On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

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by sifshadowheart

Summary

Dropped into a pre-Outbreak world, Harry, Sirius, and Remus follow the advice of a thankful Seer and prepare for the worst. Six years later, the dead begin to walk and the Walsh/Grimes group forms. Only, instead of finding only a hand on the roof of a department store, Daryl and the rest find nothing at all, leading to the question: How did Merle escape?

Loosely follows the first couple seasons of the Walking Dead before the major canon-divergence. Warnings for Slash and canonical violence and rape references, the Mpreg is off-screen until later in the story.
Introduction: The title for this one comes from *Ode*, an amazing poem by Arthur O’Shaughnessy that was published in 1873. I took the title from the first of the seven stanzas:

*We are the music makers,*

*And we are the dreamers of dreams,*

*Wandering by lone sea-breakers,*

*And sitting by desolate streams; -*

*World-losers and world-forsakers,*

*On whom the pale moon gleams:*

*Yet we are the movers and shakers*

*Of the world for ever, it seems.*

When I was looking for a title for this fic that hadn’t been used or done to death for a Harry Potter fic or HP crossover, I thought of my favorite poem and how the idea of losing and forsaking a world fit this story perfectly with the trope I used to make the crossover as well as the imagery of the stanza: desolate streams, lone sea-breakers, but still alive and kicking despite it all.

If you have a minute, go look up and read the poem in its entirety, it’s seven stanzas though most people think it’s only three. Go on, go. I’ll wait.

Now for the things you need to know before reading this story:

I’ve altered at couple of ages to make the main pairing work. Also, this story is both **SLASH & MPREG**.

There will be some het elements as well but there are at least two slash couples and mpreg things going on. Most of the male pregnancy stuff happens in between the intro of the HP characters to the Walking Dead world and the actual start of the Walking Dead so it will mostly be “off screen” without vivid imagery of a male giving birth. Just referenced. Also with pregnancy comes children so there will be a couple OC’s that are children as well as a couple of OC’s who help out around Harry’s place before the world goes to hell. They won’t be major characters but they’ll be in the background of things.

We start in a slightly AU *Order of the Phoenix* just before the Battle of the Ministry. Changes to the HP storyline as well as the Walking Dead storyline will be addressed as they happen. The only thing you need to know to start with is that, again, I’m changing a couple ages to keep the main pairing
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Now on with the show…

**On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams**

**Prologue**

“Harry Potter you listen to me this *instant!*”

Maybe it was over a dozen years of having to obey Petunia immediately or having Minerva McGonagall for his Head of House or being friends with Hermione Granger…sort of. But whatever caused it, Harry knew instinctively that when an individual of the female gender got *that tone* in her voice, he damn well better stop, shut up, and pay attention. And that was exactly what he did as he froze on the way to gathering the Thestrals from the Forbidden Forest and faced his occasionally-out-of-it friend Luna Lovegood.

Hermione and Ron had disappeared to do Merlin-knew-what before joining him, Luna, and Neville at the edge of the Forest to leave for the Ministry and to rescue Sirius. Likely send a message to Dumbledore. Harry had figured out a *long* time ago that they were his friends out of a desire to keep payments from the old bastard rolling in than any sense of shared adventure or actual friendship.

Neville, growing up with his Gran, froze as well, being equally as well-trained as Harry regarding female *tones*.

Harry and Neville hit it off after the former apologized to the latter after he got out of the hospital wing in First Year. He’d never thought Hermione would hex him like that, and it was a miracle the shy boy hadn’t been seriously injured when he collapsed to the floor. So he’d done what Hermione should have: sucked it up and made it right.

Letters from Nev were the only few that slipped past Dobby that first summer, the Longbottoms using large eagles for their correspondence for centuries after they’d lost a rare heirloom due to owl-tampering in the Middle Ages. Not even a barmy house elf was going to mess about with a creature large enough to snatch it up in its talons and have it for dinner. Even at eleven, both boys knew that for some reason the Headmaster wanted Harry secluded using his “two best friends” and kept their friendship quiet until Fourth Year when everyone abandoning Harry gave them their chance to go public with it.

Second Year had brought Luna into their secret fold, Harry having found her wandering around in search of her shoes during one of his nightly wanderings under his Cloak.

With both Neville and Harry having been bullied most of their lives in one way or another, they swiftly set to trying to help the blonde who seemed to be focused on otherworldly things more often than not.
That first year of their hidden trio neither boy had known quite what to make of her until the flyers for electives came out when Harry wondered aloud if maybe Luna was some sort of Seer after reading up on Divination. Time and testing her coded warnings made them certain she had some sort of knowing if nothing else, both boys deciding to study Divination to see if there might be some way they can help her focus a little more on the world around her…if only to protect her better from those who might prey on her. After all, if it took a pair of twelve-year old’s less than a year to figure her out, she really wasn’t all that safe even if her code was impossible to break without knowing her the way they did and do.

It worked…sort of.

They ended up probably being the only thirteen-year-old boys with links to two verifiable Seers…even if one used a complex code and the other had only made two true prophecies in her lifetime.

Which was interesting in itself.

Professor Trelawney was a Delphic-Oracle type Seer, highly reliable with visions she herself never remembered. But she was limited in the extreme from what the three of them discovered. The sherry-addicted woman seemed to only “tune-in” to cataclysmic-potential events effecting the British Wizarding World. Case-in-point: Voldemort and how he could rise or fall.

Luna on the other hand was a Delphic-Oracle lineage Seer…which was as different from Sybil Trelawney as chalk and cheese. Her mother was Pandora Delphi of Athens before she met and married a writer and amateur cryptozoologist from Wizarding England, aka Luna’s batty Father. When Luna Saw it could be something from two centuries in the future or two decades in the past that happened or would happen next door or in sub-Saharan Africa. She rarely shared the things she saw with Neville and Harry, taking after her mother who had trained her before her death and chronicling her visions using a special parchment and quill that would only reveal what was needed when it was needed and to the right person.

Fortunately, Delphic-lineage Seers were always female and would only ever gain active power when they became the oldest-living female of their lineage.

Unfortunately for Luna, her mother was the last of their line.

And her mother died in a spell-accident when she was nine.

Their best friend had been Seeing the best and worst of humanity when all she should have been worried about was learning to fly or ride a bike.

Her mother Pandora knew that something was going to happen that would take her from her daughter at a young age – but never when or what the cause would be – so she had done what she could to prepare her only child for the future Fate had written for her.

And though Harry never knew it, Pandora had prepared Luna for something else she Saw. Something involving Luna’s first true friend, a boy with green eyes and a lightening scar.

This was the subject that Luna needed to talk to Harry about before they left for London, though Harry had no idea just how epically his future was about to diverge from its original path.

If he had, who knows whether he would have done as he was doing at this very moment: stopping, turning, and giving his petite blonde friend his undivided attention.

“What is it, Luna?” He asked patiently, knowing that it might take her a minute to share whatever it is she Saw.
Or at least, he thought that was what was going on, sometimes with Luna it was very hard to tell, even for him and Neville.

“Take this.” The Ravenclaw demanded, shoving a necklace at him. “I don’t know what’s going to happen or why you need it…but you do.”

Harry gently took the heavy piece from her dainty hands, studying it for a moment before shrugging and fastening it securely around his neck. If it was anyone else, he would’ve balked, especially after seeing the design etched into several of the heavy links. When the latch clicked into place, he felt a warmth pulse once from the old piece of heavy men’s jewelry, making him arch a brow at his friend.

“It’s enchanted.” Luna supplied, eyes dazed as she tried to relay what she both already knew and what she Saw about the piece around her friend’s neck. “My mother gave me a box before she died. In it was several enchanted items and a letter with instructions on who to give them to and when. This was for you ‘before your green-eyed friend flies away to rescue a Grim.’” She refocused on her friend’s worried gaze. “I know it’s necessary and you’ll need it: it was made so no one else can take it from you and you’ll never lose it.” She bit her lip helplessly as the Thestrals appeared around them and hearing the approach of Granger and the two Weasleys, Ron having gotten his sister for some reason. “That’s all I know Harry.”

“Thank you, Luna.” He told her sincerely, reaching out and giving her a sideways hug. “Really.”

“You’re my friend, Harry.” She answered back, eyeing where the now-hidden necklace lightly bulged against his school shirt. “I want you to be safe and happy…and now I know you will…whatever happens next.”

“Sirius!” Harry screamed as he raced for the Veil, Remus right behind him as the Lord of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black fell backwards after being hit by a vicious Stunner cast by none other than Bellatrix LeStrange.

Harry had no idea how it had all come to this but he knew exactly where to lay the blame: Dumbledore and Voldemort with their endless games. Both were equally as bad as the other as far as Harry was concerned, both using others as little more than expendable game pieces in their never-ending game for control of Magical Britain. If it was up to him he’d leave them all out to dry, Prophecy bedamned.

But it wasn’t up to Harry.

Not yet anyway.

So long as Dumbledore had the safety of Sirius to hold over him, Harry would never be able to take a step without someone guiding him and making all his decisions. Luna had been very certain about that when she tried to take a peek at Harry’s future to reassure him. As long as Sirius was a virtual prisoner and/or Dumbledore lived there was no chance at freedom for Harry.

Those were the conditions that bound him: either Dumbledore had to die or Sirius had to be freed.

Rather than ignoring him or running away or obeying Dumbledore or a thousand other choices that would have made Sirius and Remus little more than occasional visitors in Harry’s life, they had nodded their heads respectfully when the old goat told them they were too dangerous to be around Harry or that Harry had to stay with his relatives, for his own safety of course, and then promptly fucked off to do as they pleased once the goat fucker was appeased with their “obedience.”
In reality, Messrs. Padfoot and Moony had set up shop, figuratively speaking, just outside of the ward-zone Albus had set up around Number 4 Privet Drive.

Sirius had already proved that his Grim form could come and go from the wards as he pleased, the Headmaster having no real way to prevent animals from the vicinity of the Dursley residence.

And while the wards did a great deal to keep magical people out of the ward-zone it did little to keep Harry in, which was why this past summer the old man had had no choice but to station watchers around the residence, lest Harry wander too far from the “protection” of the wards.

Like he had been doing all the summer before, going off once his truncated (Sirius made one hell of a deterrent) list of chores was complete.

It didn’t matter if he missed every meal with the Dursleys when Harry could – and did – easily walk the two miles to the cottage-like home of the last living Marauders, and no, Wormtail didn’t count.

A summer filled with loving care and attention from his godfathers, Sirius being much saner than before thanks to regular visits with his cousin Andromeda’s husband Ted who was a Mind Healer and Andy herself a Healer, regular meals, and tutelage under the loving-but-firm eyes of Professor Lupin made all the difference.

Harry knew what a family was now. He had one of his own. A real one not the whatever-the-fuckery was going on with the dysfunctional Dursleys.

Okay, yes, Padfoot and Moony weren’t exactly what people thought of when they thought stable-family-environment…but they were Harry’s and they loved him and each other and that was all that mattered to the teen.

So, Harry’s personal freedom was predicated on Sirius’s freedom…and Harry was at peace with that.

His godfathers loved him, fed him, taught him, trained him, and did everything they could to fill the massive gaps in both his magical and mundane educations. Especially once they found out that the Headmaster had hidden the Potter Lordship from him. Harry’d actually thought his school vault was all there was to the Potter wealth.

That more than anything enraged the two of them.

Dumbledore could have passed off the abuse as Harry not telling or the Headmaster otherwise not knowing. He could have said that Harry didn’t show any interest in extra tuition. Or that he was just too young to learn certain necessary skills. All of that would have pissed them off but he probably would’ve gotten away with it.

But it was anathema, an utter taboo, to hide the heritage of a magical child.

Especially when that heritage was that of a long, long and proud magical history and came with wealth and stature along with it.

Where originally they were going to let him have the school-year off from their extra studies and have him focus on his school work, Sirius and Remus kept in touch with him through both their linked-mirrors and a set of linked-journals that they had made for him. At that point they had over a dozen years’ worth of training to catch up on…sticking to summers only wasn’t going to cut it even with a student as bright as Harry, who had flourished under their care and focused attention away from the Dursleys and the pressures of being the perfect “Golden Gryffindor” at Hogwarts. Remus caught him up on mundane and magical education while Sirius focused on traditional “pureblood”
raising that Harry had missed, things like etiquette and protocol as well as martial training, dueling, and other so-called “Lordly” necessities.

Once Harry had survived his Fourth Year and returned to Privet Drive, it was much harder to teach him, Harry having to use his personal Cloak to slip out to the cottage or Sirius having to wait until one of the more unobservant watchers was on post to teach him. The only time it was ever “easy” was when Remus was stationed at Number 4, but they would still have to be careful lest the Dursleys rat them out to the Headmaster or they be caught in the act by Remus’s replacement guard. Still, they made it work and the training and teaching continued.

One result of which was Harry being a lot less scrawny than he used to be though he was still smaller and shorter than others his age.

Something which infuriated his godfathers to no end but that they knew had to wait until he was sixteen to fix. Most wizards gained a lot of height and bulk between sixteen and seventeen in preparation for their magical inheritance, making it the prime time to correct his malnutrition and growth issues without making it look as if someone had interfered in the Headmaster’s “plan”. Correcting his eyesight would have to wait until then as well, except with eyes it was more to let them stabilize, else they risked additional deterioration afterwards and Harry having to go through a painful potion and spell regimen two or more times to continually fix and refix his sight.

They might not be a “normal” family but they were Harry’s family…and that was all that mattered to him.

So to see Sirius falling back into a Veil that felt cold and warm, light but oh-so-dark, that whispered and called Harry’s name…it was the worst thing Harry had ever seen or felt including the Dementor-induced visions of his mother’s death and watching Voldemort return to semi-life.

He loved his mother, he knew he loved both his parents. They had loved him and died for him. But he didn’t know that until he was eleven. Before that all his parents were, were another thing for the Dursleys to beat him down with.

But Sirius and Remus…

They were real.

They cared about him and loved him and did the best they could for him without drawing dangerous attention to their flouting of the Headmaster’s plan.

To lose one of them and do nothing but watch was against everything Harry was and he proved it in the next second, darting forward and around grasping hands to stop him, his Seeker’s reflexes driving him and his quick hands grasping desperately at the edge of the dragonhide battle-robe Sirius was wearing.

Grey eyes were closed thanks to the Stunner, Siri’s handsome face resting in dreamless repose and blind to the danger he was in.

Sirius Black was almost lost without ever realizing it.

Unfortunately, Sirius Black was also a large, well-muscled man after spending two years recovering from the ravages of Azkaban, and his weight was too much for a five-foot-nothing Seeker-build wizard of fifteen to handle, Harry being dragged ever forward into the Veil without anything to anchor him to the world behind him.

The sheer weight of Siri’s lax body nearly had Harry’s grasp losing him before he roared and sung
himself forward, grabbing on with the hand still clutching his wand, refusing to give up his godfather to the Veil.

In the seconds it took another set of hands to latch onto Harry’s waist from behind, Harry seeing a flash of amber eyes out of the corner of his locked-on-Sirius gaze, the momentum of falling was just too much for even a werewolf to combat in the middle of a battle with no one else seeming to pay attention or even to bother with an Accio which might have saved them from their headlong tumble into the Veil.

It took less than a minute for the Boy-Who-Lived, a werewolf, and an escaped convict to tumble away from the Wizarding World forever, the crack of the Veil sundering and crumbling to dust behind them the only sign of where they’d gone to alert the others of the event that in less than a minute changed the landscape of a war forever.

…

In the wake of the destructions of the Veil, those of the Chamber unknowing of the battle between Voldemort – wounded and enraged by feeling the link between himself and the Boy break – and Dumbledore who felt the sundering of his tracking charms on said Boy occurring over their very heads in the Ministry Atrium, looked stunned to a man whether witch, wizard, Order, or Death Eater.

At last only the pleased cackling and raving of Bellatrix was all that remained, a cackling that was silenced forever with a quick and ruthless *Sectumsempra* hissed from the shadows by a formerly-shy teen who had learned the spell from Harry’s godfathers.

Neville Longbottom stepped over the bleeding-out remains of the Death Eater, breaking her wand and wand-hand with a vicious *crack*, and came to stand beside and offer support to the ethereal figure of a bruised but unbloodied Luna.

The Order and Death Eaters quickly recovered, the Order recovering first thanks to the Aurors in their ranks setting off a series of Stunners and Binding Hexes except for Moody who used Avadas while the others turned a blind eye. The loss of the LeStranges to Moody’s wand was no great loss in the grand design after all, they were all going to be Kissed after their escape from Azkaban anyway. The grizzled old Auror paused a moment by the pair who were studying the shattered stone and dust that was all that remained of the Veil in silence, one callused paw of a hand coming up to clap the lad on the shoulder and giving him a gruff: *Well Done*, in regards to his finishing of the Black Witch.

Albus might scold Moody for his lethal spells and would eye the lad harshly if he ever discovered just *who* it was that ended Batty Bella…but Moody had no intention of playing by Albus’s rules this time around. In fact, the Auror rather thought young Neville was just what they needed in the wake of Potter’s disappearance. He would have to make sure Augusta was onboard with Moody’s plan to train up her grandson before Albus tried to get his hooks in the boy.

This one was made of the right stuff to survive this war and come out – mostly – intact on the other side.

Moody was certain of it.

After the clumping sound of Moody’s gait wandered away from the silent pair, Neville turned damp brown eyes on his companion, asking one question.

“Did you know?”
Luna shook her head, a tear falling from momentarily clear blue eyes as her wispy blonde hair floated around her. She’d done considerable damage of her own against the adult Death Eaters, causing more than one broken or shattered bone, one of which was to Fenrir Greyback and unless was treated immediately would likely kill the wolf, shards already dangerously close to his heart. She’d known something was coming, a change, a catalyst for lack of a better term. But she’d had no idea what.

Or that it would cost her one of her only two friends in the process.

“Things will change now.” She said in the echoing voice she only used when what she Saw was certain. “For us and for him. Whether for better or worse, only time will tell.” She looked away from the remains of the Veil then pointed her wand and incanted: Evanesco, vanishing the shards and dust.

“Luna?” Neville whispered, voice unsteady at her actions.

“They can’t find him now.” She said simply. “And they would have, after spending too much time and resources on trying to bring back their “Savior”.” She sighed. “Now they have to focus on the War. And so do we.”

Neville wrapped her up in a hug and they turned away from where the Veil once stood, walking unsteadily but in-step through the ruined chamber and back towards the lifts.

He only had one more thing to ask before he let his first friend rest in whatever peace there might be found on the other side of the Veil.

“Will he be at peace, be happy?”

She hummed lightly under her breath before giving a quiet laugh at what she found.

“In time, maybe.” She said without her usual cryptic Code. “But there will be a fight for him before he reaches true happiness.”

Neville snorted.

“Of course there will.” He rolled his eyes as the lift doors snapped open and they stepped out into chaos. “This is Harry we’re talking about. Getting him to accept anything good without a struggle is like trying to take gold from a Niffler.”

…

Author’s Note: This is the last you’ll see of the Harry Potter world. Our next installment will start in the Walking Dead universe but pre-Series. Gotta give the guys some time to adjust…and see just what is going on with the necklace Luna gave Harry…the Walking Dead characters will be introduced starting in chapter 2…I think…

Also, chapters for this story will be between 5,000-10,000 words for the most part, not the giant updates TotFM gets that are nearly novel length in size.
Harry, Sirius, and Remus wake up somewhere very different from where they’d last remembered.

I was going to hold this chapter back until next week but I have another seven written already for the weekly updates and decided to spoil you lovelies and get the pre-Outbreak plot setup finished. Chapter Two has the Outbreak and Chapter Three is where our favorite Harry collides with the Walking Dead storyline.

Harry groaned as he came awake in a tumble of bodies, head thumping and body sore and aching. Nudging and crawling out of the pile up, he cracked his eyes open as the sound of grunts and groans reached his ears, noting that he’d been pinned between Siri and Remy with Siri landing first and taking the brunt of the impact. Once that cleared his mind and he was able to think around the trolls beating on his skull, he jumped to his feet, wobbling a little, and held up the wand still clenched in his bruised hand, searching for the battle and the Death Eaters they’d just been around a few seconds ago as far as he knew.

As his eyes focused on their new surroundings he blinked staring at the tall green trees and the squirrel up on of them at was chattering angrily down at the trio.

“What the fuck…” He gasped, eyes nearly spinning in their sockets in shock as he whirled around to get a better look at where they woke up. “Siri! Remy!” He shouted at the two who after moaning and groaning had snuggled back into each other’s arms, the same as they did whenever he would wake them up in their bed at the summer cottage. “Get the fuck up! We have problems!”

The two war veterans came fully awake in an instant at that, springing to their feet and coming to stand back-to-back-to-back with Harry, all three of them with wands out and ready. They’d practiced the move so often with James and then later taught it to Harry that it was like second nature to do so at the code their pup gave. They quickly took in the scene around them as the battle they’d been in before – and the events Remus saw come to pass – flashed through their minds.

Once they’d ascertained they were safe, the elder two wizards turned to their pup and stared him down with calm but serious demeanors.

“Okay, pup.” Sirius said blowing out a breath as he sheathed his wand. “I think it’s time to share what happened, everything you know, and then we’ll do the same, deal?”
Harry nodded, mimicking Siri’s movements as he put his holly wand away in the Auror-grade holster on his wrist – a secret gift from his godfathers for his last birthday. The two of them hunkered down on a nearby log while Remus kept watch and paid attention to their conversation, his advanced senses being best suited for standing guard in a strange place. Their godson took a deep breath and began, explaining everything that led to the Department of Mysteries: the visions, the awful Occlumency lessons that had Sirius almost in a fresh rage, Umbridge, Kreacher, the Threstrals, even what Luna said and gave to him before leaving, the Prophecy, everything that he’d not told them that had happened up to their arrival at the Department of Mysteries.

“Okay, let me make sure I understand.” Sirius said after he’d risen to his feet and started pacing, muttering under his breath about traitorous House Elves when Harry had gotten to that part. “Snape had tried to teach you to shield you mind using the quick-and-painful method.”

“Likely under Dumbledore’s orders.” Remus interjected. “Severus is – was –,” he corrected himself remembering falling through the Veil. “A good if demanding educator. He would’ve gone with slow and thorough if he’d been given a choice in the matter. He knows better than anyone just how good Voldemort is at playing with the Mind Arts.”

Sirius grumbled but allowed that his mate was right before continuing. “Snape tried to teach you Occlumency but it only made the visions worse. Voldemort found out -,” Sirius frowned thinking about all the noise that surrounded Arthur Weasley’s snake bite, rightly assuming that was when the Dark Lord started to get suspicious. “And used the link to set a trap with my as fake bait.”

“Right.” Harry sighed, running one hand through his hair.

“You tried everything you could think of under duress: Flooing, warning Snape, but forgot about the journal or the mirrors.”

“I know you guys don’t take those outside of your bedroom.” Harry admitted, nibbling at his lip. “I didn’t want to take the time to go all the way up to Gryffindor Tower, un-ward the box I keep them in to hide them from sneaks.” He sneered thinking of Ron and Hermione, and Hermione’s rather ironic way of enchanting the DA roster. “When Flooing would be quicker and I was…” he shuffled his feet a bit and blushed. “Panicking.” He stared up a Sirius and Remus with big green eyes, unknowingly giving them the worst set of puppy-eyes in history. “I was worried Siri.”

Remus and Sirius shared a wordless look as they melted a little bit inside. Their pup was still in trouble for pure recklessness but they couldn’t deny his heart was in the right place. And so far it looked like they survived in one piece so…all’s well that ends well?

Nah.

He was still going to get the shit pranked out of them once they had whatever-the-fuck-was-going-on figured out.

If nothing else a prank war would help him to learn to think more and react less, like they’d been trying to reinforce the last two years. But a dozen years of ground-in survival instincts and reactions from abuse was hard to overcome. The Headmasters two years of “testing” Harry’s abilities hadn’t helped their endeavors eithers.

“Fast forward to the Ministry.” Sirius said, pinching his nose between his fingers and thumb. He had one hells-of-a-headache which wasn’t helping him process what had happened. “Death Eaters, Prophecy, decking Lucy,” here he gave a giant smirk. “That had felt damned good. “Battle, battle, battle. Bella.” He paused, looking down into worried green eyes. “Last thing I remember was that Stunner.” He sighed, knowing he wasn’t going to like this. “What came next?”
“You fell Siri.” Harry whispered, tears gathering in his eyes as he remembered, his godfathers coming to sit next to him and hold him between them like they would when he had nightmares before the Order started keeping him on total lock-down. It was a lot harder to disappear for an entire night when someone was watching you around the clock. “Into the Veil. I couldn’t just let you go, I couldn’t.” He whispered, one hand curled into and holding onto Sirius’s shirt with a death grip. “I got to you, grabbed you and held on but…” He looked down, not able to stare into those soft grey eyes anymore as they filled with horrified understanding for the first time.

“You’re too heavy Pads.” Remus added with a sigh as he linked hands with his mate, keeping one arm wrapped tight around Harry. “And Harry’s too fast. I couldn’t stop him fast enough from grabbing you and even I’m not strong enough to pull both of you back once the Veil had gotten hold of you. So I…” He sighed and looked away, thinking of a letter he’d gotten just that morning. “I wrapped myself around Harry, buried one of my hands in your belt and held onto both of you for dear life.” He growled low, he knew just how close he’d come to losing both his mate and his pup. “I wasn’t going to lose you both…not again.”

“Moons.” Sirius whispered, tilting his lover’s face up to meet his for-once serious gaze. “Thank you.” He let out a shaky breath. “For not leaving us. For not letting us go.” Cocking his head, he looked down at a softly crying Harry who had buried his head in his shirt once Remus had picked up where he’d left off. “You said you talked to Xeno’s girl before you left?”

“Mhmm.” Harry hummed under his breath with a snaffle.

“Pandora.” Remus muttered, eyes unfocused. “She’s Pandora’s girl, Luna, isn’t she?”

Sirius furrowed his brow, thinking. Xenophilius was his distant cousin, but then who wasn’t related to the Blacks in Wizarding Britain? “Should be.” He agreed tracing the lines. “Xeno married a Greek witch he brought back from his travels. He never gave her name but I’m pretty certain Pandora Lovegood was Pandora Delphi before she got married if the Tapestry was right.”

Harry looked up confused. He already knew that; Luna had told him. And from knowing Luna he knew the significance.

“Why?” He asked.

Remus answered. “I received a letter this morning.” He said meaningfully, looking over at Pads. “One of the things Pandora did before she died was set up a deal with the goblins to send out a few important letters on certain dates.” He shrugged. “Neither Voldemort or Dumbledore could get her onside but neither was willing to try and kill her either.” He imparted. “Bad things happen to those who try and kill Fate’s favored.”

“What did the letter say?” Sirius asked, diverted momentarily from the necklace Harry’d been given.

“That before midnight I’d have to make a choice.” Remus sighed shaking his head. “To hold on or let go. And that she hoped I’d hold on.” He chuckled. “That was Pandora for you, left you in the dark most of the time but for those she liked there was always a warning – and a choice to make.”

“Sounds like Luna.” Harry agreed. “She said her mother taught her what she could before she died. And that she left her a couple letters and things to give to people at certain times as well.”

“Never said any more than that?” Sirius asked.

Harry shrugged, finally letting go of his death-grip on his godfather. “I never wanted to pry. Talking about her mum hurt, no matter how much she pretended otherwise.”
“So.” Sirius looked around him. “This doesn’t look like much of an afterlife.” He joked. “What do you think the odds are that the ‘Veil of Death’ was really a portal somewhere elsewhere or elsewhen?”

“Could be.” Remus agreed with a thoughtful hum before tugging the neck of Harry’s shirt to one side and tapping a finger against the heavy mithril links resting there. “But before we do anything else, I vote we examine just what a pair of Seers Saw fit to send with us…wherever we are…”

The others agreed, Sirius transfiguring a sturdy table and some cushioned dining chairs for them to use while trying to “crack the code” on the necklace. Once they were situated, Remus as the more medically-inclined of the adults, gave the others a quick going-over to make sure they weren’t wounded or cursed. A couple sluggishly-bleeding wounds on Harry’s back had been taken care of with the obligatory growls at the scars he had from Vernon – Remus and Sirius were both pissed that they likely weren’t going to be able to dish out revenge on that fucking Muggle once Harry was of age – and Pads had the gash on his head wrapped before Remus would let them try and figure out why Pandora had insisted on Harry getting a necklace of all things.

It was a heavy piece, the adult wizards agreed after Harry unclasped it and handed it over for them to see, and handsome in the fashion of a king’s or lord’s necklace from the Middle Ages. Made of mithril as Remus had smelled, the metal was distinct, and goblin forged and enchanted, none of them could figure out how a Seer who did her best to live a quiet life under the radar had come into possession of it. It wasn’t until Harry was rubbing at one of the etched oval links that alternated with diamond-shaped links set with faceted stones that they had an answer – that set off another round of questions.

Harry had gotten a bit of blood on his hands from holding his side during the battle, and with his rubbing some transferred to the mithril necklace.

As the enchanted metal recognized Harry’s blood, it glowed gold and silver for a moment before the magic died down, leaving the formerly-obscured markings on the necklace visible and one of the stones had popped open from a hidden hinge, showing a hint of a cavity beneath it.

“Holy fuck.” Sirius breathed, his eyes wide. Tapping one finger on the family crest that was now clear on the two “plain” links adjoining the center-most and largest stone. “That’s the Peverell Crest.” He revealed to the confused pair staring at him. “I recognize it from when I sat in on James’s lessons with your grandfather Lord Charlus.”

“And…” Harry prompted him. They hadn’t gotten into too much of his family history yet, focusing more on the politics and skills he would need to survive the modern Wizarding World. They’d assumed there would be plenty of time to cover his family history once they had him ready to take his place as Lord Potter.

Sirius shook his head in bemusement. The things only the oldest Wizarding Houses knew that others simply didn’t never failed to amaze and confuse him. Even Remus, who had a pureblood father, didn’t know and the Lupins were an old family in their own rights, if not one of the “Noble” families.

But then…the Lupins came with the Saxons and married into the Roman-lineage wizards and witches of the isles not the old families that had their roots in the pre-Roman Druids and Picts…so no, Remus wouldn’t know this either.

“There are seven families that were the oldest of the olde in magical Britain.” Sirius lectured both his lover and his pup who paid attention with rapt eyes, both loving when Siri would get into the Olde history of magic and magical origins in Britain. “The Four Founders, the Emrys line that birthed
Merlin, the Pendragons who eventually made a treaty with the Roman invaders, and the Peverells.” He shook his head. “Even Beadle the Bard used one of their family legends in his compilation of tales. The Tale of the Three Brothers was about three of the Peverells who lived around the same time as the Founding of Hogwarts. Necromancers.” He confided. “Who each created an item so powerful that other wizards feared them and later Beedle said they were “gifts” from Death. Only two families in the modern day could trace themselves back to the Peverells: the Gaunts from a bastard line, and the Potters.” He smiled at the shock on Harry’s face. “Who are descended directly from Ignotus Peverell.”

“So…” Harry gestured towards the necklace. “This is really, really old then.”

Sirius snorted, rolling his eyes. “That’s one way of putting it pup.”

“More importantly.” Remus pointed out in his quiet way. “How did Pandora get her hands on it? If it’s a Peverell heirloom it should have been in either the main Potter Vault or the Peverell Heirloom vault. Not in a box in a schoolgirl’s bedroom until Luna gave it to you Harry.”

“Seer.” Harry shrugged. “I stopped asking questions like that one in Second Year. They know things no one else does and as a result can find things no one else can. That’s one of the reasons Luna’s things never stayed lost no matter how hard those bitches in her House tried before Nev and I stopped them.”

“Point.” Remus could accept that reasoning.

“Well.” Sirius said, gesturing for Harry to open the hidden cavity in the necklace. “This looks like a Lord’s Mantle to me. They were locked to bloodlines and only the Lord was able to open the secret caches they had inside them. Which means it’s only safe for you to investigate, pup.”

“Okay.” Harry took a shaky breath and opened the hinge on the necklace fully. It was the stone that was closest to the left of the latch. Frowning a moment, he asked: “Do the rest of these open too?”

The necklace had a total of over twenty stones and an equal number of alternating mithril ovals, any of which could hide a cache behind them – if they could figure out how to open them.

“Maybe.” Sirius told him after studying the necklace a moment more. “The Black necklace that was forged by the goblins had seven or eight caches, this one could have less or more.” He shrugged, arching a brow at Harry’s stalling. “Only one way to find out.”

“Okay, okay.” Harry groused good-naturedly, reaching in with his thumb and forefinger to the inky-pocket-of-mystery and hoping the damned thing isn’t cursed and snapped his fingers off. Luna was his friend and he trusted her after all…but this was the same girl who thought Acromantulas were “cute”.

In some things her judgement was a little…skewed.

He let out a breath in relief when all he found was a shrunken-down trunk the size of a matchbox and with a shrunken scroll attached to it. Setting it in the center of the table and closing the stone, Harry put the necklace back on for safe keeping while Sirius and Remus tested the two items for traps, hexes, and curses before spelling them back to proper size. To their surprise but no one’s real shock after the other events of the day/night, the scroll had their names written in an elegant hand just below a wax seal with the imprint of a stylized third eye Harry had seen in his Divination text books on the history of the Oracles of Delphi and their lineage.

Remus reached out and undid the tether holding the scroll to the trunk, breaking the seal with a flick
of his wand and setting the opened scroll to hover in the air for them to read. It wasn’t too long, but as it hovered, and they read, it extended and duplicated, showing more and more information before their wondering eyes. One of the new scrolls that appeared as they read was titled: Home, another: Studies, and a third simply: Harry.

Puzzled but strangely energized, the trio read the original missive as Remus set the others aside for the moment.

Greetings Lord Potter, Lord and Consort Black:

If you are reading this then things have indeed come to pass as I Saw and my beloved daughter Luna has given Lord Potter his ancestor’s necklace as instructed.

I’m so very glad.

You see, there were many futures that I Saw in my last year of life. Many, many futures. Some were vague and ephemeral, others were dark and horrific, and still, a handful of the rest contained joy. I planned for three of the most likely and am rejoicing that you are reading this for this future is the best of the lot that was among the most likely to come to pass.

The future, for all some like to say otherwise, is never set in stone you see.

And someone like me...well...we know that better than anyone.

I won’t trouble you with those other futures, for now that you are where you are and reading this, those futures will never come to pass.

But I will thank you from the bottom of my heart Lord Potter for the friend you’ve been to my Luna and the help you’ve given her. That friendship was the same in all three of the most likely futures, which is why I’ve extended my help to you, even if it comes to pass differently in each of the three and at different times. Thanks to you, in this future, my darling girl has a bright future, one free of torture or manipulation. She will have a wonderful, loving husband in Lord Longbottom, and two beautiful sons and a single daughter that they name Lily Hadrianna in your honor.

Your little namesake will have my family’s gifts and so our line will continue on.

Do not worry for those left behind on the other side of the Veil. For all that you three are strangers in a strange land, now that they don’t have you Lord Potter to pin their hopes on the public will rise up and cast down both Voldemort and Dumbledore. My daughter and Lord Longbottom as well as some others will help reveal the truth behind the lies and Wizarding Britain will recover and renew itself, becoming more and better than it ever was.

And it’s all because two roguish rapscallions grew some gonads and disobeyed a certain Headmaster.

You have a grand destiny before you now, and I’ve given you what help and direction I can to help you on your path. It won’t be without hardship. In fact, in a few years you’ll be wondering if I’d truly lost my mind when certain things come to pass.

Stay true and strong, read and understand what I have gathered for you, and above all: survive.

A renewal is coming for the world the Veil dropped you in, and no great renewal ever came without hardship as the three of you well know.

Stay the course gentlemen, even the darkest of nights will eventually give way to the dawn.
The Peverell Mantle is spelled to open as things come to pass, the only exception is the center stone and the teardrop stone that hangs from it. Those you should open as soon as you follow the directions in Harry’s scroll.

You are in a world without active magical people, though there are some small supernatural things such as a true psychic or two, Voodoo priestesses and native shamans. Nothing like your former home. You’ll need to keep your magical abilities close to the chest here, unless you want to wind up in a government lab being experimented on.

Inside the trunk are things to get you started: gold, silver, and other precious stones and metals to sell for currency, a wizarding tent to keep you safe and sheltered until you can follow the “Home” plans, food, clothing to blend in, and more. Much more. Just be cautious and follow the help I’ve given you.

A Seer can help and guide but I cannot tell you what will happen or what to do. I’m bending the rules beyond recognition as it is. And there will be a price I have to pay for it. But it’s one I’m willing to pay to thank the boy who saved my Luna in more ways than even you will ever know.

Thank you Harry.

And blessed be.

Lady Pandora Selene Delphi-Lovegood

P.S. You’re in the USA, State of Louisiana, in the National Forest located there. The date is June 12, 2004. You have approximately six years to get ready before the troubles begin. Don’t dawdle. Set up the tent and ward the area, get rested, cleaned up and changed, and then apparate to New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Shreveport to start offloading the gold and silver. Use glamors that match the fake ID’s that are in the trunk, you have two more sets of fakes and one that has your real information for when you get settled.

…

They obeyed what Sirius joked was “The Voice from Beyond.”

Waking up the next morning, Remus and Sirius found a quiet Harry pouring over the other three scrolls they’d been left but hadn’t opened the night before, breakfast and tea waiting on the small kitchen table inside the tent while Harry had the scrolls and their contents spread out on the massive dining room table.

This Wizarding tent was more lushly appointed than the one Arthur Weasley had used at the World Cup, having a full kitchen and formal dining room, a study, massive library that had stunned them when they were exploring, a common bathroom, two guest rooms, as well as a pair of suites with private bathrooms, one a Lord’s suite and the other an Heir’s suite. It reminded Harry of the mini-Manor the Malfoys had taken to the Cup but on the outside it looked like a wooden cabin, not the mini-Manor it was inside. The kitchen had been stocked, the preservation charms still working in full-force, though none of them had been up to cooking once the adrenaline wore off and they’d cleaned up before crashing into bed.

Harry had obviously woken first, being an early riser by necessity when he was with the Dursleys and by habit once he’d started Hogwarts.

In this case it worked in his favor as the contents of the “Harry” scroll had most definitely been for his eyes only. If Siri and Remy knew… He shook his head, laughing internally at the thought. It
was better they didn’t know. Remus could be a stubborn mule, let them find out from experience and he’d not fight it…as hard.

He was looking forward to the day when Siri started to wake up nauseas every morning.

Honestly.

They were grown men and supposed to be responsible…at least Remus.

Having Siri be up the duff on *accident* was nothing less than they had coming for forgetting to use their contraceptive charms. They’d even given Harry “The Talk” this last summer so it wasn’t like it wasn’t on their minds. Maybe they thought Remus couldn’t *have* kids or something because of it never happening before… He shrugged, wasn’t his problem…and he was kinda looking forward to being a big brother.

“What’s the story pup?” Sirius asked after he and Remus sat down and started in on filling their bellies.

“We need to do Harry’s healing and correction potions and spells before we do anything else.” Remus decreed before Harry could begin. “I didn’t like the sound of that renewal Pandora wrote about…we all need to get into peak condition and *stay* that way.” His amber eyes glowed a moment. “We have to be ready. She said six years but she admitted herself that things can change as choices and decisions are made.”

“Agreed.” Harry said with a sigh. He was looking forward to not being so small and stringy anymore…but even Siri had to admit that some of the correction potions weren’t fun after having to take them himself after Azkaban and his own family-induced abuse from his childhood. “I looked through the scrolls and dug around some in the trunk.” He swung a hand between the two. “She gave us a fortune – or that was what I thought.” He held up the scroll with his name but didn’t hand it over due to some of the contents. “It’s ours.” He finished helpless to understand how it had happened.

“What do you mean, Prongslet?”

“It’s ours.” He flicked a finger between himself and Sirius. “The total contents of our vaults are contained in that trunk with some of it hidden in the Peverell Mantle. *Somehow,*” he gave them a confused look. “She convinced the goblins to empty the whole of mine and Siri’s belongings in the bank into the trunk and Mantle except for a certain amount to supply different contingencies.” His voice sped up as he rushed to tell them both what Pandora wrote – and what he’d discern for himself. “If things had gone another way, I would’ve had just enough to get through school and maybe a year or two after.” His voice broke a little. “Unless Siri died… then there would be Grimmauld Place and a little more, maybe enough for me to work and an inheritance for my possible kids…but not the entirety of the Potter/Black wealth…not by a long shot.” He looked lost for a moment, Sirius and Remus leaving their plates to cuddle him for a long while before he shooed them back to their breakfast. “I’m fine…” He insisted. “It didn’t turn out that way so…I’m fine. And,” he gave a bright smile. “We’re wealthy beyond what we can spend in a hundred lifetimes. We just have to convert it into American dollars instead of gold and silver.”

“We can do that.” Remus nodded, frowning thoughtfully. “One of my very short-lived jobs was working for a muggle gold dealer.” He shook his head. “I’m not sure how to find one in the States but I’ve worked a computer before. And pawn brokers are easy to find in any city.” He grimaced. “We won’t get as much that way but it’ll be enough to set us up while I find a reputable dealer to sell a portion of the gold.”
“If things really do go to hell.” Sirius cautioned the others. “We’ll want to have most of the gold and silver on-hand. If this is as bad as Pandora made it sound – and my instincts are screaming at me – governments will collapse and paper money won’t be worth anything except to start a fire. We’ll need to be careful.” His grey eyes were focused elsewhere as he held his warm tea mug between his long fingered hands. “Exchange what we need for the next five or six years – and only that much.”

“You’re right.” Remus sighed, leaning back in his chair. “But it’s hard to say how much that’ll be. Especially if the pup wants to go and get an education for the world goes to hell.”

Harry held up his hands in a stopping gesture before the two of them could delve too deeply into that rather convoluted and thorny subject.

“We’re not totally lost.” He handed over the “Home” scroll as Remus sent the dishes to wash themselves with a wave of his wand and Sirius poured them all some more tea. “Here.” He laid out the instructions and plans. “Two states away – apparently,” he drawled, none of them being too terribly familiar with the geography of the southeastern US. “Pandora says is a plot of land that’s two square miles large for sale.” He tapped the topographic map that the Seer had included, the edges of the property highlighted. “I guess it used to be some kind of protected wildland but the state government is having a budget crises and is trying to sell it – with little effect.”

“Why?” That didn’t make any sense to Remus from what he knew about the States. “Untouched wildland is like gold nowadays.”

“And it would be.” Harry nodded, rolling his eyes a moment at the stupidity of people. “If not for the wildland being triangular and wedged between another protected national forest and a prison complex. He gestured to the other highlighted spot on the map. “The national forest surrounds the land on the west and north with the prison land bordering the southern edge. The only free access point to build a road onto the land is where it comes to a point between the forest and the prison to the east. No one wants it.” He said with some relish. “No developer wants to build that close to a prison and part of the contract is not logging more than ten percent of the land per the regulations of bordering protected national lands. It’s a white elephant no one wants to touch.”

“But perfect.” Sirius barked a laugh. “When you’re talking about a former convict, a werewolf, and three wizards.”

“Right.” Harry nodded with an eager smile. “Set up the wards Pandora mentions and multiple layers of fencing and access gates and we’ll be safe from any mundane threat. We’ll just have to find a reputable company to do the build.”

The three hunched over the topographic map, discussing fencing possibilities and what type of house they’d like to have – the bones of it anyway. Mundane contractors would do the heavy lifting while they took care of any magical expansion needs. In the end, Remus and Sirius set off to start selling the bulk of the gold for the land, hitting pawn shops first and then a gold broker Remus found using an internet café while Sirius discovered the wonders of the internet and caramel lattes for himself. Harry stayed behind to do more research on security fencing and house layouts, referring frequently to the basic blueprint Pandora had included in the “Home” plans.

It was a massive place, a half-manor and half-fortress. Pandora recommended, and Harry’s research backed up, having two levels underground and three above all made of stone. The below-ground levels would include a secured cell for Moony – just in case – and a potions lab and ingredient storage as some could be made with plants and animal parts in their new home while others he’d found in both the tent and the trunk. Also in the basement would be massive amounts of food and item storage areas with preservations charms, and a dueling and magical workroom.
Harry had taken Pandora’s warning to heart, anything in-your-face-magical would be in the bottom-
most underground level with the one above it mostly storage.

In the upper levels they would have a kitchen/dining room/bathroom/library/common area floor,
followed by the second floor with more bedrooms, bathrooms, and a secondary common area/living
room. The top floor would have three sets of suites: one for Pads and Moony, one for Harry, and
another for the kids Pads and Moony don’t yet know about. All three of the suites were more like
self-contained apartments with at least two bedrooms, a study or common area, and a private bath.
And if need be since it was a private floor they could always magically expand.

He had even more fun with the grounds.

Off the back of the house would be a massive glasshouse/orangery which would grow everything
from potions ingredient to food and was just as large square-footage wise as the entire home. He
added a barn, stables, animal pens, an orchard and farm land, as well as a couple of smaller cabins.
If anyone asked they would say they were for the “farm workers” since they couldn’t very well tell
them that they were going to use magic for the farm chores and planning on just-in-case the world
ended…or something Pandora having been frustratingly vague. All he knew was that it was going
to be bad and Pandora wouldn’t have included the plans for the smaller homes unless they would be
needed.

Basically what they were going to end up building was their own self-contained village, eerily
reminiscent of the Potter Estate back in England that Pads and Moony had taken him to the summer
between Third and Fourth Year.

Harry estimated that by the time everything was built – and without taking down much of the
surrounding forest beyond needing clear line-of-sight and farm land – that they would be able to
house over a hundred people…and that was before you added magic into the mix.

Honestly, the new “manor” would be able to house that on its own – or more – once you added
magic, never mind the dozen or so smaller homes they were going to build that were all between one
and four bedrooms each.

Each of which could be expanded to four times its size inside before causing problems.

Harry sat back, flushed with success at having finished plotting out their new home with help from
the spells in the book Pandora had suggested he find in the tent library. In the end he had the manor,
glasshouse, barn, stables, tool shed, garage for the main “estate” which was then enclosed in an
eight-foot-high stone wall with a single gate made of solid steel – goblin forged though the workers
would never see it. Inside that first wall would also be a pair of gardens mainly for animal feed and
grain. Between the estate wall and the next fence line would be the dozen houses, the orchard, and
several more gardens and fields for animals and crops. Then there would be another stone wall,
again eight feet tall with a gate made of reinforced mundane steel. After that was open land for five
hundred yards in all directions that they could graze animals on if needed before there was a third
fence right before the forest line. This fence would be made out of reinforced steel eight feet high
with a honeycomb pattern similar to chicken wire – but much much stronger and another reinforced
steel gate. From there would be a series of four fences, each six feet high and made out of reinforced
steel that would let wildlife travel freely through the forest lands – but would stymie most people, and
all with a single gate.

The beauty of the seven fences and their corresponding gates was that the road that connected the
gates wasn’t a straight line.

So, if someone, say with a tank, broke through the first gate there was only a space of ten feet
between that fence and the next – enough time for a small car, motorcycle, horse, or person on foot to maneuver but not for anything larger to turn and make it to the next gate leaving them with the option of either giving up or breaking through the fencing which with the reinforced steel and the wards the trio of wizards would use the steel to anchor was about as likely as Dumbledore giving up lemon drops or manipulating everyone around him.

The longest distance between the fences was the five hundred yards between the outer stone wall and the third fence.

Azkaban would be easier to break into – or as Siri had proven out of – than their home would be by the time Harry and his godfathers were finished. And Harry found after years of living with the threat of Voldemort and the Death Eaters over his head that that was exactly the way he liked it. He’d designed a fortress, with some suggestions from the late Pandora, and he’d never felt better.

Siri was free. So was he, and Remus would never have to worry about finding a job or being caged because of a disease he can’t control. Harry smiled down at the plans he’d sketched out with the tools the trunk and tent provided.

Life was finally good.

…

Things were a beehive of activity for the trio of wizards as they got the foundation laid for the rest of their lives in Georgia.

Remus had decided after that first trip and seeing the suspicious nature of the pawn shop owners and the gold dealers that he wanted to conduct that first step a little farther afield than two states from their eventual home – and that he and Siri worked better together than splitting up after one brawl on the part of his mercurial other half.

With help from a book on scrying from the tent library and a map of the states and a crystal from the trunk, Remus would find several new sets of coordinates and set off to sell silver, the two adults knowing that it would raise less eyebrows than the gold did after that first day. Sirius handled the bags filled with the precious metals after donning gloves and transfiguring the sickles into plain bars and ingots. But silver was worth a lot less than gold and even with all the coins in the vaults transfigured, by the time a week was out they were forced to start in on the gold, Harry and Remus knowing more about mundane practices and building – and with Harry being dropped off in Atlanta before they set off to sell to do research – and deciding that they were going to need tens of millions of dollars US to make their plans feasible.

Fortunately, while selling the metals was a pain, both the Potters and Blacks had been filthy rich and even once they’d sold all they needed to see them through the next ten years – deciding to go a little above and beyond rather than risk running short – they still had piles and piles of gold left over.

With the papers provided by the goblins via Pandora, they were set up in new identities – and bank accounts that they filled with cash from their flooding of the precious metals markets.

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin became Sirius and Remus Black thanks to a fictitious marriage in New York State and the license provided by the goblins.

And Harry happily left being the Boy-Who-Lived in their old world, taking the name Hadrian James Black who was the son Sirius and adopted after his dad’s marriage by Remus.

They moved from the forest in Louisiana to a penthouse hotel suite in Atlanta while their home was
built, Sirius easily playing the eccentric English Lord with more money than sense to the Southerners who did the building. All three of them would pile into Remus’s new car – a massive diesel truck that seated six between two bench seats and could easily haul several tons…and that was before they tinkered with it… - and would set off to check the project and hammer a few nails in their new home-to-be. Sirius went up more often, riding his new motorcycle that he enchanted for stealth, flying, and invisibility, while Remus would corner Harry at the penthouse and set him to his studies.

That was one thing Harry wasn’t quite as happy about.

Beyond the rest of the plans, advise, and flat-out orders their nosy Seer had left them was a study plan for all three of them. Things that while all of them could agree would help them survive any situation, Harry wasn’t thrilled with as the bulk of it was necessary for him. Sirius and Remus were already skilled with things like weapons, first aid, and survivalism from Sirius’s childhood lessons and Auror training…and what one Marauder knew so did the others…mostly.

One thing he was happy with was the continuance of his magical studies…just with more emphasis on necessary knowledge rather than things that would be of use to pass a test.

Skills like the Animagus transformation and Conjuration were a lot more useful than how to make a pineapple tap-dance.

And with a lack of magical creatures, knowing how to hunt elk with a bow made more sense than how to take care of a niffler.

Though his dads did have some things to learn of their own, like how to tend fields – with and without magic – and take care of and maintain livestock. Sirius knew a lot of theory from his father’s lessons on estate management but that was only theory. An idle conversation between the construction foreman and Remus had the two of them signing Harry up for 4-H and saw them tagging along as they learned about agriculture and sustainability. They got a couple of looks for being wealthy and homeschooling Harry, most “rich folk” in the States apparently relied heavily on private schools over private tutoring, but for the most part they left it be after a quick explanation of not wanting him to get comfortable in a school only to have to transfer once their home was finished.

And a year after landing in Louisiana, it was exactly that finished.

Sirius had hired several constructions crews that all worked together simultaneously to make the estate viable. There was still a lot of finish work going on in the “Farm Hand” cabins as the guys had called them after seeing the plans, but the “Big House” was move-in ready. Several of the guys were even interested in moving and settling into the new complex that the rich English Lord had made, an option that Remus and Sirius were heavily discussing between themselves and Harry. It was mostly single guys who were interested, the kind who took to construction because it paid well enough to support them but who weren’t 100% sold yet on settling down and starting a family. To them, living out in the woods with a strange rich family and helping them work the land seemed like a pretty good deal.

In the meantime, Harry’s healing had gone well, the formerly tiny teen shooting up over a foot in height in a matter of weeks and bulking out considerably. He was still lithe, but now he had a swimmer’s build instead of muscle-and-bone. When as best as they could figure his seventeenth birthday had come and gone a year later – complete with a light show in the magical area hidden in the second basement – Remus and Sirius fixed his eyes.

And he’d been right.

Remus’s face when Sirius turned up preggers a month after they moved into their new home was
Pandora provided healing texts along with the massive library, and Harry having known about Siri’s eventual condition absorbed them with a fervor.

His little brother – named Rastaban Lionel Black – was delivered safe and sound by his older brother then three months later Harry left for college, pre-med.

No one could say that years of intense tutoring and undivided attention from his dads had gone to waste – he tore through college in two years before starting at medical school in Atlanta.

They’d all spent their time wisely, they’d prepared and stocked up, after the birth of Raz and then his younger sister Jamie Carina a year later, they’d taken on a handful of good men vetted via Veritaserum and bound under blood Oaths to keep their secrets and work the land.

And then, two weeks after Harry returned from his first year at medical school, the Dead began to Walk.
Author’s Note: I played around with Axel’s character a little bit, making Big Tiny have the water pistol story and Axel both younger and in for grand theft auto.

Chapter Two: The Walking Dead

“It’s happened.” Harry’s voice was quiet but carried through the common area of the Big House. All the adults were gathered, the couple of kids including his own little siblings Raz and Jamie were asleep, completely unaware of the drastic changes that had just rocked their world. Because in their little slice of the world…not a whole hell of a lot had changed beyond all of the gates going into lock-down at once.

Sirius and Remus stared in pride at their son – and at this point loath as they were to admit it for fear of marring James’s memory, Harry was more theirs than his.

Harry had grown a lot in the last six years. He had the strong V-build of an Olympic swimmer with wide shoulders, strong arms, a chiseled chest and stomach, meeting lean hips and long strong legs. He’d stopped shooting up when he matched James’s height of six-foot even, leaving Sirius two inches taller but less muscled with his lean build and Remus an inch shorter but more massive with his were-strength. And smart. Merlin he was smart.

Whenever Remus or Sirius would start to doubt, start to wonder, Harry was there to kick them back on the path. He tore through his high school education and then regular college, managing to pack in as much as possible about medicine before the world went to hell.

And, in the end, it did.

After a couple years, the two elder wizards had questioned if the future trials Pandora foretold would really be all that bad.

Harry, maybe due to his friendship with her daughter, never had. He’d stayed the course when they’d doubted or gotten lost in the humdrum of everyday life and the joy of their two young children.

Raz was three now and Jamie two.

And they were going to grow up in a world where the dead came back to life and were hungry.

Remus watched with pride-tinged-worry, Sirius much the same, as Harry addressed the handful of adults they’d let into their little village before the world came crashing down. There was no doubt, not among any of them, that it was Harry who was the leader here. Oh, they knew that all three of them made decisions, they’d seen that for themselves. But Harry’d been tested in the fires of Voldemort and the Tournament, this respite as they waited for the other shoe to drop had merely been that to him when Siri and Remy got comfortable: a rest.

Now it was time to fight and survive once more…and Harry was going to make sure they did just that.

“What is this, Hadrian?” One of the two women, both wives who had met and married two of their
single workers, asked. It was Sarah, a small quiet blonde married to their foreman Max, a big bruiser who had a gentle hand with horses and people alike, who’d spoken up. “What’s doing this?”

Harry sighed, running his hands through his shaggy black hair. He’d grown it out since they got here, letting it fall half-way down his back before he started cutting it. It suited him, made him look like the old-time Lord and warrior he really was at heart – despite his dip into healing and medicine.

That was a necessity.

Anyone who ever saw him spar sword or wand against Siri could see where his heart really laid.

“A virus.” Harry blew out a breath, shaking his head. “There were…whispers.” He decided with a nod. “Rumors before school let out for the summer that there was a new viral contagion spreading. It started slow, somewhere in South America…but it didn’t stay there. And it grew faster and more contagious with every day.” His eyes hardened. “From what I could unearth before I returned it was only a matter of time before it went airborne. That means,” he folded his arms, staring everyone including his dads down. “NO one goes outside the wards. I altered the first ward-line to add a contamination field, anyone carrying a virus of any kind will have it eradicated from their system. It should,” he eyed them as they moved fractiously. “Keep the dead out…but we have to be cautious nonetheless. Any system can get overloaded and fall…”

“It’s best not to make more trouble.” Remus finished with his low, soothing voice, settling a couple of their people who were unnerved. “We know what we are.” He added. “Who we are. We knew something was going to happen but this…” He shook his head. “Who could predict this?”

“Zombies.” Declan, the youngest of their workers shook his head with a bitter laugh. “I used to love horror flicks but now? Knowing…?”

“Too right.” Sirius agreed with a grunt. The pure-blooded Lord had taken to muggle films like a duck to water.

“The important things now.” Harry held up a hand before they could get off track. “Is stay the course. We maintain the fences, keep the gates closed, man the farm, and wait this out.”

“How certain are you that it’s plausible to do that?” Max asked, not out of any kind of insubordination but more wanting to be prepared. “Wait? We’re stocked here.” He said, the others agreeing with nods and rumbles. “We have our own doc,” he smiled at Harry. “And all of us are good with weapons – or at least enough to deal with these zombie-things. We can maintain this place and live off the farm for years…but not forever.” He shook his head. “Eventually we’re going to need new seed, new breeding shock, hell.” He laughed ironically. “For us humans too. This isn’t a colony that can survive and repopulate after the dead have picked the land clean of the living.”

“You’re right.” Harry agreed easily. “But we won’t have to.”

“What do you mean?” Rob, a tough, short red-head that reminded Harry too much of Charlie Weasley asked in his gruff baritone.

“Five to eleven years.” Harry said to everyone’s confusion before enlightening them. “That’s how long it takes a body in the ground to decompose beyond the possibility of movement if they’ve been reanimated somehow or are braindead except for primary survival functions.”

“Walking, eating.” Remus added, a light dawning in his worried amber eyes.

“Exactly.” Harry nodded. “I don’t know what this virus does but I do recognize putrefaction from the couple on the news before the networks went down. They’re decaying. And eventually they’ll
reach the point they can’t walk or even crawl. The brain will decompose beyond what this virus can animate.”

“Five to eleven years.” Rob’s wife Sharla narrowed her eyes. She’d been a science teacher before she fell for a hardworking carpenter who eventually moved them out to the sticks. Now she mainly worked around the farm with the others and helped teach the Black children and Max and Sarah’s twin girls and lone son who were five and four respectively. “With exposure and Georgia’s whether we’re closer to the five, places like Canada and New England will be closer to the eleven.”

“Right.” Harry nodded, pleased that they were following his thought. “The only problem is the fluid that comes with decay and putrefaction is filled with bacteria, viruses, fungi…” He grimaced. “It’s toxic, long story short, to both plants and animals. We’ll have to kill and burn as many of these things as we can safely without getting taken out ourselves or else we risk poisoned groundwater and land that’s no good for farming.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Sean, the last member of their group and the other singleton commented. “Do supply runs so we don’t run short, kill what we can, and hunker down.”

“That’s pretty much it.” Harry said with a sigh, a weary look on his handsome face. “It’ll be safest if us three,” he waggled a thumb between himself and his dads. “Do all the runs. We have better senses and me and Dad Siri can make good time in our other forms if we have to.”

“I don’t like it.” Declan objected, which being the youngest Harry thought he would. Declan was only twenty-one while Sean weighed in at twenty-five, Rob twenty-eight, and Max thirty-five with Sarah thirty and Sharla at twenty-three. It made for quite the spread when you added in his dads in their early forties, Harry himself at almost twenty-one, and the kids five, four, three, and two.

“I didn’t think you would.” Harry nodded, acknowledging his complaint. “But as was already pointed out, we’re already lean on numbers – especially for how big this spread is. We’re going to have to add in patrols around the various fence-lines in addition to other duties, and cut back on how much we use the gas for the equipment doing more by hand. Believe me,” Harry gave a small smirk. “There will be more work than we all can handle…even with magic.”

Sirius, who had been mostly quiet, pointed out something Harry had yet to broach with the others.

“What about the prison?”

Everyone save Harry and his dads froze at that.

Having a State Penitentiary next door had been one of the harder selling points both Rob and Max had dealt with when it came to Sarah and Sharla.

That it housed murderers a mere handful of miles away wasn’t any kind of boon to the area, and the reason the three wizards were able to buy such a large parcel of land in the first place.

“You don’t think…” Sarah turned horrified eyes towards her husband. “They just let them go, do you Max?”

“Doubt it.” Sirius grunted in answer before Max could soothe her. “If anything they either put everyone down or locked them all up, threw away the key, and went the hell home.”

“Or both with the military bombing entire cities.” Harry sighed, heart hurting at the blatant and useless loss of life. “Either way…it’s too close to leave it.” He turned sad green eyes on the two women. “I don’t suppose you two are up for babysitting tomorrow so we wizards can find out for sure…one way or the other…”
“Well.” Harry said grimly as two of the three wizards stared down at the prison. Sirius had stayed behind, the trio having a family meeting after the others returned to their homes and deciding that unless it was a large operation like securing the prison, only one of them would leave at a time. It was simple math: if something happened requiring magic to fix it, like say with the wards, they needed at least one of them home-bound to deal with it. Or call whoever it was that normally handled those things. “Normally I don’t mind admitting when Padfoot’s right but this…” He trailed off sharing a horrified look with Remus.

Remus silently cast a *Homenum Revelio* to see if anyone in there was still alive, lighting up a central part of the prison with a small glow. He narrowed his eyes. “Less than a dozen.” He estimated based on the size and brightness of the spell feedback. “But more than one or two.”

Harry blew out a breath, knowing what their next move would be. He’d hate to say it but it would have been a lot easier to deal with if there wasn’t a living soul in the prison. One Fiendfyre and it would be over with, no fuss no muss.

“We’re going to have to breach it.” He said, setting his jaw and unsheathing the sword at his back. Remus was a helluva better shot with a bow than Harry, having already cleared the perimeter between them and the fence then summoning the arrows back. “Clear as many as you can with Bombardas to the head.” He decided that would work best at the middle range. “Then I’ll use a Fiendfyre to clear the courtyard. Once we’re inside it’ll be Bombardas or swords as we move through the prison.”

“Which first?” Remus asked. “Survivors or walkers?”

“Walkers.” Harry said resolutely. “If there’s one thing the war taught us it was that there’s nothing more dangerous than man. I’d rather we take out the known threat before dealing with an *unknown* one.”

“Lions or lambs.” Remus said philosophically. “Anyone will kick or bite if cornered. And locked up with the walking, biting, dead is one hell of a corner.”

“Agreed.”

With that they apparated down onto the top of the guard tower, Harry dealing with the walker inside with a Bombarda, leaving Remus to start clearing the walkers stuck between the two fence lines as he looted the tower, stuffing weapons in one bottomless bag, food in another, and anything else like med kits in a third. This was their first raid/supply run and he was testing out what would work best. With a group of people including kids, and several capable of giving birth, it was important to stock all they could. He even cleaned the blood from the moveable furniture before shrinking it down if it had salvageable metal or wooden parts. Harry was leaving nothing behind to chance since he still planned to raze the prison once they cleared it.

It was too close for his comfort. He didn’t want to chance a dangerous group of survivors claiming it and moving in a couple miles from his doorstep. No thank you.

Better to remove the temptation than allow it to sit and fester and with the prison the only other dwelling within ten miles, that gave Harry and his family one hell of a buffer zone.

And one that he desperately needed if he ever wanted another good night’s sleep.

“Clear.” He called out to Remus, his werewolf papa swinging inside from on top of the tower in a
move made possible thanks to his supernatural strength and agility. If nothing else, six years off the poison Snape called the Wolfsbane Potion had given him back his youthful demeanor and abilities. Running with his pack was nothing to sneeze at either for keeping Moony happy.

At peace for the first time, Remus and his wolf were content and no longer sought to do damage to whatever they happened to come across.

With careful steps they descended the tower, searching the office at the bottom and adding a few granola bars, bottled water, and a fire extinguisher and emergency axe to their haul.

“Ready for this?” Remus asked his pup as he rested one hand on the locked door.

“Are you?” Harry smirked, rolling his sword in his offhand and twirling his wand.

Remus rolled his eyes, commenting that his pup was spending far too much time with his mate now that college was done for.

With a laugh, the two blasted the door open and set to work, Remus staying behind Harry as he sent off controlled waves of Fiendfyre to clear the courtyard, the elder wizard taking out the few that were out of range of Harry’s cursed fire as the younger man walked slowly and steadily towards the main entryway doors. One of the most dangerous and uncontrollable spells in existence in their former world, even for a wizard as powerful as Harry it took total control and concentration to use it the way he was. Turning and trying to catch every undead with it would do nothing by fray his control and have it taking everything in its path…including the prison they were there to raid and the prisoners they – might – be setting free.

“Clear!” Remus called firmly as they reach the steps to the prison, not seeing or smelling any remaining walkers.

Harry canceled the spell with a relieved sigh, he hadn’t done magic like that and on that scale in a long time. “There will be more around the building.” He cracked his neck and shook out his shoulders. “We should clear them and then search the outbuildings before we breach the prison proper.”

“First we rest.” Remus corrected, eyeing his pup. “Fiendfyre is no joke, you need to stop and recharge a moment.” With a flick of his wand he locked the prison doors in case any walkers were drawn by the noise they’d made thus far. “Fifteen minutes and a juice and scone.” He decided digging into the pack strapped to his back. Like Harry’s trio of bags on his belt, Remus’s backpack had multiple compartments all with extension and featherlight charms. One of which held their supplies in case it took them all day to clear the prison.

Knowing arguing was futile when his papa got that tone, Harry sat gracefully on the steps and tucked into the blueberry scone and orange juice Remus handed over, the werewolf sitting beside him and taking three scones to Harry’s one, his metabolism being in high-gear with the full moon in less than a week.

“There’ll be gas in the shop.” Harry gestured over towards where the prison bus was parked. “Tools, oil, diesel, all things we need for our vehicles and the farm equipment.”

“Mhmm.” Remus agreed around his mouthful of juice. “There should be an armory in one of the outbuildings as well.” He speculated. “And a barracks with riot gear and emergency supplies.”

Harry nodded, his wild hair staying tight in its braid thanks to a spell Sirius had taught him years ago when he first grew it out. “And a cafeteria, infirmary.” Harry rattled off, dusting his hands lightly on
his dragonhide pants. “All things we’ll need for the long haul.”

“We’re already stocked to last for years, Harry.” Remus commented with concern, turning to stare at his son. “Unless…” He continued with understanding. “Governments topple.” He closed his eyes in realization. “When we first talked about this years ago something was said about governments falling.”

The younger man nodded, waving his hands towards the abandoned prison.

“I’d say that time has come and gone…wouldn’t you?” Harry’s voice was filled with grief for the lives lost. “We discussed pandemic theory in my virology course. Something like this?” He said shaking his head. “With the speed it spread and the bombings, the riots? It cost billions of lives in the first month.” His face was grim. “If we’re lucky ten percent of the world population is still alive in five years. If we’re not it’s one percent. And less than half of that will make it through the max eleven years we talked about last night.” Harry stood, ready to get to work. “We’re stocked to outlast this thing, Papa.” He admitted, eyes searching the yard. “But the world is gone. If we want to make it out the other side and have something worth living for we have to think long-term…no matter what fairy tales we tell the others so they can sleep at night.”

“What was in that letter?” Remus asked himself under his breath as he trotted off with his son to clear and raid the outbuildings, the question plaguing his mind as he saw Harry shrink down the entire bus after cleaning it and picking the buildings clean of everything. Scrap metal, wood, weapons, supplies, raw materials, if it could be resources, reused, or repurposed, Harry took it. To Remus’s eyes, by the time they razed the building there would be nothing left worth staying for anyway except the safety of the walls. And to his own surprise…he found himself okay with that, jumping in to help Harry break down a pile of sheet metal that was likely used for repairs.

Come hell or high water…Remus’s family was going to be part of the world that was left after the walkers were finally exterminated.

Hours later, they were done scavenging the yard and outbuildings, having cleared another couple dozen walkers as they were at it, and were sitting on the steps again, this time having lunch and talking to Sirius over their enchanted mirrors.

“We recast the Homenum Revelio now they we’re closer.” Harry reported to his dad who was plainly showing worry while tucked away studying ward schemas in his study. Sirius was looking for something akin to the wards that used to prevent anyone with ill-intentions from gaining access to Number 4 Privet Drive, Harry’s words about a containment ward having sparked the idea in his head. “There’s five survivors and based on the map we found in the tower they’re in the cafeteria.”

“Probably locked inside.” Sirius supplied. “Maybe a guard had an attack of conscience while the rest were culling the inmate population.”

“Maybe.” Remus nodded. “If they’d escaped in the chaos they would’ve taken off.”

“Agreed.” Harry nodded. “I’m going to see if I can find any hardcopies of the prisoner files. Veritaserum works a treat, but I’d rather not waste it if one of the five is a lost cause anyway.”

“Careful with that Harry.” Sirius, the formerly innocent convict cautioned. “We’ll have enough blood on our hands from the walkers without adding innocents too it.”

“I will be.” Harry reassured him. “And I won’t go off half-cocked. But if there’s a murderer or a rapist in there…I’m not about to let them go free to attack us later when we make a run.”
“It’s your call pup.” Sirius said rubbing his eyes. “Just...be careful. I don’t want one of them to get a lucky shot off any more than I want you to take an unnecessary life.”

“Love you.” They both called out as Sirius was called away by Raz, ending the call. They finished up their lunch of sandwiches and more juice and water – Georgia summers were no joke and it was easy to get dehydrated – before packing away the containers and rising to their feet, ready to start the tedious work of clearing the undead and looting the prison.

They were right.

It was boring, tedious work after a while. Hours of growl, stab, loot, repeat. They had found a couple sets of keys in an office, along with the prisoner records Harry had wanted, as well as a wealth of fabric sourced from the prison warehouse that was filled with new uniforms – both inmate and guard – blankets, towels, sheets, etc. Most of it was cheap – but warm, including the flimsy shower shoes and slip-ons...but they could always be transfigured into something else or used for the animals bedding.

They took the entire library, knowing what was useless could always be burned for fuel or repurposed, and cleaned out the infirmary.

The sun was close to setting and they’d already had dinner when it was time to finish. There was just one place left to raid – the cafeteria with its handful of inmates. Remus and Harry debated leaving and coming back the next day, but really, the idea of having it done and over with was a powerful lure.

With that in mind, they sheathed their wands, took out their swords and a pair of handguns found in the armory, and unlocked the cafeteria doors.

Quickly they spread out, Harry nodding towards the doors that were locked with handcuffs. “Clear!” He called to Remus, the large area being free of the undead and the prisoners apparently held in what must be dry storage as the generators were still up and running with the cold lockers stocked.

“How do you want to do this pup?” Remus asked too quietly for the shadows they both spied in the dry storage to hear.

Harry set the files down on one of the tables near the locked doors, making eye contact with one of the men inside before hissing whispers erupted from the inside.

“Clear the area.” Harry said, just as quiet as his papa. “We pick it clean the same as the rest, then we’ll deal with them.”

“Okay.” Remus nodded, fine with that plan. “Your call...boss.”

Harry gave a mock growl at the reminder of his new place in the hierarchy of their group. His dads were still his dads. But when it came down to it...it was Harry’s call. Remus was just too humble and quiet after a lifetime of dealing with disdain and Sirius was still damaged from Azkaban. As a unit they were solid. But separately...one would waffle and the other be too impulsive. It just wasn’t a good mix as all three of them had decided when the news came out and the subject was broached.

And Harry wasn’t the scrawny teen or the tiny baby they once knew anymore. He was a man, a young, vital, strong man more than capable of leading. His name meant “leader” and a leader he
was. The alpha of their little pack, and Moony was happier for it.

Eyes watched them through the window as the pair cleaned out the cafeteria, judicious use of Notice-Me-Not spells keeping them from seeing just how much supply-wise they were sourcing. Sometime later found them bag-less with only their weapons standing outside the locked doors and Harry whispering to Remus. “What do you smell Papa?”

“Fear.” The wolf whispered back, eyes flashing. “A lot of it. And anger, hate.” He shook his head. “But mostly fear.”

“Alright.” Harry narrowed his eyes as he focused on the door. “Break the chain and then get back: fast. I’ll hold them at gun-and-sword point while you find them in the pile. If they lie about their names we can always match their pictures.”

“Done.” Remus nodded, darting forward and snapping the steel chain like tinfoil with his werewolf powered strength. The next moment found him with the files and aiming his shotgun at the door. It’d happened so fast the inmates inside hadn’t had a chance to respond.

“Come out, come out, whoever you are.” Harry called semi-mockingly when it seemed like the inmates wouldn’t move at all. Then a voice was heard, a little higher than either man expected but definitely male.

“They’s got guns on the door, Tomas.” The voice said. “We better listen.”

“Big Tiny’s right, man.” Another, lower voice said. “That’s a M-4 in the younger dude’s hands… it’ll go through these doors like paper.”

“Fine.” The voice that must be Tomas answered, the apparent leader of the handful of inmates before it called out louder. “We’re coming out, don’t shoot!”

And out they came.

One big blonde guy the size of Remus, another even bigger black guy who seemed meek even as he towered over the others, a man around the size of Sirius but bulkier who was mixed race – probably some sort of Latin descent and black -, another of the same racial mix but much younger than the rest and smaller with it, and the last who walked with a strut and a handgun who was Latino.

“Hmm.” Harry hummed taking in the straggler who was already puffed up. “You must be Tomas.” He arched a brow as he kept his gun leveled on the biggest threat, ignoring for now the other men. “Got a last name with that, Tomas?”

“Martinez.” The man growled, hand clenching around his gun, cold eyes focused on the M-4 pointed at his chest. It pissed him off something fierce that the pretty boy was ignoring Big Tiny and Axel in favor of focusing that weapon on him. And he was steady with it, none of the shakes he’d seen in the guards before they got locked in the dry storage. “What of it, puta?”

Remus stood up, a file in hand, drawing attention to the second man…who was even bigger than the pretty boy to the inmate’s eyes. And more…drawing their attention to the shotgun that could fuck up more than one of them at a time. He spoke in an upper-crust English accent, much crisper than the muddled crisp/drawl Harry had after six years in Georgia.

“Tomas Martinez, 31.” Remus stated, reading off the inmate’s rap sheet. “In and out of prison since he was sixteen for gang-related activity. The first of which was an assault and battery on a fourteen-year-old girl.”
The other inmates flinched at the ripe disgust in the man’s voice as Tomas’s face slowly filled with blood as his temper was sparked by the judgement being cast down on him.

“His sheet includes A&B, a rape indictment that was tossed out, and the last a life-sentence for a double homicide.” Remus said lowly to Harry. “And that’s only what they could prove. Additional time was added inside for an attack on both a guard and several fellow inmates. He’s trouble. Dangerous trouble.”

“We agreed then?” Harry asked idly as Tomas started to raise his gun shouting:

“No puta, the fuck we’re agreed!”

Remus nodded once, and Harry pulled the trigger, shooting Tomas in the head before the man could get off a shot of his own.

“Here’s how this is going to work.” Harry explained as he focused on the other inmates as they moved away from him – and his rifle – as he went to collect the pistol and the spare clip from Tomas’s cooling corpse. “You’re going to tell us your name. My papa Remus here is going to find your file. Then we’ll decide if you’re leaving this prison with us – or joining Tomas. We clear?”

“Crystal.” One of the unnamed men agreed after sharing a look with the others. “Oscar Gonzalez, 37.”

With quick hands – and a wordless search spell – Remus pulled out the file and read it out. “Oscar Gonzalez, 37. Second-time offender, in on a five-year stretch for breaking and entering. The first offense was the same.”

“Deadly weapon or force.”

“Neither.” Remus shook his head.

Harry arched a brow at the now-dubbed Oscar who shrugged, staring him down calm as could be.

“Never saw the point. If I got popped with a weapon it would add between ten and twenty to a sentence.” Even his voice was calm and unshakeable. “I got a family outside. They don’t need me gone any longer if I can help it. I’m a criminal…not a thug.”

Accepting that, Harry jerked his head over towards an empty table giving Oscar the wordless go-ahead to sit and take a load off before focusing on the youngest of the group.

“Andrew.” His voice was shaky, still staring down at the blood pooling around Tomas. “Carter, 19.”

“Andrew Carter, 19.” Remus’s voice turned grave as he read the rap sheet. “He’s a rapist, Harry.”

The gun barrel came up at the same time as Andrew’s hands, the younger man blurting out. “It was a beef. She was seventeen and her Daddy didn’t like me, I swear!”

“Remus?”

“The sentence was for a statutory.” Remus said grimly. “But there’s only one way to be sure.”

“Go sit at the table next to Oscar.” Harry decided. “We’ll come back to you, Andrew.”

Praying under his breath the youngest convict all but ran over to the table the other man pointed him to, ignoring the looks he was now getting from the other inmates. Tomas was supposed to be his
new protector now that the world went crazy. With him gone, Andrew was out of his mind trying to figure out what to do next. He only hoped they didn’t have a way to get the real story instead of the bullshit he just fed them.

The biggest of the men stepped forward next. “Jackson Michaels.” His voice was higher than one would expect from a man that size. “28. Robbed a convenience store…with a water pistol. Everyone calls me Big Tiny.”

Harry held in a laugh at that. It wasn’t funny that he’d got sent up for armed robbery with a water pistol but at the same time…it was in a horrible way. Remus again checked the story against the paperwork, this time it checking out no problem with the case notes, Harry sending Big Tiny off to sit with Oscar, leaving only the big blonde left.


“Checks out.” Remus said with a nod.

“Well then.” Harry said, still eyeing Andrew. There was something about him that hit Harry as wrong. A smug sort of cunning that reminded him of Lucius Malfoy. Veritaserum it was then. “Remus, I believe we’re in need of a little Truth around here.”

…

When the truth was out – both about Harry and Remus’s abilities and Andrew’s real past – and Oaths had been given not to reveal them in any way – all that was left of Andrew was a bleeding corpse on the floor.

He’d been in for statutory rape all right.

Of a thirteen-year-old girl who was the little sister of a rival gang boss.

And that wasn’t his first violent crime…not by a long shot.

Honestly, after hearing about his crimes in detail, not even the gentle Big Tiny would want Andrew around if given the option.

Then as they raided the food Harry and Remus gave the guys the run-down on what had happened to the world, Oscar and Big Tiny taking it the hardest of the three, the wizards having figured that Axel likely didn’t have any family from the little – very little – the quiet man said.

“So my wife, my kids, my mom?” Oscar asked for clarification.

“Either dead or found some sort of safe haven.” Harry confirmed with no-little amount of regret. Big Tiny crying a little at the memory of his two moms. “It’s estimated billions of people have died worldwide at this point based on the virology work up and how fast this thing spread.”

“You a doctor or something?” Oscar eyed the younger man warily. He’d certain shot quick and smooth for a doc.

“Was going to be.” Harry sighed. “I just finished my first year of med school and come home again from Atlanta when the worldwide outbreak hit.”

“Which since they bombed Atlanta.” Remus added, giving his pup a side-hug. “Was damned good luck.”
“Potter luck at work.” Harry joked back before sobering. “I’m sorry guys but your families, your friends.” He shook his head. “Most likely dead by now.”

“I still have to try.” Oscar said, resolutely.

“In that case.” Harry sighed, then dug out a duffle bag and a shrunk-down Humvee they’d found still in working order in the prison yard. “We’ll set you up: some food, water, supplies, a couple guns and knives.” He rattled off the others following like ducklings as they left the prison behind. “I’m going to light up the prison…it’s too close to home to leave it empty. If you find them – one way or the other – I’ll give you a map that’ll lead you to the first gate. You’ll have to wait there for someone to come and get you.” He warned. “But as long as they’re not dangerous to us or our people, you’ll be welcome Oscar.”

“Thanks man.” Oscar nodded, eyes wide as Harry resized the Humvee and handed over the supplies. “You’re good people. I’ll be back…one way or another. Big Tiny, Axel, you coming or going?”

“Going.” Big Tiny shook his head. “My moms were old, too old to escape this. They’re gone. But Harry and Remus…it sounds like a good place they’ve set up. A fresh start.”

“Same.” Axel nodded. “A second chance.”

“Well then.” Oscar climbed into the Humvee and turned the key, smiling as it started with a roar. “Adios.”

“Vaya con Dios.” Harry answered as Oscar nodded and roared away. Turning towards the two remaining inmates, he said: “Go with Remus and keep a lookout, I’m going to light up the prison. Once it’s done…we’ll go home.”

“Home.” Axel mused staring at the blood-stained courtyard. “Been a long time since I had one of those. Sounds real nice.”

“It does.” Big Tiny agreed with a smile, in spite of everything that had led them to this point, a home sounded just fine to him.

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Three: Meeting Merle

On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

Chapter Three: Meeting Merle

Author’s Note: I’m a little fuzzy on the timing since everything is pretty vague in the show but I know a lot of things happen in a couple week period. What I’m going with here is Rick waking up two months after being abandoned in the hospital by Shane (and how the fuck that works I don’t even know…) then once Merle gets left on the roof it’s at least three days before they get to the CDC. One to go back and run into the Vatos, another day back at camp, the night herd attack, and then another day where they figure things out and travel back towards Atlanta. It’s tight but…it’s what I’m going with.

I’m also making Jacqui older, in her 60’s, while Merle is in late 20’s and Daryl about 25ish.

Two Months Later

Harry was working on clearing a high-rise in Atlanta that showed no signs of life when hit with a 
*Homenum Revelio* when he heard the distinct crack crack crack of rifle fire…and it was close too.

Groaning under his breath at the utter stupidity of however was sniping undead from the next block over, Harry shook his head and kept clearing, burning corpses to nothing but ash and taking everything he could salvage. His family had grown with the addition of Big Tiny and Axel, the former of whom made a great hand on the farm and the latter knew engines forwards and backwards in addition to being decent at running the fence line. Big Tiny wasn’t much for taking on walkers, but between Harry and the others having one man who was a little squeamish wasn’t a big deal in the grand scope of things.

Oscar had yet to make it back but the tracker Harry had slapped him with was still running hot and alive so he knew the man was alive and steadily making his way closer to the estate. With the speed he was moving, Harry thought he must’ve ended up on foot, likely from having too large a group to make cars a workable solution. Whatever the cause, they were still several weeks out but would definitely make it to the estate before winter set in.

It had also been Harry who had discovered the Vatos and the nursing home they called home. During his second run in Atlanta a couple weeks back, he’d crashed – literally – into a running Jose with a walker on his tail. After taking care of the undead, Harry had helped the younger man to his feet and back to the Vatos base, meeting the main crew and the elderly and kids they were guarding in the process. Now whenever he or his dads were running a sweep through an Atlanta building, they always stopped by to drop off some supplies. They would move the whole group but many of the elders wouldn’t survive the trip.

The Vatos *had* agreed however to relocating the kids and a couple of the more able-bodied elders to Harry’s estate, which they’d done on his trip last week. Now he was due to drop by again later that day and give them an update…which he would do as soon as he figured out what-the-fuck was going on with the gunfire. Finally clearing the building, he popped back to the roof and took out his omniculars, searching for the cause of the now-quiet gunfire.

What he saw shocked him…and made him once more doubt whether mankind was even worth saving as a group of people had a man handcuffed to the roof of a nearby department store and
proceeded to leave him there. Harry watched and waited for the other to be far enough out before making the apparation jump into a spot hidden from the bound man’s immediate view, spotting the padlocked door almost at once. Moving over quietly he stood over the bound – and apparently delirious – man.

He was a big guy; Harry could see that easily. Probably as tall as Sirius but with Remus’s more massive bulk. Not as big as Big Tiny…but still massive. Freaking giants, he grumbled to himself as he crouched down to study him more closely, trying to figure out why he was handcuffed and basically left for walker bait.

With the delirium came the rambling, enough so that Harry pegged the guy for a rather uncouth – but highly entertaining – redneck who had been left behind by a cop no less.

He was also high as a fucking kite.

Harry groaned and shook his head, picking up all the scattered tools before Mr. High-and-Dirty could reach the saw he was going for. Strong survival instinct, Harry surmised. There might be something worth saving in this guy after all.

“You got a name Pretty Boy?” The redneck goaded him with a delirious laugh. “Or are you the meth and sun?”

“Harry, Dirty Man.” He responded not easily offended now that he’d spent the last six years under the care of his dads. “How ‘bout you?”

“Name’s Merle.” He grunted, squinting, trying to get a better picture of the pretty boy – no, he saw getting a clearer picture of the calm face and weapons – this was a man despite that pretty face. “Sgt. Merle Dixon, USMC.”

“Well, Sargent Merle Dixon, of the United States Marines.” Harry said cheerfully as he eyed the handcuffs. “As I said the name’s Harry or Hadrian Black if you’d rather. Any idea where the key to these are?”

“The darky dropped ‘em somewhere over there.” Merle jerked his head towards a grate. “Before hightailing it outta here and leaving me for walker bait.” He spat what little water he had off to the side for punctuation. “Damned fucking cowards.”

“Okay then.” Harry shook his head at the slur. If he’d read the man right, and he was pretty sure he had, then he was doing it for a reaction, testing him or looking to piss him off. Either way, he wasn’t going to jump at the bait when he’d heard a lot worse for a lot less growing up with Vernon Dursley. “I’ll see what I can do that doesn’t include sawing off your own hand.”

Merle eyed him a moment before letting his body fall slack. His instincts were shouting at him to trust the other man, even muted as they were under his fading high. “Suit yerself then, I’ll just hang here, won’t I.”

Harry snorted, ambling over to the grate and crouching making a minor ado of it to hide the summoning charm he cast. Keys in hand, he killed another couple minutes as Merle gave into the heat and passed out from a combination of the drugs and shock. “Finally.” Harry said under his breath. “Was starting to think I’d have to hit him with a stunner.”

Pocketing the keys to the cuffs and stowing the tool bag in his bottomless pack, an *Alohomora* had the cuffs open and Merle freed. Casting a glance at the roof-hatch that was banging from the walkers, he decided to come back and raid/clear the department store another time. Right now he
had to detox Sgt. Dixon and see if he’d make a good fit for the estate the way his read of him said he would.

No one tried that hard to live without having a reason.

No one.

And if he had a reason to live…then there was a good chance he was just the sort of person Harry was trying to help survive this whole hell-on-earth.

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Harry dropped Merle off real quick at the base he used when running for supplies in the city, it was also where the Vatos knew to drop notes to him if they needed something badly. They knew it was just a crash pad, but they still kept it and the building it was in as clear as they could, helping him out the only way they knew in return for the good hand he’d extended. There wasn’t a note so he popped quick over to the Vatos’s building, calling out to them and letting them know the supplies were there before taking off just as quick. They wondered at it but didn’t pay it any mind, figuring Harry had a deadline this run.

Apparating back to the locked-down apartment, Harry checked on Merle again, noting that the sleeping charm he’d hit him with before popping away from the department store was holding strong, giving him time to clean him up and run some diagnostics.

What he found under the grit and grime wasn’t too promising but he still thought that Merle might be worth saving.

Some minor malnutrition, part of it going back to childhood, dehydration, and the toxins from the drugs he’d ingested were all par for the course, no real surprises aside from the minor childhood malnutrition.

But it was the history that made Harry feel for the man, knowing his own had been very much similar before Siri and Remy got their hands on him.

Broken bones, fractures, lacerations from a lash, all major markers of abuse – and with the scars to show it.

Then there were the knife and gunshot wounds, likely stemming from his time in the service, and the markers of Merle being a brawler.

All in all, Harry sighed, set down the diagnostics, and opened up his potions kit. There wasn’t much he could do for the old wounds, but the poison he’d pumped into his own system…that Harry could take care of. One Detoxification Draught spelled into Merle’s stomach along with an IV drip Harry had set up and they were good to go while Merle slept it off.

Casting an alert ward around both Merle and the door, Harry sent off his Patronus to update his dads before hunkering down himself for some sleep. Something told him that as soon as Merle was up and on his feet, a good deep rest would be hard to find.

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Merle came awake with a gasp and his eyes flying wide, searching his perimeter for hostiles – and his brother.

Which pretty much explained the way Merle saw the world.
Either you were kin…or you ain’t.

There wasn’t a whole lot of in-between for him and he’d taught Daryl just the same.

Figuring he was safe – if alone and in a strange place – Merle took stock next of himself, spotting the IV with an arched brow.

“I’ll be damned.” He muttered to himself. “The Pretty Boy wasn’t a hallucination.”

“Not quite.” A smooth voice agreed. Merle liked the sound of it, mostly a southern drawl with a hit of something…rich under it. “Though I’m not surprised you thought so.”

The voice came closer, revealing the figure Merle had dubbed Pretty Boy in his mind. And damned if he hadn’t been right about that. A cool six feet tall, what his mama would’ve called a tall drink of water, with strong arms, a flat stomach, long legs, and broad shoulders. You could cut glass on his cheekbones and his bright green eyes were damn-near the prettiest Merle could ever remember seeing in his life.

“Well.” Merle rasped out. “Yer certainly Pretty enough.”

Harry threw back his head and laughed, his ebony hair flying as he’d not yet bound it back.

“Ya see.” Merle continued, a smirk on his stubble-clad and rough but still handsome face. “Even yer laugh is pretty, Pretty.”

And his thought from just before he passed out was right, Merle decided. Pretty was pretty. But he wasn’t a boy…not with that build and that look in his eyes. Merle knew that look. Hell, he owned that look most of the time. Pretty was deciding if Merle was a threat…and if not if he was of any real use to Pretty.

Normally a look like that had his hackles rising but in this case…for some reason it made him wanna square his shoulders and stand at attention more than any barking from his C.O. had ever managed.

“You’re detoxed.” Harry said bluntly. “I’m not sure what you were living for so hard on that rooftop if you’re using – besides your next high – but I tossed your stash while I was at it.”

Merle growled a little at that jab.

“Here’s the deal Sargent Merle Dixon.” Harry moved over and gently removed the IV as he spoke, taping it up and helping Merle sit up. “It’s been two days since you passed out. You’re able bodied – mostly – and that junk is out of your system. Now it’s up to you.” He eyed him quietly. “You really wanna get taken down by a walking corpse because you’re high as shit and slow with it…or do you really have something worth fighting for?”

A long silence set in as Merle wrapped his head around that and Harry brought him over some hot chicken-and-stars soup from a can he’d whipped up. It wasn’t home cooking but it was the best he could do without causing more questions than he felt ready to answer at this point. As it was he had to keep Merle knocked out an extra day to let the shakes pass, lest the man wake up in the middle of withdrawal…and that wouldn’t do anybody any good.

“Gotta brother. Daryl.” Merle admitted once he finished the soup. “With a group of idiots ‘bout as useful as tits on a bull…but we figured a bigger group would be safer…with the walkers an’ all. He’s kin.” He finished simply.

“Alright.” Harry nodded, now that actually made sense. “Then we’ll go find your brother…and
from there we’ll see what we see.”

Merle eyed him shrewdly. “You got somethin’ yerself.” He knew a man with an anchor, a support holding him up. It was the same for Merle. Both’a them were dangerous men. The only thing keepin’ em from being straight-up deadly were their anchors. For him it was Daryl. For Pretty… only time would tell. “Somethin’ worth dyin’ for. Or worse,” he laughed bitterly. “Worth livin’ for.”

“That I do.” Harry nodded, helping Merle to his feet. “As for you, a trip to the bathroom, some more food and water in you and then we’ll set out.”

“I-85.” Merle told him as he found his footing and followed Pretty’s directions towards the head. “They were camped out in a quarry down I-85.”

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“Shit Pretty.” Merle grunted as they left Atlanta behind and started up I-85. “You’re light as a cat on your feet, boots and all. Useful for huntin’ and killin’ walkers. Gunna give ol’ Daryl a run for his money on the quiet-creeper meter when we meet up.”

“Use to come in handy when I was a kid.” Harry said drily. And wasn’t that an understatement. “Guess I never lost the habit. You’re handy to have around yourself with that sword.”

Merle snorted. “Better with a rifle but these days gunshots are like a dinner bell.” He frowned. “On that subject…how come you always light up the geeks like?”

They continued to walk and talk quietly while making good time up the interstate, each keeping an eye out for random walkers or other survivors…both knowing that the latter was likely more dangerous than the former.

“I was a med student before all this.” Harry admitted, eyes on their surroundings and missing the satisfaction that flashed on Merle’s face for pegging him right. That IV and dressing was too good. He knew Pretty had had training somewhere. “Took an elective course in virology and pandemic theory my last semester taught by a doc on loan from the CDC. One thing she was firm about was if you didn’t know what the fuck it was the first rule of containment protocol was burn the bodies to prevent contaminating the ground water and food sources.”

“Like crops and grazing animals.” Merle commented in understanding. “Or fish in poisoned waters.”

“Exactly.” Harry gave him a bright smile, pleased Merle got it. Not everyone did, mores about burial too ingrained for them to see the sense in cremation.

They were quiet for a time after that, only stopping to give a quick check to a couple cars they passed, Harry finding and tucking away a couple things he knew were good for salvage that others had overlooked.

Before they could start another topic of conversation, they heard the distinct roar of engines moving in a convoy, trading a look and darting to hide behind a couple of cars by the roadside. They didn’t want to go too far off incase this was Daryl or that group but they didn’t want to be out in the open either. Harry passed Merle some binoc’s the former Marine quickly using them to check out the on-coming cars, a shit-eating grin crossing his face as he spotted a familiar truck.

“It’s them.” Merle reported handing the binoculars back to the Pretty and climbing on top of the car, waving them down. “And Daryl’s with ‘em.”
“Good thing.” Harry joked. “I wasn’t looking forward to a twenty-mile hike and no guarantee of Daryl at the end. I gave it fifty-fifty that he’d taken off for good to scout for you.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Merle grumbled back, rolling his eyes. “I know.”

Before Harry could continue with his teasing the convoy rolled to a stop, many of them in shock at the figure bounding down from the car and swooping his equally-ecstatic brother up in a back-pounding hug, overlooking the smaller man Merle had been travelling with…for the moment.

One who didn’t overlook Harry was the new defacto leader Rick and his fuming “brother” Shane, both of whom eyed the heavily armed and seemingly at-ease form warily.

“I don’t like this, brother.” Shane hissed under his breath to his best friend. “Merle was a menace and who knows what kinda trouble he hooked up with after getting off that roof? Could be dangerous, just look at him.”

And take a look Rick did, spotting the heavy sword on the man’s back, the leather clothes, filled pack, and at least a pair of knives in his boots and two pistols in holsters at his hips. Whoever this was…he was a survivor the kind they hadn’t run into yet. One who made Shane looked light-weight and the Dixons normal.

He was dangerous, Shane was right about that, Rick agreed. But to who was the question. And was he the kind of dangerous that would help protect Rick’s family like Daryl did?

Only time would tell Rick supposed.

But in the meantime they had a building to reach.

Which Daryl was in the process of telling his brother and his brother’s companion about if Rick’s ears were right.

“The CDC, that’s Officer Friendly’s play.” Daryl said with a shrug after Merle asked him what-the-fuck they were doing on I-85. “Says if anywhere has an answer or safety it’d be there. I was going along so I could start scouting Atlanta for your mangy ass.”

“Hey now.” Harry shot with a grin. “I was thorough. He’s a little rough and rank – especially in this Georgia heat – but I didn’t find mange. Just distemper.” He gave the younger Dixon a grin as the two brothers guffawed.

Merle finally introduced him to his little brother. “Daryl Dixon, meet Hadrian “Harry” Black. Harry this is my little brother Daryl.”

“Nice to meetcha.” Daryl nodded. “And thanks for saving his rank hide. He’s kin.”

“Not a problem.” Harry nodded back. “He slept for the most part so it’s only been today that he’s been bedeviling me with his sense of humor and bad b.o.”

Daryl snorted out another laugh as he and Merle made short work of hauling down his motorcycle before Harry jumped up into the cab to join Daryl in his truck.

“Hey now.” Merle warned with a light glare. “There’ll be none-a that ganging up on ol’ Merle business, ya hear?”

Harry just rolled his eyes and gave a snort as the watching – and eavesdropping – convoy set back out, the others glad that Daryl – their main source of game – was happy again, or what passed for
happy with his surly self. They weren’t quite as glad over having Merle back, especially in the wake of the losses they’d sustained the previous night and having the Morales family take off. And adding Harry – and unknown and possibly dangerous – joining up didn’t endear any of them to Merle any further.

All they knew about him was that he apparently magically got along with the Dixon brothers – and that was more a cause for alarm than it was rejoicing.

They were almost to the CDC compound with twilight nipping at their heels when Daryl spoke up, watching the guy who saved his brother – Harry Black – out of the corner of his eye.

“Thank you for that.” Daryl said gruffly. “Merle’s all I got.”

“Wasn’t right.” Harry answered softly, deep emerald gaze scanning around the perimeter of the truck, his advanced sight from his Animagus form easily picking out the Walkers shambling slowly towards the noise from the darkened alleys. “Leaving a man cuffed to a pipe – no food, water, or shelter and walkers banging on the door.” Harry shook his head. “By the time y’all came back for him, Merle would’ve either been long gone or dead. He was already reaching for a saw when I got there and I’d only waited for the other to clear out. I don’t need thanks for being decent…though I ‘preciate it anyways.”

Daryl let that rattle around his head a bit as they pulled up to the building, worry and caution running high in him as they studied the piles of bodies – military, civilian, and CDC staff from the lab coats – strewn around.

“Jesus Christ.” Daryl cursed and spat as he shouldered his crossbow, Merle coming to stand at his right and Harry at his left with swords bared and ready at the sight, their keen hearing already picking up the shambling steps of the undead. “He led us righ’ inta a graveyard.”

Rick and Shane ran to the heavy metal shutters as the Dixon Brothers and Harry guarded the groups’ flank, picking off the walkers as they appeared in ever-increasing numbers drawn by the raucous of the two cops banging on the metal covering the CDC entrance.

“Nobody’s here man.” T-Dog told Rick, voice low but still his words carried to everyone in earshot.

Harry glanced over at the doors and shook his head. “There’s somebody here.” He corrected the man, Merle had given him a brief rundown of who was in the group before they met up. “Or else those shutters wouldn’t be on lock-down…it’s just a matter of who and if they’re going to leave us out here to die or not.”

“He made a call.” Shane said as the Dixons worked to take out more of the incoming walkers and they were being slowly but surely pinned as a group against the building. “No blame.”

“We can’t be in the city after dark!” One of the women cried. Harry was pretty sure it was Lori based on what he’d been told about the group dynamic.

“It’s a dead end, brother, let’s go!” Shane yelled urging Rick to give up.

Harry’d about had enough.

“Move.” He ordered the others, shoving Rick away from the camera he swore moved. Standing steady and stock-still he spoke clearly and concisely with none of the panic that Rick had been exhibiting. “My name is Hadrian James Black. I was a medical student at U of G Atlanta before the
Outbreak.” His green eyes pinned whoever was on the other side of the screen. “Dr. Maria Livingston-Jenner, if you’re in there, please open the shutters. We have children with us and no way to reach safety. Please let us in.” He took a breath, shoving a frantic Shane back with a stiff-arm when he tried to horn in. “Even if just for the night, Doctor.”

Metal grinding on metal focused everybody’s attention as once Harry finished speaking the shutters slowly began to open.

Shane and Rick took point, wary in the extreme at this point considering it took a stranger to them who apparently knew one of the doctors and promised to only stay the night if needed to get the shutters released and their group sanctuary – even if it was temporary. Harry waited for the others, guarding the flank with the Dixons before he ducked in, following the others. The group came to a stop before a man in pajamas and a scruffy beard but strapped up with firearms to high heaven.

“Any infected?” The gruff man demanded to know, his face under the scruff making Harry narrow his eyes.

“No.” Rick said. “Just looking for a chance.”

“Wasn’t asking you.” Pajama man shot back turning his head to look at Harry in the rear of the group, still watching the doors for walkers. “Was asking him.”

Harry turned and answered, having finally placed where he’d seen that face before – on the desk of his virology and pandemic theory professor.

“No, Dr. Jenner.” He answered succinctly. “They’re all clear.”

“Just want a chance.” Rick said again, his desperation rising as he was sidelined for the first time since waking – and in preference for a much younger man who they barely knew beyond Merle Dixon.

“That’s asking a lot these days.” Jenner replied, lowering his gun with a sigh.

Merle snorted, keeping in his cynical commentary to himself. The cops were too high-strung to appreciate it, and his brother and Harry were busy keeping eyes on their flank to bother responding.

“Everybody takes a blood test.” Jenner declared after casting a considering glance at Harry’s back and a sad one at the children. “That’s the price of admission.”

“Done.” Rick agreed, hastily.

“If you have anything you want to bring inside, you better get it in now.” Jenner warned them. “Once those doors shut they stay closed.”

Everyone rushed out for packs and supplies, Harry already having his on his back watched and stood guard while the others gathered their things. Something about the finality in Jenner’s voice tickled Harry’s survival instincts. Green eyes locked on two pairs of stormy blue, then the three of them traded nods. The Dixon Brothers felt it too.

Something wasn’t right here. And it was more than the change the world had undergone since the Outbreak. For one thing…

“You always carry like that, doc?” Daryl asked with a sarcastic brow.

Oh, yeah. The Dixons were suspicious as hell of what was going on.
“They were around.” Jenner said with a sardonic smirk. “I familiarized myself. Doctor Edwin Jenner,” he introduced himself finally. “Though one of you at least already knew that.”

“Harry Black.” Harry nodded, reaching out to shake the offered hand. “Your wife was my virology and pandemic theory professor at UG Atlanta. I recognized you from one of the pictures on her desk…only in it you had a lot less beard.”

Jenner barked out a laugh. “I bet I did at that.” He nodded, leading them into an open debriefing room where he set about gathering vials and getting introductions as he drew the required blood. “Maria hated my beard when we met, refused to have anything to do with me after the first date unless I shaved it off.”

The kids Sophia and Carl kicked up a bit of a fuss over having their blood drawn but they went along with it anyway. Merle gave Harry a look, which Harry answered with a tiny shake of his head. Dr. Jenner wouldn’t find anything on his tox screen. He was sure of that. If wasn’t until the sole black woman of the group, an older woman named Jacqui according to their introductions and Merle’s info, wobbled on her feet after her blood draw that Jenner stopped chatting idly with Harry and took real notice of the group.

“Is she okay?” He asked his doctor’s concern raising its head.

“She’ll be fine.” T-Dog assured him after ushering her over to a chair. “Just hasn’t eaten much in a couple days.”

“Well.” Jenner stood and collected the blood samples – all save one – and started walking from the room. “Guess I’ll give you the dime tour.”

“Doc.” Shane barked a question though it was a tad quieter than his normal abrasive behavior. “What about Black?”

“Harry knew my wife and she knew him.” Jenner said simply. “And was a med student in her cohort, which makes him either a genius or close to it. If any of you were infected he’d know it. Especially himself.” He shrugged, ignoring the incredulous looks he was getting form the others. Though in the case of Harry and the Dixons the looks were plain amusement. “This is just…insurance.”

After setting the samples in a lab, Jenner ushered them around the “Zone 5” and introduced them to Vi his computer AI. At the words: hot water, many of the group set their things down in the designated rooms and grabbed fresh clothes, rushing off to shower. Harry did the same only slower, first making a pit stop in the kitchen to throw together some rafts of lasagna and casserole, cheating with a spell so that the pasta cooked enough, before throwing them in the oven. He knew full-well that as soon as everyone was clean they were going to go hunting through the kitchen stores. The others could worry about throwing together some sides, with the rafts in the oven at least he knew the mains would be edible.

As he walked past Dr. Jenner in his lab, Harry’s eyes focused on the red numbers on the countdown clock.

“We cut it fine.” He said quietly, Jenner raising his head to look up at the student his wife had told him about. Young, she’d said. But promising.

“Yes.” Jenner admitted, turning to look at the clock as well. “You did.”

Harry nodded. “And the shutters?”
Jenner grimaced. “They take too much power to open. If you want to leave…” He sighed, he would be fine with making the choice for the others, from what he could tell they were mostly just a rag-tag group. But Harry Black…a promising medical student interested in virology…who knew and respected Maria…that was a harder thing. Strangers lives aren’t worth much in the present day. Jenner knew and admitted that. But this young man? Jenner found himself feeling that for once there might be a shred of…hope…as Rick put it a chance, after all. “It’ll have to be before the clock hits two hours left. Otherwise…”

“Got it.” Harry gave him an understanding smile. One without a lick of judgement. “You going to stay?”

“I tried, Mr. Black.” Jenner sighed. “The French…they were close. And Maria…”

“Infected?”

Jenner nodded, grief all over his face.

“One thing I do know about this thing.” Jenner scrubbed his hands over his face before making sure they were alone. “It’s airborne. More than that…”

“We’re all infected.” Harry supplied. “I figured. Some of the undead I’ve seen died without a scratch or a bite.”

“I’ll show you guys what I know further in the morning.” Jenner said, head lifting to stare at Harry. “But…”

“We’ll keep this to ourselves.” Harry agreed, looking back up at the countdown clock. “They need a rest if they’re going to keep on. A momentary break from the fighting and the scrabbling. Let’s let them have it.”

“Better go get a shower, Mr. Black.” Jenner suggested with a half-smile. “By the smell of the food you made up it won’t be long before the horde descends.”

…

Over dinner and bottles of wine, the group laughed and refreshed.

Some of the men were trying to convince Lori and Carol to allow the kids to join in, Dale mentioning the French before Lori finally gave in, only for everyone to laugh at the disgusted face Carl made after a single taste of the acidic grape beverage.

Daryl’s face was rosy with the drink and Glenn was well on his way to sloshed when the younger Dixon noticed that both his brother and the new guy were sticking to water or juice.

“Merle?” Daryl laughed pushing a bottle over towards his brother who sat beside him. “Have a drink, brother.”

Merle opened his mouth to say something that was likely to offend…everyone, when Harry spoke up instead.

“He just spent two days recovering from malnutrition, sunstroke, and dehydration.” His voice was calm but steely. “Alcohol is a poison and it dehydrates you. Merle’s not drinking.” His crooked grin softened the order. “Doctor’s orders.”

“Fuck it.” Shane growled, snatching up the bottle before Daryl could take it back. “More for me.”
“Harry?” Dale laughed, trying to lessen the now-rising tension. “What about you? Teetotaler?”

“No.” Harry laughed along good-naturedly, pushing a bit away from the table as he’d finished and beginning to comb out his hair and braid it up much to the fascination of the others who’d never seen a man do such a thing in their lives. “But I only drink when I’m sure I’m safe and not going to have to be running in the next couple days.” His smile lessened the blow a bit that came with his next words. “And no offense but other than Merle…I don’t really know any of you from Adam.”

“Fair enough.” Rick allowed, taking another pull from his bottle and closing the subject. “Fair enough.”

Shane, never one to let a subject go gracefully, turned to Jenner and brought the mood down further: “So when were you going to tell us what happened here, doc?”

“No.” Shane ignored him. “I wanna know before I lay my head down.”

“Shane.” Rick hissed, “let it be, brother.”

“No.” Shane ignored him. “I wanna know before I lay my head down.”

“When things got bad.” Jenner began, staring into the ruby liquid in his glass. “People…left. Walked out. Left their work, the search, everything. Mostly those who had families they wanted to be with on the outside. The rest of us…” He sighed, taking another drink before setting the glass down and pushing it away. “When it got worse, some bolted.”


“No.” Jenner stared down the aggressive cop. “A lot of them…opted out. A rash of suicides and .45’s to the skull. It was a bad time…” His voice was faint as his eyes hazed in remembrance. “A bad time.”


“I kept working.” His voice and eyes sharped. “I had to keep working.” He stood, walking away but still his last words carried back to the group. “I promised her…”

“Man.” A more than half-tipsy Glenn glared at Shane in disgust, rising unsteadily to his feet. “You are such a buzz-kill.”

…”

“Dr. Jenner.” Harry walked up quietly behind the man he found once more hunched over a microscope.

Everyone else was either passed out, in bed, or a couple were still sitting in the dining room. All but Harry and Dr. Jenner. Not that that was much of a surprise.

He’d noticed Daryl and Merle stalking around after dinner – more Merle than Daryl with the younger brother being half-drunk. Harry would lay money they were already planning on having to leave despite whatever fairy tale Rick had told himself. What the Dixons were doing looked a lot like Harry’s own plans: clearing the CDC before it went up in smoke.

“Yeah, Mr. Black.” Jenner rubbed his tired eyes. There were no surprises in the blood work despite his half-hopeless wishes.

“I’m going to clear the building.” He spoke firmly, ignoring the surprise on the doctor’s face. “With as long as I think this thing will last, I never let a supply opportunity pass me by. You mind?”
Jenner shook his head and sighed. “Take whatever you think you can use and carry.” He agreed easily. “If you think they’ll agree to leave with you then stack what you can’t by the shutter doors and I’ll leave them open…it’s not like it’ll matter any longer at that point.”

“Thank you, Dr. Jenner.” Harry nodded genially and turned to go, knowing he had a long night and likely a longer day ahead of him on only a cat-nap in Daryl’s truck and a couple hours the night before as he watched over Merle.

“Mr. Black?” Jenner called after him, making him pause, head cocked to the side as the younger man listened. “There’s a library on virology and contagious diseases in Zone 9. I would… appreciate it if you took it with you somehow.”

Harry nodded once, hearing what Jenner didn’t say.

The doctor may have given up on himself but he hadn’t yet given up on humanity. It was just too damn bad Harry didn’t have the time to convince the doctor that a cure or just survival was worth living for. Harry shook his head. Everything that made that man tick died alongside his wife.

And it was a damned shame.

…

Harry did exactly as he’d said and in the same fashion he’d been practicing for months. He started at the top floor of the building – where he’d found the executive offices and an array of interesting items like an antique text from the last century that described the first successful creation of a vaccine – and worked his way down. Thankfully since this was the CDC and they’d been trying to cure the virus, there were no walkers to clear…or bodies to burn.

It was from a CDC doctor that Harry had learned pandemic control after all, and the incinerators this building contained were hot enough to destroy any living thing down to the final cell.

Clearing the building was easier for it…but also harder as Harry had to leave entire sections untouched for fear of running into something deadly or even weaponized like smallpox or Ebola. Again, the executive offices came in handy here as one of the first things he’d done was search out a diagnostic of the building and where the vaults containing the disease samples were located before staying the fuck away from those sectors. He added a ton of medical supplies and equipment, more than enough to set up a dozen labs in his basement, hell he could have his own CDC with what all was shrunk down and stuffed in his bag.

And Jenner had been right about the weapons too.

The military and high brass had had similar thoughts to Rick: sending everything they had to protect the hope of a cure.

Rifles, pistols, RPG’s, riot gear, ammunition, grenades both flash-bang and explosive, the haul was truly impressive and better than the one he’d scored with Remus at the prison by far.

By the time he made it back to Zone 5, he could clearly see where the Dixons had helped themselves to some armament, and good on them. He left that Zone for last and continued moving downwards. Food, dry goods, medical supplies, by the time he hit the basement and the nearly-empty fuel drums, even his bottomless bag was starting to fill up. Harry estimated that this one run alone would stock the estate for years in everything except food and fuel.

Dawn was starting to peak over the horizon as he climbed the several stories up to Zone 5 and tucked away all the supplies he could find there except for the open toiletries in the showers and
enough food for a breakfast feast. They still had several hours before the deadline Jenner gave him, and with that one his mind he set an alarm for an hour cat-nap, kicked back in a chair, and nodded off. It had been a fucker of a long night…but it was worth it in the end.

Harry blinked open tired green eyes as the alarm on his wand buzzed against his arm in his hidden holster.

Groaning he climbed to his feet and stretched, feeling moderately recharged from the nap. Digging in his pack he looked around cautiously before taking out two vials of Pepper-Up. Slugging one back, he let the rush of energy tingle up his spine as he shook out his arms and walked over to the kitchen and the supplies he’d left for breakfast.

Setting down the Pepper-Up, he started pots of coffee and tea with quick, smooth movements, taking out several rashers of bacon and sausage, along with powered eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, potatoes, everything he would need for a Full-English except toast. He gave making fresh bread a ponder but decided against it, knowing it would take time he didn’t want to waste. Pouring orange juice into several glass pitchers, he split the vial of Pepper-Up, knowing that the strong citrus juice would hide the slightly peppery taste of the concoction.

By the time the first person stumbled in, drawn by the smell of frying meats and coffee, Harry had made up platters of meats, scrambled eggs, fried tomatoes and mushrooms and home fries, while for those who were a little less into the Full-English he had cheesy omelets with tomato and onion, all under warming charms.

As Harry’d expected, the first to arrive was Merle with a grumbling and cussing Daryl stumbling after him and cursing his hide.

Harry chuckled at the sight and handed over a cup of black coffee that was hiding a small dose of pepper-up. So far from what he’d seen, only the Dixons were worth saving. The rest *might* have some redeeming qualities, they all *appeared* nice enough…well except for Shane. But Harry would admit he needed to give it some more time, and that’s exactly what he’d told his dads when he mirror-called them before he started clearing the CDC.

Leaving a man handcuffed to a roof…not exactly a shining example of the human race.

He eyed the group as they walked and/or stumbled in, canceling the warming charms with ease, and started to plate up some breakfast. He’d give it a week or two, he decided. Enough time – without resorting to magical means – to make a decision about these survivors one way or another.

Part of him – the annoying hero-saving-people-thing part – complained over the loss of life that might result. It badgered him about playing judge and jury – the same as it had screamed at him over killing two of the prisoners. But Harry just found his inner Slytherin and beat up the hero and duct-taped it in a corner of his mind.

He made these decisions so his family would be safe – and so they wouldn’t have to.

His conscience could bear the burden of lost lives. Sirius and Remus – wonderful Gryffindors they are – were just too damned noble to weigh the cost of their family versus innocent lives. It was where Harry had no issues beyond a pesky conscience every now and again. The results of childhood abuse and being trained to make the hard decisions by a manipulating old goat.

To make it through this, people needed a strong survival instinct and more than a little cunning.
Fortunately, those were both traits Harry had in spades.

... 

Conversation was light as the group tucked into Harry’s breakfast, the man in question quietly sitting down between Jenner at the head of the table and Daryl, with Merle between his brother and Rick.

Jenner spoke quietly to Harry, his words only catching the attention of the Dixons as the next closest person – Rick – was too busy talking to his family and Shane across the table to pay attention to a couple rednecks and doctors.

“I’ll open the shutters after the debriefing Mr. Grimes was after.” Jenner said voice pitched low. “And leave them up. The sound will draw in the infected, based on what I’ve seen you’ll have a matter of minutes to load up and head out, Harry.”

“Okay.” Harry nodded, eyes focused on his meal. “And this debriefing?”

“Starts in ten.” Jenner traced eyes over the rapidly emptying plates. “Everyone should be awake enough then.”

Harry just nodded again, the Dixons catching his attention.

“Load up?” Merle questioned, trying to avoid intriguing either lawman near him.

Daryl just sat quiet and let Merle take point as he worked on tucking away the second down-home meal he’d had in months besides the squirrel/rabbit stew they were mostly living on in addition to random non-perishables they sourced. He didn’t know what the hell Harry had put in that coffee but it had worked wonders on his hangover so he wasn’t about to say shit. The others might be willing to write off their miraculous recovery to coffee and hot food by Daryl knew better than that.

He noticed everything.

It was what kept him mostly in one piece when Merle was gone with the Marines and he’d been left with a Da too fond of ‘shine and ready with his belt.

“This is the CDC, Merle.” Harry reminded him, voice pitched to match Merle’s. Not quiet enough to draw attention but not loud enough to be easily overheard either. “You were a Marine, Merle, you know about cleansing protocols at secured facilities.”

Merle bit out a curse under his breath before explaining to the sorta-lost Daryl.

“Secured facilities like the CDC go boom when they run out of power to keep tangos from getting their grubby paws on things like anthrax and Ebola.” Merle said around his coffee cup, hiding his mouth from the rest of the group. “This place doesn’t have solar panels which means its running on a generator.”

“And when it runs out of fuel.” Daryl cursed himself, turning fully to face Harry and Jenner. “How much time?”

“Hours.” Jenner said, scratching at his beard. “A matter of hours. Long enough to give the sheriff the answers he’s after and get clear. Then it goes up: the air itself will be lit on fire and not even a single-celled organism in the vaults will survive it.”

Right on time, Rick finally keyed into the serious discussion going on next to him. “About those answers, doc?”
Jenner nodded, standing. “Everyone meet back in the classroom in five. And I’ll give you what answers I have.”

Merle leaned over and told his brother to pack up before heading off to do the same. He’d known things weren’t right here. That Harry had known too just reinforced a decision Merle had already made: the Dixons were sticking with Black.

No matter what.

The Pretty had already saved his ass once and was doing it again by getting answers out of the weasely little doc.

That was the sorta person they needed around to survive the walkers.

And if Officer Friendly didn’t like it he could suck Merle’s dick.

…

“Vi?” Jenner spoke to the computer as they all gathered, the rest of the group casting side-eyes at the packs on the backs of the Dixons and the new guy Harry. “Begin playback of TS-19.”

As the computer echoed his order back, the blank screen in front of them all lit up, showing a human brain.

“Is that a brain?” Carl asked, eyes wide and kinda excited. It was cool. And kinda gross all at the same time.

“An extraordinary one.” Jenner said, his sad eyes meeting Harry’s knowing ones. It was Maria, his wife.

Another order from Jenner had the computer going into Enhanced Internal View, the screen showing the inner workings and electrical activity of the human control center.

“What are the lights?” Sophia asked, clutching onto her doll for all she was worth.

Jenner bounced the question back to the med student with a challenging arched brow.

“A person’s life.” Harry answered the challenge, voice quiet and respectful as he knew who it was he was about to watch become infected and die. “Thoughts, experiences, memories, instincts, even addictions if they have any. Everything that makes you you and someone else, someone else.”

He continued after a moment when Jenner didn’t.

“It’s what makes us human, those little lights. Electrical signals that travel from the brain to your spinal column and every cell thereafter. That decide everything about you from the moment you’re conceived and your brain forms until you die.” He sighed, shaking his head. “One thing we’d figured out from the rumors at school was that whatever this virus is: it affects the brain.”

After Harry stopped speaking, Rick picked up on something from his words.

“Death?” He asked. “This a vigil?”

“A playback of one.” Jenner replied honestly, though Harry caught the sheen in his eyes.

“This person died?” Andrea asked with a gasp. “Who?”
“TS-19.” Jenner told them, watching the screen and ignoring their expectant looks.

“Dr. Maria Livingston-Jenner.” Harry supplied, then Jenner continued as if he’d never spoken.

“Who was bitten.” Jenner bit his lip. “Infected and volunteered to have us record the process. VI, scan to the second event.”

The Dixons swung their gazes between the two men who knew the brain – the woman – on the screen, not one of the group knowing what to make of watching a vigil with her husband and one of her students standing there like statues.

“The resurrection times can vary.” Jenner continued his voice taking on a monotone as he focused all his attention on the screen, knowing this would be the last time he ever sat this vigil. “The shortest time recorded was three minutes, the longest we heard of was eight hours, and in the case of this patient it was two hours, one minute, and seven seconds.”

They watched as the screen showed what happened when the walkers reanimated, the lack of signals except for some dull red in the brain stem.

“It restarts the brain?” Lori cried out in shock.

“No.” Harry corrected her immediately as he watched every minute change with narrowed eyes. “Just the brainstem.”

“It’s just enough to get them up and moving.” Jenner added.

“So they’re not alive?” Rick asked, sounding so hopeful the Dixons rolled their eyes with a sneer.

Officer Friendly, too much of a do-gooder to accepted that he’d been killing people from the moment he woke up. What was the point of consoling yourself that the walkers weren’t alive per se when the world was burning around them and the living were more dangerous than the dead? Case in point: Officer Friendly cuffing Merle to a rooftop and leaving him to die.

“You tell me.” Jenner said, seeming unbearably tired all of a sudden.

“They’re dead.” Harry shut down the coming debate resolutely, his tone and words leaving no room for compromise. “And now we know why we need to aim for the head and burn the bodies.”

“Burn the bodies?” Lori gasped. “What about our own?”

“We burn the bodies.” Harry bit out.

“Standard contamination protocol.” Jenner jumped in to defend his wife’s protégé. “We don’t know what this is, only what it does. In such cases until the contagion is isolated and a cure or vaccine synthesized all contaminants are incinerated to ash.”

Jenner turned and looked at Harry telling him: “It’s time to go. I’ll open the shutters; you know as much as anyone now.”

“Thank you, Dr. Jenner.” Harry nodded, clasping the man’s hand. “And I’m deeply sorry for your loss.”

“Aren’t we all?” Jenner sighed, moving over to the workstation and keying in a series of codes then swiping his key card and giving Harry a nod.

“Time to go?” Carol asked, clutching Sophia to her. “What do you mean time to go?”
“Doc?” Shane growled. “Something you two,” his eyes dragged over the prepared Dixons. “Sorry four, want to share with the class?”

“This is the CDC.” Jenner said simply as Harry and the Dixons told everyone to pack up, most of them scattering to obey except the two cops and Lori.

“And?” Rick barked out as he held Carl close to his side.

“When the lights go off.” Merle drawled with a sneer. “This place goes boom.”

Harry pointed to the red countdown clock that showed a mere thirty minutes left after the power it took to raise all the shutters, lights beginning to flick off leaving only the low-powered emergency lights and flashers.

“It’s been over two months.” Harry explained. “This place will go up in less than half an hour to prevent anyone accessing the dangerous samples locked in the vaults. It’s standard protocol for secured facilities.”

“Time to shag ass, boys.” Merle sneered. “Unless you plan to go up with Dr. Jenner and the CDC.”

“Dr. Jenner?” Lori asked with a gasp.

“I’m tired.” He answered the shocked woman as her husband and boyfriend rushed to gather their packs, Carl tagging along after them and Harry and the Dixons made for the exit. “I’ve done what I can. Now I just want to be with Maria again…is that so much to ask?”

…

They were several miles out of town in the convoy when the earth shook and a wave of heat blasted them, Rick ordering the convoy to pull to a stop as they all looked back at the cloud of smoke mushrooming up over Atlanta.
Harry jerked awake when the truck came to a stop.

After staying awake save for an hour nap and some pepper-up, he’d hunkered down against the truck door while Daryl drove in a mirror of the day before. Merle rode ahead of the convoy on his motorcycle followed by the jeep with the Grimes, then Carol’s car, the RV, and finally Daryl and Harry bringing up the rear. Daryl had given him a knowing look when he swung into the truck without a word.

It had quickly become clear over the last twenty-four hours that the Dixons were sticking with Black, even before he and Merle had had a few words to that effect before he passed out the night before. Harry had gotten a couple more hours’ of sleep while they rolled on, this time he assumed they were going with Shane’s plan for Fort Benning, a good hundred and some miles away. With the state of things and needing to stop every night and source fuel and food every day, Harry would wager it would take over a week to get there. Or more.

Plenty of time for him to decide who he should bring home with him – and who to try and leave.

“What?” He asked groggily as he rubbed at his gritty eyes, Daryl laughing quietly as they climbed out of the truck.

“RV broke down again.” Daryl cursed.

“Fan-fucking-tastic.” Harry sighed, blinking open eyes and taking in the scene ahead of them.

“Well it could be worse.” He pointed out as Rick hollered for Merle, the elder Dixon doing most of the engine repairs…apparently. He continued to speak as they met up with the group surrounding the RV. “Lots of cars in this jam up. We can source fuel and supplies from them and then push them out of the way while Merle works on the RV.”

“I don’t know how I feel about that.” Lori protested rubbing at her arms with a shiver. “This is a graveyard…it’s like…”

“Stealing from the dead?” Harry asked mockingly, saying what she couldn’t bring herself to say. “They’re dead. What the fuck to they need food, fuel, and supplies for huh?” He rolled his eyes and the Dixons snorted in mute agreement.

“Hey!” Rick snarled. “Watch how you talk to my wife and around my kid.”

“Your wife?” Harry arched a brow. “And here from those scratches on his neck I was thinking she was Shane’s girlfriend.”

Shane swung on Harry with a roar, only to be knocked back by a crossbow to the chest.

“Oh uh.” Daryl tsked. “He’s the only reason we’re all alive right now. You got a problem with the truth? Take it up with the harlot you’re fuckin’ behind her husband’s back.”

“Oh come on.” Merle added as the group gasped and Lori started up with her whiny protests. “We
all know they were screwin’ every chance they had before Ranger Rick showed up alive. Don’t take it out on Pretty for sayin’ what shoulda been said days ago.”

Most of the group looked uncomfortable as Rick grabbed Lori and Shane and drug them off for what looked like a come-to-Jesus meeting.

“Alright.” Harry sighed, pinching his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “We’re all tired and still shaky from the CDC. I didn’t mean to say it,” like that, “but what’s done is done and we still have to carry on.”

Everyone could agree with that as seen by the round of nods. As one almost they shifted from watching the Grimes drama to paying attention to Harry who stepped into the void made by the steadily-escalating fight at the roadside. Merle and Daryl, already secure in what they should be doing, headed off to look for either parts to fix the RV or supplies.

“Dale, if you could keep watch from the RV?” Harry asked, the elder man nodding genially and climbing up. “Jacqui, if you would keep Carl and Sophia occupied in the RV?” He asked, nodding when the oldest woman gathered up the kids and ushered them inside. “Great.” He sighed, eyeing the rest. “T-Dog and Glenn work on sourcing fuel if you would. Ladies.” He turned to Carol and Andrea, “go with them and have them pop trunks and doors for you to source supplies.”

With everyone set to a job, Harry trotted off after the Dixons, set on helping them with his own bag almost full to the brim after the high-rise and the CDC.

He really needed to take a couple hours and pop back to the estate, he told himself. Empty his pack except for what he needed in case he came across another supermarket or barracks. But it could wait, he decided. At least until they stopped for the night.

They’d been at it for a while and the brawl between Rick and Shane had finally broken up with the two men licking their wounds and both ignoring each other and a still-squawking Lori…for the moment…when Dale called out the alert.

“Walkers! Down, walkers!”

Harry found himself under a van with Daryl tucked in close to his side, the other man’s closeness reminding him all-too-well that he hadn’t had any…companionship since he’d started summer break from school. The guys at the estate were all like family to him. And honestly, none of them had really hit his gaydar as either bent or curious.

Although…

He did wonder sometimes about Axel but the massive blonde wasn’t really his type. He was nice enough – for an ex-con – but quiet and rather meek at times. Harry wanted someone who didn’t mind tossing shit back at him or standing toe-to-toe with him. An equal. Or as close to it as he could get in a world with a distinct lack of magical kind.

As it was, Daryl was handsome in that same rugged way as his older brother, and tough as nails. Harry didn’t doubt for a moment he could hold his own. He just had a hard time pegging the brothers. Partially at least because they were rather taciturn. He thought Merle might be at least a little bent with how he calls him Pretty every other time they talk but…he shook his head. It was damn-near impossible to say.

Harry cursed a little under his breath as the heat and scent of Daryl filled his senses. With showers just that morning it wasn’t a bad scent by any means. Just…Daryl. Spice and leather and male.
Merle was similar only with a hint of engine grease.

And…

Thinking about that wasn’t helping him lose his very badly timed hard-on.

Feet shuffled past with excruciating slowness as Harry fought to control his hormones. After what seemed like forever – but was around fifteen minutes – Dale called the all-clear. Only for things to go to hell in a handbasket all over again.

“Lori!” Rick called, not seeing his wife anywhere. “Lori?!”

“Rick, what?” Shane asked only to get ignored as the other cop ran over towards the RV and Dale.

“Dale!” Rick yelled up to the watchman. “Can you see Lori anywhere?”

The older man paled and stood, searching frantically before calling out a negative.

“Jesus, fuck!” Rick slammed one fist into the side of the RV. “We have to find her!”

“And we will brother.” Shane calmed him down, their issues put aside for the moment in the face of a larger crisis. “We will.”

“Anyone else missing?” Harry asked calmly as he and Daryl trotted up the rest dogging their heels. “Jacqui, the kids?”

“Everyone is accounted for.” Glenn said as he did a quick headcount. “It’s just Lori.”

“Alright then.” Harry blew out a breath, sending a glance at Merle who went back to working on the RV. “Who knows how to track?”


“Me too.” Harry nodded. “But Merle needs to stay and get that engine running. Twilight is coming in fast and we don’t want to be dead in the water still come morning.”

“WE need to find Lori.” Rick almost screamed in the younger man’s face, who just stood there and took it calmly.

“We’ll look for her.” Harry agreed with a small nod. “But we’re not going to kill off everyone else in the process. Daryl?”

“Yeah.”

“Try and find a trail, yeah?”

“On it.” The hunter trotted over to the last place he remembered seeing the annoying woman before looking for tracks.

“Now.” Harry eyed the others. “Once Daryl has a trail, him, you two.” He pointed to the cops. “And me will spread out and see what we can find before dark. If we find her great, if not she’s a grown-ass woman who should be smart enough to survive the night and we’ll pick it back up in the morning, clear?”

“Who the hell died and made you king, huh?” Shane demanded getting up in the little shit’s face.
“Your ability to be rational.” Harry shot back with a smirk and a drawl. “Or your ability to keep your hands off of your best-friend’s wife: take your pick.”

Shane shoved him back with a growl, only to find himself on the pavement courtesy of a roundhouse punch to the jaw from the man he’d written off as a nerd on finding out he went to medical school.

“Shee-it, Pretty.” Merle called admiringly from where he was watching the drama. “Where’d you learn to hit like that?”

“My Papa taught me.” Harry called back with a laugh as he watched impotent rage brew in those dark beady eyes. “You wanna see what else he taught me?” He asked the bigger man as Shane climbed back to his feet, hands clenching and unclenching in his rage.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Dale crowded in between the two hands shoving them apart. “This isn’t the time for this.”

“Dale’s right.” Rick ground out as he wavered, not entirely sure who’s side he would take if things went any further. “We need to focus on Lori.”

“I got a trail!” Daryl called back.

“Thank Jesus for that.” Dale said under his breath, not sure otherwise if Shane’s powder keg temper would hold in the face of a challenging opponent.

“Allright.” Harry called back. “Allright?” He asked as the two cops drew their sidearms.

“Fine.” Shane bit out as Rick nodded before leading the way at Harry’s wave of a hand.

“Be careful, Pretty.” Merle warned Harry lowly as he walked past him, the younger man giving him a calm look and a nod.

He wasn’t about to die from a bullet to the back now that he thought he might’ve found something of his own outside of his family that was worth living for.

Not by a long shot.

…

It was a discouraged Rick and Shane to stumbled back onto the highway well after dark. Harry and Daryl had returned just as the sun started to go down but Rick and Shane had ignored their advice and carried on. Honestly, the Dixons were making bets on whether the two cops would make it back at all, let alone in one piece.

“Lost her trail.” Rick told the others as he accepted a plate of food from a hovering Carol. Carl had cried himself to sleep in the RV with Sophia rest alongside him.

“You can try again in the morning.” Dale said in an attempt to comfort the lost man. “She’s a smart woman. She’ll make it until we can find her again.”

Rick just grunted, Shane silently scowling down at the plate of beans as he worked his way through it.

“We’re sleeping in the rigs tonight.” T-Dog reported. “Merle got the RV running again…so that’s something at least.”

“How long do we wait and look?” Andrea broached the dangerous question as the Dixons and
Black were all off either on watch (Merle) or hunkered down for the night in the truck (Harry and Daryl). “What?” She demanded at the aghast look she got from Rick and Dale. “I’m asking because if it was any one of us, Shane would’ve already left us for dead with Lori as his little cheerleader.” She sneered. “As he,” she jabbed a finger at Shane who was flushed once more with temper. “Has said over and over: this is a numbers game now. How much in resources: time, ammo, and fuel; do we waste on one woman who barely contributes except to cause problems, huh?” Her eyes demanded support from the others who were as well aware of the shortcomings of Lori Grimes as Andrea herself was, mainly T-Dog, Carol, and Jacqui, Lori’s husband and lover not going to bad-mouth her even after the shit she pulled and Glenn and Dale too damn nice to.

“We’re not gonna leave Lori to the walkers.” Rick said firmly, eyes glaring daggers at the blonde woman. “We’ll keep looking until we find her.”

“Yeah.” Andrea scoffed, climbing to her feet and making her way back to her bunk. “That’s what I thought you’d say.”

“Rick.” Dale interjected calmly as the others headed off either to sleep or in the case of Glenn to take over Merle’s watch. “I don’t know if you’ve…noticed. But things are changing in the group. You push them too hard and some will start splitting off.”

“And go where?” Shane snorted derisively. “We’re the best chance of surviving this thing and they know it, for all their bitching.”

“No.” Dale said ponderously as he left for his own bed. “I don’t think that’s necessarily true anymore.” He eyed the thoughtful Rick for a moment advising him to: “Think on it. You might not be the only game in town anymore.”

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“We’ll help you pick up her trail again.” Merle compromised the next morning.

The debate that Andrea had sparked the previous night had flared back up in the presence of the Dixons and Harry, with that trio agreeing – to no one’s shock – that they didn’t want to burn daylight looking for as Merle put it “a weak link who wouldn’t survive much longer anyhow.”

Another fight was narrowly avoided thanks this time to Carl between Rick and Merle, the elder Dixon still having bad blood for the cop who left him to die.

“She wouldn’t do it for us brother.” Daryl sneered at the cops. “Not for our lives and the guns, isn’t that what she said Ranger Rick, when I went back for Merle?”

“Mom said that?” Carl asked his father with eyes the size of dinner plates.

“Regardless of what she said or didn’t say.” Rick waved it off. “We’re looking for her again. That’s final.”

“And we’ll lead you to her trail – or where you two lost it last night.” Harry said equally resolute. “That is also final.”

Rick sighed, shoulders slumping and gave a tired nod. It wasn’t like he could force them to help at gunpoint. Which would be useless since at this point he was pretty sure the newly-formed trio out-armed him and Shane from picking up supplies at the CDC.

“I wanna look for Mom.” Carl announced, breaking away from where he’d been corralled by Jacqui and Carol. “Please, Dad? I wanna find her too.”
Rick and Shane shared a glance over his head, Shane giving a “it’s your call,” shrug.

“Okay.” Rick sighed, staring down at his boy firmly. “You stay with us. At all times, Carl. You hear?”

“Yeah, Dad.” If Carl had a tail it would be wagging, the boy excited to be doing something useful.

“Alright then.” Harry nodded. “Daryl and Merle will lead you back to the trail. The rest of us will keep moving cars and sourcing fuel and supplies. If you’re not back by sunup tomorrow…” Harry warned trailing off.

Honestly, if he was more of a dick he would take off with the rest of the group while the Grimes contingent was on walkabout.

But he couldn’t make himself leave the boy.

He laughed to himself as he went to pick up with sourcing from the day before. Rick giving into his son may have just kept him from being left behind like so much excess baggage.

Daryl and Merle had returned and they’d almost finished clearing the car boneyard when a shot rang out for miles.

Harry cursed. A single shot wasn’t likely to be from walkers. He only hoped Shane had managed to control his homicidal tendencies and hadn’t decided to do away with Rick.

Meeting back up with the others, they conferenced in real quick.

“If we heard that so did walkers.” Merle cursed under his breath. “They’ll head right for whoever popped that shot off.”

“Any idea how far away it was?” Harry asked the former Marine.

Merle got a distant look in his eye as he did some figuring. “Anywhere from one to ten miles, hard to say.”

Harry nodded. “We’ll get back to work, finish clearing the cars and load up. We have to be ready to roll if trouble hits us – whether the Grimes’ are back or not.”

The rest nodded and scattered, moving with more purpose than they had previously – except for the Dixons who always moved like a herd would set upon them at any moment. Sophia was tucked back in the RV with Jacqui while Dale moved back up top to keep watch.

And they waited.

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At the Greene farmhouse everything was in chaos. They’d found Lori and had been heading back to the road when Otis – forgetting to clear the area – shot Carl on accident. Rick had run back towards the road having gotten directions while Shane and Lori followed Otis.

“Hershel!” Otis yelled, feeling guilty and panicked as hell. “Gotta patient for ya.”

“Wait.” Shane demanded. “Unless he’s a doc he just needs to keep Carl stable.”

“What?” Lori looked at Shane aghast, exhausted from a night spent up a tree and not able to sleep lest she fall onto walkers.
“Harry.” Shane bit out grimly. He didn’t like that little shit or the Dixons, in fact he’d go so far as to say he hated them but Harry… “He’s a medical student, remember?” He nudged Lori out of the way as a white-haired man bustled into the room. “And one helluva one if I read Jenner right.” Shane looked over at the snow-hair who must be Hershel. “Just clean the wound and keep him stable as best you can. Rick will be back with our doc on the double.”

“Glad of that.” Hershel said with a self-depreciating laugh. “Imma vet not a people doctor.”

The group waiting anxiously, or resignedly depending on the person, at the RV started when they heard crashing coming from the trees. After several months dealing with walker they knew that was a person and they were coming in fast.

“That ain’t good.” Daryl commented, shouldering his crossbow and aiming for the area the racket was coming from.

“No, it isn’t.” Harry agreed absently, his sword held loosely but firmly in his hand.

For good or ill, whoever was coming was going to bring walkers down on their heads with the noise they made. And in the wake of the largest herd Harry had seen the other day on the highway, it raised everyone’s hackles. People were already on edge between that and Lori going missing without dealing with an idiot bringing more undead down on them.

No matter what their intentions.

“Harry!”

It was Rick, moving as if the devil himself was on his tail.

“Load up.” Harry gave to order without a second glance. “We can’t stay now no matter what news Rick has.”

The rest climbed into their various rigs, Harry standing loping off on silent feet to meet the frantic lawman.

“What?” He bit out, less-than-thrilled with Rick’s extremely reckless arrival.

“Carl’s been shot.” Rick gasped out, bending over hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath after the several-mile run through the forest terrain. “A hunter after a deer, the bullet went through-and-through and into my son.”

“Where?”

It was a two-fold question, both where was the boy and where was he hit? Fortunately, Rick wasn’t completely worthless and knew exactly what he meant.

“A farm, a couple miles down the road,” Rick raised his eyes to meet implacable emerald. “It’s a gut wound.”

Harry cussed up a storm at that. “You’re with us.” He jerked his thumb at the cab of the pickup, Merle once more taking point on the motorcycle. “Merle!” Harry called over the roar of engines. “Take flank, Officer Friendly’s our nav on point this run!”

Merle shot him a good-natured but crude two-finger salute before waiting for everyone else to pull
out before getting in line behind the RV.

It was a tenser than tense ride to the Greene farmhouse as Harry sat between Rick and Daryl, neither man overly enamored with the other and Harry plain fed-up with both Rick’s mealy-mouthing and Shane and Lori’s bullying.

“Tell me again what happened.” Harry demanded after Rick pointed out the off-turn to the farm, spotting a woman on horseback waiting for them at the gate.

“An older man – Otis – was out hunting.” Rick said, words tripping over themselves as Daryl roared to a stop in the driveway, Rick bolting out of the car and Harry on his heels with his pack in one hand. “He didn’t see us. Bullet went through-and-through, hit Carl in the lower abdomen.” Rick’s gaze caught on Lori crying on Shane’s shirt as they rushed through the door a blonde girl pointed out to them. “He was bleeding pretty bad.”

Harry’s gaze swung to the older gentleman with white hair who was taking Carl’s pulse with an old pocket watch as he came to stand over Carl’s sweating and groaning form. Harry rubbed his hands down quickly with the rubbing alcohol the man held out as the grey-beard took over from Rick.

“I’ve kept him as steady and stable as I could.” Hershel explained to the young man with the piercing green gaze. “He’s lost a lot of blood, going to need a transfusion to make it through. But the bullet splintered best as I can tell.” Hershel lifted the tea-towel that was stained red with Carl’s blood. “I’ve never removed bullet fragments from a human before, I’m not sure of the anatomy or procedures.”

“Okay.” Harry took a deep breath as he peered down at the open and sluggishly-bleeding wound. His gaze swung back over to the boy’s parents. “Either of you a donor match?”

“I am.” Rick said gravely, Lori nodding along having traded one pair of arms for the other.

“In that case,” Harry pointed at Rick. “I need you to stay, as well as…”

Hershel supplied his name quickly.

“As well as Doc Greene, here.” He made a vanoose motion towards the door. “Everybody else out I need quiet to concentrate. This is delicate work needing doing.”

When Lori swung around to face Rick to protest all she got was a shake of his head. He wasn’t about to fight the younger man. Not when it was Carl’s life on the line. He meaning-filled look at Shane had his…best friend, former best friend?…moving to usher the brunette out of the room, ignoring her protests all the way.

“Alright then.” Harry took a deep breath and dug out some medical supplies from his pack.

“What’ve you got there, son?” Hershel asked, half out of professional interest and half out of a desire to learn what he’d need to take care of his people in this new world they were facing.

Harry sensed both motivations and explained as he went.

“IV supplies, for both the transfusion and to keep Carl hydrated and supply his meds straight to the bloodstream.” He handed the kit over to Hershel who immediately started prepping the boy’s forearm opposite the wound. Harry approved with a nod of the elder’s work. “Local anesthetic for when I have to dig out the shrapnel, tweezers, medical-grade stitching supplies, antibiotics, and a general anesthetic strong enough to knock out a horse.” He gave a grim smile at the last. “Once you’ve got that IV in we’ll set up a bag of saline and administer the general, once that’s done I’ll give
the local and start on the wound. When I’ve got it cleaned and start stitching him up, I’ll need you to get Rick set up and start the transfusion Hershel.”

“Got it, son.” Hershel nodded, looping the saline bag onto a coat rack to keep it steady, watching with interest as Harry explained the drug he was using to knock out the boy and the dosage, timing it with his wristwatch before he rubbed his hands down again to sterilize them, doing the same to the tweezers and a scalpel he dug out as well before setting to work.

It was one of the hardest things Rick ever had to do, sitting there in silence as Hershel held a light for Harry – a man Rick barely knew – to operate on his son. The younger man explained what he was doing step by step, giving Rick some relief, though he knew full-well that it was much more for Hershel’s education than to alleviate Rick’s fears. Though, in a part of Rick’s brain that was separated from the fear and tension, he had to admit that the man who looked not much out of his teens was doing one hell of a job educating the older veterinarian.

“Flush the wound again for me, Hershel.” Harry asked the older man, the two of them quickly falling into a sort of comradery as they labored over the panting boy, Carl close to shock from blood loss even with the fluids and drugs. Harry made a pleased hum as he didn’t see any more shards in need of removal. “That’s all of them.” He decided cracking his neck and trading the scalpel for the needle and the dissolving stitches for the interior of the wound. He could use regular silk on the outer stitching, but the boy would heal faster with the sterile dissolving kind on the inside. “Rick, we need you over here to start the transfusion, you know how to switch between the saline bag and the direct transfusion, Hershel?”

“I’m familiar, son.” Hershel chuckled a little now that the worst was over. “Just usually my patients are a little bigger and furrier.”

“Fair enough.” Harry laughed, wiping his forehead on his sleeve before hunkering back down and starting on the stitches. He would need to start the antibiotics yet, and that cut of T-Dogs needed a check, the fool tried to keep him from tending it. He lost that fight, of course, but now Harry took a sort of vindictive pleasure in poking and prodding the other man until he got used to having someone to look after their cuts and scrapes around.

…

After the transfusion was finished, Hershel helped a woozy Rick down the stairs, almost being pounced on in the process by the man’s wife as he led him into the kitchen and sat him in a chair.

“Well?” The woman demanded, only to get hushed by her husband.

“Bethie, would you get some sweet tea and crackers for Sheriff Grimes, here?” He asked his daughter politely, like the southern gentleman his mama had raised him as. “He needs to replenish a little, just in case another transfusion is required.”

Lori went white at that, knowing well enough from Rick’s stay at the hospital that one person can’t give too much blood too close together without being in danger themselves. If they were going to risk that… Carl must be in more danger than she thought.

Rick, looking up from the cool glass of tea he was gulping down, saw the look on her face and rushed to reassure her before she went barging back into Carl’s sickroom and irritating the shit out of Harry.

He didn’t know what it was about the two of them or about Harry and Shane for that matter but either combination was like gas and a match…and the last thing they could afford right now was
another blow-up.

“He’s fine for now.” Rick reported, others around the room and listening from the hall letting out a relieved breath.

Everyone liked the Grimes boy, those that knew him anyway, and the Greenes were all just happy that Otis didn’t accidentally take an innocent life.

“Harry cleaned out the wound and stitched him up, neat as you please.” Hershel added, admiration plain in his voice. “Real steady hands on that boy, couldn’t have done better myself, and likely worse.”

“As Hershel said.” Rick nodded. “Harry’s giving him the first round of some antibiotics now, and a saline drip to keep him hydrated.”

“Where did he get all that?” Carol asked mystified. She’d never seen those sort of medical supplies from all the cars they raided over the last couple of days.

“The CDC.” Merle hollered in answer, smoking and listening to the chatter from the porch near the open kitchen window. “He knew going in that something was off. If I had to guess, then he talked to the doc right off and got the situation.”

“He spent the whole right clearing the building while we slept.” Glenn spoke up quietly. “He was making his way up to the top of the building when I went to bed, and I saw him heading for the basement in the middle of the night when I had to pee. I don’t think he slept but an hour or two the whole time we were there.”

“Agreed.” Merle said gruffly. “I found a med kit in my pack I didn’t put there, and extra food. Daryl was the same.”

“Same.” Carol whispered from where she was sitting beside Sophia. “I thought maybe I was being distracted with everything that’s happened but there were extra supplies in our bags I don’t remember packing.”

“Everyone else?” Rick arched a brow, his group all shuffling their feet or blushing and giving a nod or agreeing shrug.

“Not mine.” Shane shook his head with a growl.

“Gee.” Daryl drawled mockingly. “I wonder why that would be…?”

The rest of the group, save the Grimes, laughed uncomfortably as Shane growled and stormed from the house.

Hershel stood and gestured for Rick to follow him, having gathered that he was some sort of leader for the group, though he still wasn’t sure of the dynamic as yet.

“Not that I don’t understand the bind we’re all in these day.” Hershel said as the two stood next to the chicken coop. “But this is my home, and the farm produces enough for my family with only a little left over. Y’all can stay until the boy is back on his feet but I don’t want you to get too comfortable. After that y’all need to move on.”

“Okay.” Rick agreed easily, already planning on working on the older man to let them stay despite his words. “We can do that, we’ll all pitch in around here until Carl’s better.”
“Another thing, Rick.” Hershel said with a severe look. “I’m not comfortable with all the guns I see. Y’all wanna stay, you lock the guns up unless someone is going huntin’, you hear?”

“Again, your place, your rules, Hershel.” Rick held up his hands in a show of not fighting. “I’ll have them all collect ‘em up and put ‘em away in the morning.”

“You do that.” Hershel nodded once, sharply before going back inside and up the stairs to pick Harry’s brain some more on the differences between doctoring humans and livestock, grabbing a pitcher of sweet tea and some muffins to share as he went.

So far, from what Hershel could tell, Harry was one of the only members of this group that he was comfortable having around. But only time would tell, and it would be a couple weeks at least before little Carl was up and around. That would give him plenty of time to suss out the bad-apples of the group and maybe convince the good to stay behind.

They’d see.

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The group quickly had the tents all set up and a fire pit dug out in the area Hershel’s daughter Maggie pointed out to them, though there was a little discussion over where Harry was going to sleep. A discussion that Merle and Daryl shut down by telling the others he could bunk with them if he didn’t have a tent or something stuffed away in that pack of his. Some of the others (Shane, Lori, Andrea…) were a little – okay a lot – uncomfortable about how close their newest member and only medic was getting with the two “dirty rednecks” but not one of them was either brave or stupid enough to say a word about it.

For all that Shane hated that little shit he was damned useful to have around, the same for the Dixons who did a damned good job of keeping everyone fed.

It stuck in his craw that the trio was quickly becoming the rock everyone else was anchored to – either them or Rick. Shane was the one who kept the group together and saved them time after time. Not Rick in his coma or the Dixons and Black who were relative outsiders to the group. Him. He just needed to wait it out. Soon enough something would happen and force the others to see things his way again.

Either that, or he’d have the opportunity to…eliminate some of the competition.

…

Come morning, Carl had made it through the night and over the first hurdle, much to everyone’s relief. Harry had sat in the sick room all night long, dozing here and there and administering antibiotics and pain relievers every four or so hours. With a sigh, he climbed to his feet and went downstairs in search of the coffee that was tickling his nostrils.

The boy would make it, all he needed now was a final dose of antibiotics in another eight hours and to rest and recover.

Which was what he told the Greenes when they all asked at the sight of him, then getting him seated at the table with a mug of coffee and a plate of eggs and bacon before him.

“Hadrian Black.” He said in reply to the quick round of introductions. “But most call me Harry.”

“Harry then.” The eldest of the women, Patricia, agreed with a soft smile.
Harry could easily see that these were good, kind, hard-working people. But they were soft still, he saw that just as clear. They’d need to toughen up some if they wanted to survive.

“So,” Maggie asked, leaning forward eagerly with a mug of her own in her hands as they all rested a bit after morning chores and breakfast. “You’re a doctor, Harry?”

“Was working on it.” He gave a half-smile at the question. “Made it through the first year of medical school at UG Atlanta before going home for the summer…then the outbreak happened.”

They all made hums or other noises of agreement.

“You’ve got mighty steady hands for only having one year in, son.” Hershel complimented the younger man. “You did fine work up there, just fine.”

“Thank you, Hershel.” Harry nodded, taking the compliment calmly, with none of the bashful stuttering that would’ve occurred in his early teens…before the Veil. “You weren’t a half-bad assistant yourself.” He leaned over and craned his head to look out the window. “Speaking of doctoring, have you noticed if T-Dog is up yet? He has a nasty cut I’ve been keeping an eye on.”

“They’re all up and about.” Jimmy piped in. “Setting up their camp some more and getting some food on. There was talk about making a run into the small town a couple miles up the road from here.”

“Mmm.” Harry hummed under his breath as he finished the last of his coffee. “Guess I should claim a spot for my bedroll then, it’ll be a week or two yet before Carl’s ready to move on.”

The Greenes exchanged a few looks before Hershel spoke up.

“You’re welcome to the couch in the other room, there, Harry.” He said invitingly. “You need to be close to your patient and we wouldn’t say no to your company either.”

Harry arched a brow at the unexpected invitation. “I think I’ll take you up on that, Hershel.” He said with a half-smile. “Just the same I’ll set my pack there and then head out to talk to my group, see what’s what and give the good news to the anxious parents.”

“One thing, Harry.” Hershel said quietly, eyes focused on the pair of pistols holstered at the younger man’s hips. “I’m not too comfortable with some of your group carrying. So I made a deal with Rick to ban them on the farm entirely. I hope you understand.”

“No problem.” Harry agreed easily enough. He was a lot deadlier with a wand or sword than he’d ever be with a gun anyway. “You don’t mind the sword or knives, do you? These days I feel naked without them.”

“No, son.” Hershel chuckled at that. “I don’t mind those at all.”

“Well, then.” Harry nodded and waved a hand before striding off to tuck his guns away in his pack and set it in an out-of-the-way area next to the sofa. It had an anti-theft and notice-me-not charm on it but he still didn’t like to tempt fate. A quick cautionary glance was followed by an arm thrust deep inside the bag, bringing out his army-surplus mummy-bag he found in the barracks at the prison and carried for a time such as this. Laying it out on the sofa, he nodded in approval at the mundane sight, before turning and heading on outside to meet up with the others.

“Merle.” Harry called out to the elder Dixon as he caught sight of the man keeping watch from the top of the RV. “What’s happenin’?”
“The chink is getting sent out on a run to the town nearby.” Merle told the athletic younger man after he’d easily scaled up to the RV roof. “The women are all cleaning the RV or doing laundry, lady chores.” Merle sneered at that. If he was them he’d tell Queen Bitch Lori where to shove it when she started handing out marching papers. “Officer Friendly and Deputy Dog are patrolling the perimeter, they weren’t sure when you’d let them back in to see the boy.”

“T-Dog and Daryl?”

“Lil’ brother went out to hunt, ain’t sit right with either of us relyin’ on these folk to feed us.” Merle spat over the side of the RV with a scowl. Ungrateful pussies, takin’ from the Greenes but not givin’ back. “The darky is helpin’ with the farm chores.”

Harry snorted. “At least one of this lot knows how to act right.”

Merle chuckled at that, finding it funny as hell that of all people, he agreed with an educated med-school Englishman. Who’d’a thunk it?

“Carol and Mama Darky were helpin’ the farm girls with their chores before Queen Bitch started up her routine with Deputy Dog backing her up, Officer Friendly just lookin’ lost as usual.” Merle snorted. “Glad she ain’t dumb enough – yet – to try that shit on me ‘n’ Daryl.”

Harry sat back on his haunches, eyes tracking the treeline as he brought up a topic from before they met up with the group, on the way to the quarry.

“You give anymore thought to what you an’ me talked about?”

The other man eyed him from his peripheral. “You mean takin’ Daryl and headin’ out?” Merle asked idly. “I thought your bleedin’ heart wouldn’t let you leave these kids all defenseless like.”

“I’m still trying to make a decision.” Harry let that hang out there. “Wanted to know what you and Daryl thought.”

“Why us?”

“Well.” Harry laughed drily. “From what I can tell neither of you ever left someone to die on a rooftop before. Y’all have a code. Which is more than what I can say for most of these sheeple.”

“Sheeple.” Merle snorted, loving that. “Ya got that a’righ’.” He scratched at the scruff rapidly taking over his jaw. He was due for another shave. Merle couldn’t stand the backwoods-beard for all that Lori and Shane kept calling him a dirty redneck. “Dunno.” He decided. “Ya asked me at the CDC, I’d’a said none of them got what it takes to make it out here, ‘cept maybe the chink. Even Mad Dog Shane doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground anymore. But the longer we go along with ‘em…” He shrugged. “I see flashes of things that make me think maybe a couple of the others might survive.”

“Carol?” Harry suggested, having been surprised by her calm head more than once.

“Yep. Now that ‘er husband ain’t here to black her eye every other night.” Merle grunted. “Blondie too, if she doesn’t go off half-cocked.”

Harry nodded, agreeing for the most part. “And Rick?”

“Officer Friendly.” Merle snorted. “He’s too busy tryin’ to be the leader he ain’t and ignoring that shit between his wife and his dog to step up. It’ll take somethin’ drastic to wake him up all the way. Half the time I think he left his fight in that hospital bed.”
Daryl had come back packing a buck sometime while Harry was upstairs giving Carl his last round of antibiotics. The boy hadn’t caught a fever and there was no sign of infection so Harry was cautiously optimistic that he wouldn’t need any more drugs beyond some pain killers to take the edge off until he can start taking standard Tylenol.

Harry left the parents and the omnipresent Shane billing and cooing over Carl, shaking his head in disbelief. No matter what he would never understand people. Two days ago Rick and Shane were trying their best to rip each other apart with their bare hands over that woman, now because Carl is hurt they were going to all play house together? He shrugged, walking over and plopping down next to Daryl with a sigh as the other man worked on tanning the deer hide, the meat having been prepped and cut down, some of it smoking over the fire while he’d given the rest to the women – both the group and the Greenes – to cook up.

“Somethin’ on your mind?” Daryl asked with a smirk as his blade made quick work of removing the left over fat and tissue from the hide he’d already stretched out, the brain of the animal mashed and waiting in a bowl at his feet.

Everyone else had scurried off, save Merle who was still smoking and keeping watch up on the RV, at the sight.

Now here was fancy-degree and rich-voiced Harry sitting down next to him and his – even he would admit – grisly work.

The things you find out about people just from payin’ attention would never stop boggling Daryl’s mind.

Though he supposed as a doctor-to-be, with cadavers an’ all, Harry had seen his fair share of stomach-turning shit long before the dead started makin’ meals of the livin’.

“That shit.” Harry gestured toward the upper story of the farmhouse with a vague flap of his wrist. “I have no words to even begin with how fucked up that is.”

Daryl snorted a laugh, blue eyes twinkling just a fraction at the younger man’s exasperation.

“You an’ me both, hoss.” Daryl chuckled, scraping away a particularly tough piece of tendon before stepping back and eyeing the hide with approval before picking up the bowl of mashed brain and starting to smear the mixture on the flesh-side of the hide. “You an’ me both.”

Harry watched in fascination as Daryl set to work. He’d read the theory on tanning hides before, all part of the “studies” Pandora had suggested. But with all the stockpiling they’d done on the estate they weren’t even close to needing to start doing so themselves. He supposed when it came time to slaughter some of the livestock in the next month or two they’d need to do it themselves just to keep from being wasteful, but watching Daryl do it…it drove home that for all their preparations there were still weak spots in their plans.

Firming his jaw, he decided that he was just going to work that much harder on making a decision about the people he was running with, and trying to convince those he chose to follow him.

Though if Shane kept up on his oh-so-wonderful downward spiral, there wouldn’t be much convincing needed.

Not even Rick would be blind to that danger forever, he was just worried about how big of a push it would take to get the former Sheriff onboard with what the rest of them already knew.
Or if Rick would end up being more collateral damage via Hurricane Shane.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” Harry asked more to keep the conversation going than any real need. He could guess from what little he knew about the Dixons. But still…confirmation never hurt a body.

“Merle.” Daryl said quietly, shooting a glance up at his watchful big brother. “Taught me most-a what I know. Huntin’, trackin’, shootin’. More of a Da to me than our own.”

“Mmm.” Harry nodded, pleased with his guess being right. “I thought it was somethin’ like that.”

“Like wha’?” Daryl narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He thought Harry was cool but if he was tryin’ to talk shit ‘bout his brother an’ him he had no problem going a round with him.

Harry just gave him an enigmatic smile and tugged up his sleeve, flashing the scar from Voldy’s resurrection at the suspicious hunter. “Remind me to tell you ‘bout my own childhood sometime.” Was all he had to say before he wandered off to talk to Rick about teaching more of the group how to defend themselves.

He’d seen Carol try and use a knife when they were at the CDC and it was just pitiful and in need of serious correction.

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Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Part 2 of A Series of Unfortunate Events...or what the wiki calls Season 2...I think.

On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

Chapter Five: A Series of Unfortunate Events pt. 2

Glenn looked alternately jumpy and cow-eyed (when looking at Maggie) when he came back from the supply run, making Harry arch a brow, wondering what could’ve created that particular combination in the normally calm and chill man.

Harry shook it off though, trotting off into the woods to “patrol” after checking on his patient one last time.

He’d put off popping back home for over a week, his dad and papa were less than amused whenever he snuck a moment to message them. He was lucky that with nightfall in a couple hours, they wouldn’t be able to grill him too long, what with him needing to offload his full pack and swap it out for an identical but nearly empty one.

Every week each of the three grown wizards made a supply run to a different city, trying to keep from picking them clean and staying away from smaller towns in hopes that other survivors would find what they left.

Harry had claimed Atlanta, knowing the city much better than his dad and papa after three years of college there, while Siri took New Orleans, and Remus Savannah.

All three of them had been hit by the napalm the military had laid down, leading them to believe it was the same in every major city in the country if not the world. Harry honestly thought that more people were initially killed by their own government trying to “take care” of the problem than by the virus. The more he saw, the more he felt that his 90% death-toll estimate was dead-on...if not a little generous on the living side.

Certain he was far enough out, Harry was up a tree in no time, leaving tracks that would support Harry going high just in case anyone came looking, then closed his eyes and activated his port-key. The magic hooked him right behind his navel and spun him around, carrying him the miles between the Greene farm and the estate, about a week or two to travel depending on how fast they moved and how long the cars lasted if he had his geography right. He shook his head at the ringing in his ears.

He fucking hated port-keys.

But with needing to hide his tracks, it was the best he could do since he wasn’t about to spin and apparate while up a tree.

“Harry!”

“Harry!”
“Papa, Harry’s home!”

The happy squeals of his younger brother and sister were music to his ears after being gone over a week, the dirty man crouching and swinging them up and spinning them around in his arms when they clamored him.

“There you are, pup.” Remus said blowing out a breath in relief. He never stopped worrying, not even for a second, when his mate and pup went on supply runs, grown or not. And he knew it was the same for them.

“Hi, Papa.” Harry grinned at the werewolf, still cuddling his siblings despite being rather dirty even with cleaning charms. “Dad out on a run?”

Remus nodded and came over to wrap his children in a strong hug, the two and three-year-old letting out happy giggles as Harry and Remus tickled them before setting them down and shooing them back to their lessons. They’d been alerted just like Remus when the port-key activated, being more than magical enough to sense the strong wards around the estate. It drove their teachers – whether Remus, Sarah, Sharla, or any of the others – batty as once they felt the wards let someone in they were off and running for the arrival room.

“Harry stay?” Jamie asked, big amber eyes that took after her Papa focused on her brother.

Harry sighed, trading a rueful look with Remus.

“I can’t right now, Jamie-bug.” He told her gently, speaking to Raz as well. “I need to go back out. There’s some people I’m helping.”

“Like Sasha?” Raz asked curiously.

Sasha being one of the children who were port-keyed out of the Vatos compound in Atlanta, a little four-year-old girl who had easily captured the attention of Harry’s two young siblings.

“A little older than Sasha.” Harry told them with a chuckle. “More like the twins.”

“Ah.” Raz nodded knowingly. “That’s ok.”

“Well.” Harry rolled his eyes over the pairs’ heads, sharing a look with his papa. “I’m glad I have your approval Mr. Raz-Monster. Now, back to Ms. Sarah.”

“Yes, Harry.”

“Yes, big brother.”

Once the duo had trotted off, Remus guffawed and walked with Harry down to the basement where all the storage rooms were kept for his adopted son to swap out his packs.

“There’s enough medical supplies to run a hospital for a year in here.” Harry reported, setting down the leather pack on the table they used to sort out the contents from runs.

Every pack – all enchanted by Remus who had a deft hand with the needed charms – had multiple compartments used for different kinds of supplies. They’d learned after the prison that it was better just to have one pack and organize it that way rather than fiddle with more than one. And with bottomless and featherlight charms the packs worked a treat.

Harry grabbed an empty pack, quickly packing it with the things he would need for a couple weeks:
food, supplies, clothes, etc., before eyeing the shelves in the dry storage. Moving quickly, he took
down a couple cartons of smokes and a lighter, then raided the chocolate supply and a couple of toys
for Carl and Sophia. Remus eyed him knowingly, waiting for the packing to be done and for them
to be returning to the arrival room before speaking.

“So.” Remus asked leadingly. “What’s so special,” he almost leered the word, giving his son a
knowing look. “About this group that you’re willing to spend weeks tagging along with them,
hmm?”

“Papa.” Harry nearly groaned, blushing. “I so don’t want to have this talk with you.”

“Must be a man then.” Remus responded blithely. “Handsome, muscular, badboy?” He rattled off,
having seen for himself the types of guys Harry had been drawn to since he went off to college.

Harry looked away, refusing to make eye contact.

Remus snorted, must be all three then.

“Just be careful, pup, for me?” Remus asked. “You know how your Dad gets, I don’t want him
haring off to break someone’s legs because you got hurt.”

“I will.” Harry said with a crooked half-smile. “Besides.” He sighed, dejected. “I don’t even think
guys are really…”

“To his taste?” Remus arched a brow before frowning at Harry’s nod. “Well…either way.” He
shrugged. “If worse comes to worse, do what you can for the kiddos and come home, we miss you
little love.”

“Okay.” Harry agreed as Remus enfolded him in a bear hug. “I will.”

With a wave, Harry spun in place and popped away, leaving Remus behind to break the news to his
mate that not only had he missed the pup’s on-the-fly visit…but that he appeared to have a serious
case for some Georgia-bred bad boy.

Joy.

…

Harry popped back to the farm hidden behind the barn only to get the shock of his life as he heard a
very distinct shuffling and groaning coming from inside.

“What the fuck?” He breathed moving around to peer inside from the chained up doors, pulling back
almost immediately as his enhanced vision made out close to a dozen walkers shuffling around inside
of the old wooden building. “What the fuck is this shit?” He asked the air incredulously as he
trotted back over to the campsite, shaking his head all the way.

“You ok, hoss?” Daryl asked handing over a plate with a slab of venison and some canned beans,
Harry having made it back just as dinner was starting up.

“Fine.” Harry answered automatically, sitting on the log beside the two brothers and tucking in.

“Where’s everyone else?”

“The women decided to make up dinner for the farm as a ‘thank you’.” Merle drawled rolling his
eyes. “Course ‘cept for the venison they roasted up, almost all of the provisions for said feast came
from the Greene’s larder.”
“Let me guess…” Harry sighed, taking a sip of the coffee Merle handed over with a thankful nod. “Lori’s bright idea?”

“Yup, got it in one Pretty.” Merle smirked at Harry’s mock-glare over the continued use of the nickname before digging into his own grub.

“You bunking with us tonight or keepin’ watch over the boy?” Daryl asked now that all three of them were in one place.

Harry shook his head, swallowing his mouthful before speaking. His name wasn’t Ron thank-you-very-much. And Siri and Remy had worked hard to instill manners into him beyond the little he’d picked up watching Petunia and the other kids at school.

“Hershel offered me the settee,” he though a moment before correcting himself at their almost identical unison frowns. “The couch.” He shrugged, not 100% certain on why but willing to take what he could get that wasn’t a car seat or the ground.

“Probably thinks ‘cause yer a doc – or close – y’all got similar ideals.” Merle noted astutely. The three of them snorted almost in sync at that.

“That just goes to show Hershel don’t know me well at all.” Harry shook his head, scraping up some more beans and venison before continuing. “They’ve been pretty well sheltered here. Safe. Given time they might toughen up. But now…” He snorted once more. “They wouldn’t last a day out there without someone to hold their collective hands.”

The brothers didn’t have much to say to that – mostly because they agreed with the sentiment even if they would’ve worded it very differently.

Pussies, as Merle would put it.

“Officer Friendly seems pretty set on staying here.” Merle observed, eyes narrowed on the glow from the kitchen windows. “What do you think?”

“Not gonna happen.” Harry said immediately. “Not unless something drastically changes. Hershel doesn’t have enough food to feed his family and this whole group for all of winter and the start of spring. We’d go hungry with the leaner hunting and have to supplement with supply runs – which is a shit idea in the snow and weather. Rick needs to wake up and smell the weather. They need a real plan to make it through winter…not a pipe dream.”

“They?” Daryl asked, a knowing smirk on his face. He’d known there was more to Harry than a bleeding heart. And every day he was proving him more and more right. He’d especially enjoyed watching him lay out Deputy Dog.

“They.” Harry answered his smirk with one of his own.

…

The next morning brought with it Carl waking up for longer than a few minutes at a time and Lori – back at her Queen Bitch act – insisting on yet another supply run to the pharmacy for god-knows-what-reason.

Harry just rolled his eyes and gathered up Carol, Sophia, and Jacqui after they’d done their share of the morning chores and started them in on learning to use an edged weapon. Hershel’s younger daughter Beth had joined in, intrigued by the sight, Harry having no problem teaching another. He’d
set them all up with K-Bar’s and sheathes sourced from the “CDC” through really from the prison run.

It was almost visceral, the confidence all four gained as he taught them the best way to hold, draw, and use a knife – both against walkers or a human attacker.

Of course, Lori being Lori, couldn’t leave it alone.

“Heard, here, and here, Sophia.” He taught the young preteen patiently, tapping out spots on his own chest and legs and having her “strike” each in turn the way he’d shown her using a fence post. “Those are the best spots to fend off an attacker. You have to be careful, honey.” He warned her. “People can be deadlier than any walker.”

“What are you saying?” Lori screeched/yelled at the ebony haired man, already furious with him for outing her and Shane to the entire group. “You can’t tell her things like that! She’s just a child!”

“But she’s not your child, is she?” Harry snapped back arching a brow and gesturing towards the practicing Carol. “Sophia’s mother is right there and if she had a problem she is more than capable of saying so.”

Lori spluttered impotently before storming off, likely to bitch to one of her boy-toys, which ever she was in the most favor with at the moment.

That either of them was willing to give her even the time of day was more drama than Harry wanted to try and wrap his head around. The idiotic tools. Seriously. She wasn’t even that pretty. What, did she have a gold-plated snatch or something?

He just rolled his eyes and carried on with trying to at least give the more vulnerable members of the group a defense. When they all went to give the knives back, Harry waved them off, pointing to his own sword and daggers with a smile. The women once more in the wind and working on chores or lunch, Harry ducked inside to check on Carl, pleased to see that his wound was healing just fine.

“Well, me boyo.” Harry announced, cheerfully putting on an affectation of Seamus’s accent. “You’ll be up and giving your mother grey hair in no time a’ all.”

“When can I get out of bed, Harry?” Carl’s voice was half way between pleading and whining. The eight-year-old had to be bored out of his skull.

“Tomorrow.” Harry said, with a moue of his lips. “Maybe the day after. But it’ll be only down the stairs and sitting in the kitchen, mind. You’ve get several days of recovery yet before you can walk around freely or start running about, savvy?”

“Okay.” Carl sighed, feeling put-upon as only a laid up young boy can.

“That’s the spirit.” Harry ruffled his hair before making a fool of himself craning his head around as if looking for spies. Once he’d gotten a giggle out of the boy, he reached into his shirt pocket with a flourish and presented him with a Hershey bar, much to Carl’s delight and awe. “This is strictly contraband.” He said in a conspiring whisper. “You’ll have to hide the evidence from your mother.”

“Deal.” Carl said, eyes wide and joyful as Harry handed over the treat before winking and ducking back out of the room.

He was off to do…something. Harry sighed, feeling a little bored himself. Maybe Hershel could use some help over in the stables…
A very shaken Maggie came back with an equally-scared Glenn from the supply run as the young woman tossed several packets of pills at Lori’s feet, hissing something the others missed, and then stomped off.

With the drama of the day satisfied, Harry relieved Merle from watch so the older man could get some sleep, his eyes following that muscular back – and ass – all the way to his tent with heated eyes.

Harry really, really needed to get laid, he groaned to himself. If he had to pick one thing he hated about the “apocalypse” it was being a gay man in rural Georgia. Even Glenn had gotten some by now if he recognized the signs right.

It was distinctly unfair.

Especially with Merle and Daryl strutting around being just his type and straight brothers besides.

Fucking destiny that cruel bitch.

…

Harry was hoping for a quiet, drama-free day the next day, only it wasn’t meant to be as Glenn came walking up to the group during lunch time.

“Um…guys?” He started tentatively, looking around but not seeing several people. Like Rick. Oh, well. Too late now with Harry, the Dixons, and Shane all staring him down. “So…there’s walker locked in the barn…”

…

“Is there any way this doesn’t blow up in our faces?” Harry muttered in an aside as he, Merle, and Daryl stood at the back of the group, separating some of them – Sophia, Carl, Carol, Maggie – from those just going along after Shane like lost puppies – T-Dog, Glenn, Andrea. He didn’t know what it was about that manic look his Shane’s eyes but there was no fucking way he was going to go along with his latest psychotic break.

“You can’t do this!” Maggie cried, trying to appeal to the group, already seeing that Shane was a lost cause. “My dad will make you guys leave if you do!”

“Not in any way I can figure.” Merle answered, Daryl nodding along sharply.

A hypothesis that was made that much more real as they tagged along after the gun-toting idiots and found Rick helping Hershel and Jimmy wrangle a pair of walkers on dog-catcher poles.

“Oh fuck me.” Harry groaned, covering his eyes with one hand.

“That an invitation, Pretty?” Merle drawled with a leer, Harry waving him off with a scoff.

He wasn’t about to raise to the bait, he knew damn-well that the Dixons were straight as a fence post.

Harry tuned back in to Rick pleading for Merlin’s sake, pleading, with Shane.

“We can work this out, brother.” Rick was saying hands up, a desperate look in his eyes. “We have to stay here, compromise.”

“Compromise?” Shane shouted, completely unbelieving of the words hitting his ears. “They have fucking walkers in the barn like pets and you want to compromise with these people? Jesus, brother,
grow a set and protect your fucking family from the things that want to eat their faces.”

In the wake of Shane’s announcement, the rest of the farm’s inhabitants, temporary and otherwise arrived, Harry latching onto Maggie and hissing in her ear.

“Get your sister out of here.” He said, telling Carol to get Sophia and Carl away while he was at it.

Seeing the look on his face, both women hurried to do as he said, but too late. Shane had already shot the walker on one of the poles three times in the chest.

“Look at that shit, man!” Shane shouted. “Look at it! Three to the chest and it’s still going. There’s no person on earth that can survive that.” Another shot rang out, Shane finishing the job with one to the head, the walker instantly down and not getting back up. “Do you see now? Has it finally made it into your stubborn fucking skull?” He shot the other one point-black all without looking away from Hershel’s crumbling form. “These are not people. They are not sick! They are diseased creatures and the only cure they need is a bullet to the brain!”

With that Shane picked up a pick-axe and tore the lock off the barn before darting back, him, T-Dog, and Andrea unloading on the dozen walkers that rushed out, drawn by all the shots and shouting.

And then it was quiet, all of the undead taken out.

Quiet…except for the sobs of the Greenes.

The adrenaline-laced euphoria quickly wore off the shooters, Lori once more trying to take charge.

“We should bury them.” She said in the wake of the Greenes all leaving the others to mourn. “It’s the decent thing to do.”

“Fuck that, Queen Bitch.” Merle snorted, blowing out a puff from the smoke he’d lit sometime in the post-killing rush back to the house by the others, which included Rick chasing after Hershel.

“Excuse me?” Lori hissed like the cat in heat she really was. “What did you say to me you redneck trash?”

“Don’ you talk to mah brother like that, bitch.” Daryl spat at her feet. “Y’all woulda starved by now ifn it wasn’t for me an’ Merle. You owe ‘im more than that.”

Before Lori could puff up and unleash a tirade, or Shane, Harry spoke up for once diffusing the fight instead of starting it over the latest stupidity.

“You don’t listen at all, do you?” He asked with mock-idleness as he studied the wench. “The CDC, contamination protocol, any of this ringing any bells?”

The others traded uneasy glances, none of them wanting to admit that they’d forgotten that tidbit until him – and Merle – reminded them.

“We burn all the bodies.” Harry continued, his voice calm but steely. “The Greenes want to have a service and bury the ashes after, that’s their affair. But I’m not going to risk the further spread of this disease because you’re constantly trying to keep to a standard that is no longer valid, you hear me?”

Sheepish nods all around heralded everyone’s agreement, except for Lori who stormed off in a huff and her faithful dog right behind her.

“Ok, here’s the plan.” Harry took a breath and eyed the area, pointing to a clearing far enough off
that the fire won’t catch any of the outbuildings. “Stack them up over there: T-Dog, Glenn, me and
the Dixons. The ladies will gather firewood from near at hand – don’t wander.” He warned.
“Dale…”

“I know.” The older man blew out a breath. “Keep watch.”

“Good man. Let’s get this done before anything else goes wrong.”

…

Because, like clockwork, something else went wrong.

This time in the form of a shock-ridden Beth and an AWOL Hershel and Rick.

Harry growled and cursed all the way up the stairs, still reeling over the utter gall of Lori trying to
order Daryl and Merle around. Though he had to admit enjoying watching Daryl bitch her out. It
seemed like even the milder Dixon brother had had enough of her condescending bullshit.

And good for him.

Though the erection his take-no-shit speech had caused in Harry was damned uncomfortable.

Still…

Nothing to do about it except wank in the comfort of a bath later, he was due one according to the
roster Patricia had made up.

Calming himself before he entered Beth’s room, he sighed, then pushed open the door.

…

By the time Harry had Beth stabilized, Shane and Lori had shown back up.

Harry stared, incredulously at the scene…and glad that Maggie was upstairs talking to her sister.
The woman was going to be pissed when she found out that Lori crashed her car…on an empty
road.

“Where’s Rick?” Lori asked, desperately looking around her. “Where is he?”

“Um…Lori?” Carol said tentatively. “Rick and Hershel aren’t back yet.”

Shock plain on her face Lori whirled around on Shane, slapping him clear across the face. “What,
lying to me once over my husband wasn’t enough, you had to do it again, Shane?”

Harry leaned back on the porch rail beside the Dixons, smirking viciously and saying in an
undertone: “I would kill for some popcorn right about now.”

The snorts-in-stereo were music to his ears, as was watching Lori give Shane a right bollicking after
listing to her bitch and moan at everyone else for over a week straight.

“For fuck’s sake, Lori!” Apparently Shane had finally had enough of her slapping at him. “You’re
pregnant! You can’t just take off like that anymore!”

“Queen Bitch is knocked up?” Merle repeated, eyebrows up to his hairline in surprise.

“What a stupid bitch.” Daryl spat in disgust. “Cattin’ around without protection after the world goes
to shit, what kinda life is that for a kid…especially movin’ around the way we do?”

“Show of hands.” Harry said loudly enough for everyone to hear. “Who knows how to count?” He smirked as Lori’s face went milk-pale. “Two weeks…hmmm….” His laughter was vicious. “Where’s Maury with a DNA test when you need him? Oh, wait I know.” He pointed at Shane dramatically. “Shane, you are the father.”

Another round of screech-and-bitch and fume-and-stomp later from the erstwhile lovers and things had mostly settled back down, everyone waiting for Rick and Hershel to show back up. It was one helluva time to go on a bender in Harry’s opinion, but then, when the world ends he figured a man was entitled to at least one good drunk. Merlin knows he had one after having to make the hard call at the prison.

He supposed seeing your wife as a walker and watching her be gunned down alongside your stepson was worth a bottle or two of bourbon.

Maggie was furious though, ready to light into Hershel the second he stepped through the door. She and Harry kept a close watch on both Beth and the driveway, Maggie out of worry, and Harry not wanting the girl to break. She was close, he was sure of that. But if he could redirect that self-pity into a protective mindset, she might come out of this even stronger instead of broken inside.

Jimmy helped, coming and talking quietly at her bedside, the two holding hands, after he’d helped collect up and bury the ash of the dead with a marker the way Harry thought they might do.

Eventually, they did show back up…but it wasn’t alone.

Trouble as always, following Rick Grimes like fleas on a hound.

…”Aw hell naw.” Merle groaned watching as the car roared to a stop in front of the house and waking him from a sound sleep after a night on watch. “What is this shit now?”

Hershel was yelling for Patricia to prep the shed for surgery and calling for Harry’s help.

To the Dixons’ – and Harry’s – shock, no herd had come calling in the wake of the barn shootout. But all of them were twitchy and on edge, preferring to rotate watch at night between pairs made of the three of them rather than leaving it to the others. All of them silently knowing that eventually the bottom was going to fall out after Shane’s stunt, Lori’s pregnancy just added another layer of fuckery to an already FUBAR situation.

Harry loped over with his steady gait, quickly getting the story from Rick and Hershel as he studied the young man’s – late teens he thought – wound. Getting eye contact as Rick mentioned the boy’s “group” Harry immediately stepped away, hands raised high in the air as he picked up scenes worthy of a true bottom feeder. He wasn’t a true Legilimens, but any wizard with enough power and a focused mind could glean surface thoughts – something that came in handy around homicidal fucktards like Shane.

“Nope.” He said with quiet steel. “I’m not helping this one. He’s too far gone already.”

“What?” Hershel straightened over the wound he’d been examining, truly flummoxed.

“What ya mean, Pretty?” Merle asked for both the watching brothers.

“I know how to read people.” Harry gave the simple answer. “It’s how I knew Merle was worth
Eyes widened at what their medic just implied about the boy – Randall – Merle and Daryl exchanging a look before telling Rick: “We’re with him, Officer Friendly.” “Not gonna waste my time on someone who ya shoulda already taken care of, Ranger Rick.” Before walking away to get some food and water before taking another night’s watch.

“Never thought I’d say this brother.” Shane grimaced. “But they’re right. Why are we even wasting time discussing this?” He asked plaintively as Hershel and Patricia set to work dealing with Randall’s wounded leg.

“I made a call not to leave him for walker chow like his people did.” Rick shifted uncomfortably under the questioning gazes of the others. “It’s done.”

“It’s fucked, more like.” Shane muttered under his breath, still reeling over agreeing with a trio he’d gladly see the back of, him and the others leaving Rick to watch as Hershel used what Harry had taught him to try and save the boy’s leg.

Later that night saw both the Dixon brothers and Harry on watch, the idea of Randall’s crew following Rick back to the farm having them on high-alert.

First the barn fiasco now this. Harry shook his head as he voiced his thoughts aloud. It was like Rick and Shane were trying to get them all killed through sheer stupidity.

“Might be righ’ there.” Daryl said with a snort. “It’d be damned funny if it wasn’t so damned dangerous.”

Merle jumped on the chance to get an answer to a question that’s been bugging him from almost day one of Harry finding him.

“You got any kin out there, Pretty?”

Harry eyed them carefully before scanning the area around for eavesdroppers before nodding once. The Dixons gave him a demanding look that had him rolling his eyes in explanation.

“I know you already figured it out.” He said lowly. “I’ve said more than once I was on a supply run when I found Merle.” He arched a brow. “One person doesn’t go on supply runs. Not for themselves after only two months. Any smart solo survivor would’ve stocked up and hunkered down.”

“Figured it.” Merle said with no little triumph, Daryl nodding as well.

“Why’re you here then?” Daryl asked several long moments later. “Why na go back to yer people? Stayin’ for the kiddies?”

Harry just smirked watching them patiently to see if they’ll work it out on their own.

“He’s observin’,” Merle answered the question, knowing it was what he would do. “Scoutin’, judgin’ whether any of us are worth bringin’ home to mama.”

“Close.” Harry chuckled quietly. “It’s actually Papa, I’ve got two dads. And no. Both of those
“Really?” Daryl was surprised, from what he’d picked up, and the things Harry’d said, he didn’t figure him for actual blood family. But adopted by two men…that never even pinged his rader.

“Really.” Harry shook his head with a smile. “They were my folk’s best friends. Started looking after me in the summers after I popped back up on their radar, and adopted me when I was just shy of sixteen.”

“Why so late?”

Harry’s voice was grave, matching his eyes though they were hidden by the night.

“I was sent to live with my mum’s sister after they passed. Remus was…sick and Sirius was out of the country when it happened.” Well…at least that was one way of looking at it. “By the time Remus could look for me, I was long gone. Wasn’t until I turned thirteen that they saw me again.” He grinned. “Remus ended up teaching at my school in Scotland and ran into me…almost literally.”

“ Took ‘em three years to get custody?”

“Two men.” Harry shrugged that one off easily enough. It was a lot easier to swallow than well there was this Headmaster with his head up his ass… “It wasn’t an easy sell, especially in England where they never legalized any form of gay marriage before the world ended. Remy and Siri had to come to the State to get hitched.”

“They gonna be worried, you been gone so long?” Daryl asked in concern. He knew he about lost his mind with fear for Merle and he was only missing a couple days. Harry’d been with them going on two weeks now.

“Nah.” Harry shook his head. “They know I can handle myself. ‘Sides, they’ve got my younger siblings to run after, keep ‘em from turning their hair grey with worry.”

“How old?” This from Merle who took being a big brother to extremes of protective fury.

“Two and three.”

“Jesus.” Daryl said blowing out a breath. “No wonder your folks got other things to worry ‘bout.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” Harry said, thinking of the accidental magic that has steadily been on the rise…

Harry just rolled his eyes and scoffed when a week later Rick and Shane loaded up Randall to drop him off at a utility station before heading out to hunt with Daryl.

Over the last two weeks the Dixons had both gone hunting with Harry, quickly realizing that he was even quieter than them on his feet and had a good feel for it, bringing back food both with them and on his own, being damned quick and accurate with those knives on his person.

When Harry wasn’t hunting with the Dixons, he was teaching the women, now joined by Carl though Lori still turned up her nose at his lesson, what he could about defending themselves, Rick and Shane finally jumping in with the guns to teach them how to shoot.

It was something Harry debated doing himself but in the end banked on the two cops finally getting
with the program, not wanting extra questions about where Harry would’ve gotten the guns and 
ammo to teach with.

Still, it was with no little trepidation that Harry watched as Rick and Shane returned, Randall still in 
tow.

“Ya know.” Daryl grumbled as they walked inside coming across Lori and Andrea scrapping like 
cats in heat – over chores of all damned things. “Times like this? I’m real tempted to say I told you 
so.”

“You and me both, Daryl.” Harry sighed, the two of them joining Merle in leaning against the far 
wall like the outsiders they’ve very much become as the cracks in the group became more and more 
apparent. Hershel – and as a result the rest of his people – didn’t quite know what to make of Harry 
anymore after his refusal to help with Randall’s leg. So they all stepped lightly around him, while 
the rest just were looking for a strong leader to step up – but tended to lean more towards Rick than 
Harry…probably due to the badge he used to sport.

And that Rick was trying to keep everyone happy while Harry just didn’t give a shit at this point. He 
was just waiting for the other shoe to drop so he can cut his losses, grab the Dixons and whoever else 
was left, and go the fuck home.

He’d had enough of this “making stability” in an unsafe situation shit.

He liked Carol and the kids, even Dale, Glenn, T-Dog, and Jacqui. But not enough to die for them. 
Not when he had two little siblings waiting for “Their Harry” to come home…hopefully with 
presents.

“How are we going to do this?” Andrea asked like the lawyer she used to be. “Majority rules?”

“I just want to hear from everyone.” Rick said after a moment, Harry trading a knowing glance with 
Daryl and Merle.

It won’t matter for shit whatever they decide. Rick couldn’t make a decision as things stand to save 
his own life let alone everyone else’s. Dale would talk him around, then Shane would, then Lori, 
and around and around they’d go and nothing would get solved, leaving a rapist living in the shed.

“You know where I stand.” Harry spoke up first, the Dixons nodding in agreement. “You 
should’ve killed him in the first place instead of dicking around. Put a bullet in him and burn the 
body, like I said a week ago.”

“Agreed.” Shane nodded, albeit reluctantly. “You made a call brother.” He said, gazing calmly at 
Rick…for once. “It was wrong, now we gotta clean it up.”

“He’s just a boy!” Dale protested. “We should give him a chance.”

“How certain are you?” Carol spoke up a hint of new steel in her voice. She remembered well what 
Harry implied about that boy. She didn’t want him within a hundred miles of her daughter and if the 
others had any sense at all they’d think the same. She turned and faced Harry making it clear who 
she was speaking to. “About…what he’s done.”

“Enough to walk out there myself and take care of it myself?” Harry said implacably. “Hippocratic 
Oath bedamned.”

That quieted a lot of the fence sitters, seeing him so resolute. They didn’t know what Harry knew or 
what Daryl had gotten out of him when Rick brought him back…but they knew enough to be
scared. And they were all tired of being afraid.

“Hershel.” Dale appealed to the other voice of reason – usually. “He’s the same age as your girls. You’re really gonna condemn him for being an accomplice?”

Harry snorted at that. Accomplice his ass. His silent contempt for Dale assertion of innocence rang loud and clear through the room.

“Show of hands.” Rick finally called for a vote after several more minutes of debate and entreaties by Dale. “For Harry’s solution.”

Only one hand stayed down, Dale staring at them all with betrayed eyes as he stood and stormed from the room, the sound of the front door and then the RV door slamming the only noise to break the thunderous silence left in his wake.

…

“Think he’s really going to go through with it?” Daryl asked in a low drawl as he and Harry followed Rick and Shane to the shed, Merle returning to the watch post.

A minute shake of his companion’s ebony head was his only answer followed by: “But it’ll get done nonetheless.”

A few minutes of fucking around on the parts of Shane and Rick – including a timely interruption by Carl – and Harry was proven right.

In the end, it was a bullet from his own gun that ended the Randall threat, Rick wavering at the last second.

…

“Best get the truck ready to go.” Harry told the brothers quietly later that night as they watched the sun go down over the Greene farm. “I’m done with this. I’ve seen enough. And when the shit goes down…I’m hoping you two will come with me, whatever the others decide.”

“You got me offa that roof.” Merle said gruffly, clapping the smaller man on the shoulder. “We’re with you.”

…

“You know.” Harry cursed, staring at the herd approaching, drawn no doubt by both the hail of gunfire a week before and then egged on by his execution of Randall earlier that afternoon. It was just after dusk now and Harry easily made out the shuffling forms as they broke the tree line. He was speaking both to himself and to the Dixons that had come over at the sound of his cursing bluestreak. “Sometimes I hate being fucking right.”

“Jeezus.” Daryl breathed, eyes wide before the Dixons were in motion, yelling for everyone to gather up as they grabbed their own packs and strapped up, ready to move out. There was no point in sticking to quiet methods anymore, not with the herd of hundreds, maybe more, shambling out of the woods and swarming the barn.

“Lights off!” Merle barked, “Head count!” Harry demanded at the same time, Patricia and Maggie rushing to kill the lights in the farmhouse as they all crowded into the kitchen.

“Carl’s missing!” Lori cried out, holding herself and shaking, a small backpack already in place over
her shoulders and Rick’s side arm strapped to her hip.

Hmm. Harry thought. Maybe not totally useless after all even if she was a shit wife and absent-minded mother.

“I’m not leaving without him!”

“Officer Friendly’s missing too, Pretty.” Merle murmured in Harry’s ear, the feel of his breath making Harry have to subdue a shiver. “And Deputy Dog.”

“There’s swarmin’ the barn still.” Daryl reported from the window. “Somethin’ out there is drawin’ ‘em. But a couple stragglers are headin’ this a-way.”

“Here’s the plan.” Harry said quietly but with iron-hard resolve, the others even Lori shutting up – for once. “We fueled up the rigs earlier in case of this very event. Everyone has a pack and there’s supplies in each rig. We,” he motioned between himself and the Dixons. “Will keep the walkers off our asses and keep the path clear. Dale, Andrea, Jacqui, Patricia, Otis.” Harry rattled off. “You’re in the RV. Carol, Sophia, T-Dog, Lori – the Jeep. Hershel, Beth, Jimmy – Jimmy’s truck. Maggie, Glenn – the farm truck. We’ll take Daryl’s rig.” Merle’s motorcycle was already in the back. “I want one gunman per rig keeping the walkers offa ya. But once you’re clear no more gunfire, we run quiet as we can for as long as we can heading north.”

“But Carl…” Lori whimpered as the others gathered near the door in the groups and order Harry rattled off with Harry and the Dixons taking point to keep the path clear.

“We’ll do what we can.” Harry promised albeit reluctantly. He wasn’t killing himself or the Dixons for either cop but he’d at least try to save the boy. He was a good kid…just a little naïve and sheltered yet for the land of the living dead.

“Ready?” He asked, more demanded…because ready or not they couldn’t waste any more time. “Let’s go!”

Harry and the Dixons poured out of the house, more quietly than the others expected, sticking to their swords – for Harry and Merle – and Daryl’s crossbow for the moment since they weren’t swarmed…yet. They knew the sound of the engines firing up would be like a dinner bell to the walkers. As it was, they were still focusing on slaughtering the livestock as the grunts and frightened squeals attested, Harry grimacing at the sound. He could execute a murderer or rapist without blinking but innocents being slaughtered – man or animal – never failed to get to him.

And if he was honest with himself – which after the Veil he always tried to be – it was the animals that bothered him more than any person’s death.

Animals – save for Marge’s Ripper and the Basilisk – had never hurt him out of anything but instinct and trying to protect themselves. And those two exceptions were caused by vicious, bloodthirsty people in the first place. So yeah. Hearing walkers attack defenseless animals was harder on Harry than putting a bullet in Randall.

“Fuck me.” Harry cursed, as a red glow lit up the farm. “What the hell are they doing?”

“Well, Pretty.” Merle drawled giving him a playful leer at hearing one of Harry’s favorite sayings. “That is one way to kill walkers.”

“Damn stupid way.” Daryl growled as he took down another walker on the run, switching to his guns after the others started firing up their engines and peeling out of the drive, Jimmy, Otis, T-Dog, and Glenn doing a good job of keeping the rigs and the drive clear.
Daryl slammed into the cab of his truck as his brother and Harry jumped into the bed, Harry shouting:

“What the fuck! They’re on the motherfucking roof!”

They could hear Rick hollering and Carl screaming for help.

“Aw fuck.” Merle reloaded, Daryl already gunning the engine. “This shit is going to get us killed.”

“I said we’d try.” Harry said grimly as they both held on, each of them taking out walkers as they held onto the truck cab with one hand, leaning out on either side of the bed and popping walkers as Daryl tore through walkers towards the barn.

“What the fuck!” Carl shouted, gesturing to the truck barreling towards them as the flames licked up the sides of the barn. “They came! They didn’t leave us!”

Rick was almost on autopilot, the shock of what happened to Shane numbing him to everything but the danger he and Carl in as Daryl peeled to a stop, Daryl and Harry killing as many walkers as they could before quickly reloading, Merle steadying the end of the ladder Rick let down onto the top of the truck cab.

“You first, Carl.” Rick sent down his son, Merle grabbing him as soon as he was within reach, Rick clambering down afterward and jumping the last few feet into the truck bed.

“Let’s go!” Harry shouted, tossing Rick and Carl more ammo as he kept up a steady, smooth rain of fire, not even jolting a fraction as Daryl peeled out once more, gunning for the road.

“Thank you, thank you.” Rick mumbled, his breath coming out in pants and his pupils swallowing his iris from a nasty cocktail of shock and adrenaline. His head cleared a moment as they cleared the herd, Black and the Dixons instantly lowering their guns and settling down, Carl looking around between his father and the others a moment before following the other men’s example. “Lori, the others?”

“Safe, so far as I know.” Harry answered promptly. “We’d,” he jerked a thumb between himself and the Dixons. “Had the rigs and packs prepped…just in case. We got them loaded up and off the farm. They should’ve headed north if they can follow orders worth a damn.”

“Which they cain’t.” Merle snorted, rolling his eyes. “Though Pretty here did a good job of putting the fear of god into ‘em before we loaded up so…maybe they did. For once.”

“Why do you call him that?” Carl asked mystified. It was a question that’d been bugging the boy for the last couple weeks but he’d never got up the gumption to answer. After the Dixons and Harry saving him though…maybe they weren’t as bad as his mama liked to say when they weren’t around. “Pretty?”

White teeth flashed in the darkness as Merle let out a guffaw, Harry already grumbling under his breath as he sat back against the truck cab, hearing Daryl snort from the driver’s seat as the window was still rolled down and Carl’s piping voice tended to carry.

“’Cause he is pretty, boy.” Merle was still chuckling. “Just ‘bout the prettiest man I ever did see is our Harry Black.”

“Oh…” Carl said, contemplating that. He did suppose Harry was pretty when Merle put it like that with his long hair and green eyes. Even his mama had said that the other man had pretty eyes. But that just brought him to another question and since the last one got answered without him being
shushed he decided to risk it and ask another. “Does that make Harry your boyfriend, then? Cause Dad always said he asked Mom out because she was the prettiest girl in school.”

“Oh fuck, kill me know.” Harry groaned quietly as Daryl broke into honest-to-god guffaws inside the truck as Rick hissed a shocked “Carl!”

“What?” Carl asked indignantly. “Sandy from school had two daddies. So I know boys can date and marry boys. We did a whole section on it in social studies.”

“Jesus this kid’s a hoot.” Merle laughed, dark blue eyes twinkling over at the mortified Harry. “I shoulda spent time around ‘im ages ago.”

“Not everyone who thinks someone else is pretty likes them that way Carl.” Rick hurried to diffuse the situation, not trusting the Dixons to not blow up at his son if they decided to get offended by an innocent-enough question. “And not all boys want to date other boys just like not all boys want to date girls. It varies.”

Rick couldn’t believe he was having a truncated Talk with his young son while on the run from a walker herd.

The more things change…he swore, able to find some humor in the situation since none of the other men were seemingly offended.

“And some like both Carl.” Harry said with finality. “One of my dads likes both and one of them only like boys but they fell in love and got married. I like both as well but I like other men more than women, ok?”

Carl thought on that long and hard for several minutes before dropping the embarrassing – for two of the adults – topic, spending the rest of the ride in silence as they hurried to catch up to the rest of the convoy.

Unbeknownst to Harry, he’d just given both Dixons more food for thought than they really knew what to do with, with that little revelation of his.
Six: Homecoming

On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

Author’s Note: I’m aware I skipped the whole Carl-walker-taunting thing and Dale’s death BUT since Harry was keeping such a close eye on him while he was recovering and then keeping the kids busy with training, I figured that Carl wasn’t likely to slip away without Harry noticing or having the opportunity to taunt the walker so it would fight to free itself from the swamp. Chalk that walker up to one of the walkers that were killed on patrol by either Harry, the Dixons, or the cops.

Chapter Six: Homecoming

Approximately five miles out from the farm, Dale rolled the RV to a stop awfully close to the place where it’d originally broken down a couple weeks before, feeling an insanely strong wave of déjà vu.

The rest of the convoy rolled to a stop, Hershel seeming in some state of shock while Lori was sobbing and holding herself the other women gathering around and giving her what comfort they could until the Dixons and Harry arrived to word – one way or another.

“One hundred and sixty years.” Hershel murmured, almost to himself as his daughters came to hug him from each side. “One hundred and sixty years that farm had been in my family. I was born there and wanted to die there. Would’ve stayed and made a stand…”

“And killed yourself in the process.” Maggie bit out, so done with her father’s mule-headedness. “And likely all of us with you: making yourself a suicide and a murderer as your last act on Earth.” She shook him lightly, snapping him out of his daze. “But thanks to Harry and his take-no-bullshit orders, you’re alive, so are we, and we have fuel and supplies to last us until we can find another place to hole up – at least temporarily – and readjust.”

“Harry.” Lori sneered through her tears with no little amount of loathing. “If he hadn’t shot Randall, none of this wouldn’t happened!”

“Jesus, Lori.” Andrea burst out in disbelief. “You wanted that cretin dead the same as everyone else except Dale! Don’t go blaming the man who stayed back to try and save your wishy-washy husband and your boy! Especially since it was your husband who brought danger right to us in the first place.”

“And your boyfriend who laid down a storm of gunfire on an otherwise peaceful farm.” Hershel bit out harshly, still furious over Shane and his casual disregard for human life.

“Rick was just being a good man and Shane was keeping us safe!” Lori snapped back. “I can’t believe how ungrateful…!”

Before she could finish a tirade that would’ve had everyone turning on her, the sound of an oncoming truck, moving at speed, roared through the night.

“Rick?” She broke off hopefully.

“Maybe.” Glenn allowed, stepping up in the wake of all the other “leaders” being either missing or probably dead. “But we can’t be sure, everyone load up just in case we have to take off. And kill
the lights.”

They all obeyed, even if that tone coming from the usual mild man took several of them aback, Maggie giving her man a look of distinct approval at him stepping up and taking charge.

She’d known he had it in him all along, no matter how Rick and Shane disregarded him as a mere “runner” only good for watch or gathering supplies.

Maggie snorted.

As if this group would’ve even made it to her family’s farm without Glenn going on runs for supplies.

Talk about ungrateful, Lori and her men took the cake though some of the others weren’t far behind.

And they weren’t only that way with Glenn and her father, Maggie had noticed well enough. They were the same – only worse – with Harry and the Dixons who were their only hunters besides Otis and Jimmy. And a far sight better at it than either of those two, none of the three men ever coming back from the woods empty handed.

Their hunting while at the farm – when the others were content to just live off the largess of Maggie’s father – had definitely lightened the burden over the last two weeks.

Honestly, without their hunters, even the farm’s bounty wouldn’t have fed them for much longer with over double the amount of mouths to feed, and they would have run short during the winter and early spring, making running for supplies the only option besides starving to death.

The group as a whole let out a relieved breath when they recognized the tall figures of the Dixon brothers and Harry alongside that of Rick and Carl’s much shorter form.

They’d made it, only losing Shane in the process of losing the farm.

Which if they were interested in the cold hard facts…had probably just extended their life expectancies significantly.

“All right.” Harry said firmly, standing arms braced on either side of a map spread out on the hood of Daryl’s truck and flanked by the brothers. They were letting the others console themselves and mourn the farm – though they weren’t sure what Rick was doing with his pacing and muttering other than getting on their last collective nerve. “We need a place to hole up for the night and refuel and resupply in the morning.”

“We’re ‘bout here.” Daryl made a mark with a red Sharpie on the map that Harry had picked up on a run that showed the area – Western Georgia - they were in. He’d known it had to come in handy sooner or later. “And here,” he made a large red circle and slashed through it. “Is the farm.”

“’Bout a handful of miles away.” Merle muttered, eyeing the scale of the map. “Give or take. We’ve got a couple hours before that herd follows us here – if there’s not one closer drawn by the rigs or scavengers –,” meaning the human sort. “Who heard us likewise.”

“Never seen sign of others.” Daryl shook his head. “cept for Randall’s crew and they were in the other direction from what he knew.”

“Still.” Harry sighed, studying the map closer. “We won’t want to count on that with children and a handful of older folk who aren’t as spry as the rest of us.”
“I heard that, sonny.” Hershel commented, making his way over and running a canny eye over
the map, tapping spot about fifteen or twenty miles away up the road. “There’s a little way-point here.
Couple houses, a gas station and repair shop that catered to RV’s and vacationers.”

Harry and the Dixons traded a look, the brothers giving him a short nod. Based on the amount of
fuel they were able to put in the rigs; they might make it. “It’ll be close.” Daryl muttered, scratching
one hand along his jaw. “The RV’s a gas hog.”

“Can we split the group into the other rigs?” Glenn tossed in, having followed Hershel over. “And
siphon the gas from the RV?”

“If Dale agrees.” Harry narrowed his eyes as he did a head count. “It’ll be tight…but it’s our best
bet since that beast tends to break down at the worst possible moment anyway.”

He gave Daryl a nod and the younger Dixon let out a whistle, drawing the groups attention and
bunching them in, Harry handing out orders once they’d gathered.

“There’s a way station Hershel knows about approximately twenty miles up the road.” He told
them, arms crossed and face stony, leaning back against the grill of the truck. “But we’re worried
over the RV. Our best shot is to fill the other rigs with their max loads, siphon the gas from the RV,
and make a break for it. It’s getting darker.” He added when they started to shift, Dale and Lori in
particular. “And colder. We need to move on before that herd or another tails us here.”

“It’s a plan, Dale.” Andrea whispered to the older man. “And not a bad one either.”

The older man gave a sigh, nodding his head reluctantly.

“Good.” Harry said lightly. Not that he was going to listen to any disagreement anyway. They
wanted to fight him right now they can look after themselves. As he’d already told the Dixons,
Harry was done. “Everyone work on moving the supplies into the other rigs’ trunks, listen to Merle
and Daryl as far as load limits goes.” He said commandingly. “Merle and I can work on siphoning
the gas from the RV and splitting it between the other rigs. Let’s move it people, we’re burning the
little light we’ve got left.”

“How’re you going to split the people, hoss?” Merle asked in an aside as he and Harry gathered up
the empty cans and set to work. “This bunch is like oil and water at the best of times.”

“Both the larger farm truck and the jeep can seat six.” Harry muttered, eyeing the others as they set
to work like a pile of pissed-off fire ants on a scattered hill. Which wasn’t far from the truth of the
matter as he thought of it. “I’ll ride in with you two on point, Hershel can fit another in with him,
and that should take care of it. It’s tight but workable, just have to watch the additional weight in
supplies since we’re making like sardines.” He sighed, eyeing the gas spilling into the canister.
“Wish I had my papa’s rig, it can haul more in people and supplies than any of the rigs we’ve got
right now. Or even my rig or bike,” he smirked at Merle’s shocked look. “It’s a helluva lot quieter
than that beast you roam around on.”

“Hell you say.” Merle scoffed in mock-offense. “You watch how you talk about Merle’s lady,
Pretty.”

Once the rigs were loaded and the fuel topped up, the bit of extra in a canister in the back of Daryl’s
truck, Harry handed out the seating assignments, paying exactly zero attention to any bitching on the
part of the others *cough, Lori, cough*.

“The Grimes family and Otis are in the jeep with Carol and Sophia,” he ordered, rolling right over
Lori’s squawking and Rick’s attempt at interrupting. Likely trying to wrest back control of the group. As if Harry was going to let that happen without a fight they couldn’t afford at the moment. “Patricia, dear, you’re in with Hershel, with T-Dog, Jacqui, Dale, and Andrea piling into the farm truck with Maggie and Glenn.” He eyed them all for mutiny before nodding once. “Let’s roll out.”

They made it to the way station about a half-hour later, Harry having kept the speed lower to run back the light of the moon and keep the noise level down. The lack of headlights and engine noise was profitable in terms of avoiding attention. Something the group as a whole couldn’t afford.

The other men stood guard while Harry and the Dixons, Glenn tagging along at the last minute, moved into the gas station and auto shop to clear it. They found a mini-hoard of about a dozen or so walkers locked inside the mechanics’ bay but cleared them with little fuss. Merle, knowing his way around a shop, got the bay doors open and the other men quickly piled the bodies around the back of the gas station, planning on burning them in the morning when it wouldn’t make a beacon in the dark.

A van and a tow truck were in the shop, T-Dog and Daryl easily getting them outside and out of the way while the others backed their rigs in, Merle waiting for everyone to get inside and clear of the doors before shutting them and locking it down until a watch rotation was decided.

Glenn handed out some of the food he’d grabbed from the gas station shelves – mostly junk and crackers but it was better than nothing at all and they didn’t need a fire in a place that was likely flammable.

The kids set down to eating easily enough while the adults all gathered around the shop bench and started discussing their new situation.

“What are we going to do now, Rick?” Lori started things off – to no surprise.

“There has to be another place.” Rick said, his eyes feverish and half-mad. “We just have to find it make it safe.”

“Winter’s comin’,” Daryl drawled. “And we don’t have half enough supplies to make it through.”

“He’s righ’,” Merle grumped. “Come a week or two y’all’ be pickin’ clothes off’a walkers just to keep warm.”

“Can we go back to the farm?” Lori suggested desperately. “They must’ve followed us off…”

“Farm’s lost.” Hershel shook his head mournfully. “Wasn’t safe to begin with…I just didn’t want to see it.”

“Look, look.” Rick said, motioning for people to calm down as they all started talking over one another, except for Harry who was watching it all with a blank look on his face. “I’ll find us a place, make it safe…”

“No offence there, Officer Friendly.” Merle snorted at Rick thinking he was still in charge of things. “But I dunno what la-la land yer livin’ in but it ain’t y’all that led us off’n that farm and to safety. That was Harry. If’n we’re discussin’ leadership, I know who’s got my vote.”

Daryl nodded once, sharply, his jaw set stubbornly, throwing in his lot behind Harry and his brother.

“What…?” Rick spluttered, highly taken aback. “I can’t believe you people.”

“What people?” Harry said, voice low and quiet. “Rednecks? White trash?” He asked eyes
“glinting in the light of the torch lantern out of the shop. “How about the people who’ve fed you, kept you safe, and all the while took your slurs without leaving you high-and-dry? Watch what you say about the Dixons, Ricky.” He sneered. “Far as I’m concerned they’re worth ten of you…with your guns.” He jabbed at Lori, having heard about that doozy from Daryl a long time ago.

“How about the people who’ve fed you, kept you safe, and all the while took your slurs without leaving you high-and-dry? Watch what you say about the Dixons, Ricky.” He sneered. “Far as I’m concerned they’re worth ten of you…with your guns.” He jabbed at Lori, having heard about that doozy from Daryl a long time ago.

“Now boys.” Dale stood up trying to keep the peace. “Let’s stay civil here…”

“Civil?” Rick burst out, veins throbbing in his head and neck. “Civil? I killed my best-friend for you people! Oh don’t give me those looks.” He sneered at the shock on most everyone’s faces. “You saw him: Shane was out-of-control, unhinged. I had to do it. Had to keep us safe. My hands are clean…”

“Maybe so.” Hershel said, eyes dark. “But if the issue at hand is who’s going to lead us now, no offense,” he nodded once at Merle acknowledging his words. “But Harry has helped feed us all, kept us safe, saved your boy when he might’ve died otherwise. He kept us all calm and got us off the farm and to a place we can rest for the night.”

“You…” Rick stuttered, sitting back on his haunches in shock. “You all…”

“You’re so ungrateful!” Lori jumped back in. “My husband has kept us all safe this whole time!”

“What ‘whole time’ Queen Bitch?” Merle asked scathingly. “When he left me to die? When he brought trouble to our front door?” He shook his head mockingly. “Naw. Yer husband might have what it take to lead…but I ain’t seen much of it yet. And I ain’t gonna bank on it when I got someone I trust to have my back already steppin’ up.”

Before Rick or Lori could get into it further with Merle, Glenn spoke up, his voice soft but carrying.

“Green-eyed white boy.”

“What?” Carol asked, lost at the strange non-sequitur. “What was that, Glenn?”

The others turned to study the quietly watching Asian man, even Lori and Rick, Glenn in turn watching Harry as if he’d figured out something profound – and amusing.

“Green-eyed white boy.” He repeated himself. “When I was with the Vatos I talked to several of them including the leader. He told me about this green-eyed white boy who would drop supplies off every week or so like some kind of guardian angel. That this guardian angel had even taken the kids and the more able-bodied of the elderly back to his family’s base. A green-eyed white boy.” Glenn shook his head musingly. “I can’t believe it took me this long to see it. It’s you, isn’t it?” He asked of Harry. “You have a base somewhere. A safe place. And you haven’t said a word.”

Harry gave the other man a nod and a half-grin in agreement.

“What?” Rick shouted, infuriated all over again. “You’ve had a base this whole time and haven’t said anything?”

“What in heavens is wrong with you?” Lori asked teary-eyed. “We lost Shane, almost lost Carl, all because of you…”

“Oh now, that’s rich.” Harry drawled mockingly. “Let’s talk this out just for a second: the facts of the situation.” He focused on each of the adults in turn, the kids having tucked themselves up for the night in the jeep when it appeared the adults were going to be busy for a while. “All I knew about y’all was that you left a man to die, tied up, with walkers at the door. That was it.” Harry arched a knowing brow. “If you were in my shoes would you lead those people to your family’s doorstep.”
Daryl snorted. “Not fuckin’ likely.”

“Fast-forward a bit.” Harry made a twirling motion with his hand. “Merle told me what he knew of the group: weak with a hot-headed leader and a wife beater in the mix. Not the best incentive to play happy families. We came looking for Daryl, found a lot less people than expected, and ended up at the CDC. But that didn’t last long…” He drawled. “Now did it? By then I knew I was willing to help y’all out…even if just for the kids…but I still wasn’t set on bringing y’all home like stray puppies or not.” He sneered. “Couldn’t count on you not to bite the hand that fed you.”

He held up a hand when Rick made to protest, carrying on.

“Before we get much clear of the CDC, the RV breaks down, and Lori goes missing.” He rolled his eyes at that bit of epic suicidal stupidity. “Again, I was tempted to leave with the Dixons but I didn’t want to abandon the kids like sitting ducks in the middle of a highway, ripe for walkers or scavengers to pick off.”

“Good of you.” Carol admitted, not sure she would’ve had Harry’s patience with everyone.

“And then,” he threw up his hands. “Carl gets shot and needed tending, especially with his parents too busy with their own drama to look after him. You know how many times I had to keep that boy from wandering off because you two were too busy to look after him?” Harry didn’t intend to reveal the last but he’d been wanting to rip into them both for a solid week…and he had to admit it felt good. “Do you? But before he was healed up enough so I could finally fucking leave and get back home, what does Rick do but bring home a rabid dog I ended up having to put down.” He felt remarkably in-tune with Severus Snape at the moment, fearing his face was going to freeze in a permanent sneer any second. “As if bat-shit-crazy-Shane wasn’t enough, you had to bring home trouble. I wouldn’t have had either of them within a hundred miles of my people, Rick, lifetime friendship or not.”

“So what?” Lori snapped back, Rick nearly comatose from the shock of Harry finally pushing back. “You sat up on high judging everyone else? Seeing who was what? Worthy of meeting your precious family?” She gave a derisive sniff, eyeing both him and the Dixons with a gimlet eye. “If they’re what you consider good people then I wonder what kind you hold dear.”

“That’s not fair, Lori.” Maggie jumped on her words, eyes wide at the never-ending stream of bullshit that poured from the other brunette’s mouth. “It wasn’t like we didn’t do the same thing when your group rolled up to the farm.”

“Maggie’s right.” Hershel said with a sigh. “I wasn’t any more of a fan of Shane than Harry, in fact I ordered Rick to remove him from my farm more than once…for all the good it did me.”

“Everyone casts judgement these day, Lori.” Jacqui said in her quiet, grace-filled way. “Even you, just look at what you just said and implied about Harry’s own kin. Harry’s just been more open about it.”

“Jacqui and the others are right.” Glenn said with a firm nod.

“It ain’t like he was bein’ subtle.” Daryl snorted. “Merle an’ I had him figured out within’ the first day or two.”

Now that took the others aback.

“You knew?” Lori breathed through her nose like a pissed-off horse. “You knew he had some kind of base, safety, and you didn’t say anything either?”
“Why would we?” Merle shot back at once, making them all fidget. “It ain’t like this is the first time y’all ’ve talked shit ’bout us dirty rednecks now is it?” He gave a bitter laugh. “If’n it’d been up ta me, we woulda left as soon as I met up with Daryl again. And fuck the rest of ya just as y’all left me to die.”

“We can go around in circles about this all night.” Harry spoke up after several long silent minutes. “But the fact of the matter is, you’ve got three choices the way I see it. One: we break into groups; one with me, one with Rick. Two: we splinter completely; everyone goes their own way. Three:” here his voice returned to the steel-edged tone of command he’d used in times of crisis or when handing out orders. “You all stick with me, come back to my base, and toe the line.” He pinned several of them with his flashing emerald gaze. “That means no bitching, no drama-laden bullshit. You follow the same rules as everyone else, listen to the chain of command, and pull your weight.” He focused mostly on the Grimes but also shot looks at Dale and Jimmy, especially as he mentioned that there were rules and a chain of command, both of those men having proven to have problems with such in the past. “There’s no loafing or free rides. Everyone does their part and pitches in for the good of everybody, from Alpha to Omega to the youngest kids and oldest elder.”

“Kids?” Carol said hopefully. Others her age would be good for Sophia.

“Kids.” Harry nodded. “They have lessons and chores, but time to play and be kids too. It’s not a work camp or jail. But everyone helps even if it’s just picking up their toys and rinsing their plates so adults don’t have to.”

“Who’s in charge?” Rick asked with narrowed eyes, making Harry roll his with a groan.

“Does it really matter?” He asked in exasperation.

“Rick.” Lori turned to her husband, for once being a voice of reason instead of a shit-starter. “I’m pregnant. I can’t deliver this baby with only you and Carl. We need Harry even if it’s just until the baby’s born.”

“That’s an option as well.” Harry snapped his fingers before pointing at the infuriating woman. “If you want to leave after the baby’s born we won’t stop you, hell.” He laughed drily. “I’d probably throw a parade, neither of you have done much to get in my good books.”

“Whatsoever you decide, Rick.” Hershel told him standing with his family to go get some shut-eye. “We’re following Harry.”

“Us too.” Jacqui spoke for herself and T-Dog, Andrea and Glenn nodding along.

“Dale?” Rick asked, noting the older man had yet to jump on the Harry bandwagon.

“I don’t feel right about following a killer…” Dale said plaintively. “And that’s the gods-honest truth. It doesn’t feel right.”

“Then don’t.” Harry shrugged. He couldn’t be fussed either way. “It’s no skin of mine.”

With that, Harry with the Dixons dogging his heels, left for Daryl’s truck, the three of them agreeing for splitting the watch between them, Harry starting then Daryl then Merle since Harry was needed to navigate and Daryl to drive in the morning.

Harry found himself glad that they’d locked down the shutters after him as he climbed up the side of the building. He wouldn’t have put it past Rick or Lori to take off in the night with a bunch of the supplies with them. Well… That last bit was more Lori than Rick. But with as sketchy as the lawman was being since leaving the farm, Harry couldn’t count it out.
The next morning found the same trio huddled around the map on Daryl’s truck.

Everyone else was up and at it, clearing the houses (T-Dog, Glenn, Rick, Jimmy), gathering supplies (Maggie, Beth, Patricia, Otis), siphoning gas (Andrea, Dale, Hershel), or minding the two kids (Lori, Carol, Jacqui) while gathering the rest of the food and supplies from the gas station. Harry and the Dixons were keeping watch after lighting up the bonfire with the walker bodies, more being added as the other men cleared the houses for the others to raid, and plotting their path to what was currently being called Harry’s Place in lieu of Harry providing an actual name. Which it had. Harry just wasn’t Mr. Sharing-and-Caring at the best of times and the Grimes (at least the two adults) somehow managed to grate on his nerves just by existing at this point with Rick’s post-murder-angst over Shane and Lori…being Lori.

“What’s the verdict?” Merle asked as he rubbed at his tired eyes and drank down an energy drink from the gas station stock.

“A week.” Harry mused, studying the map. “Give or take. We’re on the dead-wrong side of it. There’s only one access road and it’s here.” He tapped a spot almost fifty miles off from where they stood. “Could be longer depending on how many jam-ups and walkers we run into.”

Merle and Daryl studied the point he’d tapped on the map, arching identical brows at the location.

“Ain’t nothin’ out there.” Daryl mused, familiar with the area. “Cept’n’ the prison and the national forest.”

“There wasn’t.” Harry agreed. “But around six years back the state but a plot of formerly-protected land up for sale, several square miles worth. But…”

“Ain’t nobody wanted it.” Merle finished the thought easily. “On account of there bein’ dick out there but convicts and trees.”

Harry nodded easily agreeing. That was one of the reasons what Pandora chose it for them. Hard to get to and absolutely nobody around.

“My family wasn’t afraid of one and liked the other.” He noted drily. “And now we’re all thankful for it.”

“What the hell you doin’ makin’ runs to Atlanta for?” Daryl couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Let alone every week? Might as well go to creation and back.”

“Not really a problem for me.” Harry answered absently. “You’ll see what I mean soon enough.” He rolled up the map and tucked it back in the glovebox of the truck. “Let’s put some fire under some asses. We’re burnin’ daylight.”

That first day went okay.

The others weren’t pleased with the length of time to get to their destination but the promise of a safe place was enticing enough to keep them civil at the least – for however long that blessing would last. They ran into a couple of minor jams but with their man power they cleared them and looted the cars in less than half it would’ve taken them before. A good deal of that was Harry’s no-nonsense leadership, giving everyone a job and setting them to it, not letting anyone stand around like tits on a bull.

Rick had to admit the younger man was good at it – fitting jobs to the people he had on hand. That
didn’t mean he liked it, especially when Harry had an acidic edge to his tongue he wasn’t shy about using. At least anymore now that they’ve thrown in with him. It just made Rick that much more decided about taking off once the baby was born. He’d been Alpha all his life, being knocked down to Beta, or more recently it felt like Omega, didn’t set well with him.

But there was little he could do about the status quo…except stew and brood and take his knocks.

He’d seen for himself what having a member undermining the leadership could unleash when it was Shane doing it to him, and like it or not that wasn’t a situation they could afford – at the moment.

Harry was strict about combing over every pile up they came to for supplies, the same with the houses or gas stations they would crash in for nighttime.

Every day it was the same routine:

Wake up, split into the established work groups, and get to it.

Someone would start a fire; walker bodies would be added as the clearing group took them out.

Then the supply runners would pick the houses/stores/whatever in the immediate area clean and split the supplies between the rigs.

A couple people would stand watch and mind the kids, another couple would siphon gas.

Similar when they came to jam-ups on the roads, no matter how big or small.

First they’d clear the cars, burning bodies and marking the ones with gas.

Someone on watch, others siphoning, others supply-picking, with the strongest of the group moving the cars to the edge of the road.

Somadays they made good time, others they’d run into a massive tangle that would take hours to clear.

But they always had food and water and gas.

And the road rolled on before them with the siren-call of safety and home calling them ever onward.

People felt good, useful, even Harry’s biggest detractors had to search hard for things to nitpick or complain about. Not that he paid them any mind.

Harry was going home after too damned long gone.

And that was all that mattered to him, the rest might as well be gnats buzzing around his ears.

…

“Well, ain’t this a bitch.” Merle stated in his gruff way, Daryl snorting in agreement as the truck rolled to a stop.

The reason: a massive pile-up bigger than any they’d seen before, only a few short miles from where Harry said the access road was.

Said leader looked up at the cloudy sky then his watch, getting a read on how long they had until dark.
The others piled out of their rigs, waiting for Harry to give the go-ahead to start in on the pile-up though there was no little amount of trepidation in doing so. This was way bigger than any they’d dealt with thus far. Most of them felt their muscles twinge in complaint at the thought of moving that many cars out of their way.

Harry climbed up on top of the truck roof, trying to get a bead on how far the pile-up stretched. While he was at it, he spotted something that made him smile, or he would if it turned out to be what he thought it was.

“Here’s the plan.” He said jumping down elegantly from the roof, the smooth motion rising more than one brow. It was the first off thing they’d ever seen him do. He was getting more comfortable letting loose now that he was close to home. “There’s a couple of semi-trucks up toward the front of the blockage. Merle and I are going to run ahead and see if either runs. If they do when we’ll be able to move all of the supplies but our go-bags into the back of one. Either way, that’s where we’ll sleep tonight.”

“In a truck container?” Lori asked incredulously. “Why on earth would we do that instead of find another house?”

“Because we’re close, sugar tits.” Merle spat off to the side, missing Lori by inches. “Real close.”

They all murmured in excitement at that.

“How close?” Hershel asked, holding Beth close.

“If it wasn’t for this…” Harry waved to the mess in front of them. “We would’ve had warm beds tonight. We’re that close. Instead we have work to do and the promise of a warm bed tomorrow. Time to get cracking.”

With that Harry and Merle trotted off at an easy lope while the others split into their work groups.

“Was it smart, tellin’ ‘em that?” Merle asked as they quickly came in sight of the trucks Harry’d spotted, only running into a pair of walkers that were easily dealt with. “It’d be real easy to take off now and lead an unfriendly group to your doorstep…if they were of’a mind.”

“I’d like to see them try.” Harry answered with a knowing smirk, thinking of the wards that encircled the property, let alone the rest of the defenses.

They’d been slowly expanding the ward scheme, taking more and more land for themselves and enclosing it within their wards. It was easy enough to do with only the national forest on two sides and the former prison-grounds on the other. Fences and outposts could wait until they had more people, one of the reasons Harry’d stuck it out so long with this lot rather than cut his losses and go looking for other, easier, people to join up with their outfit.

Harry and Merle split off, each investigating one of the two most promising-looking semi-trailers. Each were newer models, the kind with almost a full-apartment in the cab, and hauling who-knew-what. Well, quickly Harry and Merle each knew, Harry’s truck contained what looked like things for a warehouse store: toilet paper, paper towels, dry goods and non-perishables. A treasure trove in other words, once he shuffled the boxes around and ditched the things that were useless (TV’s, DVD players, back-massaging chairs) all things that were both electronic and mostly made of plastic that ran off way too much electricity and couldn’t be repurposed.

Merle’s load was less useful, being a refrigerated trail filled with now-spoiled and rotting foods in massive quantities, both trucks probably going to a Sam’s Club or Costco or similar store in Atlanta
“How much fuel you got?” Merle asked as he climbed up into the other trailer and helped Harry shift around the boxes, making room for people to sleep for the night and their own supplies. Some would fit in the cab but at least a couple would have to crash in with the supplies.

“Quarter tank.” Harry grunted as he moved a particularly stubborn box of, he looked at the label, multivitamins. Well with a pregnant lady and kids those would come in handy. “You?”

“Almost full.” Merle sighed in exasperation. It wouldn’t be worth the aggravation to swap the cabs. “I’ll start this one up, make sure it runs, before I start siphoning the diesel.”

“Okay.” Harry agreed absently. “I saw a couple emergency containers in with the tools on this one, yours is probably the same. Might be empty but will help with the siphoning.”

Merle just grunted in recognition and left Harry to his work. It was too dangerous to go anywhere alone so the two of them would stick around the semi’s until their work was done, Harry getting a jump on cleaning out the cars and moving them from around them until Merle was finished. Both of them knew there was no way the others would make it to them before Merle was done siphoning, there was just too many cars between the two points.

They were right too, Merle and Harry finishing with the trucks, managing to move the cars around them enough to get the second semi off the road, before the others were even close to making it to them.

Jogging back, Harry gave the good news: they had a secure place to sleep even if it was the back of a big rig.

“Don’t worry about organizing your haul or splitting up the loads today.” He told them with an easy-going smile, the first of its kind they’d ever seen on his face. “Just load up our trucks and the jeep, it’ll all fit in the trailer, no problem.”

Andrea blinked at the way the usual-stern and stoic man lit up with a simple, genuine smile, bringing life to his eyes and youth to his face. For the first time, she believed that he really was only twenty-one, the rest of the time he just seemed so serious. Far too mature for his age. But that was what the outbreak had done to people, she knew from experience.

Aged them far before their time.

“We’re taking it with us?” Dale asked surprised. He was under the impression they were going to sleep there and take what they could from it before carrying on, the same as they’d done with others along the way.

“We are.” Harry nodded before explaining. “We’re close enough now that I’m not as worried over the noise it’ll make or the diesel it’ll need. If we’d been closer to start with I would’ve kept the RV if it made the trip.”

Of course, he made no mention of the tanker-trucks of gas or diesel he’d shrunk down and stowed in his bag, or the trailers of crisps and soda and water that he’d done the same with as they came across them, popping back to the trackers he placed on them once everyone else was asleep.

This trip was hard on him, and his family, mainly in worry and stress but with the boost in numbers and sheer amount of supplies he’d sourced, it had been more than worth it now that the end was in sight. Even deal with Shane’s idiotic ass. For making dead certain good life for his siblings would continue on, Harry would do it all over again.
Most would all him over-cautious or paranoid with his worry over the supplies lasting or the multiple fences and layers on layers of warding.

Harry just preferred to, as Moody would be proud to know, practice Constant Vigilance.

They made it to the truck and trailer before the sun started to go down, Harry setting some of them to moving the supplies inside the trailer from their rigs while Dale took his watchpost on top of the big rig’s cab, the rest of them continuing on with the cars Harry hadn’t cleared yet in the time it took Merle to siphon the diesel into their new ride.

There were still cars to clear and push out of the way by the time Harry called for everyone to pack it in, Hershel ready and waiting with aspirin for aching bodies (except Harry who always refused for some reason…) and Carol and Lori handing out canned rations, bags of chips/crisps, and bottles of water, Glenn taking his up onto the cab to eat and relieve Dale from watch.

“It’ll be a bit tight.” Hershel observed, eyes looking around the dim storage trailer that had rapidly filled between the goods already present and those they’d added to it. “But it’ll be more than fine for one night.”

Nods abounded as most agreed but were too busy eating or just plain too tired to talk.

“You three on watch again tonight?” Maggie asked with an arched brow. Not that she really needed to. Harry and the Dixons always took watch through the night. They let others cover it during the day when their strong backs were needed for other work, but the rest of the time they trusted no one but themselves on guard.

Everyone could tell it chafed at Rick especially, but no one wanted to push it when it’d been made clear that first night that the trio had zero problem leaving troublemakers to find their own way and their own place.

Most of them respected that about Harry, even if they didn’t appreciate it much.

Harry nodded, swallowing before saying: “We’ll bunk in the cab, there’s room enough for two while the other’s on watch.”

“Twin bed?” Dale asked with amusement. “With two of you?” He snickered imagining it. “Going to be awfully comfy in there.”

“Ha ha.” Harry rolled his eyes as several of the group coughed to cover their laughs. “I went to a boarding school; this isn’t the first time I’ve had to share close quarters with another guy. And since I’m bi I certainly hope it won’t be the last or I might just cry.”

That shut most of them up, most of them never even considering that not all of them were straight.

“You’re a fag, man?” Jimmy scoffed with a sneer clear in his voice even if his face was shaded by the looming night.

“Fag, poofter, queer, shirt-lifter.” Harry rattled off cool as can be. “All ignorant ways of mocking someone who prefers their own gender – which I happen to do. But I also scored plenty with the fairer sex in college too, Jimmy Boy.” He said cheerily. “I’m comfortable with who I am and my family will accept whoever I choose to love…could you say the same, even before the world ended?”

…
Silence pervaded the container as Harry stormed out, they could hear him climbing up to the top of the cab and sending Glenn back down, taking first watch a bit earlier than normal.

The Dixons climbed to their feet, intending to move into the cab or go talk to their friend – and yes, they truly counted Harry as a friend and gave a shit about him – when Jimmy spoke up, cutting off Hershel who was probably going to make some kind of excuse for his behavior.

“I didn’t mean to piss him off.” Jimmy said, a bit subdued. “Let him know that, will y’all.”

“We’ll tell ’em.” Daryl said, before warning him and by proximity all the rest. “But y’all say shit like that where we’re goin’…ya ain’t gonna last long.”

“What d’ya mean?” Carl piped up, reminding everyone that there were kids present…kids who soaked up everything like a damn sponge.

“Harry has two dads, remember, Carl?” Rick supplied to everyone else’s shock as the Dixon’s left on cat-like feet. “The name Jimmy used and the ones Harry said are all bad names for two men who love each other.”

“Boys who like boys?” Carl asked frowning. “But I thought you said that was okay?”

“What have you been telling our son?” Lori hissed, infuriated and disgusted. If that…freak wasn’t a doctor she’d have Rick take them away from here right this instant. Poisoning Carl’s mind with the notion that faggots were okay…if his daddy had heard him…it wasn’t the way either of them were raised and it wasn’t going to be the way she raised her children.

“The truth.” Rick said resolutely, well aware of his wife’s prejudices on this matter but not sharing them. “Gay people are just people who love differently than straight people and there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Amen.” Andrea muttered, irritated that it even needed to be said. She’d spent her whole law career working with civil rights issues, she’d hoped that in the wake of the outbreak that the whole stupid gay/straight debate had been left behind.

A fool’s wish from what she’d seen but one she still hoped for nonetheless.

... 

Noon the next day saw Harry pointing out a well-concealed side-street from the highway…one that had a sign for West Georgia Correctional Facility marking it.

“A prison?” Some of the others muttered, only to hold their tongue when instead of following the pavement, he had them turn-off onto an almost-invisible gravel road.

One that if he wasn’t with them they never would have found with the number of wards and charms that covered it.

Daryl shivered, drawing Harry’s attention as the truck’s tires left the pavement entirely.

“You ok?” He asked, wondering over the timing.

“Felt like someone walked over my grave it all.” Daryl drawled, Merle nodding mutely in agreement.

Huh. Harry sat back in bemusement. The Dixons actually felt the wards as they crossed them.
They must be at least a little supernaturally sensitive to do so, neither of the inmates they’d taken in had ever said anything or their farm hands except for Max.

It wouldn’t surprise him.

Pandora had warned that there were “sensitives” and physics and the like in their new home, if no actual active magical culture.

For one thing, the Dixons having some sort of preternatural something to them would explain why Harry was so drawn to them despite the hopelessness of his regard. Like was drawn to like after all. And with all of them being half-broken survivors, a bit of magical…residue…would be all it would take for his instincts to settle on the brothers – one or both his hormones really didn’t differentiate.

“Fuck me.” Daryl breathed, eye wide as they came up to the first gate, the only access point to the gate system that led to the main property. The fence towered high, taller than a man, and solid reinforced steel in this area. First-gate blended into the solid grey wall seamlessly…you’d never find it unless you knew it was there.

Harry learned forward with a grin. “Is that an invitation?” He teased.

The other man grumbled, Merle echoing him at Harry’s joke, all three of them piling out of the truck as the others came to a stop, Dale bringing up the rear at the wheel of the semi.

“Well.” Hershel drawled, eyeing the massive sheer wall that blocked the road. “You were right about the security here, that’s for sure.”

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” Harry chuckled. “This is only the first fence, there’s another five between here and the grounds proper, and another between there and the main house.”

“It’s a compound.” Rick noted eyeing the high fence, spotting a tower in the distance.

“Like a cult?” Lori frowned in consternation.

“Not in the least.” Harry shook his head. “We’re an old family from England.” He gave the quick and easy version. “When we moved here we built something that reminded us of home: a very old estate.”

“Castles, moats, drawbridges?” Andrea asked with a little laugh.

“Well, light on the moats.” Harry laughed along with the others. “And we don’t have a drawbridge but the main house could probably pass for an old Norman tower easily enough.” He thought a moment before shaking his head. “Whatever you do, don’t suggest a moat and drawbridge to my dad, he’ll actually try and install one and will drive me and Papa mad talking him out of it.”

“This banter is nice and all.” Dale frowned looking at the woods that hemmed them in on all sides. “But I’m feeling a bit…cornered.”

“And exposed.” Lori murmured, drawing Carl into her side.

“What’re we waiting for?” The older man asked, only to be answer by the hiss and grind of a heavy gate being unlocked and starting to move.

“That.” Harry jerked a thumb over his shoulder, knowing that either his dad or papa had arrived and was opening the gate. Turning on his heels, he strode over and was quickly pounced on by a taller ebony-haired man with a trim goatee. After a long clench and some back slapping, Harry led the
taller – and older they could clearly see – man over to the group. “Everyone.” He said with no little ado. “I’d like to introduce Lord Sirius Black,” he paused smirking at the shock covering more than one face at the title. “My dad.”

... 

“Lord?” Merle drawled taken aback.

He’d known Pretty was well-off if only from the way he spoke and the med-school bit. But having an actual English Lord for a da? Shit. No wonder he didn’t pay ol’ Merle any mind…

“Oh the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black.” Sirius supplied in his smooth baritone with the rich, aristocratic accent. “Not that that means much nowadays, with only a handful of us left.”

Harry quickly ran through the introductions, Siri shaking or kissing hands as the case may be, the old dog still holding onto his nearly-lethal charms.

The flirt.

He was lucky Moony knew he loved him to hell and back or one of these days they might end up with a Padfoot-skinned-rug for the dining room.

After the introductions, Sirius passed Harry an old-fashioned scroll and a black quill, to everyone’s befuddlement, having never seen such implements in person outside a museum let alone in actual use.

“What’s that?” Sophia asked, interest peaked at the strange tools.

“This, my dear Sophia.” Harry explained with a flourish as Padfoot went to open the gate enough to allow the cars through. The semi would have to be shrunk but the rest would make it easily. Sirius would use his wand out of sight to open the heavy gate, then transform back and run to the second gate that was close and open it as well, the convoy having to pass through both as it would be too long to let everyone in, close the first gate and then open the second. “Is as the late Dr. Jenner would say, the price of admission.”

He made eye contact with every member of the group, even the Dixons who normally he knew would have his back. This was no time for making mistakes or assumptions. It was the blood-bound contract that would prevent them from talking about his home, his people, and their unique abilities to anyone else who wasn’t “In the know.”

The same that all their workers had signed on hire and that the inmates and the Vatos refugees had agreed to as well down to the smallest child of the age of reason.

*Constant Vigilance.*

“But what is it?” She asked again, still confused.

“A contract.” Harry explained. “A binding contract. It covers the three rules that everyone has to agree to before being welcomed into my home. One: You will never, knowingly or unknowingly, reveal the location of the Black Lands. Two: You will never, knowingly or unknowingly, reveal the secrets of those who call the Black Lands home. Three: You will abide by the rules and laws set down but the leader of the Black Lands and accept any punishment deemed appropriate for breakage of said laws as adjudicated and sentenced by the leader of the Black Lands.”

Well…that was the gist of it anyway. The actual wording replaced ‘leader’ with ‘Alpha’ since the
Blacks were a pack – werewolf, Animagi, or child. There was also some fine print involving a Stilled-Tongue enchantment on the parchment that would keep anyone from even thinking about telling an outsider about the property or the magicals who call it home.

As a blood-bound contract written with magic and signed in blood, there wasn’t any real way for mundanes to break or fight it.

But Harry didn’t believe in leaving things to chance, not with the protection of his people, not after almost losing Siri to the Veil.

There was some grumbling and more than one exclamation of shock over the blood-quill, something Harry was still irritated Pandora sent along even if it did come in handy, but in less than twenty minutes everyone had signed including Carl and Sophia.

Rolling up the parchment he sent it back to his study with a wave of the wand that appeared in his hand to the groups shock, then shrunk down the semi-truck with a series of flicks before levitating it and snatching it out of the air before their very eyes.

“Congratulations.” Sirius called grandly with a barking laugh. “And welcome to the Black Lands. Or perhaps,” he shifted from Padfoot and back again. “I should say: welcome down the rabbit hole.”

Harry rolled his eyes drawling, as he knew what Siri was going for: “We’re all mad here.”

…

“What the fuck was that?” Daryl burst out, his eyes about ready to pop out of his head.

“Magic.” Harry said obdurately for probably the sixth or seventh time answering the same damn question from different sources. “Real, wand-waving, shape-changing, magic. Coming along or going to scatter now that you’re two miles from safety and a warm bed.”


“Real as Daryl’s chupacabra.” Merle said well on the way to belief but always ready to take the piss outta his brother.

“The fuck.” Daryl whirled on his brother. “I know wha’ I saw. And this time I saw a guy, real as you or me. Make shit disappear and a semi the size of a hot-wheels. Then another guy, also real, turn into a damn dog!”

“Magic,” Harry sighed, rapidly getting bored of repeating himself. “Magic is real, at least as far as me, my dads, and my siblings are concerned. Now we can all debate whether what I just did was real or not – and yes, it was – but that gate only stays open for a certain amount of time. So if you’re coming load up, if not, adios and vaya con dios and shit.”

With that he jogged off to stand next to Siri, rolling his eyes at his dad.

Some people could see the impossible happen right in front of them and still not be able to admit that there was more to the world than what’s explained between the pages of a book.

It made doing magic easy, since no one ever believed it, but when it came time to actually convincing people it existed and had real value and even limitations, it got old fast.

The others traded looks, resigned, scared, or otherwise at the thought of being left out in the cold in the middle of nowhere. When it came down to it, weird shit happening and rolling with it or dealing
with walkers and winter coming with no shelter and Harry having the bulk of the supplies, they shut up and followed, firing up the rigs with Dale climbing into the back of the Greene’s farm truck since his other ride was now in Harry’s pocket.

“Interesting group you found, pup.” Was all Sirius had to say, face and voice bland as Petunia Dursley’s cooking. “Especially those two tall drinks of water. No wonder you were gone so long… trying to bag some strange?”

“Oh, shut up, Dad.” Harry groaned, blushing lightly. “They’re not even bent.”

Sirius snorted a coughing laugh. Like the smaller – though that didn’t say much, what did they feed people in backwoods Georgia? – brother Daryl, Sirius knew what he saw. And what he saw was two pairs of eyes checking out his Prongslet’s perky ass.

Harry huffed and stalked off to the second gate, each of them waving the rigs through as the drivers carefully navigated the tight turn between the massive outer wall and the smaller-but-still-large inner wall. Once the tail car had cleared the first gate, Sirius tapped a rune that blended almost seamlessly into the wall with his wand and the massive door swung closed and locked with a resounding clang.

Daryl in point position had driven slowly alongside Harry as he jogged forward until the ebony-haired younger man motioned for him to stop and wait, the two Dixons staring out at the trees and woodland all around them – complete with wildlife in an abundance they hadn’t seen in months.

“Magic or no magic.” Daryl said, rubbing at his arms having gotten that tingly-feeling from the drive all over again. “This already looks better than anything I seen in ages.”

“Yer righ’ ‘bout that little brother.” Merle nodded, eyes spotting deer tracks without even looking too hard. “Plenty o’ game here, and not any walkers to go along with it or else the wildlife wouldn’t be around.”

“Yup.” Daryl said, lighting up a smoke then handing it to his brother and then getting on for himself. “We stayin’?”

“Shee-it.” Merle blew out a smoke ring as he eyed the Pretty through the haze. “Course we are.”

“We scrapin’?” Was the next question, light blue eyes catching the direction of dark blue.

“Naw.” Merle shook his head, a bit ruefully. It’d been ages since he had a good scrap with his brother. “He ain’t one to scrap over. Like as to beat both our heads in for it than ‘preciate it. We just gotta try a bit harder is all, now that we got the time and space for it. Like fishin’.” He blew out more smoke. “Set the bait and see what bites.”

Daryl nodded, glad that they weren’t going to come to blows over the man they both fancied. They’d never sat down and talked it out proper-like before, but both brothers were comfortable enough to try now that they’d heard from his own lips that he went for his own team. Neither of them was gay or straight per se…more…opportunistic and liked what they liked.

And in this case with a tight ass and a bad-ass attitude, they both liked.

The subject was dropped as the topic of it sauntered over to Daryl’s open window, showing no sign that he’d heard – and was rather stunned by – most of their short meeting of the minds.

One thing kept playing back through his mind: He ain’t one to scrap over. He. He. Fuck him running, the Dixons were gay or at least some form of bi. It was mind-blowing…and a little irritating considering he’d been silently pining for weeks convinced it was hopeless.
The fuckers with their straight pussy talk and their straight macho attitudes and their straight…straightness.

“What’s the plan, hoss?” Daryl asked, giving no sign that he’d just been eyeing the other man up alongside his brother.

“It’s about a hundred yard to the next fence-line and a half-mile east to the next gate.” Harry reported. “Dad Siri is going to lead the way as Padfoot – the black dog.” He added at the confused flash in Daryl’s icy blue eyes. “Think you can track him?”

“Shee-it.” Daryl drawled. “That ain’t no question a’ tall.”

“Glad to hear it.” Harry chuckled, happy that at least the Dixons were putting aside the weirdness of earlier and getting down to business. “I’ll hop in the back and bang on the side when we’re close, Siri might run ahead and open the gate so we can drive straight through, if he does pull up about fifty yards in and a hundred to the west, we’ll have to zig-zag through the fenced zones to hit the different gates.”

“Someone went all out designing this place.” Merle said with an arch of a brow. “I’ve seen military bases less secure and well-laid-out.”

Harry chuckled, blushing a bit at Merle unknowingly complimenting him saying: “Thanks, I spent weeks working on the original schematic before deciding on this one.”

With that shocking bit of information, Harry swung into the back of the truck, easily navigating the group through the secured zones with Sirius taking point as Padfoot, shifting each time to open and close the gates.

When they breached the treeline gate, Harry leaned down and warned Daryl to watch for livestock or random dogs.

“Livestock, dogs?” Merle asked, a boggled look on his face.

“Home farm like back home.” Harry explained, as Daryl navigated slowly over the pasture land toward the stone wall – the first like it they’d seen the rest being some form of steel or other metal – and the gate he was told was on the opposite side of the compound. “We run sheep flocks for wool, meat, leather, milk for drinking, butter and cheese, and tallow to make candles and soap. That means we also have a pack of sheep dogs to tend them – a mix of German Shepherds and Border Collies. Enough plus frozen samples of semen that we won’t run into a DNA drought any time soon.”

“What the fuck.” Daryl breathed as he caught sight of a flock and both a man and dogs tending it. “It’s like y’all were expecting the world to end.” He did a double take when he caught sight of the expression on Harry’s face, having to quickly correct his steering when he jerked the wheel. “Ya were?”

Merle studied Harry’s caught expression through narrowed eyes. “There wasn’t enough time between you hearin’ about the virus at school and doin’ all this. This takes years of advanced preparedness. Preppers? Doomsday-types? Green-peacers? Or just regular-old crazy?”

“Short answer?” Harry asked, with a snort. “Yes. All of the above depending on how you look at it. If you’re willing to wait it out until the peanut gallery are all squared away, I’ll give you the long answer later tonight…if you still want it by then.”

“That works fer me.” Daryl agreed as they came up to the next gate, it already open and the black dog – or the man he/it turned into – nowhere in sight.
“Fair warning.” Harry said with a shrug as he directed Daryl to park in the graveled area next to one of the barns. “We’ve kinda collected all types – both before and after the outbreak – I’d watch the goading based on the easy-kick like color or sexuality while around other people.”

“Shee-it.” Merle grumbled. “Take away all mah entertainment why don’ ya.”

Harry just grinned and swung down from the truck, walking a short distance away from them and starting to set out a series of what looked like toys but were quickly resized, showing both the semi they found the day before and others – almost a dozen others. Tankers with fuel or oil or diesel, even a water truck. Supply trucks with logos from companies now dead-and-gone like the rest of the world – canned goods, dry goods, soda, even a beer truck. Both the Grimes group and Harry’s people watched, with varying looks of shock, amusement, or giddiness on their faces.

“Merlin’s knickers!” A gruff voice called out joyfully. “That’s one way to show up your Dad’s bragging about the haul he brought in last week from Nawlins.”

An amber-eyed man with the massive build – if an inch or two shorter than Harry – to match his gruff bass growl swooped the emerald-eyed man up and swung him around saying:

“Welcome home, pup. You’ve been missed, more than you know.”
Seven - Down the Rabbit Hole

On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

Chapter Seven: Down the Rabbit Hole

The Grimes/Greene group watched, utterly disconcerted, as Harry was welcomed home by people that seemed to just keep coming, though in reality was only a dozen or so men and women, the kids and elderly sequestered until the Blacks were certain on how these new elements were going to slot into their lives.

He laughed and talked and hugged, showing a joyful, loving side to himself that they’d never seen before in full-force though there had been hints of it.

A guffawing laugh at one of Merle’s crude jokes or Daryl’s quiet snarky jabs.

Telling bedtime stories to calm down Sophia and Carl after a walker was killed during the day.

Bringing back toys or books for the kids on a run when others focused on only the pure necessities.

Yeah, there’d been hints of the happy, outgoing man who was slapping backs with a stocky redhead one moment and being locked in a headlock by one of his dads – the dark haired one – the next.

Pity most of them had never really bothered to get to know that side of him save for the Dixons and even they had never seen him let go like he was now that he was back among his own.

“Kill the fatted calf.” Hershel quoted quietly. “My beloved son hath returned.”

“What’s that, Hershel?” Rick asked, blinking at the scene playing out.

“The fable of the prodigal son.” Carol said, fingering her cross necklace. “That’s what we’re seeing right now: the return of the wandering son, long gone from home, but returned safe and beloved even more from the absence.”

“Alright you lot.” Harry laughingly shouted. “Shoo, y’all got work still to do before nightfall. We’ve got plenty of time for shenanigans later.”

“Ooh,” Sean played up, pretending to faint, fanning himself deliriously. “You promise?” His grin was salacious, lucky for him, he was too far away to hear the in-unison growl the Dixons let out at the open flirtation.

“Go on with you.” Harry shoved him away in exasperation. “I’ve got business to attend to.”

Laughing brightly, Sean and Declan wandered over to the trucks to begin unloading them, Remus moving to help with the heavy lifting via wand. A lot of it he would be banishing to the storage in the main house but some, like the tanker trucks, would have to be driven over to the in-ground tanks and pumped in after the safety of the contents had been tested. It wouldn’t do to add contaminated fuel or water to their supplies and ruin the whole lot. Harry had checked himself of course, but they always checked and double checked the hauls from the supply runs as standard operating procedure.

“Remy was right about one thing.” Sirius said eyeing the trucks. “That is one hell of a haul.”

“If the tankers aren’t contaminated, I think it’s worth doing every run.” Harry agreed with a firm nod
in the direction of the line of trucks. “But either way, I’m definitely doing it with the dry goods from now on rather than moving things into my bag and going about it that way. I wasn’t sure on the limits of the spell but I didn’t have any problems with it.”

“No.” Sirius shook his head with a rueful chuckle thinking about the amount of power packed into that one body. “I wouldn’t think you would have at that.”

Harry just laughed the implication off, striding back over to the new additions, Siri handing him the Housing file while he was at it. Inside was a list of all the dwellings on the property – from the studio apartment above the stables to the main house itself – with a listing of who was living where as well as how much magical expansion each home could undergo and if any magical adjustments had already been done. Sort of like his RA’s log from college…only much, much more detailed.

“We’re going to give y’all a mini-tour of the vital areas y’all need to know off the bat.” Harry started in before anyone could ask a single question. He needed a shower, a nap, hugs from his brother and sister, and some food before he dealt with anymore bullshit from any of these people. He was just tapped out from the last several weeks. He was due a break. “While we’re at it,” Sirius stood quietly at his pup’s back, staring calmly over the group, sizing them up for the weak links – and the troublemakers – Harry had warned them of in his last message. “We’ll get your housing needs taken care of. You have this afternoon to rest up and take a load off, get cleaned up, etc. Tonight there will be an introductory meal-slash-q&a in the mess hall with just you and the leaders of this outfit. Then tomorrow you’ll be slotted into the work rotation.”

Carol raised her hand with only a fraction of her former timidity.

“Yes?” Sirius asked, Harry busy studying the file in his hand and working out the housing situation in his head.

There were several empty homes and rooms to be had but Harry didn’t believe in spreading everyone out only to have to pull back in later as others came along – and he was set that there would be others, as well as other buildings being built as time passed.

For one thing Harry really wanted some kind of outpost with living quarters added to the watch towers to make guard duty easier when the wards alerted him and he sent people to watch the walls.

The response time turn around alone would be worth the extra effort.

He also wanted to add an outpost to the former site of the prison since the damned place was still on the maps, someone would be willing to try for it sooner or later as the walkers fail to die out with time.

“How will the housing be decided?” Carol asked. Were they going to all be shoved together like at the Greene farm or…?

“Everyone have your packs?” Harry asked mildly, looking up from figuring out how he was going to handle that very issue. At the round of nods he spun, motioning them to follow.

“Mess hall is there.” Harry pointed out the large-ish building. “It doubles as a meeting hall. For the most part people would rather eat in their homes together but we try and have one big group meal a week with a meeting after to discuss issues.”

“Plus the single guys need to eat something real besides sandwiches or eventually they’ll revolt.” Siri joked but still being half-serious. Heh.

“And that.” Harry chuckled, some of the others seeing the humor but others still too shell-shocked.
“That’s the gate to the main house, you have to be keyed in to cross it either for work or what have you.” He waved a vague hand. “Inside that zone is the glasshouse, a couple gardens, the main house of course, etc. and so on.” Pointing towards another massive building, this one an obligatory red, he said: “Main barn: houses livestock, feed, hay, the coolers for the DNA samples.”

“What’s that mean, Mom?” Sophia asked a now-blushing Carol.

“How they make baby animals.” Carol said then hushed her daughter, trying to pay attention, many of the others chuckling a bit at the situation.

“Stables.” Harry came to a stop at the neat and tidy structure. “Horses both for riding/patrol and working the crops fields. Which brings me to the first housing question of the day.” Turning he gave the hand-holding Maggie and Glenn a knowing look, ignoring the frown on Hershel’s face. “The stables have a studio apartment that’s already furnished, it was where the foreman lived before he got married and moved into one of the houses on the land. If you two are interested…” He trailed off, leaving the offer open for them to accept or decline.

Hershel opened his mouth to speak, but a firm look from Maggie had him holding his tongue.

“We’ll take it.” Glenn nodded, truly thankful for the thoughtful gesture on their part.

“Great.” Harry grinned, bouncing a little in place. “Everyone follow me up, since it’s empty at the moment it’s a good place to show you what all you can expect in the different housing options we’ll be setting you up with. Most of the appliances and things are the same everywhere, only the size and amount of bedrooms and bathrooms really varies.” He explained as he led the way to the outside stairs that accessed a small, pretty balcony with some pumpkin-orange mums still in bloom in the planters.

“This is lovely.” Jacqui said with approval, touching one dainty petal gently and eyeing the painted-white wrought iron patio set under the canvass awning that kept sun or rain from ruining the seating area.

The other women in the group murmured similar compliments, Maggie getting a little chuffed over this place being hers – for however long it lasted.

Opening the door, Harry and Sirius stood back while everyone else filed inside, filling the living area pretty much to capacity.

“As you can see.” Harry gestured to the far end where the half-wall over looked the stable proper and the horse stalls, “It’s basically one large open room.” He pointed to a pair of doors. “Closet/storage and a full bathroom with a modest hot-water heater.” Opening the bathroom door, he flicked the pull-chain lightly that worked with toilet. “Most of the appliances and things like that run on permanent enchantments that my dads and I put in: the plumbing, water heater, food storage.” He pointed one slender-but-callused finger at the lantern hanging down from the rafters. “Even the lights.”

“What about the solar panels?” Rick asked, frowning at that.

“Backup systems.” Sirius said, waving a hand. “Anything that runs on magic here has a backup that can be switched over to the solar system. Right now we’re mostly using it for the wells and storing the rest for just-in-case. But the farm equipment is all mechanical and doesn’t take magical adaptations well so we use it for those as well, the ones that don’t run on diesel or petrol anyway.”

Harry took over once again, drawing open the shuttered doors that hid the laundry area. “Crank
washer and wringer, there’s a community drying line in the courtyard or a retractable one you can use inside during inclement weather.” Going over to the kitchen area he pointed out the wood stove which can also be used to heat the area as well as cook, and the enchanted food storage. “Frozen, preservation, and chill-charmed.” He explained, showing them the labels. “They do what it says on the tin: preserve food fresh or cooked, keep frozen things frozen and cool, like a fridge.”

“Okay.” Andrea had to say. “That’s damned amazing considering the times we’re in. Modern science couldn’t even preserve food like that and that was before the outbreak.”

“Wonders of magic, lass.” Sirius gave her one of his patented roguish grins, making the blonde blush bright red.

“Down boy.” Harry said drily. “Honestly, I swear he’s housebroken, but sometimes he can’t help himself, might need to be fixed to curb his behavior.”

“Oi!” Sirius squawked in protest, Harry not paying him any mind.

“Moving on.” Harry ushered them all out save for Glenn and Maggie, taking a quick moment to show them how to remove and place the privacy shutters that came down over the half wall looking out over the stable proper. “Next stop the bunkhouse.”

About ten yards from the stable was the building in question, the same sort of country architecture as the barn and stables but skinnier than either while keeping a good deal of length. Opening the door he read off a series of names.

“Dale, T-Dog, Jimmy, this is you.” He motioned them inside. “Single men’s housing. Four of the bunks are already taken, feel free to claim any of the empties. Bathroom, shower room, kitchen and dining area. Laundry facilities. All the comforts of home. The guys have a rotation to clean the common areas, they’ll work you in, you’re responsible for keeping your personal areas picked up and at least moderately tidy.”

Those three dropped off, he ushered everyone along, though most were confused about why the Dixons weren’t staying with the other single men…including the Dixons.

Still, Harry was keeping them moving and not paying attention to any attempts to grab his eye.

“You got this from here, pup?” Sirius asked as he saw Max coming their way, likely wanting to talk about the new work schedule they were going to come up with.

“Yep.” Harry nodded, waving him off. “Go do management things. I’m a big boy, I can take care of housing on my own.”

“Ta, then.”

The next stop was a little farther in, closer to the main house wall than the outer wall unlike the barn, stables, and bunkhouse. It looked more like a house too, a big log cabin-ish thing but much too large to be a proper cabin as most thought of them. Still…it was made of seasoned logs and had that rustic feel.

“This is the Vatos house, where the refugees from the Vatos base in Atlanta live.” Harry said as he led them through the front door. “There’s two kinds of residents here: active elderly who were healthy enough to make the trip, and the orphans the Vatos had gathered up, most of them between sixteen and six, though there’s one four-year-old who stays with our main teacher and her husband. Ms. Jacqui,” Harry smiled gently at the older woman. “I think you’d be most comfortable here, around others your same age and ability. There’s a lovely empty room overlooking the garden, and
lots of hands to help with the chore roster.”

“Thank you, young man.” Jacqui, an active and tough woman in her mid-sixties, smiled gently as Harry showed her to the room he described.

“Your housemates will come around to meet you here in a little bit after you’ve had a chance to settle in.” He told her, the others all waiting in the living area. “Rosalia is the “den mother” if you would, a bit younger than yourself I believe. She tends to wrangle the kids and put together the chore roster.”

“That sounds just fine.” With that he took his leave, showing everyone else back out as the group slowly dwindled with each assignment.

Eyeing who was left to place, Harry waffled a bit before coming to a decision, stopping first at a four-bedroom house between Max and Sarah’s and Rob and Sharla’s homes.

“How did you manage that?” Carol asked quietly. “Fitting a bunch of elderly and children in one home?”

“Magic.” Harry said sardonically. “It originally was the biggest home we built outside of the main house: six bedrooms and three bathrooms intended for a large family situation. We expanded it to the max, put in a lift, ramps.” He shrugged. “We made it work. The elderly have value just the same as the children are our future. Both deserved to be taken care of. Now it’s a twenty-four bedroom, four storied, twelve-bathroom complex housing over a dozen children and an equal number of older folks with Jacqui’s addition.”

Turning the door knob, he gave the specs of the home: “Four bedroom, two bathroom; for Hershel, Beth, Andrea, Otis, and Patricia. Your neighbors are the Foreman and his family and Rob and Sharla who took in little Sasha from the Vatos group.” He smiled a bit. “I hope you don’t mind kids running around.”

“No, not at all.” Hershel returned his smile with one of his own. “This’ll do, more than do.”

Even if he was a daughter short at the moment…but he supposed he couldn’t keep her a little girl forever…and at least that Jimmy was tucked away with the single men.

He was a good boy but Hershel had better things to do than chase him away from his baby girl. Hopefully some hard work and a crew to keep a look out will keep him too busy for tomfoolery.

Well.

An old man can hope, anyway.

Two houses down, on the other side of Rob and Sharla’s was the last on this row, another set of empty homes on the other side of the graveled path waiting for occupation.

“There at the end of the way is the orchard and one of the equipment sheds, as well as the granary.” Harry pointed out each in turn, though for the most part they were self-explanatory.

Walking them over to the last house on the row, a craftsman-style painted stormy blue with white trim, Harry again opened the door saying: “Carol, Sophia, and the Grimes family. This is you here. Four bedrooms, two bath, with room to expand or we can convert the office into a nursey when the baby comes, either way.”

Carol let out an overwhelmed gasp as she walked into the entry way, the gleaming-white kitchen
“Thank you Harry.” She said tearfully, the Grimes’ and her daughter all following her inside and leaving her to thank their guide. “This is more…”

“You’re welcome, Carol.” Harry said softly. “Word of advice? Don’t let Lori bully you. Like I said before, here she has to pull her weight, and that goes for chores inside this house as well as outside of it. You have it in you to stand up to her: do it. It’ll be what’s best for her in the long run.”

“I will.” Carol nodded, straightening her spine as the three men walked away. “Thank you, again Harry. For everything.”

Harry just nodded and closed the door, turning to face the stoically watching Dixon brothers.

“And us, Pretty?” Merle asked, at sea to what tricks the man had up his sleeve. “Savin’ the best fer last?”

“Indeed.” Harry said honestly, even though it came across a bit snarky and sassy. “Trust me: to avoid the inevitable bitching from Lori and one or two others, you don’t want them knowing where you’re bunking.”

“Point.” Daryl nodded shortly. It would be a lot harder for the others to come knocking on their door if they didn’t know off the bat where it was.

Harry led the way back around to the courtyard, naming the other outbuildings as he went, and making sure to show Merle and Daryl where the machine shop was as well as the smokehouse and meat processing areas since he knew it wouldn’t be long before they’d be itching to either hunt or get greased up from head to toe in some engine.

It wasn’t until they reached the main house gate that the two Dixons caught wise to what exactly was going on. They weren’t just bunking with the other hands, workers, or in some cases (as the Dixons would put it) strays. Harry was leading them to the big house itself.

He was trusting them to stay with his family not just his people.

And that meant more to the two brothers that’ve been looked down on and condescended to than Harry would ever know.

Stopping dead-center in front of the currently-open gate’s face, Harry removed one of his daggers and sliced open his palm, waiting for the blood to pool before pressing it firmly to the center medallion which was etched with a simple howling wolf motif. The Dixons arched identical brows as he did so without flinching or showing any sign of pain, impressed despite themselves. That hadn’t been an insignificant wound he’d slashed into himself.

Closing his eyes, Harry tuned into the ward schema, specifically the ones that surrounded the main house and the most heavily-protected zone. He could access the entire ward structure from anywhere within or touching them, but it was much easier to do in certain places if he was going to manipulate them at all, such as keying someone in. If he was going to tinker with them more than that, he’d have to use the main wardstone hidden within his actual home.

Feeling the click in his magic that let him know the wards were ready to accept new persons to be keyed in, he lifted his hand and had it cleaned and bandaged with nary a thought.

Spinning the dagger in his hand, he offered it to the brothers telling them: “A couple drops each is all you’ll need, center of the medallion.”
Shrugging, Daryl stepped forward first, using the razor-sharp dagger that Harry had cleaned before handing it over to nick the thumb on his off-hand before pressing it to the spot Harry indicated. After a moment he shivered, handing the dagger over to his brother, Harry cleaning it again with a flick of his wand.

“Got that grave-walking tingly feeling again, but worse.” Daryl said, staring curiously at his thumb which after an Episkey from Harry showed no sign of the dagger jab.

“That’s the wards, yeah.” Harry nodded, healing Merle in turn and taking back the dagger. “You two are sensitives of some kind to all things Other as best as I can tell. Some kind of latent ability or some such thing.” He shrugged, that was a puzzle for another day. Sheathing both wand and dagger he waved them on through the gates, both Dixons coming to a quick halt at their first real sight of what laid beyond the last gated wall.

“Welcome, Dixons.” Harry said with a smile and a flamboyant wave ala Sirius. “To Castle Black.”

…”

“Now I fuckin’ know what Alice felt like.” Merle muttered to his brother as they followed Harry still shell-shocked by the place that was their new home. “This might as well be wonderland it’s so far from our run-down cabin.”

Daryl nodded, eyes taking in the tapestries and thick carpets, the heavy wood furniture, massive library filled with book. Crystal and gold and things he didn’t have names for filled the place from top to bottom. What the fuck was he doing here?

“I know it’s a lot to take in.” Harry said as they came to the top floor. “And that’s just the areas that those outside the family know about. Everyone else has no idea about the two basements and the storage areas, they all think it’s up on the third floor – but really that’s just empty bedrooms.”

“That’s an understatement, Pretty.” Merle drawled. “You weren’t kiddin’ ‘bout the castle, huh?”

“Nope, unfortunately not.” Harry chuckled nervously, running one hand up and down his braided hair. “It was a case of practicality: castles were the fortification of choice for a reason for centuries; running smack-dab into a good dose of English eccentricity.” He explained further. “Sirius comes from an old family. And I mean old. Manors and estates and castles, the whole nine yards. And he had the money to prove it. The kind you can’t spend in a hundred lifetimes. So when it came time to design our new home, he wanted what he wanted and he got it no matter how many times Papa Remus or I told him things like, no, it’s too expensive, or my personal favorite, you’ve gone barking mad.”

“He prides himself on being barking mad, you know that pup.” The gentle growl of Remus’s voice greeted them as they crested the final set of stairs to the top floor and the family apartments. “And saying something is too expensive just gets you that glassy-eyed blank look, the same one he used to get during Professor Binn’s lectures.”

Remus nodded at the two new additions, having only gotten a cursory look at them before. Oh yeah. His pup had it bad for a pair of backwoods bad boys.

He was worried…and rather proud strangely enough…all at the same time.

Harry had definitely picked up on Remus’s taste in men, Siri being the epitome of charming-but-naughty-bad-boy.

Though he supposed this pair seemed more the rough-but-gentle-to-loved-ones types.
“Family meeting before the intro for the new members, pup.” Remus told him. “You have two hours to unpack, clean-up, and present yourself for sibling-snuggles in the living room.”

“Sounds good to me.” Harry grinned eagerly. “I’ve missed the little monsters something fierce.”

With a wave at the awkwardly-hovering brothers, Remus ducked back into the master suite/apartment, leaving Harry to finish showing them around.

Merle couldn’t leave that opportunity alone as he padded along down the hall behind the younger man. “Sibling snuggles?”

“They’re two and three, shut your face.” Harry tossed back, joking along. “I’ll have you know I’m a champion snuggler.”

“I bet you are at that, Magic Man.” Daryl said under his breath, but not low enough to evade Harry’s sharp ears, not that the other man reacted, well-used to ignoring things he shouldn’t be seeing or hearing around “normal” people or just those who weren’t an Animagus or werewolf… basically anyone who wasn’t a Black.

“You’re keyed in now, so you can come and go at will.” Harry told them, opening the door to his apartment which was on the opposite side of the floor from the one his dads shared with the little ones. Raz and Jaime were still too young to move into their own rooms on the third floor, neither getting the spare apartment on the fourth until they were of-age or otherwise proved themselves responsible. “Just use a little common sense: mainly staying away from the basement areas, that’s where we mostly use magic freely. I wouldn’t want either of you to get blasted by some stray hex or curse while one of us is working off some steam or the kids is having an accidental magic outburst or something.”

“No basement, easy enough, Pretty.” Merle agreed hastily. None of that sounded like something he’d enjoy. Though he’d probably like to see what Harry meant by “blowing off steam” using magic. It sounded interesting…and hot. Very hot.

“And no matter what you hear.” Harry sighed, not believing he even had to say this. “Don’t go in my parents’ apartment without invitation. Not unless you want to be scarred for life by the antics of two horny old dogs.”

“I dunno.” Merle joked. “They’re both rather fetching for older men…”

Harry snorted, then winced, smacking the bigger man on the arm in retaliation. “Ew I have icky threesome Merle/Dad/Papa pictures in my head now you asshole. I need brain bleach…or an Obliviate.”

“Sorry, fresh out.” Merle chirped with an evil grin.

“Ass.” Harry repeated half-heartedly before showing them around the apartment. “The castle has built in cleaning charms but you’ll still want to keep your things picked up, in hampers or drawers, etc. Kitchen, breakfast bar, living area.” He pointed each out in turn. It wasn’t a massive space like some of the houses or the castle itself but still good sized. “My bedroom/bathroom/study.” He nodded towards a door at the end of one hall then turned to the one at the end of the opposite hall. The space was open, with two halls on opposite ends, Harry’s suite-in-a-suite on the same end as the kitchen with the guest suite off the living room. “And your new home away from home.”

Daryl opened the door being closet, barely keeping his jaw from dropping at the sight of the “unused” guest room.
A mirror of Harry’s own quarters, only without the personal touches, it opened into a sitting area complete with fireplace, with a tapestry showing a crest in ruby with a golden griffin centered on it, the couch and chairs in a darker red with pale gold threads, the rug on the floor the same but the colors reversed. The door on the opposite wall from the entry was already open, showing off a lushly appointed bathroom in creams and browns with a woodland mural over the garden tub.

Harry leaned one shoulder against the entry jamb, saying: “Merle to the left, Daryl to the right.” Prompting them to move, each of them opening the door matching Harry’s words.

He’d had his dads remove the study when he’d decided on bringing back the Dixons, fixing the space into a second bedroom.

Merle’s was done in dark blues and browns with touches of cream and light grey to lighten it up. A king-sized bed, fluffy pillows, and a chest of drawers with a side chair catty-corner completed it. Daryl’s room was arranged the same, only in shades of green, and having a rack for his crossbow hanging on the back of the door. Merle had a holder for his gun/sword belt.

“I’ll let you guys get settled in.” Harry announced, backing out of their new space. “The food chests will all be stocked if you’re hungry now, dinner’ll be in just under three hours in the mess hall.”

“Alrigh’.” They called out, words overlapping as they spoke almost in unison.

It was official. The Dixon brothers had actually died. They’d died and this was heaven, complete with their own hot-ass angel showing them around.

…

Alone in his own room, Harry walked over to his pack which Remus had brought up after emptying the supplies out of it save for his personal affects. A wave of his wand had it unpacking itself and his things flying into place. Bracing his hands on the back of his favorited arm chair that rested before the bare fireplace, he let out a shuddering breath.

It was over.

He’d finally gotten them – as many lives saved as possible – safely set up and settling in.

He could finally rest.

But, remembering the sheer awe and honest shock on the faces of Merle and Daryl when he led them to their rooms…he couldn’t hardly stand it.

They were such good men under all the gruff and snark and goading.

Amazingly good considering the familiar marks he’d seen on each of their backs and all the shit they’ve taken for where and how they grew up.

He’d only been listening to it for a few weeks – they’d dealt with it their whole lives.

And yet for as much as Merle bitched and complained about helping “weak links” they just kept on trucking on, bringing in meat, running for supplies, doing everything they could for everyone else.

All for not one word of thanks.

A warm bed of their own and hot meal was the least they deserved.
And this was probably the first time in their lives they’d gotten it without fighting and scraping and still having it snatched away in the end.

It broke Harry’s heart for them, that look neither brother knew they had when they walked into the sitting room.

The whole walk through his home, they’d been tense, waiting for the other shoe to drop despite their real trust in Harry.

As if they were expecting him to tuck them away in the attic like a mad wife or a dirty little secret.

Not install them in his own apartment with a mini-suite of their own and beds they didn’t have to share with anyone not even each other.

Shaking his head, he put it aside to deal with later.

He had a hot bath and scrub-down to finish and a snuggling appointment to keep that he’d been looking forward to since he’d left for the Atlanta run.

…

“Alright everyone, settle down.” Remus stood after the meal was finished and everyone from the new members of the estate were gathered up including the two kids. His own two were already tucked in bed with monitoring charms on them that would alert him or his mate if they woke for even a moment. “We know you’re all tired from your journey and are looking forward to some quality sleep but there’s some things we need to go over first.”

“First of all.” Sirius jumped in, taking over at Remy’s signal. “Have any of you had trouble figuring out your homes, appliances, anything? No?” He tracked over the group, seeing blank faces staring back at him. Which in this case was a good thing. They were calm if a little disbelieving over the events of the day.

“Okay then.” Remus clapped his hands together briskly, he spoke with his “teacher” tone that brooked no argument. “To answer the question still plaguing most of you: yes magic is real. Also, yes, myself, my mate, and all three of our children are magical. There are three others on the estate that are magic-sensitives but not having active magical abilities in their own right.”

“No.” Sirius said, cutting off some of the storm that he saw brewing once more in several eyes – particularly belonging to the pregnant woman. Harry’d warned them about her but it’d proven unnecessary – both he and Remus were old hands at sensing trouble, they’d had to be to survive one war and the start of another.

You didn’t grow up with Bellatrix Black after all and not be able to sense crazy.

And Mrs. Grimes was a special cocktail of selfish, manipulative, and cunning that was one push from going over the edge.

“Magic isn’t evil.” He continued his voice bland but with a hint of exasperation under the charm that made several of them – mostly those more judgmental than thankful – flush and drop their eyes. “There was no offering up of souls to demonic forces or sacrifice of babies required – we were all born this way, every single one of us, the same as you lot were born instincts that’ve kept you alive when others have died.”

“That contract you signed.” Remus arched a brow, his amber eyes flashing as he smelt a fresh wave of fear and grief. Is a magically binding one. Those rules you agreed to?” He smirked just a tad.
“Your blood will hold you to them. The rules are as follows: You pull your own weight, whether its helping with the elderly in the Vatos house, working on the farm, or hunting or running supplies. We’re well-stocked here from good management and rationing. We’d like to keep it that way.”

“Rule two;” Sirius cocked a hip on the side of the table, Harry still seated at his place in the center as his dads spoke, green eyes not missing a trick as he alternated between working on the papers in front of him and watching the new estate members. “We don’t fight our own. You gotta problem with someone? You take it up the chain of command or you leave it for the group meeting on Sundays after the communal meal. That doesn’t mean.” He laughed a little, eyes dancing. “That this is a pacifist commune or any such thing. More than once we’ve tossed a pair of hot-heads into a paddock and let them duke it out. But once the problem is adjudicated, it’s done.” His grey eyes turned steely. “There’s no seeking personal or private justice here. We have a system that keeps order. You don’t like it? We’ll drop you, a rig, and some supplies a hundred miles away. End of story.”

“Who does the adjudications?” Rick’s hand shot up but he started talking before he got the go-ahead, which had the Dixons rolling their eyes at his back from their kicked-back spots at the rear of the mess hall. They were close enough to listen, but if they had any questions themselves they’d take it up with Harry rather than sidelining the meeting. “The contract said something about a chain of command and an ultimate leader but none of that’s been explained to us.”

“We’ll get to that.” Harry said idly, looking up with a steady gaze from his papers. “Let them finish with the rules first.”

“Three,” Remus took back over with a small nod at his pup. “We family or unit is responsible for keeping their own area clean. We won’t barge in and check on you, but every stick and stone on the Black Lands belongs to our family: your renters in other words. Respect the property that has put a roof over your heads and don’t make a mess of it.”

“Number four, and this one is important for those of you who’ll end up doing watch, runs, or hunts.” Sirius pinned a couple of the men with his quicksilver gaze. “Several of us, as you’ve seen me prove, are capable of transformation into an animal form. As a result, the only game we hunt here is small game: rabbits, squirrels, quail, or large game like bear, deer, elk.” He rattled off. “Between the two canine forms and the working dogs on the estate, we check and double check before we bring anything down.” He arched a knowing brow at the large figure of Otis. “We don’t want another accident like the one that had my pup performing an operation now do we?”

“What sort of forms?” Hershel asked, leaning forward eagerly. As a vet, he found the entire idea fascinating, the shift from species to species.

“You’ve seen Sirius’s already, the show-off.” Remus said with exasperated love in his tone. “His is a large black dog or Grim, with grey eyes, code name: Padfoot. I’m a large wolf with a sandy coat and amber eyes, code name: Moony.”

“Moony doesn’t come out to play often.” Sirius warned sharply. “But when he does, don’t bother him. As a wolf, the instincts are wilder in the transformation than my own. We don’t want any accidents of either kind.”

“I stick to the forest at night for patrols as Moony.” Remus reassured the concerned mothers in the group. “But my other side’s wildness brings us to the next rule: Curfew.”

“Come nightfall.” Sirius told them with a sigh. “Unless you’ve been assigned a specific job that requires otherwise, everyone is expected to be in their housing units. That way if there’s an emergency or something, we don’t have to waste time looking for stragglers. We also prefer that
unless you’re on watch or patrol or hunting that firearms are left in your homes. We’re safe here between the walls and the protections we’ve put in place.” He smiled. “And you’ve all seen what can happen because someone has an itchy trigger finger, I’m sure.”

“And last but not least.” Remus said with a grand wave. “We have a simple honor system here: what’s yours is yours. This goes for property: clothes, weapons, etc. But also for things like fidelity and families.”

This had Lori’s cheeks flushed red with shame and rage, her hands clenching in her lap.

“Consider it a truncated Ten Commandments if you would.” Remus continued, ignoring the fuming woman and the looks she was getting from all the rest bar her son. Her husband couldn’t even look at her. “Don’t steal, don’t kill, don’t covet.” He shrugged. “The rules are simple and they’re for the good of everyone. Be kind to others, help where you can, and you’ll find yourself a part of our people in no time at all.”

“Speaking of helping where you can.” Harry said from his spot as his dads sat back down, their part finished. “You all should have seen – with a couple exceptions – a corkboard in the kitchen of your homes. Everyone find them?”

Nods all around save for Jacqui and the Dixons, which were the exceptions Harry mentioned.

“Good.” He nodded once. “On one side is a chalkboard that’s set up like a shopping list. It’s linked to the one in the storage areas where we make up the rations for the week before handing them out. On the other is a calendar that should’ve been blank at the moment: that’s the work roster. Each week on Sunday rations will be handed out here in the mess hall in the morning, most everyone will get the same things just in varying amounts based on how many people they’re feeding, age, gender, activity level.” He shrugged. “Y’all get the idea. If you find yourself after the first week needing less or more, note it on the chalkboard and someone will come and talk to you about it before the next week’s rations are given out. And if you have any allergies or need something specific like say,” he arched a brow at the Grimes family. “Prenatal vitamins, note that too.”

“We’ll do the best we can to accommodate everyone.” Remus assured them in his gentle manner. “If there’s a special day like a birthday coming up and you want to celebrate and bake for another example, that’s easier than say, wanting to have a guys’ night with a dozen bottles of Wild Turkey.”

“Mark it down.” Harry repeated. “And we’ll discuss it with you.” He shifted some papers, lining a couple up in front of him, ready to be done. “As far as work goes, we showed you all the main areas. Most of you will be reporting to either Max, Remus, or Sarah in the morning as follows:

Rick, Jimmy, Hershel, T-Dog, Otis, Patricia, Glenn, and Maggie: report to Max and he’ll set you up with work around the farm.

Lori, Andrea, and Jacqui: meet at the Vatos house and Rosalia will have assignments for you there.

Carol, Beth, Sophia, and Carl: you’ll be picked up by Sarah at Carol’s house and shown to the school room. Beth you’ll be helping with the younger kids, Carol wherever Sarah and Sharla need you, and you two.” He pointed at the kids. “Will be going back to lessons.”

“Aw man.” Carl groaned lightly. “School.”

“That’s right my man.” Sirius barked a laugh. “School. Everyone under the age of sixteen is required to attend lessons six days a week, at least part of the day.” He gave a knowing smile. “Keeps y’all out of trouble.”
“Chores for the youngsters are up to their parents or Rosalia depending on their situation.” Remus explained. “But on Saturdays there’s only a partial school day and we usually send them off to help with the animals, most of them like working with the horses or sheep, Max gives them some lessons and hands-on training for working with the livestock or on the farm.”

“Like 4-H.” Sophia said brightly bouncing in place.

“Exactly.” Harry smiled at her, happy to see her perking up without the constant threat of walkers or her late abusive father hanging over her head.

“Dale,” Remus said. “Harry says you’ve got some experience stripping down or working with machines?”

“That’s right.” He nodded, eyes shining for a moment. “I owned an auto shop before I retired.”

“Then you’ll be with Axel in the machine shop.” Harry said, folding his hands easily over his stomach. “Y’all are bunked together so just follow him. He knows what needs doing.”

“An’ us?” Merle asked gruffly.

“Y’all are with me: runnin’ supplies, huntin’, working in the storage area and prepping rations,” Harry shrugged. “Taking watch. Whatever needs doing outside of the normal work of the place, that’s mine to handle. Now.” He turned his head slightly to look over at Rick. “As far as the chain of command goes it’s simple: y’all are assigned an area and a boss. If there’s a problem while you’re working or what have you and it can’t wait for the open forum on Sunday, you take it to them. They’ll take it to the Foreman Max, and he’ll either handle it or kick it upstairs to us.”

“We’re not a dictatorship here.” Sirius said, knowing that there were some hard feelings over how brusque Harry had been in getting them safe. “We’ll listen to the problem and adjudicate it as best we can. But once a decision is made: that’s it. It’s done.”

“What if y’all cian’t make a decision?” Merle asked shrewdly.

Harry stood up, shoulders strong and squared. “Then I’ll make one.” He looked down firmly at Rick. “You wanted to know the leader: well here I am. And my word is final. Take it or leave it, that’s the way we run around here. So:” he arched a brow. “You staying…or leaving?”

...

To no surprise, not a soul asked to leave, despite whatever grievances they’d had with Harry in the past. They all could see that this was a safe place but more than that it was a good place. A fair place if it all worked the way the three Blacks said.

And that was more than any of them had ever hoped to find in the world of the walking dead.
Chapter Eight - Harry the Hoarder

On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

Chapter Eight: Harry the Hoarder

After the others had returned to their new homes and Harry had bid his dads goodnight, he made his way back to his rooms with the brothers in tow, already mentally preparing for how he was going to explain the situation that landed him and his dads in the States a handful of years ahead of the outbreak.

Buying time as Merle threw himself in an overstuffed chair, Daryl hunkering down to light the fire Harry had laid in the grate earlier that day, Harry made his way over to the chill cabinet and took out a trio of familiar glass long-necked bottles, popping the tops one by one and grabbing a couple bags of crisps out of the dry storage.

Daryl had the fire roaring and was making himself at home on the plush rug before the fire, his arms stretched out to the sides and knees up with his bare feet flat on the floor, having shed his boots on entering the apartment, both Dixons unconsciously echoing Harry’s movements as he’d kicked off his own and set them on a low shelf adjacent to the entry. The younger brother didn’t even open his shuttered eyes as the butt of a cold glass bottle was set gently on his flat stomach, simply lifting one long-fingered hand and wrapping it around to steady it before it could fall over. Lifting his head slightly he studied the label with a crooked grin. Harry certainly knew how to stock a fridge.

“Hard cider?” Merle asked, half-mocking. “You ain’t got no regular beer?”

“Nope, sorry, fresh out.” Harry said unapologetically lying straight to his face. “Can’t stand that piss water you Americans call beer. I’d go for one of your ciders anyday.”

“There it is.” Merle pointed an accusing finger that was attached to the hand holding the bottle at the Brit. “I was waitin’ for the hoity-toity Brit to come out. Here I was thinkin’ you were plumb Americanized by now.”

“Six years is a long time when it starts in your teens.” Harry admitted easily with a nod. “But I was more than transplanted from a different country. I guess my dads and I held onto a couple of things harder because it was all we had of home. Like how we prefer to drink.” He held up a bottle in mocking toast before taking a long pull that had the muscles in his throat working to the fascination of his rapt audience.

“Y’all said you were gonna explain that later.” Daryl said head turned to the side, cheek against the soft rug as he spoke. “It’s later.”

“It’s…” Harry sighed, leaning back in his chair with a slump, taking another, quicker drink of his cider. “Hard to wrap your head around, even for us…what happened.”

“Try us.” Merle shot at him, polishing off his cider and going for another with a loose-limbed saunter. “We might surprise ya.”

Harry nodded, mentally struggling with trying to decide how to start. At the beginning he supposed, though even that required some heavy explanation.

“What do you guys know about parallel universes or the multiverse theory?” He finally asked, trying to get a bead on just how much he’d need to explain. “Or just magic in general.”
“Like in the Twilight Zone?” Daryl asked with a frown. “A bunch a different worlds an’ shit but with different realities or somethin’.”

“Sort of.” Harry blew out a breath. “From what we’ve read or just guessed at, there’s hundred or thousands of difference universes. A lot of them are similar to this one before the outbreak, usually with small differences.”

“Some say the world will end in fire, others in ice.” Merle quoted with narrowed eyes, bringing up some of his mama’s favorite poems to mind.

“Exactly.” Harry snapped his fingers at him. “Like that. This world has walkers, another has the Resident Evil T-Virus. Follow?”

“Yup.” “Yeah, sorta.”

“So.” Harry leaned forward, rolling his half-empty bottle between his palms restlessly. “My world, the world we came from: me, Siri, and Remy. It had a whole society of magic users just like use going back to the beginning of time. No one really knew why or how we got magic, just that it occurred naturally in about one percent of the human population.”

“Like a recessive gene.” Daryl observed, thinking on it a moment. “Blue eyes, red hair, magic.”

“Pretty much like that.” Harry nodded. “So, going back to the beginning, like all other people, magical people created things and innovated. Partly out of need or necessity and partly out of curiosity. In my time there was even a whole section of the magical government dedicated to study and innovation called the Department of Mysteries, who also worked on magical innovations from the past that the purpose of has been lost to time and forgotten.”

“Pyramids.” Merle grunted, showing that he was following.

“Right.” Harry agreed easily. “In my world they were created by the magical sector of Ancient Egypt and were cursed to the rafters to protect the treasures. There was a whole career that revolved around breaking the curses to raid them and study the remains.”

“Graverobbers.” Daryl sneered, having always hated those kinda people.

“In a way.” Harry allowed, not wanting to get into that debate. He’d already done it once with Hermione and that was enough for one lifetime. “Now, one of the things the Department of Mysteries studied was this archway hidden in the bowels of London. In fact, the Department and the Ministry itself were built over and around it to keep it hidden and study it. They called it the Veil of Death.” He shuddered out a breath. “Because no one who went through it ever came back. It was covered in runic markings that no one ever deciphered. And on the 18th of June, 1996, a battle began in the Department of Mysteries, eventually leading to the Veil chamber, where in a serious miscalculation of his opponent’s abilities, a wizard named Sirius Orion Black III was hit in the chest by a Stunner, and thereby fell backwards through the Veil.”

“Jesus.” Daryl breathed eyes wide. “That’s fucked up.”

“It gets better.” Harry laughed hollowly. “Sirius was – at that time – my godfather and one of only two caring adults I had in my life. I was fifteen, angry as hell, and had spent the last nine months being systematically tortured by a woman who was supposed to be my teacher and having my mind torn to shreds by a man who actually was my teacher. To say that losing Sirius wasn’t an option for me in that mindset would be an understatement since the battle began in the first place by a trap being set for me using Sirius as bait. I’m fast, always have been. Before he disappeared into the Veil I
managed to grab onto his robe. But Sirius was close to the same size-wise as he is now and at fifteen I was a hell of a lot shorter and scrappier than I am now."

“He pulled you in.” Merle cursed under his breath. “The weight of him…”

“Yeah.” Harry gave a rueful half-smile. “He did. And not just me. Remus was right behind us trying to pull us back by gravity, force, momentum, whatever you want to call it…it was just too much.”

“An’ it landed ya here?” Daryl asked incredulously. “What y’all are dead and we’re just livin’ in yer hell or somethin’?”

“No, nothing like that.” Harry waved a hand. “What we do know about the Veil now is that it’s—or it was—a portal of some kind that could lead to different world or universes. A—source—of ours called it the Veil of Judgement. And since none of us were guilty of any real crimes, it spit us out in the first available world—this world, six years ago last June.” He thought for a minute before adding. “Which is actually kinda heartening since the Ministry used it for executions once upon a time. I imagine those actually guilty would end up in some form of actual plane of punishment while those falsely accused—and yes it happened even with magic—ended up in a relatively benign world somewhere.”

“We really need ta examine yer senses if this world is wha’ ya call benign, Pretty.” Merle drawled shaking his head.

“It is though, relatively.” Harry shrugged at the shocked looks he was getting from two sources. “I mean the dead are walking and hungry and civilization has gone to shit: agreed. But with three grown and powerful wizards, our family fortunes, and magical texts to help with wards and spellwork.” He cocked his head shooting them a devil-may-care grin. “This really isn’t hell for us. Shitty at times but not hell. Hell would be a world were magic didn’t work at all. To a magical person,” he explained further seeing their confusion over his priorities. “Magic, our magic cores, are as dear as breath, water, or the blood in our veins. Take it away from us and we’ll go insane in a matter of days and die within weeks. Magical people can’t live without it. We can choose not to use it…but we all need it, more than food or shelter or other basic human needs.”

“Ya said y’all were powerful?” Merle asked after chewing on that for several minutes. “How ya mean?”

“Sirius is a Black.” Harry replied, setting aside his empty bottle and talking over his shoulder as he went for another, tossing one to Daryl when the other man held up his own and caught his eye.

“That title of his isn’t just for show. When we said old family we mean as in ancient and magical. They are a line of insanely powerful witches and wizards.” He sighed as he sat back down, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “But thanks to inbreeding to “keep the lines pure” they were heavy on the insane with a 50/50 split on whether a Black will go round the twist or not. Sirius has a mild form of the Black madness that just comes off as eccentric…but he has almost zero impulse control. At all. About anything.”

“That’s one a the reasons ya lead an’ not him, ain’t it?” Daryl observed shrewdly. “It were easy to see even ‘fore ya said it. They’re yer da’s an’ ya listen to ‘em, take their advice…but yer in charge.”

“It’s one of them.” Harry admitted, chewing lightly on his bottom lip. “Sirius doesn’t like to take command if he doesn’t have to. You wouldn’t guess it to look at them but Remus and Sirius are very much an Alpha/Omega type pairing…and you don’t have to do much guessing to know how the Alpha is. Sirius needs a leader. When they were kids it was my father.” He pointed to a set of pictures up on the mantle the others had noticed but not really studied.
It was a series of pictures from his photo-album or Remus’s things that had eventually been found inside his necklace. How Luna – or Pandora – got their hands on them was just another mystery to add to the pile surrounding the two Seers. But they were all glad they did, however it came about.

“That’s them there: the Marauders they called themselves in school.” He smiled, looking up at the young faces of Prongs, Padfoot, and Moony, Wormtail nowhere in sight. “My father James, dad Sirius, and papa Moony.” Two pairs of blue eyes flicked from Harry’s face to the series of pictures, more than one question rolling around in their heads at what they saw. “Next we have my mother Lily, father James, and mini-me.” Baby Harry was all big eyes and a shock of black hair, a beautiful redhead woman holding him in her arms as James hugged them both from behind, clearly in mid-laugh.

“Why do ya look like yer da, then?” Daryl asked seriously confused over what he was seeing. Unless someone knew otherwise, anyone would guess Harry was Sirius’s son just with some features from whoever his mother was. Line him, Siri, and James up in a picture and you’d be hard pressed to guess at who was related how.

“My father and dad Siri are second cousins, or were.” Harry explained, a scrunched up look on his face as he tried to remember the degree of relation between them. “My grandmother was Siri’s great aunt…or something…I think. Sirius looks like a Black, while my father is a Potter with some Black features, and I’m a Potter with Black and Evans features coming from my mum. The cocktail makes it so I could pass as either’s kid unless you knew my parents, then the relation is pretty obvious.”

“That explains how ya got here.” Merle was like a dog after a bone. “But not how y’all knew to prepare for the walkers.”

“We didn’t know it was going to be walkers.” Harry corrected immediately. “That wasn’t even in the top ten of guesses when we designed this place. But we knew – we warned by a source we trusted – that something was going to happen in five or six years. So rather than melting into normal life with a house in the suburbs, we bought a chunk of land no one else wanted and started preparing, bringing in people we thought we could trust after a while and carried on carrying on. I went to college and then med school, dad and papa had the kids, and so on and so forth.”

“What source?” Daryl jumped on that like a tick on a hound.

Harry blew out another breath. They dealt with magic easily enough, having seen proof with their own eyes. But how do you explain a Seer?

“With magic came some unique magical abilities.” He started. “Like Siri’s transformation. Not everyone could do it, in fact back home I only knew of half-a-dozen witches and wizards with animal forms. Another is Sight.”

“Like a Ms. Cleo or somethin’?” Merle asked skeptically.

“Not even close.” Harry shook his head emphatically. “More like Oracle of Delphi or the infamous Cassandra: real, verified, witches and wizards capable of seeing or knowing things no one else could. And one of the most accurate in decades saw what happened to me and my dads and decided to help us out – not that we had any idea at the time.”

“Why?” Daryl was mystified by that. Magic or not, that wasn’t the sort of thing that happened, not even before the world went to shit.

“Because whatever it was she saw.” Harry explained as simply as he could. “It led her to believe that my befriending her daughter led to Luna having a better future than she would’ve had I taken
another path and eventually ended up here. She was thankful and helped us accordingly: warned of
danger in the future and made sure her daughter gave me an enchanted necklace that was packed
with things we’d need in this new world: both information and gold from mine and Siri’s family
fortunes.”

“Like a guardian angel.” Daryl muttered, eyeing his empty bottle. He wasn’t near enough drunk for
this talk of Seers and precognition shit.

“Basically.” Harry agreed. “Though Pandora would say it was just one good turn deserving another
if she was around to ask.” He climbed to his feet and stretched, collecting up the bottles and
dumping them in the bin where they were magically transferred to part of the farm for cleaning and
repurposing. “I think that’s more than enough for one night.” He waved over his shoulder calling
out a goodnight as he ducked into his room, leaving the Dixons to stay up and think over what all
they’d learned – and whether or not it changed their plans for their Pretty Magic Man.

…

Daryl woke with the dawn as light crept through the window, the hunter having left the drapes
thrown wide out of both neglect, it had been a long time since he thought about things like curtains
rather than watching for walkers, and a lifetime of habit.

He knew Merle would sleep for a couple hours more yet, Harry having let them know after leaving
the meeting the night before that they could sleep in a bit as he’d only be working on the work roster
for the next week and other things they weren’t needed for.

Taking advantage of the quiet time, he ducked into the shared bathroom, larger than any he’d seen
before for one or two people and started to explore.

The day before he and his brother had had a quick scrub up with the simple unscented bar of soap in
the shower, not taking the time to dig through the closet or drawers. Daryl felt himself grin as he
found a whole supply of men’s soap, shaving foam, razors, shampoo and conditioner, even an
electric battery-operated beard trimmer and after shave lotion. All fancy-pants things that he’d seen
in stores but never seen the point in wastin’ money on over simple bar soup and two-in-one
shampoo.

Opening bottles and pots and wrappers, Daryl found some neutral-scented things that wouldn’t stick
and scare off the wildlife if he took it in mind to go huntin’ sometime, before caving in a moment of
weakness and snatching a pot of shaving lotion with a light sandalwood musk to it.

Staring in the mirror, he dragged one hand through the short beard he’d grown in the last couple
months before picking up the grooming scissors tucked in the trimmer bag and set to work on
removing the dead animal from his face. A quarter of an hour later saw him with a much-trimmer
goatee and his hair cut back to his face and neck instead of hanging down past his jaw. Cleaning up
the hair from the countertop with efficient hands, he climbed in to revel under the hot water and suds
of the shower for a good thirty minutes – half of that dealing with a persistent problem courtesy of
his friend and host Harry.

Toweling off, he wrapped one of the massive fluffy bath sheets around his waist, then headed back
into his room to paw through his clothes – both his own from before and those that’d been left for his
use in the closet and chest of drawers.

In the end he through on a pair of butter-soft leather pants in a dark brown that would wear well, a
soft cotton undershirt, and a tough broadcloth work shirt with long sleeves and black buttons in a
dark blue, slipping his feet into thick boot socks to keep them warm before padding out to investigate
what the cabinets in the kitchen had to offer for breakfast, only to come to a screeching halt at the sight that waited for him.

It was Harry, but a Harry he’d never seen before.

In other words, Harry was half naked, wearing only a pair of tough leather-looking pants with a scale pattern like the ones he’d first seen him wear when they came across him and Merle, only this pair was an inky black instead of a worn-looking grey, the other man not even having a pair of socks covering his bare slim feet or a tie to hold back his hair.

The women had been the ones to notice it first.

Because, honestly, how often did men pay attention to what people wore or didn’t, especially in the middle of running for their lives.

But once they said something about it, Daryl and Merle had found it hard to not notice, enough to the point that they’d even talked about it once – as much as they actually spoke about anything instead of just reading each other.

Harry never changed his clothes in front of them.

Not once, not ever.

He never went shirtless or shucked down to a tank top, never was found in any sort of undress or with a button out of place.

The closest anyone ever saw him to even semi-naked was when he’d take his braid down and redo it – that was it.

Nothing else, not ever.

And it wasn’t like an unobservant idiot would think, that he was just living in the one set of dirty clothes and never changed to be caught at it.

Harry was probably the cleanest person in their group, constantly rotating between a pair of jeans, his grey leather pants, and a pair of tough work pants in brown, his shirts changing just as often if not more so.

So, then the question became, why?

With as many people tripping around each other in a confined space, catching someone in partial nudity or full-on naked was a fact of life.

You would have to work hard at not getting seen to avoid it, and no one worked that hard without reason.

As Daryl stared at Harry’s unknowing back and sides, taking in the patchwork of silvery scars in shapes he was familiar with – belt marks, cigar burns, a knife slash or two, and what looked like claw marks from something nasty, Daryl knew that he’d finally found the reason behind Harry’s almost obsessive privacy.

He didn’t want anyone’s nosy questions or annoying pity, something Daryl could relate to after Carol had seen him washing up in the quarry at one point and asked about his own belt marks on his back.
If he’d had the choice…he wouldn’t have let anyone see his own scars either.

“Cat got your tongue?” Harry asked lightly, turning his head lightly to the side, proving that he wasn’t as unaware as Daryl had thought. He just didn’t want to make a bigger deal out of what Daryl was seeing than necessary, and spinning around to hide his back would’ve done just that: made a big deal out of nothing.

After another moment or two Daryl continued forward, taking the cup – of coffee by its scent - Harry held out to him all without turning around to face him head on.

“That the reason your dads fought to get custody of you, then?” Daryl asked, remembering what the other man had said about his family.

Harry turned to face him, leaning back against the countertop with a cup of his own in his hands.

“Part of it.” He allowed, before taking a cautious sip of the hot beverage before motioning with the cup to the steaming platters on the breakfast bar and the plates and silverware already sitting out.

Harry must’ve woken up even before Daryl to have showered, cooked, and made coffee already, Daryl reckoned.

“Food’s on.” Harry said casually as if Daryl hadn’t just gotten a peek into his shitty past. “Help yourself.”

…

“Coffee and warm food on the counter.” Daryl told his brother when he stumbled out of their part of the apartment over an hour later.

Merle had obviously taken advantage of the bathroom supplies as well, trimming his hair back down from its curly poof and getting his beard down to a close clean shave. He was wearin’ boot socks, clean work pants, and a plain black t-shirt with his leather jacket in one hand. Daryl held in a snort. His brother looked down-right respectable – almost – for once.

“French toast, bacon, eggs, coffee?” Merle let out a low whistle. “Like Christmas morning when ma was still alive.”

Daryl nodded once, agreeing but not as surprised. Harry noticed everything. Daryl wouldn’t be shocked if he’d picked up on their likes from what he’d seen them take to the best or little things they said here or there.

Ignoring his brother as Merle bolted down breakfast, Daryl went back to sharpening his crossbow bolts and maintaining the fletching. Several of them were going to need repair, but he was sure somewhere around there would be feathers he could appropriate. He had his smallest whetstone in his hand as he maintained the edges on the points, a larger one sittin’ and waitin’ in water for him to get to takin’ care of his knives.

Before long, Merle had finished as well and joined his brother on the living room floor after laying down a protective tarp from his bag, breaking down and starting to clean and maintain his guns before grabbing a whetstone as well and working on his own knives and sword.

Neither of them felt the need for conversation, knowing they were of the same mind about this new place and the man who ran it.

They simply enjoyed the quiet and the companionship, knowing that soon enough they’d be up and
runnin’ around with Harry and back to work.

Still, it was good to just sit and abide awhile with some familiar tasks to keep their hands busy and their minds off the world going to hell just outside the gates.

Once Daryl had set aside the last knife, clean and sharpened in its sheath, he told his brother what was on his mind as Merle knew he eventually would.

“Harry’s kin were like Da.” Was all he said. “He’s got the marks an’ everythin’ just like us.”

Merle nodded slowly, running a rag down the edge of his sword after testing the edge with the pad of his thumb.

“We thought that might be the way of it.” The older man said. “How’d you find out?”

“He was fixin’ breakfast in only his leather pants.” Daryl shifted a little restlessly as – now that the shock had worn off – he could fully appreciate the vision Harry had made this morning. “And he had his back to me. Hard to see a patch of skin without a scar on it – no matter that most of them are old an’ silvered. Even had some on his front an’ arms.”

And one that looked like words on his hand that Daryl knew he would’ve noticed before now. The other man must have some way to conceal it. There was nothing else that made any kinda sense.

“You two decent?” Harry called out as he strode into the apartment, effectively killing their conversation of his background – for the moment.

“Shit, Pretty.” Merle joked as he resheathed his weapons except for the guns that would go back into his and Daryl’s rooms. “Been called a lot of things in my life but decent is a new one.”

“Bet you have at that, cantankerous creature you are.” Harry laughed, rubbing one hand on the back of his neck under his rebraided hair. “Well.” He eyed their dressed and relaxed forms all loose-limbed on the floor. “Ready to get to work? I’ve got some things to take care of and wanted you two to come along and start learning the estate.”

“Yes.” Daryl shrugged. “Ain’t got nothin’ else ta do since ya claimed us last night.”

“Okay then,” Harry wandered off towards his room. “Let me grab my jacket and we’ll head out, there’s new boots for you two by the door, your old ones are being cleaned and repaired by Remus when he has a minute to spare.”

The Dixons climbed easily to their feet, strapping on their various weapons, including their pistols and some full clips, the way Harry made it sound it was like they were going on a scouting trip or some such. Daryl darted into his room – his room he still couldn’t get over it, with his bed, and all his things after a lifetime of sharing everything with Merle or having nothing at all – and grabbed the leather jacket he’d seen in the closet. Merle tossed the fresh – but broken in both brothers could plainly see – boots at his brother’s head, Daryl snatching them out of the air with a soft growl at his brother’s evil chuckle.

They were a perfect fit, reaffirming the Dixon’s earlier notion, Harry pays attention.

The man himself sauntered back in, relaxed and easy from the feeling of being back home, at least that’s what the Dixons assumed it was, he wasn’t relaxed or loosehipped enough to have gone and gotten laid…likely with that flirty hand of his Sean or John or somethin’ like that. Whatever his name was had seemed awfully amenable to the idea if they’d read him right, despite Harry writing it off as mere teasin’. It’d been real enough to get their possessive hackles raised. They might be
willin’ to share with each other, the way they’d done pert-near everythin’ else in their lives, but they wouldn’t stand for an outsider to hone in on their territory—whether they’d claimed it yet as theirs or not.

Harry eyed them both a moment, disconcerted over the stormy looks both had on their faces, not sure what’d caused them but betting on a memory of some sort—they hadn’t really been doing anything or around anyone that would’ve gotten them hacked off so that was the only thing he had to explain it.

If he only knew…

“You two any good with horses?” He asked, shaking off his mental wanderings for the task at hand, focusing on the best way to get it done.

“Good enough, but no buckaroos.” Merle said. “Those nags of Hershel’s were the first we spent any real time around ‘em.”

“Our are a little better trained for these times than Hershel’s farm horses.” Harry promised with a laugh as they made their way through the castle and out the doors towards the stables. “And it’s the best way next to walking it to get a feel for the land or surrounding area.”

“What would your plan be if we weren’t willing to sit a horse?” Merle had to ask. He just couldn’t not. Harry had been damned good so far at not assumin’ shit so he knew the Pretty had to have a backup plan.

“Motorcycles or ATV’s.” Harry said nonchalantly. “But I like to keep those for when we need to venture out and might run into people, they’re harder on the land than horses and their fuel source isn’t renewable like the feed for the livestock.”

“Wouldn’t know it by the way you bring tankers home.” Daryl said with a cocky grin. “Y’all have to be better stocked for fuel than anyone for a hundred miles.”

“Probably.” Harry conceded with a little amused twitch of his lips. “But anything will run short by the time this whole thing is over, we have to make the things we have last as long as we can.”

“What will you do when the fuel runs out and you have all those cars an’ such lyin’ around, Pretty?” Merle questioned as Harry led them towards the tack room and had them grab what they wanted for their ride, both brothers going for the more utilitarian Western working saddles that were plain save for some tooled designs.

They carried the tack out, each man with a saddle swung over his shoulder save for Harry whose things were already waiting on a stand next to a stall. His getup was an inky black that matched his dragonhide—though the brothers weren’t familiar with the material other than it being a type of leather—pants with the same griffin from their rooms stitched in dark grey on the skirt and reins. Harry whistled once, bringing horse heads swinging over stall doors, ears twitching and eyes bright and gleaming dark.

“Repurpose what we can to run on solar or magic.” Harry shrugged, pointing out a tall buckskin Walker and a bay Quarter horse to the brothers, both mares. They didn’t have any geldings on the estate, only stallions like his and Siri’s mounts, or mares. “Tear down the rest for scrap metal.”

Turning as lips nipped at his braid, he hushed the stallion who was a massive seventeen hands, more than a hand taller than most other Fresiens ever reach. All black and beautiful, Harry’d instantly been drawn to the stallion at the auction he’d gone to with Max and Sirius to get the foundation of
their herd. They’d agreed ahead of time to stick with Walkers and Quarter horses but like when Hagrid had handed him a cage with a snowy owl in it, when Harry saw ‘Knave of Spades’ now known as just Knave, it’d been love – or familiar – at first sight.

The last thing Harry had ever expected on getting dumped in a strange world was to find another familiar after Hedwig had been left behind (though Pandora assured him she found a great home with Neville), let alone a horse from a breed that’d been used as war horses for centuries, preferred by generals, kings, and knights from all over Europe.

“Hey, Knave.” Harry reached up and rubbed one hand down his silky black nose. Said familiar snorted in his face and tossed his head before trotting over to the far end of the stall, flicking his tail at his human in derision.

Knave was not amused to have been left alone by his human for weeks.

As if running around with other two-legged grown-up apes was sooo important.

He whinnied in protest, snorting once more.

“Having troubles there, Pretty?” Merle asked, plainly amused from where he already had the buckskin bridged and was leading her out to get the saddle on her back.

“Oh shut up.” Harry snapped back, jumping lightly over the stall door without bothering to open it, not wanting to chance Knave bolting in his temper, and unknowingly showing off his lean strength. “He’s just irritated I was off without him, huh Jacks?”

Knave snorted, eyeing his person warily over his shoulder, not willing to be appeased by a few pats and soothing murmurs from his human. But Knave knew full-well that his human was wily. Harry had to have something up his sleeves or he never would’ve jumped into the stall with him. Knave had to be strong and ready to ignore whatever…oooh…His wonderful, perfect human brought him sugared dried mango pieces.

While Knave was distracted munching the rare treat – taken from Harry’s stash in his bedroom, otherwise his little brother and sister would’ve already eaten it all the monsters – that was like candy for both people and horses, Harry quickly had him saddled and bridled, leading his familiar from the stall and then the Dixons from the stables altogether.

“Sugar lumps?” Daryl leaned forward trying to get a look at what bribe had caused such a massive turn-around in the formerly stubborn horse.

“Dried mango with sugar dusting.” Harry explained. “A favorite one of my school-friends introduced me too in the way back, almost impossible to find anymore unless I hit a payload like that warehouse store supply truck. It’s like crack, Knave can never say no.” Harry offered a piece to both brothers, snacking on one himself and enjoying the pleased looks they each got at the sweet-tart flavor of the treat.

Clearing the stable doors, the trio swung up into the saddle, Harry a lot smoother than the brothers but they still got the job done even if it wasn’t as pretty or practiced as Harry’s own movement, before turning and setting the horses at an easy lope for the gate, ignorant to the eyes watching the sight they made: tough and handsome men on horseback, it was certainly a sight to see.

…

Harry led them back through the switchbacks and zig-zags of the gate systems, certain that after
leaving and coming back again both Dixons would know the path blindfolded, being the trackers and hunters they were.

“What’ve you got planned for us, Magic Man?” Daryl asked after getting familiarized with the bay mare, Josie while Merle was still busy adjusting to his mount dubbed “Annabel Lee.”

Most of the time you’d never know Merle had spent the better part of ten years gone with the Marines, the two brothers were so in sync with each other, nearly twins at times. But then something would come up, Merle’s military training rearing its head or him being uncomfortable with something that used to be easy, like horseback riding, and the differences were plain as day. Like they’d said, neither of them were buckaroos, but Daryl had done a stint as a stable hand when his drifting took him into horse country while Merle was busy getting shot at by tangos in Afghanistan.

He’d learned enough in those couple weeks before his feet got itchy again that using the horses to patrol the Greene farm was a simple thing, and riding again now was easy as pie once he got back used to it.

A good thing too, since if he was reading Harry right, they were going to be on horseback a lot in order to cover the miles and miles of fence lines that circled the estate.

“Those signs on the way in.” Harry explained, still kicking himself for overlooking such a simple thing. “They’re like beacons just calling out for someone to come looking for high walls and secure doors. I can’t take the prison off the map but we can make it a bit harder to find if anyone comes looking. And as this thing lasts and people key into it not being over quick, they’re going to come knocking for those walls and fences and steel doors. Figured you two wouldn’t mind watching my back and learning some of the local territory while I was at it.”

“Ya coulda just gone an’ done it, ain’t that so?” Daryl asked perceptively, eyes open and on the passing forest, looking for sign for when he came back huntin’ in the next day or so. He couldn’t stand eatin’ food that others had worked hard to grow an’ harvest an’ not give anythin’ back. He’d never taken anythin’ he hadn’t earned in his life an’ he ain’t ‘bout to start now.

Daryl didn’t really count the supplies that the group had brought in as his own contribution. Sure, he’d done his part clearing cars and houses and stores, but no less than anyone else though more than some. Plus he plumb cain’t stand bein’ idle for any length of time.

Merle was much the same, Daryl wouldn’t be surprised any if tomorrow or the next day when Daryl took off to hunt his brother either tagged along or wandered into the machine shop to put his hand in there…if Harry didn’t have anythin’ for ‘em to do anyways.

“Could’ve.” Harry smiled, ducking his head a bit shyly, not willing to admit he wanted their company. “Didn’t.”

“What else can ya do?” Merle asked, eyes scanning between the ebony horse and rider and his surroundings. They’d said a whole lot of nothin’ ‘bout their capabilities if you asked him. He’d let it go in front of the others, mostly useless pussies that they were, but wanted a better idea of what sort of limits they were working with in case they got in a jam. Thinkin’ like the soldier he’d been and the survivor he was, even before the dead started to walk.

“A lot.” Harry said drily. “If you know how, there’s not much magic can’t manage. And between my dads and our library, there’s not much we don’t know, magic-wise.”

“Like wha’?”
“Funny, or ironic, enough.” Harry gave a bitter snort. “We can’t bring the dead back to live. Not actual life, anyway. We have something similar to Walkers though, called Inferi, that are animated corpses usually used to guard tombs or treasure. But they’re not hungry or contagious.” He frowned, not sure he’d explained that very well. “You have to burn them to kill them, even a bullet to the head won’t work.”

“Gee.” Daryl deadpanned. “That sounds like a barrel of laughs.”

“Never saw one myself outside of a textbook.” Harry shrugged. “I think maybe Remus or Sirius have though, there was a war before I was born and the other side liked to use them as shock troops.”

“Ya know.” Merle narrowed his eyes thinking strategically. “I could see how that’d be damned effective. If all ya were lookin’ ta do was cause shock and awe I mean…not worried ‘bout survivors or collateral damage…”

“No, Merle.” Harry shot that down before the thought could fully form. “We’ve seen how dangerous it is to try and wangle walkers on the Greene farm. Let’s not even go there.”

“Was just imaginin’.” Merle shifted a bit, a faint blush rising in his cheeks. “I ain’t gonna actually do it or anythin’.”

Harry turned the topic back around as they left the final gate, all of them much more alert now that they were coming close to the end of the wards and outside of the strongest protective fields. At this point there were mostly alert wards and intention-based wards, nothing as…militant as the ones that were anchored to the various gates and fence lines. They need to be sharp. Just because his wards weren’t warning him of danger, didn’t mean that danger didn’t exist.

Even the best wards could be fooled, Sirius and Wormtail having both proven that at Hogwarts, not to mention the diary and Quirellmort.

“Magic can’t manufacture love, the real kind anyway.” Harry kept his voice low, not wanting it to carry. “But it can create infatuation and obsession through potions…both of which were highly illegal and akin to date-rape drugs. And it can’t conjure food.” He frowned trying to think if there was anything he missed. “I think that’s it, but you’d have to ask Papa Remus to be sure, he’s the bookworm in the family.”

“Y’all had wars?” Daryl asked, averting his eyes shyly when he was pinned with Harry’s emerald green gaze. He wasn’t one to make too much eye contact in the first place, after growin’ up with a da who was set off by it, but Harry’s made him feel like the other man was lookin’ straight through him.

“Did we ever.” Harry rolled his eyes, able to find it both funny and sad with distance and time. “Three really bad ones back-to-back-to-back and over the dumbest shit.”

“Like wha’?” Daryl persisted when it seemed like Harry wasn’t going to say anything more.

As it was, Daryl found how talkative the younger man had gotten the last couple weeks interesting. Didn’t say boo to most anyone but him an’ Merle for weeks on end, then the man gets riled by Rick and suddenly he’s handin’ out orders and openin’ up, ‘specially once they arrived the day before.

‘Course, Daryl didn’t have much to say himself most the time, Merle able to read ‘im and know that he’s thinkin’, and himself happy to sit back and observe while his brother did the talkin’, usually too much.
“Over blood.” Harry finally whispered after several long minutes, making Daryl think he wasn’t going to get an answer at all. “Three wars over who had the better blood-right to using magic. As if it meant a damn in the end: magical was magical, and we all fought and died and bled red just the same.”

By the time Harry spoke, they were coming up on where Harry had said the prison was…though looking at the burnt out foundation shell, Daryl had to amend that to used to be, him and Merle sharing a shocked look behind Harry’s back. They had a pretty good idea what or rather who happened here. After all, short of a massive explosion that woulda torn up the surrounding area, there wasn’t much that could do that to concrete and solid stone.

But a wizard…yeah…they figured he coulda done it just fine and easy as blinkin’.

The only question was: was there anyone alive inside when he’d done it.

“Watch the woods and the road.” Harry half-asked half-ordered as he reined a frisking Knave to a stop beside a large metal sign for the prison. The familiar wanted a good gallop, especially with a long open road stretching out before them. He would have to wait until they were back inside the fences to the pastureland on the other side of the trees for his gallop. Hopefully the cows and sheep would be put up by then and the sight wouldn’t have any of them off their milk. “This is outside the wards entirely; we do patrols to clear the walkers from the outermost wall but unless I have time on my hands I rarely go looking for them farther out than that.”

“On it, Pretty.” Merle said briskly, unholstering his throwing daggers, knowing it was a very bad idea to try and shoot a gun on horseback unless you were dead certain the animal was trained to it.

Harry had the sign uprooted from the road’s shoulder and shrunk down, tucking it away in Knave’s saddlebags to be repurposed, like he did damn-near everything.

Daryl shook his head at the sight. He knew they had ways of reusing things, but he’d never met a bigger pack-rat than Harry. The man made some of the hoarders on TV look plumb mild by comparison. ‘Course…Harry was neat and clean about it, not filthy like some’a them.

The road to the prison from the main turn-off they’d taken to the estate stretched a good five miles, with a couple more signs for Harry to remove while they rode. Daryl plugged a handful of walkers in the meantime, his crossbow having a better range than Merle’s daggers, though it was a draw for who tended to see them first. Both brothers found themselves pleased by the steady nature of their mounts, neither so much as shying at the sight of the undead creatures, or batting an eye when Harry sent a stream of fire from his wand to burn them to ash where they fell.

Knave on the other hand wasn’t being as considerate, making Harry well aware that a long gallop was more than overdue and he’d had enough of his person’s stalling.

“Any more signs need to come down?” Merle asked around carefully concealed laughter as Harry’s mount, a horse as pretty as its master, frisked up again for the fourth time in an hour.

“No.” Harry sighed after he hissed a curse at stubborn mules only good for glue. “Any others would be farther out, and we’d need wheels for that. Without knowing exactly where they are, I’d rather just call it good and cast a charm over this turn off that’ll deter all but the most determined…or someone who already knows its here.”

“Handy.” Daryl said, as the three of them turned back and made their way for the gate at a lope that took them quickly out of sight of the highway and back into the forest lands. Daryl knew his legs would be a bit rubbery, not used to spending so long in the saddle, but got a nice internal cackle over
knowing Merle’s ass would feel like someone took a bat to it…repeatedly as he smacked into the saddle rather than moving with the gait of the horse when they first started out and he got used to it.

“That why you didn’t wanna just tell the others where it was in case we got separated?”

Or someone took off on their own, which was more likely considering the mix in the Grimes/Greene group.

“Part of it.” Harry nodded as he raised up a little in his stirrups, allowing Knave to pick up a bit more speed since they were back on the estate road. “More…I just don’t trust anyone with only a few exceptions.”

Green eyes flashed over to each of the brothers, reassuring them that they were a couple of those exceptions before doubts could sneak in.

For two such tough, aggressive men, they had enough self-esteem issues to fill a warehouse and have overflow left over.

He’d have to see what he could do to remedy that, though he already saw some small changes just by showing them he had their back and that they were truly welcomed among his family. Giving them rooms inside the main house instead of with the others had done quite a bit as well. But there was more that he could do, he just had to set it up in a way that didn’t ruffle their feathers.

Harry would work on it, plans still needed tweaking.

They passed through the first several zones in companionable silence, the Dixons having more information to mull over and Harry busy thinking of a hundred things at once.

Clearing the forest-gate and trotting out onto the pasture land encircling the first stone wall, Harry reined up alongside the waiting brothers, who had paused and let him secure the gates before continuing alongside him rather than ride ahead. They were surprised when Harry let out a carrying, three-note whistle, leaning idly over the pommel of his saddle. A moment later had another three-note whistle, this one different than Harry’s echoing back to them over the fields.

“The gate to the farm proper is open if you two want to ride ahead.” He told them after deciphering the tune in less than a second after hearing it. “Knave and I are going for a gallop.”

“Alrigh’,” Daryl nodding catching the saddlebag with the shrunk-down signs and sign posts in it. “What ya want me ta do wit’ this?”

“Give it to either my dad or papa.” Harry told him with a smile. “They’ll know what to do with it, thanks. It’s past lunch so if you wanna grab a snack after taking care of your mounts you’re free to, I’ll be back in about a half-hour, maybe an hour depending.”

“An’ after?” Merle asked, dark blue eyes watching him calmly…despite his aching backside.

Harry just smiled blindingly, not about to give either of them any warning about what was coming… though for some reason they both eyed him even more cautiously than before, somehow seeing through his patented “There’s nothing to worry about, I’m completely innocent!” look, and leaned up over Knave’s neck whispering in one velvety black ear, the two of them taking off like a shot and leaving two very concerned, but resigned to whatever mischief he was up to, brothers behind him.

…
Daryl clutched his stomach and crossed his legs, bowing half-over in an attempt to contain himself. His raucous and rollicking laughter, that is.

Harry’s mischief that they’d been so resigned to turned out to be them tagging along on his Thursday afternoon duties…which happened to be teaching practical lessons to the estate kiddos.

A.k.a., Merle Dixon’s personal version of hell on earth.

It wasn’t that his brother was bad with kids, he’d done well enough teaching Daryl all he knew after all both when they were growin’ up and after he returned for the Marines.

Kids just made Merle plumb uncomfortable, for several reasons that Daryl had figured out over the years.

For one, they had giant ears that heard everything and loose lips that repeated everything. To a rough-talkin’ and foul-mouthed man like his brother that meant he’d been scolded, more’n a dozen times, by irate mama’s over what their “angels” had picked up from the man. Lori only bein’ the most recent in that long, long parade.

Two, Merle was a large, tough, physical man. You put one of the tea-cup kiddos, under say five foot, anywhere near ‘im and he was afraid he’d break ‘em. Put a baby in his hands and he ‘bout turned to stone, afraid if he even breathed wrong they’d start screamin’ or he’d hurt ‘em.

And if there was one thing neither of them abided, it was someone that hurt kids after all they’d been through with their da.

Weren’t fans of wife-beaters either, but at least with grown-folks Merle wasn’t scared of breathing wrong in their general direction the way he was with kids.

And here, Harry had the two of them lined up right next to him, wanting them to help teach the kids survival skills.

Today the lesson was, apparently, how to set traps for small game.

Even the littlest kids were outside in the courtyard, Carol and the foreman’s woman Sarah helping wrangle them, not that they needed to much of that.

Based on how Harry’d been tackled, a pair that looked awfully like his dads leading the charge, these kids universally adored the ebony-haired man who wasn’t afraid to wrestle in the dirt with them.

“Attention my army of minions!” Was how Harry called the kids to order after fielding a signal from Sarah. At that, the tea-cup midgets all lines up against one side of the courtyard, in what Daryl and Merle could tell was a pre-established order, the older kids all paired up with a younger one, but all of them the twelve-and-under set, the older teens likely having different lessons elsewhere or chores to see to. “As you can see,” he waved to the petrified Merle and amused Daryl. “We have some
new helpers today. The taller one is Sgt. Dixon and the younger one is Mr. Dixon.”

“HI Sgt./Mr. Dixon!” Many of the kids said/shouted/and/or waved at them.

Daryl leaning over and saying: “Sgt. and Mr. Dixon?”

“Being firm about discipline and manners is vital to keeping them from running wild.” Harry explained out of the corner of his mouth while the kids quieted back down. “Up until I brought y’all in we were seriously outnumbered with able-bodied adults versus kids. It was needed and it works, since none of them want extra chores or to be excluded from privileges.” He paused a moment, giving the silent-and-stiff Merle a quick frowning glance in concern before his face smoothed out as he turned back to the kids. “And it gives them the stability they desperately need. So, yes. When you’re dealing with the kids in any kind of official capacity, it’s Sgt. Or Mr. Dixon.”

“Today, my minions.” The kids all giggled at Harry’s mocking impression of a supervillain. “You have a treat: Sgt. And Mr. Dixon are hunters and trackers who are going to help teach us all how to set traps for small game.” He gave the brothers a blinding smile and ushered them over to where Sarah had set the supplies for the traps near the shade trees. “Now, everyone gather around one of us and we’ll get started!”

Merle’s eyes shot wide with panic at that, breaking his statue-like petrification. Harry wanted him to help teach…okay he could probably muddle through that with his sanity intact. Harry wanted him to teach kids alone…?

Aw, hell naw.

Unfortunately, before Merle could stutter out an excuse and make a break for it, pride be damned, they’d already circled him like piranhas sensing his fear, led by a smiling little demon…er…mite with black hair, amber eyes, and an all-too-familiar devilish grin.

“Hi, Sgt. Dixon!” The mighty mite piped up, the rest echoing him. “I’m Raz, Harry’s broder!”

It was official.

Merle had died and this was hell, staffed by evil little creatures with bright eyes and charming grins.

…

“What’s up with Merle?” Harry asked Daryl, utterly lost as the other man high-tailed it out of the courtyard after the lesson was over and the kids had been dismissed as their parent’s trickled in to collect them while the older Vatos kids led the younger ones back, being old enough to navigate the estate without getting lost.

Harry and Daryl each had a minion of their very own, Jaime having taken to the quiet, shy Dixon brother that led her group and had attached herself to his hand like a limpet the moment class was dismissed by Harry.

Raz on the other hand, taking well after his fathers, had had a look that screamed up to no good, resulting in being tossed over Harry’s shoulder before the nearly four-year-old could make a break for it.

With his brother hanging upside down and giggling while Jaime skipped along at an amused and discomfited Daryl’s side, they made their way along in Merle’s dust up to the castle to drop the kids off with either dad for a quick clean-up before dinner.
“He’s scared of kids.” Daryl said with a snicker, watching Merle stumble all over himself trying to not set a foot out of place had been the highlight of his *month*. “Doesn’t know how to talk to ‘em, always afraid he’s gonna break ‘em. That’s Merle.”

“Really?” Harry asked, brows shooting up to his hairline in surprise. “I never would’ve guessed, he did fine today, even got this monkey,” he shot fingers into sensitive ribs, sending up another peel of laughter from his little brother. “To pay attention long enough to set a simple trap. Better than most would do if you set them in a group that diverse.” And Harry knew from experience as all the able adults had taken rotations with teaching the kids hands-on skills sooner to later.

“Oh, ya don’ need ta tell me that.” Daryl said with an expressive roll of his eyes. “I know who taught me well enough. But if you asked ‘im if he’d rather take on walkers bare-handed or be responsible for a group of kids? He’d take the walkers any day of the week.”

“Huh.” Harry shook his head, boggled over the very idea. “The things you learn…”

“Tell me ‘bout it.” Daryl concurred with a meaningful look at Harry’s clothed back, the other man looking away at the reminder.

They’d only been around each other a month, give or take.

And most of that was spent watchin’ each other and tryin’ to survive, not exactly filled with heart to hearts.

There was still plenty more to learn, and now that they didn’t have to constantly be on the run for their lives, they actually had the time to do it.

…

Harry and the Dixons joined his dads and little siblings for dinner that night, Harry watching closely as Merle kept trying to avoid Raz, the two playing a hilarious game of musical chairs until Remus eventually took pity on him, having heard about Merle’s kid-phobia issues, and called Raz over to sit down on his booster seat next to him, letting Merle take the spot beside his brother safely on the other side of the table from the munchkins and their “evil” ways.

Ignoring that all the other men at the table were visibly biting back their amusement at his expense – something Merle wasn’t known for taking well – he sat down giving Remus an honest and heavy ‘thank you.’

They were eating in the dining area of the master apartment, the family rarely using the formal dining room and seeing no reason to start now when a flick of a wand would have the round table expanding to fit two more with ease. The kids were sandwiched between their parents, so the seating went: Harry, Siri, Jaime, Raz, Remus, Daryl, Merle, and back to Harry now that the kids were strapped into their seats and unable to stalk the elder Dixon around the table.

“He’s really taken to you Merle.” Harry teased lightly, meaning no harm. “I think someone has a crush.”

Sirius groaned, throwing his head back. “Please for the love of Merlin stop aging my babies. It was bad enough when you started in on the crushing and the angusting and *ugh!* I am *not* ready to go through that again.”

That brought up a question that had been bugging both brothers since they’d seen Harry’s family pictures the night before.
“When you say your babies…” Merle trailed off, not wanting to ruin the good thing they had going here, Harry’s evil horde of minions aside. “How…?”

“Why do they look like us, you mean?” Remus took pity on the poor man Harry and Raz had double-teamed from the moment they figured out his weakness.

“Yup.” Daryl said with a nod. “Woulda said ya used a bought mama or somethin’ but…y’alls kids look like both a ya.”

“Well…” Sirius joked, having the time of his life with new targets that weren’t wise to his ways yet. “When two men love each other very much…”

“Naw, man.” Merle rolled his eyes, exasperated. Harry’s family was exhausting. “We know how that all works.”

“Really?” Sirius arched a cool brow, his mood changing on a dime. “Have a lot of practice do you?” He muttered under his breath: “Better not be practicing with my innocent pup…”

“Siri.” Harry hissed, hiding his mortified face in his hands after Merle swung his head around to stare between him and his dad. “I’m not fourteen anymore… If I want to practice with one of them or both or the whole bunkhouse that’s my call!”

“Really, now, Pretty?” Merle asked, voice low and gruff as he leaned in close, Daryl watching them with hot eyes. “Do I get a vote cuz if so…”

“Male pregnancy.” Sirius blurted out, eyes narrowed on the man leaning way too close to his little Prongslet. “Remus got me up the duff, twice, and Harry delivered them. They’re ours in every way they could be.”

“Still, way too much information about your relationship.” Harry’s eye twitched, as he reached out and dished himself up from the platters Remus had retrieved while Sirius was making him wish he was an orphan all over again, just to avoid these kinds of scenes mind. “Kids should not know those kinds of things about their parents, no matter how old they get or degrees in medicine they earn.”

“So make sure you use protection.” Sirius continued on, oblivious to the wide-eyed looks he was getting from his mate. The only thing keeping him from a head-slap being that their two youngest were way too into their cheesy potatoes and cubes of chicken with crisp carrot sticks to hear what he was saying.

“Siri…” Harry groaned, sure he was going to be permanently red after this one dinner.

“Because muggle or not, my Prongslet is powerful…”

“Padfoot…”

“And all of you smell fertile…”

“Pads…”

“And I’m too young and good-looking to be a grandfather yet…”

“Sirius Orion Black!” Remus nearly barked out the name, all his previous tried to grab his mate’s attention falling on deaf ears.

Sirius definitely had a bad case of canine-selective-hearing, especially when he got caught up in
something like the obsessive mutt he was at heart.

And this time it was sure to get him in the doghouse, both with his mate and his eldest, as he blinked, snapping out of his hazed-rant-spiral, seeing Harry attempting to melt into his chair, face beat red and Remus’s eyes nearly glowing with irritation.

Meanwhile in Dixon-land, they were alternately caught up in oddly-arousing pictures of Harry swelling ripe with their children or in very-arousing fantasies of the act that would plant them there, making them both seem rather out of it as they stared in a distinctly predatory fashion at a deathly-embarrassed Harry Black.

“Oh.” Sirius said in a small voice, looking over at Remus with his infamous kicked-puppy eyes. “Too far?”

“You might as well be in another galaxy, yes, Padfoot, too far.” Remus said, voice ripe with loving vexation. “And you’ve wondered why Harry never brought any of his boyfriends or girlfriends home? I think we have the answer, besides which, they’re not even in any kind of romantic relationship, Pads! Bad! Bad parenting!”

…

“So…” Daryl drawled when they’d finally escaped the Sirius-and-Remus show, aka dinner with the Blacks.

“Not talking about it, ever, the last hour never happened.” Harry bit out waving his hands in a clearing motion in mid-air.

The mortified man was sprawled on his stomach across the couch, Daryl having once again lit the fire and taken to laying out on the rug, leaving Merle to raid the chill cabinet for drinks and pick one of the two empty arm chairs in the communal living area of their shared apartment.

“I dunno.” Merle said, more than ready to tease after the heck he’d taken over his kiddie issues. “It’s engrained pretty well in my memory. I didn’t even know people could turn that color-a purple.”

Harry whapped him half-heartedly on the leg as he leaned down to hand over the bottle, another one of Harry’s ciders, Merle just chuckling at the feather-light hit as he tossed the other bottle to his brother before manhandling Harry into lifting his legs before letting them fall back over his own, sitting in a sprawl now with Harry lying a third over him.

Lifting himself up onto his elbows, Harry turned and craned his head to stare at the man who just lifted his legs and made himself right at home under him.

“Comfy?”

“Yup.” Merle took a long pull outta his cider. “Think I’ll stay righ’ here.” He tossed a leer up the length of Harry’s prone form. “It has one helluva view.”

Groaning at the bad line, Harry flopped back down onto the couch with a twist, making it so he was lying on his back instead of showing off his ass to the jackass, taking what little sips of his drink that he could without picking himself back up and subjecting himself to Merle’s jokes and smirking leers, eyes shut firmly.

A dangerous grin on his handsome face, blue eyes flashing darkly, Daryl came slowly over onto his hands and knees, setting his bottle aside, Merle watching him with a knowing smirk. Crawling over quietly with the same stealth he used to stalk prey – he supposed Harry was at the moment – Daryl
loomed over the oblivious form of his target, Harry continuing to sulkily take little sips and making
quite the picture. The next thing Harry knew, his bottle was being jerked quickly out of his hand, his
eyes flying open to the sight of Daryl having planted his hands on either side of his head, all he could
see was flashing hot blue eyes and then his eyes fell closed again as Daryl stole his mouth in a
burning, possessive claiming of a kiss.

It was conquering, a ravishment, and completely aggressing, no sign of Daryl’s natural shyness
anywhere in evidence as his lips silently demanded Harry’s acquiescence, which the younger man
gave, mouth opening to the forceful thrust of a hot, sweeping tongue that entered him like an
invading general invent on claiming new territory for its own.

Harry gave a quiet moan, lips pressing back against Daryl as the shock gave way to pure heat, strong
arms wrapping around taut shoulders, callused hands burying in short, choppy strands of nut-brown
hair.

His moan was answered by a deep subvocal growl, Daryl moving to pin him down firmly, bringing
himself down firmly over his prey, moving his hands to one wedge under Harry’s neck and hold his
head firmly in place for his ravishment, the other sweeping over firm, ridged muscle before coming
to rest on one tight hip, his thumb caressing the sliver of flesh bared between leather pants and a soft
cotton shirt that had ridden up with Harry’s twist onto his back.

Merle watched, eyes blazing and hands clenching on either his cider bottle or Harry’s ankle where
he’d clamped down on when Daryl had made his move, but made no further advance of his own,
letting Daryl make his claim undisturbed while still keeping Harry aware of his presence – more that
Merle was allowing Daryl to stake first claim but not bowing out either.

Hands holding him at neck and hip and ankle, mouth under siege, Harry found himself never happier
to be wrong as he gave way with nary a whimper under the sudden aggressive onslaught.

Apparently, Harry thought amused in the back of his mind, Daryl at least had figured out what his
friends at Hogwarts had known for years – Harry was the most oblivious male to inhabit any planet.

If you wanted him to know and understand you were interested – you had to make it plain, and more
than just a little flirting.

Well…

You couldn’t get much plainer than the pounce-and-kiss.

Being a good kisser didn’t hurt either, and for all that Daryl was a little rough around the edges, he
certainly knew how to kiss a bloke senseless.

Finally, the need for air won out over their heated battle of lips and teeth and tongues, Daryl ripping
away from Harry’s drugging lips and burying his face in the silky curve of his neck, letting his hand
move back to lift him up a fraction from pinning his partner down completely as he had before.
Panting harshly, Harry moved to run one hand up and down Daryl’s spine soothingly, both of them
were quite wild at the moment, their lust and vest for survival rapidly turning into a different kind of
lust and a desire for another base drive. His other hand held on to Daryl’s shaggy hair strongly, his
eyes opening, green irises blow wide as he pinned the hotly-watching Merle with a lust-filled look
that would break a weaker man.

But neither of the Dixons could ever be called weak, Merle merely allowing his hand to tighten
minutely on his captive’s ankle, not showing any other sign that the debauched vision before him
moved him at all, let alone set fire to his very core, a fire that had already been banked a burning by a
scene playing out beside him hotter than any skin-show or porno he’d seen in his life.

Uncoiling like the human viper the elder man was at heart, albeit a hot-blooded one, Merle shifted and dragged himself up the side of his Pretty, rubbing every inch of Harry from foot to head with his strong, tough body, coming down in the crack between Harry and the back of the plush couch, effectively pinning the younger man between himself and his brother as he propped himself over the flushed and panting man.

The two Dixons, each now propped on an elbow with a hand either under Harry’s head or neck as Daryl had shifted to allow his brother access to their prize, ran hot eyes up and down the clearly aroused and fidgeting form oh-so-gently pinned under their combined strength. They knew that the wizard beneath them could get himself free with his magic…if he really wanted to. That was the key. They held the dominant position – but only because at the moment at least, Harry didn’t want to fight them for it or force them away.

Merle lifted his free hand – which had been busily exploring the slabs of muscle that was carefully concealed by Harry’s often looser over-shirts, tunics, and jackets – and rubbed one callused thumb gently over a plush and pouty kiss-reddened lower lip, Daryl taking a turn at watching while petting Harry, learning every dip and curve of the tight, lean body under them.

…

Time passed in a white-hot haze before a rather-squashed wizard struggled to sit up and nudge his new…lovers? Boyfriends? Friends-with-benefits? Off of his extremely-compressed chest, Daryl rolling onto the floor with an irritated grunt allowing Harry to wiggle out from under Merle and take a deep breath, thankful that his lungs didn’t seem permanently damaged from having a pair of massive rednecks constricting them from expanding. Merle just threw out one hand and hooked his arm around Harry’s waist, towing him back into his body before he could get far as Daryl cranked open an eye and gave Harry a half-pissed half-bleary glare.

“What was that for?” Daryl growled as he shifted and sat up properly, rubbing one hand against his shoulder which had borne the brunt of his collision with the wooden floor, the impact only mildly cushioned by the rug warming the living area.

“Couldn’t breathe.” Harry explained, reaching over and gently combing the fingers of one hand through Daryl’s hair in apology. “Sorry. But whatever they fed you two to get you this big wasn’t kind to my ribcage…especially with both of y’all all limp and boneless on top’a me.”

“Hmm.” Was all Daryl had to give in response to that, his expression melting from cantankerous into soft concern as his gaze tracked over the disheveled wizard, looking to see if they’d caused any actual injury.

Watching and flirting with Harry over the last couple weeks, then seeing how that hand responded to him…then Sirius’s rant…well…

It hadn’t set them up for the gentlest method of making their intentions known.

But while Daryl could plainly see that Harry was covered in marks – from both of them – and had the bruised-lips of someone well-fucked, even without actual fucking being involved, he was clearly fine with what had gone down.

Daryl would even say more-than-fine considering the pleased, cat-that-drunk-all-the-cream look on
his pretty, stubble-burn-reddened face.

A nudge from Harry had Merle – still mostly dozing in his post-sex-high – releasing his hold albeit with a grumble or two, allowing the wizard to stand up and stretch, his still-open leather pants and cotton shirt doing more to frame his body than conceal it as they were almost falling off of his arms and hips.

“We all need to get some sleep.” Harry said around a wide-yawn, lowering his arms back down from his stretch, back popping obligingly. “And not on a couch or on the floor.”

Daryl nodded and climbed to his feet, an uncertain look on his face. Did Harry mean together or…? He got his answer as the other man extended his arm out, hand open and palm up in a silent offer. A shy blush – his innate quiet nature reasserting himself now that his aggression, generally roused by either his temper or desire, had calmed back down – dusted the tops of his ears and cheekbones.

Linking their fingers together with a soft smile and a small lowering of his lashes, Harry kept hold of him as he leaned over and shook Merle awake with his free hand, the older Dixon peeling open one dark blue eye in question as he quickly noted the stances of the other two.

“We’re going to bed.” Harry explained gently. “You coming with us or…?”

Merle got to his feet, one hand rubbing at the side of his jaw as he yawned himself, jaw making a quiet popping sound, then gestured for Harry to lead the way, the oldest of the trio padding along quietly behind the other two, eyes focused and considering on their linked hands as he followed along.

Harry left the light off as they entered his room, heading straight to the bedroom and his massive four-poster with heavy light-canceling hangings. Peeling the covers back, he dropped Daryl’s hand and shucked his clothes, before motioning for Daryl to climb in first before joining him, already knowing that Merle – being Merle – would want the side closest to the door. Turning to first one and then the other, he gave each a soft goodnight kiss in turn before snuggling down between the two hot-blooded men, all three of them rapidly surrendering to the night’s dark embrace.

…

His internal clock woke Harry as it had since he was four and deemed old enough to do chores at the Dursleys at the unholy hour of six am.

It had never mattered how good or bad his sleep was, he always woke at the same time like clockwork after spending years being woken at that hour by either Petunia or Vernon, though if the nightmares were bad enough, he would wake even earlier than normal out of grief or rage or terror, not even bothering to return to sleep.

He took stock of his position and that of his companions, the three of them having moved and shifted some during the night, bodies moving closer together so that they fit one to the next like puzzle pieces. Harry at some point at turned so that he was half sleeping on his side but mostly leaning on and snuggled into Daryl, his face tucked into the curve of the other man’s shoulder and one arm slung over his waist. Merle was sprawled on his stomach, one arm bent under his pillow and with his other hand clasped possessively on Harry’s bared hip, one leg tucked between the wizard’s.

It would be a losing proposition to get out of bed without waking them, especially with their battle-hardened survival instincts.

But Harry’s active nature wouldn’t allow him to simply lay there and be either, his brain kicking into
gear before his eyes even open, going over all the things to get done that day, and what needed doing the next day and next week, next month to keep everyone relying on him safe and healthy.

“Too early.” Merle muttered into the pillow, able to hear the differences in Harry’s breathing and it bringing him far enough out of his sleep to comment. “Go back ‘a sleep.”

Harry merely leaned up and kissed a sleepily-watching Daryl, light blue eyes barely cracked open and visible in the dark of the shadowed bed, on his scruffy jaw before turning and doing the same on Merle’s stubbled cheek.

“You go back to sleep.” Harry told them quietly. “You could do with some more rest, we were up late last night.” He blushed thinking about what had transpired in the living room to keep them “up” before they retired to his bed and slept.

“You too.” Daryl responded gruffly, leaning up on one elbow as Harry climbed over the still-sprawled out Merle after prying the man’s hand off his hip, careful not to hit anything sensitive with his knees. “’Sides,” the more-awake Dixon shot him a rakish smirk. “Bed’s not as comfy without you.”

The wizard just shook his head regretfully, laying one finger over his lips in a shushed motion before pointing to the once-more-unconscious Merle who let out a breathy snore.

Daryl shook his head, eyeing his idiot brother – that noise was damn fake – before turning and slipping from his side of the bed, completely unabashed as he padded over to stand before a blushing and heatedly-staring Harry. Crooking one index finger under his wizard’s chin, Daryl stole his breath with a sensuous good morning kiss. Nipping lightly at the full lower lip with strong white teeth he pulled back before grabbing hold of one of the hands hanging loose by Harry’s side and towed him out of the bedroom, correctly guessing which door led to the attached bath.

Harry winced as the bright lights kicked on at their entrance, Daryl letting go of his captive long enough to move over to the shower and play with the settings until steaming-hot-but-comfortable water was pouring down from the trio of shower heads. Turning back to Harry, Daryl gave a brief frown as he noticed Harry arms had come up to shield several of the worst scars he carried on his body, one hand covering – or trying and failing to cover – what looked like the marks left by a pissed-off animal with nasty claws, the other tucked behind his back. That wouldn’t do, not a’tall.

Walking back to stand toe to toe with the other man, eyes both fierce and gentle, Daryl lifted and spread his arms up and open, then began to turn showing off each and every mark on him in a display more blatant than he’d ever made before.

He wasn’t ashamed of his scars, not even the ones from pure stupidity on his part or that were mementos from his dumbass father, but neither did he show them off either.

In this case, he felt the cause was worth the minor discomfort he felt over making a spectacle of himself.

“I ain’t got nothin’ to be shamed of.” Daryl said once he’d completed his circle and was facing Harry, the other man having lowered his eyes at some point. Cupping his cheek gently in one callused paw, Daryl forced Harry’s green gaze to lift and focus on him. “An’ neither do you. Will ya tell me ‘bout ‘em?”

Teeth clamped firmly between white teeth, Harry nodded hesitantly, allowing Daryl to tug him under the ache-soothing water.
Daryl started him off easy, with the ones he was pretty sure he knew the story behind, at least in general terms, moving around to the back of Harry and brushing a finger down the whip marks and cigar burns.

“These?”

“Gifts from my loving uncle.” Harry said with a slight sneer. “After my parents died I was sent to live with my mum’s sister, her husband and son.”

“This one?” Daryl leaned over to rub a burn scar on Harry’s thigh.

“My aunt. Tossed a frying pan filled with grease at me when I was nine for burning breakfast.”

Limber fingers traced the nasty claw marks on Harry’s rib cage, Harry supplying the answer before he could ask: “Dragon caught me with her tail when I was fourteen.”

“Dragons are real?” Daryl leaned back, focusing on Harry’s water-dappled face.

“In my old world, yes. Here?” He shook his wet head, slicking his long tangled hair back off his face and neck. “Not so much.” He pointed to a round puncture scar in his upper arm that Daryl had confused with a gunshot wound. “Basilisk fang at twelve, rare but real.” And then a vicious slash on his hip. “Acromantula fang…also fourteen, think Shelob from Lord of the Rings. All magical creatures that existed in my original world.”

Catching his arm, Daryl turned it so the inside – and the thick wounded from an edged weapon – was revealed, arching a brow at the sudden haunted look on Harry’s face.

“A coward with a knife.” Harry said quietly. “Who served the madman who killed my parents.”

Leaning down, Daryl pressed a soft kiss to the wound, unknowingly soothing an ache inside Harry that flared to life every time he saw or thought of that scar – and the hell that followed its creation. Turning, Daryl showed his own back once more, paying back Harry’s confidence in kind.

“My dumbass da.” Daryl told him, watching Harry’s wet face – though from the shower or tears he could only guess – over one tanned shoulder. “From thirteen to eighteen after Merle left and before I took off once I was legal.”

A bitten-marred pair of lips pressed butterfly kisses from one end of a lash mark to the other, casting up and down, not leaving a single silvery line untouched. Spinning around once Harry’d finished his work, Daryl scooped the wizard up in his strong arms and backing him up against the wall, settling in between Harry’s legs that’d wrapped around his hips and nestling their arousals together that had started to rise with Harry’s lips on his back. A thumb traced the zig-zap on his forehead, a question in blue eyes.

“The madman to killed my parents.” Harry said with a bitter twist of his lips. “When he tried to kill me and failed.”

Sun-chapped lips brushed over the faint line that had faded almost to nothing on entering this new world and helped along in fading with both time and scar-fading cream that Sirius had brewed up with what ingredients they could find.

“Any more?” Daryl asked, one hand braced against the water-warmed shower tile while the other clung onto Harry’s scarred hip.

“Just one.” Harry admitted with a sigh, lifting his hand and showing the clear back, much to Daryl’s
confusion before Harry started to rub at the back with his opposite hand, words showing pinkish-silver after he was done.

This single scar Harry covered with a permanent glamor that he had to consciously remove. While he had other cursed scars – the AK scar, Pettigrew’s knife, the Basilisk’s puncture – only the one from the Blood Quill had proven resistant to the combination of time and potions. Remus had speculated that it was due to the scar being from constant reapplication over a series of months – cutting deep into his hand almost to the bone.

An eternal reminder of the year from hell – and what that year almost cost him save for a pure moment of serendipity and a thankful Seer.

“I must not tell lies?” Daryl read off the words, a consternated look on his handsome face. “Wha’ the fuck?”

“Magic isn’t all shrinking charms and rainbows.” Harry told him with a crooked – if bittersweet – smile. “It can do horrible things just the same as wonderful things. It just matters how you use it. You yourself have already used what caused this. But to have the same effect you would’ve had to spend hours upon hours over a series of months writing out the same thing in an effort to make sure ‘the message sank in.’”

“Someone did this to ya.” Daryl snarled, eyes flashing in realization as he recalled the stick – quill – that Harry had had them use to sign that contract of his. “Yer aunt…naw…” His eyes narrowed, thinking of what he knew about Harry’s life. “Someone else…”

“A teacher.” Harry told him, shifting a bit against the wall and wrapping his arms around Daryl’s shoulder to help hold himself up a bit more. “Who tried everything she could to cow me or shut me up.”

Daryl snorted derisively. “Ain’t no way that woulda worked.” He said knowingly, hitching his hands under Harry’s hips before walking them directly under the spray of the shower heads so that they could actually set to cleaning up. “Ain’t no how. She musta not known who she was fuckin’ with.” He snorted once more shaking his head. “Stupid bitch.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” Harry said with a brilliant smile, leaning forward to steal a kiss before hopping down now that Daryl had given up on getting lucky in the shower, having clearly seen that the talk of his scars had put him right out of the mood.

No matter.

There would be other mornings.

Thousands of them if Harry had his way, and he intended to.

Cuddling under the steamy water with one – or both – of his lovers after a night of intimacy was Harry’s idea of heaven on earth.

One he planned to enjoy as often as possible.
On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

Disclaimer: The idea for the “testing stone” used in this chapter (and maybe in later chapters as well) comes from the Celta series by Robin D. Owens. An amazing futuristic/fantasy romance series that is breathtaking, really. If you haven’t read it I encourage it if you like that type of genre. Anyway, I make no claims to have developed this idea, I’m merely borrowing it as it is the property of Ms. Owens, neither is this testing stone the exact same as in her stories, I’m merely borrowing and tinkering with it a bit.

Chapter Ten: Settling In

For the second morning in a row, Merle stumbled out of bed to the smell of freshly made breakfast and hot coffee.

Mana from heaven.

However, this time when he hit the kitchen, both his brother and their Pretty were sitting down at the bar, steaming mugs of coffee and mostly-full plates of pancakes and eggs laying on the countertop in front of them as they perched on the cushioned stools. With the suite being originally designed when Harry was still a teenager, there hadn’t been a need to add an actual dining area, with the ebony haired man – then teen – preferring to eat with his family. Something he might have to consider changing, maybe expanding along the far kitchen wall, if he planned on having private meals with his Dixons.

Merle made himself at home at the place that had been laid for him, thanking Harry with a nod and a barely-coherent “Thanks,” before gulping down coffee and digging into the food.

Harry was finished first, mostly because even after all the healing he’d undergone thanks to his dads as well as years of full meals and getting up to a healthy weight, he still had a hard time shaking years of having to bolt down food before it was stolen from him. He’d weaned himself off of guarding his plate, and remembered to chew more than just once or twice…most of the time, but still eleven solid years of abuse followed by summers that seemed determined to make up for his absence the rest of the time, had left a strong mark on his behavior that he fought and would continue to fight all through his life. But, leftover habits or not, Harry often found himself more thankful than ever that the Dursleys’ abuse and neglect had been mostly corrected as far as his actual health was concerned.

His mental health now…that was a different story as what the Dixons had dubbed his “hoarder” habits and severe preparedness that bordered on obsessive paranoia made clear to anyone who thought about it.

And no matter how much he’d like to, Harry couldn’t blame his mental scars on the Dursleys alone. No, they’d definitely had help on that front. Help from years of a finicky public, lying reporters, traitorous friends, and manipulative old goats to make him this fucked up.

Shrugging it off, as he tended to whenever his mind wandered to the subject lest he lose control of his temper – and his magic in the process – Harry sat back, hooking his feet around the rungs of the chair, and wrapped his hands around his still-warm cup of coffee, inhaling the life-giving aroma with pleasure.
His movements drew a pair of dark blue eyes that studied him carefully now that Merle had had a cup of coffee and cleared away half of his plate, allowing him to think of things other than how much he’d like to go back to sleep or the growling of his stomach.

“What’s with the fancy treads, Pretty?” Merle asked in between mouthfuls of pancake slathered in fresh butter and Aunt Jamima’s. “Got an appointment at the golf club?”

Harry was wearing a pair of crisp cotton slacks in a rich cream color, topped with a, silk? Merle thought, red short-sleeved Polo shirt. Leaning over a bit to study the rest of the Pretty, the canny-eyed elder man recognized a genuine leather belt in black and matching black leather boots on his feet – nice ones too that shone under the light and didn’t have the tough-as-nails look of his normal boots.

Daryl, who had wondered over the clothes when he’d seen Harry pick them out from his large closet, didn’t say a word but was obviously waiting and listening for Harry to answer his brothers question.

“Not quite.” Harry laughed lightly. “No, I’m afraid today I’m playing doctor instead of runner or hunter or commander. I normally open up the little clinic attached to the mess hall on Sundays for non-emergency visits, yearly physicals, and the like.” He cocked his head and gave a shrug thinking about the next couple of days ahead of him. Hopefully soon he’d be able to slow down and just be for a day. He needed the break to recharge after the adventure that started with rescuing Merle and had yet to really end. “I’m not a fully-fledged doctor, mind, but I had all the fundamentals taught to me and was about to enter my year of Patient Care, plus with my magical medical training and first aid…I come as close as we’re likely to find with the dead wandering around. Plus,” he sighed thinking about it. “I’ve gotten a lot of practice since this thing began.”

“Ain’t today Friday ’cording to yer calender?” Daryl pointed out with a slight frown. “Why’re you openin’ up today?”

“You.” Harry supplied before adding: “Well your group. Everyone gets checked over when they come in from the outside, and gets checked on a rotating schedule. It helps me keep an eye on any chronic conditions people have and stop problems with a person’s health before it becomes something I can’t treat. These days, with the healthcare system gutted and no way to replenish supplies for medications and vaccines, prevention is more important than it ever was.”

He let the brothers mull that over a minute, finishing off his coffee and taking his empty cup and plate over to the sink where they automatically started to get cleaned but the permanent enchantments that he activated with a press of a gemstone inset next to the faucet.

Then he finished his explanation saying: “Besides, with all the magic everyone is exposed to daily from the protections and using things like the chill cabinets, I have to keep a firm eye on their magical-radiation levels.”

“Magical radiation?” Daryl blinked, taken aback by that, those two words not making much sense to him next to each other. “What the Sam-Hill is that?”

“Magic is dangerous to non-magical people, at least over-exposure is.” Harry told them as he wandered around and put up the leftovers, taking Daryl’s plate with a smile when the other man handed it over. “There were studies done on it and everything in my original world. And like anything else, the healthier someone is the more they can take – along with other factors. The protections, the wards, we live under give off a constant, low-level hum of magic that seeps into everything under them. The same with anything else that’s magical. Radiation is the best way of describing it since it’s similar: some, small amounts is fine, greater amounts you need to keep an eye
on like X-Ray machines, but large constant doses like exposure from a reactor malfunction or nuclear winter can be deadly…depending.”

Merle got up and took his own plate to the sink, watching with narrow-eyed contemplation as the cloth and scrubber got to work and the plate and silverware dunked themselves in the wash and rinse before floating over to rest on the drying rack: all without him lifting a finger.

“There’s another layer of protections on the castle.” Merle noted with his sharp cleverness. “And a shit-ton of magical shit on the inside of it.” He looked over at the steadily-watching figure of Harry, his brother having padded off to tug on his boots, but still listening from the entry-way. “That’s why all the others houses are on the other side of that first wall…that an’ for extra security for your family itself.”

“Yes,” Harry acknowledged with a slow nod. “That was part of the reason I designed it this way. If you’re not at least a four on the scale of magical power, living in close contact with this much magic could be toxic after a prolonged period of time.” Harry smirked, turning and walking with Merle as they went to join the waiting Daryl, the older Dixon quickly tugging on boots and grabbing his jacket from the hall tree. “Which is why the two of you are my first patients of the day: I was sure from your reactions to the wards that you’re each at least a four on the scale but I won’t be 100% until I test you myself.”

“Gonna play doctor with us, Magic Man?” Daryl drawled, low and silky, making Harry blush a bit unwittingly thinking back to water-slicked kisses on scarred skin…and their unfinished business that came along with them.

“That’s the general idea.” Harry said, clearing his throat and ignoring the knowing leer he got from Merle, the other man having a damned good idea of something happening between the other two in their joint shower, just not what. “After if you want to hunt or help out in the machine shop, you’d be welcome to. Just if you take one of the horses let Max know…and stick to either Annabelle Lee or Josie…some of the others can be trouble if you’re not used to them and them to you.”

…

The trio stopped off at Max and Sarah’s house, catching the foreman at his own breakfast, so Harry could have them pass along appointment times to the others in the Dixons’ group, doing the same with Rosalia, before Harry led the brothers into the small clinic attached to the mess hall.

It wasn’t much of a thing, Harry having his “lab” – fancy word for it since while it was set up, Harry was still learning how to use some of the equipment and learning how to process certain tests and read results when he had a moment – in the basement levels of the castle. Mostly it was a small area for people to wait with a chalk board on the wall that had reminders of open hours on Sunday, as well as a place for people to sign in, and a blank area for Harry to write in whatever tickled his fancy on a given day or for kids to draw on. Today Harry wrote out a list of questions for people to be prepared to answer as best they could, setting out a small table with several forms – medical history from what they saw – with clipboards and pencils.

Next to the chalkboard, Harry had hung up a long list that had important tests, vaccinations, and other healthcare milestones from birth through death on it. On another wall there was a list of signs of having an emergency such as high fevers, sharp chest pains, and sudden dizziness or blurred vision. After you passed through the waiting area, Harry had set up a staging area like found in any doctors’ office that had a height chart, a pair of scales, and an eye test chart. There were only two rooms, one much larger than the other that was clearly used for emergencies requiring surgery or a sterile environment, and the smaller that was a regular clinic room with an exam table, doctor’s stool, and cupboards that held Harry’s tools of the trade, including a locking filing cabinet and a door that
led to a dispensary that had from what they were told, a fraction of Harry’s actual supplies the rest being kept in the castle storage until required.

For a family that claimed to trust the people under their care, they certainly didn’t skimp on the safety precautions.

Which both Dixons heartily approved of.

Just because you take someone in, that didn’t mean they won’t try and screw you over, magically-binding contracts or not.

“Alright.” Harry bustled around, grabbing a box out of a drawer from his desk in the staging area. “Who’s my first victim?”

Merle none-too-gently shoved Daryl forward, feeling zero guilt over offering his younger brother up as a sacrificial lamb in this situation, sure that Harry wouldn’t do them any harm…especially after the night before.

Besides which, Merle had spent time under Harry’s doctoring and the other man had never harmed him once, no matter how much Merle wanted to cuss him blue for detoxing him when he was passed out…whether Merle liked it or not.

Looking back, and able to see for himself the differences between him using and him clean, Merle was more than okay with that decision.

That didn’t mean he was one-hundred percent at ease with Pretty making it for him without so much as a by-your-leave.

“Excellent, Merle.” Harry smirked wickedly. “You’re up first big boy.”

Daryl snickered at his brother’s face, feeling no sympathy since Merle tried to screw him over.

“Catch.” Harry tossed the contents of the wooden box – some sort of egg shaped stone – at the former soldier, the other man’s reflexes snatching it easily out of the air, only to suck in a sharp breath as after a moment it started to glow. “Put it down here,” Harry told him, gesturing to a mat on he’d laid out on his desk that had a series of colored squares printed on it.

Merle set the weird glowing stone down at the top of the chart where Harry had pointed, Merle seeing that it was a blank square in black, whereas the rest of the squares had some sort of abbreviation under them, even the white one. Harry tapped his wand on the glowing stone, and to the shock of the brothers, one of the colored squares lit up. Harry tapped his wand again, and the stone went back to what looked like a white diamond the size of a lemon.

“Yellow.” Harry told Merle, referencing both the chart and a book which he flipped through to the proper page. Arching a brow, he said with no little surprise: “You’re more gifted than I thought, Sargent. Yellow: a six on the Scale of Magical Power. You would’ve been identified as a PC or having a partial magical core in my old world. I knew you two were something because of being able to feel the wards but I figured you were a four at best, the same as Max who can feel them also.”

“What’s that all mean?” Merle asked with a frown, not sure what to think about what he was hearing. “PC, partial core, an’ all that?”

“It means,” Harry read out from the book he was leaning over, missing the wordless communication going on over his head via worried or angsty-looks on the part of the brothers. “That you have a magical core but only have partial access to it. You’d never be able to do spells but you can use
magical items that don’t require a constant supply of magic to maintain themselves, you can bond a familiar or a spouse, and might have developed a sort of extra sensory which can be anything from telepathy or clairvoyance to just being a really really good sniper with survival instincts that are frankly ridiculous.”

Harry said the last with a smirk as he eyed the somewhat-smug grin on Merle’s face at that last bit acknowledging the ex-Marine’s skills.

“So nothin’ too…”

“Freaky?” Harry asked with no little amount of sarcasm. “No. Nothing you haven’t already developed, like those skills I just mentioned and you would know better than me what you’re just a little too good at. The good news with that is I can use magic to diagnose you or treat you, which is a helluva lot quicker and more effective than mundane methods. You also don’t have to worry about the magical radiation we already talked about: since you have a core even a partially blocked one, you’re inoculated against it.” He gave the other men a wry smile. “Magic wouldn’t do us much good if we were poisoned by it on a daily basis, just for existing.”

“An’ the bad news?” Merle asked with his usual wariness.

Harry shrugged. “That depends on your perspective. In my old world there would’ve been some blow-back if you’d been born into a magical family. Kids born without a fully-functioning core like a PC, and especially a blocked core BC aka a Squib, well…it was treated like some people treat birth defects here. Some didn’t care, others gave them up rather than deal with the ‘shame’ of it. In any case the only difference it makes in this world is you’re a little safer thanks to your enhanced skills and instincts and maybe, depending on the magical power of the other person, you might have a magical child. That’s it.”

“What’s bondin’?” Daryl chimed in, a thoughtful expression on his face. “You said Merle might be able to bond a familiar or a spouse…wha’s that then?”

“Magical bonds are like the contract you guys had to sign to get here.” Harry shrugged, propping his hip on the desk. “But completely binding and unbreakable. A familiar is an animal companion, like my Knave. They’ll be in-tune with your thoughts and feelings, almost like they can read your mind, and can display uncanny abilities.” Harry gave a soft smile, the expression in his eyes far away. “Before here, back in my old world, I had an owl as a familiar, she always knew when I needed her for anything and could find me or anyone else, anywhere in the world, no matter what wards or protections they were under. Knave is much the same but different since he’s a completely different animal.”

“An’ with a spouse?” Merle prompted, more interested in that than the other, though the way his Pretty explained havin’ a familiar made it sound rather intriguing. Like the K-9’s the Marines had that were trained to find bombs…but better. He wouldn’t mind one-a them.

“‘til death to you part. Literally.” Harry’s voice was as dry as the Sahara. “But for it to work there has to be a certain level of compatibility, love, or companionship already in place. And there’s different levels to it. Remy and Siri share a creature-bond due to Remy’s other side. It’s second only to a soul-bond as far as how deeply bound to each other they are.”

Harry tossed the stone over to Daryl, who being more prepared from watching the process with Merle wasn’t surprised when it started glowing, though the color seemed a little different than Merle’s.

Apparently Harry thought so too, as after it was set down and the wizard tapped a spot on the chart,
two of the colors lit up, the yellow of Merle’s PC rating and the orange right next to it.

“Hmm,” Harry muttered to himself. “That’s interesting.”

“Wha’?” Daryl asked gruffly. “There somethin’ wrong wit’ me or somethin’?”

“No,” Harry answered, shaking his head as he flipped through the reference guide. “But you’re harder to classify than Merle, not strictly being either a six or a seven but floating in between.”

“An’…?” Merle asked in a growling drawl. “Wha’s that mean? He’s more powerful than me or somethin’? That’s what this test is, ain’t it? Seein’ where we are and what we can do or use with your magical shit?” Makin’ sure they were good enough for him more like.

“It’s more for your safety, actually.” Harry shot back at the hidden accusation in Merle’s words. “Due to that magical-radiation issue we talked about earlier. If you two weren’t at least a four…I’d have to see about finding a way to shield you while you lived in the castle. And if you were only a four I’d have to be very careful about using magic to take care of you or to rescue you in case of trouble since you’re constantly being bombarded by magic living under the wards. I just want you two to be safe.” Harry snorted, eyeing Merle scathingly. “I don’t give a rat’s ass if you were as magical as a doorknob or Merlin reborn you defensive asshole.”

Turning back to Daryl, Harry ignored the growling form of Merle.

“You’re borderline between a six and a seven which means you probably have a fully functioning magical core, just not a powerful one. If you want I can do some more tests to see if a magical focus like a fine-tuned wand or something could let you do actual magic…though how you two wound up with the cores you have I have no idea.” The last was more muttered to himself in vexation. “We were told there wasn’t a magical community in this world but you two kinda contradict that idea… but maybe…I guess it could’ve happened…”

“Wha’?” Daryl asked, then said. “Don’ worry ‘bout the focus or whatever. I done without spells and shit all my life, I’ll get by just fine without messin’ with it now.”

“I told you two about the Veil, yeah?” Harry clarified his mumbling for his audience. “And how it used to be used for executions? Well, if it spit me and my dads out here because we weren’t guilty of execution, then it’s possible others had been as well. And since it dumped us in Louisiana…they could’ve been dumped in the South as well. And magical people tend to be both suspicious as hell and reclusive around ‘outsiders’.”

“So…” Daryl followed the thought. “Two brothers from bumfuck Georgia could have magic in their blood because some shmuck was falsely accused of a crime and lit out for a more rural area after gettin’ dumped off in the South, what…a couple hundred years ago?”

“More or less.” Harry shrugged. “What Pandora wrote made it seem like there wasn’t a magical people native to this world, at least not one we were used to. But Seers tend to be cagey as hell. I could be way off base and you two have some sort of native power that shows up on my scale. I don’t have facts I just have theories and no way to really prove them short of a blood-lineage test and a record of every person sent through the Veil…which doesn’t exist as it was an open-secret that some of the Darker ministers and families had used it off the books in the past.”

“How many people are you talkin’, Pretty?” Merle asked, nearly incensed at the idea after he barely dodged a Dishonorable Discharge due to his CO gettin’ his panties in a twist. If his JAG lawyer hadn’t been as good as that fella had been, Merle would’ve been bounced and done time in Leavenworth for Felony Assault of a Superior Officer.
“Could be a handful.” Harry sighed, shoulders drooping at the idea which was highly probably true. “Could be a thousand or more. It’s impossible to tell.” He shook his head, needing to finish with the brothers before the others started showing up in the next half-hour. “Let’s finish up, which I can do with a spell each if you’re okay with it? I can just get your histories and stuff that way…save a lot of time.”

The Dixons exchanged a look before giving him dual nods, Harry smiling at the sight. Tapping his wand on the two folders he’d already prepared, just in case, he linked them to the brothers. Any diagnostic spells or magical treatments would automatically record themselves in the folders, while potions use would have to be logged manually, like he just did for the Scale diagnostic with the power stone. Another tap recorded the potions and treatment he gave Merle on finding him, which wasn’t too dangerous at the time since Harry wasn’t planning on whisking him away under the wards immediately to prevent a magical overdose. A precaution at the time since Harry had no way of knowing where on the scale he fell, most of the inhabitants of the estate being not magical – as he understood the classification - at all, which had been his assumption for everyone in this world before meeting Max and finding out otherwise first-hand.

Another set of spells had the medical history of each brother writing itself out in the folders as Harry – the Dixons’ leaning over his shoulders – watched avidly. And with no little amount of concern over just how thorough the spell was going to be. Both of them have taken injuries they weren’t necessarily proud of.

They just hoped it stuck with the injuries and illnesses themselves and didn’t show what exactly caused them.

Merle snickered a little bit as a period of malnutrition – lasting exactly nine days – accompanied by a poison oak rash, showed up in Daryl’s folder, knowing full well the story behind that little episode.

Daryl smirked back at him and pointed out a line in Merle’s own folder – one which embarrassingly recorded his bout of – and treatment for – a case of the clap he’d caught while visiting a brothel in Amsterdam while on leave from his base in Germany.

“Nice, brother.” Daryl snarked, shaking his head in disappointment. “Way to play it safe.”

“Shut it, baby bro.” Merle snipped back, blushing heavily at Harry seeing that awful thing show up. Daryl was one thing, but Merle wasn’t happy in the least that Harry was gettin’ a front-page view of one of the worst choices he’d made in his life. “I learned from it, didn’t I? And taught you better’n that.”

“Calm down you two.” Harry shushed them. “I’m not here to play judge and jury over shit that happened before I even knew you existed. So long as you’re clean now, that’s all I give a fuck about. It’s not like I was an angel when I was away at school, no matter what my Dad Siri likes to believe.”

Scanning over the contents of each folder as the spell came to a close, Harry nodded to himself absently not seeing any surprises in their current health, though he’d been taken aback by a couple of things in their histories despite what he fed them to keep them from getting into a brawl in the middle of his clinic.

In addition to injuries likely caused by dumb kid shit and too much testosterone-fueled fights, he saw the physical abuse they’d been subjected to in black and white – and some nutritional gaps from not enough fresh fruits and veg growing up though it hadn’t stunted their growth at all. The Bastards. But that did mean he’d have to watch them and make sure those gaps didn’t continue lest they develop issues down the line.
There were Merle’s injuries from his time in the service, and Daryl’s increased abuse once his father didn’t have two targets any more.

Plus, Merle’s drug use to take into account, and a little dabbling in the same for Daryl though nothing really hard-core like Merle, more just a bit too many beers, a liking for smoking, and some pot here and there.

“All in all.” Harry told them after reading both folders through. “You two are as healthy as you’d expect after three months on the run from walkers. Hearty meals, some potions you’ll take whether you like it or not to fill the gaps in diet, and you’ll be right as rain. Throw in some exercise to make sure the extra rations become muscle and not fat and you’ll have an easy time keeping up if you come on runs with me.”

“Exercise?” The Dixons parroted back in unison, both with mild frowns.

“Exercise.” Harry echoed with a firm nod. “We’re big on prevention of issues here, as you’ve already heard me say. I can soothe sore muscles but I can’t cure cancer, not with the drugs I have on hand and no reliable way to get more. Or perform a heart surgery or remove plaque from clogged arteries. Even with using magic, I won’t be able to keep you two healthy if you don’t do your parts. A few of the men exercise after morning chores but before breakfast some days. My dads and I workout in the evenings when we can. I’ll show you where, and let you make your own decisions on it but I’ll repeat.” His voice and eyes were calm and dead serious. “Magic isn’t a miracle cure-all. And if you two get yourselves killed because you got fat and lazy and a walker munches you, I’ll call back your ghosts and make your afterlives hell, am I clear?”

“Yup.” Daryl winced.

“I hear ya, Pretty.” His brother growled.

“Good.” Harry said with fake cheeriness. “Glad you can see it my way. Now go make yourselves busy elsewhere, I’ve got a bunch of people to run through today and I can’t cheat the way I could with you two most likely. Go on. Shoo.”

…

As Harry had anticipated, Daryl wanted to go hunting while Merle was interested in investigating the machine shop and getting some grease under his nails.

Daryl found himself very happy that Harry knew him well enough to know he wouldn’t be comfortable stickin’ with helpin’ out here while livin’ off the produce of the farm and stockpile of food and supplies the wizards collected and were constantly addin’ to. Harry had given them both – in a show of trust that still shocked them – each a metal bracelet in a metal neither brother had been before coming to the estate. It was silvery and pretty and shiny – but tougher than anything they’d ever seen. The bracelet was both a keycard to the wards and gates, allowing them to come-and-go as they pleased, and a tracker that would let the wizards know where they were at all times – if they cared to check.

It would even let Harry or one of the others do their “popping” trick – apparatin’ or whatever they called it – if the bracelet told ‘em they were in trouble.

They couldn’t take it off – much to Merle’s grumbling about wearing jewelry even one of such masculine design – no matter what which allowed for some insurance on the part of the wizards.

The only way trustin’ them could backfire was if’n one of them went off and brought back others
through the wards – which would in turn alert the wizards before they even made it passed the second gate.

Still, it was a big deal and one they fully understood the gravity of, with Harry explaining that only Max had another one, any of the other people on the estate who worked outside of the farm proper had to have either Max (or now the Dixons) use a bracelet or have the wizards open the gate with their wands.

All this boiling down to the fact that Daryl and Merle didn’t feel trapped under the protection of the wizards – and in Daryl’s case was able to go off and hunt or scout around the outermost wall whenever he felt the urge without having to check in with anyone else like a snotty-nosed toddler.

Daryl made quick work of gatherin’ up his crossbow and a huntin’ knife from his room before headin’ to the stable to saddle up Ms. Josie who he’d leave hobbled in the pasture land to wait for him to return with his haul.

If he was lucky and huntin’ was good Ms. Josie would be a grand help to haul his catch up to the outbuilding they used for processing either game or livestock during slaughtering time.

Gods knows he doesn’t want to pack a deer all that way, and venison for dinner sounded mighty fine to Daryl Dixon.

Mighty fine indeed.

Merle gave him a one-fingered salute as he loped past his brother mounted up on his horse, Merle already belly-deep in the guts of Daryl’s truck and happy as the grumpy bastard was capable of being without their Magic Man cuddled up against him.

His brother was planning on tuning up and doing some maintenance work on both his motorcycle and Daryl’s rig, keeping his hands busy and their vehicles in good condition all at the same time.

Which was a damned good idea.

Nothin’ good ever came from Merle havin’ idle hands and too much time to get stupid-ass ideas in his head.

Shit like that was how his big brother wound up cuffed to a roof.

Like a dumbass.

…

In the clinic, Harry was starting at the top of his list with the easiest (he hoped anyway) members of the new arrivals before ending with the biggest pain in the ass…the Grimes family.

His hope was getting them between the end of the day and dinner time would make them too tired to piss around and waste his time.

He hoped.

Anyway between then and the Dixons wandering off at his insistence, Harry’s day passed in a blur of tests, medical histories, and handing out some medications or treatments for the little problems that he found in the course of his exams.

Honestly, the only surprise he fielded was the knowledge that somehow Otis was still alive with his
insanely high blood pressure which Harry would bet Castle Black was matched or exceeded by his cholesterol.

Though he was intrigued that several of this group scored above a one on the magical scale, one being completely non-magical and having no magical ancestry or genetics. Carol and her daughter Sophia was one such pair, Carol scoring at a two (no magical core but being of magical descent) and Sophia a three (no magical core but having active magical recessive genetics), both of which meant that Sophia was capable of bearing a child with a magical core, the same as having any other recessive genetic pop up in her offspring. The Greenes were almost identical, only with Maggie being a three and her sister a two, Hershel remaining a one which meant that their mother was the magical gene carrier, likely another two.

It was fascinating to Harry, watching with his own eyes as his theory about magical descent bear fruit, making him think once more that “muggleborns” were merely the product of several generations of descent without an active magical user until the recessive genetic popped up in a random child of their line.

Magical descent and how the magical power scale plays out in families had become a hobby of Harry’s after Max married Sarah and had children. Children who were either on the same level of power as their father or more powerful. Harry couldn’t yet explain how a four (Max) and a one (Sarah) produced another four (their son Jacob) and twin fives which was a blocked core or Squibs in Celia and Felicity, where it was insanely common for inbreeding in the magical world to produce less powerful children instead of more. His thought was that perhaps living in a magical environment, even from the womb, and being surrounded by powerful, mostly intact magic had played a part.

Other than Sirius, the rest of the magicals on the estate had diverse magic that wasn’t pruned down from inbreeding. It was like Siri’s magical gene sequence was, for lack of a better term, missing some pieces in the code. But with the genes from Remus, who was a half-blood and a strong werewolf, their children were more powerful than either man.

And neither was a slouch in the magic department, most of the wizarding world was rated at a nine which was the standard power range for a witch or wizard.

Sirius was a ten or adept wizard and Remus was an eleven or master wizard, Remus edging out Sirius by having a power boost from the werewolf virus and also from strict training during his Defense Mastery.

Minerva McGonagall, Harry knew, had been an eleven as well, while Severus Snape was a twelve which put him in the Sorcerer category just one notch on the scale lower than Albus Dumbledore.

Though from what Harry had come to understand after tearing through every book in the Black library on the subject, the higher up the scale you climbed the greater the difference in power levels became.

Oh, there were some hoops to jump through to become officially recognized as having that level of power, like gaining a Mastery in some cases or completing a rare spell or skill like the Animagus transformation.

But as far as the raw power needed to even attempt gaining that recognition, the gaps widened considerably as the levels increased.

Merle and Daryl were a good example of that, there being barely any noticeable difference in their cores. And yet, Daryl was almost a Hedgewizard, the levels were that close.
His siblings were certain to be powerful, of that he was sure, but it was impossible to tell until they were much older. At this age in their development, they were rated at an eight until their cores were fully developed and they’d begun seriously training their magical abilities. In fact, Harry would bet that at least one of them would match Remus’s eleven while another would likely surpass it.

Harry spent his day musing on this topic until the end-of-work bell rang through the estate, bringing with it the end of his peace and the Grimes family who were the last to be examined.

Joy.

…

“The Grimes Family, right on time.” Harry says with his steadiest “I’m a doctor”-ish voice.

Rick and Lori stood with Carl nestled in between them, halfway hovering in-between the hallway of the mess hall and the entry of the clinic office. Harry had been erasing that day’s schedule and putting up a few appointments that some of the others on the estate had made with him for before the open hours on Sunday. Being gone except for flying visits had made his work – in all areas – stack up and he was furiously working whenever he wasn’t with either his little brother and sister or the Dixons.

And even then sometimes he would be mentally working on work schedules for the next week or planning the herd thinning before winter, or or or as he spent time with others.

Sirius and Remus had helped where they could, but there were some things only he could do.

Like the clinic.

Sure, his dads knew some basic first-aid and battlefield medic spells, how to use basic household and non-professional strength healing potions. Max and Rob both had a grip on emergency first-aid, as did Sharla as a former teacher. But when it came to things like elder care (which was the bulk of his work anymore) or pediatrics, they were lost.

And he had been even with his years of schooling and theory until he hunkered down and did the best he could between his texts and what hands-on experience he’d gotten from anatomy labs and the summer before college where he’d gotten EMT training along with the rest of his 4-H troop.

This was one area in particular, more than almost any other, where Pandora’s suggestions had born fruit, as Harry had yet to come across a doctor to add to their growing community on the estate, as it was Hershel was a godsend, already taking over and helping fill the gaps in their livestock care and animal husbandry programs that Max oversaw with the other hands.

“I’m sure you’ve heard from the others how this goes.” Harry said with a knowing arch of his brow. There was no way that the two adults at least hadn’t grilled the others over what happened during their exams. “We can do this one of two ways.” He dusted off his hands as he motioned for them to follow him back into the staging area. “I can do all of you at once or I can do the adults privately. Either way I’ll need one of you to stay during Carl’s exam. So,” he propped his hip against his desk. “How do you want to do this?”

“I would prefer a private exam.” Lori spoke up, not making eye contact with anyone. “If Rick and Carl can go first, I’ll go back and wait in the entry.”

Rick opened his mouth as if to protest, before his eyes glinted and he clamped his jaw shut with a harsh click of teeth. Jaw tight, he nodded, and Lori scurried back out of the staging area, the door swinging shut and closing with a click that boomed in the silence left in her wake. Already feeling a
headache building in his temples, Harry motioned for Carl to walk over to his side, where Harry handed over the calibrated power stone.

“What does that do?” Rick asked, tugging himself out of his furious whirl of thoughts, as the stone in his son’s hands started to glow.

Harry quickly gave him a simplified explanation of magical radiation, finishing with: “This will tell me how much, if any, magic I can use on or around others in case of healing or any other kind of emergency.”

Carl’s eyes were wide and locked on the glowing stone that Harry had taken from his hands and set down on the desk. After a moment of processing what the older man had said, the eight-year-old asked: “So that thing can tell you how much magic I have?”

“Sort of.” Harry allowed, not wanting to get as deep into magical theory and genetics as he’d gotten with the Dixons and then again with Hershel and the Greenes who had asked all sorts of questions. “It’s more complicated than that, buddy, but that’s the basic idea, yes.”

A raise of his brows was the only sign of surprise Harry gave as he focused on the glowing stone, already knowing without activating the chart what the color meant, having seen various shades of it before already today more than once but never this dark.

Turning back to the boy and ignoring his father for the moment, Harry asked an important question: “Carl, when you passed through the gates, did you feel anything?”

“What do you…?” Rick started to ask, only to be silenced with a swift, cutting look from the wizard over his son’s head.

“Yeah…kinda.” Carl shrugged, not thinking too much on it. “It was a little tingly I guess, at first and then I didn’t really notice it anymore.”

Harry nodded calmly, that made since. It wasn’t as severe as the reaction the brothers had had but it was definitely more…awareness…than anyone else had had, even those like Sophia who were higher on the scale than Harry had anticipated. Carl Grimes was a four, the level he’d expected for the Dixons, and a magical sensitive. Which mean one of his parents, or even both, were more than a simple non-magical.

And as it was Rick that survived almost six weeks with almost no care in a coma, his galleons were on the sheriff over the housewife.

“Why?” Rick probed, his instincts shouting over the unexpected question.

“Because, Sheriff Grimes.” Harry said calmly, taking out a folder and making a note in it. “Your son is a magical sensitive, a four on the scale of magical power, and I would’ve been concerned if he’d felt nothing at all.”

“What does that mean?” Carl frowned, looking between the two men. “A magical sensi-tive?”

“It means, Carl.” Harry explained soothingly, to both father and son. “That staying here is perfectly safe for you and we’ll be able to take care of you quicker and better because we can use some magic like potions to keep you well. That’s all.”

“So I’m not magic?” He asked, kinda disappointed.

“No, you are.” Harry cocked his head, eyeing the slight pout to the lower lip with some amusement.
“You just can’t do spells the way I can. It’s the same as anything else; some people are just naturally better at things than others. I’ll never be the marksman Merle is or as good of a hunter as Daryl. And there’s nothing wrong with me, that’s just the way it is.”

“Oh…” Carl nodded, feeling better when Harry put it that way. “Ok, I guess.”

Harry sent an inquiring glance at Rick, the other man nodding, not happy with the news but still… fine with it.

“We’ll have to have a discussion about what magical healing entails, with both you and your wife.” Harry spoke directly to the former sheriff. “And get hashed out how much we’re allowed to do with Carl as far as that goes, get paperwork filled out for treatment permission, that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, of course.” Rick agreed with a sigh and a wave of his hand. “Whatever y’all need to do what you do.”

“Now.” Harry picked up the stone. “Do you want Carl present for your part or would you rather I finish with him and then send him out to your wife?”

“Carl first, please.” Rick said at once.

Nodding, Harry removed his wand and looked over at Rick with a questioning look. The other man nodded a go-ahead, and Harry quickly cast a diagnostic, the folder filling out – though much quicker than it’d done for either Dixon. Carl was the only other member of the new group that Harry could use magic to treat – but not as liberally as he could with the brothers. It made things easier – and at the same time harder – since without a functioning core, blocked or unblocked, Carl would still be susceptible to mundane diseases and have a mundane lifespan while the Dixons were harder and longer-lived but could catch magical diseases…if there even was such a thing in this new world.

That was the trade-off of a magical core. Longer life, fewer diseases. But. Magical diseases could wipe out an entire population within days if healers aren’t on top of things or parents didn’t vaccinate their children.

“Nothing to worry about.” Harry reported when the diagnostic was finished. “Some slight muscle issues from his gunshot and surgery, as well as a mild onset of malnutrition the same as everyone else in your group.” He gave both Grimes males a reassuring grin. “A couple of nasty-tasting but fast-acting potions will take care of both issues, while taking a multivitamin, eating a good diet, and some mild exercise will have you back in top-form in no time, young Mr. Grimes.”

Carl laughed a little at the funny voice Harry took on to call him young Mr. Grimes, only calming back down as Harry returned from his dispensary with a pair of glass vials – must be the potions – and a jar of kids’ gummy vitamins. Harry handed the vitamins over to Rick, then passed the vials to Carl, standing by with a bottle of water in hand to wash them down with.

“Best get them down the hatch quick as you can, lad.” Harry advised with a sympathetic grimace. “They taste gross as can be but they’ll help, believe me.”

“GAH!” Carl made a twisted face, sticking out his tongue after he’d done as Harry’d said. “That was so gross! Like gym socks and, and, ewww!”

“Here you go.” Harry handed over the water. “Drink this and go keep your mum company in the waiting area. Your dad will be out to join you in a little bit.”

“Potions are so gross…” Carl grumbled as he trudged out to wait, Rick handing over the vitamins as he went, mumbling other things about the nastiness of potions and how he was never taking them
Harry chuckled a little bit, shaking his head as he handed over the stone to Rick. “That brings back memories.” He laughed to himself. “I thought the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey were sent to make my life hell when I wasn’t much older than that.”

“I’m pretty sure all kids are the same.” Rick chuckled along with the other man, forgetting for the moment their issues in the comradery of the moment. “And boys are worse than girls.”

“That’s for sure.” Harry rolled his eyes thinking of how sweetly Sophia had taken her potions, with just a little pout over the taste, none of the grumbling and moaning to be had. “Well, Sheriff.” Harry chirped, eyeing the stone he took from the other man and setting it aside. “Looks like I was right: you’re a four as well. Which is good,” he said consideringly, eyeing the too-thin form before him. “Since I can probably correct most of the damage done by your gunshot and subsequent coma followed by running from walkers. And bad.” He grimaced. “Since I doubt your wife is and I’ll have to provide all her pre-natal care the mundane way…and without a lot of the diagnostics used before the world ended for a high-risk pregnancy.”

“High risk?!?” Rick’s eyes shot wide and a bit panicked. “What do you mean, high-risk?”

“She’s pregnant.” Harry explained, his voice only a tad dry and sarcastic. “Between ten and twelve weeks if I’m right: the bulk of the first trimester which is when a lot of the most important development stages take place in fetal life. And she spent the bulk of it on the run, under extreme stress, and with hit-and-miss nutrition.” His face was calm but understanding as what he said started to sink in. “I’m sorry Rick,” Harry gave an apologetic shake of his head. “But there’s no way this isn’t a high-risk pregnancy when you take into consideration all those factors. And if you do the math…”

“It’s Shane’s baby.” Rick finished the thought blowing out a breath and scrubbing his face with his hands. “So you’ve said before.”

“Does it make a difference?” Harry asked, cocking his head curiously. “I mean…”

“Yes.” Rick sighed, then shook his head. “And no. I’ll take care of her, and this new baby, the same as if they were my own. It’s what Shane did when he thought I was dead, I can’t do any less. But that doesn’t make what happened right or okay. I’m pissed as hell, and can barely look at her. Jesus.” He gave a bitter laugh. “I’ve been camped out on the couch since we got here and I don’t see that changing any time soon.”

Harry listened, understanding more of Rick’s erratic behavior now that he heard it from the man himself. It was a shit hand he’d been dealt, and from what Harry saw, Rick was a good, solid man before everything happened. Before he woke up in a warzone with no clear way out or any idea what had happened to his family.

“There’s options here.” Harry told him, after getting the folder in order and the spell going for the diagnostic. “We don’t want strife or drama but we don’t want our people living in misery if we can help it. If need be, there’s always a bunk open for you in the bunkhouse. Or if you and Lori come to an understanding we can set up either her and Carl or you and Carl with a separate house. Just let us know what you need…before you snap,” again, “under all the pressure, clear?”

“Yeah.” Rick gave a bitter laugh, having heard that again even if it wasn’t said outright. “We’re clear.”

“Good.” Nodding once, sharply, Harry scanned the results, already figuring out in his head what he
was going to do to negate some of the damage. There was more than he’d realized…and not all of it was limited to his body. His head had been effected from the lack of nutrients and even oxygen. Merlin. It was no wonder he’d been so unpredictable and having mood swings. Anyone would with a diagnostic result like this. “You’re not as easy a fix as Carl, I’m afraid.” He tsked under his breath as he quickly wrote out a treatment plan in the chart. “I’m doing to have to set you up with a potions regimen, some of this I don’t know if I can fix…but I’ll do my best.”

“What’s wrong?” Rick asked with a creased brow. “Shouldn’t it just be nutrition issues, maybe pulled muscles or somethin’?”

“No, unfortunately.” Harry blew out a breath, looking over at the twitching man who was visibly straining from a desire to snatch the results out from under Harry’s nose. “There’s damage left over from the coma as well as events before and after it. Honestly,” he waved a hand at the folder in agitation. “I’m not even sure where to start to fix it. If left untreated, I’d be surprised if you lived out the decade, if a walker or survivor didn’t get you first.”

Harry thought a moment before walking off and collecting a handful of vials, tucking several of them into a cotton bag. They were spelled unbreakable so he wasn’t worried about that at least. Setting a quartet of vials on the desk, with the filled bag off to the side, he fetched some water to wash them down.

“We’ll start with what I know will work to fix what I can and then do another scan and go from there.” Harry said decisively. “You’ll have standing weekly appointments until you’re either as fixed as I can get you or I run out of ideas. First off,” he pointed to the vials. “Take these now. A stomach soother first, the pink one, it’ll keep you from tossing up the others no matter how bad they taste. Then a nutrition potion, a mild muscle and bone regenerative, and another for nerve damage.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair as Rick tossed the potions back, grimacing after each one and chasing them down with the bottle of water. “You’ll take these same for every night for the next week. And then we’ll go from there.”

Rick gave a little groan, not looking forward to doing that. But what Harry had said about his life expectancy had hit him hard. Ten years wasn’t even enough time to see Carl fully grown. Despite the vague ideas floating in his head still about taking off after Lori’s baby was born, Rick wasn’t about to be taken out by his health. No way. He’d listen to Harry and take the nasty-ass potions.

And then they’d see.

Maybe, for a man who could be colder than ice when it was called for, Harry Black wasn’t so bad after all.

Maybe.

…

Harry finally let the sneer slash across his face as he watched the back of Lori Grimes finally fucking leave.

The woman turned out to be a two on the power scale, which made turning down her requests for first, a paternity test and then second a diagnostic like the one Carl told her about, easy as can be, stating that it would be too strong a concentration of magic for her to undergo, especially while pregnancy.

And as if he didn’t like her enough already, the bitch completely disregarded his concerns about her unborn child and tried to flat-out demand he perform the tests anyway. Yeah, he’d get right on
killing her fucking child.  Bitch.

Which was a possibility if said baby took after its mother rather than its half-brother.

The downside of Harry waiting to do any tests on the group was that he had no idea where on the scale Shane had been and couldn’t make an educated guess on how powerful the child will be. There was also whether living in constant contact with magical wards and items would have any effect as well. He thought there might be, but it was hard to say.

Sharla or one of the other women who were low on the scale and also married to someone low on the scale but living under the wards and in contact with magic would be the true test of whether magical contact while in the womb increased the child’s innate power or not. Harry wasn’t thinking that it changed a fetus’s genetics, a baby carried and sired by a completely non-magical person was almost impossible to gain a magical core via contact alone. But he thought it might boost or amplify what was already there.

Harry himself had been carried and sired and born under the magical protections of Potter Manor before it was destroyed in the war and his parents moved to the mostly-magical Godric’s Hollow, before living out his infancy and first months of toddler-dom under the Fidelius Charm, and then the blood wards after that.

For all that Harry had been raised by and among muggles, it was still under highly-magical protections.

Protections that were equal if not less than the ones around the Black Lands.

And no one could deny that Harry was powerful.

It was very much a nature/nurture type of debate but while most would argue for one or the other, in the case of pure magical power, Harry rather thought it was both.

And the trained medical student in him was nearly giddy for the day he could discover if he was right or wrong. Either way it would be a huge stride forward in understanding magic in their new home. Giving him a firm idea on whether it would be possible for Harry and his dads to make plans for the future of magic in the Black Lands…or if it was truly a pipe dream after all that would eventually die alongside their descendants as their magic slowly dwindled and died out.

Anyway, after way longer than it should have taken, Harry had sent off Lori with a firm no, a bottle of pre-natal vitamins, and the date of her next exam.

From what he could tell with manual testing (that copy of Spiritual Midwifery was turning out to be a major blessing, despite the sideways looks he’d gotten from the cashier at Barnes and Noble for buying it before the outbreak,) she was as healthy as could be under the circumstances. Her blood pressure was a little high, and she was a little dehydrated, but otherwise fine…for the moment. Only time would really tell how her unborn child had handled living the first ten or so weeks in a somewhat hostile growing environment.

At least for the sake of the child, Harry hoped his worries were wrong, and Lori carried and birthed just fine.

Thankfully, from what he could tell, everyone was settling in, even the contentious Lori.

Harry preyed the trend continued, lest he never get that time to decompress Remus was badgering him to take.
Werewolves made the worst motherhens over their pups, as Harry and now Raz and Jamie could tell you from experience.

It kinda made Harry look forward to giving the man grandkids to spoil. Maybe. Eventually.

Though whether those kids would be half-Dixon remained to be seen.

…
Chapter Eleven – Running Atlanta

It was a visibly happier Daryl that returned to the castle after processing the buck he’d tracked and hunted before hauling it in with Ms. Josie’s help.

After a lifetime spent doing for himself, it just didn’t sit right living off the labor of others, even if Harry would tell him that learning the security set-up and his future help with killing any walkers – or hostile survivors – that came within their perimeter was more than enough to earn his keep if he’d mentioned it.

Merle was the same – and different – as Daryl when it came to the issue.

His big brother was more at ease with helping in the ways that suited him best – like his sniper skills or gettin’ all greased up in the machine shop – and letting others take care of making sure they had enough to eat. Merle was a hunter, don’t get Daryl wrong, he just didn’t have the same need as Daryl to provide for himself. After all, when Merle was gone so long, there’d been no one less to do it for him, their Da being more likely to drink the grocery money than spend it on his favorite punching bag.

Walking back to the castle – and that was what it was no matter what anyone tried to tell ‘im – Daryl shook his head thinkin’ about the “processing” area Harry and his dads had built. It was clean enough and big enough to pass for a small factory. The three of them had done everything they could think of – from what Daryl could tell – to make livin’ off the land as simple as they could. Both with and without magic.

Which made sense, none of their workers – even before the world ended – could do what the three of them did with wands.

Daryl thought – and what he’d heard from the others reinforced the idea – that Harry and Sirius had taken the “home farm” ideal from their noble backgrounds and ran with it in figuring out how to house and feed a bunch of people through the end of the world. Right down to the pasture lands and massive castle. It was what they knew, and what they knew worked.

Daryl had a hard time finding fault in the set-up, aside from the obvious divide between Harry’s family and everyone else. It was the sorta thing that his Da had ranted about all his life. Rich privilege and all-a that.

But then, his Da was a dumbass.

He had a hard time swallowing most of what his Da had tried to beat into his thick skull – usually with his belt or the back of his hand.

Merle fell into step with him as he passed the machine shop, the work-end bell having rung while Daryl was lost in thought. A look and a nod was all the greeting they needed as they walked back to their rooms in lock-step, catching sight of the Grimes family hot-footing it to the mess hall. Harry wasn’t done yet then.

Splitting up when they hit their shared rooms, Daryl dropped off the package of venison steaks he’d cut for them and wrapped up separately from the rest of the animal which he’d cut and wrapped
before putting them in the cabinet in the processing area as Max had shown him, then went to
shower and clean up. Between him and Merle they should be able to fix supper, after a long day of
dealing with health issues, he was sure Harry would appreciate the break from both cooking and
some quiet instead of eating with the rowdy bunch he called family. Daryl had told Remus not to
expect them when they’d passed him in the halls, now he just had to make good on the idea.

Dressed in a fresh pair of black jeans that rode low on his hips and a plain t-shirt in dark blue, Daryl
washed his hands in the kitchen before starting on his preparations, rubbing down the steaks with salt
and the spice mixture he put together before leaving them to dry marinade as he peeled and cut sweet
potatoes before throwing them in a pot of water to cook for a mash, deciding to pair the two with
some green beans fried up with bacon that he found in the chill cabinet. Merle came out and eyed
him before joining in, testing the grill-pan on the stove with a flick of water that instantly beaded and
rolled. Nodding, he grabbed the steaks and slapped them down with a stomach-growling sizzle, the
door opening as he moved to wash the blood and juices off his hands while Daryl chopped onion,
garlic, and bacon for the beans.

Harry just stood there a bit bemused at the far-too-domestic sight the Dixons made, biting back a
cooing tease of a comment.

He was well aware that if he gave them any shit – any at all – over being sweet they’d never do it
again, the prickly bastards.

“Go get cleaned up.” Daryl told him without lookin’ away from his knife. “Foods on in fifteen or
so.”

“Okaaay…” Harry drawled, snatching a kiss from Merle as he walked past the kitchen area taking
the long way to his room, pressing a buss to Daryl’s scruffy jaw as the other man focused on his
chopping. “I’ll do that. Be right back.”

While Harry got cleaned up and Daryl fixed the veg, Merle moved to set the low coffee table in the
living area with plates and silverware, tossing cushion from the couch onto the floor for them to sit or
recline on. There just wasn’t enough room for them to have a nice sit-down together at the breakfast
bar. It worked when they were just trying to fill their bellies, but not so much for a private meal
together.

Testing the doneness of the steaks, Merle gave a nod then set them over on a cutting board to rest,
grabbing matches from a drawer to light the fireplace as Daryl finished frying up the green beans and
mashing the sweet potatoes.

Satisfied with the set-up, the elder Dixon gave a nod then set them over on a cutting board to rest,
grabbing matches from a drawer to light the fireplace as Daryl finished frying up the green beans and
mashing the sweet potatoes.

Satisfied with the set-up, the elder Dixon gave a nod as the wood caught with a crackle, grabbing out
a water pitcher and a trio of Harry’s ciders from the chiller and setting them out as Daryl dished up
the plates, Harry coming back out of his room in time to help Daryl move them over to the low table.

Harry sat with a sigh, Merle and Daryl flanking him, and stuck his legs out under the table resting his
back against the couch as Merle and Daryl half-turned towards him while keeping their legs
extended down the sides of the table towards the fire rather than sit cross-legged and end up with
their legs asleep.

“I needed this.” Their third admitted as he rolled his head on his shoulders, cracking his neck with a
pop and grabbing for the already-opened alcoholic cider. “So much. That woman…” He wrinkled
his nose – adorably to his audience – in disgust as he remembered the demands of Lori Grimes.

“Hi, honey.” Merle drawled, cutting into his steak. “How was your day?”
“Shit with a lot of repetitive b.s.” Harry snorted, rolling his eyes. “Thank you for asking…and the quiet meal. Your twos?”

Merle shrugged. “Worked on my bike and Daryl’s truck, nothin’ to write home about. Got to know whatcha-name, Axel? A bit. Talks too much without really sayin’ anything.”

“Sounds about right.” Harry nodded, digging into the fresh venison and giving a guttural moan as the rich taste of the meat and excellent seasoning danced on his palette, Daryl flushing at the sound of hearty approval. “He’s one of the prisoners who outlasted the riot that we saved when this all started. He tries a little hard but all-in-all not a bad guy. Daryl?” He arched a brow before pointing his fork at the steak on his plate. “I can taste for myself how your hunt went.”

“Yeah.” Daryl shrugged, not really seeing the big deal. “Caught me a buck in-between the first and second fence lines. A four-pointer, ‘bout two-hundred pounds.”

“There’s a couple super bucks out here.” Harry told him, well-aware of the local wildlife from his and his dad’s roaming. “But we leave them alone, and they only come out at night. Smarter deer like that are what the population is going to need to maintain despite the outbreak. I’d like to think that between the wards we’ve put up and extended into the national forest, here at least the wildlife population won’t be decimated before this is over.”

“I’ve noticed you’ve got a kinda Noah’s Ark thing goin’ on here, Pretty.” Merle commented, before polishing off his steak and digging into the sweet potato mash and green beans. “Dogs, barn cats, cattle, horses, sheep, chickens…” He circled his fork in the air a moment. “And more. Plus, us.” He smirked. “You tryin’ to save the world?”

“Not really.” Harry snorted, thinking about his reputed “saving people thing”. “More just trying to weather the storm and help those we can. I can’t to shit for a lot of people – and animals as it comes to that. But we do what we can and when this thing ends we’ll still be standing – hopefully with enough others alongside us and surviving in other places that our species and others aren’t lost entirely.”

Daryl nodded thoughtfully, sitting back as he’d finished with his meal. That made a lot of sense from what he’d seen of Harry’s behavior. “You really believe that, don’ ya?” He asked, putting into words the feeling he’d gotten from the other man since they’d met. “That this is only temporary.”

“I know it is.” Harry stated passionately. “I don’t know if it’s a bio-weapon run amok, or an experiment that escaped the lab, or even Mother Nature’s response to a species that was not-so-slowly killing her. But in time, this will end. And I intend for myself and everyone I care about to still be standing when it does.”

“So…” Harry drawled hesitantly after the plates had all been cleared away and the dishes were washing themselves in the sink. “Are we going to talk about this or…?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Pretty.” Merle said with a smirk. “But neither one of us is all that much for talkin’ if we don’ have to.”

“Believe me, I noticed.” Harry commented dryly. “But that doesn’t quite cut it when we make a jump from friends to more without figuring out exactly what the fuck we’re doing. I mean…” He gave a helpless shrug, desperately not making eye contact with either man. “What are we doing?”

“If you don’t know, Magic Man.” Daryl smirked wickedly. “I’d be more than happy to show ya,
again and again, until ya figure it out.”

“I know that part.” Harry whopped Daryl with one of the cushions laying around them as they all lounged in front of the crackling fire. “It’s the other part of things I’m trying to get a bead on here. For starters: do you two want to be public about us being a thing…whatever kind of thing we eventually decide we are?”

“Don’ plan on hidin’ it.” Daryl said after a minute of exchanging glances with his brother. “Ain’t like we got anythin’ to be ashamed of, even if us sharin’ wasn’t looked kindly upon before the world ended. ‘Sides.” He growled, narrowing his eyes as he thought about a particular hand. “I wan’ people knowin’ you’re with us.”

“What he said, Pretty.” Merle agreed with a firm nod. “Yer ours now. Ain’t wanna have ta take someone apart for poachin’ a man they didn’t know was takin’ already.”

“Okay.” Harry nodded, blowing out a relieved breath. That, for him, was his major worry about jumping head-first into this thing the way they did without working out the finer details first. He wasn’t about to be anyone’s dirty little secret. “I’m good with that.” Really good with it. “So we’re…something. And we’re not going to hide it. What are we?” He asked almost timidly, voice quiet. “Friends who screw around sometimes? Or more? And if we’re more, how much more? Are you guys going to sleep in my room every night or keep to yours or…?”

“Hey now, Magic Man.” Daryl said soothingly as he moved to wrap his arms around the visibly freaking-out Harry. “Calm down now. It ain’t anything that’s life-ending, now. Calm on down for me. That’s a good ‘un.”

Daryl whispered softly in one pink-shelled ear, as Merle moved and picked up a set of fisted hands, rubbing his thumbs over the backs until Harry gradually unclenched, twining their hands together as he let them soothe him and talk him down from his anxious spiral.

Harry had never felt so out of his depth in his life. He’d never expected the little crush he had for the Dixons to turn into anything, let alone have them living with him and discussing an actual relationship. Something he didn’t have the best track record with, having been turned off the idea after Cho and mostly sticking to casual flings or one-night-stands after leaving for college.

This was something else entirely.

And for all his normal calm and commanded, he was freaking the fuck out.

Sucking in a breath, he blew it out, repeating the action three or four times before relaxing back into Daryl, keeping his eyes locked on a gentle ice blue gaze.

“We’re all pretty temperamental.” He whispered, taking charge once he’d snapped out of his freak out. “I think we should keep the separate bedrooms just so we all have our own space to calm down if we need it.”

“But your ours.” Merle growled, Daryl nipping lightly at Harry’s neck in silent agreement with his brother’s claim.

“I’m yours.” Harry nodded. “And your mine. Any time you want to sleep in my bed – or do other things – you can, and same goes. We’re…partners. And everything that implies.”

“Sounds good to me, darlin’.” Daryl whispered against ebony hair, hands running down Harry’s chest as his brother watched, fire lighting in those icy blue eyes. “Sounds just ‘bout perfect to me.”
“I need to do an Atlanta run tomorrow.” Harry murmured that night into Daryl’s chest as they cuddled – not that the macho Dixons would admit that was what they were doing – after sex in his bed. They still hadn’t “gone all the way” but they were taking their time exploring, Harry splitting his focus between them and the brothers lavishing him with their own.

For a couple of men he’d pegged as straight, they gave damn good blow jobs, he’d say that much, it made him excited for when they took that next step.

Merle was snugged up against Harry’s back and side in an echo of the night before, as Harry laid with half of his body covering Daryl’s own from where they’d collapsed after coming for what seemed like the dozenth time.

Running for their lives had certainly done their stamina wonders, along with the soft beds and good food of the estate.

“Why?” Merle grunted, peeling open an eye to half-stare half-glare at the other man from over his shoulder. “We jus’ got back from bein’ on the move, an’ your gonna head off again?”

“Not alone, he ain’t.” Daryl rasped out, tugging Harry in with a possessive arm around his waist. “I’ll go with. Though shithead over there has a point, why you goin’ back out so soon?”

“Guillermo and the Vatos.” Harry answered with a shrug. “My dads are good but they don’t understand mundane medicine the way I do or know what to look for. Besides which now that we have more men I want to try and convince them to move here since we can run a convoy without hamstringing the estate.”

“Saving people thing.” Merle rolled his eyes with a soft snort, hunkering back down into the silk sheets and fluffy pillows. “That bleedin’ heart of yours is gonna kill ya someday, Pretty.”

“Didn’t hear you complaining when it got you off that rooftop, now did I?” Harry snarked back, digging one finger into sensitive ribs and making the other man jump. “I’ll be careful…” he gave Daryl a sweet grin. “And it’s not like I’ll be alone this time.” His eyes lit up. “I bet with two of us we can double the haul from the run!”

“You have serious hoarding issues, darlin’.” Daryl shook his head in mock chagrin. “I think we need ta stage one-a those interventions for ya.”

Harry stuck out his tongue childishly at that charge. “Some of the things I’ve taken to ‘hoarding’,” he rolled his eyes at the term. “Are things that will likely never be made again: not in our lifetimes. Things like vaccines and medicine, feminine hygiene products, shit.” He snorted. “Even toilet paper. We stockpiled literal tons of supplies before the outbreak, but there no sense in just letting things rot. And,” he drawled the word. “We don’t pick places completely clean unless we’re going to raze it like the prison or the CDC. I clear a building, take most of the supplies, and then cast a ward that’ll keep out walkers: supplying a semi-safe place for other survivors. I work Atlanta, Siri does New Orleans, and Remus Savannah. Once we’ve done what we can in those cities, we’ll start branching out.”

He thought for a moment before giggling.

“Wha’?” Merle asked groggily despite having his face buried in the pillow that smelled like Pretty. All fresh herbs and leather.

“Just remembering what we did when I came back from school.” He laughed helplessly into Daryl’s
We knew whatever it was was starting, so Siri, Remy, and I hit a series of warehouse stores and cleaned them out of things like the drums of freeze-dried food and pallets of dog food and toilet paper. All over the country.” He gave another giggle. “It was called one of the oddest series of crimes in the last decade: warehouse stores all over the place being raided. There was even talk of a task force to find us but then…” He sighed, relaxing down into the bed as his tiredness finally caught up with him.

“The world went ta hell.” Daryl chuckled at the thought of the magical trio playing toilet-paper bandits. “What all did ya steal, anyhow? An’ why with all-a yer money?”

“The why was easy: the world as we knew it was ending.” He shrugged. “Same reason people turn to looting during riots and blackouts. Only in this case we actually knew things weren’t going to be the same afterwards. Why keep forking over our cash to corporations that weren’t going to weather the storm anyway? As for what all we’ve stockpiled…well.” He gave a smirk. “After we run Atlanta tomorrow I’ll take you two down to the warehouses in the basement and let you help me process our haul. It should be very enlightening…”

“Guess we better get some rest then, Pretty.” Merle grumped. “Unless you two little girls wanna stay up and chat some more…”

They landed in Harry’s Atlanta base with a soft “pop” much quieter than the standard loud gunshot sound that Harry had heard both Sirius and Remus make when apparating, which was due to his power level according to Remy. Part of apparation was breaking through the sound barrier, resulting in the trademark “crack”. But with Harry’s power, it was more of a slipping through time and space instead of forcing himself through, hence the softer pop.

Daryl and Merle both stumbled a bit on landing, before hunching over and taking several deep breaths.

He’d warned them that magical transportation could be sickening – especially at first – but they’d both refused to take stomach soothers.

The macho idiots.

“How’s those ‘stomachs of steel’ treating you now, lovers?” He asked with no little amount of entertained sarcasm in his voice, Daryl shooting him the finger accompanied by a glare from his bent over position, Merle too busy keeping his breakfast down to respond.

Rolling his eyes with a sigh, he dug into the inside pocket of his leather jacket which was enchanted – as just about all his clothing and bags were – with expansion and cushioning charms. Taking out a pair of the aforementioned stomach soothers, he handed them over without any more teasing, both brothers gulping them down immediately. The potions did their jobs and within moments both men were back upright and scanning their surroundings, Merle with a look of recognition on his face.

“How’s this place stay so clean when you haven’t been here in more’n a month?” Merle asked, running a hand along the edge of the kitchen table and not finding a speck of dust.

“I haven’t.” Harry reminded them. “But both my Dad and Papa have been picking up my slack while I was out keepin’ an eye on your old group. They would’ve dropped in here for a couple quick cleaning spells before heading back home. Same as I would do with their bases in Nawlins and Savannah if need be.”
“You recognize this place?” Daryl asked his brother with a curious cock of his head as he eyed the handful of books on the bedside table.

“It’s where Pretty patched me up and detoxed me.” Merle said jerking a thumb at their newly-minted partner. “After Officer Friendly and the rest left me ta die.”

Daryl winced at the reminder of how close – again – he’d come to losing his older brother as they followed Harry out the door, the wizard waving his wand a couple times and making the room smell like mint and lavender as the pillows visibly fluffed and the rug and quilts brightened as the tiny bit of dust was banished. He tapped a spot next to the outside door, opening it, then once they all were in the hall closed it behind them with another tap on the door itself – resetting the wards from what he’d explained about magical security systems. When they hit the outside, Daryl arched a brow at the lack of walkers – or anyone else for that matter – around.

“Notice-me-not charms.” Harry answered the unspoken question. “And wards like what I put on both the estate and the buildings I clear to keep anything with a heart rate under a certain number of beats per minute out. From everything I’ve seen, the walkers don’t have a heartbeat which explains the decay and putrefaction. Another tick in the ‘dead’ column.”

“How slow is it set for?” Merle asked curiously. He knew, as well as Daryl, that some animals had much slower heart rates than humans, and some birds much faster depending.

“Fifteen beats per minute.” Harry told them, as they jogged lightly down towards the next building he wanted to clear, having already picked up the wish-list Guillermo or one of his men had dropped off. “It’ll keep away some sea life like a blue whale, but the slowest resting heart rate on record for a living human was last clocked at twenty-seven bpm.”

“Well.” Daryl drawled with a shake of his head as they moved from building to building, eventually starting to run into stray walkers that one of them would take out and then Harry would burn to ash with his magic. “That’s one way to skin a cat for sure.”

“Whatever works.” Harry shrugged, then pointed to a very familiar department store and the pharmacy next to it. “Those are our targets for the day, gentlemen.”

“You’ve gotta be shittin’ me.” Merle growled, taking another walker out with a strike of his sword through its head.

“Wish I was.” Harry shook his head, understanding of Merle’s pissed off expression. “But I’ve cleared most of the other buildings in this grid, and I need some of the drugs I hope are in the pharmacy next door. In and out,” he swore as he cast another Incendio Maxima, “I promise.”

“Hold ya to it, Pretty.” Merle said grimly, setting his jaw. “I’m gonna hold ya to it.”

…

They worked like a well-oiled machine, clearing the remaining walkers from the department store and stacking them up while Harry summoned the still-salvageable goods from the store before setting the walker corpses aflame, waiting for it to burn down to ash, then moving on to the pharmacy.

It was picked pretty clean of things like antibiotics and wound care supplies, but for once, that wasn’t what they were looking for.

No, Harry took most of what was left, leaving only a few necessities for anyone desperate enough to hit Atlanta for supplies, but mainly he focused on things Guillermo needed: asthma medication, things for cholesterol, heart disease, even diabetes and Alzheimer’s went into a separate bag for the
By the time they were done, Harry had them settle down for a quick lunch of grilled venison (leftovers) and tomato sandwiches with some crisps and fizzy drinks from the pharmacy.

It was a bit of a run from their location to the Vatos nursing home, and none of them wanted to do it on a growling stomach, it having taken a good six hours to completely clear, raid, and burn the bodies in both large buildings. The pharmacy was one of the one-stop kind that carried things like cosmetics, food, and even some housewares, making it take nearly as long to clear as the department store had since Harry couldn’t just summon everything. Things like lip balm had to be picked up separately, Harry having no interest in taking a ton of make-up junk with him, the first time either Dixon had ever seen him turn his nose up at looting, well, anything.

A few other things were in the cosmetics area that Harry picked through like clear nail polish and nail polish remover, all things that could be repurposed.

Even Harry couldn’t find a way to re-purpose to twelve-hour lipstick and all-day mascara, though he had taken into account the ladies on the estate and so the estate has a small (very small) section for makeup, but it wasn’t something he actively stockpiled, more a “Meh, there’s nothing else around to grab so I might as well…” kind of thing.

Climbing up onto the roof of the pharmacy, Harry got out his omniculars and scouted the route to the Vatos nursing home, cocking his head as he noticed something strange.

They’d all noted and commented on the herds they’d started to run into as time went on, someone (and Harry couldn’t remember who for the life of him) even saying that they were acting like they were moving towards something. Standing twenty feet in the air and getting a decent view of the surrounding area, Harry might have an idea what, exactly, is going on with them. More importantly, the why behind the what.

“Hey guys.” Harry called out softly to the brothers who were sniping down any walkers in the radius with Daryl’s crossbow and the compound bow Harry had tossed Merle before leaving the estate. With his wand and the brothers knowing about magic, he really didn’t need a long-range weapon at the moment. Merle would get a shit-ton more use out of it than he would…and it wasn’t like he didn’t have at least a dozen more hanging on the wall of the armory. “Which way is South?”

“That way.” Daryl pointed after looking around for a moment, Merle grunting in agreement as he nailed another walker right in the eye. Harry’s ability to summon their arrows and light up the corpses from the rooftop coming in very handy.

“Thought so.” Harry mused, rubbing one hand over his jaw as he handed the omniculars over to Daryl for the others to see for themselves. “I think they’re migrating of all damn things.” He snorted, shaking his head. “Going south for the fucking winter.”

“What the fuck?” Daryl snatched up the magical binocs, spotting what Harry had easily before passing them over to Merle. “I’ll be damned.”

“Simple math, instincts at their best – or worst.” Harry shook his head as he moved over towards the metal fire-ladder bolted to the side of the building. “Survival: the virus activates their brainstem enough for them to be hungry, band together in packs or herds, and now moving them further south since the winter will slow them down. But,” he smirked as they one by one made the jump to the pavement. “It’ll kill them faster: the putrefaction speeds up in hot and humid areas.”

“So if they’re all doin’ this, migratin’…” Merle supplied. “Then…”
“Yep.” Harry said cheerily popping the “p”. “They’ll decay quicker and not be able to keep walking faster, making them easier to find and destroy. Though since they move so damned slow, not all of them will make it south before the snows come and will end up frozen until spring…which kinda makes me wanna take a trip North…spend the winter torching frozen walkers.”

“With your magical poppin’ around.” Daryl snorted a laugh. “You can have yourself a walker bonfire every weekend an’ still spend the rest of the time on the estate with the rest of us.”

“Deal.” Harry gave him a cheeky grin, then darted around the taller man to cut off a walker head and light it up. “You bring the marshmallows, I’ll light the fire.”

“Tha’s…disgustin’.” Merle decided after a moment. “Thanks, Pretty. Y’all have officially ruined s’mores for me…for life.”

“Awww.” Harry pouted teasingly, then gave him a soft smile in apology, Merle accepting with a short nod as the smaller man walked up to a barricaded door and rapped out a short tune on the metal. “They reinforced it…with some help.” He winked at Merle, Daryl having been there before.

“All you seem to do is help, Pretty.” Merle noted, eyes watching their flank as Daryl did the same, one facing the open alley and the other the door, bows ready. “No matter how cold you come off at times. All you do is help. Cain’t be natural.”

“It isn’t.” Harry snorted with a roll of his expressive green eyes that were just a shade off bitter as he thought of it. “But it’s damned hard to overcome years of conditioning. Even someone with all the reasons in the world to do so…like me.”

“Oi, Guillermo!” Harry called out as his hearing picked up the sounds of Miguel calling out for the other man and leader of the Vatos survivor group. “It’s getting too damn cold to stand around out here, man!”

“Angel, Guillermo!” Miguel called back inside the building. “Angel’s back!”

“Angel!” They heard various people cheer inside the nursing home, Merle and Daryl each turning a smirk on the now-blushing Harry.

“An-hel?” Merle drawled, a shit-eating grin crossing his face. “Way to prove my point, Pretty. You’re so damned good that y’all’ve got people convinced you’re a damn angel from Heaven.”

“Shut. It.” Harry said with little heat to back it up as he fidgeted in place. If he’d known the Vatos were going to react like that he wouldn’t have brought the brothers.

“Naw, dog.” Guillermo said with a cheesy grin on his face. “To prove my point, Pretty. You’re so damned good that y’all’ve got people convinced you’re a damn angel from Heaven.”

“Shut. It.” Harry said with little heat to back it up as he fidgeted in place. If he’d known the Vatos were going to react like that he wouldn’t have brought the brothers. Merlin this was embarrassing. Not as bad as his Dad’s rant about sex, but still…damn embarrassing especially considering what they were just discussing. “They just call me that because I drop supplies for them, that’s all.”

“Naw, dog.” Guillermo said with a cheesy grin on his face as the door into the nursing home finally cracked open, allowing them inside. The Vatos leader had clearly heard at least part of Harry’s last words. It’s cause my Abuela thinks you’re pretty enough to have fallen from Heaven, man.”

Cheeks flushed bright red, Harry shoved the bad of supplies at the other man, muttering under his breath as he stomped away, the brothers following him and laughing fit to be tied.

“Hey dog.” Guillermo frowned as both Dixons moved into the light. “I know you, you were with that cop and the Asian dude. Daryl, right?”

“Yeah.” Daryl said with a nod. “An’ this is my brother Merle. Harry joined up with us a while back before dragging us home to his dads with most of our group who were left.”
“It’s cool man.” The Vatos leader clapped one hand on Daryl’s shoulder as they followed along in Harry’s wake. “Any friend of Angel’s you know?”

“Yes.” Merle gave one last laugh. “We know the feelin’.”

“Well, anyway.” Guillermo handed the bag of supplies over to Felipe to go through it and sort it out. “Welcome. Don’t know how long y’all will be here, depends on Harry, but you’re welcome while you are.”

“Thanks, man.” Daryl nodded, finally spotting Harry crouching next to an elderly man. “Appreciate it.”


Later, just before dark, found Harry and Guillermo tucked in a corner having a deep conversation, the others keeping clear, though the Dixon brothers were close enough to overhear or toss in a word here or there if needed.

“Come on, Guillermo.” Harry nearly growled in frustration. “Even with the reinforcements and wards we’ve put up: this place isn’t going to last forever. I really don’t like the look of that group that formed up in one of the hospitals, and not everyone is as genial as you an’ me.”

“Naw man. Naw.” Guillermo shook his head, a pained expression on his face. “You know the score: half the people here can’t make it to the toilet alone and you wanna move them a hundred miles or more away? They can’t survive the trip using your magic, you know that, otherwise we would’ve moved already. I’m just tryin’ to do the best I can for them, you know?”

“I get that, G,” Harry said, a knowing look on his face. “Believe me, I get it. But now with merging this group into my people, I have the man power I need to move the rest of you guys out, even if the rest of the Vatos don’t wanna come with, just the elderly and a couple people to help keep them taken care of one the trip and we can get this done.”

“How, Harry?” Guillermo demanded. “How you gonna manage that? Most of them are incontinent, hardly any are mobile. Naw man, that’s just askin’ for trouble.”

“He’s right, Pretty.” Merle said, voiced pitched low. “It’d be like meals on wheels for the walkers.”

“See,” Guillermo arched a brow. “Even your novio knows it.”

“Spotted that huh?” Harry sighed, running his hands though his hair, loosening it in the process from its tie, somehow not surprised that Guillermo had picked up on the partnership between himself and the brothers…or his Abuela had anyway and told Guillermo. “Anyway. I know we can make this happen, Guillermo. Some spells on the incontinent to vanish excretions, charms to make everyone comfortable: they wouldn’t even have to leave the bus once we get them settled. No moving them around or anything. And,” this was where he thought he might have the winning bit. “Taking Daryl’s group to my home already cleared a bunch of the road between here and there. A car at the front for point, one at the back to flank, and fuel, we can be there in a day, three at the most if we have to stop and clear cars out of the way.”

“Can you do it?” Daryl asked seriously. “Use your magic that way?”

“Yes, easily.” Harry said with a firm nod. “Most of it is prep work on the bus. Then a couple spells
Once we get the elderly situated and off we’d go. It’d take an hour, tops, to get everyone loaded. Me and Remy could set the spells then he could return home while I make the trip. With everyone “in the know” it will be a shit-ton easier than the group’s trip out.”

“I just don’t know.” Guillermo sighed, shaking his head. “This…this is a big thing, man. I don’t know if they’ll go for it.”

“Like I said, it doesn’t have to be everyone if they don’t want to leave.” Harry reassured him. “Preferably it would be Felipe and all the elders, plus whoever else helps take care of them. Anyone else would be a bonus but…” He shrugged. “I have to try; you know? You’re all so vulnerable here, I don’t want anything to happen to you if I can prevent it.”

“Yeah, I get that about you Angel.” Guillermo gave a short laugh. “Had that figured out months ago.”

“Look.” Harry leaned forward intently, eyes dark. “It’ll take days to even prep the spells on the bus and get a working plan figured out. I’ll swing back through on, say, Wednesday for you answer. If it’s a go, we’ll start out Friday. Cool?”

“Yeah.” Guillermo nodded, rubbing one hand on the back of his neck. “That’s cool. Give me time to take a poll or some shit, yeah?”

“Alright then.” Moving over to the Dixons he held out his hands for them to take, giving Guillermo and the others a nod. “I’ll be back Wednesday for your answer. For everyone’s sake…I hope it’s the right one.”

And with a spin and a soft pop, they were gone.
On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

Happy Birthday to Chelsea, one of my Facebookers! I held this back a little so it landed on her special day, and I hope it was an amazing one! ❤️ Sif

Chapter Twelve – Harry’s Saving People Thing

Merle Dixon would never stop wondering over the strange creature that was Harry Potter-Black, or as Merle simply liked to call him “Pretty,” though he was willing to concede that his brother’s nickname of “Magic Man” was just as appropriate.

Never before in his life had Merle met someone so capable of cold-blooded killing – and yes, he and Daryl by now had both gotten the story of the prison to back up Pretty’s execution of Randall – who went so far out of his way to save people.

Pretty actually gave a damn.

And not just about his own skin or his own people either.

No, Pretty thought about the world, about how it was going to survive this plague, not just his life or the lives belonging to his kin.

It was a trait both Dixon brothers had seen precious little of, even before the world went to hell.

And whether either of them were willing to admit it or not, let alone willing to talk about it either with each other or Harry, it made them love him just that little bit more.

Knowing that he cared and had a heart not just big enough for a pair of mangy backwoods rednecks, but for every last person who lived on the Black Lands, and every person outside of them that Harry found worthy of hauling back to his home and let into his world.

This and other thoughts were swirling around in Merle’s mind as he watched Pretty greet someone called Oscar and his family with laughs and smiles, welcoming them into the fold like long-lost kin who’d finally come home to stay.

The group had been getting settled in when Harry and the brothers had returned from another run of Atlanta after Harry had finished laying out his plan to move the Vatos elders and whoever was willing to come with them onto his lands. He’d been busy – often with help from one or both of his dads – getting the bus ready for days, making sure everything was spelled and enchanted just right. From what Merle and Daryl could gather, the Martinez family had shown up at the gates – having been told how to find by none other than Harry after he’d freed and provisioned the one called Oscar after clearing the prison – not long after the trio had taken off on their run and to take to Guillermo at the Vatos base.
It was a big group – and all family – nine in total by Merle’s count.

At the head of the group and the one to slap backs with Harry after the three of them wandered into a repeat of the “welcome” meal the Dixon’s group had enjoyed, was Oscar. He’d brought with him his mother, wife, brother, brother’s wife, and four children between the two couples – three boys and a girl – ranging from twelve to seventeen. Which would probably go over well with the two teenagers from the Greene farm and some of the other kids, having more kids in ages to help fill out the gaps a little bit.

Not that Merle cared all that much.

Still.

It was certainly something to watch as Harry got that beaming look on his face that warred with the calculating tinge to his eyes.

Always running the numbers, that was Merle’s Pretty.

Always thinking of not just what was needed that day like a lot of the people on the estate, especially the ones that had come along with the Dixons, or even that week or that month like the brothers and the foreman tended to do.

Long term.

Merle’s Pretty was set on figuring a way for humanity to not only survive the walkers, but to be able to grow after they were gone – whether that took the shape of having massive stockpiles of supplies, or simply having the numbers to not breed themselves into a corner, Harry had considered it.

Honestly, it made him feel a little bit better about Harry running off sometimes to do god-knows-what without either him or Daryl tagging along, that streak of calculation.

Knowing that he had it – and more than that used it – made it so Pretty’s well-hidden (outside the Black Lands anyway) soft-heart doesn’t get him killed.

God knows…there were more than enough people in the world – before it was mostly destroyed – that would use and abuse it, if given half the change.

And it would be over ol’ Merle’s dead body that someone was given a chance to do that to his Pretty while there was still breath in his lungs.

So help him God – or what passed for one anyway now that the world has gone to hell...

…

Later the next day, after his Pretty had spent most of it closeted in the clinic lookin’ after people, Merle and Daryl ushered their Magic Pretty Man along at a fast clip, Harry eyeing them in bemusement the whole time, right up until they cleared the threshold of the castle.

"Merle?"

The sniper said nothing and simply entwined their fingers, pulling Harry up the stairs with him, looking this way and that, as if searching for something specific as he pulled them through the castle in search of their – their – rooms. "Merle, are you angry?"

Finally, a grin lit Merle's face; it was wicked, holding a lot of delicious danger. "Course not, Harry.
Nah, not angry. Tense. Very tense."

"Where are you going?"

"We're goin'," he corrected firmly. There was this look in his eyes that made Harry swallow thickly. Merle's eyes were darker now too. He looked sexy like this, though to Harry he almost always looked sexy. Sexy and determined, though Harry had no idea what he was determined about...though he was getting an inkling as the bigger man towed him unerringly towards their bedroom.

This only stopped when Merle opened a door down the wing they'd turned into. He pulled until Harry was in front of him. He then maneuvered them until Harry was pressed against the door. "What're you doin' with a mangy ol' coot like me anyhow, Pretty?"

"Well… I guess I saw something in you, right from the first. I'm not afraid of you, but you knew that. You’re smarter than most give you credit for…and strong, so strong," he whispered, staring up at him. The wolfish grin Merle sent him in return set Harry's body on fire.

"There's more to it, ain't there, Magic Man?" Daryl asked as he pressed in on one side of the trapped – willingly, but trapped all the same – wizard.

Harry pulled in a breath. It was no longer fear and anxiety that filled him. It was excitement. "You really need me to tell you what you already know?" He asked, grinning to cover the nerves the subject brought up. He didn’t think either of them would take well to hearing about how his magic had…reached out to them for lack of a better term. "There's really no need for that, is there?"

Merle laughed and nodded before dipping his head to capture Harry in a heated kiss. It lasted long minutes before they finally separated, Daryl swooping in to take his place as Merle steered the three of them fully into their suite and down the hall.

... Afterwards, Daryl managed to turn his face and press bitten lips against Harry's kiss swollen lips. "You were great, Magic Man. Have ta do it again sometime."

Harry's response was a garbled pant.

"We'll take tha’ as a compliment," Merle murmured beside them, smiling as Harry snuggled down between them, Daryl reaching out and covering their naked bodies after a nearly-unconscious Magic-Man remembered to hit them all with a cleaning spell and a flick of his almost-limp fingers had the lights out.

... Moving the Vatos was a massive undertaking, much as Harry had expected.

Three vehicles including the bus, more than a dozen bedridden or near-bedridden elderly, along with whatever younger members of the Vatos decided to come along – which ended up being more than Harry had expected, making the Vatos the single biggest micro-grouping among the Black Lands population.

Daryl rode point in one Humvee, which Oscar drove, the former inmate signing up immediately when the plan was hashed out over Sunday dinner, the backseat taken up with a trio of Vatos all
packing heat. His brother Juan drove the flanking truck, a big four-by-four with a Gatling gun mounted on the back that Harry had sourced from the CDC that Glenn manned, Guillermo riding shotgun while Merle drove the bus with Harry, Remus, and the remained of the Vatos who were all charged with helping take care of the elderly.

It took them two days, with half the first taken up with just clearing out of Atlanta on the car-jammed roads.

Working in their favor was the Harry had recently cleared – with help from the Dixons and their group – a big section of highway leading to the estate.

Working against them was the sheer infirmity of the elders and having to manage several groups of people who weren’t quite sure of each other, even as they were certain of Harry.

Still…

They made it, though they lost the weakest of the elders along the way, the excitement of it too much for the man’s ailing heart. A brief ceremony and prayer was said over the ninety-one-year-old veteran of WWII, then Harry cremated him. One spell from Remus gathered the ashes, whilst one from Harry conjured an urn, the man’s remains handed over to his newly made widow, who managed to rise above her grief to thank them for treating “Her Artie” with respect and saving him from turning into “one of those things.”

Honestly, the biggest hiccup they had was in the preemptive Blood-Quill and contract signing so that Harry and Remus could use magic freely on the trip, otherwise there would’ve been no way to explain bedpans that magically vanished waste or cots that were so comfortable that even the most bedsore/pressure-ulcer prone lady didn’t have to change positions.

Sirius had helped a great deal with the enchantments, but in the end, it was decided of the two of them Remus’s calm demeanor was likely to go over better with the Vatos and elders than Siri’s roguish charm and joker personality.

The second stumbling block came when they reached the main gate of the Black Lands – and the very-tight fencing system that would prevent a bus from navigating into the compound.

“What’s the plan, cub?” Remus asked as they all piled out to stretch their legs – including those of the elders that could still ambulate safely. More than one was goggling up at the massive gate. It was a stop they could well afford, given that they were inside the outermost ring of wards, which they’d been steadily expanding, increasing their territory even if they didn’t advertise it with an additional fenceline. Anymore, the shell of the prison complex was theirs, as well as the turn-off from the main road leading to it, and it didn’t even do to think on just how much – former – national and state lands they’d encompassed inside their wards.

A few anchor stones sunk into the ground here or there, and bam! Instant territory increase.

It wasn’t legal, but then, what the hell was when the world ended and governments did more damage to the populace than the virus they were trying to destroy?

“Well.” Harry smirked as Sirius came bounding out of the gate, alerted by the wards once they’d crossed the “boundary” of the ward-line. “We have two options: either we float it or…we float it.”

Remus groaned at the bad joke while Padfoot barked in sympathy with his mate before shifting back into the tall, handsome form of his human self.

“Papa,” Harry tilted his head towards the werewolf as his lovers sauntered over, having finished their
inspection of the immediate area…because paranoia they name is Dixon.

Which was an excellent personality trait to have when you were smack in the middle of the apocalypse Harry supposed.

“I’ll want you on the bus to soothe the elders while Siri and I float it over the fences from the back of the truck.” He decided, knowing that they didn’t have to worry about spooking any livestock since Sirius would have had them brought in once the wards alerted that they were back. “You should be able to help stabilize the thing if it wobbles or hits and air current. So, Dad.” Harry grinned brightly at the Animagus as his Dixons slung their arms around his shoulders. “How’s your Leviosa work feeling today?”
According to the timeline, Lori took a pregnancy test and was showing symptoms around day 70 of the outbreak, which puts her anywhere from six to twelve weeks (believably) with somewhere around eight most likely. It is known that at the start of season three, approximately 300 days post-outbreak, that Lori is overdue to give birth. I’m marking her conception at around day 15 post-outbreak, which would have her carrying to term at/around early-mid April.

Chapter Thirteen: The Bitter Cold

Daryl watched with a mix of bemusement and awe as his Magic Man coasted to an elegant slow down, clawed feet turning into heavy boots in an instant as Harry didn’t even pause in his pace when he transitioned from aerial hunter – one of the finest, Daryl had more than a healthy respect for what his love’s falcon form can do after watching him diving and snatching small prey, usually squirrels or the like, in one of the meadows protected by the wards – back into magical man.

It was something he’d had to get used to, one of the biggest shocks to his system now that his – as Harry would put it – “world view” included magic.

The way both his love and his Da moved from human – even a magic one – into an animal and back, often in the same stride in a smooth flex of their power that had an animal there one moment and a man the next without even a flicker of hesitation.

Though, he had seen Harry land in a crouch instead of walking more than once when he came in a smidge too fast, but the action was still as natural as could be.

And the rule about not shootin’ down birds made a shit-ton more sense once he realized that was to keep ‘im and the others from shootin’ down Harry.

Especially now that Fall was officially well and gone and Winter had its icy grip on Western Georgia.

After the old folks (and some younger folks) from the Vatos had been settled in, things had ramped up in the Black Lands. Everybody pitchin’ in and gettin’ things squared away for the colder months. He and Merle had done their parts, much like everybody else, helpin’ with slaughterin’ and breakin’ down the carcasses from the various meat animals they raised, trimmin’ down the herds and flocks an’ such for winter.

Once that was over, the three Black men had gone back to doin’ their runs, but hadn’t been bringin’ back anymore people.

Which was a good call from what Daryl had seen.

Everybody had seemed to just hunker down once the weather started to turn, and when it was real ugly nobody went anywhere, unless the wards pinged and then usually Harry would take flight to go investigate.

Merle – and more than a few of the others – kept busy in the mechanics shop, while Daryl found himself more often than not helpin’ out with the keepin’ the kids entertained by teachin’ ‘em what he knew about horses or huntin’ or makin’ traps.
His brother teased ‘im for it more often than not…but Harry appreciated it and wasn’t shy about showin’ Daryl that appreciation in ways that would make his toes curl days later jus’ thinkin’ about it.

Time passed quick enough when you weren’t always amped up and expectin’ an attack, an’ somehow in a blink he’d found himself wonderin’ what to make his Magic Man and some of the others for Christmas in a week or two, or Yule as that was what the Blacks all celebrated on the Winter Solstice rather than the Christian holiday.

He an’ Merle had both gotten a kick out of the appalled looks on more than one southern woman’s face when the newer members of the Black Lands found out that their hosts and leaders were a group of pagans.

That had been priceless.

“Hey love.” Harry smiled brightly at the sight of Daryl waiting on him in the courtyard, a piece of wood and a knife in his hand. Both of the Dixons were working on presents from what Harry could gather, preferring to fashion gifts with their own hands rather than try and go out “shopping” in the cities for them instead. Some of the others who didn’t have either the ability or inclination to make gifts had pulled one of the three Blacks aside to ask if they would grab such-and-such for a partner or friend or child. “Managed to escape from the two terrors I see.”

Daryl cocked a half-grin at that.

Ever since the first time helpin’ with the kiddos Harry’s siblings had taken to following him around when they could, though Raz often dogged Merle’s heals to his brother’s consternation.

“They’re not so bad.” Daryl said as he tucked his project away and dusted his hands off before standin’ up and leanin’ into Harry for a welcome-home kiss. “Jus’ need a bit of patience is all.”

Which his brother was learnin’…slowly.

Well…

At least he didn’ run away from a mite no bigger than a grasshopper anymore anyhow.

Harry snickered a little after pressing a hot kiss to slightly-chapped lips. No matter how many pots of lip balm he put in the bathroom or on the kitchen counter, both of the brothers always forgot to grab one before heading out for the day. They’ll use it when he reminds them, both other than that “weren’t much for fancy shit” like lip balm or sunscreen, even in the near-blinding winter Georgia sun as it bounced off the ever-rising snow pack found this far out in the wilderness and mountains.

He knew exactly what Daryl was thinking of when it came to Raz and Merle – which was one of the cutest versions of hero-worship going on he’d ever seen in person.

“Me an’ Merle have a plan for t’night.” Daryl told him, linking their fingers together as they made their way over to Max the foreman who was talking with Sirius for Harry to report on whatever-it-was that had gotten him up and out of their warm bed early that mornin’ to investigate. “You gonna be around?”

“Oh dear, a Dixon Plan?” Harry teased him lightly, thinking of more than one time where the two brothers had gotten into scrapes from their “plans”, all of which had been relayed in one way or another to Harry during fireside talks the last several months. “Should I wear my armor…just in case?”
Daryl snorted, rolling his eyes.

“Naw.” He drawled, smirking. “Jus’ your pretty skin.”

“Well,” Harry smirked right back. “In that case…”

…

Harry was dragging his feet by the time he made it back to their suite that night.

Expansion was the name of the game right now, especially since the colder weather had most living things hunkering down to wait out the winter.

It wasn’t a hard work he was doing by any means – though he was planning something that he would need help with once it came to that point – but when you were going through the same routine over and over again for hours it was exhausting even if it wasn’t difficult.

Those dragging feet came to an abrupt halt and emerald green eyes shot wide as he pushed open the door to his suite and stepped into something very different than what he was expecting.

When Daryl had told him they had “plans” for him, Harry had expected something raunchy and clothing optional – which he was honestly looking forward to.

This…

This wasn’t that.

The couches had been pushed to the edges of the room along with the low table that was normally in front of the wide fireplace, making a large open area before the ever-present fire and the soft rugs laid out before it.

Harry cocked his head to the side, eyeing said rugs with a smile.

There were a couple extra rugs than normal, it looked like the brothers had robbed all the rugs from their normally-empty bedrooms to carpet the wooden floor.

In the center of the new layers of rugs and fabrics on the floor were several wooden trays – normally used for breakfast in bed – laid out with some of his favorites, chocolate strawberries, cheesecake, butter crackers smeared with cream cheese and pepper jelly, the works. To one side was a wine bucket which had a breathing bottle of champagne on ice. And standing over the spread of soft furs and extravagant tidbits were his loves, only instead of their normal jeans or work pants and cotton shirts they were in finely pressed linen pants and silk shirts, their hair was trimmed, Daryl’s beard trimmed and Merle was freshly shaved. The only thing out of place on the high-class picture were the bare feet each man was sporting.

“Hello there.” Harry gave an admiring arch of his brow. “Don’t I feel overdressed?”

The Dixons both chuckled, enjoying the turn of events, as both of them have spent more than one moment in their time with Harry feeling out-of-place in his world.

Rolling his eyes as the brothers knelt and got comfortable, Harry wandered into their bedroom, arching another brow as he saw the dozens of lit candles scattered all over the room.

They’d really gone all-out.

A freshening spell and switch of clothes into simple linen drawstring pants and silk tunic both in
endless black that made his skin glow and his eyes shine later and he was snuggling down in between his loves who were waiting patiently to woo him – Dixon style.

“You guys put a lot of effort into this.” He commented as Merle handed him over a glass of perfectly chilled champagne, smiling a little around the flute as his eyes landed on a pair of wrapped boxes that had been hiding behind a pillow when he first walked in.

Both packages had the messily-wrapped appearance, complete in butcher paper that had been painted in slashes and splotches that read of help from Raz and Jamie while the choice of wine shouted Sirius and the nibbles Remus.

“Yer ours.” Daryl shrugged, a bit uncomfortable as always with discussing feelings. “Been workin’ hard, deserve a little care every now an’ again.”

“Thank you.” Harry smiled softly at Daryl, reaching out and clasping his hand, then turning and doing the same with Merle. “Both of you.”

They chatted a bit, somehow got on the subject of dates-gone-wrong which had all three of them rolling with laughter as the brothers took turns feeding Harry and being fed by him, most everything they’d put together working well, though the cheesecake took a bit of doing and made more than a bit of a mess at times.

But kisses were just as sweet with the tang of the treat on their lips as not, and none of them had a problem cleaning up any would-be spills from lip or hand or neck or chest.

The bottle was coming up empty when Harry’s curiosity got the better of him and he started eyeing up the two packages, the brothers smirking at him knowingly as they each picked up their gift, having a wordless conversation that ended with Daryl turning a bit to face him and handing over his first as Merle sat back and watched, content once again to let his little brother lead with their Pretty.

As Harry carefully peeled back the edges of the paper, revealing a jeweler’s box in an odd size – too big for a ring, but wrong for just about anything else – Merle spoke as the Dixons fixed their eyes on his face.

“Ya explained ta us awhile back.” Merle said. “’Bout how y’all do marriage. Bondin’ ya called it.”

Emerald eyes flew up to stare from one ruggedly handsome face to the other in shock before darting back down to the box in his hands, having one hell of an idea now what it contained.

“Talked to yer das when we decided to put this all together.” Daryl continued, picking up the story from his brother. “’Bout how it all works. We know,” he jerked his head to include his brother. “Tha’ this is the wrong time-a year for it. But we wanted…”

“Wanted to mark as ours anyway.” Merle finished. “An’ then bond good an’ proper come spring, when yer Da Remus said were best.”

“Are you…are you sure?” Harry’s voice cracked a little. He’d never thought, never even considered that the Dixons would propose. Because that’s exactly what this was. A proposal. “I mean…” He bit his lip as he glanced up through inky lashes at the brothers, darting a glance down at the box Merle still held in steady hands. “Bonding…it’s not like marriage. It’s forever.”

“We know.” Daryl said simply as he reached forward and nudged Harry’s hand off the top of his box, flicking it open to show the shining platinum cuff etched in decorations that he’d carved himself. Sirius had helped him pick it, while Remus had come through with the tool he needed to do the metalwork himself.
Merle took that as his cue and quickly shed the wrapping on his box, opening it to show a similar band, though in place of etchings his was set with a single, simple emerald cabochon.

A cabochon that matched his Pretty’s eyes perfectly.

“We want ya.” Merle told him, flashing a cocky grin. “‘Sides…where in this world we gonna find ourselves another Pretty Magic Man like you?”

Harry snorted out, half-laugh and half-happy tears as he picked up Daryl’s cuff first and offered his right wrist, the same side as Daryl always took in the bed or next to him at a table, the quieter brother clasping it on his wrist with fingers that shook – just a mite, mind – then repeated the action with Merle’s cuff and his left wrist.

Laughing, he gave no resistance at all when he found himself pounced on and pushed to his back on the rugs, the Dixons having reached their limit for mush without being physical, all the while planning out in his head what his cuffs on the Dixons were going to look like.

On the upside…deciding on a present for the pair had just gotten that much easier.

...

Merle purred as he felt his Pretty climb between silken sheets and lay a gentle kiss on his shoulder blade.

“Enjoy yer flight?” His voice was gravelly and rough from the previous night’s activities, the older brother taking a lazy morning in the wake of their late night that didn’t end until the wee hours of the morning.

Harry’d been up first for another fly around the borders – he was plottin’ and plannin’ somehin’ but hadn’t yet brought it up with either them or his dads.

Whatever it was, Merle knew two things: it was sure to be cunnin’ as all hell, and just as labor-intensive.

“It’s freeing.” Harry admitted. “My mind processes things differently, sees things in a whole new way from the skies. But it’s a lot of information, teeny tiny things I never noticed or paid attention to before I found my wings. And if this weather keeps up I’ll be grounded for a bit.”

Winter was kicking Western Georgia’s ass the closer it crept to the Solstice.

Which was good – since on one hand it slowed down the walkers.

But also bad – it slowed people and animals down as well, the ones that haven’t tucked away for the winter months.

The gruff former-Marine chuckled and turned onto his back, hand flashing out lightning-quick to haul his young lover over and across his chest, locking him in place with a deep, tongue-twining kiss.

“And where’s mah brother?” He murmured as he moved, covering Harry’s arching neck in nipping kisses as he waited for an answer.

“Working on something with Jamie and Raz.” Harry finally gathered his wits to gasp out. “All three of ‘em were pretty hush-hush about whatever is mischief they’re planning to unleash on their victim.”
A white-toothed grin flashed in the low afternoon light.

“Excellent.”

…

“Big broder, big broder!” Raz cheered on the morning of the Solstice as the trio wandered down to the family living room in sock feet, Jamie joining in with his chants.

Each of the two terrors climbed to their feet and gamboled over to the trio, glomping first onto Harry then attacking their Dixon of choice – Raz, Merle and Jamie, Daryl – before switching, the two brothers scooping the tykes up and slinging them over their shoulders to return them to their spots by the fireplace that had been set with a “Yule” log.

It had been a fascinating glimpse into the practices of their new little family unit that the Dixons were settling into, goin’ out with all the Blacks including their Pretty and picking out a tree to cut down and prep into the traditional log. Both had enjoyed watching their Pretty and his das debark the massive thing and carve it with “runes” before they twined it with garland and sprinkled it with wine. Harry had told them that they’d light the log at dusk, then the adults would keep a vigil through the night until the dawn.

But for the moment, it was time for breakfast and giving out a few gifts, as the terrors wouldn’t be up at daybreak to get theirs along with the ones exchanged between the adults.

“Presents! Presents!” The kids chanted and the grown-ups laughed.

Now matter the holiday celebrated, some things were universal.

And little kids and their honest greed was one of them.

“Alrigh’ alrigh’.” Daryl laughed, caving first to the puppy-dog eyes while Harry gave a coughing “sucker” under his breath, taking the sting out of the tease with a smacking kiss to one morning-grizzled cheek. “Here ya two go.”

Daryl handed over the two paper-and-twine wrapped package which the two siblings tore into with glee, smiles and bright eyes all around as they discovered the identical presents that only differed with the name carved into the base.

Picked out in nice solid oak and down by hand with one of his knives was a rather good sculpture of a wolf, a shaggy dog, and a pair of cubs with a falcon perched on the back of the wolf, the only color added to the piece the gold or grey or green of each’s eyes.

“Papa, Papa look!” Jamie shoved her sculpture in Remus’s face as Raz showed his off just as exuberantly to his “big broder” before doing the same to Sirius. “It’s us!”

“I see, little cub.” Remus hugged her to his side, eyeing the cuff on his oldest cub’s wrist with approval and the sculpture with genuine pleasure. “I see.”

Merle had thought along similar lines, though his was a toy and not a decoration, fashioning a pair of metal kids’ puzzles from some of the scrap, each engraved like Daryl’s pack with the name of the child it belongs too.

Gifts that were accepted in part with just as much glee due to the sheer noise they made as the fun the
kids thought they’d be to play with.

“Yeah yuck it up.” Sirius muttered as he winced as Raz gave a particularly exuberant *clang* of his puzzle. “You forget that my pup is capable of *bearing young*?” He smirked over at the suddenly pale-faced Merle. “What goes around *comes around*, asshole. You just keep laughing. Remus and I’ll be *more* than happy to sugar up your kids and send them home to daddy once our pup makes us grandfathers, just you *wait*.”

... 

The explosion shook the trees, sending reverberations through the gully below, rocks shaking loose and tumbling down to crash into the icy water – all without making a sound as Harry’s warding silenced the area and dispelled the flames and smoke.

“*Goddamn.*” Merle cursed, Daryl and Harry’s Dad Siri just watching with wide eyes as they witnessed the result of Harry’s weeks of plotting and planning.

Sirius whistled, one hand held above his eyes to protect them from the competing glare of sun-on-snow and the bright flames of the soundless destruction.

“That the last one?” Daryl asked the pertinent question as he studied the gaping maw over a gully that used to be a bridge – one of several that fed into the network of roads leading to what was now over a dozen square miles of land warded and guarded by the magical family.

Harry nodded as he stepped forward, a quiet word and wave of his wand banishing the lingering dust and rubble of the explosion.

He’d already set up a “Bridge Down, Road Ends” series of barricades on the other side to keep someone from taking an accidental dive into the river below.

“All but the one that I’ve warded to hell and back.” Harry told them, speaking of the lone main-thoroughfare that he’d left alone. Other than hiking in on foot or hoof, though if someone had a dirt bike or ATV they could probably manage it as well, there was now only *one* way to gain access to the Black Lands.

If their wards weren’t enough, the roads being down and bridges gone would make for one hell of an obstacle course for someone to find Harry’s family – if they even knew where to look.

It was all part of Harry’s greater plan, which he’d have to explain to his loves and dads later.

Honestly, if it wasn’t for wanting Siri’s wand helping him with this last – and biggest – demolition, he wouldn’t have said a word until the wards were altered the way he wanted as well, presenting the whole thing as a *fait accompli*.

“Why?” Siri couldn’t help but ask, baffled at what was going through his pup’s mind. “The wards will keep out muggles and walkers alike.”

“That’s the problem.” Green eyes flickered over the tall forms of his lovers meaningfully. “*Muggles.*” He arched a brow at his dad. “Which would have been enough. But we’re not *exactly*, as alone here as we thought...now are we, Dad?”

Sirius groaned, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

Well.
At least that explains his pup’s recent dive into paranoid destruction.

And honestly…Prongslet had a point.

It was something they – he and Remus – had discussed idly, how odd it was that Harry kept finding people with at least a little talent in them.

After the latest round of emigres from the Vatos compound in Atlanta, they’d found that a full half of the “muggles” they’d rescued and set up in the Black Lands – including their workers from pre-outbreak – had some form of magical connection, most scoring on the lowest tier in the scale of magical power, between a two, being of magical descent, to a four which was a magical sensitive like their foreman Max or his son Jacob or the Grimes boy Carl.

Harry had also found the brothers who were higher up on that scale, and more than one who had no magical blood at all.

Which made simply warding against non-magicals a crap-shoot, since while the brothers were on their side, the next person to be powerful enough to see through the notice-me-not charms on the main road to the Black Lands might not be.

“Don’t worry about it too much, Dad.” Harry smiled a little, eyes gleaming. “I’ve got an idea. But I’m going to need all of us – Blacks and Dixons – to make it work…”

…

“It’s a beacon.” Remus whispered, golden eyes dragging upwards from the ward schema his cub and laid out on the round dining room table.

They’d returned from blowing the shit out of the last bridge leading into the Black Lands – or at least the last one he was planning to blow up – and had a nice mellow dinner with Remus and the kiddos, despite the Dixons eyeing him in confused interest and no little amount of worry – worry echoed in his Dad Siri’s eyes.

Raz and Jamie had been ushered off for baths and then bed, while Harry grabbed the plans.

Plans he’d found in his lord’s mantle the morning after he’d returned from getting the remnants of the Vatos onto the Black Lands.

The mantle had opened before – several times.

Such as when Harry went off to college or when his younger siblings were both born, every time with plans or tools or what have you that would be a help in the future, even if they didn’t immediately understand how, it always dawned on them what was going on once Pandora’s planning panned out.

Harry’s currently plan of attack was fully half-Pandora Delphi-Lovegood’s fault and half his own paranoia.

The plans for the new ward schema were all Pandora.

Making it even more difficult for others to find the Black Lands?

The destruction?

That was all Harry.
“Beacon?” Merle frowned, not understanding a lick of the magical hoodoo that his Pretty and his Da’s were discussin’. “What kinda beacon?”

“Let me ask you both a question.” Harry turned towards his loves, shifting a bit in his chair to have a better view of the men flanking him on either side. Merle on his left and Daryl on his right, as had become their habit over the last months. “Ever since coming here, how do you feel? Anxious? Hyper-aware?”

“Safe.” Daryl said almost at once with a slight jerk of his shoulders and a light frown. “I handle bein’ away on a hunt or a sourcin’ trip jus’ fine…but I feel safe here.”

Merle just nodded in silent agreement with his little brother’s words.

“It’s the wards that do that.” Remus explained, seeing where his cub was going with this whole… scheme. “Short of us, you two are the most powerful – magically – residents of the Black Lands. You feel it the most, while someone like Hershel who isn’t magical at all will feel it the least.”

“What I want to do.” Harry explained, excitement creeping into his voice. “Is flip the wards a little with this addition.” He waved a hand over the schematic. “Extending that feeling of safeness into a beacon that those with magical blood will actually be drawn to from outside the wards.”

“A beacon.” Merle blew out a breath as he rubbed one hand over his upper lip. “Like a lighthouse in a storm.”

“Exactly.” Harry nodded firmly. “Any safe port, right? What’s safer than here?”

“An’ the demos.” Daryl commented slowly as he rolled what he thought was goin’ on in Harry’s mind around a minute. “That’s ta give ya time to gauge the folks drawn here, yeah?”

“Basically.” Harry shrugged, as awareness sharpened his dads’ eyes. “With all of us giving input to the wards to help, well, tune them to the sort of people we want to find us, that should cut down on the danger involved in doing this. But still…we’re all here.” He waved a hand between the three of them and the two quietly-debating-amongst-each-other forms of his dads. “And the kids. Not to mention anyone else. I want people that will make us stronger in different ways to come. Not someone with an eye on taking over or whatever.”

“How certain are ya that ya can tune it like that?” Merle asked shrewdly, taking the words right out of Sirius’s mouth if the approving nod the older man gave him was any indication.

“Eh.” He waved a hand side to side. “So-so. Pandora’s notes say it will work…but I don’t like taking chances. Hence the upping the difficulty of finding us exponentially with the risk we’ll be taking.”

“So-so.” Sirius shook his head, frowning deeply even as he knew he was going to agree to his pup’s madcap idea. “What the hell. You and Pandora haven’t led us wrong yet. What do you need to make this work, pup?”

…
Fourteen

Chapter Summary

This is the last chapter of this portion of the story, there will be an epilogue out next week with the possibility of a sequel in a year or so.

On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

Chapter Fourteen: Awakening

Blood ran thick over his hands, spilling out onto the tile floor and scented the air to the point he could taste the sickly coppery taint on his tongue. It soaked through the sheets and towels, painting the bed crimson and black. Blood gushed and poured and hemorrhaged.

Magics done with blood were the strongest of all, capable of defeating all but soul and death magics in their turn.

But above all, blood was life.

And when it ran so substantially from one source, life was precisely what it cost.

Though in this case whose life had yet to be determined.

Unlike some would think, this surge of blood and despair wasn’t accompanied by screams or shouts or raucous weeping.

No, the only sound in the blood-drenched birthing room Harry had set up in the “Surgery” portion of the clinic was the labored breathing of a sweat-soaked Lori Grimes as she struggled for the fortieth hour of her labor.

The baby was still alive…but from what Harry could tell without using a spell and risking mother and child alike – or rather, causing them further risk than the premature labor was causing… premature by over a month no less, this being the first week of March (as close as Harry could tell) and the child not due for approximately another four to six weeks – risking both their lives as Lori had no protection against the effects of his inundating her with magic would have in her weakened state and the child’s resistance to magical radiation being unknown until its birth.

A single spell at this stage could – and likely would given how weak Lori had gotten through the long, strenuous labor – kill them.

From what Harry could tell from a visual and physical examination, the baby was sideways in the womb, and none of the tricks and tips he’d picked up at medical school or even in the midwifery book he’d consumed like a starving man had helped turn it.

Lori was tiring…worse, with the hemorrhaging and her being non-magical, she was dying.

Too much blood loss, even with the transfusions she’d been given from the small pool of available donors in her type who were healthy enough to donate, too much strain, and no way for him to fix her as a medical student with EMT training and a tower of books and potions.
“She can’t go on like this, Harry.” Carol, who Harry had drafted as his assistant/doula at Lori’s – and Rick’s – insistence spoke, breaking the near-silence of the soon-to-be-tomb.

“She’s always been high-risk.” Harry commented absently as he churned through all the options in his mind. “I told her – and Rick – that first thing after they got here. Premature, on-time, or overdue, there was never a way for me to tell which way it was going to go. Lori and I talked about it – at great length – what her wishes were. I was just hoping…”

Hoping.

Hope, he sometimes thought, was more evil than hate or rage or despair.

At least those didn’t raise you up only to cast you down.

If sins and virtues were demons and angels, Hope would be the former masquerading as the latter.

Harry couldn’t even verbalize what it was he’d been hoping for.

The baby to turn? Lori’s labor to miraculously transition and end? A bloody – rather ironic given the state of the room and Harry’s hands – miracle either of those would be.

Maybe for someone – anyone – to show up and take this…this burden off of his shoulders.

Lori had made her wishes clear.

If it came down to it – no matter how much she was disgusted by him, loathed him, and feared him – she’d respected him, at least in part where it came to his knowledge of medicine.

As she’d put it: “I’ll be on your table and in your hands. It’s your call.”

Not hers, if they could rouse her, or Rick’s or Carol’s or hell, even Carl’s.

Harry’s, because he was the closest thing they had to a doctor and he’d – supposedly – do whatever had the greatest chance for a healthy mother and baby.

If only he knew what that was.

Because at this point…he wasn’t certain that whatever choice he made, it wouldn’t end up with two bodies to burn, one much smaller than the other.

How was he supposed to walk out into the waiting room and tell Carl: “I saved your mom or your sibling…but not both?”

What kind of choice was that for anyone to make? Let alone a gay wizard from another universe who’d never finished medical school because the world kinda decided to end.

The answer was simple, it wasn’t a kind choice for anyone to make, but despite Lori’s own wishes, it didn’t have to be his.

He wasn’t her husband.

If the world hadn’t ended it wouldn’t have ever been in his hands, unless there was an advanced directive or power of attorney in play.

This was Rick’s choice.
Though whatever the good Sheriff decided…Harry had an inkling that both of them were going to have to live with it.

…

“She’s dying.” Harry told Rick after pulling him aside, Daryl running interference with Carl to keep him distracted.

His loves couldn’t do shit to help him in the birthing room, but they could do whatever possible to keep tensions down in the waiting room and keep Rick or Carl or whoever from bursting in and bothering him, Carol, and most of all Lori.

Especially as they were close to entering their third day of labor, most of it having been some form of active from the speed and pace of contractions and the breaking waters.

A wordless sob came from Rick as he seemed to crumple in on himself before Harry’s eyes, a veritable picture of grief with the only thing holding him upright being the wall as his hands came up to shield his tears and shattered face from Harry’s sympathetic – but far too knowing – gaze.

“Are you sure?” He heard a few minutes later through the grief, albeit muffled by tears, sniffling, and the shielding hands.

“She’s lost too much blood even with the transfusions.” Harry told him simply but firmly. Lori Grimes was already dead. Her brain just didn’t know it yet. “Even if I could stabilize her somehow…the baby is still presenting as transverse…on it’s side. No matter what we’ve tried, even manually manipulating it…Lori still can’t deliver. And with the amount of blood she’s lost already…even if I did a caesarian section – or as close to one as I can manage – she’ll still die, from blood loss or infection or any of a dozen or more other complications that come with major surgery.”

Rick visibly pulled himself together, rubbing his hands over his face to remove any signs of tears even as they still fell unchecked from his reddened eyes, staring – looking the next thing to dead himself – flat at Harry.

“What are you telling me, Black?”

“I can save the baby.” Harry said bluntly, knowing that while Rick would probably never like him, he at least appreciated his no-bullshit attitude. “It might even survive being a premie with or without magical intervention depending on where it hits on the scale.” He hesitated a moment then finished the thought. “Lori’s dead either way. If I can deliver the baby with a C-Section, it’ll be a miracle, second only to it actually surviving with the conditions it survived in the womb and the ones we have to offer out of it. But I don’t think I have a third one to pull from my bag of tricks.”

“Why are you asking me?” Rick asked in desperation to not have to say what Harry was asking him – without asking him at all it seemed – to say. “She told you to decide if it came to her or the baby and she wasn’t coherent didn’t she?”

“I’m not her husband, and to be honest, I don’t like her as a human being all that much.” Harry said, still keeping his tone as calm as possible. “Given that, I don’t think this should be my decision. I’m not exactly without bias.”

“Neither am I.” Rick snorted a bit, scrubbing at his cheeks with the heel of one hand. “Do it. She’s my wife, and I’m telling you…save the baby if you can.”

“Okay.” Harry nodded once, spinning on his heel. “I’ll do what I can – for both of them.”
“Thank you, Harry.” Rick called after the ebony-haired man with the red-tinged hands, making the wizard pause a moment in his easy stride before nodding once and continuing on, that all the acknowledgement Harry gave Rick’s thanks.

It wasn’t exactly the sort of thing you could say “you’re welcome” to, after all.

He’d just forced the man to verbally affirm his own wife’s death, a burden he could have shouldered for him.

But Harry had learned a long time ago, in a different universe, the dangers that came with shouldering burdens not your own, and it was a price he wasn’t rushing to pay ever again, seeing as it almost cost him the lives of those nearest and dearest to him in an endless tumble through a beckoning archway.

…

The resounding cry of a newborn baby – albeit one that was a tad on the weak side – rang through the small clinic and out into the mess hall, carrying easily over the thunderous silence and tense edginess of the crowd who had gathered of those who had gotten to know the Grimes family over the past several months when word spread that Lori wasn’t likely to make it.

“There.” Harry pointed towards a box on his desk that held a familiar stone. “Press it against her chest then set it on the mat and tell me what color it is, Carol. I’m going to…put her back together as best I can and clean them both up…if I can.”

“Won’t the magic hurt Lori?” Carol asked anxiously as she followed Harry’s instructions, holding the baby girl who was about the size of a cantaloupe close and setting down the stone on the mat when it started to softly glow, making the new baby cry out again at the light bothering her sensitive eyes. “Dark grey, Harry. It’s dark grey.”

“Magic sensitive.” Harry nodded, mouth grim as he, as he’d said, put Lori back together after her C-Section and cleaned her up with a couple of spells. Magical radiation didn’t really matter when she was going to die anyway. The least he could do was give her some dignity in the meantime. “Not great, but I’ll take it.”

Cleaning himself and the room with another spell, he gestured for Carol to hand over the baby girl so he could see to her.

“Go get Rick and Carl if you would.” He said softly as he started with the measurements and such that he could take manually before switching over to some spells to get an more in-depth look at any issues the premature birth might have caused other than the expected small size and frailty. “I think they both should be able to say goodbye.”

Carol bit her lip, tears returning to her eyes after crying herself out after the first few hours when Harry couldn’t turn the baby and had to hope she’d turn on her own.

She’d known what that – combined with the risky pregnancy – likely meant for Lori, and probably the baby too.

Harry had been so calm the whole time, even when he’d sent her away to get herself together so she didn’t disturb Lori and cause a further set back from distress.

Nodding, Carol left. Rick and Carl venturing into the room, both surprised by the cleanliness but focusing on two much more important things at the same time – the baby Harry was working over and the blanket-draped form of their wife/mother who had only her head and hair showing above the
covers that were trying – mostly in vain – to keep the rapidly declining woman warm as she slipped farther and farther away from them with every weak breath.

“How…?” Rick wasn’t even sure what he was going to say, but was silenced by the firm shake of Harry’s head and green eyes cutting between Carl and the nearly-still form of Lori, only the faint rise and fall of her chest giving credence to her still-living state. “Why don’t you go…go say goodbye Carl.”

“Goodbye?” Carl whispered. “But…but…”

“Magic can’t fix everything Carl.” Harry explained again as he picked up the – mostly – healthy baby girl who weighed four pounds and one ounce, a good size for a premie of her gestational age. He’d cleaned her up and wrapped her in a thick knitted blanket in bright Gryffindor red, a gold cap, mitts, and booties helping to keep her warm as well and protect her in addition to the plain cloth diaper and onesie. “You know that. Your mom…she doesn’t have much time, I’m truly sorry.” Gently, Harry passed the baby girl over to her – father’s, he’d done a paternity as soon as he’d finished the other tests, he’d been right, she was Shane’s – father’s arms, whispering as he did so. “It’s a girl. I’ll be in the hall. Just…let me know when you and Carl are done and we’ll get you set with a bottle for the little one. She’ll be fine for right this second…”

Taking the baby girl in numb arms, Rick looked between the sweet scrunched up face and the pale death mask on the bed and mentally gave Lori all the goodbye he could manage, more concerned with the here-and-now of how the hell he was supposed to take care of a newborn and Carl, all on his own.

Forgetting, for the moment, that so long as they were on the Black Lands, the Grimes family was nowhere near alone.

Spring had woken the land, but it had taken his wife, and beyond that for a time Rick was deaf, dumb, and blind.

…it

“You can still change yer mind, love.” Daryl whispered softly in Harry ear as they waited with Merle for Harry’s dads, who were bringing little Raz and Jamie with them, in the hidden chamber beneath the fortress they all called home.

For the first time in either Dixon’s life, they were surrounded by wealth beyond measure, not just in the extrinsic value of the company they’d chosen to keep in the Blacks, but also by a series of gemstone pillars that stood all around them in alternating heights, some only a foot high while four at what even underground the brothers recognized as the cardinal points of a compass were taller than a man.

There’d been a brief moment of hilarity when Merle had wondered aloud how they’d gotten those done there, before an arch of Harry’s brow and a drawl from Daryl of “I dunno, maybe magic,” had the older man flushing in embarrassment and threatening them both with stealing all the covers or engaging in other dastardly behavior that night in revenge.

Harry himself stood leaning with tense nonchalant bravado against the center pillar, what it held Daryl had learned during the discussions that had gone around and around and around between his Magic Man and the elder wizards as the central “warding stone” for the entire sprawling – and ever growing thanks to Harry’s industriousness – estate.

One little stone, a rarest-of-the-rare red diamond the size of a fuckin’ softball and worth more than a
small country before the world ended – set up on a white granite pillar anchored the whole shebang.

“You’re right, I could.” Harry agreed, pressing a kiss up onto the corner of Daryl’s mouth, shooting Merle a promising leer when he pouted a bit from where he stood on Harry’s other side. “Then I remember having to cut into Lori Grimes and guess from there because I’d never done a C-Section, even on a cadaver or an animal. We need people to come to us. I just have to trust with all of us throwing our hearts and minds and souls into the mix, that they’re the right kind of people.”

A real doctor, in particular, would be nice.

“An’ what if they ain’t?” Merle asked with a smirk and a cocked brow.

Harry gave a wicked quirk of his lips, one shade off of a genuine evil grin.

“That we will, Pretty.” Merle snorted, Daryl linking his fingers together in silent solidarity with his magic man. “That we will…”

“Then it’s time to flip the switch…and whoever dares to ride up to our doorstep with evil intentions better pray to heaven or hell that they can’t make it onto our land…because if they do, not even the devil himself will be able to protect them…from us.” Harry proclaimed, Sirius and Remus giving him approving nods and proud glances as they arrived together with their children, the same as they’d arrived in this world in the first place, as a family, though that number had certainly grown.

Harry smiled a madonna’s smile as he rested his free hand on his lower stomach.

It had certainly grown, indeed.
Epilogue - Renewal

Chapter Summary

Short but sweet, here's the epilogue for On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams.

I may or may not add another installment and turn this into a series at some point...if I do I'll but a new chapter up on here to announce it!

<3 Lots of love, Sif

On Whom the Pale Moon Gleams

Note: The vows here are taken from traditional Celtic wedding vows that I've tweaked a bit.

Epilogue: Renewal

“I vow you the first cut of my meat…” Harry said, his Lord’s Mantle gleaming against his black silk tunic with its edging in green and blue, a gift found inside the heavy enchanted necklace when he’d been fiddling with it that morning – along with the fancy “duds” as Merle had called them that both of the brothers wore, Merle in blue with black accents and Daryl’s green.

…

“…the first sip of my wine…” A gruff voice spoke, blue eyes gleaming in the moon light as he bit back a smile as his little brother fidgeted with nerves, waiting for his turn to speak.

…

“…from this day it’ll be only your name I cry out in the night…” Now that was an easy vow for Daryl to make. His Magic Man was the only one he’d ever wanted this way, the only one he could see wanting forever.

“…and into your eyes that I smile each morning…” Green eyes flashed as his lips curved along with the line.

…

“I’ll be a shield for you back as you are for mine,” Merle swore, biting back the emotion that rose with each line.

…

“An’, above and beyond this, I will, cherish…”

…

“…and honor…”

…
“Ya.”

“Ya.”

“You.”

“Through this life and into the next...so mote it be.”

...

“I still can’t believe you married those two rapscallions, pup.” Sirius shook his head as the two of them worked in the stables the day after Harry and his loves came out of their brief “honeymoon” that they’d spent in seclusion in their rooms or roaming the nighttime forest away from the ever-growing settlement.

“Just like I,” Harry shot back good-naturedly. “Can’t believe either you or Dad James convinced Papa Remus and Mum Lily to date, let alone make honest men of you.” He shook his head in turn, his much more mournful – and mocking – than his dad’s had been. “Something wrong with that picture...maybe I’ll suggest to Papa that he get himself check for Amortentia…”

“You!” Sirius shouted with a laugh, flinging the first handful of straw, and the fight was on.

...

“So...did either of you happen to pay paying attention when my Dad was ranting about not wanting to be a grandfather...? I hope so, ‘cause otherwise the next six months are going to be really awkward…”

“What the fuck, Pretty?!”

“What the fuck, Magic Man?!”

...

The End...for now.

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