shake of his head.

"It could be Quinn."
"The chances of Quinn finding an Intended is as likely as you accepting a Casper."

"...darling, that's not fair."

"I'm not trying to be unfair, I'm simply saying that Quinn, in his own delightful way, would never think that far ahead. Naturally, the one who is open and receptive to a possible future apart from his present circumstances—Alejandro—will be the one to find what they are looking for. Nothing you want ever comes true, unless it is clearly desired."

Surajini smiled, surreptitiously slipping her feet closer to Hiram. "The same as you two?"

"No, he was in a category all by himself," Hiram bit back a smile at Patrick's immediate pout. It was that adorable expression that had changed his initial impression of the man into something more favourable. "An entire category." He teased.

Twin spots of red appeared on Patrick's face, his pale blond hair shimmering in the flickers of sunlight. "That's not fair—you can't both of you gang up on me at the same time-!"

"It's hard not to," Surajini grinned up at him. "You make such adorable faces."

"Adorable?"

"Mmhm. Just like our Dyshoka and her new little Alpha."

"Not that little," Hiram said, half to himself. "I can't believe she was courting a Deveraine this whole time and a Gheyo Alpha at that? I didn't think she had in her. It didn't register until I saw them together, you know."

"She mentioned it, darling."

"I know—but hearing about it and seeing it, are two different things. She only mentioned a name, but for all these years—how did I miss that?"

"She's secretive when she wants to be. I didn't see a reason to pry it out of her when she was so happy."

"Really?"

"Content," Surajini said. "A little calmer than mere happiness. She took a few bits and bobs of time here and there, but mostly, tended to her duties, took care of everything I asked of her and I'd never seen that mark until today. I didn't even know she'd taken formal vows of intention."

"That's our Dyshoka." Patrick said, proudly. "Though I will say, I can't believe it was a soul bond. It would explain why her episodes calmed down."

"Mm. Maybe. I wouldn't write it all off as stabilized magic, but she's still avoiding any specific answers."

"She's had visions?"

"She always has visions. These new ones have simply been more—troubling—than others."

"She saw the courting?"

"Yes."
"…so she was right."

"Patrick?"

"Remember—that year—she had a dream. Cried her eyes out and couldn't make the opening ceremony, because she didn't want to see the people the faces belonged to—her own words, mind you. She didn't want her dream to be real, because of an awful ending."

"…ah," Surajini said, her smile saddened. "I remember. I told her not to worry about it. Quinn told her it was only her imagination and yet—"

"And yet, that would be why Quinn's still meditating." Hiram guessed. "He's always been well-attuned to her."

"Magical feedback?"

"Possibly. We were all close to that soul cry and we've never been able to pinpoint where his Soul Casting abilities come from."

"True." Patrick allowed. "It's definitely not from my side of things, so it has to be from somewhere else."

"Mm. Let's worry about that later. We need to do something for Dy."

"Oh?"

"She's his favourite sister," Surajini hummed. "And if you think I'd miss the chance to celebrate one of our children's bonding, you're sadly mistaken."

Hiram eyed her, warily. He had a vague feeling how this would turn out. Surajini loved to take charge of events, turning the event into ten times what a simple party should have been. "It's a bit of a short notice though?"

"Oh?" Surajini perked a brow. Her eyes flashed, faintly, the golden hue darkening a touch. "I could make it happen—with a little help."

Patrick winced. He was hoping to relax a bit more—not to spend the evenings dashing about for food preparations, decorations and wrangling a guest list. Not that the Pareya wouldn't help, but they were usually enjoying themselves during the Hunt, also allowing for him and Hiram to spend more time with Surajini. "I think he means more along the lines of the others were courting, so we had time to prepare."

"Timing doesn't matter and you both know that. It's the sentiment that counts." Surajini sniffed. "She deserves a formal ceremony of some sort."

"No ceremonies," Hiram held up a hand. "None. What was witnessed and accepted today, was enough. Celebrations—yes. You can do whatever you like there, my princess."

Surajini sniffed. "But Hiram!"

"No," he said, fondly. "You'll overwork yourself again and I won't have it when we haven't even made it through the middle of the Hunt."

"But—Patrick!" she whined, turning pleading eyes to him. "It'd be fun!"

It took some effort to hold strong against her pleading face, but Patrick managed in the end. He
held his smile as best as he could. "I'm sure it would be—but we're still listening to Hiram."

"And none of that," Hiram added, poking her cheek when she pouted in answer. "You'll have plenty
to do with planning a celebration anyway."

Patrick stifled at laugh. "You just want to avoid the entire family descending, don't you?"

Hiram glanced away. ". . .that has nothing to do with this. Besides, this is Dyshoka. She's never
liked it when we've made a fuss over anything for her."

". . .for Quinn though," Surajini said, quietly. "She's always minded, since Quinn. It didn't matter
before that. They always celebrated together."

"Ah." Patrick hummed. His shoulders drooped. "And you would be right on that point."

"She wouldn't want to make him uncomfortable and he wouldn't want to make her worry—so then
you'd have both of them together in the same space, trying to keep a brave front for longer than
they're able to." Hiram said, knowingly. "They'll talk it out with each other when they're ready, but
I don't think it'd hurt to give them some space to come to terms with everything."

". . .I suppose. He spoke to Harry for a little, you know" Surajini said. "I was worried when I didn't
see them for a bit, so I went looking and they were there."

"Together?" Hiram looked surprised. "Then again—he does have that sort of feeling around him."

"The empathy, perhaps?" Patrick suggested. "I don't think he knows how to use it."

"Actively, perhaps not," Surajini agreed. "But subconsciously, probably. He has a good heart, for
one so young."

"A quiet soul," Patrick said. "Almost as if it's afraid to shine as brightly as it could."

"They match, don't they?" Surajini said, thoughtfully.

Hiram straightened up at once. "No matchmaking!" he warned. "Stop it right there. I mean it.
Leave Quinn and Harry to their own time and pace. If there's anything at all to be had there— it
won't help him or Harry, if you two make some big deal out of nothing. Honestly, he's always had
a habit of adopting strays—he'll keep them until they're healed and then help them move on. I
won't have you two meddling where you shouldn't."

"But Hiram-!" both of his Bonded chorused.

He rubbed his forehead. "I mean it—both of you—no creating unnecessary situations or awkward
conversations for the sake of your own personal-"

"We'd never do that-!"

"Since when have we ever-"

"I'm serious!" Hiram said, firmly. "Don't you dare."

"But we wouldn't do-"

"We haven't done anything-"

Golden eyes narrowed faintly, a slight furrow in his brow, as Hiram glance between them. "...you
know, whenever the both of you protest quite so—loudly—it usually means you've been up to something and—"

Surajini hurried to sit up, reaching out for him at once. "We haven't," she said, earnestly. "Honestly, we haven't. It only just occurred to me."

Patrick floated the cup of Chai out of the way and safely over to the corner with his own. He didn't bother to speak up in his own defence. He hadn't actually followed through on anything after all.

By the time he turned back, Hiram had an armful of affectionate Surajini, purring happily as her kisses were returned.

He moved to join them, thinking that this sort of distraction really wasn't any hardship. It'd been a balm on his soul to find that returning after a long trip hadn't left any gaps whatsoever. He'd simply slipped into their dynamic as if he'd never left.

A shimmering bubble popped into existence, a quiet humming announcing the message, before it actually played.

*Request for immediate portal from Ethan Hartwood, seeking any available Master Healers within the Kalzik Clan, on behalf of Harry Potter of the Nott Circle. Situation is cited as an emergency within the guidelines of acceptable mortal peril. Involvement may carry lasting effects. Please accept or deny.*

"...Harry?" Patrick repeated. "You don't think—?" He looked to Surajini.

She frowned. "Why would a Hartwood be calling on his behalf?"

"...trouble magnet," Hiram muttered.

Surajini's muffled exclamation spoke for all of them. She slumped in Hiram's arms, even as Patrick pressed a comforting kiss to her shoulder. Instead of fixing her clothes, she swapped them for her full Healer's garb, spelling her hair up and out of the way.

"Jini?"

"If it's Harry and he's found himself a new bonded, they'd call on his behalf, wouldn't they—?"

Her Bonded smiled, offering acknowledgement and comfort in the same gestures.

She sighed, softly. "The Hartwoods are good people. They will probably take equally good care of him, seals and all."

"Mm. Think of that later. Would you answer it?" Patrick nodded to the bubble.

Hiram rose to his feet, pulling her up with him. They stood together, as she cleared her throat and spoke clearly to the waiting message.

"Master Healer Surajini Kalzik accepting immediate portal. Receive within a five-foot radius," Surajini said.

The portal sprang to life on the floor, illuminating in a swirl of colourful energy accompanied by a rush of powerful magic. From the pale-golden-white strands of magic, the distinguished form of Ethan Hartwood stepped forward.

Surajini silently tucked away her immediate impressions for later thought. He was tall and slender,
a typical mark for a Pareya that was light on his feet. That was a good note.

Ethan bowed deeply at once, his gaze fixed on the floor in a deliberate show of respect. "I apologize for interrupting you during the Hunt—unannounced, even, but on behalf of my Submissive—we are in desperate need of your healing talents."

"You're speaking of Harry Potter, the one bonded to Theodore Gorgens-Nott?"

"...yes."

"What is your relation to them?" Surajini rose, her hands clasped in front. Behind her, Hiram and Patrick had followed her lead and swapped their own dress-wear for the Hunt, in exchange for their Healer's robes.

"...Harry's new Pareya. The bonding will be formally announced tomorrow with the updated listings at the Central Courts," Ethan straightened, meeting her steady green-gold gaze with his own firm one.

The three Healers exchanged a glance. Hiram spoke for all them.

"Has something happened?"

"Something is happening," Ethan corrected, mildly. "He's in a bit of a situation. I was hoping that perhaps, one of you could help-?"

"Depends on the situation," Hiram said. "What exactly are you asking of us?"

Ethan hesitated.

"If you're spending more time thinking of how to word something, when your Submissive's life hangs in the balance..." Patrick prompted, gently. "Might I suggest you rethink your priorities and-?"

"It's a Death Seal," Ethan said, lightly. "He mentioned that you were aware. But certain events have happened and, we think it's unravelling right now—across realms and with a bit of a disjointed timeline, so the effect is a bit delayed. I can't say for certain, but he's out cold. Theo and Charlie are with him—he's alive—but it isn't looking good and-"

"Why in Arielle's name, would he be unravelling that dark thing?" Surajini's face clouded over. "I thought he was waiting to have them removed—Lachman!" She called for her Pareya, tugging strongly on their connected bonds. They would need additional assistance for this.

Patrick stepped in, smoothly. He could already see that Surajini was shifting from her motherly concern to the sharpened senses of her Master Healer rank.

"What happened to start this? A Seal doesn't unravel without some sort of interference on a fairly intimate scale. We have examined the seals and spoke to him at length-?"

"Er—Prince Raspen is involved," Ethan said, hastily. "I really would love to share all the details, but time's important now. The longer we linger here; I don't know that it's good for him."

"As many details as you can manage between now and then, is best," Hiram said, briskly. "Patrick—artefacts. Find them, quickly. Everything for binding to the realm and anything that will heal a shattered soul."
"Shattered?" Surajini snapped around to stare at him. "Hiram! He's not dead yet-!"

"If there's timelines we're dealing with and with his having so many seals on him, we might need one of the Vega's or one of the—"

"Is anyone there—besides the Royals?" Surajini wanted to know. She waved him away from the centre of the room and began to gather magic in her hand for a stable portal.

Lachman still hadn't arrived yet, so she'd tugged on a few other Bonds to draw her Circle to her. If Hiram was right and another Circle of Master Healers were necessary, the Vega's would definitely be her preferred option.

"Prince Raspen is the only Royal at present," Ethan explained. "I don't know if the others are—available."

"The Royals will be enough," Hiram said, as he held out one hand and a puff of silvery smoke deposited a golden caduceus in his palm. Rich, stifling waves of magic radiated from it. "Even one of them will be powerful enough to start and the others can be called, as needed. How big is the room and what sort of situation are we looking at?"

"A sitting room. My Circle, the Prince," Ethan said, slowly. "Is it too crowded?"

"It'll do." Hiram said, stiffly. "Lachman—!" the name was spoken as a scold, as the harried Pareya burst through the door, cradling a half-dozen emergency health kits in his arms.

"Apologies. We were short two." Lachman explained. He hurried over to join them, wincing faintly when Hiram paused long enough to catch him by the ear—a quick reprimand.

"And Ranvir?" Surajini hurried over, accepting one of the kits, even as her magic continued to swell and spill out of her. "We need the others. If we're short stabilizers—Hiram!"

"I've already called them. Whoever is here will come, the rest will have to stay until summoned. We can't wait."

"Found the other half of that one," Patrick announced, reappearing in the doorway, a fat round golden pot cradled in his arms. Strong magic shimmered around him and the pot, as he tucked it under one arm. "Jini—I thought you were bringing yours?"

"I'll summon it when we're there. We haven't got the time—" the rest of her words trailed off as the room's doors burst open and the rest of her available Pareya came spilling into the room.

"The stabilization—" Patrick tried. "It'd be a small room and we've already-"

"I've already begun the 'portal and if he doesn't need it, there'll be too much magic in the air."

Surajini threw her head back, eyes glowing. "The rest of you on standby, please—Lachman, with me, would you? I'll leave you at the perimeter mark. Come at my word."

"Of course," Lachman said, growing serious at once. "Shall I hold wards?"

"Yes." Surajini said.

"No." Patrick countered.

"Patrick!"

"If he raises them on his own and can't hold them without room for additional anchors, it'll put us
in a bad spot."

"...point." Hiram allowed, drawing near. He beckoned to the other Pareya to gather around. "Think of it as a box—and cast accordingly. Decide when we arrive. Patrick?"

Patrick moved to stand closer, still cradling the pot under one arm. "Ready." He leaned into Ranvir, who stood at his left, ready to offer support.

"Ready." Surajini echoed. Lachman stepped closer, a hand on her arm, to offer a contact point for the portal.

Ethan stood to the side, shuffling in closer at a slight nod from Patrick.

The air grew thick and heavy, like swampy, heavy water, slowly turning into solid form. It crackled and groaned, swirling frantically around Surajini as she spoke a Healer's Transportation Circle into being.

In the background, Hiram chanted out the calming and grounding protections that would keep them within Nevarah.

"You said your name was Ethan?" Patrick inquired, lending his own brand of soft, pale blue magic to the mix with Surajini and Hiram.

"Yes." Ethan said. "Ethan Hartwood. I'm the middle son of the fifth heir from the main clan."

"...good for Harry," Patrick allowed. "Congratulations are in order then. Please allow the formalities to be completed later."

"Of course!" Ethan said, quickly. "I would much rather—"

"Ready?" Patrick checked. He silently counted off on his fingers, waiting for the rest of his Bonded to complete their preparations.

"Please hurry!"

"Can you still feel him?" Surajini asked. Magic surged up and stretched to touch the ceiling, encircling all of them within a hollow cone of golden-white light. It hummed and thrummed, growing steadily wilder and stronger as their magic fed into it.

"...yes," Ethan said, softly. "Please, if there is anything-!"

"We are already on our way," Hiram soothed. "That was our answer and I assure you, we will do everything within our power to save him. A life is a life, no matter how you look at it."

Ethan offered a faint smile, even as his shoulders squared. The portal was powerful and mesmerizing—he'd never seen nor witnessed one of this calibre. It made him shiver from the sheer depth of the residual magic swirling around them.

For one awful moment, he wondered exactly what kind of a temper Riven Cairothe was known to have and if it truly was as horrible as the rumours he'd heard.

In the next instance, he dismissed the thought as quickly as it had come. Riven would simply have to deal with it.

Harry had spoken so fondly of the Kalziks, with such a hopeful, wistful expression on his face, that between Riven's opinion of them or the Kadels—well. He'd had to listen to his heart.
And his heart was already Harry's.

Trusting an Empath was good. Trusting Harry's judgement was even better. He'd noticed it, the obvious insecurities around Harry—but also, the complete and loyal devotion to Theo and Charlie.

As if there'd never been any question that they were a bonded triad and completely enamoured with each other. It was that fleeting feeling that had allowed him to fall so deeply into his instinctive haze to urge Theo to claim him.

Ethan nearly smiled. The situation, grave as it was, didn't feel quite so terrible. There was still a strand of hope and he chose to cling to that for as long as reality would let them.

The Kadels were neutrals to the Hartwoods, but that wasn't anything he'd taken into consideration when he'd made the request to the Kalziks'. He'd only thought of Harry and that achingly bittersweet smile as he'd spoken of a mute Healer who had seen through him—and hadn't judged everything about him.

Now, as Surajini's magic washed over him—strong, pure and fierce—Ethan thought he might have understood what it felt like, for Harry to be wandering through the Hunt in their company.

There was something so beautiful and yet, so restrained, between the Kalzik triad. He couldn't help but feel it, in the way that their magics twined around each other's with Hiram's harder grasp of the Earthen element and the lightness of Patrick's shimmering blue-energy mingling between them.

Filling in each others' gaps, complimenting where nature allowed and defending where it did not. Even their Pareyas had melded together, as simple, shimmering pillars of light, that held them together even closer than before.

Ethan shivered, faintly. Both Alpha and Sub were Earth, but he couldn't quite pinpoint Patrick's element—Nameless of some sort, he mused—and yet, the Nameless title did not fit him.

Just as it did not fit Harry.

As if there were some important detail he was missing.

Ethan squeezed his eyes shut as the portal reached its highest point. He'd only ridden in two of these before and each time, the experience had nearly wrecked him. To be able to cast a portal that felt as if someone was simply pulling a curtain and then yanking it back—with the ground intact beneath their feet.

That—was true magic.

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**KALZIK CIRCLE, ETHAN: PRINCE RASPN'S ROYAL QUARTERS, W/HARRY AND CO.**

Ethan 'ported into the room with the famous Kalzik Trio in tow. Surajini, Hiram and Patrick stepped out from the portal, clad in their official robes of Master Healer rank. Behind them, all three looked rather disturbed at the scene before them, even as they fanned out into the room, forming a sort of triangle around Harry.

The portal remained open as the Kalzik Pareyas stepped out. Clad in their respective Healer robes, each of them bearing a golden caduceus in hand. They scattered through the room at once. Lachman starting up a series of grounding incantations to hold the room as a sacred casting space.
The others rearranged the room, pushing furniture out of the way and taking out charmed sheets, pillows and various instruments from their respective emergency kits.

Prince Raspen leaned against the wall near the door, watching as the Kalziks took over. He accepted a glass of water from one of the worried Pareya. Relief flooded him, as he felt the pressure in the room ease significantly.

Harry lay on the floor, his head pillowed in Theo's lap, one of his hands held by Charlie, who sat to his right. His eyes gleamed bright and vivid, of the clearest shade of emerald—even as his body trembled visibly.

The vague, glazed look, suggested that Harry's mind was not presently within him, but that perhaps, he was elsewhere in his mental mindscape.

Theo's eyes had gone pitch black, his instincts simmering beneath the surface, even as his element allowed him to keep from giving into the panic that lurked at the corners of his mind.

Charlie's flaming hair danced lightly about his shoulders, as he continually fed warmth through their shared bond and Harry's hand. He could feel the chill radiating from Harry and Riven, but he'd only been able to respond as instinct had demanded of him.

As it had demanded of Theo, who had immediately gone to Harry's side, the moment Riven had proclaimed the anchoring a success. He was still feeding calmness through their shared bonds,

The moment was broken, with Ethan's entrance. He drew their attention, as he stepped out with an entire entourage behind him.

Charlie couldn't hide his relief at seeing the Kalzik trio filing in behind him. Even though Ethan seemed torn between worry and embarrassment, he came straight to Harry's unoccupied side.

Prince Raspen was torn between dismay and a fleeting flicker of pride as he untangled the last of his protections around the room. His magic flowed back into him, even as his aura thrummed contentedly from the experience of being so close to the living heart of Nevarah.

There was no time to savour such memories, for the current situation at hand, would require some careful wording. There was bad blood between the Kalziks and Cairothes—enough for others to take note of it, but hopefully not enough that the Kalziks would ignore Harry.

At least, not with how he'd seen the Kalziks taking Harry under their wing. Even their son, Quinn, had seemed to take a liking to him—enough to spend the day in his company.

A detail Prince Raspen had noticed, because, there were Royal eyes everywhere, after all.

He didn't quite know what the Cairothes had done to upset the Kalziks and he didn't particularly care in that moment. The Kadels, once a Healer Clan themselves, had gradually shifted into the branch of fortune telling and psychic gifts, when the rift had grown too wide to bridge.

"Harry!" Surajini's pained exclamation seemed to say it all as she descended on the small Circle, with an aura of deliberately projected warmth. She paused long enough to nod in the general direction of Prince Raspen—before settling down beside Theo. "Your Pareya gave us the barest of details—is there anything you can add?"

Theo's dark eyes glittered with anxiety. He didn't flinch from her touch, even though the magic glowing in her hands, seemed to burn straight through to him. "We were waiting on a report from the Cunninghams—but there's been some problems. We—it looks—" words faltered and Theo's
hands curled into fists from where he sat, helplessly, with Harry's head in his lap.

"Deep breaths," Surajini said, calmly. "Ethan said something about a Death Seal?"

"Yes," Charlie spoke up. He pressed Harry's hand to his cheek, pushing another burst of warmth through their physical connection. "As best as we can tell, that's what Riven said that-"

"Riven?"

"Riven Cairothe," Theo explained. He gave a jerk of his head in the direction of the newly displaced Riven, who now stood slightly apart from Harry, a dark look on his pale face.

Everything seemed to slow.

Silence held for a long moment, before Prince Raspen straightened up. He made as if to push away from the wall, but the movement seemed to be the only prompt needed for the Kalziks to react.

"Cairothe," Hiram growled. His brilliant golden gaze flared several shades darker as he deliberately moved to stand between Riven and Surajini, who knelt beside Harry.

Tension returned to the room.

Patrick's blue eyes gleamed. He didn't speak, but he did straighten up enough to adopt a similar protective stance in front of Surajini—careful to include Theo and Charlie behind him.

Riven hissed. His angry eyes sought Ethan, a sudden, searing fury causing the Pareya to flinch. Purple energy sparked visibly in the air surrounding him. "What part of bring one of the Kadels was so hard to comprehend?"

"Harry is more comfortable with the Kalziks—and they've seen and treated him before. I thought this would be more comfortable for him," Ethan said, standing his ground.

"Comfortable for him?" Riven snorted. "Comfortable enough to die? Are you trying to kill him?"

Theo shuffled out from behind Patrick, angling to be a bit closer to Ethan. He didn't think that Riven would actually react beyond terse words, but old habits died hard. It was easier to assume the worst and therefore, never have to truly be caught unprepared.

Ethan pretended not to notice, when Theo slipped over beside him. He simply held his head high.

"Idle threats were always your preference," Hiram said, blandly. "Please refrain from dramatic—"

"Their entire Circle is comprised of Master Healers in some capacity or another," Ethan shot back. "And Harry's an Empath. He'll pick up on the slightest disturbance—the Kalziks are good to him. He trusts them."

"That's not the point here," Riven growled. "If you can't handle simple instructions, then don't get involved. I don't play with people's lives because I want to. There are far more powerful things at work here, than a mere matter of pride."

"...it doesn't appear to be a matter of pride," Ethan said, carefully. "I was thinking of Harry."

"You were thinking of his feelings and I was thinking of his life," Riven snapped. "Do you want him to die? I need a Healer I can depend on. Not these!" He glared at the Kalziks. "I can't work with those arrogant, inflexible-!"
"You cannot save him on your own," Hiram said, calmly. "But I believe we can manage on ours. Feel free to excuse yourself, if our presence is so troubling. Patrick?"

Patrick's cool gaze fixed deliberately on Riven's fuming form. "We can cast as soon as he's out of range. The sooner the better. I'm not sure how far he's gone, but something doesn't feel right."

"Don't cast anything!" Riven growled. "You don't even know what you've come into! Don't start throwing around magic as if—"

"We're Healers, not uncertified specialists looking to make a name for ourselves," Patrick said, smoothly. "Weren't you leaving?"

If I leave him—he'll die."

"You needn't think so highly of yourself," Surajini said, quietly. A general diagnostic spell spun to life on her fingertips. She refrained from casting it, waiting for a signal from Patrick, that it was alright to begin treatment. "Shouldn't Harry be the main priority right now?"

"Harry is the main priority," Theo said, firmly. "And I'd appreciate it, if you all would either work together or stand aside, so someone else can try. He was fine up until several minutes ago."

"His breathing is fine, his vitals are holding steady," Ethan added. He edged forward, carefully positioning himself in front of Theo, unable to fight the instinctive urge to protect.

"I'm not the one trying to start something," Riven sniped. "It's magical feedback from whatever is happening on the other end of that blasted seal—and the longer we take to counter that, the more he'll suffer for it."

"Riven—" Prince Raspen warned.

"Don't," Riven snapped. "I'm serious. This is an inter-realm issue with a Death Seal involved. I don't have time for a bunch of Healers to tell me what they think needs to be done."

Hiram sighed. "And if we were to listen to you?"

Riven hissed. "Tell your watchdog to stand down."

Surajini barely glanced up. "Perimeter wards," she said, lightly. "Set them around the room. I need to see his seals—and if they're unravelling, then we need to hurry."

"If you cast perimeter wards in this small space, you'll scramble any inter-realm connections, unless you've got an outside anchor," Riven snapped. "Are you stupid?"

"Please don't start with name-calling right now," Prince Raspen spoke up, rubbing his forehead. "I don't have to understand why you disagree with each other or your reasons for doing so. However, Theo is right. Harry should be the main priority and I do agree that time is of the essence."

"As I've already said," Riven began. "If they would listen-!"

Prince Raspen cleared his throat, his golden gaze hardening. The air in the room grew heavy, weighted with the authoritative pressure of an elemental Royal. "I do not appreciate that," he said, calmly. "Compose yourselves and assist, or remove yourselves from the room, so the rest can work in peace and harmony. Theo, Surajini—how is he?"

The subtle scold had both Riven and Hiram looking away, in mixed irritation and embarrassment.
"He's stable for the moment, but I can feel the edges of his control fraying a bit," Surajini explained, she gestured for Theo to draw closer. "How new are his bonds?" She looked to Ethan. "You said you were recent?"

"Yesterday," Ethan said, quickly. "We've had a night."

Surajini bit her lip. "I suppose that's better than nothing," she murmured. "Any specifics?"

"Soulbond," Ethan said, following Theo forward. "We connected at the food courts. There was an instant attachment on both of our parts."

"How lovely," Patrick commented, his expression softening.

Ethan's lips quirked into a sad smile. "It'd be better if I could be of more help right now," he hinted.

Surajini smiled. "You're helping quite a bit already. Theo, do you mind, love?" She gestured to Harry. "His head in your lap, keep a hand on your claim mark, channel anything good, light or calming that you can spare, alright?"

Theo nodded. He settled himself on the floor, as Surajini eased Harry's head and shoulders onto his lap. He followed her directions, slipping a hand beneath Harry's collar, to stroke the claim mark.

"Is there anything we can do?" Ethan asked, beckoning to Charlie.

"Keep touching him," Surajini said, as she cast another barrage of diagnostics. "Even if you can't focus on his claim marks, as Theo is—focus on the bonds you share. As long as he can sense that you're here, he'll stay. If he's anchored between realms, it'll be harder for him subconsciously transport."

"Riven anchored him to the realm," Prince Raspen said, drawing near. He deliberately walked between Riven and Hiram, breaking the potential stare down into an awkward shuffle. "He was starting to fade, so it brought him back."

"Fade?" Hiram and Patrick exchanged a glance.

Surajini's look turned grim.

"That's really bad, isn't it?" Charlie asked.

"You don't fade unless you're dying," Surajini said. "And if you're dying, then you don't stop halfway. You fade."

"In that case, I suppose we'd best make sure that he doesn't quite fade then," Prince Raspen said, with forced cheer. His smile was fixed, but the sharpness of his gaze made his intent known.

It didn't matter if there was bad blood between their Circles, if all the dragels with necessary talents were present to help Harry, then he expected them to help Harry. Whatever came afterward, could come, but for now, they were to unite as one.

Their Prince demanded it.

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**HARRY'S MINDSCAPE:** TAVIT THE NECROMANCER: Harry, Tavit, Maurice.

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Tavit opened his eyes, dropping into the murky nothingness with an ease born of practice. He'd
infiltrated countless mindscape after all, in his line of work.

His anchor, Niko, pressed gently against their shared connection. She would guard his physical body until his return, as she always had.

He nearly smiled. He'd have to reward her this time around, if they made it through this mess, unscathed.

The mindscape shifted and twisted, morphing into something a little lighter, vaguely more purple than black.

The change set his teeth on edge, as he touched down into the empty blackness that seemed to be the floor. What a bleak and tortured mind.

Emptiness of this sort, usually meant a fairly troubled soul and those were always the worst. It was something to tear apart someone that deserved it, but another thing entirely to destroy something—or someone—that was only trying to live.

Trying to protect their tattered, broken heart, with walls of distance.

He twirled the staff in his hand, checking to see that it had changed planes of reality, accordingly. It'd be much easier to work if he could use that. The shimmering gem at the top, gleamed with purpose.

Ah. That was good.

Tavit started forward, drawing his darkness around him like a cloak. It was best to mask his presence, lest it cause any unnecessary complications.

This would be easy enough, after all, he was only doing Death's bidding and what harm could there be in that?

Something niggled in the back of his mind and he turned, accordingly.

"Somewhere off to the left then?" he muttered.

And there it was, a flicker of a speck of light. So faint that if he hadn't been looking for it—if he hadn't known what to look for—he'd have missed it.

Huh.

What a strange mindscape.

He drew near, finding himself staring out at a fairly impressive view. A vast chasm of blackness yawned overhead—even darker than the ground he walked—stretching up to unfathomable depths.

The void, a large circle, was framed by dozens and dozens of thick, leeching chains of silver. They hung, limply, disappearing up into the blackness. The sheer volume alone, was disturbing.

Seeing them, made his chest tighten.

Those were never good.

Death had already come.

Tavit drew near, inspecting the chains closest to him, noting how some were thick and others were
thin. The depth of the commitment from the one who had forged them.

Curious. Some seemed easily broken, while others were definitely more involved.

Tavit picked his way through the troublesome mess, taking care not to let any of them linger on
him too long. He was not here to pay their price, after all.

At last, he came upon two strands, which were somehow thicker and stronger than all the rest.

"Odd," he mumbled, to himself. In fact, those two seemed to fall directly from the very centre of
the pit.

Tavit grimaced. Reluctantly, he twined the chain around his free arm and gave it a strong yank.
Holding his staff tightly in his other hand, he gave a slight push from the ground, even as the chain
began to respond.

It pulled him up at once, with surprising speed.

He flinched, as the other chains brushed against him. Some icy cold and others, scorching hot, as
the one wrapped around his arm, seemed to sink into his skin.

He twirled the staff in his hand and when he could vaguely make out a brighter purple sky
overhead, he cast the spell that would break the chain's hold on him.

It flung him up and outward, with an angry screech.

A monster denied a meal.

Tavit smirked, floating up over the void. "Niko?"

Her warmth poured into him, healing the damage from the chain.

He smiled, and simply took a seat, with his staff as if it were a floating broomstick. Now safely
perched, he peered down at the void that had swallowed him up. What a strange mind he'd
wandered into.

There were chains everywhere along the edge, as far as he could see, surrounding the blackened
pit.

Along with a soft spot of light.

Oh?

Tavit floated down for a better look, careful to avoid landing too close to the chains.

The sight that finally registered, made his black heart clench in distaste. This was much worse than
he'd expected.

A dragel submissive, cuddled in the arms of man with tattered clothes and two chains still deeply
embedded in his person.

From the way they clung to each other, Tavit had no delusions as to what he was interrupting.

_Pity, _he thought, darkly. *It's always a pity, isn't it?*_

Niko's careful warmth filtered through their shared connection once more. He huffed, touching
down on the ground, and tapping his staff to announce his presence.

The dragel submissive didn't react, but the man did. Great, sorrowful eyes fixed on him, with a look that seemed to say a thousand lifetimes worth of experience.

Tavit swallowed. He always hated these sorts the most. The ones that saw it coming and would offer no resistance, because they knew.

The man surveyed him for a moment, gaze flickering to the impressive staff and then back to Tavit's unyielding expression.

"You are here for me?" he inquired.

"...if you are Maurice Elswood, then yes."

"...I am."

Tavit rubbed the back of his neck. The bad feeling resurfaced again. He really needed to pay more attention to it. "...this isn't your mind, is it?"

"...it is not."

"Damn it."

Maurice merely shrugged.

"You know why I'm here?"

A smile then, bittersweet. "I have a fairly good idea," Maurice said. "The lack of a scythe, means you are not a reaper, so that must mean you're a Necromancer."

Tavit twitched. There was no point in confirming that.

"Shh, Harry." Maurice nuzzled the submissive sitting in his lap, his overall stance, vaguely protective, though deliberately relaxed.

Tavit sighed. Maurice wasn't about to make it easy for any of them. Of course not. He was practically the walking dead, with nothing left to lose. "Right. Then, as soon as you could manage it?"

"What is the price?"

"...pardon?"

"I know what I have done. I know what is still—active. What is the price?"

"...that is not yours to bargain for. I have come for you on behalf of one that has requested that you live."

"And yet, I have no need to live, if I have nothing to live for." Maurice countered. "Answer me, what is the price?"

"You know as well as I do, that I cannot answer that." Tavit twirled his staff, appreciating the solid thwack it made when he struck the ground. "Though if you understand, then kindly move. I dislike having to actually-" he gestured at Harry.
Maurice looked at him and then down at the young man in his lap. His lips quirked into a near smile. That was curious. He'd expected to be roughly separated, but this sort of kindness was welcome. "His name is Harry," he said, softly. "And I have lived my life—well. He hasn't. He deserves far more than I am able to grant him, in my current state."

Tavit started.

The chains still twined around Maurice's body, were now tangling with Harry. The biggest one wrapped around Harry's ankle, pulling itself taut.

"I will go with you," Maurice said, carefully. "If you will spare him."

"...that is not my choice to make."

"No," the small smile grew steadier. "But it is within your power to influence." He gently eased Harry off of his lap, his hands cradling a blotchy, tear-stained face. "Shhh." He whispered, pressing a kiss to Harry's forehead. "You are strong, you are brave and you are so loved."

Harry hiccupped. More tears trickled down his face, his expression dazed as if he couldn't quite understand what was happening. His lips trembled, but he offered no protest.

Tavit scowled, a slight flush along the side of his neck. He should have turned his back to them, to offer some privacy. It was these sorts of moments that reminded him why he'd been forced into this line of work, instead of choosing it of his own accord.

He gritted his teeth. "Stop stalling—unless you'd rather I offered a hand?"

Maurice ignored him. He hugged Harry again—hard enough to hurt—and heard a tiny squeak in answer. It prompted a final smile.

"You'll be fine," Maurice whispered. "Just fine, Harry. I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

Tavit pushed them apart with his staff, his glower pinning Harry to the floor, his staff, keeping him there, as he grabbed Maurice by the arm and began to tow him away from the void.

The bad feeling grew considerably worse, when Maurice stopped moving with him, and began to tug in the other direction.

"Don't you dare-!" Tavit began.

"...I'm sorry to you as well," Maurice whispered. "But I'm afraid this is the wrong direction for me."

"Wait-!" Tavit ducked the incoming swing. His movement was one beat too slow, as Maurice pulled free of his grasp and launched himself backward to the void.

Chains sprang upwards from the void, yanking Maurice into their cold, tortuous embrace—and well out of Harry or Tavit's grasp.

"No!" Harry's cry echoed Tavit's.

From the great void, Death's hooded figure rose.

In Death's gnarled hand, Maurice sat calmly.
His head bowed, as he clung to one bony thumb of the great hand, massive enough to span the width of the entire void.

Death's glare eased a fraction. The darkened, overpowering presence seemed to absorb all the light from the dreary space.

Tavit skidded to a stop at the edge of the void. He glanced back at Harry and then at Maurice. The silvery chains continued to strain upward to latch onto Maurice again, intent on dragging him down to their grave depths.

"I am yours," Maurice murmured, even as the chains stabbed through his body, anchoring themselves once more, with a vengeance. "Surely you know this?"

Death stared down at him, hand slowly closing, protectively almost.

"I come to you willingly," Maurice continued. "As I always have and in doing so, I ask only that you spare him."

Tavit choked. He glanced back at Harry and then at Maurice. Foolish man! He'd already had this conversation. There was no happy ending to be had here, it was why he'd hurried to come to this plane of reality.

Quick thinking would only allow him to save Harry, if he spun his words right. Riven would have to live with a loss, for there was no way he could bring Maurice back, if the man willingly went to Death.

Harry stood, frozen, his mouth open, but no sound.

"You swore yourself to me," Death intoned. "Over a century ago."

"I did. Our oath was brokered and sealed with the span of this tainted life of mine." Maurice agreed.

"And now you wish to change the terms of contract?"

"Never. My word is what it always has been. I simply wish to restate, that my contract was only for myself." Dark eyes hardened. "And myself alone."

"...what you have done with this life that is not your own, is not overlooked so easily."

"And yet, have I denied you?" Maurice's voice trembled, faintly. "Did I protest when you took everything from me? Everything that I had to offer? All that I had to live for?"

Death was silent.

"I did not!" Maurice hissed. "I let them go. I watched you take them."

The air trembled.

Tavit gritted his teeth.

Chains rattled. Lighting up as Death's hand began to close.

"You will spare him," Maurice's voice rang out, steady and firm. "I have already asked you once. You owe me this much."
Silence stretched out, as Death seemed to consider.

Harry took one step forward, stopped by Tavit's staff flipping up to block his way. He twisted around to stare at Tavit's impassive face.

"Don't," Tavit ground out. "This isn't your place." He thumped the end of the staff against Harry's chest, taking care to remain within reach to stop him from doing anything stupid.

"As you wish, mortal." Death said, and closed her hand over Maurice.

The chains began to rattle and groan.

The void collapsed.

A grunt escaped, as Tavit fell backward, hard enough to jolt his spine, as his feet flew out from under him. He swore as the ground began to crumble around them, everything caving into nothing. He needed to leave this mindscape as soon as possible and find Riven.

The deed was as done as it would ever be and whatever the repercussion, perhaps he'd be of some assistance in that plane. Tavit slammed his staff onto the ground, to anchor himself. He glanced over, to see that Harry hadn't even wobbled.

The ground continued to shift and tilt, drawing everything to the great yawning entrance of the collapsing void.

An irritated growl came out, as Tavit began to silently cast the incantation to return him to the original plane. He had two reapers to separate after all. Though hopefully, Niko hadn't instigated them into hacking each other's head's off. She'd always been rather good at that.

He felt her answering pulse of magic, in response to his silent query. She would anchor him, if he was ready to return to her side.

And then the ground beneath him, dissolved into nothing.

Harry came tumbling down, dragged by the chain, his hands scrabbling along. He caught Tavit's staff, hanging on by strained fingers.

Tavit glared at him, unable to move enough to shake him free. A sick feeling passed through him, as he watched the chain yank furiously on Harry's leg.

*It's not my problem, not my problem, not my-*! He thought furiously, and then the awful feeling drilled a bit deeper into his chest and Tavit gave in.

Magic leapt to his command, as he directed it through his staff. Tavit twisted downward, catching Harry's hand with his own, wrenching it free of his staff. He aimed the gem at the parasitic chain and blasted it free.

The silver chain shrieked and screamed, slithering back to the void where it had come from.

"W-what's happening?"

"You're either waking up or dying," Tavit said, bluntly. He drew Harry up into his arms, scrambling to sit on his staff as it floated them up and away from the crumbling ground.

"...dying then," Harry said, faintly. "I don't think waking up hurts this much."
Tavit glanced down at him, trying and failing to ignore the fact that Harry felt significantly smaller in his arms, than he’d looked at first glance.

Too light, almost, even.

Harry's arms flexed, carefully, from where they were twined around Tavit's middle.

Tavit shifted, awkwardly, to settle him a bit better. "If you fall, I'm not catching you."

"...is he dead?"

"...yeah."

"W-was there anything you could do?"

"Death doesn't discriminate. It takes from every living thing, no matter the consequence."

"...right." Harry whispered. The memory of those warm arms, left him feeling distinctly chilled. This wasn't the way it was supposed to end, was it? Wasn't there something else he could do? "He was the first—the first one to—!" His grip slackened.

"...and I'll be damned if I let you go after him." Tavit growled. "Wake up! Wherever you are resting—whatever realm holds your physical body, by the stars and every immortal above, wake up if you want to live!"

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PRINCE RASPEN'S ROOMS :NEVARAH : HARRY and Co.

Harry's body jerked and twisted, shuddering violently in the next few minutes. The Kalziks began to shout orders, each of them reaching out to steady, calm and heal.

Charlie and Theo were shuffled to the side, with Ethan thrust between them. Surajini and Hiram were focused at Harry's head, their glowing hands pressed to his face and neck.

"What's happening?" Theo pushed against Charlie and Ethan's worried hands. They were holding him back, but trembled still—they were worried too.

"We're losing him!" Patrick barked. "Jini!"

"I'm trying—we need the seal!" A faint sheen of sweat gleamed on her forehead, as Surajini continued to channel her magic through Harry and out again. An extended feedback loop to keep his physical body from overloading with the energies traveling through him. Her Pareya were grounding all of them—and the room.

"It's hard," Hiram forced the words through gritted teeth. Surajini was definitely better than him at pulling out Seals. He was better at anchoring, but in this case—she'd already activated her artefact and it was his turn to act in her place.

The artefacts glowed, slowly strengthening the room and easing the burden on all that were present.

"It's coming," Patrick said, squinting at Harry's glowing chest. It was hard to see it clearly, but he didn't dare pause his own spellwork long enough to cast any extra charms.

"Something feels—different," Hiram muttered. He flinched from the blinding light that washed
through the room.

"Hiram, the seal!" Surajini's frantic cry was seconds too late.

They were thrown back and away from Harry, as the expanding brightness exploded out of Harry's prone body. He floated up, a few feet into the air, as the seal emerged.

A brilliant glowing light, too bright to make out the symbols and incantations inscribed on the magical seal itself.

A whispery, gravelly voice filled the room—ancient in its sound, but distant in its volume.

The seal shattered.

But the Kalzik's protections held.

Everything in the room rattled.

Patrick threw himself in front of Theo and the others, his shield active and holding. Soft teal in colour, but fierce in its intensity, he held it effortlessly.

Surajini was shielded by her Pareya, even as Hiram's shield included Prince Raspen.

In the corner of the room, Riven pushed away from the wall, his staff in hand. The great eye rolled back and forth, wildly.

"Idiots," he muttered, loud enough to be heard. A trickle of blood dribbled down from his left eye. He smeared it away with one ragged sleeve. "I told you to call one of the Kadels…" The bloody bandages on his left hand, unravelled, pooling at his feet.

Riven crossed his staff with his newly unwrapped arm. The angry purple energy crackled and simmered in his veins, standing out against his pale skin. His hair rippled down, stretching to the floor.

He sucked in a breath, eyes fluxing to black.

_Tavit, if you've screwed this up—we'll all suffer for it!

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**ESTATE OF SEPTIMUS WEASLEY : TORVAK TERRITORY : UNPLOTTABLE, VOIDSPACE : (Mariana and her half of the Cunningham Circle)**

Mariana glided to a stop a single breath away from triggering the warning system that surrounded the shrouded manor in the distance.

Scout's tracking had paid off once more. They'd entered this private void with little resistance and no one to greet them. True to her gift, Scout had discovered the estate, in spite of the seemingly non-existent location.

The very thought of there being a possible element of surprise, sent a happy thrill up her spine. Mariana rolled her shoulders back, rocking forward on her toes, a quiver of excitement rippling through her as she waited for the rest of her Bonded to catch up. She was always at the head of the pack and sometimes, it took a few more seconds for them to reach the same place.

Scout joined Mariana, a few seconds later, barely concealing an excited quiver. She'd trace the
location through the magical signature of one who had placed the Beacon on Harry's house.

The expression on Mariana's face, promised lethal payback and free reign for the rest of them to do as they liked. That thought was infinitely soothing, Scout mused. She wanted to tear into something with claws and fangs, but held herself in check as they waited for the rest of their Bonded to catch up.

"Excited?" Mariana hummed, stroking a hand through Scout's soft hair. "Breathe, darling. You can do as you like, after we've determined who cast it."

Scout turned, nuzzling against the gloved hand. Does it matter?

Mariana twitched. It didn't really matter in the way that Scout meant—because she was right—there was nothing in all the realms that would spare the unlucky soul from her undisguised wrath.

Soft taps sounded as the rest of their Bonded touched down on the ground beside her, the menacing aura growing progressively larger as a collective whole.

Mariana suppressed a shudder. Scout warbled beside her. The bloodlust was absolutely delicious. She couldn't wait and her Bonded mirrored the sentiment back through their shared bonds.

This would be the most fun she'd had this month.

"It's a whole nest," her Queen said, eyes alight with barely restrained mischief. "I can feel it. More than a dozen of them in there. Imagine that. It'll be so much fun. I can't believe it's a whole nest—can you feel that?"

"I can feel it," another Bonded chimed in. "I can feel it so well; I can't wait to rip it apart."

"Tear them into dozens of itty bitty bloody little pieces, yes?" one Joker hummed. Eyes fluxed pitch black, menacing aura maxed out. Short stubbly dark hair, morphed into the trademark silkiness of a Fae warrior's ponytail. "How do we take them, milady?"

"Dead or alive?" her Queen countered. "Or dead and mostly dead?"

"Mostly dead would be fine, I suppose—but I want them alive for now," Mariana sang, softly. She twirled her poisoned blade in her hand, enjoying the familiar feel of the well-worn hilt. She meant to enjoy this. There was too much frustration to burn, after all.

"Alive?" her Joker echoed. "Truly?" He exchanged a glance with their Queen. "Not mostly dead?"

"I want them all alive, to know what they'll lose, before it's lost." Mariana said. "Then you can make them mostly dead. Objections?"

A collective shrug rippled through her Bonded.

"As you like," the Joker nearest to her, swung his arms overhead. Double-jointed limbs, long enough to almost touch the ground—and yet, it was the crazy smile that distorted his handsome image.

The same crazed gleam that seemed to wrap around each of them in turn as the bloodlust overtook them, one at a time.

Mariana only mirrored the smile. "Free the prisoners, too—would you? They always have some, hidden away somewhere. Make sure to get them out. Add them to the line up—remember,
darlings, this group—these ones, they hurt my little Maury and by extension, the damage they've caused is not something to be forgiven."

"Your will is our only wish, milady," her Queen bowed, solemnly. "We move at your mark."

Mariana tossed her head. Her fangs throbbed, fiercely.

Maybe it wasn't all for Maury. Maybe it had a little bit to do with Harry. But what did that matter in the grand scheme of things? It wasn't as if she was going to tell anyone that.

A ripple of hisses and growls signalled that her Bonded were ready and waiting. More than ready, really.

To make them wait any longer would surely be cruel. "Mark." She hissed, body poised to strike.

They moved.

The eerie emptiness of an unplottable location was gently breached by nothing but the shadows that guarded Death and gave nothing away when they did so. There were no guards, no watchmen—nothing to sound an alarm.

Mariana and her Bonded had destroyed what few makeshift buildings they'd passed on the way deeper inland.

No spies or border patrol.

Odd, but not a problem.

They drew to a halt, outside of a secondary set of protective wards.

Also odd, and possibly a problem.

Mariana stopped short of the warded field, holding up a hand to halt their progress. Her Bonded gathered around her at once, shadows still wisping about their feet.

"Milady?" her Queen inquired, drawing near. "It isn't a complicated shield. We can unravel it."

Mariana shook her head, faintly. "Something's off. Do you sense that?"

"...what part of it?"

"The menace. Something's not right."

"...what would you have us do?"

Mariana took a deep breath, eyes fluttering half-closed, as she pieced out the scents, drawing heavily on her senses to determine exactly how many living creatures resided within the space somewhere up ahead. There was bound to be a house of some sort. This was an Estate void, after all, and they had yet to stumble across any other facilities.

"We need to be quick. We can't linger."

"We won't. We never have." Her Queen assured her.

"House up ahead," The Joker closest to her, Robere, tipped his head to where Scout now beckoned.
"She says it's a large manor. Likely a waypoint of some sort. It's not large enough and the scents are too singular."

"A single family, perhaps some visitors," Mariana suggested. Her brow furrowed faintly. She twirled her blade once more, focusing enough to sink deeper into her instincts. "Doesn't feel right though. Should be more."

"It's a cloaking scent," the next Joker swung his arms overhead, scales rippling up and down, mirroring the instinctive need to release the building emotions currently shared by all of them. "You can pick out the others, if you don't search for it."


He snorted.

She held out a hand and he took it, drawing near enough for the kiss of reward—and the casual mind meld that merged their senses together. She would draw from his natural edge on tracking and hunting, he would pull on her quick categorizing and flawless strategic mind.

"The house is on fire, Milady. Scout said, abruptly I think—it's just starting—I can feel it."

"Then let's help them along, shall we?" Mariana smirked. "Burn the house." She stepped back, a slight shake of her head to resettle her instincts where she wanted them to be. The itchiness brimming at her fingertips, warned of her true dragon from lurking too close to the surface.

"Gladly," the Joker murmured. The scales along his arm, flashed from red to gold, then red once more. His hair ignited without a sound and his wings unfurled with careful precision. "Ignean, Pyro—" he beckoned to his fellow fire Gheyos.

Without hesitation, they swept upwards to join him.

Mariana watched them streak higher into the air and accepted the hand of her hovering Gheyo Knight, perhaps it would be easiest for them in the air—the Torvaks could shift to their wings faster, after all.

And then they waited.

It was a thing of beauty when it descended.

Pure fire, in the rawest form—a volley of red-hot-fury that slammed into the house, as the occupants came streaking out in a panic.

"Round them up nicely," Mariana called, summoning her second favourite sword to her freehand. "Drop me a bit closer, love-hm?"

Her Knight grinned and flew her closer in.

Mariana and her Bonded, descended upon the unsuspecting Torvaks with a methodical ruthlessness that made quick work of the entire situation. The one-sided battle was nothing short of absolute destruction. Seamless teamwork and pinpoint precision gave the impression of living, breathing, machine. The few unmuffled shrieks and cries, were simply those that were used to lure the rest out of hiding.

To add to the already burning fire had been a brilliant idea and the rest simply fell into place.
afterward.

Many hands made light work, after all.

And so the terror grew.

Paraded out to the front lawn, bound and mostly silenced, the captives marched in single file. Some tried to fight and sported bloody wounds for their efforts, while others were stuck in partial transformations, with feathers sticking out of bruised skin and visible signs of the cancellation spells that had forced them into such forms.

Fear. Anger.

Hate.

Mariana didn't seem to notice. Instead, she counted them, silently, as they were moved from the openness of the front yard, and further into a paddock that seemed to be a training yard of sorts.

The bloodlust in her veins had yet to settle. The skirmish, short and pointless as it was, had done nothing to help take the edge off things. They would have to keep hunting for a bit, if only to calm the instinctual need thrumming through her body.

Then again, it wasn't as if she had any shortage of targets.

Mariana continued to watch her Bonded organize them into sections. Separating them by men, women and children. She could guess which groups were family and which were merely friendships. That was interesting. Most of the Torvak groups she'd had the displeasure of observing, had always taken care to keep their ranks closed. They tried too hard to all be the same and in doing so, always lost the edge that would have saved them.

But there was something upsetting about this raid.

Someone had set fire to the Estate before her command, which meant betrayal somewhere in the Torvak ranks. She wondered if it was worth the hassle of ferreting out who and why, or whether it was simply easier to let it be. It wasn't her problem after all and it wasn't like she intended to remedy it in any way.

"Milady, we're done," Scout said, drawing near for the ruffle to her blood-soaked hair. "They are all in the main paddock. Two of the young ones are coming—and that's the last of them."

Interested, Mariana turned to see Pyro frog-marching a young redheaded man in front of him. His magic, though temporarily sealed, was fluttering and struggling. The depth of it was promising, to say the least, though familiar almost. How curious! The shade of red was right—for a flame element type, she guessed—but his walk was something else entirely. The length of his stride and the slight flex of his arms—testing Pyro's grasp constantly—was definitely not that of a well-trained Torvak.

All Torvak children knew how to behave as captives. How to try and trick their captors. How to escape. It was the most obvious thing, whenever there were young ones present in a raid. This one though, he was sauntering along as if he were merely having fun. As if everything was somehow a game and that he intended to win.

A self-assured confidence that was just begging to be shattered.

Scout followed her line of sight. Her lips twitched into a smile. "There's something on him and the
other one. You can feel it if you reach out to them. Pyro seems taken with him."

"Does he now?" Mariana hummed. "I do owe him a birthday present. He never did say what exactly he wanted…"

"That would be quite a birthday present."

"Jealous?"

"Nay, Milady."

"Liar." Mariana curled an arm around her, pulling her close for a bite to the ear.

Scout squirmed, but allowed it. "…a little."

"I always take good care of you," Mariana reminded her. "Though if I have been neglecting you, then you need only say so."

Scout nuzzled closer in answer. It would take a minute or two for her ear to heal over, for that had been a reprimand.

Mariana hummed. "Good girl." She turned her gaze back to Robere and watched him lead another redhead young man further along the walk, to the main paddock. Scout was right. There was something curious behind it all.

"I'm just asking what's going on is all-" the light tone of almost forced-cheer was far too calm for someone in such a position. He stumbled along, per his captor's guidance.

Mariana continued to watch, glancing past him to see Robere guiding a beautifully cursed redhead, trapped in a form of partial transformation. Inwardly, she hid her amusement, because the enchantment was easy to see.

The magic of whatever potion he'd taken, had been unstable. He'd obviously drunk it before the required brewing time was finished—probably from an instinctive urge of some sort.

Wild magic was seldom used in potions for that very unpredictability. It had changed him quite nicely to compensate for his troubles.

Surprisingly, Robere allowed the teen to stumble along, instead of pushing him, as Pyro guided his own captive.

Mariana gently tugged on their bonds, directing them to walk the two captives by her. She ignored the twitching smile on Robere's face. Sometimes he said more with his smug face than she liked.

The taller redhead was led in front of her and Mariana reached out, snapping her fingers in front of his face, to grab their attention. "Name," she prompted, briskly.

Fierce brown eyes met and held her darkened gaze, before a roguish grin surfaced. "Fred Weasley at your service—though I don't know what I've done to upset you-"

She snapped her fingers again. His mouth clicked shut. A flicker of interest showed in Pyro's eyes, reflected back at her and she fought to keep her expression neutral. So he'd sensed that too—dragel magic, tightly twined around Fred Weasley, almost as if cradling him protectively.

What a useful detail.
Perhaps he would make a good birthday present for Pyro. She did try to spoil her Bonded, every now and then. It was always good for morale.

"They're all here—every sentient life form," Ignean murmured, beckoning her forward. "Is there anything specific you want out of this?"

"I'll know in a minute," Mariana followed him into the paddock, her apprising look sweeping over the myriad of faces. Most of them, she could tell, were trying to be brave and some were managing.

She didn't expect anything welcoming—this hadn't been a simple calling card, after all. The anger was obvious, the pure hatred was minimal and the desperation—that was the very worst.

Her eyes settled on the younger Torvaks in the group, there were five children—each trying not to draw attention to themselves. This was the part she hated the most.

Torvaks, though they ought to treasure their own, sometimes chose the worst ways to show that. Not that she could justify what they did. There were things that ought not to be done.

Children were children. They deserved care, love and discipline according to their own individual needs. Safety, above all else.

And yet, since the first nest she'd ever razed—this ugly truth had come forth.

"Children first." She snapped.

The children flinched.

Fred straightened up, tugging uselessly on Pyro's hold once more. The look in his brown eyes had hardened significantly.

The Gheyo Prince and Princess moved together, singling out a child apiece from the gathered group. They were made to stand before Mariana, a simple barrage of diagnostics cast over them.

The readouts came back to spin in the palm of her hand—a pale green ball of healing energy. Each report spanned an impressive two feet. Mariana tipped her head at the young boy and without ceremony, he fainted. The Gheyo Prince picked him up, the last flickers of the sleeping spell hidden as he scooped up the child and carried him some ways over, to set down on the dirt.

The girl squared her shoulders, chin held high. Her lower lip trembled. A thin scar was barely visible along the edge of her left sleeve.

Mariana merely watched her, waiting until the true emotion in her own eyes finally touched the fear in the girl's.

Slowly, thin shoulders drooped. A teary-eyed gaze stared resolutely in the dirt, unable to hold Mariana's knowing gaze a second longer. Her lower lip trembled.

Mariana exhaled, softly. "Was it family or a friend?" she asked, gently. "And are they here?"

The girl swallowed, hugging her arms to herself. Small tears turned to tiny drops of ice, as she sniffled.

It took nothing to gently slip into the girl's mind and draw out the name, along with every instance of the horrifying memories. Mariana withdrew almost at once. She'd only sought confirmation and it had been given. She would not subject the girl to anything more—there were Healers for that.
Her darkened gaze flickered across the group of captives, before discovering the one she sought. Her fangs clicked together, throbbing faintly.

Behind her, Robere gestured to the group, singling out the stony-faced Torvak that Mariana had projected through their shared bonds.

Across the paddock, Ignean smiled, grimly. His sword gleamed as he drew it and moved in.

There were seven bodies, when it was over.

The children were put to sleep, binding seals cast over them to help with inter realm transportation and self-harm. Healers would handle the rest, if they passed the test of admission to Nevarah.

They were dragels after all. Not monsters.

Mariana couldn't keep the contempt from her face as she surveyed the remaining captives before her. There was one soft gaze that had tracked every movement of her blade since she'd appeared at the paddock.

Ah.

It was about time…

The cool blade pressed against her neck, hard enough to cut—but somehow, not yet breaking the skin. Cedrella almost didn't dare breathe. Her heart trembled. Her magic quivered.

The potent aura of the terrifying woman before her, Mariana Cunningham, was almost too much to bear.

Loyalty won out before fear could truly set in.

Shoulders slumped, head lolled back, throat exposed.

Mariana smirked. She had expected no less. She'd sent a warning ahead of them, after all. It would have been poor form to arrive unannounced, no matter how long the years had been. "Cedrella."

"Milady."

"I trust you know where you stand?"

"Beside you where you have placed me," came the expected reply.

Mariana smirked. "What an excellent memory. Is there anything I should know or are your affairs in order?"

"…they are in order."

"You hesitate."

"Torvak business."

"Ah."

"It is of—no consequence."
Mariana scowled. "And what would you ask of me?"

"I have nothing to ask of you, milady."

"Nothing, whatsoever?" Mariana eyed the respectable gaggle of scruffy redheads and brunettes, with their worried eyes all fixed on her.

"My life was yours from the day you took me as yours. Nothing I have is my own, only an extension of you."

Lips twitched, faintly. Mariana turned the blade so the flat edge smacked gently into Cedrella's throat. "You have an odd way of proving your loyalty."

"Irrelevant—if you believe me," came the immediate reply.

Mariana laughed, at last. A short bark of laughter. She let her hand drop, the blade returning to her side and offered a hand to the kneeling woman. "I ought to rip your throat out."

"If you like," Cedrella said, mildly. She took the proffered hand and rose, gaze averted, neck still bared.

"Wouldn't do much good." Mariana shot back. "Never did before." But she reached out anyway and pulled Cedrella close enough for a mind meld.

When they broke the connection, Cedrella wobbled, a hand moving up to her forehead, even as Mariana steadied her with a quick hand at her elbow.

A pained grimace flickered across Cedrella's face. "…apologies…you're the only one that ever does this…and it's hard to—"

"You were never used to it, were you?" Mariana smiled. "Even back then and Arielle knows you had plenty of practice."

"I've fallen out of practice, then."

"Plenty of time to step back in," Mariana returned. "The Shadow Court welcomes you back, shadowed one."

"And your shadow greets you, glad to have returned to your side," Cedrella said, her voice catching and then, it didn't matter.

They hugged each other tight enough for armour and bones to creak in protest.

In the background, her family shifted uneasily.

"I see you gave into him after all." Mariana said, pulling away. "Was it worth it? Your children look just like you."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Cedrella shot back. "Of course it was. How could I resist such pleading eyes?" She reached up to rub her neck, where her claim marks were now in plain view. "What was that blade made from?"

"The rarest, darkest souls my beloved could find," Mariana hummed. "Still stings?"

Cedrella scowled in answer. "The older ones are mine, the others are—well, they're grandchildren."
"Grandchildren?" Mariana looked from her, to the gathered Weasleys and then across the paddock to where Fred was still kept by Pyro. She already had a feeling she knew where this was headed. "Let me guess, those two are yours as well?"


"Oh?"

"No wife."

"Ah."

"...she's dragel. The children are inclined one way or another. He didn't take it very well."

"I see. So that's why they feel that way."

"It is my own doing and my own problem. The Court needs not trouble itself."

"But it is troubled nonetheless," Mariana said, smoothly. Cedrella had always been a stubborn one and it seemed that time had not dulled that trait in the least. "What is wrong with you and yours?"

Lady Amanda broke the silence, before Cedrella could answer. "You traitor! You're with them! I knew it! I knew you were one of them! I knew it! I knew you were one of them! You let them in here so they could get rid of all of us!"

Cedrella ignored her.

"Amanda-!" Lord Heron protested, his face pale. "Don't provoke them."

"Don't provoke them?" Lady Amanda screeched. "They'll kill us! Didn't you see what they did to-!"

Her voice cracked.

Lord Heron shuddered, eyes averted. He hadn't been able to look away from what had taken place only a handful of feet away. But he'd also seen the way the children had been singled out. He swallowed. "Don't provoke them."

"They won't spare you, even you sympathize with them," Lady Amanda laughed. "They're monsters. All monsters."

"Amanda!"

"He was my brother!" She strained against her bonds, eyes burning with a fierce, renewed blueness, her Torvak fire simmering beneath the surface. "I'll burn you to-!"

Both women turned to her with identical expressions of bland indifference.

Mariana twitched. Her blade glowed, faintly, the runes along the edge, glowing a sickly green. "Filth is filth, no matter how you cover it up," she said, lightly. "It's not my place to comment on your own faults, but honestly, I doubt your fire matches, Pyro's. If you'd rather die on your own terms, you're welcome to try."

"You-!" Lady Amanda howled. "All of you! All of you, I'll-!"

Cedrella licked her split lip. "Milady, I feel obligated to mention that they set my house on fire..."

Mariana huffed. "You think she's a traitor?" she repeated, advancing. "Do all of you think that?"
Lord Heron cringed, shying away from the approaching Mariana. The gleam in her eyes promised a world of hurt—and death.

In the background, Cedrella winced. She turned away, before an answer was heard.

"So their council no longer trusts you?" Mariana asked, inspecting her blade and checking the runes inscribed at the edges.

"I think that was ruined the moment we brought Regulus in." Cedrella explained. "They have never truly accepted him and with his wife—Jun."

"The Runemistress?"

"Yes. She goes by the name of Juniper Evanson."

"And her Circle?"

"I never knew her to have one. She had Regulus and I don't really remember seeing her marks on him or otherwise. They were sort of—private."

"An Evanson?" Mariana mused. Her Advisor had mentioned something about a missing Alpha, when visiting the archives. This was almost too much of a coincidence. There was plenty of information to sift through, from the earlier mind-meld, but she would rather do that later.

There was plenty to occupy her current situation.

"Yes. She was the one who—*helped*—the children."

"Did she know what she was helping?"

"Possibly. I could not give myself away."

Mariana perked a brow.

Cedrella gave a slight shake of her head. "It is my responsibility; however, it has come about."

"I see. And if I were to offer some sort of assistance?"

"...I would not refuse."

"Good girl. Anything else?"

Cedrella hesitated. "W-would you take it off—anytime soon?"

"Pardon?"

"I-I let you cast it because I couldn't trust my own words, but hearing myself say such things—of myself, of our own kind, of what we've—what I've done. I said them under enchantment and I meant them in that moment." She shuddered, hunching forward on herself. "Please—I beg of you. Reverse it. I'll likely need memory charms for the rest of my life."

"Would you really?" Mariana asked, knowingly. "As much as you've done—I suppose I owe you this much—" she snapped her fingers in front of Cedrella's face, watching her flinch backward as the spell became visible.
Twining chains of gold and silver, stretched from her ankles to her throat, where they gathered there, weighing down a fat, choking collar.

As if on cue, they dissolved. The enchantment reversed.

Cedrella coughed, choking as the magic writhed through her and into the ground, to harmlessly disperse. Her glare was half-hearted. Her shoulders twitched, her wings wanting out.

"Don't," Mariana warned. Her expression had darkened considerably, a hint of redness bleeding into her angry eyes. "I'm not in the mood. The geas was to keep your cover and it did what it was bid to uphold the oath you swore upon your life. Now, answer me this—will you return? Or would you prefer to run?"

Cedrella froze. She hadn't expected to be offered a choice. Her cheeks warmed. "If Nevarah would have us, yes." She said, at once. "Me and mine, only. I cannot speak for the rest."

"I wouldn't trust you if you did," Mariana said, brusquely. "Your Bonded and theirs may pass. You'll be spelled to return and there is a permanent geas upon touchdown. You will never speak of this and I will never hear tell of it."

"I expected as much."

"You will take it?"

"It is my home."

"Indeed. It's also currently on lockdown. We'll have to send you back through one of our portals."

"Has something happened?"

"Something is always happening."

"...milady."

"...The Hunt proceeds. The night of a thousand prophecies is upon us."

"This century?"

"If you find yourself bored, I am sure I can think of a suitable errand or two."

"...as you wish."

"I wish. Any other questions or perhaps you could read a news feed or two upon your return and spare me the trouble?"

Cedrella had the good grace duck her head in deference. She could sense the growing agitation in the way that Mariana's Bonded, began to shuffle restlessly. They were preparing to move again—it seemed as if their Estate was not the only one in Mariana's warpath. "Are you time jumping again?"

"When am I ever not?"

"...good point." Cedrella hesitated. "W-what took you so long?"

The sharpness returned to Mariana's features. Her sword hummed and gleamed. "I do not answer to you, though you are of my own inner court," she said, coolly. "Do not ask questions you have no right to voice. Go. Now."
"My grandsons-"

"Pyro seems to like that Fred one and I owe him a birthday present. You'll have to leave him."

"Milady-!"

"Don't worry. Pyro plays nicely with the things that catch his eye. As for the other one, I think Robere will suit him. Our Rune Master can reverse the enchantment, when my hunt is through. If they wish to return after that, then the choice may be theirs, if I feel so inclined."

"They're only children and—!"

"Now, Cedrella. Before I'm less inclined to allow you to leave with your head upon your shoulders." Mariana turned away, stalking off to where Scout was waiting with more information.

"...yes, milady." Cedrella whispered. She offered another bow, her smile hidden.

She'd sworn life and loyalty the moment she was old enough to understand it and now—in moments like this, she was reminded of why it worked.

There was nothing she wouldn't do for the darling of the Shadow Courts.

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**CHARACTER SNIPPET : ALEC : NEVARAH, DEVERAINE'S BEACH HOUSE**

"They've found blood. They've found a scale. Oh please, Alec, do whatever magic it is that makes things make sense!" Alec fumed.

He stalked down the darkened beach, taking care to keep from the water's edge. The uneasiness in the air was best ignored for now. He'd had to wait until night fell, before making any moves.

It was easier on his skin and brain—simply because of the cooler temperatures and the likelihood of possible action, as the beach was often occupied during the day.

Alec was fairly certain that nothing would have happened during the day, though he'd sort of kept an eye out to be sure that nothing did.

Nothing had.

Instead, he'd been rudely awakened from his not-nap, to an official message from his two least favourite Merrows.

King Alcandor's words rattled around in his head, along with Advisor Kieran's stiff, flat orders. As usual, both of them were asking the pointlessly impossible.

What did he look like? Some cursed miracle worker?

A walking contradiction, at any rate, Alec thought, darkly. Kesmar knew where his skills came from and he'd only his mother to thank for the strength of his magic.

He'd hoped to at least spend a day or two, without having to work himself to the bone, but it seemed that Alcandor and Kieran had other ideas.

Blood and a scale.

Odd.

Rare, even, for it to reach such a point.

He glowered out at the peaceful waters, irritated at the flicker of moonlight from overhead. The secrets contained in those shadowy depths—well, that was what he was here for, wasn't it?

Alec continued down the beach, skirting further up to hide in the shadows of the Deveraine's beach house. Convenient place for a beach house, given the prime location to the semi-decent casting grounds contained on the seabed of the Merrow Waters in front of it.

Advisor Kieran had said something about the scale being torn and the blood being too little. A scale that was torn, meant it was large—and most dragels did not sport large scales, regardless of rank, so that ruled out a great deal of things straightaway.

Too little blood suggested youth, rather than adult. Neither samples had been sent for his inspection, so Alec guessed that they weren't within Merrow disposal.

Perhaps he ought to pay them a visit and relieve the evidence archives of such a trivial sample.

Silently, he sent a wish upwards that they were not in some idiot Gheyo's hands, being sorted into some stupid unsolvable case file and therefore, not worth the hassle of breaking and entering.

Granted, the two details were helpful—it meant the victim could still be alive, since blood and a scale were immediate proof.

But still troublesome overall, because really, Merrow healings weren't the kinds of things to be throwing around so carelessly and if he found said idiot that had been stupid enough to be captured in the first place…

Alec gritted his teeth at the image of imploring emerald eyes that flickered through his mind.

Harry.

That troublesome, irritating, pointless excuse of a land walker! Of all the creatures in existence, he'd had to dredge that up from the watery pits.

Better yet, he hadn't been able to really help healing the thing—no, Harry—and of course, that had gone spectacularly sideways as well.

It wasn't his fault he was bound by Oath.

Dragging him into more trouble than he'd already been in, hadn't helped anything at all. Alcandor had been furious and Alec had seriously thought that Kieran would kill him.

Not that the thought wasn't entertaining, but honestly, he hadn't meant anything by it.

The entire experience, both at the current strip of beach and again beneath the stupid tree—they lingered on in his mind, memories that he couldn't simply push aside.

Instead, he remembered irritating things, like the way Harry had flinched from him, the confusion in those stupid green eyes and the contented purrs when he'd dared to rub his shiny, silver scales.

Stupid, troublesome, irritating creature!
Best to avoid him at all costs in the future—ha! Alec thought, darkly.

If he were to set eyes on that idiot, he'd likely need every single ounce of—oh. Movement. The thoughts shuffled themselves out of the way as Alec focused on his reason for being here in the first place.

Out of the corner of his eye, at the water's edge, something that was nothing—moved. If he'd been anyone else, it would have escaped him, but he'd been prepared for something like this.

And he was a Merrow, after all.

A concealment spell? There's nothing I can sense at this range...

Alec stealthily eased down to the ground of the concrete floor of the lower section of the beach house. He was grateful that he'd seen the thing in both daylight and nightlight, because now, he knew exactly where the shadows fell.

At present, there wasn't a single shadow user among them—and he could tell in the way that the shadows willingly hid him.

He pressed up against one of the supporting beams for the overhead balcony and watched as the trespassers emerged from the water.

By not looking at them directly, he could make out the distinct forms of three men and one woman.

He ground his fangs together, as they crept further ashore, hauling their cargo behind them.

The nearly invisible shimmer to their concealment spells was the hint that they'd had some sort of Merrow assistance.

Not a pureblood, for no pureblood ever bothered with something as pointless as concealment spells. That left black market trading or some unfortunate, young Merrow, held captive.

Alec forced himself to relax.

It hadn't been Merrow blood, though the scale had been Merrow.

He watched them uncover a dozen crates between them, systematically covering their tracks and verifying that their cargo was still in good condition.

A whiff of stale air filtered over to him, before abruptly vanishing.

The hint came a split-second too late.

Alec rolled sharply to the side and pulled heavily on the water beneath the beach house.

The sand obligingly swallowed him up as he saw the darkened figure looming overhead, stab downwards where he'd lain, only seconds before.

Kesmar!

Alec swore, burrowing deeper into the sand and using his elemental ability to pull his attacker in after him. Best to make a scene, if that was what it was coming down to.

He couldn't sense the others reacting, but the killing aura remained.
Surfacing several yards away, he found the Halfling sprawled out, half-hidden by the beach house shadow and half-draped over the slight indentation of sand. There was no sign of life.

Naturally, of course, the smugglers were gone.

Alec scowled.

In mere seconds, it'd become far more troublesome than it was worth.

He stretched a hand out to the body and slowly curled his fingers up. There was a muffled, gurgling sound, before all the moisture in his attacker, retreated at his beckoning.

The murky bubble of liquid floated over to him, but Alec only waited until it darkened to the appropriate colour of blood.

Ah. That was better.

He whispered the words that solidified it. Hefting the cold orb in his palm, he held it up to the moonlight.

A gentle wind from the waves, blew the skeletal body away—everything returning to dust—as if nothing had ever happened there.

The waves rippled again. Alec hefted the orb in hand. He strolled to the water's edge and smiled when Goonter surfaced.

"Treat for you," he called out, softly.

Goonter yawned, his great maw opening to show vicious gleaming fangs. He snapped up the orb, crushing it easily.

"Good boy," Alec crooned, stepping into the water. "Very good boy."

Goonter purred, a rumbling sound that made the water vibrate around them.

Alec threw an arm out to the shore and watched as the waves did as he bid them. A suitable wave surged upwards to the shoreline, washing away any troublesome traces of other beings.

This was a Merrow problem. His King had declared it so. Therefore, it wouldn't do to have any others entangled in the mess.

Goonter circled him once, surfacing with his head pressing against Alec's hand.

"Ready to work?" Alec asked, climbing aboard.

Goonter yawned again.

"If you don't wake up that stupid brain of yours, you'll fall asleep in the middle of our important assignment and I'll let Alcandor turn you into soup for that stupid banquet that he's throwing for-"

Goonter dived.

Deep beneath the water, as the moonlight faded from overhead, Alec relaxed. He let himself shift from his two-legged form, to the more comfortable Merrow form that he preferred.

Smugglers.
What a bothersome chore.

Especially when he was sure that the awful, skin-crawling smell he'd caught, was nothing more than death and destruction.

Dead as in dead something-that-was-not-to-be-eaten and destruction as in loss-of-a-magical-life. Only a dead Elf or Fae would smell like that.

Pity.

It seemed they'd truly stumbled across something troublesome.

Oh well. Kesmar willing, he'd report more on it in the morning, for now, with Goonter's help, perhaps they could retrace the route that had brought them to this part of the beach.

After all, he had all night.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This Chapter was a rollercoaster to write. UGH. I hope you enjoyed it. :P I think there might have been a tissue warning. and a drama warning. and goodness knows what else. I did not mean for this chapter to take so long.

Thank you as well for the well-wishes! My health has been much better this month, along with my muse and much better stress levels, as well. :) I hope it's been a good month for you guys as well! Also, if you read the snippets, there was a oneshot with Harry and his Bonded, being all cute and adorable. Check it out if you need to cheer up after this chapter! It's called "Denial is a River in..."

Thank you for your patience! Thank you for your support! I love you guys! ~Scion

Many thanks to brissygirl who always does a fabulous job of beta-ing these monster chapters. Did you know this chapter is 70 pages long in MS Word? *le gasp*

WANT TO VOTE IN TBDH'S NEXT CHAPTERS? Tell me the top 3 plot lines you'd like to see tied up next. (Explanations with Lord Cunningham and Hadrian are due in chapter 106, along with a Wikhn snippet, so cast your vote for something else you'd like to see more of!) :)

...
As I Come Into The Light

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

!!Possible TRIGGERS FOR: mentions of death/implied torture! (basically, Death and Mariana are still on-screen)!!

RECAP: Riven Cairothe and Tavit the Necromancer, work to keep Harry alive and out of Death's Clutches. It is Harry's Missing mentor, Maurice Elswood that is the final sacrifice to stay Death's hand. Giving himself in place of Harry, Maurice has enough time to give a final farewell. The Kalziks get involved when Ethan rushes to bring in a set of Healers by Riven's request. Prince Raspen maintains a tense truce, as everyone works together to save Harry. The Cunningham's are caught between the mess on Earth with the Dursley's to the issues with the Torvaks, and by extension, The Weasleys. Keep reading more fun and plenty of drama! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NIKO - PRIVET 4 DRIVE (EARTH) : HADRIAN AND THE CUNNINGHAM'S

Niko pushed the scythes apart with a finger on each, wickedly curved blade. Her fingers twitched, the spell readied at her fingertips to undo the stasis she'd cast earlier. Tavit had vanished—no doubt to some pointless mindscape for another one of his long, drawn-out negotiations with Death.

Not that she minded, of course.

This was the true nature of his work and she knew better than to interrupt. There was no point in splitting his focus with her presence. If he needed her, he would call—and if he didn't, she'd answer his unspoken call. There was something between them, after all.

It was only a hassle to have to deal with the aftermath on her own. In this case, separating two ranked reapers caught in the midst of their own bloodlust.

Fascinating, she thought, darkly.

Personally, it would've been far more fun to watch them take it out on each other, but from the body submerged halfway into the seal below them, she had a feeling it was in her best interest to preserve it. Tavit's scolding's were legendary and his punishments more so—she wasn't exactly in the mood to suffer at his hand.

At least, no more than necessary.

His last lecture was still ringing in her ears for prancing through another's mind uninvited. He hadn't cared that she'd wrestled something out of the poor unfortunate soul, he'd been upset about
the lack of consent. But Tavit was Tavit and Niko was Niko.

She knew which limits she could push him to and he knew when to stop her, so that was that. As long as she could still sense him, that he was hearty and hale, then all was well. There was no need to break promises and seals or tear through limiters meant to keep her powers at bay.

Niko knelt, patting along the surface of the seal, gently pushing the body back into the final layer. The seal could hold the body until Tavit was through with his negotiations. The preservation spells layered over it, would keep everything exactly as it needed to be. Burying the body back into the seal would also keep it safe from the reaper's scythes, should they decide to attack her, instead of each other. The spell warmed in the palm of her hand, as she danced out of reach of their swing and then released the spell that held them frozen.

Predictably, both of them pivoted to swing at her, their balance thrown off by the return of movement. Identical rasping growls of displeasure emanated from both reapers.

"Don't point those at me," she said, darkly. "And come to your senses before I make you." Her eyes glowed, faintly. Her thick, dark hair flared out behind her. The air sizzled with untapped energy from realms both visible and not. "I doubt you would like it if I made you…"

The Cunningham Gheyos shuffled restlessly, but no one dared to approach the standoff between the two reapers and the little darkling girl.

She knew they wouldn't. They valued their lives after all. She drew the reaper's attention, masterfully manipulating her natural talents to force them back to their normal selves. Her command of the shadows was nowhere near like those of a Shadow elemental—no, Niko pulled on the dimension that was hers to command.

Death.

And no reaper could ever refuse death.

Shadows could be shades of things long past or never to be. So instead of reaching out through the absence of light, Niko drew heavily on every strand that traced itself back to Death. This, she could control. This, she would wield as a weapon of its own.

It took three containment spells and two tempering ones, to finally reign both of them in mid-strike. Niko scowled as she watched it happen, relieved that it hadn't taken that long and annoyed that they'd both tried to kill her. That was the problem with reapers—always swinging their scythes around.

Lord Cunningham was the first to snap back to himself.

Of course.

He came to himself with a gasping groan and the immediate flash of blue energy in his pitch-black gaze. Spirit energy. The blue faded back to black within seconds as he straightened to his full height.

A flicker of concern filtered through his shared bond with Mariana, a silent inquiry as to whether he was alright. He relaxed, almost at once, the bloodlust ebbing to a tolerable measure. She'd always been able to reach him in moments like this. It'd been her gentle, mental prod to interrupt the chaos that had clouded his mind.

His scythe retreated, and he took a step back, allowing it to rest beside him, as he studied Hadrian's
looming form. He could see at a glance, that Hadrian's reaper form was far more elaborate than his own, with an equally suggestive boost in dark magic.

Dark, but not black, he noted. That was a good detail. An admirable upgrade to what he'd known of the slightly anxious Hadrian.

Possibly more Death magic than Shadow magic, if he was to honestly break it down. That realization eased a lot of worry over past interactions, as in hindsight, it explained far more than Hadrian himself, had ever dared to share. The strained conversations, stubborn habits and routine persistence—self-defence mechanisms that Hadrian had built around himself to keep from showing too much darkness.

Lord Cunningham smirked. No wonder Mariana had been so taken with him. She had an uncanny knack for sensing these sorts of things. Death did seem to favour her, after all. He willed his reaper persona away, waiting until the last of his reaper's robe, faded back into the clamouring shadows around him. This was no longer his fight.

The darkling girl standing just within his field of vision, scowled at him. "I'll take it that you've managed to come to your senses?"

"Indeed, little lady."

She bristled. "I am called Niko. I belong to Tavit. I trust you know whom I speak of. You may address me as Niko. Anything else and I might not be inclined to see you safely to where you are required."

"As you like," Lord Cunningham said, smoothly. "Niko. I take it I have you to thank for sparing a thick-headed, stubborn-hearted stray of mine?"

Niko ignored him. She turned her scorching glare on Hadrian, who flinched. The drooping slant of his shoulders suggested that he was no longer a threat. That was good—now she just had to move them to where Tavit would most likely end up.

It was fifty-fifty chance that he'd step back into Death's realm or approach the entire mess sideways—through the Hound's Inner Court.

Niko drew out a small, silver coin from her blouse and flipped it in the air. She slapped it down on her wrist and wrinkled her nose at the result.

*The Hound's Inner Court it is then...*

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**EARTH : PRIVET DRIVE : LORD CUNNINGHAM + NIKO**

Hadrian stirred, faintly, as he felt the aura leave him. His reaper persona faded away, leaving behind an oddly disconnected feeling.

The chill of the surrounding magic and Death's presence, registered almost as an afterthought.

Stabbing pains sliced through his stomach and Hadrian doubled over, vomiting onto the street. His shadows heaved and groaned around him. A single round of shudders wracked his body.

"...easy—breathe in, hold it—and let it go," Lord Cunningham appeared at his side, one strong arm curling around Hadrian's quivering shoulders.
Hadrian flinched, turning his face to the side, to hide the expression he couldn't control. His stomach churned again and he dry-heaved, as a gentle stomach soothing spell washed over him. He turned, confused, to meet darkly amused eyes.

"Mariana would be unhappy if I allowed you to suffer when it was within my capacity to aid you," Lord Cunningham said, calmly. "Better?" He banished the vomit with another, discreet spell. "Normally, you don't eat anything at all, but today you decided you felt like it?"

Hadrian gaped. That wasn't at all what he'd been expecting. "You're not—you didn't—didn't you see what I-?"

"That's quite a rank you hold as a reaper. I wasn't aware you'd taken the oath." Lord Cunningham eased him upright, gauging whether he could sit comfortably on his own.

Hadrian coloured, eyes averted. "I-I didn't." He muttered. He shuddered again, his shadows writhing in agony. He couldn't release them—yet.

"Had it gifted to you, then?"

"...something like that."

"What price do you pay?"

"Eh?"

"I pay in soul currency—an easy enough trade, given Mariana's tastes and habits. As such, I retain my current state and rank, with very little effort. Death does not trouble me and I do not trouble it."

"Ah," Hadrian twitched a hand. His shadows stilled. "It's—complicated."

"Indeed. Death is not a kind nor easy mistress."

"...I do whatever is asked of me." Hadrian shuddered. He shouldn't say more. He couldn't. It would mean thinking about it—and remembering things that he'd sworn not to remember again. There were rules that lived in the shadows and this was one of the twisted rites that lurked beneath the surface. Death chose her reapers from their ranks—after they'd crossed one line too many.

He'd wondered if any of the Cunningham's were reapers themselves, but he'd never worked up the nerve to ask. Mariana had seemed like a good candidate, but then he'd had to discount for the fact that she preferred a clean death, unless otherwise provoked—a distinction that exempted her from the dark mantle that he wore.

Even Death had limits, it had seemed.

Hadrian tried not to notice his trembling hands. They curled into lose fists, as he willed the shudders to stop. His transformation always took more out of him with each consecutive turn—and some day, he was sure he wouldn't change back. There would be no reason to.

"Anything?"

"...anything."

"That is indeed a very steep price to pay." Lord Cunningham patted Hadrian's shoulder, before straightening up. That was a heavy price to pay—to some degree. Death always favoured her own, when possible. A gamble that most Shadow elementals used to their advantage—Hadrian was no
different, he was sure. "When you're through feeling sorry for yourself—there's work to be done."

Hadrian stared up at him in a mixture of disbelief and gratitude. He had no words to say, but only gave a short nod.

Hiding a smile, Lord Cunningham strode forward. "Circle up!"

The Death Seal shimmered at their feet, the final layer groaning terribly from the invisible negotiations between Death and Tavit.

It shuddered and cracked—like a plate of glass shattering into a million pieces.

Maurice Elswood's lifeless body remained in the centre of the sidewalk, contorted in the position the seal had required. His blackened wings stretched out behind him, in full breadth, his clothes torn and stained with the evidence of a battle beforehand. The emptiness and lack of magic, spoke the loudest to them all.

Lord Cunningham bowed his head, pulling a handful of shadows from over his right shoulder, a soft cloak of black was formed in his fist. He handed it to his ACE, who took it wordlessly, to drape over Maurice's form. The Cunningham's gathered around, forming a protective circle around the cloak. The wards shrank inward. The time-regulated space thrummed with the effort of containing the magic swirling within.

Hadrian stumbled to his feet, forcing himself to stand upright, relieved when his body obeyed. He fell into rank, slipping into the place set out for him between two of the Jokers.

"The house?" the ACE inquired, a steady blue flame alighting on his hand.

Lord Cunningham merely took the flame and cast a look to the house. He flicked it onto the lawn and watched the flames spread at once, hungrily devouring everything within their path, intent on consuming the entire house.

"...milord?"

"Yes?"

"...they are still in the house."

"...are they?"

"Milord!"

Lord Cunningham sighed, as if put upon. "Very well. Retrieve them."

"Thank you," the ACE said, testily. He gestured for the Vega Twins to move first, waving in another pair to join them. Four would be enough to rescue the three Dursley's.

Hadrian stared, numb. He watched as the entire house and then the entire lot, was consumed by cursed, blue flames. He watched as the Cunningham Gheyos hauled out the twisted, grotesque form of a female dragel halfling, stuck in mid-morph, along with a feral youngling, and the bloated, butchered body of a human in stasis.

The Dursley's were laid out on the street, away from Maurice and the Cunningham's.

Shucking flickers of blue flames from their uniforms, the Gheyos grumbled and muttered, as the house groaned and fell behind them.
"…two more minutes!" one Vega Twin whined, examining the singed tips of their fluffy ponytail. "ACE!"

The ACE sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Yes, yes, I'm sorry." He moved close enough to offer a hug of consolation, followed by the expected kiss. "There, it's not so bad. You can get it cut when we return."

A pout was the answer, but the Vega Twin didn't complain.

"…they're alive?" The ACE glanced over at them, noting the stasis spells and low-magic maintenance.

"The woman and child," the other Vega Twin approached, more intent on checking their Twin's hair, than the trio behind them. "I'm surprised the house stood at all. Seems as if it was attacked and rebuilt."

"The entire house?" The ACE's eyebrows arched upward. "It looks—well. I suppose it was possible."

"Definitely Possible, but hard to tell now. I'd wager someone held a shield over it and either couldn't hold the shield or tried to save the house and everything in it."

"And those two?" The ACE gestured to the woman and child.

"In stasis," came the expected explanation. "They will require extensive healings and at least a mind healer, given that the child is feral." The Vega Twins wrinkled their nose in tandem, identical expressions mirroring their faces, as their gifts came into play. Golden eyes glittered for the Twin on the left, while icy blue eyes settled on the one at the right.

"Death will still come for them."

"Death does not discriminate."

"…Death never has," the ACE said, lightly. He hugged both twins, nuzzling the tops of their heads to settle them, pleased when they relaxed and chirped softly in answer. He waited until they returned to their selves—each sporting one gold eye and one blue one—before he turned them loose. "Have one of our contacts prepare something over there, to receive them. Tell them we want them charged to the maximum degree allowed and demand recompense."

"Yes ACE." They chorused. "The body too?"

He twitched, faintly. It would be better to take the body with them. In fact, it'd be best if they didn't leave any trace of their presence on Earth. The ACE glanced Lord Cunningham, still manipulating the burning of the house. "…the body too."

"Yes ACE!"

---


Maia Kadel blew a long stream of lavender-hued smoke into the scrying bowl before her. The slender pipe balanced on her hand, dripped with shimmering gold. A single, blood tear, trickled down her face. She'd seen things again.
She tipped her head back, lifting the pipe to her lips. Another draw, another puff.

The tiny, smoky room, seemed to stand still in the midst of time.

Visions cleared, dancing before her eyes as she stared through the smoke. Only against the ever-changing canvas of greyness, could she discern the truth behind each shifting montage. Her heart had flipped twice when she'd seen Riven accept Prince Raspen's request. She'd expected to see him for a few hours at some point, for the duration of his visit to Nevarah.

The times had not been kind to him, though their friendship had not suffered for it. She'd wondered if he would ask her to seal him again. His preferred method of handling his issue was to bandage the suppression runes on his arms and hope for the best.

A poor strategy, she knew, but one that suited him fine. He always thought of himself last, in times of need. She'd long wished for him to have someone who would look after him or at least convince him that he was worth the hassle of being looked after. Storm elementals were always tricky.

But, her vision of Riven had changed, merely seconds after she'd realized it. The images had wavered, giving way to showing King Edgar fulfilling that honoured duty of bandaging his arms. She had guessed then, that he wouldn't visit this time around.

Not that she could fault him for it. Even if she would miss his company for however brief the visit would be.

Their powers—her future sight and his life-altering magic—were not meant to peacefully coexist in such close quarters within the same realm.

At least not when he was still alone.

"...Idiot," she murmured, softly. The notes she'd scribbled on the parchment beside her, faded away to nothing, as the information was no longer relevant.

It'd been some time since she'd seen this face, after all. The image of Tavit, the Necromancer, stuttered into place along the swirling pictures of the possible futures stretched out before her. Tavit was a heavy hitter—he could easily change the track of a potential failure, but only if engaged in time. His own future was just as tangled and unstable as Riven's, if not more so.

"I told you to call him first..." Maia scribbled another note on the parchment.

This time, it stayed.

The image of Riven and his stricken face, wavered on the water's surface before it began to churn. The light faded from it. The room fell dark once more.

She dropped the pipe into the bowl and turned away from the mess. The parchment burst into flame, ashes pooling, before dissolving completely to dust.

Hugging her arms to herself, Maia rubbed insistently on the claim marks lining each limb. This one truth—a Circle to call her own—was the singular ray of light that made her life worth living, cursed as she was. There were too many strands of Fate in play and she could not leave Nevarah until her duty was done.

Faint shivers ran down her spine, as she waited for her Bonded to respond. Since Riven had not called her, it would mean helping in a different way.
Visions flickered faintly, in her mind, but she stubbornly kept her eyes open. She would hold onto the most successful version of this future and coax it into happening, no matter the cost.

Riven had a habit of stumbling into those who always needed the most help and proceeding to help them, even at a tremendous cost to his own existence. It wasn't a bad habit, exactly, but every so often, his rescued ones would become the history changers.

The oddball individuals to shift an entire realm's course, simply by existing and using their own gifts to the fullest capacity. And he would pay a price for having been the one to stir them into life-changing motion.

She sighed. He was doing it again for the sake of a lonely, little soul, with beautiful green eyes. Ah, but she'd met his Alpha—hadn't she?

Henry had brought them over. A serious young man with the tempered strength of his earthen element and the calmest fire elemental she'd ever seen in years. It had been such a new, but promising start for a triad, that she'd been very pleased to make their acquaintance.

Just seeing the odd little pair had prompted the ridiculous words to leap from her mouth. She didn't give favours to just anyone and yet, something in her chilled heart had warmed at the sight of their earnest, muted introduction.

It had actually sparked her curiosity in wanting to know just who this Harry was and why he would attract such fitting Bonded, given what she'd checked after meeting Henry.

And then, of course, there was the matter of the bloodstones. She wondered if Cora would actually follow through. In spite of her age, Cora was capable and resilient, when she wanted to be. Too often, she was daydreaming some other invention or the other, but once in a while, a sharpness that lurked beneath the surface—made itself visible for a moment.

If she'd timed it right, then this would be the moment. Maia stifled a yawn. She'd been up for hours and now, could feel the weight of it resting on her shoulders.

There was still so much to see and track, between all of the visions she'd experienced. She would have to spend a few hours scribing to record all of it for later use.

Footsteps shuffled outside in the hallway before a quiet knock to announce his presence. Her Beta appeared in the doorway, his jaw set, as he fluxed from invisible to visible, touching down into the Nevarean plane of existence. "He didn't call?"

"...I don't think he had the choice," she said, lightly. "But let's help him anyway, hm?"

"Since when are we so generous?"

"Since I have my eye on something and that something appears to be in mortal danger," Maia tapped his shoulder as she passed. She'd never met such a curious submissive, this 'Harry'—his face, his eyes—something in them had reached out to her.

And she'd been unable to leave it be, much in the same way that she'd first met Riven. She needed to meet him soon.

Her eyes burned, the weight of possible visions resting heavily upon her.

"...you should rest...?" her Beta hesitated.
She went straight to his arms, grateful that he was visible and corporeal enough for the embrace. It was quite troublesome to be the only one existing on this plane in Nevarah.

But it was the price she paid for the gifts that ran in her veins.

"I cannot." She breathed deeply of the ashen scent that clung to him. "We do not want any other futures than this."

"...he is playing again?"

"A Cairothe never plays."

Her Beta hummed. "Indeed. I suppose it's our turn then?"

"Yes. Gather in the second transportation room."

"Where are we headed?"

"...to see the Hound, about a certain soul."

Her Beta nodded. "As you like."

"I have one more thing to check and then I'll be right there, hm?"

"Shadows be with you," he murmured.

The press of his lips on her forehead, faded halfway, as he fluxed from visible to invisible. A flicker of wind dashed through the hallway, drawing some of the smoke from her seeing room, after him.

Maia held out a hand, for her pipe. It floated up and over to her hand, pristine and refilled as if she'd never cast it into the bowl.

She whispered the words to light it and placed it to her lips. Now then...if it were possible, how could I save a soul that desperately wished to die?

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**SHADOW HAUNTS : NEVARAH : WIKHN**

Wikhn stepped out from the pits, his traveling license safely hidden on his person. It was a pain to have things signed by someone other than Dahlia—but the last thing he wanted, was to have her keeping tabs on him. She certainly hadn't bothered to take note of him after she'd left with Shayla.

She'd find him soon enough, if she really wanted to.

If she needed him.

It wasn't like he was running away or anything.

Definitely not running.

There were consequences for that.

He twitched, faintly, at the last memory. He was not fond of being dragged back to where he belonged, but standing by her side had been tolerable to the point of genuine affection. She'd cared and so, in turn, he'd learned to return that care.
A care that had gradually turned to something more.

He'd forgiven her nearly as much as she'd forgiven him, somehow overlooking his faults and deeming him worthy.

To see her standing beside Shayla, still perturbed by the history between them—but yet, willing to start a new chapter, a new life together—that had been unexpected. His chest throbbed. The ache had yet to dim.

He hadn't expected it to hurt this much. Wikhn pressed a hand to his heart, focusing on directing his magic there. It was the best he could do for the current moment. He'd managed to ignore this for far too long.

The pain eased, moments later, a dulled ache that he didn't care to notice again. He boxed up the thought and shoved it in the back of his mind. He could mope about it later.

For now, he simply wanted distance. Some space. Some time. Maybe a bit more.

Just—a change of scenery.

There were more important things to command his attention and he meant to let them distract him.

Pushing his way through the crowded exit, Wikhn turned his steps towards the Shadow Haunts. It was easier to lose his tracks here, though predictable.

The Shadow element had never bothered him. The bland indifference made it easy to master his affinity for it. Notwithstanding that Shadow Gheyos tended to be far more enjoyable in bed than most other elements.

Wikhn ducked into a corner alley, making his way through the backstreets. He paused at one point, to shift his appearance a bit more obviously.

Just because Dahlia might look for him, didn't mean that he had to make it easy on her.

Or anyone else for that matter.

He was on the King's business, after all, and some secrecy would likely be helpful. The details had been short, specific and bound by secrecy.

Tangling his fingers in his short, choppy hair, Wikhn tugged and twisted, until the strands lengthened to silky, smooth locks, that nearly reached his waist.

Scooping up a handful, he tugged one of the ceremonial earrings from one ear and tapped it against the thin ponytail. The earring morphed into a clip, securing the hair against his head.

That would keep it out of his face, in case he actually had to worry about it in the middle of a fight. Not to mention, he would definitely appear more fae-like to anyone caring to stop him at first glance.

There were plenty of Dark Fae among the shadow ranks, easy to spot with the pitch black hair and odd pink eyes. Playing up those traits would allow him to move freely.

Wikhn squinted up at the sky, eyes fluxing from pink to red. There were general protections still cast over this section.

He could see them without trying.
Curious.

Hopefully, it wouldn't stay that way through the entire season, but stranger things had happened. Hands free at his sides, Wikhn ducked out from the side streets and made his way towards the street where the Kuroe Clans resided.

He'd seen them out and about in the Hunt, and there was enough neutrality between them to allow an unexpected guest to wander in.

The head Pareya answered the door, a flicker of recognition as he waved Wikhn inside the great house. "One of the Black Dahlia's?"

"Her former King," Wikhn allowed. "She is Bonded now."

"Ah, yes. We heard and witnessed," the Pareya chuckled. "Quite an explosive bonding, if I may say so."

"You may," Wikhn allowed. "But I am not here on her business."

"…who commands you?"

"The Earth King."

"King Edgar?"

"Prince Raspen has not yet taken the throne."

"…indeed. We welcome you then, the King's business is our business. Do come in." The Pareya led the way down the hall, a twitch of their fingers taking down the wards that would keep out all others.

Wikhn broke into a trot following along until they came to great double doors at one corner of the house. The War Room, he guessed.

Sure enough, he was admitted, and welcomed into the company of nearly the entire Circle. The Alpha greeted him with pleasantries, while the Submissive offered a temporary oath of secrecy.

"Drink?" one of the Pareya offered. "You can seal the oath with it."

"Ah—thanks." Wikhn took the proffered cocktail, holding out his free hand, wrist exposed. The oath was sealed by way of a thin band of wild magic—a promise that he would not speak of whatever he heard while in their presence, and asking the same of them on behalf of the King's business.

"May we be of some assistance?" The Alpha inquired.

Wikhn swirled the drink in hand. He'd contemplated a dozen different ways to phrase his request, but mostly, he wanted extra insurance. There were other ways to find out what the King wanted to know.

Still, Wikhn did not intend to run himself into the ground to satisfy the desperation or curiosity from the request of a single dragel.

At least, not one that he didn't have a personal connection to.

He was Fae after all and there were rules.
"Blood?" the Gheyo beside him offered, wrist extended.

"...thanks." Wikhn held out the cup, accepting a clean dribble into the pale drink.

The Gheyo chuckled, taking the cup from Wikhn's hand to swirl it and take a sip, while Wikhn tended to the neat slash on his arm with a few, quick licks.

The drink was returned—and finished. Wikhn twitched, faintly, feeling the magic within the oath activate. He felt the answering pulse of magic in the room, as the wards shifted and adjusted to his presence there.

"The King has sent me to verify the vampire activity for the Hunt."

Glances were exchanged between Alpha and Submissive.

"...vampire activity for the Hunt now?" The Alpha wanted to know. "The introductions have already passed."

"They requested entry—but a far larger number than ever before. It's been some time since Nevarah has hosted them," Wikhn explained.

"...by which you mean the ranks of our element are unsettled and we have not kept a large store of bloodstones." The Alpha frowned. "That could be troublesome. Most natural vampires—if they do not travel properly in their respective groups, they can cause chaos by improper feeding."

"The bloodstones ought to be inventoried," the Submissive said, thoughtfully. "At the very least, we should clear some space and build a bit of shadow housing."

"They'll come here?" the Pareya checked. "For certain?"

"...They would not send them anywhere else but to our section." The Alpha said, wearily. "And since our element does not hold a royal rank, we have no one to outright object."

"The Cunningham's could protest," The ACE suggested.

"I am sure they are already aware."

The ACE shook her head. "No, I don't think so. They certainly would step forward, if they were aware. Lady Mariana is not one to sit quietly—and we all know that if anyone were to assume a crown for this rank, we want them. They deal fairly with their own kind and ours, so that is all we could ever ask."

Wikhn half-smiled. He shared the sentiment, if only because of their fearsome reputation. It was true to his nature that he would trust fairness over other traits—the Cunningham's had never dealt badly with Lady Paielda, at least, not in any dealings that he was aware. What little dealings he'd had with their Jokers, had been professional courtesy—in the form of brutal efficiency. There was never anything wasted between them.

In turn, it meant that those beneath her held a healthy sense of respect for their Circle.

"Are you venturing alone?" The ACE asked, offering another drink. "We could spare a few blades, if you wanted."

"No need to trouble yourself." Wikhn began.

"They're bored, you'd be doing me a favour," the Submissive said, dryly. "Please do take them, if it
suits you. I don't mind if they get a bit of fresh air. This lockdown is scarcely old enough to register and still, I feel as if I can't breathe."

"Now cut me some slack," The ACE protested. "We haven't been that bad."

"...your version of climbing the walls, still involves climbing actual walls," came the dry answer. "You're driving me crazy just watching. Honestly, if you could take them with you—unless your orders are otherwise?"

"The King did not say," Wikhn said. "I don't know if it's allowed, but-"

"But you'll be fine on your own," the Beta smiled, warmly. "Spoken like a true Fae. That is what matters then. So you're to count their numbers or something more?"

Wikhn twitched. The King hadn't been that specific, so that ought to be alright to share. "...something more. That's why I came here."

"Oh?"

"...besides a full suite of blades, I want to ask your opinion on the information I was given."

The Alpha frowned. He gestured to the chairs around the planning table. "Then make yourself comfortable. We can spare the time."

"...thank you." Wikhn approached the table, seating himself to the left of the Beta, with a nod. "The King mentioned that I was not the only one dispatched to verify and report."

"There were others?" The ACE took a seat opposite of Wikhn, folding her arms atop the table. "How many are we talking about?"

"I don't know. He didn't exactly say, but he said others, which suggests at least three or four."

"And they'd have to be of your calibre," the Alpha murmured. "At least, to even be chosen. Your reputation is well known."

Wikhn flushed. His left hand twitched towards the hilt of his cursed sword. He'd never done anything specifically for the sake of his own reputation, but it had managed to be something all on its own. "Any strong blade would have done, I wasn't familiar with their names, though I do think they must have had some claim to bring them to his notice. However, none of them have returned. Not a single one."

"Did he send ACE ranks or Jokers?"

Wikhn hesitated. "...that's where I think it didn't work out right. He didn't say and when I asked, he said I was the only one he'd seen personally."

Another round of glances were exchanged across the table.

"So it's very possible there's a spy?"

"Not that far up," Wikhn said, quickly. "Definitely not that far up. I think it's a little further out."

"A little further or a little darker?" The Submissive wanted to know.

"Darker," the Alpha supplied. "That's why you've come here, isn't it? To us?"
Wikhn shrugged. "Someone is helping them. The Vampires have been peaceable for many years. Many. I have a few friends among them and I do count them as friends. They are as peaceable as we dragels are. Happy to spend their time doing what they like, which rarely, if ever, involves excessive bloodshed and war. They savour their peaceful times, just as we Fae do."

"Ah," the ACE brightened. "You think there's unrest in their ranks?"

"It's the only thing I can think of. They know better—they know, all of them—that to try to attack Nevarah will not end well. The Fae's blessings are upon this realm and both sides will rise to see it protected."

The Beta hummed in consideration. There was truth in Wikhn's words, for both the Light and Dark Fae, would step forward if Nevarah asked it of them. "True. The Fae and the Elves—though notably the Elves are more neutral than anything else."

"Neutral enough," Wikhn said. "They would act, if it were in their favour. Most of them that reside here, like it enough to protect it. They will stand to defend Nevarah's borders if it came to that. Perhaps not beside us, but certainly behind us for another layer of protection."

The Alpha sighed. "So you've come here to—what? Warn us? Invite us? Mention secrets that can't be repeated?"

"You may do what you like with the information. I simply didn't think it polite to come without offering some sort of token, in exchange for your assistance." A flicker of red flared in Wikhn's darkening eyes. "I came to ask for a safe portal to a specific point in the Vampire Realm. Your portal master and I, have spent time together in the pits."

The ACE flashed a grin. "Indeed you did—Oi!" She called over one shoulder, waving a hand at the Gheyo nearest to the door. "If Rudy's out back, tell him to expect company, alright? Set any groundings in place, if needed."

The Gheyo nodded, excusing themselves from the room and disappearing through the massive double doors.

"You're welcome to stay for—something," the Submissive offered, wrinkling his nose. "We're not trying to chase you away."

"He means it'll take time for a new suit to be crafted," The Alpha explained. "An hour or so, perhaps. Do you have recent measurements?"

"Yes." Wikhn rose from the table, as the rest of them followed suit. "I don't want to linger though—and of course the cost—"

"Can be billed to the King," The Alpha said, smoothly. "You are on his business. He can foot the bill to see that you are properly kitted out. You two," he grinned at the two Gheyos inching to the door. "Take him to get fitted. You need any traveling gear, besides a fresh suit and new weapons?"

"I'll keep my blade," Wikhn said, tapping the hilt. "I'll trade everything else."

"Good choice." The Alpha slung an arm around his Submissive's shoulder. "Do you want to entertain or would you rather I-?"

"Go." The Submissive said, dryly. "Just go. I know you're dying to share the news."

"If the Cunningham's aren't back as yet, someone needs to do something," The Alpha said,
smoothly. "No reason why we can't."

"Yes, yes. Fine. Make sure you inform the others—you know Thistle hates it when you leave her out of things."

"...I don't do it on purpose."

"Yes, you do. Behave. Tell her or I will."

"...that's really not fair."

"Do I look like I'm trying to be fair?"

The Alpha huffed. "Good point. I'll mention it at some point."

"Mention it in the conversation you're off to have right now!"

"But-!"

"Go!" The Submissive waved him off, circling to fall into step beside Wikhn. "Shall we? He'll be forever and a day with all the formalities we've to set in motion before we can set foot out of this place."

"That bad?" Wikhn wanted to know.

"Depends. I mean, your ranks are close enough to have heard the news by now. There's enough taboos on the name and the topic, but you can speak it within these walls." The Submissive paused. "The Immortals are awake."

Wikhn swallowed. "...all of them?"

"Fairly certain of it, by our calculations. We've been personally verifying each claim."

"Clever," Wikhn allowed.

"Depends on how you look at it. The entire process is time-consuming and it isn't as if there's anything to be done other than saying, we know for sure. They should be making their way to Nevarah, though I can't say for sure when they'll arrive and what form they'll be in."

"It's still useful information."

"I didn't say it wasn't. But new arrivals meant shifting more people around." The Submissive trotted down the hallway, gesturing for Wikhn to follow closely. "I know Lady Deveraine was assigned one, along with the Evanson Clan—and they both have recently returned to Nevarah, so that ought to count as two." He cast a sideways glance at Wikhn. "I don't suppose you would know if there's any truth to that?"

"...Dahlia didn't speak of her mother, much. But I would wager that Lady Deveraine would not leave a job halfway."

"In theory, anyway," The Submissive mused. "Which also brings mention that there were others. The Kadels had one, the Cairothes and—well, I suppose I shouldn't be giving you information you might have to worry about."

Wikhn shrugged. "Erase the memory before I leave. I don't mind."
"Oh?"

"It might help to think about it for a bit, but I prefer not to be the only loose screw in the bracket."

"I'll make sure to remedy that before you leave then."

"Thank you."

"Anything specific for your armor?"

"Flexibility. As much flexibility as you can manage. I want to move as easily as possible and as silently."

"Granted." The Submissive said, instantly. "Anything else?"

"Infusion ability. I can maintain most silent shields, but it helps if I don't have to use as much energy off-realm."

"Ah. Are you bound to Nevarah?"

"No. Only my ACE and she is free of Nevarah."

"Also good to know." Another sideways glance flickered up and down, taking stock of Wikhn's relaxed posture and pensive gaze. "…if I were to ask how many of your kind could come to our aid should there be an—issue—would you give me a straight answer?"

"Crooked as I am?" Wikhn threw back. "…yes."

"How many?"

"All that are within Nevarah and all that come for the Hunt."

"…confident, aren't you?"

"Any Dark Fae that has bonded to a Vampire, has only done so after a halfling fusion of some sort. There are no pureblooded Fae and Vampire bonded among our clans."

"Your queen demands it?"

"Even if she hadn't, it would still be obeyed. We are self-serving creatures after all."

"…Indeed." The Submissive chuckled. "Though you are running from your lovely ACE," he ignored Wikhn's soft sound of denial. "We will keep your secret and offer whatever aid you are willing to accept."

"That is most generous of you."

"I could say the same—as I am sure you are well aware that no Dark Fae has crossed a threshold within the Kuroe Clans for three centuries."

Wikhn hid his smile, head tipped forward enough for the hair to hide his lightening eyes. He'd done as the Fae Queen had requested—it was simply a duty to be completed. "I find that most misunderstandings can be easily cleared if one is willing to gamble for the top."

"…clever."
PRINCE RASPEN'S QUARTERS : THEO, ETHAN AND CHARLIE

Theo moved to join Ethan and Charlie, at a slight twinge in their bonds. He could trace that directly to Ethan, and instinct told him to deal with this sooner rather than later. "Ethan?" He asked, nudging him towards one of the armchairs closer to the fire.

Ethan allowed himself to be directed to the chair and sat, at a prompt from Charlie's hand on his shoulder.

"Something the matter?" Charlie coaxed, when it seemed that no words would be forthcoming.

"...I brought the Kalziks," Ethan said, softly. "Not the Kadels."

Theo rubbed his face. He'd hoped this would wait until they knew for sure that Harry was alright, but of course, it wouldn't. He'd hoped to address this a bit more privately, but from the absolute distress in Ethan's face, that option was no longer suitable. From his golden eyes shimmering and desperate, Theo could read every ounce of regret contained within them.

"You did," Theo said, carefully. "Would you like to explain why?"

"Harry's more comfortable with the Kalziks," Ethan blurted out. His hands twisted together in his lap, his taller frame seeming to fold in on itself. "He's never met the Kadels. I know because he's told me that much. From the way he spoke about Quinn Kalzik, I thought that—I thought it'd work out better. The familiarity would help, if nothing else and the way he talked—I thought that maybe, there might be—something more?"

"Something more?" Theo prompted.

"Another...soul bond," Ethan said, softly. "Like mine. Harry didn't know that we had one until we touched but."

"They've touched," Theo said. "Quinn looked after him when he first came to Nevarah, along with quite a few other things. If there was a soul bond there now, I'm reasonably sure that it would've already triggered by now."

Ethan winced. "I-I know. I just—I didn't know that it'd turn out like this. I was only trying to help!"

A sympathetic smile stole across Charlie's face as he exchanged a glance with Theo. "You couldn't have known," he said, gently. "There was no way of knowing how any of it would have panned out. You're mostly right there, I mean, Harry is more comfortable with the Kalziks, because he has spent a lot of time with them. He's never met the Kadels."

"I just wanted him to be.-" Ethan's voice caught in his throat.

Theo frowned. "I understand that you had the best of intentions, but the Kadels would've been alright. We've met them at the Hunt—Maia, right?"

Charlie nodded. "She said she owed us a favour? I don't think she would've refused a request here, if she knew it was coming through us."

"The Kadels owe us a favour?" Ethan straightened up, looking even more distraught than before. "Since when?"

"Since yesterday. We attended the Hunt briefly with the Peverells, we shared their viewing box at
The Hunt and they went to pay their respects, I suppose. They're on friendly terms. I requested an introduction through them. I believe you would've been meeting Harry around that time."

"Maia Kadel—any Kadel, really—they don't give favours lightly." Ethan explained. "That's quite rare."

Charlie stifled a laugh. "I call it the Harry-effect. Basically, if it wouldn't normally happen, it happens, because Harry's involved." Ethan tried to smile, but his shoulders slumped, head bowed"…I'm sorry," he said, softly. "I meant no harm."

Theo studied him for a second, looking from his dejected pose, to the still crackling dome where Harry was currently out of reach. He reached for Ethan's shoulder, squeezing gently. "You did the best you could, with what you knew in the moment. I should have informed you that we had outstanding favours with other Circles, it hadn't crossed my mind yet. That's on me. Not you. Maybe the Kadels would've helped, maybe not. I don't know. We won't ever know. But what we can do, is mediate, perhaps and next time, don't make those sorts of decisions on the fly."

Ethan gave a tiny nod. It eased the tight, scared feeling that had overtaken him at the thought that he might have made things worse for Harry. Theo had been kinder than he'd expected—much kinder. He started, faintly, when Theo's hand rested on the back of his neck, briefly, before veering to the side, to brush against his claim mark.

A rush of relief washed through him and Ethan found himself relaxing, a touch unwillingly. He knew it was the mark and the fact that it was Theo's fingers pressing lightly over the healed surface, a physical connection to say what words couldn't. He turned his face to the side, pressed against Theo for a few precious minutes.

Theo didn't need to be worrying about him now, he needed to worry about Harry. Ethan bit his lip when he felt a strong pulse of warmth travel through Charlie's bond. Even Charlie didn't blame him. He took a single, shaky breath and gathered himself together as best as he could. Right now, Harry needed all of them.

Theo felt the change in their bonds at once, Ethan's barely muted worry, mixed with Harry's burning intensity slowly built into a searing sensation that he couldn't quite decipher. Charlie twitched, a beat later, scratching along one arm and then at his neck, as the fiery feeling passed through him. Ethan froze, for a full minute, before a violent shudder ran through him, causing him to pull away from Theo's soothing touch.

The trio stared at each other.

"…Harry?" Theo offered, after a beat.

"Definitely Harry," Charlie said, rubbing at Harry's claim mark on his own neck. "What is he doing?"

"…whatever he's doing, it affects all of us," Ethan muttered, hand reaching up to press over Harry's claim mark. It felt as if his entire body was on fire now—muted just enough to keep him from outright panicking.

"That's a given," Theo said, annoyed that his own claim mark was starting to burn as well. "He's apparently channelling Charlie."

"No," Ethan said, shaking his head. "He's making some kind of deal that affects all of us, as a
Circle—this is what that feels like.” He hissed, a moment later, when the mark's burning sensation began to intensify. "I think—we're going to be in some sort of trouble soon."

Theo snorted. "You mean more than usual?"

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**PRINCE RASPEN'S ROOMS : HARRY AND CO. + KALZIK'S & OTHERS**

Harry's body jerked upright, eyes glowing with rich, eerie emerald fire. He shuddered violently, limbs flailing and twisting before a great, heaving shadow emerged from his chest.

Like an ominous spirit, the shadow poured out of him, twisting and shuffling until it was less of a blob and more of a two-legged, two-armed, human-like body. The shadows melted away to show none other than Tavit the Necromancer, his blood-red eyes burning with fury.

"You imbecile!" he hissed as Harry flopped back to the makeshift bed on the floor, the spell complete. "I said wake up wherever you were—not to pull me in with you!" Tavit swore loudly, lurching up to his feet.

"Tavit?" Riven rasped from his corner of the room. "You shouldn't be here."

"I shouldn't be here?" Tavit hissed. "You think I don't know that? Tell me something I don't know," he dropped to a crouch beside Harry, shooing the Kalziks away from his shadow-dripping form, with silent spells that moved them out of arm's reach.

"If you're here-" Riven began.

"Niko's still there," Tavit snapped. "You'll have to trust her good humours. Break my concentration and he dies, happy?" He pressed a hand flat over Harry's flushed face. Head bowed, free hand over his heart, Tavit began to chant.

It was a simple spell, by his own standards, but the intent was weighted and thus, the magic summoned, took some time.

Long, wispy tendrils of shadow that snaked out from every unlit corner of the room, dimming the lights and visibility to something of a grey haze. There was no interference, as Tavit's ominous words had frozen everyone in place.

Even Theo held his tongue, though his aura was the most prevalent in the room, while Charlie's blazing hair continued to flicker in agitation. Ethan was the closest one to Harry, but he'd stayed exactly where he was when Tavit had hissed in his direction.

No words were spoken for several, awful minutes, as Tavit's spell completed itself.

For a moment, Tavit didn't seem so small. He seemed to stretch and grow in size, filling the room, almost to bursting. The pressure was dreadful right up to the moment, where Harry gave a wheezing cough—and then, everything relaxed.

Great shadowy hands drew out a thick, golden thread that seemed to come straight from Tavit's wrist. In the centre of Harry's chest, was a gaping shadowy hole as if pulling Tavit through with him, had ripped open some invisible part of himself.

With painstaking care, Tavit quickly stitched up the tear, as if it were perfectly normal to be sewing an astral form together. His hands were quick and light, nearly translucent at some points.
When he'd finished sewing, the shadows retreated into him and the room lightened significantly.

The pressure of his unusual brand of magic remained, but it wasn't as pressing as it had been before. Tavit pressed both hands over Harry's heart, one hand on top of the other. His next spell was whispered in a crooning, cajoling tone that drew magic straight from Harry's bonded.

A quiet grunt came from Theo, before a fat golden strand of light emerged from his chest and straight to where Tavit's hands rested on Harry's heart. Charlie's blue strand was next and Ethan's green-gold was the last one to come forth.

The three magical threads mixed and tangled with each other, until they seemed to reach an end. The light faded and Harry's body relaxed. The shadow hanging over him, vanished from view.

"He's anchored to the realm," Riven said, easing upright to his own feet and looking as if the entire ordeal had added a hundred years to him. "To keep his soul from leaving his body without—" he stopped.

The red, one-eyed glare that Tavit shot in his direction was enough of a prompt to hold his silence. If Harry's anchor to the realm wouldn't be a problem, then Riven would simply wait it out.

It was always best to give Tavit the time and space he wanted to do his magic and write his futures.

"If you'd like to make yourself useful before I separate your head from your shoulders and your non-existent heart from your soul—then cast a bloody ward to keep this damned room contained!"

Tavit bristled. "What did I tell you about containment spells, Cairothe? What did I tell you about existing in the same instance?"

Riven winced. "I'm casting, I'm casting," he murmured, his voice pitched low. "I didn't expect you to come through—"

"I didn't expect to come through!" Tavit snapped. "This little-!" he bit off the next string of words. "Pulled me through and nearly killed himself!"

"He probably didn't mean to pull you through," Riven offered. He thumped the staff gently on the ground, feeding his magic into it and watching as a web of silvery-purple magic streamed out to encase the room in a glowing grid of light. "Fairly certain he wouldn't put his life on the line to drag you to Nevarah."

Tavit shuddered. "No, he'd just die trying to save a soul already condemned." He scowled. "Yes or no—did Maurice Elswood have any bonds with him?"

Riven hesitated. There was no clear answer to that. "I don't know-" he looked to Theo. "Would either of you know?"

"Not that I recall," Surajini said, drawing herself up to her full height at last. She was not happy at the intrusion into the room and the consequent overflow of Shadow magic that was setting her fangs on edge. She'd never lost control of a room so quickly before, but there was something in Tavit's gaze that had kept her rooted in place.

Tavit glanced at her, a sizing look from head to toe. "You're his Healer?"

"And what of it?" Hiram stood beside her, a staying hand in front of his bonded to keep them from starting forward.

"Her magic isn't the one that's in him," Tavit said, matter-of-factly. "A bit of it is on him, but it's
not in him. There's a difference. Cairothe-?

"Wake him. We'll move," Riven said, easily. "I asked for the Kadels—as I always do."

Tavit made a sound in his throat, but ignored the rest of them as he lifted his hands from Harry's chest, frowning. The tiny spell that leapt from his fingers was a single spark of gold that was meant to jolt Harry awake.

It didn't quite work the way intended.

Harry's next spiralling shudder wracked his body, accompanied by a heaving gasp and wide, normal eyes, wet and shiny as he woke.

Harry's lower lip trembled, the first flood of sorrow forcing out a fresh flood of tears. "Maurice-!" he choked on the name, lurching up and straight into Tavit's unexpectedly available arms. "He's dead! He didn't deserve to die!"

"To save you!" Tavit barked, trying and failing to disentangle himself from Harry's distraught hug. "And through no fault of my own, I'd like to add—get off me!"

Riven barely managed to bite back an inappropriate laugh. The entire situation was so absurd; he couldn't begin to imagine how they'd gotten to this point. The important point though—Harry's life—seemed to no longer be the problem. They succeeded after all, even if that hadn't been his original intent. "Tavit."

"Get him off me!" Tavit snarled. "And just because he's here in this realm, doesn't mean he didn't leave any residual—oh for-!" he trailed off in another mouthful of swears, scrambling to his feet and pulling Harry up along with him.

The room grew dark once more and Harry's body went limp

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"I have him," Tavit snapped. "Don't go losing your mind before you've even begun to use it—I told you this could happen, if you ever summoned me without the proper preparations for a-"

"Stable casting grounds—unbound energy, whatever you want. Just make it happen. Don't lose him."

"I don't lose people that I actually have a chance to save," Tavit grumbled. "And the next time you decide that it's perfectly fine to send me a handful of souls to save something that costs an entire realm of-"

Riven's magic spiralled out from him with a crackling burst of sound and wind that tore through the room, as if there were no walls capable of containing it. Two single blood tears dribbled down to his chin, the red darkening to black, as scales of silver and lavender covered his face and neck.

"The Hound," Tavit said, through gritted teeth. "Will Aiden see us?"

"He'll welcome us with open arms, as he ever has," Riven countered. "Can you bring him?" he nodded to Harry, who still clung to Tavit.

"I'll have to, you're in no condition to do it," Tavit snapped. "What did I tell you about your hell-bent-"
"Lecture me later," Riven said, a flicker of humour showing around the corners of his eyes. "He had a seal—it broke."

"It better have," Tavit muttered. He shifted his armful of Harry, scowling when he couldn't untangle Harry's arms from around his neck. "He's had at least three of them removed, and his body—the time will catch up to it in a moment."

"Are you taking him to Arythmoor Estate?" Prince Raspen interrupted, making his presence known for the first time since Tavit's arrival. He'd stayed in the corner of the room, using his magic to keep the entire floor as tempered as possible, so the sheer level of power wouldn't affect anyone beyond requiring a mild healing of sorts.

Tavit barely twitched. "Where I take this," he tapped Harry's shoulder. "Is none of your business, because if he was, you've done a fine job of looking after him."

"His Alpha is under my care," Prince Raspen said, firmly. "And that makes him my business."

"He isn't even an Earth elemental!" Tavit raged. "He has an affinity for Air and possibly Fire—nothing to do with your element. Where are the others, if he's so important? Why doesn't one of them cast a geas to keep his soul within his body for the first century? Are you all insane?"

"You are stepping into the middle of a situation that you don't understand," Prince Raspen said. "And I am only trying to help you understand it without insults. If you believe that you can help by—"

"You're doing a wretched job of it." Tavit flared. His eyes glowed a rich, dangerous red, the shadows in the room straining to reach his side. "I don't need to be a Royal to understand that. Cairothe—now!"

"Tavit-" Riven began, he stopped at the glare that came his way and changed his request. "His Bonded will be too distressed to wait-"

"They can come on their own time and terms," Tavit grumbled. "I'm not dragging them with me—and neither are you. It'll be much too late, if you keep stalling. The longer we stand here, the harder it will be to undo what's been done to a soul this young and I refuse to-"

"Fine," Riven said, easily. "Niko?"

"She'll come when I call," Tavit said, brusquely. "As she always has. Now, are you going to stand here and quibble or will you open the damn portal?"

Riven smiled thinly. His eyes glowed the brightest shade of purple yet. The web of energy over the room, dissolved into silvery sparkles, the magic returning to him in order to fuel the requested portal. "Portal commencing…"

AIDEN'S INNER COURT : ARYTHMOOR ESTATE - TAVIT, HARRY, RIVEN

Riven's portal was steady and unwavering. It deposited them in the central governing hall of none other than Lord Aiden, the Hellhound, and reigning master to every Hound in Death's employ. The room was massive, with large cathedral ceilings overhead and plenty of smooth, black stone, perfect for amplifying elemental magic and boosting large spells. Red and gold tapestries brightened the initial darkness, lending a nod to Fire and Earth elements, respectively.
There was no light from any of the decorative windows—they were only there for design. No natural light, meant artificial light. A dull red glow shone upwards on the wall, from a hidden trench beneath the floating floor. The floor was the same flat black stone, polished to a near mirror-like finish.

Golden runes were inscribed in the three interlocking circles that formed a decorative pattern on the floor. At the end head of the long hall, were three thrones. One large, black-and-burgundy throne at the highest platform and one smaller version on each side on the platform below it. Velvet-covered stairs led up from the stone walkway.

Tavit shook himself, as if casting away the threads of Riven's special portal. He'd asked the other man to cast it, for the simple reason that he was in no condition to do it himself, if he had to keep Harry's astral form sealed to his physical body. There were too many variables in play.

He was pleased to note that the portal had worked—he hadn't expected anything less from Riven—and that they were indeed where they were supposed to be. He waited for Aiden's guard to notice them.

It happened within seconds.

They were circled at once by the hounds on guard, a lean, hungry pack of shadows, with glowing red eyes and distorted, shadowy bodies. Prowling in a taunting circle of sorts, the shadows pressed closer, some of them taking on more definite shapes to show glowing maws with vicious fangs and dripping green saliva.

"It is I, Tavit the Necromancer," Tavit intoned, unbothered by their approach. "I greet you, Lord Aiden, master of the hounds. Grant me the sanctuary that is writ in our destiny. I come bearing a soul, who struggles to live." He paused. "And as you well know, I would not come to you, if I had another option."

Tavit flapped a hand at Riven, motioning for him to offer some sort of greeting of his own. They were on their own when it came to winning Lord Aiden's favours.

Riven dropped to one knee, the strain of the portal obvious in the physical toll it'd taken on his body. The black tears on his face seemed to darken even more. "I am Riven Cairothe," he said, wearily. "And I come in the company of Tavit. It is my portal that has brought us here."

Tavit scowled at him. That was not what he'd meant with the gesture, but he didn't bother to comment. The look on Riven's face suggested that he was dangerously close to the kind of edge that Tavit had taken great pains to keep him from. He glanced at the approaching shadows, silently willing their master to appear at once.

It didn't help that Harry clung to him, still half-caught in the strands of emotional distress from their previous encounter and unsettled by the hasty portal into less-than-friendly territory.

"Stop—strangling—me!" Tavit hissed, leaning away from Harry's strong arms. "You'll have to sit on your own in a—stop that!" His eyes flared red, a touch of otherworldly strength allowing him to pull Harry's arms free from his neck. "Down!" He snapped.

Aiden, the Hellhound himself, materialized in a swirl of shadow. It unfolded to show him in regal best, a fitted suit of black and grey, his eyes ablaze with the same eerie red that seemed to match Tavit's.

"...and hail to thee, Necromancer," he said, sourly. "I would ask what brings you here, but I see the
soul of which you speak."

The guarding shadows broke apart, morphing into definite hound-shaped creatures, before they solidified and morphed, becoming the armoured guard of Aiden's inner court. They didn't break the captive circle around the newcomers, but they did shuffle back to allow some space.

"He was pulled into an astral plane by one who was set in a different time—and would you stop already?" Tavit said, exasperated. He tried to untangle himself from Harry again. "There were several sets of broken wards, shattered spells, not to mention the spell residue alone-"

Loud, moans rattled through the inner court.

The guards shivered.

The guards shifted restlessly, but remained in place.

Another ghastly moan echoed through the thick, murky air.

It drew a noticeable wince from Riven, and a grim look from Tavit. Harry froze in place, slowly turning to look for the source of the sound. He stopped trying to reach for Tavit and instead, shrank back against him.

Aiden frowned. "Please tell me this has nothing to do with why my mistress screams?"

"...she will be appeased," Tavit said, carefully. "But I cannot lose this one."

Aiden's ruby-red gaze flickered to Harry and then to Tavit. "And why not? Surely if you are that attached to the vessel, the spirit can be exchanged for one that does not bring-"

"Because I asked him to save Harry," Riven said, softly. He eased down to sit on his feet, the strain of standing up, now too great. "Harry hasn't had a whisper of a chance since his inheritance came in. He has some sort of blessed luck that has favoured him this far. He has had nothing else. He deserves better than a death schemed at another's hands."

"Everyone deserves to live," Aiden said, wearily. "They often choose not to. Their choice does not demand our interference."

"No, but to deliver death to one who tries desperately to live—that is where I come in," Tavit said, matter-of-factly. "Now, if you want to keep debating the semantics of it, I'm sure Riven can oblige. I have things to do and places to be. I want this over with, as soon as possible."

Riven half-laughed. "Always in a hurry, aren't you? I take it, since you've got Harry, that means Maurice was out of the question."

"Maurice sacrificed himself for this," Tavit said. This time, he pried Harry off of himself, ignoring the silent shivers and pushing him to Riven. "Hold him. I need space—Aiden, if you're through debating the obvious-?"

"The castings are half complete," Aiden said, a slight twitch of his lips giving away the fact that he wasn't as annoyed as he should be. "When I said I hadn't seen you for some time, I did not mean for you to do this."

"I'll do whatever I please," Tavit grumbled. "And I'm no one's to command. Stop shaking the foundation. I need stability. He's half-air and half-fire, a thankless combination!"
Aiden shrugged, but the room did still at his unspoken command. "It is set for those elements in particular," he said, quietly. "With some gesture towards the earthen element. He has an affinity?"

"Do I look like a healer?" Tavit snapped.

Aiden smirked. "You are lucky you have friends that look out for you, else you would have lost your head a long time ago for that smart mouth of yours."

"I have no friends," Tavit shot back. "Clear the room, unless you want me to use them," he said, with a dark look at the restless guards. "This will push at your corners. Reinforce anything that relies on them. I am not responsible for your poor spell casting."

"Says the one who casts with half a heart and soul." Riven muttered.

Aiden gave a jerk of his head, prompting his shadow guard to move to flank the far corners of the hall. That was more of a warning than he'd expected and the gesture was appreciated. There were certain things that could be cast within Nevarah's realms and there were plenty that shouldn't.

This was one that shouldn't.

Aiden frowned as a whisper of tentative air-magic stretched out to skim over his shoulders. He'd almost forgotten her, though she'd come through the proper channels, instead of barging in through the backdoor like these. "Whether you count them as yours or not, they see you that way," he said, darkly. "The lady waited for you, Cairothe. Acknowledge her and remove her when you leave. I have no use for such—{} magic."

"She?" Riven twisted around. His eyes flared again, zeroing in on someone standing directly behind Aiden. "Maia?"

The air trembled and twisted.

With little ceremony, Maia Kadel stepped down from nothing, into the hall, as if she'd simply peeled back a slice of time and space, to join all of them. "Riven," she murmured.

Her presence was a pure breath of air within the hall, blowing through every nook and cranny, breathing new life into the old magic that stirred within the room.

"Lord Aiden," she added, bobbing in greeting. "May I bring my Circle?"

"Bring whoever you damn well please," Tavit grumbled. "Air Healer?"

"And Receiver of Visions," Maia said, serenely. "I take it that is agreeable?"

"Very," Riven said, gratefully. He cradled Harry in his arms, unsurprised that Harry had simply curled in on himself, uncaring of his surroundings and situation.

"You should have come to me," she scolded, mildly. "Though I would wager from your expression, your schemes did not play out the way you wish for them."

"Miscalculation," Riven explained. "And I did ask for you, but I could not bring the request myself. It was—muddled in translation. Apologies."

"So I see," Maia hummed.

She plucked something from her shoulder and whisked it around her body, as if removing a sweeping cloak of sorts. There was an audible crack in the air, before her Circle appeared behind
her in flanking positions, each of them wearing a hand painted mask of white-silver-gold over their faces. The masks were plain white, with silver and gold scrolls along the side. There were three dangling from a silken thread in one hand.

Maia glided forward, heading straight for Riven. "What are we working with?" She leaned to the side, her magic humming as she stared at Harry. "Where are his Bonded?"

"They are—on their way," Riven hedged. "His name is Harry; he's anchored to the realm. I don't know about the rest. I've come into this halfway on behalf of Raspen. Harry has—seals. A lot of them. I saw one unravel only minutes ago. He's lucky to be like this."

"More than one unravelled," Tavit muttered. He was making his way around the runed circles on the floor, infusing them with magic, a shadowy cast slowly spread across the floor. "And heal him, if you can spare it. I'd rather he didn't drop dead in the middle of this." His laugh was dark. "I don't think I could bargain for his soul after this."

"I'll be fine," Riven protested, but Maia was already reaching for him. He held himself still as her slender hands caught his head, one hand over each ear, tipping his head back to stare up at her. He had exactly two seconds to wonder what she would do—before she gave a quick twist and his neck snapped into place. "Ow."

"Idiot," she said, trying not to smile. "You get yourself all bent out of shape and then wonder why your body is protesting at the things you force it through?"

"I would have come to—ow—ah." Riven twitched. That felt much better.

"If you'd take care what kind of magic you cast, that would go a long way towards easing unnecessary aches and pains," Maia said. She released his head, circling around to drop to a crouch in front of him. "I take it this is the source of our-?"

"He's exhausted himself," Riven said, softly. "Raspen asked me to help him and-"

"And he's just lost his mentor, one Maurice Elswood," Tavit said, matter-of-factly. "Try not to break him before I've completed this."

"Do I want to know what you're doing?" Riven asked, leaning to the side to see around Maia. He couldn't make out any of the finer points of the spell, but he could tell that there was something else happening. He started faintly, when she slapped one of the white masks over his face.

"Hold still," Maia scolded. "I have one for your Harry as well."

Riven was glad the mask hid his face. "He's not mine. He belongs to—he is the heart of—Theodore Gorgens-Nott."

Maia only hummed in answer.

"One of those had better be for me," Tavit called, as he snatched the mask out of the air, ignoring Maia's irritated huff. "Just so we're all on the same page. Answer me this, Cairothe. How do you think Maurice called him?" Tavit said, straightening up. His eyes flared briefly, magic rushing and filling the room, before he slipped the mask on. His eyes glowed red through the cut-outs.

"Mentor summon?" Maia guessed.

"Death Seal," Tavit said, lightly. "So guess what you saw break?"
"…Death Seal?" Riven said, reluctantly.

"Indeed. Do you know what happens to severed Death Seals?"

"Couldn't you anchor it to something else? Someone?" Riven amended. "Not yourself," he added, quickly. It was scarier to see Tavit's glowing eyes as opposed to his glowing eyes set in his scowling face.

"I'm not as stupid as you are," Tavit threw back. "You can't transfer a Submissive-to-Submissive Death Seal when one half is already gone. It has to be completely broken on both ends or recanted with Death as the witness."

Riven winced. He'd had an idea of what Tavit was talking about. "How bad is it?"

"I have never lost someone I have tried to save," Tavit snapped. "And I think I'd rather never have to come that close to it again."

"…did you even try?"

The blade that zinged by his head drew a barely restrained flinch.

Maia pretended not to notice. Lord Aiden shifted restlessly.

"…did you even ask?" Tavit retorted. "Idiot."

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**HARRY — AIDEN'S CASTING HALL**

It was someone who felt alright.

Soft, warm and comforting. As if everything would eventually be alright, even if it wasn't, just then.

Lights, shapes, and sounds passed in front of him, but Harry could only vaguely place them. He was trying to convince his body to cooperate, but it seemed as if the chances of that happening were slim to none. He could feel strength returning to his body, but it was thin and slow.

A stream that struggled to find a path before it became the river. He could feel it—sense it—just out of reach. A large pool of power and vitality that was now open to him.

A pathway revealed, too late.

There was little point to such strength when there was no reason to use it anymore. He'd never asked for much. Just a place to belong. Just a bit of love. He'd contented himself with scraps of affection and the few slivers of friendship that Fate had somehow, left him.

Then things had gotten good. Theo, Charlie and now Ethan.

His heart hurt just thinking about it. He'd never expected to have so much and yet, it was his. Freely given. Simply there for the asking.

He hadn't even known Maurice and yet, the man had been every inch a ray of pure light and hope. Something that had seen him, wanted him—and protected him, without hesitation, without question, completely and whole-heartedly.
The memory replayed in his head, leaving Harry crumbling beneath the unexpected grief all over again. He wanted to curl up in a ball and stay there, until all the sadness had passed.

There'd been no warning before Maurice had gone to his death. No explanation, before Tavit, had grabbed him, shouting that if he wanted to live he had to wake up.

As if he'd been sleeping all that time.

As if none of it was real.

It had to be real.

This level of sadness, of helplessness of absolute loss. This was too real to be a dream.

He flexed his hands, curling each finger open and closed. He'd held Maurice. Touched Maurice. Been held in turn. His hands had held something real.

"Awake yet?" a soothing voice asked from overhead.

Harry tried to see who it was, but his eyes weren't fully cooperating yet. They ached and burned as if he were crying and would never stop. He could see a hazy blob of light and a few darker shapes around it. They didn't feel dangerous, but he couldn't sense anything definite from either of them.

There were strands of worry coursing through him, with faint impressions of his Bonded behind them. That was good. They were alright. He'd hoped none of his trials would affect them. They didn't deserve to be dragged into his mess.

"Shh, it's alright," the voice continued. "I know it isn't—I'm sorry I couldn't—it's alright, Harry." The voice settled. "It will all work out in the end. Trust me."

That wasn't fair, Harry decided. He couldn't do anything but trust the voice right now, he was in no real condition to do anything otherwise. His mind kept replaying the last conversation, the last interaction, the image of Death looming ominously overhead and Maurice sitting in Death's hand, defiant and fearless.

The memory of the hug that simply pulled all his broken pieces together and fitted them into the right places—that was what hurt the most. It was supposed to end happily. Things were supposed to be alright. Maurice would've been saved; they would've returned together.

Everyone would've been happy.

It was just like clockwork. Everything that he touched, crumbling away to nothing. His parents vanishing from his life when he was scarcely old enough to even think about remembering them properly. His family reduced to nothing more than selfish jealous pigs that treated him like dirt. A school experience tainted by—oh. That was nice.

Harry blinked through the haze, relieved to see that his vision was clearing. He could make out the face in front of him, only to see that it was a silver-haired woman he'd never seen before.


Her face was young in a way that said she was dragel and he shouldn't attempt to guess her true age. She stared down at him with mild curiosity, a long, curved pipe sticking out of the corner of her mouth. She was shrouded in robes, for lack of a better description.
It was almost as if she'd simply taken some leftover laundry and folded it around her person. The longer he stared at her, the clearer her image became until he was sure that his vision was back to what it was supposed to be.

But she didn't smile.

Instead, it was more as if she studied him to be sure that he was not dead.

Not dead.

Ah.

Harry turned that thought over and over in his head, until it made better sense than what he'd come up with before. He wasn't dead. He'd survived. There'd been magic, Death and—Tavit!

He struggled to sit up and heard the same gentle shushing sound from overhead. But it wasn't the strange blonde lady who was speaking to him, but rather a vaguely familiar face.

Riven—with a strange mask pushed on his forehead.

Harry relaxed. The mask was curious, but he remembered Riven and his magic. Fragments of memory floated back to him, glimpses of watching Riven craft portals before things had gone so terribly wrong.

No. Not entirely wrong, he'd met Maurice.

And lost him.

In the same breath.

What kind of twisted luck had Fate seen fit to give him?

"You're alive," Riven said, helpfully.

Harry couldn't resist the half-glare that he sent to him. "Kind of figured that," he said, surprised at how quiet and raspy his voice was.

"You were closer to Death a few minutes ago, than most would be on average," Riven amended. "And by close, I mean—you've had a Death Seal removed," he said, bluntly. "I hope you knew you had one on you. It wouldn't have been removed if it wasn't absolutely necessary."

"Not just a Death Seal," Harry said, absently. Maurice's words swirled through his head. The peculiar way he'd spoken, the magic that had followed each incantation. He could feel it, now that he knew to look for it. The new sense of weightlessness, as if a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. "It was three seals, but I don't understand why they were there."

"What?" Riven stared at him.

"Three seals," he repeated. "Maurice—he took them—away." His throat caught. "And I can—it feels so light." Harry lifted his hand, staring at it in wonder and then reaching out to touch Riven's shoulder. "It was like—heavy. So heavy. All the time. I couldn't—some days, it was so heavy."

Riven frowned.

Harry didn't quite like that frown. He'd liked the worried look a bit better. The frown meant bad things—maybe? How did he know that? No. That wasn't important. He needed to focus on better
things. Happier things. He would have preferred to see Riven smiling.

Someone, anyone to smile. For things to look not so bad.

But there was no one else there.

"Since when?" Riven wanted to know. "How long have you felt—heavy?"

Harry tried to shrug. A yawn escaped instead. Oh no, no, no. He didn't want to sleep. He didn't need it. Things were fine. He was fine. He'd just survived three seal removals!

Three!

Quinn would be so proud of him.

That brought a faint smile, accompanied by a thread of happiness and Harry wondered if Theo would be proud too. Now that he thought of it, where was Theo?

And Charlie and Ethan too, for that matter. Weren't his Bonded nearby only minutes ago?


Riven's worried face shifted to one of regret. "Your Bonded are—"

"On their way," came Tavit's brusque voice. "And you can play catch up later. Quit babying him, Cairothe and put him on the floor. Oi—Maia!"

"I can hear you just fine, Necromancer," the platinum blonde woman—Maia—wrinkled her nose in disdain. "You needn't raise your voice at me."

"I'll raise whatever I like, whenever I like—if it keeps things moving and everyone out of Death's clutches," Tavit snapped. "You can whine and gripe about it later. I promise I'll apologize as prettily as you like—now hurry before we run out of time. Cairothe's not in any position to be useful, the longer he keeps sitting there! There's too much at stake!"

"You're going to put him in a casting circle?" Riven eased Harry out of his lap and onto the floor.

Harry bit back a sound of disagreement. The floor was cold. Riven was warmer. And softer. Sort of. He didn't really want to give up such a nice not-official-cuddle.

He also didn't know what the big deal was about a casting circle. As far as he could tell, Tavit had laid something out on the ground, that seemed as if it were filled with blood and magic, in the kind of way that made his scales ripple to the surface, decorating every visible patch of skin that he could see.

Whatever magic Tavit was using, it didn't feel right.

It felt cold, hard and empty.

Harry shivered.

"Cairothe!" Tavit snapped, standing at the far end of the room, at the apparent head of the giant, decorative casting circle on the floor. "Put him in the centre and move!"

"He doesn't understand what's happening," Riven muttered, half to himself. "You can't just toss him on the floor and expect the magic to take."
"It'll take!" Tavit growled. "You can explain it later!"

Riven's scowl returned. "Sure. Of course it will. Why wouldn't it? It's not like he's got any sort of magic sensitivities or a Nameless talent that could make this difficult. It's fine, Tavit. No worries. Just go ahead and dive headfirst into—" he stopped, looking down at Harry. "You have no reason to," he began, without preamble. "But I'm going to ask you anyway. It'll make this a lot easier. Do you trust me?" he shook his head. "Can you trust me?"

It wasn't a hard thought. In fact, it didn't take very long to determine at all. What a silly question. Of course he trusted Riven. There was no reason not to. Riven felt right, as far as his instincts were concerned and they were quite pleased with the apparent strength of his magic.

He nodded.

Riven stared at him, hard. "I can't explain until later and Tavit doesn't do explanations, so you'll have to wait awhile. Just trust me—trust us—and do as we tell you, alright? I promise, no harm will come to you."

"You can't promise that!" Tavit barked. "None of us can. Quit stalling. The longer you take for this—the greater chance we'll all end up dead! Now hurry up, Niko's on her way!"

Harry made no protest as he was scooped up in strong arms and carried towards the centre of Tavit's odd casting circle.

Riven's scowl had grown quite ferocious now. "I will swear it on my—"

"We will do all that we can to be sure that no unnecessary harm comes your way," Tavit said, reluctantly—as if guessing that Riven was about to say something that would give him a headache later. "Which means that if you do as you're told and don't run screaming out of that damned circle, you'll be safe and fine."

"Sane," Riven corrected, absently. "He means you'll be sane. The Death Seal—and other, uh, seals—we need to make sure that they are settled in you and either properly dissolved or severed. Since you have so many other ones, they need to be handled carefully, just—don't move, alright? You're safe as long as you're within here."

With that, Riven set him down in a blood red circle traced on the floor. The moment Harry shifted to sit back on his heels, his hands touched the floor and the entire casting circle lit up.

The magic was rich and deep.

It surged up through the floor and straight through him as if he were nothing more than a part of the magic itself. He gave a soundless gasp, as the energy flowed around him, filling the room and driving away the sleepiness as if it were nothing.

It felt like a healing. Life pouring into him and strength slowly building up to something that would not be soon forgotten.

Tears dried on his face, as the warmth grew to a nearly unbearable level and stayed there, wrapped around him, as if the magic itself, were trying to offer a hug of its own.

Harry pressed his trembling lips together. He watched as Riven and Tavit called the magic together, in tandem, one after another. He saw them raise spells that he'd never known or heard.

He witnessed the effortless manipulation of things he'd never ever thought possible. They were
right. He was protected here. He watched them as they worked, tinged with desperation and against a ticking clock that he could not see.

Niko appeared, as Tavit had warned and then, Harry didn't know where to look.

She was just as devastating and odd as the last time he'd seen her. A strange young woman that was much too pale and far too powerful. Gliding along behind her, were two massive, hooded figures that could only be Grim Reapers.

He'd seen pictures in books at Hogwarts, but this was a first.

They were nothing like Death.

Death, he'd known at once.

These were more—terrifying. It was as if they knew every dark secret that lurked within and without every living creature. Shrouded in shadows that moved with purpose and leaving nothing but darkness with each step they took forward.

One reaper was obviously older than the other, given the tattered clothes. It was the younger reaper with the massive, towering size and gleaming, wicked scythe, that drew the most attention.

They approached him, as Tavit's spell activated.

A wall of pure shadow surged up from the ground and stretched to the ceiling. The shadows thinned to an acceptable degree, allowing Harry to see shapes and movement through the magical barrier. A flicker of familiarity seemed to stretch out to him through the shadows.

Unthinkingly, he stretched out a hand, stopping inches away from actually touching the shadow-barrier that drew closer to him at the reaper's approach. Probably a dumb idea to touch that…

Harry faltered. He let his hand fall back to his lap and tried to fight the urge to test just how much magic he had at his disposal.

There was trusting Riven and then there was trusting himself. He'd managed to survive more than his fair share of impossible circumstances after all. It hadn't always been luck that spared him. The glowing golden circle of magic surrounding him, flared bright with renewed energy.

"I hope you have a plan." Riven pressed his hands flat to the floor, feeding his waning magic into Tavit's spell. "What exactly are you planning to do?"

"Something that doesn't involve you or me or him," Tavit said, flatly. He lifted his chin. "Would you take your positions, please?"

Harry turned carefully, watching as the reapers took up positions opposite of each other, with him in the middle. He pressed his lips tightly together as the first long scythe stretched through the shadowed barrier and rested on his shoulder. The second scythe pierced the barrier and rested on his opposite shoulder.

The long, cool handles, pressed up against the sides of his neck, resulting in a rather dangerous arrangement. If either of them moved, his neck was certainly in danger. If both of them did—Harry was reasonably sure he wouldn't have a head.

Or anything else.

Theo…Charlie…Ethan!
He pulled a bit harder on the pieces of their bonds that he could feel inside of him. They were faded from the stretch and pull of all the strange magic around him. He wasn't used to their energy or their presence, but Theo and the others—they were still within reach.

Still on their way.

He knew they were coming when a strong pulse of warmth and love came straight through Theo's bond. It nearly made him smile, just to think that he'd reached out—asked once—and there was an answer. An immediate reply.

A promise.

"Harry—just stay still, alright?" Riven called out, weakly. "Tavit-

"I thought you said you had enough souls," Aiden grumbled. "You're short three. There's no way you can do it with nine. You need three more."

The reapers shifted uneasily.

Tavit rubbed his face. "Niko?"

"I could find three," Niko said, confidently. "You wouldn't like where though."

Tavit groaned. "Behave. Stay. Riven—?"

Riven shook his head. "That would be entirely up to you," he glanced at the ragged reaper beside of him. "Cunningham, if you've any stake in this. Now would be an excellent time!"

"Hurry," Aiden said, through clenched fangs.

Another tremor shook the room.

"She knows he's here." Aiden strained to hold onto the protections over the room. "Death knows he is here!"

The reaper with the golden scythe merely sighed. "Mariana, my love?" He spoke—calmly and unhurried. "We're short three."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. Riven had said Cunningham. As in Lord Cunningham, who had just spoken as if his Bonded were in the room. As if he were speaking to Lady Mariana Cunningham.

As in Lord Cunningham, who had just spoken as if his Bonded were in the room. As if he were speaking to Lady Mariana Cunningham.

Two figures who shouldn't have been anywhere near Nevarah and certainly not as a—Harry nearly choked as he processed the undeniable truth. Lord Cunningham was one of the Grim Reapers standing beside him.

He dared to sneak a sideways glance and felt as if every single thing he'd known about the strange, dark man, had turned itself upside down. Clad in ripped, torn rags that might have once been an elaborate robe of some sorts, a gleaming belt of white-and-black stones cinched in at the waist. The heart-stopping detail was the scythe.

Pure gold.

Gleaming, sharp and cold.
There was no mistaking any of that—he could feel the weight of the scythe on his thin shoulders, the heaviness of an otherworldly weight pressing down into his very soul.

His hands trembled, before shifting to claws. Sharpened instincts lurked deep inside of him and Harry had a feeling that if he wasn't careful, he might be more dragon in the next couple of minutes.

Harry forced himself to count his breaths, slowly, but surely calming himself. It wouldn't do anyone any good—himself, least of all—if he were to lose his mind here.

"...I have seven, milord," Mariana's voice crackled through the room, as if it came from a great distance. "Would you accept them all or must I dine on leftovers?"

"Leftovers might improve her disposition," Tavit muttered. "Send all seven and hurry!"

"All seven, my dearest," Lord Cunningham said.

"Incoming!" Mariana said. There was a loud, streaking crack—before a ghostly apparition of blue-white-energy appeared in the midst of the room. Cradled in the Ghost-Mariana's arms were seven, pulsing, glowing orbs of light.

Seven fresh souls.

The room trembled again.

Harry jolted, wobbling dangerously between the two scythes as the floor shook. He dug his clawed hands into the black stone floor, wincing at the uncomfortable sensation. He couldn't get any purchase on the rocks, but it did steady him, just a bit. Even if he wasn't entirely sure that one of the blades had pressed a little too close for comfort.

"I see the souls you offer in reparation," Aiden said, a hint of desperation in his voice. "And I acknowledge the price that you pay for the soul you wish to exchange—let it be done!"

Harry shivered as the eerie voice boomed through the room. He squinted as red-eyed Aiden exploded in a fury of straining, grasping shadows and magic so dark and potent, it plunged the room into a darkness that was blacker than night.

The seven souls never stood a chance.

In his pure, raw hellhound form, Aiden devoured them in a single gulp.

"Now!" Tavit screamed.

The two scythes sliced straight through him.

Harry choked, clutching at his neck.

But there was nothing wrong. No blood. No wound. His head still upon his shoulders. He gasped, fighting for a breath as his body alternated between panic, relief and disbelief.

"Harry—stay in the barrier!" Riven shouted. "Don't come out of it!" He surged up from the floor, his hair unravelling behind him. From dozens of pure white, meticulous little braids, glowing, silver locks stretched out behind him, as if they were an extension of himself.

Magic rose in the room, light chasing dark.
Harry watched as Riven lunged in front of Tavit, holding a hand out to Aiden's snarling face. He dug his claws deeper into the stone, gratified that he could, this time.

His bonds throbbed and burned, as if his Bonded were near, but not quite close enough yet.

Behind Tavit, Niko rose up, a near mirror-image of Riven, with her flowing dark hair and angry energy.

The floor began to crack.

Harry scrambled up to his feet, trying not to bump into the shadow barrier, as every single stone on the floor, cracked into a handful of pieces. He stumbled, catching himself with one hand—grimacing at the sharp jolt of pain.

"I did not agree to two!" Aiden howled. "You had one!"

"Three souls were your price!" Tavit threw back. "The other four are not yours." In the crook of his arm, four glowing orbs began to fade, from the crushing pressure of the warring magics.

Somehow, he'd stolen four of them.

"You cannot keep them, Necromancer," Aiden snarled. He swiped and snapped at them, driving them back towards Harry.

"I do not intend to keep them," Tavit said, evenly. He retreated to the shadow barrier, glancing briefly over his shoulder at Harry. "Oi—answer this kid, do you want Maurice to stay with you?"

"Don't ask him that!" Riven whirled around. "He doesn't understand and you wouldn't-"

"I would," Lord Cunningham said. His reaper's rags vanished, returning him to his original appearance. He glanced at Harry. "I'm afraid, as rights are first to Mariana, then to you—the right is mine. I am open to negotiation, however." He nodded to Tavit. "Do it. Quickly, before one of us loses something we weren't planning on."

"I can't do it for you!" Tavit objected. "I don't even-"

"I'll do it then," Lord Cunningham said, easily. "Do you mind?" He scooped up the four souls from Tavit's unwilling arms, dodging back to where his fellow reaper towered above.

Riven wavered. "...I don't care which of you does what, just hurry! Death may be standing at the door, but-"

"By the powers vested in me, I ask a boon of a soul recently departed," Lord Cunningham recited. "For one that was taken too soon from one that has only just come. I ask that you grant one wish to delay your existence between the realms of time and space. I ask that you would guard the one that you have already left. Fulfil the promise made to their name and grant them every strength you have to offer. On behalf of one who saw you as a friend and another who saw you as a brother."

Harry felt his heart clench and throb. He stumbled through the shadow barrier and straight through Riven's arms, stretching out to reach to Lord Cunningham.

He couldn't explain it. Even if he wanted to, Harry didn't know words for the feeling inside of him. His magic reached out, strong and purposeful, twining around the four souls that glowed so strongly in Lord Cunningham's arms.
"Four souls," he whispered. "Are all I have to give-!"

A loud bang echoed in the room. The four souls shrivelled up and vanished, as Harry's fingers brushed over them.

Thin threads of pale white-blue stretched out of the churning darkness, latching onto Harry's wrists and fastening themselves into place. From out of nothing, a glowing light struggled to shine.

Harry leaned towards it, unable to stop the magic being drawn out from him and channelled straight into the feeble light. He willed it to grow bigger and brighter, even though the light began to hurt his eyes.

Tears streamed down as the room grew brighter and brighter, until it was nearly back to what it had been, before Aiden's transformation. Harry couldn't even see the others anymore, everything was just so white and pure.

Warmth. Hope. Love.

And then the light took form.

Maurice.

A spectral imitation of him, to be sure, but it was Maurice nonetheless.

The same kind expression, the same gentle warmth, the same endless understanding.

Harry could only stare upwards, even as those ghostly hands reached down to smooth the hot tears away from his face. "How-?" he tried to ask.

Maurice only smiled. He floated lower down, still glowing too-white-bright, until he could safely press his forehead to Harry's. "I did not know you had enough souls," he murmured. "The cost was too great. I had none left."

"No—souls?" Harry closed his eyes, even as he felt rough lips press to his forehead.

"Thank you," Maurice whispered. "I did not know I could stay by you, for a little while."

Harry's wrists began to burn. A whimper of pain welled up in his throat. He clenched his fangs together, swallowing the sound down, even as Maurice's spectral arms wrapped around him.

He could almost feel it—a whisper of a touch.

And then he felt it.

The magic.

_You have done what is allowed and acknowledged among your kind._ The voice, female, and bland, spoke out. It came from nowhere and everywhere, filling the room and purging the last of Death's darkness. _You have Caspered the soul of Maurice Elswood and that which you have done, is only accepted in turn, by Maurice, himself. Do you consent?_

_I do._ Maurice said.

_Then you will guard and guide him, until your original duty is completed, yes?_

_I shall._
Let it be witnessed…

"It is witnessed," Tavit said, averting his eyes.

"It is witnessed," Riven said, tightly.

"It is witnessed," Lord Cunningham said, a thin smile on his lips.

You have initiated him and thus created the contract—do you accept the responsibility?

"I accept the responsibility," Lord Cunningham said. "But his duty is to Harry. I have only done what none could."

And you are satisfied?

"…no. But I will not challenge this."

The room pulsed, the light grew warmer.

You will NOT challenge this. The voice said. Is that understood?

"I understand." Lord Cunningham bowed his head. "I would not go back on my word."

…it is done. May your bond be one of goodness and greatness.

Harry started, feeling a slender hand of burning warmth feather through his hair and cup his cheek. He couldn't make out any form in the brightness of the light. It ached to even look at it, though somehow, he couldn't close his eyes and look away. He trembled as the fiery hand retreated.

I thank you for the gift of a second existence. Maurice said. I will fulfil my duty.

That is all that is ever asked of you, dear child. The voice intoned.

A stabbing pain shot through his chest. Harry coughed, falling to his knees. He heard someone calling out to him, as the pressure in the room seemed to ease. Someone rolled him onto his side and he saw Maurice's glowing, worried face, before his bonds screamed and everything went black.

LEWIS PEVERELL : QUAD FOURTEEN (Outside Nevarah)

Lewis stepped out of the transportation medallion and straight into the receiving room of the Quad Fourteen Factory's welcoming centre. It was hard to miss that everything was pure, sterile and too bright.

He squinted, willing his eyes to adjust to the unexpected brightness. He could sense the loss of Nevarah's protective aura and it made his scales itch.

Silently, he reminded himself that there were sacrifices made within Circles and that this was likely one of them. He would do anything for Cora, after all. Stubborn and contradictory little thing that she was.

There was no large welcoming party, a detail that he was glad for. "Hello?" he called out into the room as the lights flickered out.

The room went from blinding white to nearly black, before emergency lights clicked on along the
floors, offering a dull, but steady glow. He could hear running feet in the outside corridor and a young woman's voice rattling off a steady stream of orders.

He caught a few phrases like 'temporary power outage' and 'excess energy overflow' along with 'inter-realm portal'.

I guess they were expecting me. He couldn't keep the annoyance from creeping in, but by the time he reached the security-sealed door, it slid open to reveal a round-cheeked young woman, with brilliant blue-gold eyes and a head of green feathers.

He bit his tongue to keep his initial snark from slipping out.

"I'm so sorry about the power!" she exclaimed, breathlessly. "I'm Esther Stauron—welcome to the Quad, we're uh—I wasn't expecting you until later."

"...Lewis Peverell," he said, offering a bow. "That may be a portal time difference. I came exactly as directed on-"

"Oh, no, no! I don't mean it was your mistake or anything I just—oh bother that. You've caught me off guard," she reached up, tangling one clawed hand through her feathers. "My younger brother, Oberon, should've been here—but one of the backup generators went—I'm not making any sense, am I?" Her shoulders slumped and her feathers flared out behind her.

Lewis forced a smile. "I'm sure we can explain everything as soon as-"

"Father's not well, so he can't sign anything over to you," she said, turning on her heel. "But I've drawn up the paperwork, so you can solidify the purchase of your half of our assets and then we can-"

"Eustace Stauron is your father?" Lewis stared.

Stauron was the kind of maniac genius that was known for his eccentricities and inventions, the kinds of breakthroughs that left Cora in throes of ecstasy at the leaps in technology. He was also known for being a recluse and keeping most acquaintances—if they could be called that—at arm's length.

Esther blinked. "...yes?" she said, slowly. "Didn't anyone tell you? I spoke to a—what was his name again—Vinny—Vicky-?"

"Vincent," Lewis said, faintly. He could practically see the expression on Vincent's face that had somehow resulted in being sent here. "I was under the impression that we were purchasing the entire-"

"Quad Fourteen is not for sale," Esther said, crisply. "It's my home. I live here—along with my family. We all live here. We aren't moving. Besides, there's no reason to. We've built this place with our blood, sweat and tears. It's all that we need."

"...then why sell half?"

Esther rolled her eyes. "You won't be able to keep up with your half of the assets," she said, carelessly. "You won't be the first one to buy half of the place and return it before you've practically drowned in debt."

Lewis frowned. "Did Vincent explain why we were interested in-?"
"Yeah—something about Bloodstones." Esther smoothed her feathers back. She glowed brightly when the lights clicked on overhead, illuminating everything in the stark, empty whiteness once more.

"A significant quantity of bloodstones," Lewis said, evenly. "Crafted with the kind of quality to hold up to multiple uses for at least several years before initial deterioration of-"

"I heard you," Esther said, motioning for him to follow her down the corridor. "I just meant that it's no big deal. This is the Quad you're talking about."

"And this is more bloodstones than we've ever had in Nevarah at any given time." Lewis twitched. There was something warm and soft in his left pocket and he was reasonably sure it hadn't been there when he'd stepped into the portal.

"It's easy," Esther said. "I'll explain, but it's probably easier to show you. The only hitch would be the amount of raw ingredients we have on hand and what we can legally get our hands on."

Lewis tried to keep a straight face as he felt tiny fangs nibbling at his fingertips. He realized, belatedly, what it was, before the little Nytura made an appearance. "Shadow-!" He exclaimed in dismay.

Esther glanced over her shoulder, a flicker of curiosity washing over her face. "Pardon?"

"Er, nothing!" Lewis said, hastily. He dodged in front of the floating Shadow, blocking the little creature from Esther's view. "Nothing at all."

Esther stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. "I'll take you straight down to the production floor, if you like. There's a few security stops, but we're on a lunch break right now, so you can actually walk on the floor while there's nothing running. It'd be a good time to show you what you're actually paying for."

"That sounds—wonderful!" Lewis muttered. He fixed a smile on his face, while trying to magic Shadow closer to him.

The contrary Nytura simply floated out of range, bright eyes sparkling with mischief. Lewis bit back a curse. He hadn't even noticed the little thing sneaking into his pocket—nor the fact that Shadow could actually make itself small enough to fit into said pocket.

A chill washed over him with soul-numbing promise. A Nytura in a gem-factory was a catastrophe waiting to happen. There was a reason that Nytura's were kept home—and given boundaries.

So they wouldn't accidentally end up causing havoc like a giant, ravenous beast.

Lewis stifled a whimper. If he didn't catch Shadow—without Esther noticing—there'd be nothing left-!

The tour went well.

Lewis was more than pleased at what they've acquired and though the conditions were just favourable enough, he knew Cora would be happy. Henry would likely fuss about it on principle, but Lewis was reasonably sure that his esteemed Alpha couldn't have negotiated better terms.

Esther, for all of her scatter-brained quirks, was quite knowledgeable about everything in the plant.
Lewis couldn't help wondering if she'd actually worked in each position, given the detailed knowledge that she was more than happy to share—within reason, of course.

His only distress was the most troublesome one.

Shadow disappeared somewhere in the middle of the tour and there was simply no way to chase after him, without giving something away. It's a bit of pride that keeps his mouth shut, because really—it's just a Nytura.

It was just Shadow and Shadow was just Harry's, but that's what made a bad situation much worse. Lewis didn't want to be the one to handle the damage control if something should go wrong.

There was also no way he would ever tell Harry that he'd lost the little thing—not only would it lead to disappointment, but he knew his Bonded would never let him live it down. He could manage children better than a single Nytura!

A growl lodged in his throat.

He was trying to think of a suitable excuse to wander around on his own, when Esther made a face at her wrist communicator.

"You'd think they could at least give me an extra hour," she mumbled. "It's not like you can speed walk through the whole place and actually enjoy the tour. I told them to split the time through material retrieval and waste disposal."

The spectacular eyeroll had Lewis wondering how much of Quad Fourteen was run by Esther and not her missing father. He had a sneaking suspicion that there was more to her than she was letting on, but he couldn't pinpoint it.

Just like he couldn't pinpoint where Shadow went.

If Vincent ever found out about this—well, that wasn't something Lewis wanted to think about. Instead, he hurried to catch up with Esther, a harmless lie on the tip of his tongue. Excusing himself to make a quick check-in call with Nevarah should work nicely as a cover for a targeted summoning spell.

They were halfway to the first security checkpoint when lights and sirens began to screech. It was loud, bright and distressing.

Lewis bristled protectively. Scales rippled along the sides of his face, his hands already shifted to claws. He couldn't sense any approaching danger, but the alarm had startled him on a level he hadn't expected.

Whether he could sense it or not, something was wrong. "Miss Stauron-" he began.

"It's a security alert," she said, glancing up where warning lights flashed along the length of the ceiling. "It shouldn't affect us, but I should probably check it out."

"Excuse me?"

"Check in with one of the guards," she corrected hastily. "At one of the sign-in stations." She broke into a sprint, uncaring of whether he followed behind.

He did.
They arrived at the security station in question, to find one young guard furiously typing at his terminal, a fine sheen of sweat on his red face.

Esther blew straight through the body scanner and went straight for him. She pivoted halfway, darting back to stopping Lewis on the other side "Stay," she said, firmly. "You're not entered in the system and I don't need you to send off secondary alarms. Julius—talk to me! What's going on? I thought we weren't using those alarms unless"

The guard behind the desk, shook his head. "It's properly categorised. This isn't a general alert. They've found the intruders in the Underwood."

"The Underwood?" Esther shivered. "I thought you said it was a natural break in the barrier!"

"It was—too clean of a break, probably," Julius muttered. He flipped a few switches, stopping the sirens and lights at their section.

Alarms continued to sound throughout the factory, with flashing lights along the corridor ceiling, but it was more bearable in their little corner.

Esther murmured something to Julius that resulted in Lewis being waved through to join them at the counter.

He did so, rubbing his forehead at the incoming headache from the magical energy fluctuating in the air. This was not what he'd expected from a simple acquisitions tour!

Even now, he was almost certain he could hear a sweeper team of some sort, getting ready in the distance. He could almost scent them too. The air currents were responding to his subtle requests, carrying bits and bobs of information to his ears. "When you say—Underwood, what exactly should I be imagining?"

Esther gave a nervous laugh. Her feathers bristled, but her blue-gold gaze refused to look directly at him. "It's more of—well, if you weren't coming through a medallion, you would've seen the place. You do know that Quad Fourteen is surrounded by high mountains, thick forest and very deep mining veins, yes?"

"...I guessed as much," Lewis allowed.

"It's extremely deep forest." Esther scowled. "Who's on dispatch? Do we have anyone not on break right now?"

He'd figured there had to be some unexpected boon to having a Quadreyan Site this far out from Nevarah. Most Quadreyan Sites were artificial realms crafted through magical mechanics, resulting in something of an independent station of sorts. Over time, the created environment would grow and merge, turning from a skeletal frame to a planet, depending on the occupants and the materials fed into it.

He'd studied them, briefly, in his last years of measured education. It was enough of an interest to hold his attention—and attract Cora's.

Quad Fourteen was simply the four-hundred and fourteenth site recognized by the Inter-Realm Association of Travel. By some stroke of luck, it held the perfect environment for gem-fire magic and was small enough to escape the notice of any freelancers looking for a quick profit.

Lewis bit his tongue when Shadow floated out at the corner of his gaze, somehow unnoticed by the focused Julius, who was still tapping away on his security terminal.
"It's a group," Julius said, frowning. "Esther, look—" he patted the countertop.

Esther rolled her eyes, but with a slight twitch of her fingers, floated up and perched on the edge of the counter, leaning over to take a look at the screen. Her eyes went from blue-gold to a definite blue. "That's more than a few. See if you can get in closer?"

Lewis discreetly reached out with a tendril of his own magic, silently drawing closer to take a look himself. He stared, surprised at the gaggle of young intruders and the two women between them.

"That looks like a Fae," Esther said, eyes narrowed. "That looks like two of them though. Can you zoom in?"

"That would explain the barrier," Julius agreed. "Though what they're doing here, I don't know."

He tapped at the keys and the image on the monitors enlarged.

A pale, petite Fae was clearly visible on the screen. Her blonde hair was neatly gathered behind her in a braid, her outfit almost blending perfectly with the natural environment. She was gesturing to someone or something, off-screen from the camera's range.

"She looks almost Elven," Julius said, slowly.

"She can't be," Esther said, firmly. "We can't have any Elves here, their magic ruins the soil's—"

"Wait—what is—there's a portal!" Julius frantically tapped the keys again, trying to find a better angle on the screen. "A second one—it's fading out at the edges, can you see that?"

"It's massive." Esther stifled a shudder. "What kind of energy disturbance did you say it was?"

"That's not an energy disturbance, it's a shattered portal. Haven't you ever seen one before?" Lewis said, making no attempt to hide that he was blatantly observing over her shoulder. He'd seen this very thing not so long ago and quite up-close. The unfortunate circumstance that had brought about a very fortunate addition to his life—Harry. "

"A shattered—what?" Esther glanced up at him, her eyes glimmering with tightly restrained magic. "Are you sure?"

"Quite."

"How are you sure?"

Lewis made himself hold her gaze with the last bit of his wavering patience. "It looks different. A shattered portal is the opposite of what I used to come through to here. Granted, there's a dozen different types of portals, but look at the edges flared out there. You can still see the energy imprint. A good portal, a strong one, it would have already faded. This one is more—amateurish. It wasn't cast by dragel hands, at any rate. You're probably right in guessing that they're Fae. Elven magic would never leave such an untidy mess behind, their too meticulous with their magic."

Esther pinched the bridge of her nose. Her feathers had gone completely flat now, her shoulders hunched forward. "Send a retrieval team," she said, wearily. "And I suggest the friendliest crew we can spare before someone else catches sight of them and decides that Father ought to."

"You mean wind," Julius said, lightly. "Before someone else—" he stopped when she smacked his arm. "Miss Stauron—"

"Shut up already!" Esther slid off the counter, a furrow settling in her brow. "I'd best tell Father
before someone else says the wrong thing," she glanced at Lewis. "I wouldn't mind introducing
you, seeing as we're going to be working together and all that, but honestly, now's not really a good
time—would you mind terribly if I showed you to the visitor's lounge? You could rest for a few
moments there. It won't take me long to—break the news."

He took the escape for what it was. A moment to himself and some privacy—however limited—
would be more than welcome. He had a few updates to pass along and perhaps, from the look of
things, an intervention to stage.

"Lewis?"

"A rest would be lovely. Refreshments?"

"Anything you like," she said, relieved. "There's a state-of-the-art replicator in one corner and you
can order out via SpellPort."

"SpellPort? Out here?"

She smiled, weakly. "Yeah. Imagine that—right this way?"

LUNA, ROLF + MOLLY WEASLEY AND OTHERS (QUAD FOURTEEN)

"They've found us," Luna said, softly. She stopped in her tracks, staring off into the distance, as if
she were looking straight through the massive trees and not simply at them. Her fingers squeezed
tight over the warming medallion hanging from her neck. It was exhausting to try and manipulate
so many variables at once, but she didn't dare rely on her mother's medallion.

She'd promised her Queen, after all. Breaking the portal had required great care and precision.
They'd all been quite lucky, but the night had been short and her dreams were troubled.

They shouldn't have stayed in the woods, but there was nowhere else to go without some
preparations in place. She'd hoped a bit of sleep would help.

It hadn't.

Which had then left the only other option—waiting for rescue after drawing attention to their
plight. This particular realm wasn't too tricky, it was an artificially crafted one after all—more
machinery than magic, but her thoughts were jumbled and distorted by the fragmented dreams that
refused to leave her alone, even in the waking hours.

Rolf paused at her side, his worried gaze flickering between her and the not-quite-a-path up ahead.
"I would ask who, but then that suggests that I would want to know what they are." He couldn't
sense anything as yet, but he'd been on edge since waking.

"People of course," Luna said, serenely. She moved effortlessly to keep up with his pace, her eyes
fluxing silver every now and again. "The ones that own this place."

"...and if I were to ask where this place was, would I like the answer?" Dean piped up. He ignored
Seamus and Lavender's shushing motions. "If we don't ask questions, we won't get answers," he
said, practically. "Luna?"

"Friends," she said, lightly. "Friends and a—oh hello there." She brightened, offering a curtsy.
Everyone froze.

Rolf drew his knives, inching forward to stay beside her and within striking range once more. He couldn't sense any impending danger, but he'd travelled with Luna enough times to know that trusting her instincts over his own—usually turned out rather well for all involved.

"It's a friend," Luna said, holding out a hand. "Is your name Shadow? It's Shadow? That's a lovely name. Come here, we won't hurt you. In fact, I have a—" she fumbled in her pocket for a snack.

Rolf sheathed one knife and fished out a piece of dried jerky instead. He dangled it over Luna's shoulder, a faint smile on his lips.

There was a blur of blackness and then a happy, chirping purr before a small Nytura perched unsteadily on Luna's thin shoulder, tiny fangs tearing into the strip of jerky.

It took a significant burst of effort to freeze in place and not move.

Rolf swallowed. He hadn't sensed the Nytura until he'd actually seen it. "…Shadow?" he said, faintly. "What a lovely—name."

Luna pressed her lips together, valiantly fighting back a laugh. She was relieved to see the creature, even if she'd only ever read about them in books before. This was her first time seeing a real one and there was also no mistaking the similarities to her dream. This was the creature she'd seen with Harry in the last set of dreams.

From the way Shadow was happily gnawing on Rolf's backup snack, Luna could hear a half-coherent stream of words filtering into her head. Shadow was glad for food, familiar scents and the magic of the realm.

Magic? Luna prompted.

Yes. Good magic. Good place. Good treats. More?

Luna held out a hand to Rolf, wiggling her fingers in a silent request for more jerky. She was inwardly amused at the expression of mild exasperation on his face, before he did as prompted and produced another salted strip of meat.

Here you go—what do you mean about the magic?


Important magic? Luna coaxed. She let Shadow nibble on the tips of her fingers as it began to purr in thanks for the treat.

Blood magic.

"Luna?" Rolf nudged her, discreetly. "What's wrong?"

"We might need to make another detour," Luna said, half-to-herself. She had time. She always had time.

"I thought you said you were taking us to Nevarah," Augusta grumbled. "Where exactly is this place and how did you intend for us to leave here?"

"I thought I was the only one who noticed," Dean said, relieved. He held up a hand, showing a few futile sparks of magic. "None of my spells seem to work here. It's almost as if there's a nullifying
field of some sort."

"Here?" Seamus frowned. He edged closer to him, unable to resist the urge to make sure that they were touching in some way. "I can still reach mine, it's a bit faint but-"

"Don't!" Dean twined their hands together, squeezing tight to draw Seamus's' attention. "Even if you can reach it, don't use it."

"...Dean-"

"I mean it," Dean said, firmly. He leaned forward, touching his forehead to Seamus' shoulder. "Don't use it unless you really need to, alright? We're good for now. It's alright. These are—friends." He swallowed, stirring faintly when he felt Seamus' faint touch on his neck. It was easier to tune out the rest of them now.

"You said it was on lockdown," Molly said, drawing nearer. Her eyes narrowed faintly when they landed on Shadow. She took a few, hesitant sniffs. The creature looked quite familiar and she could almost swear that it was the one that had been in the Burrow. She'd caught a few glimpses, a few changes in scent, before things had gone so terribly wrong.

Charlie had brought it—in an egg. Harry was content to join him in caring for the egg. The memory burned at the edges, a reminder of things lost, never to be regained. Augusta had a point, they needed to get to Nevarah

Shadow blinked innocently up at her, dark eyes shining with curiosity.

Ginny glanced between them, her brow furrowed. She moved to join Rolf, a flicker of interest in her tired eyes. There were too many unanswered questions and she was tired of bothering to ask them. There was no point in charging headfirst into something for the same result—it was better to find a way to go around it.

She'd find a way around, as soon as possible. Especially if Luna was willing to help. She'd seen this before, Luna's odd spaciness, but meticulous habits. As if there was a second person trapped inside of her, desperate to be free.

Almost like the way she'd felt growing up, beneath her brothers' watchful eyes. There were some perks to being the only girl in the family, but there were points when it had been awful too. Moments where she hadn't quite fit right, where she felt as if she didn't belong—like a fairy princess in the midst of ogres.

Luna scooped Shadow off of her shoulder and cradled it in her arms instead. It began to purr quite loudly, nuzzling its face into the crook of her elbow. She turned to face the others, her eyes glowing the same bright silver from the night before. "There is a transportation room in one of the main buildings in this realm—it will take us to Nevarah."

Augusta grunted. "That's good enough, I suppose." She nodded at Molly. "You've got kin there, right? They'll take you and the children?"

Seamus and Dean exchanged a glance, much in the same way that Neville and Lavender did. "We wouldn't want to impose," Seamus began.

"The Main House is fairly large," Molly said, faintly. Her mind carried her back to a childhood when things were simple enough that only the important bits stuck out in vivid colour. Her family's care and charge of her, the security and strength of her beloved brothers and the gentleness of her own parents.
The Prewetts' had been such an ordinary Circle. Honest and upstanding, not flashy or dramatic like others. She'd thrived on the love and care that they'd liberally given her. The lasting effect was proof of the way she strove to make the Burrow a warm, welcoming place, encouraging her children to think inward instead of outward.

Her eyes ached, a hand going to her mouth as a rush of emotion welled up inside of her. She struggled to hold back a sob as Ginny turned almost at once, going straight to her, arms outstretched.

Everything she'd had, she wanted to give them.

"You are surrounded, this is the Underwood Retrieval Team, Atlas, stand-down. I repeat, stand down! This is a peaceable location and we do not wish to engage."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This Chapter has been forever and a day, in coming. Whew. I'm so glad to finally have it out of my hands and ready to share. I'm sorry for the wait, but as you know from following the Chatterbox thread (or my tumblr & fb page), RL has been quite rough, especially through this year. I'm slowly getting myself back together and your patience and encouragement means a lot.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! I did my best on wrangling plot-lines again. :P There's at least two new one-shots (Wikhn and Charlie-centric), if you haven't seen them yet. Give them a shot, if you need some fluff. They're sweet and short, featuring Parental!Wikhn with little Teddy and Concerned!Charlie for EmeraldHollow mentioned in the Christmas 7 Sins fic. Enjoy!

My original novel, (Soula Deveraine's story), is also tentatively set for a summer release this year. (More info to come).

Thank you for your continued support! I love you guys! ~Scion

Many thanks to brissygirl who always does a fabulous job of beta-ing these monster chapters.

THANK YOU FOR VOTING FOR THE TOP THREE PLOT LINES. As requested, Luna, The Weasleys and Quinn, will be featured in the next upcoming arc. (Missed your chance to vote? Don't worry! There will be more voting opportunities in the future. Stay tuned!)

Chatterbox Thread Forum link, as requested:
https://www.fanfiction.net/topic/108964/63700063/21/#176807987
Don't Let Me Go Under

Chapter Summary

Theo, Charlie and Raspen rush to meet Harry in Aiden's Court. Death is not happy at being cheated out of Harry's soul and makes their displeasure known. Things get worse, before they get better...

Chapter Notes

This chapter was betaed by the wonderful brissygirl to provide a smoother reading experience. All remaining mistakes are my own. See first chapter for disclaimers/additional warnings/summaries.

!Possible TRIGGERS FOR: mentions of death/implied torture! (basically, Death and Mariana are still on-screen)!

RECAP: Maia Kadel makes an appearance when things take a turn for the worse after Maury's Sacrifice to save Harry. Nikolandria stops Lord Cunningham and Hadrian from attacking each other. After caspering Maury with the help of The Cunninghams, Riven and Tavit must bargain with Death one final time to keep Harry safe. Fred is rescued by Mariana and co, while the Dursleys are spared on Lord Cunningham's orders. Wikhn visits the Kuroe Clans, to ask for their assistance, while also acting as a Fae ambassador.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

AIDEN'S COURT (HARRY, MAIA, TAVIT, RIVEN, ETC)

The air seemed to still. Darkness remained hanging within Aiden's court. Then slowly, painstakingly, the great doors of hell opened.

From the shadowed, screaming depths, Death rose. She moved with slow, deliberate steps. Every movement the sound of bones rattling in cages and forever destined to that. The gate slammed shut behind her, a loud, hollow clanging that echoed in the magically charged room.

Lord Cunningham and Hadrian both stumbled forward in near-perfect synchronization. Automatically pulled to greet and serve the one who gifted them the awful powers they wielded. Lord Cunningham hissed, banishing his reaper persona at once. He was pulled a handful of steps closer, before he regained full movement of his own body. One half-clawed hand dug into his chest, directly over his heart.

Over Mariana's mark.
"Hadrian-!" he started to say, freezing in place when Death continued forward. He could no more defy Death than Hadrian could. They had sworn oaths, after all.

Her great hooded head allowing only the barest glimpse of paper-thin, dry lips. Gliding along the magically charged floor, she paused long enough to offer one skeletal hand to Aiden's kneeling form.

He took her hand in both of his and held it to his forehead. "I am honoured that my lady would visit my courts," he said, hoarsely. "And I only ask that you tell me what it is that you desire, so that I may create it for your pleasure."

"Would you?" Death asked.

Aiden's eyes remained fixed at the foot of her robes. "So as long as it is within my ability."

Death regarded him silently for a moment, before the hood fell back to show the once-beautiful face of a young woman. Her eyes were the same blood red hue as several of them now within Aiden's court.

"This is twice I am denied his soul," she whispered. Her voice the sound of a thousand ancients, her pout that of a scolded child. "Twice, my pet. Am I a merchant to be cheated at the market stalls?"

Aiden shook his head-once. "You are a being most feared, my lady," he said, softly. "I know not what the others have in store for him, but his soul will return to you-"

Her hand snaked out, catching him by the throat. Black veins grew visible, spreading from where her touch seared into him. "But you have granted them full use of your court for their nefarious-"

"You need not torture him," Tavit rumbled. "I know very well it is my skin you wish to burn." He shuffled away from the rest, his mouth set in a grim line. "We only do as we are told, after all. No matter the price."

"Puppets?" Death mocked. "Always shifting the blame to a more mortal soul than your own?" Her piercing gaze swept over Lord Cunningham and Hadrian, before settling on Maia and Harry. "You would have me believe that all of you would work together to save him?"

Riven bristled. "He is too young to die."

"And so are many others," Death hummed. "But they come to me anyway and I welcome them with open arms. As I always ever have. He was mine first. I dislike cheaters."

"Dear lady," Lord Cunningham murmured. He bowed deeply in respect, eyes lowered. "I thank you for accepting our meagre tribute, though it is not-to your liking."

"You live," Death said, dispassionately. "You all live. How can that be to my liking?" She released Aiden, frowning down at him. "You irritate me, my pet. I have taught you better."

Aiden's shoulders quivered ever so faintly as he weathered Death's fearsome gaze. "What would you have me do?"

There was a flare of ugliness that danced across Death's shadowed face, before it vanished. "Didn't I give you something to keep from straying into such lapses of boredom? A girl? A human witch? Where is she?"
Aiden rose, rubbing his throat, eyes averted. "She is free to roam."

"Oh?" Death's grin was fanged and terrifying. "And if I asked to see her?"

Aiden lifted his chin. "Then I would produce her as requested."

Death's wheezing laughter echoed through the room. "You will destroy yourself if you continue as you are. You cannot blame me for your own shortcomings." She sighed. "I have one request. Hadrian, you might find it more to your-liking."

Beside Lord Cunningham, Hadrian stiffened. The hood of his Reaper robe slipped from his head to reveal angry red eyes and an exceptionally pale face. He was staying exactly where he was by sheer force of will. It was obvious from the slight, strained tremors that Death's presence had a significant impact on him.

He had yet to banish his own Reaper persona.

"Not everyone appreciates your games," Tavit said, evenly. Another layer of darkness curled around him, almost as if it were a shield. "Though it is not my place to say anything."

"You are correct," Death rasped. "It is not your place."

Niko scowled from her safe vantage point behind Tavit's slender shoulders. She had yet to release him since Death's arrival. There was a strange, dark expression on her face.

Lord Cunningham gave a slight jerk of his head-deliberate permission for Hadrian. It wouldn't do to anger Death, but if Hadrian needed an anchor point, then he would give it to him. That was all he could give in their current circumstances.

Hadrian glided forward. His Reaper robes seemed to repair themselves as he approached Death, transforming from a ragged, desperate wraith to a tower of darkness, blood-red scythe gleaming in his grasp.

"My lady," he said, gravely.

"You did not reap him," she said, darkly. "And you were within reach."

Hadrian's grip tightened on his shimmering scythe. "His soul ransom was paid in full," he said.

"By his acquaintances—not by the boy himself."

Tavit bristled. Shadows flared and stretched around him. "I brokered that deal!" he growled. "And I won't have you undo it for your own pettiness. His soul is free and clear. You cannot have him and he does not owe you!"

Niko made a soft sound in her throat, her arms locking around Tavit's waist as if she were afraid he would move without her.

Death scowled fiercely. "Perhaps you have bargained," she said, icily. "But that does not erase his debt. I acknowledge that you have shielded him, but he owes me and I would—"

Tavit bristled. "Those were freshly harvested souls. There was nothing wrong with them. They didn't even have time to age!"

"They were gathered by one that has no relation to him!" Death's robes flared out, filling the entire space of the room behind them. The shadowed edges crept up the walls as if to swallow the room,
"What do you care?" Tavit snarled. "It's the same to you-the fresher, the better."

"It only counts as half," Hadrian said, darkly. "Souls that have no connection to the one they are trying to save-it doesn't have the same weight. Unless-

Tavit glared at him. "Do not ask me for a pound of flesh, Reaper. I owe you even less than I do him." He gave a jerk of his head in Riven's direction. "And I can hardly stand him."

Riven shifted uncertainly in the background. The great yellowed eye of his staff, blinked twice in slow-motion. His hair, flowing, and white, seemed as if it were growing somehow, pooling on the floor behind him in a great snowy trail.

Niko growled faintly as her eyes grew darker. She eyed Death's shadows creeping further through the room, along the edges of the ceiling. They shied away from her angry eyes, not daring to venture down the walls to reach them.

"Maurice," Riven said, tiredly. He leaned against his staff for support. "He had a connection to Harry. He was his mentor and guardian, given Harry's status in our customs. His soul ought to have cancelled any open debts."

Death's hiss made the walls in the room seem to melt and weep. "I did not ask for your opinion!"

Hadrian flinched. His scythe wavered and vanished, the robes blowing away to show his normal Gheyo self as he took advantage of the moment. "Then what would you accept?" he asked, steadily.

Tavit and Riven protested at once.

"You can't-!

"You aren't qual-"

Death's delighted smile spelled doom. "Clever. Always clever. I have the perfect assignment for you," she cooed. "I seem to have misplaced three things. Find them and I will-" she canted her head to the side, glowing red eyes fixed on Harry's unconscious form. "I will leave him be until he comes to me."

Hadrian's shoulder's slumped. "And what are these things?" he said, reluctantly. "And how long do I have to retrieve them?"

Riven paled. He started forward, only to be caught by Tavit's outstretched hand. "He's can't do this-"

"It's his choice," Tavit said, wearily. "You can't interfere."

"Tavit-!"

"He accepted on his own. Do not interfere, lest you wish to promise things you are not capable of delivering."

Riven's staff dissolved in his hands, disappearing into nothing. He quivered, faintly. His hair began to slowly untangle and re-braid itself into neat, warrior braids. "He doesn't know what he's-"

"Are you protesting because you'd rather pay the price?" Tavit eyed him. "You're not his
conscience or his mother."

"I don't have to be," Riven said, through gritted teeth. "Nor do I have to be an Empath to know that the repercussions of-"

"They are called by many names, but they are the same. The eye that revives a pale shade, the conduit for the ultimate power and a shield to hide your soul."

Hadrian swallowed. "An eye, a focus object, and a shield?" His confusion was quickly masked by a blank expression.

"You will know them when you see them, Reaper. For you are of my own making. Fail and you will suffer the consequences."

"Of course—and your deadline?" Hadrian asked, calmly.

Death wheezed, a whisper, rattling sound. "You will have three weeks."

Hadrian flinched back from the growing shadows that rose up from Death, to tower over him. 
"Three weeks? We're mid-season in the Hunt and-"

"Three weeks. No longer." Death held up three bony fingers. "If you do not manage it-your existence is forfeit."

Lord Cunningham glanced between Hadrian and Harry. Maia's piercing silver eyes kept him frozen in place, his protests on the tip of his tongue. Reapers were made or birthed from Death's side. Only Death could grant or recall that prestigious title—and it was not recalled lightly.

Hadrian bowed his head, "Accepted. Three weeks as of tomorrow," he bargained.

Death smirked. "Three weeks starting today." She swept by her shadows swallowing the entire room. For one, awful moment. Everything was black.


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**THEO, CHARLIE, ETHAN, AND OTHERS – AIDEN'S COURT.**

The door to the casting chamber blew open to show one very ticked off Theodore Nott, followed by a fully-flaming Charlie. Bringing up the rear—and no less annoyed—was Ethan and Prince Raspen.

Riven grimaced. He rolled his neck to the side, hearing it crack in the odd silence of Death's departure. He gathered his robes around himself. His re-braided hair had shrunk significantly, returning to the length that dictated how much stored magic was hidden within.

"Greet them," Maia murmured, fluttering her fan over Harry's sleeping face. "It's a good thing he's asleep for this. I don't think he'd want to feel that."

Soft purple energy swirled around him as Riven strode forward. This was his mess; he'd have to deal with it before it got any further out of hand. A deep pain stabbed through his chest, circling around his heart, before settling into an aching throb.

He pressed his lips together, rubbing insistently at the troublesome spot. He'd have to leave soon. He was supposed to have more time in Nevarah. He'd only just arrived. It was too soon to be taking off so quickly. It would also require the kind of explanations he didn't want to give.
There were secrets that were not meant to be shared with others, after all.

But the persistent ache was just that—persistent. From the growing pains starting at his ankles and slowly spiralling up his body, Riven knew his time was fairly limited. With a bit of luck, he could stall long enough for explanations. It was the best he could do, even if the one he'd just helped, deserved far better than a quick spell, a smile and silence.

A reluctant smile was quickly smothered. No one would understand the reason for it, so Riven schooled his features into something serious and acceptable. There was a small twinge of regret as he watched Prince Raspen, in the midst of the group, somehow commanding the room, even though he'd barely set foot in it.

It would be a while before he'd see him again, mentored student or not. Death's timing was rarely ever beneficial to those who sought to make use of it.

"Oret!" Prince Raspen moved easily through the small group to approach Riven first. His hands were outstretched, but they were quickly dropped to his sides as he remembered himself— and their audience. "What just happened? We came as quickly as we could, but there were a few complications. The entire realm just-"

The room trembled and shuddered. The floor wobbled beneath them.

Charlie barely caught himself, as Theo and Ethan supported each other. A faint green tinge touched Theo's features.

Riven couldn't answer. He had overstayed his welcome after all and with the sheer amount of magic he'd thrown around, it was no wonder that Nevarah was not happy with him. Or his meddling, no matter how well-intentioned.

Niko leaned out from behind Tavit, wrinkling her pert nose at the newcomers. She glanced up at Tavit, reaching up to rub at the furrow in his brow with small, pale fingers. "It's alright, it's alright, everything is alright," she chanted, softly.

"It's a bloody mess!" Lord Cunningham growled. "Hadrian!" He could move now and strode forward with purpose, his darkened gaze fixed solely on one wayward ACE.

Hadrian winced. He hastily schooled his features into something vaguely repentant, before ducking his head low enough for the expected headslap.

It didn't come.

Instead, Lord Cunningham caught him by the ear and gave a sharp twist, enough to draw a grimace.

"Do you ever think about anyone other than yourself? Mariana is going to burn you and that will be entirely on your own shoulders! I know you know better! There's recklessness and then there's that. You're always so busy being so self-sacrificing that you can't even see the traps you're walking right into? Three weeks is not enough time to find or retrieve Death's Hallows!" Lord Cunningham scowled.

Hadrian perked up, in spite of himself. "You know them?" He tried and failed to pull his ear free of his sponsor's grasp.

"I know of them," Lord Cunningham said, pained. "And they aren't things that you should be chasing around. There's no rumour that proves their existence either! It could easily be a folktale
"Death's Hallows are not a mythical rumour," Tavit muttered. He leaned away from Niko's fluttering fingers, pulling her flush against him with an arm around her waist. He ignored her struggles to get free and instead, turned his irritation on Lord Cunningham. "They are as real as every other legendary weapon within this realm. Have you never considered that Nevarah's existence makes other non-existent things, real?"

"What's wrong with them?" Hadrian wanted to know. He stilled-reluctantly-when Lord Cunningham gave his ear another twist.

Tavit snorted. "Maybe you'd better worry about yourself instead of your impossible challenge, hm? There's nothing wrong with them, except for they were hard-won from Death and should have returned to Death upon the original holder's expirations, unfortunately, that never happened."

Hadrian made a soft growling sound in his throat, but knelt in deference. He did actually understand his current position and he liked his ear attached to his head. Lord Cunningham wasn't particularly cruel, but he wasn't above making a point, regardless of an audience or the methods required.

Lord Cunningham held him there for another moment, as if to make a point, before he released him, his dark eyes gleaming. He barked out a series of orders to the rest of his Circle, beckoning for Hadrian to follow. He wasn't about to stay within Aiden's court for another minute.

"Why can't they be retrieved?" Hadrian looked to Tavit. "Do you know?"

"What makes you think they can't be retrieved?" Tavit smirked. He patted Niko's hands, absently, the red in his eyes flaring ever so slightly.

"Because Death would've recalled them by now, if it were that easy," Niko sang. "Can we go, Tavit? Please? I don't want to be here. I don't want you to be here. Can't I please have what I want, this time?"

"Are you going to beg for it?"

"I can!"

"Can you?"

"Yes!" Niko smiled, prettily.

Tavit smirked. "Aren't you clever?" He drew Niko in front of him, still keeping her close by way of an arm around the waist. "We can go."

"Tavit-!" Riven protested.

But Tavit was tired of listening. He mere gave him a look. "This isn't my mess, so enjoy the clean up for once. I'll be somewhere you can't find me and with some scrap of luck, I won't have to see your ugly face again until you're dead."

"You don't always have to be so rude, Tavit," Riven said, wearily. "It's not their fault that they don't know what you do-"

"You're excused," Tavit said, darkly.
"Tavit-behave." Riven gathered himself together, taking stock of the room and the current players. "Anyone who does not need to be here-I suggest you leave. This is Death's court and you are not as welcome as I am." There was a note of sternness that was not to be ignored.

"Behave?" Tavit sputtered. "You're the one trampling all over-I'd prefer if you didn't call me for another couple of decades. Save your own neck for a change!"

Aiden growled. "You should listen to your own common sense. You've all overstayed your welcome here."

The room trembled.

Maia frowned, one hand keeping Harry in place, his head pillowed on her lap. Her eyes flashed white-bright-silver, before her wispy magic swirled into the room, brightening it just a touch. She floated Harry up and into mid-air, guiding him towards the rush of newcomers.

Prince Raspen hesitated in the doorway, clearly torn between wanting to go to Riven and doing his duty, as required, when Maia approached with a floating Harry in tow.

"Out into the hallway," Maia said, briskly. "You do not want to go in there right now. It is not—safe."

"Harry!" Theo, Charlie and Ethan all spoke as one, reaching out long before Harry was within arm's reach.

"Do let me set him down," Maia said, mildly. "I don't think he'd appreciate the drop from mid-air. He's had quite a rough ending to everything."

"Harry-!" Charlie pulled Harry out of mid-air and straight into his arms, easily adjusting to hold him securely. "What happened?"

Theo gave a short, jerky bow. "Thank you for taking care of him." he said, cautiously. His golden gaze flicked deeper into the room, but he held Ethan and Charlie back, crowding them into the hallway.

"What is it?" Ethan said, worming his way between Theo and Charlie to get a better look at Harry. He cast three diagnostic spells in rapid-succession and felt his heart drop at the readouts. "Oh, Harry."

"He's fine," Maia said, serenely. Her pipe floated in mid-air beside her. She plucked it out of mid-float with elegant, long fingers. "If you are not averse to my assistance, I would offer it. I am a certified Healer; I simply choose to make my living apart from that distinction. I have worked with Riven Cairothe and his father, for decades upon decades. Our elements are complementary to each other and our magics are—"

Ethan gave a formal bow. "Please accept my apology. I was the one who brought the Kalziks instead of you, honoured one. To my knowledge, Our Circle has no quarrel with yours. I was unaware that favours were exchanged between us. Please excuse the oversight. It was not meant as a deliberate slight to you and yours or your talents—"

Maia studied him for a long moment. "Why?"

"...Harry's been treated by the Kalziks before," Ethan said, flushing. "H-he responded well. I thought that perhaps—"
"It was a mistake," Theo said, smoothly. "Perhaps we could take this conversation elsewhere? I wouldn't want to trouble-anyone."

Charlie and Ethan flinched in tandem at Aiden's blood-red gaze fixed on them. "Definitely take it elsewhere," Charlie muttered. His brow furrowed, faintly. "Theo-wasn't the mark on-shouldn't we ask about Hermione?"

Theo hesitated. "We can't just ask him, Charlie."

"Ask what?" Ethan looked between them. "Who's Hermione?"

Theo bit back a hiss when Aiden blurred from the centre of the room, to the doorway. A dark, dangerous aura emanated from from Aiden, filling the room with even more shadowed energy than before.

"Where did you hear that name?" Aiden demanded. His crimson eyes fluxed to the same, bottomless black as Death's. "And how do you know my consort? Answer quickly, if you wish to remain among the living!"

Ethan twitched, looking more worried by the second. "We know his consort?"

There were a handful of times in Theo's life where he'd wished for a brain-swapping spell. If only to give him enough cleverness to wrangle his way out of a difficult transition and then to return to his own brain, so that he could record the process and learn better for the next time.

Charlie's deliberate mention of Hermione was one such instance. He wished he'd been faster with the silencing spell, but the Hound had heard them anyway. Ethan's surprised exclamation hadn't helped either.

And neither had that silencing spell. Maybe he was losing his touch. No. There were simply too many other things to keep track of. Policing his Bonded was not a habit he wanted to cultivate. They needed to make their own mistakes and learn from them.

And he needed to let them.

Arielle. What a mess this was!

"I will not ask you again," Aiden said, darkly. There were soulless shades rising up behind him as he spoke, ready to do as they were bid.

Theo sighed. Loudly. As if put upon. "We know a Miss Hermione Granger," he said, calmly. "Because she is the schoolmate and best friend of my Submissive, one Harry Potter. We brought her with us to Nevarah after she was found unconscious and abandoned in the Forbidden Forest-"

"You brought her to Nevarah?" Aiden hissed. "I sent hounds for her! She bears my House Crest and belongs under my protection! She is not to be handled by the likes of-"

"Apparently not quick enough," Theo snapped, his temper getting the better of him. "We did nothing more than common courtesy. Seeing her through to Nevarah was harmless. She's our friend and-"

Aiden's growl rattled the walls. "You did nothing?" he snarled. "I found her in your Forbidden Forest and she was so close to Death's Door that-"
Theo bristled. He didn't like the implication from Aiden, Hellhound or not. Hermione Granger was a clever witch and one, that he was sure, would not have ever considered taking her own life.

Ethan bared his fangs, eyes fluxing from gold to a dark, rich brown. "We've come peaceably," he said, shoulders twitching as if his wings would like to make an appearance. "And I would have our conversation remain-

A low rumble started in Aiden's chest. "Peaceably doesn't have you-

"Aiden," Riven said, faintly. He slumped sideways, listing into Aiden's shoulder. "I-I can't stay much longer, the price-the magic-thank you-

Aiden jerked to the side, belatedly reaching out to steady him, only for Ethan to step forward and catch Riven instead. "Cairothe-!

Riven trembled. His eyes burned the same, bright violet, but grew steadily darker. His hands seemed to fade in and out of existence, as he gradually began to fade at the edges. "Too-unstable here," he said, through gritted teeth. "Sorry-about-everything. Needed clear-casting grounds. They're not-the enemy. They only-have-" Riven's eyes rolled up in his head.

"Oret!" Prince Raspen exclaimed. He reached for Riven, only to find his hands passing straight through the fading remnants in Ethan's arms. "Oret-wait-!

Ethan shuddered. Holding Riven had been like trying to grasp an incomplete vortex. The sheer magic contained in a single being was mind-boggling. He could feel his own scales straining to tear free of his current form, to unleash the dragon within.

The wild magic that coursed through Riven's body was nothing more than lifeblood to him-and pure chaos to anyone else. Ethan swallowed hard, his hands slowly dropping back to his sides. The absence of so much magic left an unbelievable vacuum in the empty space in front of him.

"Riven!" Prince Raspen cried. "No-!

Aiden was now exceptionally pale, his eyes even darker and bloodier than before. His lip curled, revealing gleaming, whitened fangs. "My court does not open to you, little prince," he snarled.

Prince Raspen bowed his head, eyes lowered as he backed away from the door. His expressions were schooled into something grim and bland. "I apologize for the intrusion, Lord Aiden. We came on behalf of Cairothe as the one he sought to help is the Submissive of these three-" he gestured to Theo, Charlie and Ethan.

Aiden's fiery gaze swept over all of them, before flicking into the distance where Maia and Charlie stood out of range in the hall. It lingered, briefly, on Harry's form, cradled in Charlie's arms.

"You have not seen her?" he asked, tightly.

Theo's brow furrowed. "The last we saw of her was right before you took her," he said, slowly. "That was at least-when?" He looked to Ethan, frowning. Ethan wouldn't know, because it was before his time. Where was Charlie when he needed him?

"Before me," Ethan said, helpfully. "Is she-I mean, is there-" he corrected. "Something wrong, Lord Aiden?"

Theo stiffened as an awful thought took root. "She is here with you, right?"
Charlie clutched Harry tighter to him, wishing he was out of the strange gloomy room and somewhere that they would be safe. Nothing about Lord Aiden's domain felt remotely safe. Theo was making excuses and Ethan looked shell-shocked, as if he hadn't seen that twist coming.

If he was honest, Charlie hadn't seen it either. He had a fairly decent idea that the Hound was short-tempered, given the minor interactions he'd seen only minutes before, but it seemed as if Theo was about to pass up a good opportunity and he couldn't let that happen.

Not when it was so easy to just speak up and try. There was never any harm in trying, at least, that's what his mother had always taught him. He didn't appreciate Theo's quick silencing spell—but he had to admit that he hadn't expected it.

Theo was quick, when he wanted to be and the spell was virtually undetectable. He squirmed for a minute, fighting the effect, until he could convince his flames to burn through the subtle scrap of magic.

They'd have to talk about that sometime. Maybe. He'd caught the wicked gleam of gold in Theo's eyes, right before his expression had shifted to that impeccable Slytherin-esque calm. It seemed there were some habits that wouldn't fade.

Maia eyes glowed a softer, silvery hue as she edged out of the room, beckoning to Charlie to join her. "Leave them be, they'll figure out what they must. This one needs to be in a warm bed, with warm bodies clustered around him." She feathered a hand through Harry's soft hair.

Charlie allowed himself to be guided away from the starting conversation. Even though he wanted to be there, he didn't want Harry there in the midst of it. Not unconscious and unable to listen proper or respond. There was no telling what kind of empathy feedback that might result in such close quarters as well.

He followed Maia out into the wide, open hall that stretched out in both directions. There were a few shadowed guards standing watch, but they paid no mind to Charlie or Maia. It didn't seem to matter that their swift arrival was already dissolving into a possible shouting match.

The rush to get to Aiden's section of Nevarah, then admitted to his courts, had taken a ridiculous amount of time. Charlie could've sworn that Tavit had insisted on it, because he knew how much time it would take, the bastard.

Theo's barely muted panic hadn't helped much at all. Or maybe it was Ethan's. It was hard to tell, given how close they'd been clustered together, talking over each other whenever needed. Prince Raspen's presence had helped, but not nearly as much as Charlie had hoped for.

He almost wished that Princess Ebony had come with them. There was simply something about her that made things happen and he'd be lying if he said the support wasn't welcome. Just to have another powerful dragel on their side-Harry's side—would've made him feel a lot better now. He joined Maia near the wall, within sight of the door.

A wispy healing spell twined around her free hand and leapt to Harry's unconscious form. "His vitals are fine," she reported. "He'll just be out for a while. That was an extremely exhausting ritual. He stayed awake for nearly all of it and did very well."

"Thank you," Charlie said, simply. He tightened his grip on his armful of Harry, worried blue eyes flickering to where Theo and Ethan stood shoulder-to-shoulder, answering Aiden's clipped, angry questions.
"They'll be fine," Maia said, mildly. "Don't worry from all the way over here. You'd only be in the way if you were there and you don't need this one to become a bargaining chip again." She patted Harry's head, absently.

"You don't know that-do you know that?" Charlie stared at her. He remembered Henry's introduction and the powerful magic he hadn't been able to ignore in the Kadel viewing box.

Maia gave a low, raspy chuckle. "What do you think?"

"I think Theo wanted to take you up on your offer-favour-about Harry."

"What about him?"

"In our-realm-he's part of a prophecy. It's not a very good one."

"Prophecies are seldom good," Maia agreed. Her rheumy gaze never left the arguing trio at the doorway. It was an amusing sight to her, considering who was now left in Aiden's domain.

Prince Raspen had retreated to side of the room, watching with worried eyes as Lord Cunningham dragged Hadrian off by the ear—ignoring the Gheyo's erstwhile protests.

Charlie's ragged ponytail burst into flames, the tie snapping open to let his fiery hair dance at his shoulders. "It names him as the chosen one and ends with-"

Maia tapped her empty pipe out into mid-air. "Do not tell me," she warned. "And do not give me information that I do not need to know. Just because something has more than one outcome does not mean that they must be favourable in one way or another. Sometimes the best path is the first path, no matter how dark and twisted it may be."

"It gave him an ultimatum!" Charlie's blue eyes flared with passion. "He's not that kind of wizard-dragel-person. He's suffered enough and he deserves the freedom to make his own choices-!"

"And yet," Maia said, darkly. "He will suffer some more. I do not control that, young one. I only observe and repeat my observations to those who ask to hear what I have seen. I can only tell you what is already set or what could be available, if all hearts and minds are open. It is not a guarantee and-"

"Anything but what they've conditioned him to bear would be acceptable," Charlie said, grimly. "Anything that doesn't demand that he be the sacrifice for a greater good."

There was an edge to her silver-gaze now, but Maia regarded him silently, before she began to puff on her pipe again. "Where are you staying?" she asked, abruptly. "You do not have your own place yet, correct? You were with Henry."

"We're staying with him until the Peverells Seal is removed," Charlie said, uncomfortably. "Though with Harry-"

"He's in no condition to have another Seal removed just yet," Maia said, tartly. "He'll have to sleep these off, then pull himself together before he can handle another one. Seal removals are serious rituals. They require a great deal of-"

"We don't have anywhere else to stay," Charlie interrupted. "We can't stay with the Deveraines because-" he hesitated.

Maia coughed, delicately. "The Deveraines are about as peaceable as the Cunninghams. Do not trip
over your own words. I would say that his Earth affinity is rather strong, given that he has chosen an Earth Alpha and an Earth Pareya. Perhaps there is someone who might host you for the foreseeable future?"

Charlie hesitated. Their options were limited and he was now wishing he'd spent a little more time with Ebony, visiting the courts and trying to make new friends that might care enough to host them for a few days. Even if it might be too soon to use any of those connections. "Maybe Ethan's family," he said, uncertainly. "The Peverells were fine with-"

"They will not refuse you," Maia said, serenely. "You are bonded to their son. They will at least give you a roof over your head. Think in those terms and settle someplace that will give him stability. Wherever you are, I will come and visit you in three days when he is ready to wake." She tapped Harry's head. "Until then, try and keep yourselves out of trouble, hm?"

Her body wavered, growing more transparent by the second, until she was nothing more than a pale reflection of what she'd once been. There was a mischievous smirk on her face as she tipped her pipe to Charlie in farewell.

"Wait-!" Charlie cried.

But she winked out of existence without another word.

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**FRED - THE SAFEHOUSE (MARIANA AND CO.)**

"We can stay here," Mariana said, inspecting the front room with a sharp eye. "If Wolfram doesn't mind, pair up however you like and be good guests." She frowned at the clock on the wall. "We're not moving until I have confirmation of what I want, so keep yourselves busy and out of my scales, hm?"

Her favourite Joker snorted. "Out of your scales? Not happening, darling." He hugged her from behind, his grip loose and cautious.

Mariana twitched, faintly. "I'll thank you to keep your hands to-"

"Mariana?" Wolfram appeared in the doorway, a stocky blond with spiky hair and spiked armour. "I didn't think that they were serious when they said you were passing through. What brings you to my corner of darkness?"

"The shadows talk as they ever do," Mariana grumbled. She swatted at her Joker's hands, but didn't bother trying to pry them off of her. "Do you have room? And would you mind a few Torvaks?"

"Torvaks?" Wolfram echoed. His curious eyes swept over the bedraggled group of captives standing uncertainly in the centre of the room, surrounded by Mariana's Bonded. "Ah. So that's what the magical spike was. Having fun again?"

"I'm always having fun-can't you tell?" The sarcasm in her voice did not match the unrepentant grin of her Gheyo Joker, still hanging on behind her.

"She had a lot of fun," he stage-whispered. "So much that we set an entire unplottable on fire. Pretty sure it was still burning when we left."

"We didn't set it on fire," Robere said. He nudged Fred along, until he was closer to the front of the group with the rest of them. "Their own kind set it on fire and then sat back to watch the show. If
we didn't get them out of there, I don't think there would've been much left. They are lucky to be alive and I would appreciate it if you would have someone look them over?"

"We don't owe you anything!" Lady Amanda snarled. "We-!" She stilled when Lord Heron placed a hand on her arm, shaking his head. "It is the truth; Heron-we are never to be indebted to the likes of-"

"Amanda, please. We are alive for the moment." He laced his hand through hers, squeezing gently. "Please," he repeated.

Her face grew red and she looked away with a huff. She didn't pull her hand free, though her lips pressed into a thin line.

"You can all stay as long as you need to," Wolfram said, easily. There was laughter in his soft grey eyes as he gave a jerk of his head to the entryway leading into the home. "We won't hold it against you-much. Meals are included with the rooms. Same rate as usual."

"Same rate my foot," Mariana grumbled. "You've raised your bloody prices twice in the past year. You're bleeding me dry."

"Says the charming little she-devil that can afford it," Wolfram teased. "I'm sure your Alpha is still bending rules and reality to suit your whims. He won't mind the price increase."

"He minds that I forget to ask him for it," Mariana said, flatly. "Don't raise it until the next visit. Charge the same rate."

Wolfram laughed. "Alright, alright. Old rates for this visit only. It's doubled the next time you're passing through. I always have to clean the entire place from top to bottom when your lot leaves. There's always too much blood left."

"It's not my fault you don't ward the place properly."

"Who said anything about wards?" He shook his head. "The same rate applies to you as well." He nodded to the Torvaks. "It's clean enough that you will find your accommodations to be suitable for a night or two."

Lord Heron froze. "What's the catch?"

Wolfram shrugged. "I think you'll find that we only dislike your kind about half as much as you supposedly think we hate you. So as long as you aren't trying to actively cause harm, the manor will house you. It will create rooms, provide basic necessities and protect you from outside threats. If you were not worthy of such a privilege, you would not have been able enter at all."

"...why?" Lord Heron whispered. "Why would you even-?"

"Because we're not monsters," Wolfram said, simply. "We're dragons. We have limits. We have hearts. Now, if you don't mind, I was in the middle of dinner-"

"Actual dinner or your perfect little piece of fluff that you can't bear to be away from, for longer than five seconds?" Mariana deadpanned. "Don't even answer that. I don't want to know. Do you have a casting room open?"

"He's a delightful piece of fluff," Wolfram said, smirking. "And I enjoy him very much. There's the three rooms in the West Wing, if it's other-realm-y, I wouldn't use them. Try the North side."
"North's fine. West could work. Just settling a new Casper."

"A new Casper?" Wolfram brightened. "Congratulations—that is an excellent upgrade."

Mariana hesitated. "He was a very dear friend. I wish it were any other soul than his."

"Ah. We all have those," Wolfram said, knowingly. "Come in, come in—this way, all of you. I see you have some children?"

"Not mine, obviously!" Mariana snapped. "They're all-Torvak." Her gaze flickered to Robere and Pyro. "And if they aren't, we'll find out soon enough."

Food? Scout sidled up beside Mariana, a beseeching look on her face. Something tasty? Snacks too, please?

"...and dinner," Mariana said, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Would you please find something suitable for them to eat tonight?"

Wolfram snickered. "Don't we always take good care of you?" He led them through the hallways, pausing to beckon to a few of his Pareya. He rattled off a series of orders in rapid fire, then waited to give them a head start.

Fred shuffled forward, trying not to shy away from Robere's hand. There was something about the older man that made him uneasy, as if he'd been judged and found woefully lacking in his right to exist.

Robere's magic was rich and tempting in a way that Fred had never experienced before. It was completely different from Dumbledore's stifling aura and even Cedrella's overpowering energy when he'd finally felt it.

It was powerful in the way it lurked beneath the surface, tempered grace and gravity simmering as if it could erupt at any moment.

Like a fire, burning endlessly, but with a purpose behind the flames.

"Stop thinking so loud," Robere muttered. "You'll give yourself a headache." His big hand came to rest atop Fred's head. "Your family will be fine. Nevarah will take care of them and they'll be entering under our admittance. They'll be fine."

Fred made a noise of disagreement in his throat. He was reasonably sure that his family would be alright—somehow—they were Weasleys, after all and there was something about a Weasley that simply worked.

He was more worried about George, the most noticeable half of him and the fact that they'd never been apart this long.

Never.

Even when they'd had a few brief splits, thanks to things out of their own control, he'd always been able to feel him. A strange sort of twin-sensing bond. This was different.

It was a dark emptiness that refused to be quenched and seemed to have grown in leaps and bounds, since the dragels had shown up and dragged them all away from Weasley Manor. He missed George more than the normality that he'd left behind.
George was the one to temper his wilder, crazier ideas. The slightly more rational version of himself that helped to keep them together.

Robere ruffled Fred's hair, tugging gently on the red locks. "Still thinking too loud," he murmured. "Stop doing that to yourself, hm?"

Fred bit back an irrational growl. To stop thinking was to stop breathing in this point. He didn't have a chance to argue though, because the narrow hall opened up into another set of large, sitting rooms with plenty of comfortable furniture and ambient lighting.

There were overstuffed chairs and lounges, plush rugs on the floors, corner fireplaces and low, wooden tables, anchored to the floor. Bowls of fruit were on each table and a golden tray with glass pitchers and matching glasses.

"Make yourselves at home," Wolfram said, grandly. "The Pareya will take you to your rooms when you're ready. You're expected to show your face at mealtimes, regardless of whether you eat or not-"

"To make sure we're still alive?" Lady Amanda said, bitterly. "So we're just privileged prisoners?"

"To make sure the rooms haven't eaten you," Robere said, wickedly. "The house is alive, you know. It's a crossroads inn. It exists because it's both alive and dead."

"Don't scare them," Pyro said, flatly. "And don't interrupt, it's rude." He tugged Robere out of Mariana's line of sight.

"If you understand your situation, then you won't ask pointless questions. You'll be held until some sort of verdict is handed down from the Inter-realm courts," Mariana said, coolly. "If you'd actually used your empty-headed brain to pay attention for a minute, you'd know that I submitted your particular offense to the Inter-Realm Courts and requested a Rite of Consequence."

Lord Heron paled. "You went through the Inter-Realm Court?" he asked, faintly. "They aren't-they wouldn't-"

"They listened. We play nicely enough by their rules. There isn't a problem-for us." Mariana's scowl grew. "You might find it useful to think about whether you have any useful information worth bargaining for. It might be the difference between exile to Arcalea or something less-horrifying."

"You can't just treat us like criminals and-!" Lady Amanda burst out.

Mariana snorted. "You are criminals. Placing a hunting beacon on an underage dragel's primary residence without any formal warning or notice of intent to any extended next of kin is no ordinary crime. It's not a harmless prank. It's a death sentence, plain and simple."

"We didn't-!" Lady Amanda sputtered. "There's no way you can prove that!"

"I don't know. I could try, though I don't know why I'd be bothered. Destroying his family and home in trying to erase him-also a crime. That's close enough to a similar consequence. I just need one offense to register. There's also the death of Maurice Elswood, unless you're saying that was just an unfortunate side effect? You have multiple deaths on your hands. If you don't like the blood on them, perhaps you should try keeping your nose out of dragel business."

"You can't do this!" Lady Amanda tried again. Her eyes glittered with unshed tears, her hands fisted at her sides. She quivered, faintly. "We didn't-we weren't-"
"Standing by complacently still makes you guilty," Pyro said, lazily. "And quite frankly, I don't care if you threw the spell that killed him or held your tongue when your kind went to hunt a child. You didn't speak up. You didn't protest then. What's different now?" He shook his head.

"Alright then," Mariana said, pleasantly. "So if you'd sent, say-a scout or something— and they reported back to you that there were no dragels, just a family with two children. Then what?"

"The beacon wouldn't have taken if they weren't-if there weren't any dragels inside," Lord Heron said, faintly. "It's the magic, it's not-"

"So you'd blame the magic and not the intent behind? Hypocrite. Someone had to cast that spell, to see if it would take. Someone had to decide that it was alright to cast it anyway. Someone had to authorize that the lives of two children were no longer important. Because that's how they would've appeared to you."

"A child that's over ten and not into their inheritance?" Lady Amanda scoffed. "That is no child!"

"A youngling that has not come into any inheritance is a child," Mariana shot back. "They are helpless and incapable of protecting themselves against the kinds of threats that an adult could handle with ease. They are helpless because they do not know how to help themselves. They are incapable of protecting themselves because they cannot access the magic to do so!"

Lady Amanda grew red in the face. "That's not—there's no way that you could—you can't—"

"Tell me something, do your own children immediately grow into their inheritance? Like clockwork, they're perfectly as they're supposed to be with no variances whatsoever—ah, wait. That's right. Your kind don't come into that. They're born exhibiting their powers and continue to grow and learn about them, until they are of age to take an oath of loyalty."

"How do you know that?" Lord Heron cried. His face paled. "Cedrella—that traitorous woman!"

"She did a thankless job with admirable dedication to the role that was given to her," Mariana said, icily. "Though I would wonder if you spent less time training your children, if you'd perhaps feel a little more heart for them. We treasure ours because they are treasures. Not weapons. Not tools. Not predisposed to be anything other than what they are."

"Then you're just as hypocritical as-"

"I didn't say we were perfect," Mariana said, mildly. "I just said that we didn't force them to grow up or chose their life path without allowing them the time and space to grow into their own selves." She cracked her knuckles. "Which brings me to the next problem. If you say that it wasn't you, then should I assume that you know who did?"

"You can assume all you like!" Lady Amanda spat. "It won't do you any better than-!"

"It was ordered by one of our Elders," Lord Heron said, quietly. He reached out to put a hand on his wife's arm, a sharp Look prompting her to swallow her next words. "That is all we know."

"One of your Elders?" Mariana repeated. "Of course. Convenient. Should I bother to ask which one?"

"You could bother," Lord Heron said, carefully. "But I have never met him and I have no way of properly tracing his identity or-"

"Is the magic traceable?" Mariana said, over her shoulder.
Pyro snorted. He had Robere in a headlock and was currently enjoying the payback. "Anything's traceable. We have Scout."

A wicked smirk crept onto her face. "I know," Mariana said, lightly. "I know. Just checking. We always have Scout and she is very good at what she does. You know, Pyro, I think some morning exercise might put me in better humours for the rest of this wretched trip."

Pyro grinned, fangs gleaming. "I assure you, we are as eager as can be." He released Robere, dodging closer to Mariana.

Lord Heron paled. "W-what are you saying?"

"You showed us how well you hunt," she said, carelessly. "Now we'll return the favour."

Lady Amanda made a distressed sound in her throat. A conflicted expression was on her face. "We weren't hunting—children." She spat. "We weren't!"

Lord Heron gathered her into his arms, rubbing her back in soothing motions. He didn't dare say anything else to that, because even if it hadn't been their intent, something terrible had happened.

Pyro's hair burst into flame, eyes gleaming orange. "Milady, can we-?" he gestured to Ignean.

"Take it outside," Mariana said. "You know how to work it out of your system. The rest of you disperse. Wolfram?"

Wolfram whistled.

Four Pareya appeared in the doorway, distinguished by the round, teal badges pinned to their shoulders.

"Would you please host?" Wolfram gestured to the room at large. "I am sure you know to play nicely with each other. Please see to our guests every comfort. Mariana?"

"With you," she said, wearily. "There's more to it than just a beacon."

"This way." He waved her forward as the Pareya stepped in to take over.

"So, question-" Robere said, pocketing the room key. "How long has your magic been leaking out like that?"

Fred stared. "...what?"

"I pulled you away from the others for a reason." Robere crossed the room to inspect the bath. "Your magic's been fighting itself for some time now. It keeps trying to bleed out of you. I'd take a wild guess, but it'd be easier if you just felt like sharing the important bits, so we can get it taken care of right away."

"It's-not," Fred tried. The words lodged in his throat. His hands fluttered at his sides. He was overcome by the sudden, desperate feeling that there was something much larger changing inside of him, than there had been before. "There isn't-!"

"That would be an, 'I don't know' then." He turned on the taps, charming them with childproofing spellwork and checking for pranks. Wolfram's Circle was fairly straight forward, but his Gheyos could be-unusual.
He also didn't need Fred to freak out any more than necessary, considering that it would take some interesting spellwork to remedy his current situation.

"I've been helped by enough of you to know that I don't need anymore help," Fred said, evenly.

"Oh?" Robere said, interested. "That sounds like there's a story in there somewhere. Save it for later though. Bath or shower? I'm guessing the smoke won't bother you, but the water would. There's towels in the cupboard and spare clothes under the sink. Find something that fits."

Fred scowled.

"Now," he added, when Fred didn't move. "I'm not your babysitter, so try and keep up, hm?"

"Just my warden?" Fred couldn't keep the sarcasm from his voice.

Robere frowned. "We could play captive and prisoner," he said, lightly. "But you're still a kid and I'd hate to break you. If you're looking for gentleness, that would be Ignean. I am not, nor have I ever been, inclined to temper myself in that way. He does it out of sheer necessity. Now, move-before I help you with that."

There was an underlying edge to the way that he spoke and in spite of himself, Fred obeyed. He slipped inside the bath, locking the door behind him. It took all of a minute to realize what Robere had done to the bathroom.

He couldn't escape-or inadvertently hurt himself. Childproofing spells? He thought, disgusted with himself. He knew a couple of the spells, his Mum had used them for Ginny and Ron, after all. Things to keep from accidentally ending up in bad situations.

Ten minutes later, he still couldn't break any of the spells-or the ward across the door that kept him in the bathroom and therefore, unable to sneak out through the bedroom.

Robere's words were troubling, because it explained something and nothing. He had no idea what Juniper had done, just that things had hurt and George left with her. His magic was fine, there was nothing wrong with it-Fred nearly choked when his hair burst into flame.

Oh Merlin!

That was not a side-effect that was supposed to happen.

A hasty swipe of his hands proved two things-one, it was real fire and two, it really hurt. He spun the taps open, sticking his throbbing hands under the icy water.

What was that-argh-it's still flaming!? Fred pressed his lips together to keep his growing panic contained. This was nothing like the explanations he'd seen from his Father or Grandfather on what to expect for his Torvak Fire and Ice.

His jumbled thoughts skittered to a halt. His hair was on fire-but it wasn't burning him. At least, it wasn't burning his head, neck or shoulders. Except for his aching hands, the fire was-harmless.

Fred hesitated.

Panic returned when he saw the flames rise and grow, stretching up another foot taller than his own height. The flames spread across his shoulders and down his body.

He didn't need any further encouragement to all but dive to the tub. The sound of sizzling flames
built to a roar in his ears, as he submerged himself. His body felt as if it were still on fire.

When he had to breathe again, he sat up sputtering and trembling to the horrifying truth that the flames were still there.

Still. There.

Every part of him that was above the water, was on fire. Flames that went from a normal, expected red, to a darker, disturbing red. Blood red. Burgundy red.

And Fred didn't wait to see what other colours would come. He ducked under the water again, even as an unexpected shudder raced through him. The irrational fear was muted, almost as if it had come from George.

George's fear, George's panic. Not his.

Fred gripped the edge of the tub, trying to stay underwater long enough to get the flames out. His hands were tentatively flickering, but not quite flaming like the rest of him had been a few moments before.

The tub groaned and he dared to look where his hands were melting through the sides.

_No-no-nononono-_!

**MARIANA AND MAURY, WOLFRAM'S CROSSROAD INN**

Mariana watched Wolfram disappear through the door of his private study, leaving her alone for a few blessed minutes. He was hovering—one of the reasons she'd never considered him as a potential Alpha when she'd been Hunting—but that was neither here nor there.

She could feel eyes on her—a familiar glance and presence. An old friend that made her heart ache in soft, stuttering beats.

"Maury, you old bastard—I swear, if you're just creeping around this room and-"

And then there he was, materializing in front of her in the glorious blue-white wisps of a new Casper. His expression was mildly regretful, but mostly concerned.

For her.

"Mariana," he murmured, stretching out a hand to her. He couldn't be semi-corporeal, unless she wanted him to be.

"Idiot," she muttered, leaning into the ghostly hand that cupped her cheek. "What are you doing all the way out here?"

He laughed, softly, in the way he always did when she seemed to be asking the obvious questions and he was trying not to offend by giving the obvious answer. "Thank you for the Souls," he said, instead.

"You could tell?" Her eyes narrowed. "You'd better be grateful."

"I am. Always am, where your generosity is concerned," he said, lips twitching. "Only you could garner fresh souls on such short notice—perfectly intact, mind you."
Mariana huffed. "No thanks to you. I wouldn't have had to find them, if you hadn't gone and-" she stopped, taking a deep breath.

"...I'm sorry."

"We were supposed to go together," she said, pained. "All of us. Both of our Circles. No one left behind. Wasn't that what we agreed on?"

Maury wavered, his Caspered self paling to nearly translucent. He floated out of striking range, a habit he'd never quite outgrown when it came to Gheyos that could skewer him with a single blow.

"We did," he said, softly. "Until Ryu had to be stupid and die first."

Mariana's dark eyes shimmered. "He was always stubborn like that. Trying to keep you from stubbing your toe."

Maury laughed. "No worse than yours. He just tries to worry about you from a distance. He manages because you're not there to hear his complaints when you stay away too long. What are you doing here? What's happened?"

"A great many things," she said, quietly. She hiked herself up to sit on the edge of Wolfram's oversized desk. "I'm happy to catch you up, but I doubt you can stay like that for long. Don't you need to conserve your energy?"

He grimaced. "I came to ask a favour."

She shrugged.

"You know my mentored student?"

"I won't be mentoring him. I don't care what you say or-"

"I wouldn't ask that of you," Maury said, fighting a smile. "I wouldn't do that to either of you. He needs something-kinder."

Mariana snorted. "What, then?"

"Would you keep this for me?" Maury glowed a faint yellow-green instead of a blue-white. "Harry doesn't know how to fight yet. He might need it. Just not now. Keep it for me. Pass it onto him, if you can't."

"He doesn't look like the sword-wielding type."

"Everyone learns," Maury said, grimly. "Whether they want to or not. Life has a way of doing that to you. Carving sharp edges out of smooth corners and sanding sharpness into harmless curves. He'll learn, if he has to. He might not have to."

"So you just want me to babysit it?"

"No," Maury said, slowly. "There's a chance he's better off with his magic instead of a blade in hand, and banking on that, I want you to keep it. It was always going to go to you first, if I made a stupid mistake."

She started, faintly. "Maurice, you don't owe me for-"

"We've never had debts between us, because that's simply who we were to each other, but Mariana,
you've been more than a friend and it would honour me, if you would accept."

"...it's not a repayment."

"Of course."

"I won't give it to him."

"That's fine."

"Maurice!"

"Thank you for being my friend."

"...you're going to ask for something unreasonable, aren't you?"

He smiled, sadly. "Would you release me when the time comes?"

Mariana twitched. "As you wish."

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**QUINN : KALZIK HOME : (Bedroom)**

His Medi-Kit sat on the bed, innocent and untouched.

Quinn paced the length of the room once more, before trying to settle down. He had no peace of mind to stay within the house. Something in the back of his mind kept bothering him, reminding him that there were loose ends he hadn't taken care of. It was hard to decide what and where, but he had to give it some thought.

His parents had left the house in a hurry, tagged to an official portal. He had briefly heard the name **Hartwood** and immediately dismissed it, as it wasn't the one he was looking for.

*And what are you looking for?* He thought, darkly. The obvious answer was Harry, but the reason behind it was more complicated. He'd asked Harry to consider visiting their home for an official consultation and transference of medical responsibilities in light of no longer working under Matron Olivia's Clinic.

As to whether they'd take him up on that, he didn't know. Harry might, but he was also new to everything else. Theo seemed to be handling the brunt of everything. Even Charlie was only a little bit of help. They were trying, the best that they knew how, but it didn't seem like enough. They needed someone else in their ranks. Someone that would be able to help and mediate at the same time.

Someone who was content to stand between ranks, without getting too caught up in the gaps and a potentially slow hunt.

*Could I do that?* He wondered. The thought was promising, but also troubling. Even though he'd shared his story with Harry, he wasn't sure if the actual weight of it had registered.

He'd yet to meet anyone that wanted a stripped-rank within their Circle. Especially not an Alpha-turned-Healer. The Kalzik name only carried so much power now and it was diminished, thanks to his flash fire temper. He couldn't help the occasional Alpha-ingrained responses or reactions, even if he no longer meant them the way he once had.
Theo was calm and collected, but he didn't strike Quinn as the kind of Alpha that would take kindly to having his authority overstepped. Or even marginally threatened. There was a hidden undercurrent of power and dark strength that had lurked beneath the surface when he'd first met them at the clinic.

Of course, he'd been so worried about Harry and then the seals, that he'd only halfway focused on their dynamic, until he'd realized the necessity of a Soul Cast. He'd looked into Theo's soul and only seen the good things there. Very good things.

And that had hurt.

He'd thought—briefly—that maybe, it would've been a lovely thing to have Harry for his own. But his own shortcomings had resurfaced to remind him that even considering such a thing was no longer an option. Bharin's frustrations on his lack of self-care had certainly started a new thread of contention as well.

It wasn't that he thought his life was forfeit or worthless. It was just that the thought of losing a patient—however old or young—was unbearable. To be the final line of defence for them and to fail so miserably. He hated it.

Still not strong enough. Still not calm enough.

Quinn eased down to sit on the floor, leaning against the bed, his head tipped up to the ceiling. He'd tried not to mope all day, but meditating wasn't helping. He didn't want to disturb his parents, after all, it wasn't often that the entire Kalzik triad was together in the past year or so.

It was important for them to spend time together. He could already feel the rising harmony in their home, simply because they were all back together—and with each other. They'd make time for him, if he asked, but he wasn't desperate. Besides, they'd raised him well enough to figure out his own problems.

They'd been split apart, taking care of important patients and serving their time within the Kalzik Clan's ranks. Every Healer had their responsibilities, after all, as per their sworn Oaths. He was only excused, because he had yet to be properly certified. It had once seemed like his reason for being.

Now, it was—different.

The thought of being a Healer was definitely still appealing, but the arrogance that he'd come to it with, had now vanished. As if someone had reached inside of him and removed the core of his true purpose and left it empty. He was going through the motions. Helping patients and bonding with them in a way that only a truly vested Healer could.

A sort of penance.

Before everything had gone so wrong, he'd once shunned them. The kinds who lived in the darkness and dabbled with less-than-acceptable dragel practices. He'd wanted to keep his claws clean.

He hadn't seen how he was hurting them.

How he'd hurt others.

Dyshoka...
Her face flashed before his eyes, the memory of that day stained at the corners. He could still see her stricken expression, hearing her frantic screams echoing in his ears, before he realized that his voice was no longer there. That he couldn't answer her, no matter how hard he tried.

Quinn took a shuddering breath. He'd tried to avoid thinking of that memory all day, but now, alone, in his room, it came back to haunt him. He buried his face in his arms, drawing his knees up to his chest. The knowledge that he'd hurt her so deeply was the thing that bothered him the most.

He'd eventually tried to apologize, but Dyshoka was just like him, sometimes. She had her own pride and dignity. She'd never allowed him to speak anything remotely like an apology. Even all these years later.

His heart throbbed, the ache growing deeper and more worrisome. It'd become rather persistent this year, as if the Hunt itself had triggered it. Quinn pressed one hand flat against it, resisting the urge to dig his claws into his own scales. He'd felt this phantom ache before and it hadn't done him any good to acknowledge it.

There was nothing attached to it. Everything was simply, empty. Hollow. As if his heart had been carved out, emptied and then replaced with a shrivelled up husk of something. A low, pained whine filled the room, as he gritted his fangs against the incoming wave of pain.

It hadn't hurt this bad before. He dug his half-clawed hands into skin-turned-scale, willing it to dull the pain just a little. The hopelessness that coursed through his veins reminded him that not every wrong was righted. And not every hurtful incident was forgiven.

"Quinn?"

He started, violently.

And there she was, standing in the doorway, looking as if she'd just run all the way there. In a flurry of soft, flowing scarves and robes, Dyshoka swirled to a stop just inside of his room. There was something indescribable in her shimmering golden gaze as she stared at him for a long, silent moment.

He opened his mouth, the apology on the tip of his tongue, before the rest of his memories caught up to him. His breath hitched, hot, angry tears pooling at the corners of his eyes. He couldn't even try to explain—properly—to the one person who truly deserved his honesty, belated as it was.

And somehow, she knew.

"Oh Quinn," she breathed. Dyshoka took three steps forward, before she folded down to the floor, her arms extended.

He didn't even try to fight the hug. Just listed forward until her arms wrapped tightly around him, her chin digging into the top of his head. He cried, hiding his face in the bright dupatta that half-trailed over him. He'd thought of finding her or maybe Bharin, but everything had hurt too much to move.

"It's alright," she whispered. "It's alright. You're fine. Whatever it is, you're fine."

He shook his head, a hiccup escaping. Even if that was what she said, he couldn't accept that. He'd ruined more than just her future—Kyle's too. Perhaps she'd never allowed an apology, because forgiveness was too hard to force. He took a shaky breath, willing the darker thoughts to leave him alone.
Thinking himself in circles wouldn't help anyone. He'd tried hard enough to reason his way through this mess before. The end result was just emotional exhaustion and tired eyes. Now was no different. He tugged on her sleeve, carefully, a prompt to ask what she'd come for.

"Stubborn," she scolded, softly. "So stubborn. You forget that I can see you." She hugged him tightly, her magic washing over him.

He couldn't refuse the mental connection, because it slipped so easily and gently underneath his aching defences. No matter what had happened, he still held her in the same, treasured space as he always had. Not as stubborn as you...

"I—saw something," she said, carefully. "So I came."

Can you talk about it?

"A little." She patted his head, stroking her hands through his soft hair.

Mama and everyone were called away. A Hartwood came to request help. Sounded like an emergency.

"A Hartwood?" Dyshoka allowed him to sit up, a slight crease on her forehead. "Which one of them?"

Quinn shrugged. Didn't see them. Just heard that they'd come. I was meditating.

Dyshoka perked a brow.

Trying to mediate. He corrected. It sounded kind of important, but I don't think it was too serious.

"Probably isn't," she said, slowly. "Probably."

Did you need them? He tried to focus, to concentrate, for her sake. Is it something I can help with?

She smiled then, the expression vaguely soothing as she patted his head. "Not really. I was actually coming to see where you were. I didn't think you were home."

...where would I be?

Dyshoka shrugged. "I don't know. With Harry?"

Quinn froze. What's wrong with Harry?

"If you don't know, I really wouldn't know," Dyshoka said, chewing on her lower lip. "I can't really say, because it wasn't clear and I don't know if saying anything about it would change—a better outcome. The others—well, I'm sure you can guess why I'm here. I thought I'd better come and see you—Quinn? Quinn!"

He hunched forward over himself, straining towards the floor. An emptiness that hadn't been so pronounced, now made itself known. It was immediately followed by a barrage of emotions that he couldn't even begin to sort through.


And then it all cycled through him all over again. Emotions. Quinn gritted his fangs, digging his half-clawed hands into his arms. Coherent thought was still there, but quickly fading. He was falling straight into the emotional storm that had somehow blossomed in his chest and now,
decided to self-destruct right there. Everything he'd kept so tightly buried for the past ten years.

It was too painful. Too obvious. Too—! Quinn jerked around to stare at Dyshoka with horrified eyes.

Her own expression mirrored nothing but sorrow and a thin sliver of helplessness. "I'm sorry," she whispered, twisting the bonding bracelet on her wrist with anxious fingers. She was edging away now, poised to run, before he could try and call her out for it.

Even though he knew of her visions and the way her futuresight could work, it still cut deep to read between the lines. She'd come to nudge him forward into some sort of action, to prevent a horrible future path from fully materializing. He'd never know what it was, because voicing it aloud would invalidate the entire possibilities. Her interference was limited—in the extreme sense of limitations, proof having been in the way she'd prodded him to urge Dahlia forward, unable to do so herself.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, inching further away. "I just want you to be happy, Quinn, alright?"

What did you do?

"Just be happy, alright? Give it a chance. Give it all the time in the world. You deserve to have a little bit of happiness. Even if you don't think you do, I know better. So for once, just listen to me and go." She wavered, in the doorway.

Go where? Do what? Dyshoka! He tried to stand, but her aura was thick and stifling in a way he'd never known it to be. There was something desperate in her magic, a sensation he'd never experienced before. As if turning every single bit of awareness into a magnifying glass that made it too hard to ignore. She was trying to get him to do something.

And she couldn't tell him anything more than she'd already said.

I need a hint!

"Follow your heart."

I don't have one anymore!

"Of course you do. Just because you've hidden it, doesn't mean it shrivelled up and died. This is all I can do for you now. Please, don't waste it." Her eyes flared from gold to a bright, brilliant green. "Don't ask me about this. Please. Just—go."

Quinn flinched from the brilliant spell, but it was too late to stop her. By the time he could see again, spots danced in front of his eyes and the bedroom was empty. Dyshoka had left, taking her answers with her. He rubbed at his chest, biting clear through his lip, uncaring of the healing sting.

She'd casually reached inside of him and undone the very thing he'd tried so carefully to keep locked away.

The doors to the hardened lump of nothing that had once been his heart. Oh, it had slowly repaired itself through the years. Gradually building up to something soft, tender and needy.

Something he could do better without. Dyshoka's words were true and so they did hurt—a little. But she had made the point he hadn't dared to think too deeply about. He did have a heart. And if he was to actually follow it, then he'd know where the source of that strange heartache was coming from. He could trace it back to that soft, barely-there whisper of magic.

To the green-eyed Submissive with his heart in his eyes and his battered soul tightly clutched in his
hands. The expressive face and reluctant acceptance that had morphed into genuine trust. To the Empath with more power in his emotions than he knew. Harry.

Just Harry.

Quinn choked. Whatever was happening, he couldn't begin to piece it together properly in his head. He had to start moving now. Had to find him, wherever he was. Had to make sure everything was alright. Because right now, nothing was right.

There was something wrong—specifically, something wrong with *Harry*.

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**DYSHOKA : KALZIK ESTATE, MAIN GATE**

Dyshoka materialized at the gate of the Kalzik Estate. She hugged her arms to herself, her emotions and magic twisted up together in a large knot. Pacing would've helped, but she didn't want to draw any more attention to herself than she already had.

Visiting Quinn had been inevitable. She hadn't meant to say as much as she had, but maybe it was best for him to be aware that there were forces moving behind the scenes. Things that he should've paid attention to from the start.

She'd never thought he was particularly dense, though after he'd given up his rank, she'd had to reevaluate that notion. There were times when he'd do things that made absolutely no sense at all. Times like now.

He'd spent the majority of the day in meditation, trying to calm the yearnings of his own heart. The very same sort of situation she'd seen play out in front of Dahlia and Shayla. Two hearts and souls that wanted each other, desperately and yet, refused to allow themselves such luxury.

She'd actually wanted to speak to her mother about it. Surajini had more influence in Quinn's habits and a nudge in the right direction certainly would go a long way in smoothing things over.

Except for the house was empty and even the Pareya were gone. She'd decided against tracing their whereabouts and instead, had settled in to wait, before she'd felt Quinn's presence.

Against her better judgment, she'd gone to him. His wounded heart had tugged on her sisterly instincts and she'd been unable to help stepping in to be there for him. It was only her unsettled magic that had warned her to leave.

Her parents were returning home. She could see it, clearly, in her mind's eye and that was enough motivation to leave. She needed to see them before they got to Quinn. Before they did anything else.

A portal unraveled in the distance, energy sparking along the ground and traveling up to the Estate's main gate. She could see them stepping out from the portal along with their Bonded.

Dyshoka shivered the moment they were within view. She could sense their agitated magic, even from this distance. A disturbed Earth elemental was not the least bit subtle, after all.

She waited until they were close enough to see her, before she stepped out from the shadows of the Main Gate.
Surajini spotted her at once. "Dyshoka?" Her delicate brows furrowed together. "What's happened —oh."

"Surajini?" Hiram looked from her to the gate and stilled, upon spotting Dyshoka. "Jini?"

"Give her a minute," Patrick said, catching his arm. "Let them talk." He nudged Surajini forward, and gave a slight shake of his head to the waiting Pareya behind him. "Give them a minute."

"Something's wrong," Lachman said, slowly. "It feels like Quinn."

"Quinn?" Patrick frowned. He shifted, uncertainly. "He feels fine."

"He blocks most of his feedback to you, because he doesn't want you to worry," Hiram said, calmly. "He's unsettled, but he should be fine."

Patrick scowled. "We talked about that."

"And you're hardly home to enforce it. I told you that you were staying away for too long."

"I didn't have a choice, Hiram!"

"Shh. I know," Hiram soothed. He pulled Patrick closer to him with an arm around the waist. "It's fine. Just give them a minute. You know they have something special between them."

Patrick's expression grew pained. "I know it," he said, softly. "And I acknowledge it, but that doesn't mean that I have to understand that—"

"Did you feel that?" Lachman stumbled. "It feels like—" his words trailed off in a hiss.

"The Hound," said Hiram, darkly. "It would seem that they've reached the Hound's Court."

The evening sky grew even darker. The protective shield over Nevarah seemed to morph and twist in agony. Shadowed faces fluxed in and out of the strange, magical shield. A horrible vision to those below.

Dyshoka gave a cry and huddled in her mother's arms.

Surajini held her tightly, her worried eyes cast to the sky. "Come inside, quickly," she called out. "It isn't safe to linger like this."

"Quinn," Dyshoka murmured, her voice barely audible. "You have to listen to him, Mama. Don't let him pass this up. It's important."

"Sweetheart, I can't control what your brother—"

"No!" Dyshoka said, firmly. "You have to make him go. Don't let him stay here. If he stays here and the time passes, something awful will—"

"Inside!" Hiram said, sternly. He pulled sharply on his bonds, guiding the two women inside the Estate and holding the gate open for the rest to enter. They'd opted to return outside of the Estate's confines, just in case any stray Shadow or Death magic had clung to them.

The stinging kiss of the protective magic over their own estate, was uncomfortable, but welcome. It meant that nothing unnecessary could follow them inside.

"Ward it," Patrick said, tightly. "Lachman?"
"I'll cast, you anchor," Lachman said, easily. He waved to his fellow Pareya to circle up around them.

Surajini watched them raise a new layer of protection within her ancestral home. She hugged Dyshoka, rubbing gently along her arms. "You're freezing," she murmured.

"I have to go," Dyshoka said, pulling away.

"But-"

"You know I can't stay, Mama. Please don't ask me to."

"I would never," Surajini said, sadly. "I know your own fate is no better than mine."

"Quinn," Dyshoka reminded. "Talk to him." She glanced back at the house, dark and gloomy. "And turn on some lights."

"Lachman usually does that," Surajini said. "Go, if you must. Please come and visit when you've settled. We've got to see about your Bonding Ceremony. Something pretty and colorful."

Dyshoka grimaced. "Mama, don't. I think Shayla would want to-"

"It'll give me something to do and besides, it's been ages since we've had anything to celebrate."

"Mama-!"

Quinn clattered down the stairs and into the main family room, surprised to find that his parents had actually returned. He'd felt a spike of energy within the house and had come to investigate.

Things were too quiet and that hadn't felt right.

Surajini, Patrick and Hiram were clustered together around the indoor fire pit in the center of the room. They were leaning on each other, speaking in low, worried tones. Patrick was the first one to spot him and he brightened at once.

"Quinn! Is everything alright? You look-"

Quinn frowned, pressing his mental reach to touch each of them in turn. *Papa—has something happened? Dyshoka was just here and she was upset about-*

"Ethan Hartwood is Bonded to Harry as his first Pareya," Surajini said, bluntly. Her eyes were green-gold now, as she regarded her youngest son.

"Surajini!" Patrick's eyes narrowed. He would've phrased it differently, but to his surprise, Quinn's teal eyes only burned brighter. "Quinn?"

*That's—good. He needed a Pareya or two. The Hartwoods are good people. A little boring, but good at heart. Is Harry alright?*

"Harry's—in the middle of a difficult situation," Patrick said, carefully. "He's in good hands and Prince Raspen is overseeing the-*"

*How difficult?*

Surajini sighed, beckoning for Quinn to join them in the room. She held out a hand, waiting for
him to take it. "Harry's seals are coming off," she said, moving to sit on the long, overstuffed lounge. "He's fine."

You wouldn't be telling me he's fine, unless there was something to worry about. Mama, what's going on?

"Riven Cairothe is involved," Hiram said, heavily. "I don't know how exactly this all started, because there wasn't much time for talking. You know Harry had a Death Seal, right?"

At those words, Quinn grew rather pale. He listed forward, caught by Surajini's motherly embrace. His shoulders quivered faintly. He had more than just Death Seals. I couldn't really touch much of them. I wasn't sure what he could handle and whether I'd make things worse.

"Harry's stronger than you give him credit for," Surajini said, simply. "And he's also going to be struggling for a little while. Recovering from a Death Seal will take a lot out of him and his Bonded."

Quinn's shoulders slumped. I have no right to interfere and yet—

"Yet?" Surajini prompted, gently.

He's so small. So alone. Even with his Alpha and Beta, he's just—he's Harry. Quinn tried to explain. But it was harder when he tried to think of a proper excuse that avoided the real reason behind his words.

"It's alright to be interested," Surajini said. She exchanged a look with Patrick. "There's no harm in being a friend."

Quinn huffed. He didn't want to be a friend, but that was the only option there. He had no other claim to Harry and Harry was not something to be claimed. He was a brilliant, generous soul and something about him, made Quinn desperately afraid for his own heart.

"There's nothing wrong with being more than a friend either," Patrick said, lightly. He sat down on Quinn's other side, resting a hand on his son's shoulder.

I'm not—I'm interested like that. Quinn protested. I'm not!

Hiram pinched the bridge of his nose. "Of course you aren't," he said, easily. "There's nothing wrong in worrying for your patients, no matter who they are and what they might be. Lachman?" He turned on his heel and left the room.

Surajini pulled a face. Dyshoka had said to make Quinn go, but she hadn't said why or when. That was always the tricky part about trying to decipher her visions. "Why don't you go and see him while he's recovering?" she suggested. "He's probably going to stay with—well, I don't know where he's going to stay, but I'm sure that you can visit him as soon as he's settled somewhere."

Can you ask?

Patrick hesitated. "We could," he said, slowly. "But it might be wise to wait a few hours. I don't think Riven Cairothe appreciated our presence or our assistance."

Because he's slippery trickster! Quinn scowled, but he couldn't say anything else to that. He'd also requested that Riven return to Nevarah, in hopes of asking for his assistance in removing Harry's Seals. He hadn't intended to mention that detail to his parents at any point in time.
Of course, he'd also expected to still be employed at Matron Olivia's health clinic. That would've been the perfect cover for Riven and a logical excuse to see Harry, instead of merely running into him randomly throughout the Hunt.

His chest ached again, a deep, fierce pain that couldn't be completely ignored. Hearing Surajini mention the Hartwoods had only added another bit of discomfort that he hadn't expected to feel as well.

Sure, the Hartwoods were a good family. A strong Earth Clan. Friendly, sociable and with decent standing among the scholarly ranks of Nevarah, but this was Harry. Quinn closed his eyes, trying and failing to banish the image of Harry's solemn face and piercing green eyes.

Maybe—just maybe—Harry could stay with them. Yes! That was a brilliant idea. Surely, if he had a moment to talk to Theo or Charlie, he could make that happen.

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**JUNIPER EVANSON CIRCLE : PRINCESS EBONY'S QUARTERS**

"I think Raspen's stepped out for something," Ebony said, carefully. She gestured to the room at large. "Please make yourselves at home. I've asked them to send word as soon as he returns. Is there anything at all that I can help with?"

Jun shook her head, already preparing to leave. "Beyond a thorough cleansing for our current property, no. Someone has been—looking into things that was none of their business. Our home is compromised and at present, we need to find someplace to stay. Until then, I would prefer not to—"

"Would you like some vouchers?" Ebony brightened. "We've decided to stay here in the Central City, but we were offered open rooms along some of the resort towers on the outskirts of the Main Square. I've got plenty left, we never used any of them."

"I couldn't ask," Jun began. She stopped when Briar laid a hand on her arm.

"We would be most grateful," he said, bowing formally.

Ebony grew embarrassed. "I-I'll just get them then," she said, acknowledging him with a dip of her head. "Be right back."

Gardenia scowled at the wall, glaring after Princess Ebony's retreating form. "You had to come to her?" she muttered, inching out of Briar's reach. "No offense, but they haven't exactly—"

"George needs to be on good terms with them," Jun said, mildly. "And I doubt that Princess Dawne would see us. That leaves Raspen, who seemed about as clueless as that one when I gave him my report."

"They're young," Rian said, tiredly. "They can't help what they don't know. You could always ask to speak to—"

"If I speak to Edgar, I'll kill him," Jun growled. "And don't mention the others, because I'd hardly care to see them without getting my claws into them as well."

"So, purely for self-preservation you're depending on the youth," Rian sighed. "Chris?"

"Stop winding her up," Chris chattered. His light was dimmer than it'd been all day. He allowed Rian's hug warming charm. "Everything's freezing in here. Don't you feel that?"
"And here I thought it'd be warm," Rian murmured. "What are you reacting to?"

"I don't know," Chris snapped. He shivered, violently.

George stood off to the side, fighting the growing sense of exhaustion. He'd only half-understood most of what was happening with Jun's Circle and her return to Nevarah. None of it sounded good, but he wasn't sure where to start asking questions or whether he'd get any answers at all.

"George?" Regulus nudged him, worriedly. "Alright there?"

"A little tired," George said, cracking a yawn. "Just really tired all of a sudden."

"You can have a seat," Regulus said, guiding him towards the lounge where Ivy and Orchid were practically glued to Leif. "Move over, you two," he said, pushing George forward. "He doesn't feel good."

Orchid frowned. "He looks a little grey," she said, reaching up to guide him to sit beside her. "He's cold."

"That makes two of them," Rian muttered. "Chris—sit." He pushed Chris to sit down on Orchid's other side. "What's wrong with them?"

"Reacting to something," Zephyr suggested. His tall form seemed like a hulking presence within Ebony's sitting room. He glanced up at the ceiling, frowning. "Something's not right here, but I don't know what it is."

Gardenia grunted from her position across the room. She hadn't wanted to come to the Royals at all, much less to the Fire Royals, of all things. "I wouldn't be surprised if there was—" she hissed, eyes fluxing pitch black. "What is that?"

Jun gave a pained whine. Her own eyes fluxed black. She snatched Briar close to her side, her shoulders trembling with the need to keep her wings contained.

Briar growled in answer. He pressed himself closer to her, but his eyes now burned a bright, glowing red. "Death magic," he rasped. "Very dark magic. Something—some kind of ritual is taking place here. Jun-!"

Jun was now growling in a steady, unhappy rumble.

"Something's wrong," Rian said, tersely. "Death magic wouldn't be within range of the Royal's living quarters unless."

Briar hissed. "Out. Now. We need to-"

"The vouchers," Rian said, uncertainly. "Most of everywhere is booked up for the Hunt."

"Then we'll go somewhere that no one would look to stay," Jun growled. "Circle up!"

It took half a minute for her Bonded to cluster around her, pressing George into the middle of their group. They were all touching or holding each other, staying as close as possible, when Jun's magic rose up against them.

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Jun's portal spat them out at the edge of Air territories along the corners where the magic gave way to the Fae portion of Nevarah. "We're welcome enough here," she said, darkly. "Orchid—Gardenia-"
"On it," Orchid said, briskly. "Good thinking." She gave a jerk of her head to Gardenia. "They can grow a room for us, if they're full up."

"Why didn't you think of that?" Gardenia mumbled. "Why'd we have to go to the Royals when we-"

"It's expensive," Orchid reminded. "We have to pay for the room expansion and we're not exactly a small Circle!"

Their bickering died out as they disappeared up the walkway to the large Fairy Lodge in the distance. All the rooms in front were lit with golden lights, suggested that they were completely booked.

Sweet-smelling flowers, glowing blooms and pretty rocks lined the large, landscaped front yard. There were benches, fountains and plenty of gorgeous greenery to enjoy. Everything that would make a Fae feel right at home.

Jun twitched, faintly. "Briar?" she kissed his pale forehead, rubbing a hand soothingly up and down his back. "Sorry I didn't catch that sooner. I felt something coming, but I didn't think it was that. Are you alright?"

Briar gritted his teeth, shaking his head, once. "Can't—help it," he ground out, before shoving her away. He stumbled back two steps and exploded into his Hellound morph. He grew in size until he towered over her, eyes blood red, fur pitch black. The moment he was free, he shook himself all over, then sat back on his haunches, head thrown back to the darkened sky. His eerie howl filled the night.

Jun winced, covering her ears.

Lights in the Fairy Lodge flickered, before shimmering, translucent magic stretched up to protect it. A pastel rainbow bubble of energy.

In the distance, another howl filled the air, followed by another and yet another.

Regulus sighed. "I don't even know where to start," he said, wearily. "George, you alright?"

"He's out cold," Ivy said, kneeling in the grass besides George's prone form. "I think he blacked out somewhere in the middle of Jun's portal."

"It was a long portal," Leif said, uncertainly. "He was looking weird though, like Chris."

"M'not looking weird," Chris mumbled. He flopped onto the grass beside George with a low groan. "It's still too dark here. That's probably it."

"Too dark?" Rian echoed. He glanced up at the sky and shivered. "Nevermind, I take it back."

His Bonded followed his skyward gaze and gave a collective shudder. It looked as if there were faces straining to be free of the protective dome over Nevarah. The calm night sky had turned to a vast expanse of rolling, shadows and featureless faces, writhing and stretching.

"Something's happened to Death or the Hound," Zephyr said, slowly. He joined them, taking up a protective stance around their little group. "I'm guessing she's sleeping outside tonight?"

"Probably," Rian said, frowning. "I doubt Briar can turn back right now. At least he wasn't summoned. I guess something's set off the Hound."
"Only Death can set off the Hound," Zephyr said, quietly. His worried gaze swept over Jun. "Whatever or whoever it is, I certainly wouldn't want to be them."

Rian grunted in agreement. He looked up to see Gardenia and Orchid rushing out from the Lodge with two fairies behind them. He squinted, relaxing when he realized they weren't being chased. "Not our problem. Right now, I think we'd better get you two inside and close to something warm."

Chris huffed a laugh. "I certainly wouldn't complain."

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**DAHLIA AND DYSHOKA, SHAYLA IMALDIS' INHERITED HOME**

Dyshoka started, faintly, when she caught sight of Dahlia's silhouette beside her bedroom window. She'd 'ported back into her own room, to avoid startling anyone else and so as not to disturb her new Bonded.

"Startle you?" Dahlia murmured, her voice crackly with sleep. "Sorry. I just-I woke up and you weren't there."

"Sorry," Dyshoka said, going straight to her, arms outstretched. "Didn't mean to worry you. Just had to take care of something."

"Quinn?"

"Clever girl." Dyshoka allowed. There wasn't much more she could say than that, but Dahlia was different. She would understand with only the barest of hints.

"He's the only one that would get you out of bed at this hour in the middle of what's supposed to be our honeymoon," Dahlia grumbled. "He'd better be grateful."

Dyshoka stifled a laugh. She could read that mood a little too clearly. "What? Too much brooding, not enough sex?"

"...I'm sure we can fix that."

Dyshoka snorted. "Of course you could. That's not my point though. I just had to see Quinn for a moment. He's fine. Mum and the others were called out on some assignment. I thought everyone would be home and I was going to ask for a stay of execution."

"Hmm?"

"You have met my Mama, right?" Dyshoka's lips twitched. "She'll want a fancy bonding ceremony and the whole gilded treasure chest."

"What? Dy, we can't!"

"Try telling that to her."

"I'm serious—we can't. We won't have the time."

"We've only just officially bonded," Dyshoka hummed. "There's time. I mean, we've signed all the papers and such. A ceremony is just for the fun of it. Mama likes to celebrate and it's been ages since she'd had to do any sort of bonding ceremony for any of us kids."

"Right. She'd do it out of the goodness of her heart and not because we didn't invite her to our
private ceremony instead of my mother?"

Dyshoka winced. "Why do you have to remember those details?"

"Because I know you've met my mother," Dahlia groaned. "I'm serious though. Maybe a renewal ceremony or a one-year celebration. Whatever. Just nothing now, alright? It doesn't feel right and there's too much going on."

Dyshoka frowned. "We wouldn't have to do anything though. Just show up. It's Mama. She'd handle everything. I'd just contribute favourite colours and food preferences."

"That was a definite no," Dahlia said, more firmly. "Not happening."

"Dahlia—what, are you half-asleep or something?"

"Not—exactly," Dahlia said, sleepily. She stifled a yawn. "Alright, maybe a little."

"That's more than a little. I heard you the first time, but I don't think we'll get out of it. I was only hoping to head them off before the planning got started. We might have to suffer through a small family party or something, but it won't be all that bad."

"It'll be terrible and I'd hate to leave in the middle of it. That'd be rude."

"Why would you leave in the middle of your own bonding ceremony?"

"Because I have a reputation and obligations?"

Dyshoka drew near, reaching out in slow movements to pull her sleepy Alpha into a warm, tight hug. "Do I want to know what you're really worrying about?" She pressed a kiss to the top of Dahlia's bedhead.

"Not worried," Dahlia said, snuggling into the proffered embrace. Tension drained out of her at the mere, comforting touch. "Everything alright?"

"With you? Yes."

"Flatterer."

"Says the one lurking in my bedroom. Did they chase you out?"

"They wouldn't dare."

"Aha! So you are worrying."

"Babe, please," Dahlia protested. "It's not like I want to be worrying. It's just-it's Wikhn. He's an idiot. He'll do something idiotic and he'll do it alone, because he thinks he can't ask anyone to help and it'll end up going very-"

"And you're worried you won't get to him in time to stop it? You can't baby him forever, love."

"Doesn't mean I won't try," Dahlia muttered. "His last ACE tried to kill him. Maybe not obviously, but that's what they did. When I found him-when I took him in—I dragged him away from Death's hands. I can't stand by and watch him run right back to that same edge."

"Then don't."
"It's not that easy." Dahlia's voice cracked. Her body grew taut.

"I know," Dyshoka murmured. "I know. But if he needs you-he'll call, won't he?"

Dahlia gave a slight shake of her head.

"Alright. He won't then, but you'll still answer his call. It's fine."

"Is it?"

Dyshoka sighed, softly. She squeezed her, gently, then pulled back, guiding Dahlia to the bed. "It's fine with me. You might have to make excuses or explanations to the others, but that's on you and them. I know how you think, so I know what you mean. You're too tired to think yourself in knots. Sleep on it. Worry later."

"Doesn't work like that."

"They won't mind," Dyshoka said, knowingly. "That's the whole point of having a Circle. They'll worry, because you're worried, but they won't know how to tell you. Sort it through yourself and sleep on it."

"He had someone else sign his off-realm tracer." Dahlia squeezed her eyes shut. "He had someone else sign off on it because he didn't want me to know where he was going or that he was leaving."

"...I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

"Is it? You found out anyway. I can't pretend that I understand how you two work, but if it's a Gheyo thing and he's just being—Wikhn, then I don't know what to tell you."

"If he doesn't want me to know, then I'm supposed to pretend I don't know, until I have to."

"Really? Is that the way it works?"

"With him? Yes. He needs space. He needs affection. When he can't have one, he goes straight to the other. He roams about searching for what he doesn't have, no matter how destructive those ends might be."

"And you're worried he'll roam into the wrong place?" Dyshoka guessed. "Or that he'll purposefully put himself in the wrong place?"

"He's on assignment. That should keep him out of trouble for a bit. I don't have to like the assignment. I don't have to be looking over his shoulder, but-he's running. I know he is."

"And you're not going to chase him?"

"To what end, Dy? To drag him back, kicking and screaming? If he wanted to be here-with us, with me-he'd be here. He'd have come of his own accord, wouldn't he?"

"I can't answer that, love. Only you would know."

"Wish I did."

"Trust him. Trust us."
"I do."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I'd have done anything for him," Dahlia said, softly. "But he won't come to me. I can't show any favour, unless he comes to me first." She allowed Dyshoka to lead her to the bed and settle her under the fluffy covers. She curled into a half ball, relaxing when she felt the bed dip as Dyshoka joined her.


Dahlia pressed her lips together, a pained sound welling up in her throat. There was no lie in that.

HERMIONE : NEVARAH CITY SQUARE : CHARACTER SNIPPET

Hermione slipped through the crowd, keeping her head down and her senses as alert as possible. It'd almost been too easy to sneak out of Olivia's house. To all but run down the sidewalk and straight into the first moving body of strangers that she could see. Putting distance between her and the strange house was the only priority on her mind.

She didn't want to know what was wrong with Olivia. Even if her uncle—strange man that he was—had been nice enough to find her a place to stay, there'd been no guarantee that he'd be able to help her with her request.

Finding Harry.

Finding a new home.

Finding a place to belong that didn't involve a frightening man with blood-red eyes.

Hermione curled her hands into fists, hating the slight tremors of fear that had come for her. She was stronger than this! She always had been. So what was the problem now? Yes, she was in a new place, with strangers, strange customs and even stranger magic.

But that didn't necessarily mean that all was lost. It was a matter of figuring things out.

"There's always an answer to every question," Hermione muttered, half to herself. "And when in doubt—go to the—library?" Her steps slowed as she turned the idea over in her mind, a new feeling of determination settling deep inside of her. "Of course. There has to be a library here. One that's much better than Miss—what's-her-name."

Hermione summoned up her best prefect smile and met the gaze of the next family rushing by. Her attention was drawn to a lovely, motherly looking woman, who was closest to her. "Excuse me, please—" she reached out, not quite touching their arm, but skimming her fingers across soft fabrics and gentle magic. A sharp pang of homesickness washed over her, followed by a flood of nostalgic memories.

Glimpses of her parents. Of the first time she'd read a really good book. The moments where her cleverness had balanced out her awkwardness. The moments where she'd been proud of herself—and her own accomplishments.

And then as quickly as it had surprised her, the sensation vanished. Evaporating as if she'd imagined it, except that she hadn't. Hermione started, faintly, surprised to find that she was holding
a handful of the woman's voluminous sleeve in her hand. "I'm sorry, so sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"Yes?" the woman, her eyes a rich red-gold, smiled warmly down at her. "What can I do for you?"

"T-the library," Hermione said, quickly. "I was just wondering if you could point me in the direction of the library. There is a library here, yes?"

"Of course there's a library, love," the woman's smile seemed to warm the air and make the sunlight stream a bit brighter. She stepped closer to Hermione, looking her up and down as if deciding something for herself. "First time visiting Nevarah?"

"Yes—I've sort of lost my friend. We—we were supposed to meet up at the library. I forgot to ask for directions."

The woman only smiled. Her sleek red hair was set in the envious kind of curls that had Hermione wondering if her own hair would do that some day. Now that she was paying attention, it was hard to mistake her magic as anything other than a beautiful, charming warmth that curled around Hermione, almost like a hug.

Fierce, but warm. Almost like fire.

"Those aren't very good friends then, are they?" The woman shook her head, tutting softly. "Would you mind if I asked my sons to escort you? A lovely young witch such as yourself shouldn't be wandering around Nevarah at this point in the week. You'd be asked on a dozen dates before you could get halfway across the city square. Or even courted into a half-dozen Circles at this rate."

Hermione couldn't even begin to stop the blush that crept up her neck. There was absolutely no comeback for that, because it was the very last thing she'd expected the woman to say.

"I'll take that as a yes—but really, if you do prefer men, I assure you, my sons are quite something." The woman turned in a swirl of red-and-gold robes, her voice lilting and light. "Gideon, Fabian! Would you do me a favour, loves?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey guys! It's been so long since the last chapter. I'm so sorry for the wait! I worked on this chapter for most of August and all of September. It's taken a lot of rewrites. I was hoping to post this last night, but I was halfway through Brissy's edits when I got to the Fred scene and realized two things, so I had to cut it short (I've moved that to ch 108), and put something else in there, hence some of Jun and George. So that was a lot of extra wrangling that I wasn't counting on. Oh well. Chapter is done. It's bumped up a few more words to 18k. I hope you guys enjoyed it! There's some clues in here for what's coming next-if you think you know what's going to happen, let me know! I'm curious to see who figured it out. :P

My original novel about Soula Deveraine's story was also released this summer, you can find it as "Sands of Time" by Chera Carmichael. (www.books2read.com/sandsoftime)

Thanks a BUNCH to everyone who's read, reviewed and shared about it. That means
SO much to my writerly self.

Thank you for your continued support! I love you guys! ~Scion

End Notes

Crossposted on ff.net and adultff

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!