

Black Magic By Moonlight (NC17/18)

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Summary: Harry Potter could find trouble in paradise and when Draco sends him to St Louis for a holiday it's not paradise and there's lots of trouble. With dark magic, vampires, lycanthropes and more, who else could sort it out but Anita Blake?

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Warnings: This story is set post Harry Potter and the OotP and post Incubus Dreams and therefore has SPOILERS for all previous books. If you don't want to know anything that went on in or before HP book five or AB book twelve do not read this story.

Author's Notes: I was surfing one day and found a link to Inevitable by mhalachaiswords, an AB/HP xover which reminded me how much I love the world of Anita Blake. It also kicked my brain into thinking that there are not enough HP/AB xovers out there. Never one to let a challenge go by my muses jumped up and this was born. I do hope you enjoy it. Thank you to Soph and serpentmalfoy for beta reading it for me.

Xover liberties: It has been assumed the timelines are in sync so that the end of Harry's seventh year coincides with the June after Incubus Dreams, bringing HP up to current time rather than taking AB back.

Chapter 1 Holiday Trouble

Scene 1

Harry stepped out of the taxi and stretched his back, looking up at the tall townhouses which lined the road. It was a strangely eerie place in the dark, lit by orange street lights, but he was really too tired to think about it much. He still hadn't regained all of his strength after the final battle, even six months later, which was one of the reasons Draco had given him the keys to the house the Malfoys owned in St Louis, organised an international portkey, and literally made him leave.

The clear up was taking time, and the Ministry of Magic wanted Harry travelling all over the place promoting peace, now that he had finally finished school. The Boy Who Lived had become The Defeater of He Who Must Not Be Named and the Ministry wanted to make sure no one decided to take the place of the late Dark Lord. Draco had put his foot down and told Harry to take a holiday first. So here he was, seventeen years old, his first time in the States, in the middle of St Louis with one ambition: to sleep for at least a couple of days.

It was nice of Draco to lend him the house, and it had amused Hermione and Ron no end that the Slytherin had taken to looking after Harry now that the war was over. They had become friends shortly after Draco had taken the Dark Mark in sixth year, which was kind of ironic. Being forced into following the Dark Lord by his father and having Voldemort order him to sacrifice himself by killing all the Muggleborns at Hogwarts in one foul swoop, had rather opened Draco's eyes to the madman his Dark Lord actually was.

Draco had run to Dumbledore and asked asylum from the headmaster of Hogwarts, given his fugitive father over to the Ministry, and loudly proclaimed that anyone who joined Voldemort was more of an idiot than Crabbe or Goyle. Since Crabbe and Goyle could still barely tie their own shoe laces, let alone think for themselves, this had put off quite a few of Draco's year mates in Slytherin. It had been a regular coup for the side of the light when the one house at Hogwarts supposedly full of dark wizards and witches had turned around and decided they'd rather not be evil after all.

Sixth year had been a very interesting time and Harry banished the memories with a shake of his head. He was here to forget and relax and enjoy himself. Draco was going to be visiting him in a week to show him the sights of St Louis, or at least the Wizarding sights anyway, and until then his friend had instructed him to rest and relax, which he intended to do to the best of his ability. Picking up his bag he went to walk towards the impressive town house, at which point something struck him hard on the back of the head.

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Scene 2

Waking up was unpleasant; his head hurt, his chest felt as if someone had had a go at it with a shredding charm and his arms were complaining because he was suspended from them. Opening his eyes he didn't like what he saw either. Everything was blurred because he had lost his glasses, but he could see enough to be afraid.

He was in the centre of a circle drawn on the floor in red, and the room was lit by black candles. There were symbols all around the circle's edge that he could not quite make out and there was a faint smell in the air that he really didn't want to recognise: blood.

Looking down at himself he realised that he was naked, someone had seen fit to strip him completely. He could partially see why his chest felt so bad as well; someone appeared to have carved some sort of design into it with a sharp object. Harry had a very bad feeling about this.

Almost as soon as he opened his eyes a low chanting began from the darkness outside the circle and he felt a magical shift in the room. It did not feel like the spells he was used to, or the magic charged atmosphere at places like Hogwarts or the Ministry, but it was still magical energy.

"What the hell," he managed to say as two figures walked from the darkness into the ring of light.

One was a tall, pale man in some sort of robe; the other was a large leopard. Both stood completely still, just looking at him, and there was emptiness in both human and animal eyes that scared him. Pale blue and dark brown gazes watched him, but really didn't seem to see him. His heart beat pounded in his ears as the chanting began to grow in volume. This was not a good situation and in fact he felt as if facing Voldemort again might have been a better idea.

His two companions remained perfectly still, as if they weren't real, and he pulled at the chains holding him in a vain hope that they might give. The feeling of the magic in the room was not nice and he knew without a doubt that this was a dark ritual. He could only guess what they wanted with him.

With Voldemort it had been about gloating and making him remember his dead parents, but this was entirely different. This magic was faceless and it felt old. This was not what he was used to at all.

Suddenly the chanting stopped and all at once the stillness of the circle was shattered. The man shrugged off his robe, revealing naked, pale flesh. There was a red design on the man's chest as well, but Harry had little time to look at it as the leopard dragged away his attention by launching itself straight at him. Claws raked down his leg and he screamed as long teeth sank into the flesh of his thigh.

It hurt and Harry tried to pull away, but he was chained and virtually helpless. Then he felt his head being yanked backwards by the hair and he could see the pale man up close and personal, only he realised very quickly it wasn't a man, his second assailant was a vampire. Long fangs glistened in the candle light and then Harry could do nothing to resist as his head was pushed sideways and those incredibly sharp teeth pieced his neck.

His head swam with the pain in his leg and the light headedness caused by the vampire's bite as power invaded him, and Harry knew he was going to die. These creatures were there to kill him, he was sure of it. Yet as quickly as the attack had started, it was over and he looked through pain fogged eyes to see his assailants standing away from him with a robed and hooded figure behind each.

He was fearfully reminded of the Death Eaters in their black robes, but these people had no silver masks, merely dark hoods which hid their faces. These were not those that were left of Voldemort's followers, Harry knew it instinctively, but he had no idea who they were or why they had chosen him.

The chanting began again and as he watched Harry saw the leopard change. It was slower than an Animagus transformation, but in only a few moments there

was a part man, part cat standing where the animal had been. Then, as one, the two robed figures moved in close to the vampire and the leopard man.

There was still the same emptiness in both sets of eyes and Harry could hardly believe it when his assailants allowed their heads to be pulled back. Sharp knives glinted in the hands of both robed men and Harry knew what was going to happen a fraction of a second before it did.

"No," he screamed at the top of his lungs, but it did no good.

The blades were drawn across both throats and blood sprayed straight at Harry from the veins of his assailants. He closed his eyes and tried to pull away, but it was useless. The liquid covered him, stinging his wounds and making his chest burn even more. He could feel the power in that blood as it seeped into his system; feel the magic that was wound into it searching out his magic and it took the last of his strength away.

He did not understand what was happening, or why it was happening to him, and he could not stop it. All he could do was endure as he hung from his wrists, barely able to keep his feet. Eventually the macabre shower stopped and there were two wet thumps. He did not want to open his eyes, really he didn't, but it was as if something made him and the vision that greeted him made him scream.

Only a few inches from his face were the decapitated heads of his assailants, held up by the hair, and they were still staring at him, but now their eyes were glowing. Harry could not take it anymore and in self defence his system shut down. Slumping forward everything disappeared in blackness.

Total despair engulfed him as consciousness swam back in and the first thing he heard was the chanting. The nightmare was not over and he only had strength to moan. Something cold was resting against the inside of his thigh and he opened his eyes, his survival instincts needing to know even if the rest of him wanted nothing to do with it. Kneeling in front of him was one of the robed people and the cold thing was one of the still bloodied knives. Almost before he had had time to take this in, the steel bit into his flesh and he grunted in pain. Something hard was pushed against his leg and rather absently he realised that the robed person was collecting his blood in a goblet.

Part of his mind tried to understand what was going on, but he had already lost a lot of blood and reality was very blurry on the edges. He was being bled dry and it did not take long before his vision began to fade out. It was a welcome relief when he finally succumbed and passed out completely.

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[Scene 3](#)

"Oh, hell," Anita was used to some nasty scenes, but this was up there near the top.

There was blood everywhere and the signs of ritual were obvious. It had been one of Jean-Claude's people who found the scene and hence they had called her before the police. RPIT would be here soon, but as it was, Anita had herself a pristine murder site. As a Federal Marshal she was entitled to secure a scene herself, but she knew the police were not going to like it. Looking at all the blood she was very glad she had had her overalls in the jeep.

Two bodies were lying on the floor and what appeared to be their heads were a few feet from them. At first glance they looked like ordinary men, but something was off and she hoped she was wrong, but the furthest from her made her think vampire. What really made her stomach try and rebel was the third body; it looked like a kid. A teenager if she did not miss her guess and it did not look as if he had been treated kindly.

She picked her way further into the room, careful not to disturb anything. It looked like it had been a complicated ritual and it was possible those involved had left unpleasant surprises behind. She did not want to step on anyone's toes, but there was a good reason Jean-Claude had made sure she was here first. If it had been a normal scene even the Master of the city would have called the police first, but the sheer amount of blood spoke of black magic.

There was a residue of power in the room that made her feel slightly ill. It was not demon magic, but it was evil and a lot of effort had been put into the ceremony. Anita did not enjoy the feeling of evil magic at all and if the expression on his face was anything to go by, Asher did not seem to like the place either. Her second vampire boyfriend was standing just outside the door as backup; a precaution Jean-Claude had insisted on. As Master of the city, Jean-Claude could not be here in person; it would cause too many questions, but he had refused to let Anita deal with this alone. She would have had lycanthrope backup as well if it hadn't been quite so close to the full moon and the fact that she was afraid all the blood might cause whoever came to shift.

Looking at the bodies there was little to link them except for the fact that they were all male, all naked and all had something carved into their chests. Anita had no idea what the designs were exactly, but she knew the signs of ritual spells when she saw them. The next best thing to marking out a ritual with the entrails of your victim was carving it into their skin; the spell was literally written on the sacrifices.

She did not have to touch anything to confirm her earlier suspicion since one of the severed heads had his mouth open. Vampire fangs were obvious, but she did not recognise the face. This was not a vamp she had met. The second decapitation victim looked human, but that was no guarantee in such circumstances. The head in this case appeared to have rolled and was facing away from her so she moved around the circle until she could have a proper look.

Through all the blood it was difficult to make out the features, but when she managed it, Anita stood up in shock; she recognised the man. She has seen his face only the previous week when Micah introduced him as a fellow wereleopard. He was an alpha from the Boston pard, in town to visit sick relatives, and was supposed to have been joining her pard for the full moon. Regretfully she realised she had forgotten his name, but she knew Micah would remember. Working for the Coalition for Better Understanding Between Lycanthrope and Human Communities gave her live in sweetie a knack for names.

Then there was the third victim; young, quite small, and reeking of most of the evil magic. Whatever had been done felt as if it had been done mostly through him. The vampire bite on the kid's neck was messy and frenzied, as was the animal bite on his leg. They were in stark contrast to the neat carving on the kid's chest and the slash across the inner thigh. Anita really did not want to imagine what the boy had been through before he died.

There was so much blood that it was difficult to see where one trail began and the next ended and it would take the forensic boys to figure out what happened in

what order. When things showed up in threes and one was a vampire, another was a lycanthrope, and the third was unidentified, Anita wanted to go for human. They were the three types of power that made up a triumvirate and she was almost sure the kid was not preternatural.

Looking hard to see if she could verify this hunch without crossing into the evidence zone she noticed two things at the same time: the knife wound on the kid's leg looked strange round the edges, almost as if it had started healing and in the centre was the glisten of fresh blood. For a moment she hesitated, and then, heedless of how meticulous she had been to that point she stepped into the circle. There was no way to avoid the blood completely, and she knew she would upset at least a little of the evidence, but this was more important.

Reaching out she put two fingers on the boy's throat, just above the vampire bite. At first there was nothing, but then she felt it, a slow, thready pulse, that seemed to be about to stop at any moment.

"Asher, get in here," she said straight away, "this kid's still alive."

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Scene 4

Anita was not sure who had called the paramedics, whether it had been the cops who had arrived to find Asher with the kid in his arms, just stepping out of the circle, or whether Asher had done it before he came to help. Whichever it had been, they had rushed the boy away to the nearest hospital with preternatural facilities. That the kid was not dead said that something weird was going on, but the healing on the chest wound appeared human rather than anything else. The leg wound was another matter which was why Anita was reserving judgement.

Dolph had not been happy that Anita had been there first and he had ordered her to wait outside once she had confirmed that there was no magic inside that would hurt anyone. When the big cop finally came out to see her she knew she was in trouble, federal marshal or no federal marshal.

"Anita," Dolph said pointedly, "what exactly did you think you were doing?"

"Checking out a nasty scene for possible booby traps," she replied, matching his tone. "I hadn't touched anything until I realised the kid wasn't dead. The magic in there is nasty and I didn't want anyone falling foul of it. I am a Federal Marshal which does allow me to do that, Dolph."

Had it not been Jean-Claude that called her in, Dolph might have let it go there, but Dolph did not like Jean-Claude or anything preternatural for that matter, and to her regret it was because of the Master of the city that her one time friend no longer completely trusted her; that and the fact that one of Dolph's sons was married to a vampire who wanted to bring him across at some point. They were trying to be friends again, but they still had their rough moments.

"You know this looks like a vamp cover up," Dolph said and glanced at Asher.

There had almost been a misunderstanding of the bullet kind when the cops had shown up to find a vampire carrying one of the victims. Only Anita's badge and formidable lungs had prevented a rookie from doing something stupid. For his part, Asher did not look particularly impressed with the accusation.

"Dolph, one of the vics is a vampire," Anita said without trying to hide her annoyance, "another is a wereleopard and the third is some poor kid. There was serious magic going on it there tonight, seriously black, human magic. If this had been the work of vampires do you really think you'd have been called at all? It isn't like there is a hoard of witnesses. The only thing this has to do with Jean-Claude is that he owns the property and his caretaker found the scene."

It was an open secret that what the preternatural community wanted to keep to itself never made it to the human authorities, but that didn't mean Dolph had to like it. Anita could tell that reminding him that she often worked outside the law was not earning her brownie points, but it had needed to be said.

"Was the cat one of yours?" Dolph's voice was actually softer when he spoke this time.

It warmed her heart a little to know that her one time friend still cared enough to try and ask gently.

"No," Anita told him openly and without hiding her relief, "he was from out of town. He was going to be here over full moon so he introduced himself to the pard, that's why I know his face. Micah will know his name."

"Any ID on the vampire?" Dolph asked next, looking at both Anita and Asher for the answer.

"His face is not known to me," Asher replied without batting an eyelid. "It is possible he may also be from out of town although no vampires have petitioned for asylum in St Louis in the past two weeks, or requested feeding rights."

Dolph frowned at the word feeding, and Anita hoped the cop would not make an issue out of it. Vampires needed to drink blood, it was a fact of being undead, but humans that weren't part of the scene didn't tend to like it.

"Would Jean-Claude have a better idea who he might be?" Dolph asked, hiding his distaste quite well as far as Anita was concerned.

"No," Asher replied very firmly.

Exposing Jean-Claude to the handling of the police was not something his second in command was likely to allow unless pushed and it showed in his tone of voice. Anita stepped in before there was an argument.

"Asher sees to asylum requests, passing them to Jean-Claude when necessary, so he's likely to know more than Jean-Claude about this," she said, glad that it was the complete truth. "However, I'm sure if we have a picture Jean-Claude would be happy to circulate it to find out who our dead vamp is."

That mollified Dolph in so much as the frown lessened a little. Walking the tightrope between cop and preternatural was not something Anita always enjoyed.

"Any details on the boy?" she asked in an attempt to move the conversation away from vampires.

"A lot, actually," was the surprising reply. "We found a bag in the next room with a passport and clothes. The kid only just arrived; he's British, by the name of Harry Potter; he'll be eighteen next month; his visa says he's here on vacation."

Weirdest looking passport I've ever seen; I'm amazed he made it through customs."

Anita just shrugged; she didn't like flying and was anything but an expert on how people travelled from one side of the Atlantic to the other.

"So whoever did this really doesn't care if we identify the victims then," she concluded aloud. "This is going to do wonders for the tourist trade: come to St Louis and be kidnapped for attempted sacrifice."

"I'm more worried about us locals," Dolph said seriously. "I want to know who went to all this trouble and why. Forensics have cleared you to come back in when you're ready."

Anita nodded; she wanted to know the answers as well. This was a nasty crime and it could have even nastier consequences.

End of Chapter 1

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Chapter 2 Investigation

Scene 1

Anita had worked the crime scene and given her report, but she was no clearer than anyone else about why the crime had been committed. She knew the details of the hows, but the whys were a complete mystery. The spell carvings were not her speciality and had been sent to an expert to process, so she was left to wonder like everyone else.

In the end she had called Micah and Jean-Claude and arranged to meet them at the hospital at Dolph's request. When vampires were being murdered it was Jean-Claude's business so now he could be involved. She was the first to arrive and was shown into a small office on the preternatural floor. At least they were lucky in one respect; the hospital had staff trained in preternatural medicine since there was a research lab with a large government grant in residence. No one was panicking because of possible contamination or anything ridiculous like that.

It was Zerbrowski who showed up a few minutes after she had tried to drink the hospital coffee and was hence suffering from some form of poisoning. The sergeant entered carrying a blue travelling bag.

"Zerbrowski," Anita said, a little surprised, "I thought Dolph wanted to handle this one?"

"He was called in by the brass," the cop replied with his usual smile. "Don't you love me any more, Anita?"

She gave him a look and he put the bag on the table.

"Going somewhere?" Anita asked in attempt to lighten the mood.

"This is the kid's bag," Zerbrowski said and rather killed the joke.

"Isn't that evidence?" it wasn't done to walk off with items found at a crime scene.

"Forensics said it was contaminated by handling and was useless as evidence," her companion said as if it was a completely normal happening. "I figured the kid might like it back if he ever wakes up."

Anita frowned; that sounded a little odd. She always had trouble with the forensics people; they held onto the smallest little thing because of their precious evidence trail. It didn't seem like normal procedure to let a member of the investigation walk off with such a large item, contamination or no contamination.

"They really let you just have it?" Anita knew she sounded paranoid, but something was off.

"You think I'd walk off with something like this for fun?" Zerbrowski sounded as if he might become annoyed if she pushed, which just wasn't right either.

The cop picked up the bag again and put it in the corner and looked at her pointedly. She was going to ask for more details when the door opened again and Micah came in. When she was distracted the bag did not seem so important anymore.

They needed a game plan and she wanted to get closer to the kid as soon as possible. She had been given no time to assess Harry Potter away from the overwhelming black magic at the crime scene, and she wanted to see what she could tell about him, preferably before he woke up. When they were conscious people could hide things, when they were out for the count so much more showed through.

Convincing Zerbrowski to let her at the kid alone should at least be easier than if it had been Dolph. When she knocked heads with the lieutenant they really knocked heads, and Dolph was not in a good mood with her at the moment. Maybe the higher powers really were looking out for her tonight.

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Scene 2

Harry's whole body was buzzing; it was the most peculiar feeling, and he was hot. He was sure he ached from head to foot and yet his skin was tingling in a very strange way. It occurred to him that it could be some form of magical healing, but he had never felt anything like it and he had been healed for a huge host of ailments. His thoughts seemed to be on the fuzzy side and he wondered where he was since his memory was failing to give him any useful information. In a bid to find out what on earth was going on, he slowly opened his eyes.

The florescent tube in the ceiling and the slow beeping beside him rather took him by surprise. He was in a Muggle hospital, and he had no idea why. Turning his head slightly he saw a woman with dark hair reading some sort of file and it occurred to him that she might know the answers to his questions. He opened his mouth to ask, but all that came out was a rather undignified grunt. His throat felt like he'd just drunk bubotuber pus, but the noise did at least grab the woman's attention.

"Mr Potter," she said as soon as her eyes met his, "welcome back."

She knew who he was then, which was a good start, but there was something funny about the way she spoke which his confused brain couldn't quite work out.

"Harry," he managed to force out of his unhappy throat (when anyone called him 'Mr Potter' he could not help but think of Snape, and the Potions master was the last thing he wanted on his mind at the moment).

"I'm Anita, Harry," the woman told him in a calm matter of fact tone. "Do you know where you are?"

"Muggle hospital," was the only answer his befuddled brain could provide, and he said it without thinking.

The second time it was easier to speak, but it was not exactly pleasant. Anita frowned at him a moment, but Harry was far too distracted to worry about it. The tingling in his skin was so very strange.

"Do you remember where?" she asked.

Harry thought a moment and then realised that he really didn't know and so shook his head.

"You're in St Louis," Anita provided helpfully.

The information actually jogged his memory and he smiled at the recollection of Draco forcing the portkey into his hands. His friend had totally refused to take no for an answer, and it kind of explained what he couldn't place about Anita's voice: she had an American accent.

"Draco sent me," he said, the facts falling out of his mouth as if there was no gap between his thoughts and his lips; "said I needed a holiday. What did I walk into this time?"

"This time, Harry?" Anita asked standing and moving closer to the bed.

"Hmm," he replied, as his mind wandered, "Draco will be furious. I was supposed to relax and rest, but trouble always finds me somehow. Thought I might have finished that once I killed the Dark Bastard, but seems I was wrong."

He smiled up at Anita as the most peculiar feeling ran from his toes to his head; for some reason he felt like rubbing himself against her and he was too tired to do so, but he didn't feel remotely embarrassed about it. She was looking down at him intently now.

"The 'Dark Bastard'?" she enquired as Harry tried to figure out if he could move his arm; he really wanted to touch Anita.

"Voldemort, he was really evil," he said absently as he managed to shift his hand so that it made contact with Anita's fingers on the side of the bed. "Draco came up with the title Dark Bastard; he's good with names. Why do I want to touch you?"

"You were infected by a wereleopard," Anita said, allowing him to play with her fingers. "You could say I have an affinity with leopards which is why you're reacting to me."

"Wereleopard," Harry repeated slowly. "Didn't know there was such a thing, but one of my best friends is a werewolf. Hell, I hope it won't affect my Animagus form; I'm a wolf y'know. Remus thought that was really cool because I could keep him company at full moon."

Anita's frown was deepening and Harry hoped he wasn't upsetting her, he really didn't want to do that.

"Animagus?" she asked. "Are you a werewolf?"

She sounded annoyed and Harry didn't think that was a good idea.

"No," he said and patted her hand absently, "Animagus, y'know, the spell; nothing to do with the stupid moon."

His head was beginning to pound and the tingling was becoming annoying. He found himself wishing for St Mungo's, something he had never thought he would ever do.

"Are you a witch?" Anita asked and Harry actually laughed, even though it hurt.

"Not unless I changed sex," he said cheerfully and then it occurred to him he was feeling rather strange; "I didn't did I? It took us three weeks to get Seamus back to male after Fred and George tried out their Sex Shifting Sherbet on him. He was not happy."

The frown was still deepening.

"No, you're definitely male," Anita said in what seemed to be a rather cold voice. "What are you, Harry?"

"I'm a wizard," Harry replied and gave her his best smile, even though with the headache he really just wanted to close his eyes and go to sleep. "Are you a Muggle? I'm not really supposed to tell a Muggle all this, but I can't seem to stop talking. You didn't give me Veritaserum did you, 'cause when they did that for the official records I was sick; everywhere."

Anita pinched the bridge of her nose and Harry thought that maybe she had a headache too.

"Harry," the woman said slowly, and he had the feeling she was holding on to her temper by the merest thread, "do you remember anything about the attack on you?"

Some very nasty thoughts tried to make it to the front of his brain at that question, but Harry squashed them back down ruthlessly.

"Don't want to remember," he said in a very tight voice.

The confused floaty feeling was being replaced by something much darker and he did not want that to happen. He might have had a headache, and he might have tingled all over, but he thought that where the other ideas would take him would be worse.

"We need to know as much as possible about the people who did this, Harry," he figured that her tone was supposed to be cajoling, but he also decided that she wasn't very good at it. "We have to find them to stop whatever they are planning."

Images forced themselves into Harry's mind even as he tried to stop them and they made him afraid and angry. The memory of the smell of blood surged into

his thoughts and pain that made him want to curl up and cry for help. Anita was making him remember and he didn't want that; he just wanted to forget. As his anger burned he snatched his hand away from his companion's and energy surged through him, wiping away the ache and tingling.

His vision changed, growing brighter and coming into sharp focus so that the light in the room was almost painful, and his teeth felt like they were being pulled from their sockets. Sitting up he pulled his feet under him and snarled, power flowing through him in waves.

"No," he all but growled.

Anita backed away from him, her expression completely devoid of any reaction, and the door to the room banged open. Three men charged in and Harry glared at them all. One of the men had curly hair and was holding a gun, the second was short with long black hair and the third was the one that caught Harry's attention. This man was the tallest and he had black wavy hair, very pale skin and deep blue eyes that Harry stared straight into.

The power flowing through him recognised something in the beautiful stranger, but he still snarled none-the-less. The power spoke to him, but it brought with it a need that he did not understand. That need demanded to be answered, but he had learned not to obey impulses in his fight against Voldemort. Too many things crowded into his mind at the same time as one blood ritual overlaid on another and he put his hands to his head trying to stop it.

"No," he all but begged the world in general.

The power was fading as he refused to feed it and the ache and the tingling were coming back. He could not fight anymore and as his mind filled with things he did not want to remember the weakness returned and he began to slump forward. He would have hit the metal bar on the side of the bed if it hadn't have been for the pale man, who moved impossibly quickly and caught him. The magic that flared between them as the stranger touched him was too much for Harry and he let the darkness take him back.

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Scene 3

Anita stood there for a while and tried to figure out what had just happened. As Jean-Claude placed the boy back down onto the bed she attempted to rationalise what she had just seen.

"That is not possible," she decided eventually.

Even with everything she had seen, this was outside the pale. The kid had been leaking magical energy ever since he had been brought in, lycanthrope energy. Since he had been infected so close to the full moon, the changes in him were happening rapidly and she could sense him almost as if he was one of her cats. What she had just faced down was a Master vampire that had called to her necromancy, and the cold power she always felt from Jean-Claude had rolled off the boy like a wave.

Anita held within herself the power of lycanthrope and vampire thanks to the triumvirate, but she showed the physical characteristics of neither when it came to shape shifting and fangs. She changed on a metaphysical level and gained some of the physical advantages, but she was neither a true vampire nor a

lycanthrope. She had just seen Harry Potter change from human to vampire and back again, which was simply impossible.

"Will someone tell me that he did not just become a vampire and then go back to being human again," she said pointedly, "or I may start thinking I'm on what they've given him."

"I wish I could, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude said in a surprisingly calm manner, "but this child just looked me in the eye and it was I who almost flinched."

Anita swore colourfully under her breath. Weird things gravitated towards her as if she was a preternatural magnet, but she had never seen anything quite like this. Thanks to the Mother of all Darkness she had met a vampire that was both vampire and lycanthrope, but Mommy Dearest was definitely undead and the kid in the bed was not.

"Micah," she said slowly, bringing herself under control, "I'm not hallucinating right, he feels like he's one of ours."

Her Nimir-Raj appeared somewhat torn, but eventually he nodded.

"I would have bet money that tomorrow night he'll shift," Micah acknowledged.

Anita swore again.

"What the hell did they do to him?" she asked bluntly. "Vampire and lycanthrope are mutually exclusive except for Mommy Dearest who last time I heard is still very much asleep; there is no way in hell he can be both."

"If he were a true vampire I would say that possibly you were feeling his beast to call," Jean-Claude revealed what he was thinking. "However, he is neither old enough to be the Master I sense, nor is he undead. Whatever this child is, I have never been witness to it before."

Knowing it was true and having someone else say it were two different things and it drove home to Anita quite how in the dark she was with this. They had found the boy in the middle of a ritual circle, left for dead and almost there. The doctors had not been able to explain how he survived even with the lycanthrope angle because he had been bled almost dry and should have gone into shock. It looked as if they had a partial answer to that, since vampires did not always die if you bled them, you had to be more insistent than that, but as usual, in her life the answer brought up more questions that needed answers.

"I do not believe this was intentional," Jean-Claude decided to break into the silence of everyone trying to figure out what was going on. "I believe someone may have made a serious error and that it may be a consequence of the young man's claim to be a wizard."

"So none of you know what's going on?" Zerbrowski didn't sound as if he liked the situation at all.

Anita looked at her friend and shrugged; what was she supposed to say? She was used to wandering around blind these days, but cops never liked their experts to admit such things.

"Whatever our ritualists did, Zerbrowski," she said, going through the evidence in her head just in case something occurred to her, "it's new. The magic they used

was old and black and I would have sworn our living victim was a third sacrifice until he breathed. They either chose their third participant very well and he's supposed to be alive, or they chose badly and we now have something on our hands that no one expected. Either way, I suggest we don't let him out of our sight."

"I'll have the room secured," Zerbrowski said in a tone that brooked no argument. "Let's move this discussion down the hall."

No one argued.

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Scene 4

The little office was almost claustrophobic with all the tension in it, and they had been standing around in silence since they arrived there a good five minutes previously. Anita was trying to find anything in what she had seen and felt that might explain it, but even with her wide experience with monsters she had never met this before. Micah was there as the representative of the Coalition for Better Understanding Between Lycanthrope and Human Communities and this was more complicated than that; Jean-Claude was hiding behind his emotionless mask which meant he had no clue either; and Zerbrowski was simply lost.

There had been cases that involved lycanthropes and vampires, demons and demigods, but never had any of them seen this confusing mix of preternatural in one person. No death, no vampire; if there was vampire, no lycanthrope unless you were older than god and the source of all vampirism: those were the rules and they seemed to have stepped out for the evening.

Finally Zerbrowski moved and picked up the bag he had thrown into the corner earlier in the evening.

"Let's see if there's anything in here that can give us more information on the kid," the sergeant said decisively. "If his attackers were stalking him, maybe there is something in here that can tell us who the hell they are."

Zerbrowski then unzipped the bag and upturned it on the table. What fell out looked at first glance to simply be what any seventeen year old boy might pack for a trip abroad. Anita chose to just watch at her friend sorted what were clothes and what were items that might be of interest. With care that he did not seem to show his own wardrobe, Zerbrowski then put all the clothing back in the bag, leaving everything else on the table.

"Passport," he said, picking up the small blue book and flicking through it. "Looks old fashioned, but it's in date and valid."

"Can I see?" Anita asked and held out her hand.

Zerbrowski handed her the official document without a fuss. The first thing she noticed was the tingle of magic that coursed through her finger tips as she took the blue book. The cover was gold embossed showing what she assumed was the British coat of arms and it appeared to be made of leather rather than plastic. The front looked perfectly normal as she flicked through it; that was until she reached the end and the page with the kid's picture. At first she almost dismissed it and gave it back, putting the magical residue down to the ritual, but then the picture blinked. Her mind immediately dismissed it as a trick of the light, but then the boy in the photo did it again.

"That's not normal," she said, mostly to herself.

"What's not?" Zerbrowski asked, and Anita had the sneaking suspicion that her friend had seen nothing unusual.

"Zerbrowski," she said, holding up the passport with the picture displayed, "what do you see?"

The cop raised his eyebrows at the question, but looked anyway.

"The kid from the other room looking worse than he does now, like every other passport photograph I've ever seen," Zerbrowski said as if he was stating the obvious.

"Micah," Anita held it up so that her Nimir-Raj could see the photo, "what do you see?"

"The same as..." Micah stopped mid sentence. "He blinked."

There was definite surprise in her lover's face.

"Jean-Claude?" Anita asked and showed the vampire the picture as well.

For a few moments those intense blue eyes did nothing but gaze at the passport in her hand.

"He did indeed blink, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude said eventually, "I do not believe that that is an ordinary photograph."

"Give that here," Zerbrowski said and snatched the passport back before Anita could take another look.

The curly haired cop stared at the photo hard.

"Ha, ha," he said after a moment or two, "very funny, that's just a passport photo, the joke's on me."

Anita put her hands on her hips and gave Zerbrowski a look that meant she was serious.

"No it isn't," she said pointedly, "it blinked."

For a moment she thought Zerbrowski might think she was just pushing the joke, but eventually he frowned at her and his expression was the one she had come to expect when he was thinking like a cop.

"Something you all see and I don't," he concluded slowly and then looked nonplussed, "something preternatural. But why would there be anything funny about a picture in a passport?"

Anita shrugged; this case was getting stranger by the minute.

"Maybe there's residue energy in it from what was done to the kid," she suggested, unable to come up with anything particularly sensible. "Personal items can pick up echoes and there was so much magic flying around in that ritual that

there might be a power memory on the photograph that we can see and you can't."

She'd never seen anything like this before, but Anita did not like to put anything past black magic. When you messed with arcane powers sometimes things happened that no one could predict.

Zerbrowski pocketed the passport.

"I'll have Tammy look at it," he decided with a finality that Anita chose not to argue about.

It was one of those things that Anita knew was going to bother her, but she turned her attention back to the pile of other personal effects. There was a wallet, a scroll with a ribbon, two letters, a gold key, some sort of feather, a dog-eared book, a ball point pen, a note pad, a leather holder that appeared to contain four test-tubes sealed with wax containing an odd coloured liquid and a small leather bag. Not what she would have expected really.

"No key chain," she said as the thought occurred to her.

Everyone she knew carried keys, it was part of the modern world like mobile phones and cars. That they were missing could be significant.

"Could have been dropped," Zerbrowski said, picking up the leather bag.

It jingled and Anita thought it was a change purse. The cop set about trying to open the small bag, but the knot appeared to be being stubborn.

"I have smaller fingers," Anita offered after she became fed up of watching and although he did not appear to be pleased with his failure, Zerbrowski handed over the purse.

The knot came open for Anita in only a few moments and she handed it back, unable to resist a smug smile. The coins that Zerbrowski tipped onto the table did not look remotely familiar.

"Unless the currency has changed significantly since Requiem and Byron arrived in St Louis," Jean-Claude said as he looked at the odd looking coins, "those are not coins of the British realm."

"Gringotts," Anita read from one of the large gold coins. "Where the hell is Gringotts?"

She looked at Jean-Claude since he was the most cosmopolitan of all of them, but he simply shrugged.

"I have never seen such coins before, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude said with an apologetic gesture.

Micah had picked up one of the large gold coins while she was looking at Jean-Claude and was weighing it in his hand.

"Heavy," he commented and flipped it for good measure; "like real gold."

"No one makes coins out of real gold anymore," was Zerbrowski's comment on the matter as Micah placed the coin back on the table.

As Anita watched her Nimir-Raj picked up one of the middle sized, silver coloured coins and held it for a moment.

"Well," he said as he placed it back on the table, "I can't tell about the gold, but that's real silver; it burnt my fingers."

Silver alloys would not burn a lycanthrope with such little contact, only metal pure enough to be considered real silver would do that and Micah looked very sure of himself.

"This is getting weirder," Zerbrowski said and he didn't sound happy, "but so far we're no closer to anything useful."

Anita decided to take the initiative and picked up the scroll and felt the tingle of faint magic again. She was not pleased when she opened it and the odd textured paper was covered in nothing but blurred grey smudges. It looked as if someone had written something and then rubbed it all out so that it was almost completely gone. Passing it to Zerbrowski she resisted the urge to add her own complaint to the conversation.

Jean-Claude was looking at one of the letters. From where she was standing it appeared to Anita as if the envelope had never been sealed and when she lifted it up at the corner as Jean-Claude was holding it she realised why - there was no stamp; it had not been mailed yet.

"Dear Draco," Jean-Claude began to read the letter he had taken from the envelope, "they're making me wait at customs thanks to those potion vials you made me bring. I'm sure I could have found an apothecary somewhere, but now I have to wait while they test them, so I thought I'd write and let you know that I made it in one piece. You could have warned me that international portkeys make you feel as if your stomach is three paces behind you for ages. I made a write prat of myself when I landed, but then you probably guessed that. How exactly do you always make it look so easy?"

The vampire looked up.

"It ends there," was the even pronouncement.

"Draco Malfoy, Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire, England," Anita read the front of the envelope. "Maybe this Draco can give us some more information about the kid."

Zerbrowski nodded and took the envelope when it was offered back to him.

"I'll run it through channels as soon as I get back to the office, see if we can contact him," the cop said and pocketed it as well.

At least it was something, but the pile they had left did not look very helpful. It was annoying to have quite so much information, but not be able to make any use of it. They were most likely going to be here for some time.

Fate really did not seem to be on their side. About the only good thing that happened while they tried to understand more about the mysterious Harry Potter was that the information on the spell carved into the young man's chest came back. It had been rushed through because the victim was still alive, and spells had a nasty way of having side effects. The most significant piece of information about the spell was that it required someone magically gifted; the other proviso

was that the victim be a virgin. Anita could not help thinking of the kid as even younger with that piece of information.

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Scene 5

The phone rang just as Anita was about to climb into bed and she looked longingly at where Nathaniel was curled up under the sheets before answering. Nathaniel had been waiting for them when they finally arrived home and if Micah hadn't had a meeting to be at they would all have been crawling into bed together now.

"Dolph," she greeted after her eyes scanned the caller id.

"They finished the tests on the kid," were the first words out of the cop's mouth, "negative on everything."

This was just getting crazier and Anita sat on the edge of the bed with a resigned sigh. Nothing about this was going to be normal, she could tell.

"Everything?" she had to ask.

"No reaction to dawn," Dolph told her evenly; "nothing to holy objects; nothing on the blood tests; and only a slight allergic reaction to silver. If I didn't have Zerbrowski's report in front of me I wouldn't believe he was anything but human."

She sat there in silence for a while, too tired to make her thoughts work properly.

"Anita, you still there?"

"Yeah, Dolph," she replied without trying to hide her weariness, "I'm here. I just don't know what to make of all this. The sooner he wakes up and we can ask him questions the better."

"My thoughts exactly," came the response. "Get some sleep, Anita, I'll see you tonight."

"I'll be there," she replied. "You never know, maybe the day shift will solve it all before it's ours again," she joked.

"Only in our dreams," was Dolph's dry reply.

"Bye, Dolph," she said with a finality that ended the conversation.

Even when the phone went dead Anita sat still and stared at the floor for a while. This child lying in the hospital could be the break in the case they needed, or a dangerous entity bringing harm to her people. The leopards were hers, through Jean-Claude the vampires were hers, and through Richard the pack was hers, and this could endanger them all. A small part of her wanted to get rid of the problem before it became a real threat and that frightened her.

Arms wound round her from behind and a head rested on her shoulder.

"Come to bed," Nathaniel said quietly.

Reaching up she stroked his silken hair and slowly turned until she could see his face. Lavender eyes regarded her with more knowledge than should have been in one as young as Nathaniel, and it helped a little. He would always be there for her and it comforted her. Giving him a chaste kiss, no more than a light brush of lips, she broke the embrace and moved up the bed.

Tonight they should find out what they needed to know and if there were any developments during the day Dolph would notify her. Now it was time to sleep and try and forget.

End of Chapter 2

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Chapter 3 To Be or Not to Be Furry

Scene 1

Harry opened his eyes and looked up at the ceiling. Blinking a few times he realised that he felt a lot better than last time he had woken up. His memories were fuzzy, but he did remember spilling lots of information he shouldn't have to the rather attractive woman who had introduced herself as Anita. The memories of the attack were not so nicely fluffed around the edges, however, and the image of the severed heads would not leave his mind. Trying to focus on anything else he carefully looked around the room: he was alone.

Sitting up he felt perfectly healthy, in fact he felt better than he had since the final battle, which was a little disturbing, especially since he was covered in bandages. Surprisingly his glasses were on his bedside table and he reached over to pick them up. The room in focus did not do much to settle his mind and he realised that he was going to have to fix the mess he had made. Getting home or to a Wizarding institution on this side of the Atlantic seemed to be a good idea, and then he could let the authorities sort it out. He hoped they would not blame him for talking when drugged.

Pulling out the IV in the back of his hand he reached over to find the catch on the metal side on the bed. Once he had lowered this he climbed slowly out of the bed, testing his muscles as he went just in case the new found health was an illusion. The first thing he noticed was that the floor was bloody cold under his bare feet and the draft around his rear end didn't help much to bolster his confidence either. If only he had had his wand he could have transfigured the hospital gown into something wearable, but he was not sure where his wand had ended up. He hoped he would find it again because he was rather attached to it.

When he reached the door he discovered his first problem; it was locked. Now if he had been anything but a Gryffindor he might have gone back to the bed and sat down to wait for someone to open it, but Gryffindors never gave up without giving their all. Wandless magic was not something many wizards could master, and most of those who had were over the age of 100, but seeing as he had no choice Harry decided that the least he could do was try. It had worked randomly for him in the past, so it was not completely hopeless.

Holding out his wand hand he tried to remember the nuances of the spell, and then he whispered 'Alohorama' while moving his fingers as if they were the wand. To his surprise the door actually popped open. Then problem number two reared its head as he came face to face with a man in uniform who reached immediately for his gun. On instinct more than anything else Harry held up his hand and muttered the words of the all too familiar stupefy hex. A red light lanced out of his fingers and the policeman fell over. Harry was quite shocked.

It took him a few seconds to realise that standing there staring at the fallen man was not a good idea, and then he bent down to drag the police officer inside the room. It was surprisingly easy, but Harry chose not to dwell on that at that moment. It occurred to him that borrowing the uniform might have made for a good disguise, but the man was much bigger than he was and it would have looked ridiculous.

Checking the corridor quickly he crept out of the room and started on his way to what he hoped would be a way out. He couldn't exactly go through the front door in a gown, but there had to be another way to exit the building and he hoped he could find some clothes on the way. He was headed towards some stairs when he heard a familiar voice coming from one of the offices.

"It's a wand," were the words that caught his attention. "Like nothing I have ever seen before, but it's a wand."

Totally unable to resist his curiosity Harry crept towards the partially open door.

"I can feel the latent magic in it," Anita was saying as Harry peered through the gap.

Harry came to the sudden realisation that Anita was not as Muggle as he had assumed she was because of her reaction to him, which brought up a whole load of questions he couldn't answer. He could see that some of his things were spread out on the desk and if they had found his wand they had bypassed some of the anti-Muggle charms on the bag. Draco had given him the travelling bag and it had a steal-me-not charm on it so most people would unconsciously bring it back to him, along with three compartments with strong anti-Muggle charms to prevent the magical items he was carrying being found by non-wizards. That any of these had been broken was worrying.

"I thought wands were made of crystal or covered in feathers and the like," a male voice put in.

"A wand is a focusing tool," Anita replied in a clinical tone, "everything else is more for flavouring the magic than anything other purpose. I've never felt anything like this wand before."

"So the boy might actually be a wizard, then?" a different male voice.

"Isn't that just another way of saying witch?" the first male voice asked.

Harry moved slightly closer to the door.

"The kid seemed to think a witch was female," Anita replied, and Harry watched as the woman ran her hand over the wand on the table. "It's possible that whatever tradition he's from, witches are women and wizards are men."

"So he's just a witch by another name?" the first voice again.

"Not like I've ever met before, Dolph," Anita said in an analytical tone. "He talked about a spell to turn into a wolf as if it was perfectly normal. You all heard him, and at least three of us know that messing with animal transformations if you aren't a lycanthrope is bad news. It's the kind of thing that requires human sacrifice."

Harry had no idea why he was moving closer and closer to the office, it was as if he was being drawn, and it wasn't all to do with his wand. Part of him wanted to enter the room and make himself known, and he had no idea why. It was quite difficult not to just open the door.

"I thought they did things in pretty much the same way we do in Europe," Anita said slowly, "but if Harry is typical..."

Suddenly the door was yanked back and Harry came face to face with the black haired man he had glared down earlier. Possibly he had come too close. Instinct again stepped in as he shied backwards away from the man's grasping hand.

"Accio wand," he said quickly as all the paranoia learned in war came back to him.

His wand flew off the desk and into his waiting palm, at which point he instantly took up a duelling stance. If these people were of his world he did not want to take any chances.

"Holy shit," was Anita's response to the wand flying through the air.

Harry backed off, eyes flicking between the four people in the office. All, apart from the black haired man who had opened the door, appeared startled.

"Don't move," Harry said in what he hoped was a commanding manner.

"Or what?" the big burly man with very short hair asked as if he thought the whole idea was a joke. The voice was that earlier identified as Dolph.

Harry did not have to want to exchange threats so he flicked his wand at the desk and said 'Diffindo'. Even he was quite surprised when the piece of furniture split in half; he'd actually meant to make a small cut on the wood's surface.

"Definitely not like any witch I've ever met," was Anita's succinct opinion.

He actually had no intention of hurting anyone unless he had to, but Harry did not think a levitation charm would have had the same psychological effect. Even the black haired man was not looking so confident now.

"Kid, we just want to help you," Dolph said, both his hands out in a gesture of trust.

If Harry had not been so well trained he might have focused on the big man and missed the movement from the taller of the other two men. As it was he turned, moved his wand and cast a fully body bind, followed by magic ropes just in case. His would be attacker went down with a thump.

"Do not make me hurt you," Harry said, continually backing away. "I'll just be leaving."

Anita was staring at him now and the most peculiar sensation was running up and down his spine. It was the draw again; part of him wanted to go to her and he had no idea why. There was something about the third man in the room as well, but Harry did not know what. It was almost like something inside him was trying to get out. As if this realisation started something, pain stabbed into his chest.

Feeling faint at the sudden agony he staggered backwards into the opposite wall. He tried desperately to keep his wand trained on the others, but the pain made him curl in on himself, slowly beginning to slide down the wall. Now it felt as if something was scratching inside his skin, trying to peel it away. When he heard movement he managed to bring his head and his wand back up and the three opposite him froze again, but it was a losing battle. Without being able to stop it his wand slipped out of his hand, rolling across the floor and he fell onto all fours, a moan escaping his mouth.

"What's happening to him," Dolph asked, and Harry rather wanted to know as well.

"Looks like first shift," the other man said.

"But full moon isn't for sixteen hours," Dolph said, sounding rather confused.

Harry smelt metal and he heard the scrape of metal on leather, but could do nothing to find out what it was.

"Has he done anything the way we expected yet?" Anita asked in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

All Harry cared about was the pain, and praying that it would go away. His skin felt like it was being flayed from his body and when he tried to beg the universe to let him be all that came out of his mouth was a strange mewling sound.

"Harry?" a familiar voice made it into his haze of pain.

He looked up to see Draco standing in the corridor, wand in hand, and it occurred to the logical part of his mind that he had to have been sleeping much longer than he had thought. Talking to his friend was impossible, in fact much of anything was impossible as he fought through the agony. He flicked his eyes to Anita and company and the part of his brain that was not consumed by pain noted that there were two guns aimed at him.

"What the hell is going on here?" Draco demanded and all but marched down the corridor.

Harry mewed, unable to hold his head up any longer. His glasses fell off his nose, but that was the least of his worries. It was like razors were slicing his skin all over his body.

"First shift," he heard the unidentified short man say.

"First shift what?" was Draco's instant reply.

"He was infected by a wereleopard," Anita explained, and she sounded tense and excited at the same time.

"A were-what?" Draco was having as much trouble with the concept as Harry had, but then he didn't really care as the pain exploded through every cell and he put his head back and roared.

Being boiled in oil would probably have been preferable as he felt his whole physical structure change in minute detail for what seemed like forever, and then as suddenly as it had begun the agony was gone. He huffed his confusion and lifted his head off his paws, at which point his mind caught up with the fact that

he was no longer human. The Animagus transformation was scary the first time because of the strangeness of being an animal, but this was doubly so since he had definitely not done this deliberately.

For a while he lay on the floor completely still and stared up at the people with guns. It was as if they were all standing on the edge of a precipice and he had the nasty feeling that whatever he did next would save them or push them all over. The guns were still trained on him as if he might do something terrible at any moment, but he felt no urge to attack. Anita seemed the key, he didn't know why, but he was sure it was true and without moving most of his massive cat body he cocked his head on one side and mewed at her.

It was not easy to convey confusion when one was a cat and had never been one before, but Harry did his best, and Anita frowned.

"He's in control," this from the short, dark-haired man, and he sounded surprised.

Harry sniffed the air and realised that maybe 'man' was not the right description; he smelt human male, but he also smelt cat as he studied the short individual. Anita did not appear quite so convinced, but she did shift so that she was no longer holding her gun in both hands.

"Harry," she held out her hand to him, and he climbed to his feet before he really thought about it.

Rubbing his head against her hand he felt a rumbling start in the back of his throat and then he proceeded to rub his whole body against her legs in one movement. Something about her spoke to him and it calmed him considerably. Turning around he padded over to Draco and proceeded to rub himself against his friend as well, pushing the underside of his chin over Draco's trouser clad knee for some reason he did not quite understand. When Draco reached down and rubbed the top of his head the rumbling started again in his throat.

"Well he's a hell of a lot calmer than I would have expected," Anita said as Harry sat down and looked up at her.

His eyes flicked to his wand, but now that Draco was here it did not seem so important. However, as Anita moved to pick it up he let out a warning growl that caused both her and the unidentified man to look surprised. The gun that had been lowered almost moved into firing position again, but Harry flicked his eyes between the wand and Anita. She seemed to get the message.

"Have it your way," was her succinct opinion.

When Harry nudged him, Draco moved to pick up the wand instead and his friend also retrieved his glasses from the shreds of the gown and bandages he had been wearing.

"Would someone please explain what the hell is going on," the Slytherin said pointedly. "Last time I checked the only were on the books was a wolf and they only change at full moon. Why is my best friend a bloody great black cat?"

"There are all sorts of lycanthropes," Anita said in what Harry had decided was her explaining voice, "and they don't only change at full moon. We weren't expecting Harry's first change until tonight, but it seems he lives to surprise us."

"He lives to surprise us all," Draco muttered under his breath.

"I assume you're Draco Malfoy," Anita did not sound impressed, but she was holstering her gun.

Draco for his part didn't look impressed either but also put his wand away, keeping Harry's in his hand.

"That would be I," the Slytherin said shortly. "Now would someone mind explaining how Harry ended up infected by a wereleopard? I know he's good at finding trouble, but this is fast even for him."

"Mr Potter was involved in some sort of ceremony," Dolph said in a professional sounding voice. "We are unaware of the details of how he came to be in such a position, but he was found covered in the blood of a wereleopard and a vampire. We believe that whoever conducted the ceremony expected him to die, but, as you can see he didn't, although he has yet to tell us what happened."

The Slytherin looked down at Harry with a most put out expression on his face.

"How do you do it, you Gryffindor moron?" Draco asked cuttingly. "Did you try and play the hero? One Dark Bastard not good enough of a tally."

Harry growled in the back of his throat; this had been none of his fault. Being knocked on the back of the head and dragged off to who knew where was not something he could have predicted.

"Mr Malfoy, are you a wizard like your friend, or are you," Dolph looked at Anita, "what'd he call it, a Muggle?"

Draco looked so affronted that Harry would have laughed if he could, what actually came out was a strange sort of huffing noise. This seemed to amuse the man that smelled of cat, who appeared to be recovering from his surprise.

"Of course I'm a wizard," the Slytherin said as if he had been mortally wounded by the question. "You think I'd be standing here quite so calmly if I was a Muggle?"

"Then speaking of vampires," Anita stepped in, "would you be so kind as to free that one on the floor from whatever Harry did to him."

That seemed to confuse Draco somewhat.

"Can't you do it?" the Slytherin asked with a frown.

"I'm an animator, Mr Malfoy," Anita said pointedly, "raising the dead is a snap, but I have never seen magic the way your friend used it. Now if you would be so kind, and then maybe I can convince Jean-Claude not to press charges."

Harry stood up and walked over to the aforementioned Jean-Claude and sniffed at the paralysed individual. It now seemed quite obvious that the man was not human; he smelt dead, sort of. Looking a little annoyed, Draco cast the counter spell and the ropes vanished and the vampire moved. Surprisingly Jean-Claude looked at Harry in a very thoughtful manner as he sat up, rather than with any irritation, which was what Harry had been expecting.

It was as he padded back over to Draco that Harry decided he really wanted to be in on the conversation that was bound to follow. Being a cat rather limited his

speaking skills so he decided that being human would be far better. Having made his choice he concentrated, braced himself for any pain that may occur and mentally forced himself back into his natural shape. It still hurt like hell, but felt remarkably natural the second time. Two things occurred to him the moment he did: firstly he was naked; and secondly it was drafty in the hallway.

Colouring as human sensibilities made themselves known once more he stepped behind Draco and tried desperately to regain some dignity. Surprisingly it was Jean-Claude who slipped off his thigh length jacket and helped Harry into it. Both Anita and the man Harry suspected was a fellow lycanthrope were looking at him as if he might grow another head at any moment.

"Are you feeling alright?" the man asked in a somewhat bemused tone.

Harry did a short mental check and then nodded. He was having trouble with what his instincts were telling him and what instructions his brain was giving out. His instincts wanted to trust these people, his brain was far more Slytherin and wary.

"You should be unconscious on the floor," Anita said, almost as if him standing up was an affront to her sense of rightness. "Lycanthropes cannot shift so quickly, at least not new ones; it wipes them out. What am I saying? You shouldn't have shifted until the full moon anyway."

She threw up her hands into the air in exasperation, and all Harry could do was shrug. It wasn't as if it was his fault that the rules the universe had set up never seemed to apply to him.

"Um," he said as he remembered how he had come to be where he was, "there's a police officer in my room that could do with reviving."

"What did you do to Officer McCoy?" Dolph sounded annoyed now and Harry had to stop himself growling at the man.

It seemed that the cat instincts were still there even if the form was not.

"I used the stupefy hex," he said honestly, "the counter spell will wake him up as right as rain."

The way Anita was looking at him was very calculating.

"So you can do all your tricks without the wand as well?" she asked rather challengingly.

"Ah," Harry could feel Draco's eyes on his as well, "not before today."

"Now that everyone is calm, maybe we should take this back into Harry's room," the short man seemed to a sensible type.

End of Chapter 3

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Chapter 4 What is Going On

Scene 1

Harry really did not like the fact that his higher brain seemed to be at war with his instinctive side; usually they were pretty much in agreement. The fact that the vampire, Jean-Claude, was watching him with unconcealed interest was not

helping matters. Draco revived the police officer in the room and Dolph, who seemed to be in charge sent the man home, and then everyone started looking at Harry again.

"Mr Potter," Dolph said plainly, "I'm Lieutenant Storr, I head up the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. These are Micah Callahan, the representative of the local wereleopard group, Jean-Claude, Master Vampire of the city, and you've already met Anita Blake, our resident preternatural expert and US Marshall."

It was beginning to become clear that over here they did things very differently than at home, of course Harry had had nothing to do with Muggles since the debacle of his sixth year summer holiday, so he couldn't be sure.

"Do you feel up to giving us more information about the attack?" the detective asked in a very reasonable tone.

What he really wanted to do was tell them to go stuff themselves and let him get the hell out of the hospital, but Harry was more considerate than that. He was about to reply when his stomach gave a very loud and most embarrassing gurgle.

"Hungry?" it was Micah who spoke.

"Starving," Harry admitted, and could not for the life of him figure out when he had ever been so hungry before. It was like he had a huge hole where his stomach should have been and he had a strange craving for rare steak that was trying to distract him from everything else. Last time he'd checked he hadn't even liked rare steak.

"I'll get them to bring some food," the compact man said efficiently and then walked out of the room.

Everyone else was still looking at Harry, making him more than a little uncomfortable. Jean-Claude's jacket only just covered his modesty where he was sitting down, and he never liked being the centre of attention. Part of him wanted to panic and shout and rant, but he'd been in too many bizarre situations to let this one overcome him again.

"I don't really know what happened," he admitted slowly. "The taxi dropped me off in St Marks's street and I was just going to the house when someone hit me from behind."

"St Mark's, as in the old district?" Dolph asked as he paused.

Draco fielded the answer to that one.

"Yes," the Slytherin replied, "my family own number thirteen."

That caused an interesting look to pass over both the detective and Jean-Claude's face.

"Malfoy," the police officer said slowly, "as in the Pritchard-Malfoys?"

"I believe my great aunt married a man by the name of Pritchard," Draco said, and from the tone of his voice Harry did not think he was too impressed. "My great great grandfather almost disowned her for marrying beneath her station and she and great uncle Cuthbert emigrated here. Uncle Reginald moved back to

England and managed to get himself killed by a pack of doxies, so the property reverted to my father and then me."

Draco was never good when dealing with anyone who had annoyed him, and Harry could tell that his friend's rather imperious tone was rubbing Anita completely the wrong way. Jean-Claude seemed to be rather enjoying the display.

"And then what happened, Mr Potter?" the police officer turned his attention back to Harry.

"I woke up in the middle of some sort of ceremony," he said quietly, his voice a lot less firm than he wanted it to be.

The memory was nasty and he really did not want to recall it, but he knew he had to. The glowing eyes in the severed heads were going to haunt him for a long time, he could tell. He would probably need the Dreamless Sleep potion that had caused so much trouble at customs.

"They'd taken my clothes and chained me to the ceiling," Harry tried to make the images in his head a little more distant, but they did not want to go.

Looking down he could just see the top of a white scar on his chest, poking out of the jacket. Unable to stop himself he touched it lightly, wondering how it had healed so quickly as his mind remembered the pain.

"Someone had carved something into my chest," he said eventually, "and as soon as I woke up people started chanting. I couldn't see any of them; they were outside the candle light. I don't think there were more than about four or five."

He took a breath, trying to calm himself as the memories came back thick and fast. Staring at the floor was about all he could manage, not wanting to see how any of those around him were reacting.

"A leopard and a man came out of the darkness, only I learned pretty quickly that he wasn't actually a man," Harry continued his description, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "They both looked at me like there was nothing behind their eyes, and then they attacked. The leopard went for my leg," he traced one of the three long white lines on his thigh as he spoke, "the vampire went for my neck. I thought they were going to kill me."

He had to stop again as the recollections threatened to overwhelm him. A hand rested gently on his shoulder and he looked to see Draco watching him with a small worried frown. Since the Slytherin rarely showed that type of emotion when in company, Harry decided he did not want to know what he looked like to invoke such an expression.

"We can wait a bit if you like," his friend said calmly; "you look like you're about to keel over."

Harry shook his head.

"I'd rather get it over with," he said shortly.

Now that he was reliving this he did not want to have to start all over again. They would probably make him rehash it, just like everyone at home had made him repeat his description of the final battle with Voldemort over and over again, but

he knew the first time would be the worst. He'd be able to distance himself better with practice.

"Then they just stopped," he said resolutely, drawing in another deep breath and attempting to marshal his unruly thoughts. "The leopard became something between a man and a cat and then these two robed men came up behind them. They both just stood there and let their throats be cut."

The memory of the smell of blood made power curl around in his stomach, and he bit his lip to stop himself whimpering.

"I closed my eyes, but I couldn't get away from the blood," Harry knew he had to continue or he would never finish. "It was everywhere and it burned. The dark magic in the circle was horrible and there was nothing I could do to stop it. When I opened my eyes again the robed men had cut the heads off the vampire and the wereleopard; they were holding up in front of my face. The eyes..."

He trailed off as the image burned itself into his thoughts. The fear was so real and it caught him.

"Harry?" Draco sounded even more worried.

"Their eyes were glowing," Harry whispered, staring at nothing as his mind filled with the memory. "That was when I fainted."

He wrapped his arms around himself as cold invaded his body.

"They seemed to have been waiting for me when I came to," his voice sounded odd as he spoke, but there was nothing he could do about it. "One of them was kneeling in front of me with a knife and a goblet. He cut my leg and collected my blood."

Of all things his mouth was aching and although he had yet to put his glasses back on, the floor tile he was staring at was moving in and out of focus. He felt more than a little out of control as the images in his mind became more and more prevalent.

"Harry," the voice was warm and kind and he found himself looking up into deep blue eyes.

Jean-Claude seemed to almost glow in his vision and he found all his attention on the vampire. The sight almost drove the memories away.

"You need to calm down, child," Jean-Claude said slowly and calmly, "or the bloodlust will take you."

"My teeth hurt," was the most sensible thing Harry found to say, "and I'm cold."

"Something of the vampire who was sacrificed has joined with you, Harry," the Master of the city told him gently, but with a certainty that made Harry believe him. "If you allow it to take over you will need to feed and you could hurt yourself or someone else. You must control yourself."

Harry moved his tongue around his mouth and found longer than normal, dangerous fangs jutting from his upper jaw. It seemed completely impossible, but he had never been one to ignore the facts. He did not understand, but the power he sensed moving through his body was not stronger than he was. Using the

stubbornness that had saved him many times in his life he pushed the magic back from wherever it had originated and the world faded back to its normal soft edges.

"What just happened?" Draco asked in a voice that suggested he would start breaking things if someone didn't give him a straight answer.

Harry could only sit there and blink at the rest of the room, far too confused to be of any help.

"We don't really know," it wasn't the greatest news that Anita revealed, and Harry had a sinking feeling that he had just warped known magical law, again. "We have concluded that something to do with the ceremony that was performed has bonded vampire traits to Harry as well as infecting him with lycanthropy. The major problem with this is that all vampires are dead; Harry definitely isn't."

"Lycanthropy and vampirism are also mutually exclusive," Micah added from where he was re-entering the room.

Harry almost laughed, and had to admit that he was feeling a little hysterical.

"Yes, well death tends to avoid Harry," Draco said, and the Slytherin did not sound too happy about revealing the fact, but appeared resigned to do so. "He's survived the Killing curse twice, and by all rights several other things that should have killed him."

"Killing curse?" Dolph did not seem to like that piece of information.

"One of the three Unforgivables," Draco said plainly. "The penalty for using them is life in Azkaban or the Dementor's Kiss, which before you ask I am not about to explain. The Killing Curse has no counter and no block, but Harry survived it at a year old and about six months ago when it looked as if it just bounced off."

"Bloody hurt though," Harry commented in an attempt to not suddenly start laughing like a loon.

The Slytherin did not appear impressed with his addition to the conversation.

"Are you trying to say that anyone else would be dead now?" Anita sounded sceptical.

"What I'm saying," Draco replied in such a way that Harry was sure his friend and Anita Blake were not likely to see eye to eye any time soon, "is that Harry's magic has this incredible habit of keeping him alive. Normal rules don't apply to him, and you'll probably never be able to explain what happened."

"I don't like loose ends, Mr Malfoy," Anita said with a very unhappy expression.

Sooner or later Anita and Draco were going to have a very loud row; that much was obvious to Harry.

"Which does beg the question, was Mr Potter deliberately targeted?" Dolph brought the conversation back to its original point.

"Only four people knew he was going to be here," Draco said firmly, "Harry, Harry's two best friends from home, and me. I made sure of it myself so that no idiot of a Ministry official or reporter could contact him and wreck the first proper

holiday he has had, ever. No one here could possibly have known, I even only told the house elf to expect a guest."

That was one of the main reasons Harry had left the country for rest and relaxation; at home he could never be sure someone wouldn't trace him, but here he was completely anonymous.

"So there's absolutely no way anyone could have known where he would be?" Dolph seemed to want to be absolutely sure.

"None," Draco said with a tone that begged no argument.

"So we're left with random selection," Anita sounded very unhappy about this, "which makes our perpetrators even more difficult to find."

"Not quite random, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude decided to join the conversation, "the spell carved on Harry's chest requires a virgin with a magical gift, so someone out there either has a totem or a sensitive who can discern these things."

Harry blushed at the word virgin, but at least his sudden mortification managed to distract him a little from what had been done to him.

"What's going to happen to me?" he asked before anyone could do more talking about him rather than to him.

It was not that he was suddenly dying to face all the new challenges in his life, but he was practical if nothing else. Being practical sometimes helped him avoid thinking too hard.

"I'm afraid we can't just let you go home to adjust to your new changes," Dolph said apologetically. "We'll need you to make yourself available for the investigation, which means you can't leave St Louis."

Harry had rather suspected that, but it wasn't really the police he was worried about. Anita and Micah were looking at each other and there was a whole lot of body language going on that Harry did not understand. When Anita turned back it seemed as if a decision had been made.

"It's the full moon tonight," Anita began once the lieutenant had finished, "you will change and you will need to hunt. You may join my pard for the duration if you wish."

"What's a pard?" Harry asked, although he could guess he wanted to be sure.

"Like a pack only with cats instead of wolves," Anita offered shortly. "I am Nimir-Ra of the Blooddrinkers Clan."

Harry was confused.

"You said you had an affinity with wereleopards, not that you were one," he really needed someone to start from the beginning and explain everything, but he doubted that would happen.

"I'm not," Anita said firmly, although then glanced at Micah and made a face. "It's complicated."

Now the expression on the woman's face just then was very familiar.

"Normal rules of the universe not apply to you either?" he asked and thought he did very well to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Something like that," Anita admitted with a shrug.

"There is also the question of feeding your vampire," Jean-Claude said in his annoyingly mellow tones.

That was something Harry really did not like the sound of and could not help glaring at the Master of the city.

"It cannot be helped," the vampire said sympathetically. "I can feel the bloodlust in you. Sooner or later you will have to feed it. I would suggest you allow me to assist in this matter to prevent, shall we say, any unwanted accidents."

It was frustrating when logic told him to do things he did not want to and Harry scowled.

"And what exactly does feeding my vampire entail?" he asked, not at all sure he wanted to know the answer.

"I will find you a willing volunteer," Jean-Claude said simply, "and then I will supervise to make sure nothing untoward occurs."

That sounded so delightful, but what was Harry supposed to say? It wasn't as if he had much choice. He nodded.

"When?" he asked.

"The bloodlust is faint and so I would suggest we allow you to deal with the full moon and recover from its effects first," the vampire said reasonably, "however, I would prefer if one of my people were there to ensure that your vampire nature does not incur any unforeseen problems."

Jean-Claude looked to Anita who gave her consent with a swift twitch of her head. There was definitely something between the two of them, but Harry could not quite work out what. The whole 'ma petite' thing seemed to suggest they were close, but something about the way Anita and Micah were standing together was suggesting things as well, and Harry had never been good at figuring such problems out. It was all too confusing to make sense.

"Asher," the woman said shortly, "he knows the pard well enough to be accepted. I'll ask Damian to stay as well."

"As you wish, *ma petite*," the Master of the City replied.

Harry knew there were going to be more questions and more unpleasant memories, but he hoped they would at least let him eat first. There was an enticing smell coming from just outside the door, and Harry felt his mouth watering. As if reading his mind, Micah turned towards the door.

"Food's here," was the wereleopard's announcement.

"Can't it wait?" Dolph did not sound particularly impressed with the interruption.

"Lycanthropes need to eat after shifting, Dolph," Anita was giving the police officer a look that suggested to Harry there could be an argument brewing. "It's full moon tonight, so if you want this settled in a civilised manner I'd let the kid eat. If you make me shoot him because he decides that you're lunch I will never speak to you again."

It would have been funny if the expression on Anita's face hadn't been so serious. Harry wasn't sure he'd ever feel the need to eat anyone, but as he considered it his stomach gave another loud growl and made everyone look at him.

"Not going to go mental, promise," he said and did his best to look harmless.

These people were strange, and they reacted the way he remembered people reacting during the war. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what made them like that.

"I'll get the tray then," Micah decided as Dolph and Anita glared at each other.

End of Chapter 4

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Chapter 5 Arrangements

Scene 1

"The council will have to be made aware of him," Jean-Claude said the moment they were once again in the office they had co-opted.

Dolph was still questioning Harry, but Anita had known that Jean-Claude wished to speak privately, so the three preternatural representatives had taken their leave. Anita had agreed to come back and pick up Harry later in the day.

"You have to be kidding," was her instant response.

She may not like his friend very much, but Anita felt for the kid and handing him over to ancient vampires was not her idea of a good thing to do.

"Anita," Jean-Claude said very slowly and clearly, meaning he was deadly serious, "whatever that child has become is more powerful than I care to consider. He is no more than a day old and yet I looked into the eyes of a Master vampire and an alpha lycanthrope."

That had not been what Anita was expecting to hear. So far Jean-Claude had been playing the calm, in control Master of the city, but she could tell now that this was really bothering him. That he had managed to keep it all from her until now meant he had been doing so very deliberately.

"You're not planning on trying to eliminate him are you, Jean-Claude?" she asked suspiciously.

It would not be unlike the Master of the city to remove a potential problem before it arose. Vampire politics tended to be fast and brutal, and although Jean-Claude played to the niceties of civilised society he could be completely ruthless when he had to be.

"That is a last resort, ma petite," the vampire said without attempting to hide his reasoning, "which I will only take if there is no other solution."

"You're missing part of the point," Micah entered the conversation smoothly, "he's a wizard and so is his friend."

Jean-Claude did not look impressed with that observation, but Antia thought she knew what her Nimir-Raj was getting at.

"He incapacitated you with a couple of words," Micah pointed out bluntly, "and from what I've heard I'd say he comes from a whole group of people just like him."

"He is just a boy," Jean-Claude replied; "what is one boy in the scheme of things?"

Now it was Micah who didn't look impressed.

"It doesn't sound as if Harry is average in any way," the wereleopard said. "If he goes missing, people will notice, in a very big way."

Micah had a point, but Anita was not comfortable with the whole idea that they may have to destroy Harry in the first place. There was something about the kid that spoke to her, a kinship she felt when she looked into his eyes that had nothing to do with the preternatural at all.

"Enough," she said before two of the men in her life could go at it. "Okay, so the council has to be told, but there will be no talk of killing Harry, are we understood? If nothing else, he is the only witness we have to a very hokey crime and his friend is not about to just vanish either. First thing we need to do is figure out what the hell they did to him and why they wanted his blood. Then we might stand a hope in hell of figuring out what happened to him."

They all looked at each other for a while, but eventually Jean-Claude nodded. Anita had seen the kid as an immediate threat, but the way her lover was reacting she was beginning to see that Harry Potter could be in the long term category. If Jean-Claude was willing to tell the Vampire Council anything about this rather than sitting on it as long as possible, then there was real danger here.

"He didn't shift normally, either," Micah broke the uneasy silence and brought Anita's attention back from her vampire lover. "There was residue when his beast broke free, but he seemed to absorb it back into himself."

"I observed that also," Jean-Claude agreed, back to his usual, calm mask.

"And that means?" Anita asked; she was reaching the about to yell at someone stage.

This whole situation made her very uncomfortable, and she was trying to deal with it on too many levels. Being uncomfortable made her touchy and when she was touchy she tended to yell. The fact that it was full moon in under a day was not helping because her beast was in the lycanthrope equivalent of PMS. Micah shrugged at her apologetically.

"I believe, ma petite," Jean-Claude said in his best diplomatic voice, "that all we may be sure of at this point is that it means our Harry will not stain the carpet when he chooses to embrace his beast."

"Fine!" Anita threw her hands in the air. "Well I have to call Richard and explain that the pard is not going to be at the lupanar after all. What a fun conversation that's going to be. Then I have to explain to the pard that we're going to have one extra tonight. And finally I think I'm going to get Nathaniel to make chocolate chip cookies before I kill someone."

Micah and Jean-Claude wisely chose not to argue with her.

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Scene 2

Draco was looking at Harry with one of his appraising, 'I might be about to wrap you up in cotton wool' type expressions. Harry felt a lot more comfortable now he finally had some of his own clothes, but that did not mean he was in a great mood.

"How do you do it?" his friend finally asked.

"Do what?" Harry replied and tried to feign innocence.

"Draw trouble to you like the most powerful summoning charm?" Draco said with a shake of his head.

"It's a skill," Harry returned without trying to hide the bitterness in his voice.

The Slytherin stood there with his hands on his hips for a moment longer and then he sighed, coming to sit beside Harry on the bed.

"At least you're in one piece and still you," Draco said with genuine feeling, "although what Weasley and Granger will do to me the moment they find out you're now a wereleopard is anyone's guess."

"It's not your fault," Harry said immediately, and he meant it, this was no more Draco's doing for sending him here than it was his for being kidnapped. "I'll adjust, I always do. I'm just having trouble figuring out how things work here. Muggles and magical people seem to mix as if it's perfectly normal. I thought wizards and Muggles never mixed anywhere."

"Father only ever mixed in exclusively Wizarding circles when we visited here," Draco admitted thoughtfully, "I assumed it was just like Britain as well."

"You live and learn I suppose," was Harry's take on the whole thing.

There was something else bothering him as well.

"Do you think Remus should be able to shift," the word sounded strange to him, but it never hurt to pick up the vernacular, "at will? I've never heard of werewolf packs before, none of the books even mention them."

"Maybe it's something to do with the pack structure that gives them more control," Draco suggested, although his expression said he was no clearer than Harry on the matter. "Werewolves have been persecuted in Europe for so long that they've become solitary and they hide. Maybe they've lost something along the way."

"Should I contact Remus," Harry asked, not sure if it would be a good idea, "tell him what we've found?"

Draco laughed at that.

"I think we'll worry about you first," the Slytherin said and rolled his eyes, "and then when we have you sorted out, we'll think about your werewolf."

The fact that Remus and Draco were close friends as well did not seem to be a factor in the Slytherin's reasoning. It was that thought that made Harry's chest feel suddenly tight and for a moment he felt as if he might cry, but he had had years of conquering such impulses. Draco must have dropped everything to come and dig him out of trouble and it meant a lot to him.

"Thank you for coming," he said; his voice far quieter than he would have liked.

There was a moment's silence and he didn't dare look up at his friend. Slytherin's did not do emotional scenes very well and Harry hoped he had not embarrassed Draco with his outburst.

"Well," Draco said, his voice far more playful than Harry had expected, "I couldn't leave you to our American cousins now could I. Without me here to keep you in line you'd probably have brought about the end of their civilisation as they know it."

Now he looked up and there was a grin on his companion's face, but Harry could also see that his thanks had been accepted by the look in Draco's eyes. They were both English men; emotional discussion was neither of their strong points, although Draco knew how to exploit it when necessary, but Harry knew his point had been made. Harry gave Draco a smile for his effort.

"So what's it like?" Draco asked. "Shifting that is."

"Hurts like hell, but feels oddly good at the same time," Harry replied without having to think about it. "I don't think I've ever felt quite so free."

There was something about the beast inside him that was incredibly liberating.

"It didn't look particularly pleasant," was Draco's opinion on the matter.

"That's probably the whole splitting skin and shifting bone thing," Harry replied and aimed for light-hearted.

No lycanthrope would ever say shifting didn't hurt, he was sure, but it was the kind of pain that was bearable because of where it took you. The leopard was still him, but with a very different outlook on life, and with a start he realised that as the cat he did not have the burden of being Harry Potter. In fact life looked very much simpler as a cat from all angles. Even though he had still been him, everything had felt that much more straightforward, as his embarrassment on finding himself naked in a hallway had shown. It had never occurred to him to worry about that before he shifted back.

"So is being a leopard like being an Animagus?" Draco sounded curious.

Harry gave some thought to that one.

"Not exactly," he said eventually, when he thought he had an idea of what he wanted to say. "You know when you're in animal form that you feel some of the animal instincts, but it's like they belong to something else and they're not really you?"

Draco nodded.

"When I'm a cat," he continued, "the instincts are all mine; I am a cat, I just have the human me in there as well. I can still feel the leopard inside me now."

His friend was looking at him thoughtfully.

"You like being a cat," Draco said after a few moments and there was no question in his voice.

That made Harry think; he had had little over two hours to come to terms with what had happened in the hallway and he hadn't had much chance to understand what he really believed.

"It scares the hell out of me," he admitted slowly and then looked at Draco, "but yes, I think I do like it. I've never felt anything like it before."

"Good," Draco said in a very resolute manner, "at least there's one plus point to this situation. So how do you feel about the vampire part?"

Harry didn't have to think about that one.

"That just scares me," he said with complete honesty.

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Scene 3

When Anita entered the room and gave Harry a smile it was the first time he had had a chance to look at her without something else dragging his attention away. There were no drugs in his system, he was not under the influence of his beast and there was not a major conversation going on about his future, so he took the opportunity to really see her for the first time.

She was short, something he hadn't really noticed before because of her presence, and her long black hair seemed to be trying to get away from the loose ponytail she had it in. Her clothes were practical, but showed off her assets, of which Harry was not completely unaware. All in all she was attractive, but there was something about her which set off danger signals in Harry's brain. For example her smile was not the most reassuring smile in the world, but he could tell that at least she was trying.

"Ready?" the woman asked.

"As I'll ever be," Harry replied and could not hide his nervousness.

Micah, the Nimir-Raj, if he remembered the term correctly, had been back once, around lunch time, to explain a little about the pard, but Harry was a little confused by it all. The lycanthrope seemed like a nice enough chap, but this whole wereleopard thing seemed to be quite complicated and it was a lot to take in. There was also something about Micah that called to the beast in Harry and he was not sure he liked the instincts Micah woke up.

Harry had been sorting through his things to put them all back in the right places in his bag and he moved to put the last item away.

"The bag," Anita sounded as if she felt silly asking speaking, "is there something funny about it?"

"Um, why?" he asked, trying to figure out what she was actually asking.

"Oh, maybe because it was at a crime scene, but St Louis' finest chose to just give it back," the woman replied and Harry had the feeling that she tended to speak her mind, "and the fact that I've made a mental note three times to ask you about it and only now that I'm looking at it have I actually remembered."

Harry didn't quite know what to say. He knew Anita was not a witch exactly, but she was definitely magical. At home people were either of the Wizarding world or of the Muggle world and things were not that simple over here.

"The whole bag has two charms on it," it was Draco who spoke and he still had the superior tone he had had earlier, "one encourages anyone touching it to give it back to the owner at the earliest opportunity, and the other prevents Muggles from thinking about it too hard."

The look the Slytherin and Anita exchanged was not friendly. Harry knew Draco was being defensive, because the Slytherin had taken on the role of protector for now, but he had thought the whole you are a Muggle and are beneath my contempt attitude had been buried with Draco's father. Old habits were obviously difficult to break entirely.

"Maybe we should go," Harry suggested, zipping up the bag and hoping that no one would do anything stupid.

Anita turned back to him and smiled, but it did not reach her eyes.

"The jeep's in the parking lot," she said and indicated the door.

They made it all the way into the car before the peace shattered.

"Where would you like me to drop you, Mr Malfoy?" Anita asked pleasantly as she reached to start the engine. "I'll bring Harry back in the morning."

"I'm going with you," Draco said in a very firm, almost artic tone and Anita took her fingers off the keys.

Harry had taken the front seat and Draco the back so Anita had to swivel in her seat to glare at him. It was an impressive glare; Harry had to give her that.

"You are not a lycanthrope, Mr Malfoy," she said, still sounding impressively rational even though Harry was pretty sure Draco was about to push her over the edge, "to be anywhere near the pard at full moon would be very dangerous."

"But I am a wizard, Miss Blake," Draco replied with about the same iron control in his voice, "I can deal with the situation."

It was a bit like watching two trains hurtling towards each other when there was no way to stop either of them. Part of Harry wanted to protect Draco, half wanted to protect Anita, so he just sat there.

"It's Ms Blake," Anita said the anger clear in her voice now, "and I will not let you disrupt the full moon for my people. Harry is a lycanthrope and he needs to be with his own kind for his first full moon. You will get in the way."

"If you think I'm letting Harry out of my sight you're insane," Draco responded and some of the fire Harry had been up close and personal with over the five and a half years they were feuding showed through. "So far he has been in your city three days and he has been kidnapped, infected with lycanthropy, partially made into a vampire and nearly sacrificed. Forgive me for thinking he is safer with me around."

The tension in the jeep was almost palpable and Harry felt his beast shifting as it sensed the anger. He definitely did not want to shift in the car, or do anything he would regret so he tried to find some control.

"I've seen your methods," Anita's voice was becoming much louder, "and there is no way I'm letting you within fifty feet of the pard."

"I don't need to be that close," Draco returned with venom, obviously, rationality had taken a step outside.

Harry's bid for control missed as he spotted a full scale war approaching, but he found cold instead of heat.

"Enough," he said and he could hear the power in his voice before he felt suddenly faint as vampire and sunlight met.

Hands reached to grab him as he pitched forward where he was turned in his seat and he had just enough brain power to conclude that it was more likely the crisis than the instruction that had stopped the fight.

"Harry, can you hear me?" he had closed his eyes in an attempt to prevent the world spinning, but he opened them again at the concern in Anita's voice.

"Vampire," he said with as much articulation as he could manage, "daytime, not good."

"Bloody stupid Gryffindor," was Draco's comment on the situation. "What made you think they would be a good combination?"

"I hate to agree, but your friend has a point," Anita did not look pleased.

That annoyed Harry; he was not about to take the blame for this.

"I didn't want to shift," he said, trying to hold on to his temper, "and you two were heating it up in here. I tried to control it and missed, okay?"

That caused a moment's guilt for both of his companions, but it did not last long as Anita looked at Draco and frowned.

"Yes, well he ..." the woman started to say.

"Anita," Harry did not want the fight to start again so he let her say nothing more, "Draco is an Animagus; he can turn into a tiger. We've both been with a werewolf friend on full moon to keep him company, he won't pose a threat and he won't cause a problem."

It had been a very long day and what with the full moon it was not about to end any time soon. Harry was nearing the end of his tether. Anita appeared somewhat abashed for a moment and then sat back in her seat again.

"Well why didn't he just say so," she said pointedly and started the engine. "Buckle up."

End of Chapter 5

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Chapter 6 At Home with the Family

Scene 1

Harry felt a strange kind of safety with Anita that he did not understand, but found he accepted, but that didn't stop the almost complete panic when he saw the group of people in front of the house where they pulled up. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting when Anita had told him the whole pard would be there; but it hadn't been quite so many.

"You're new," Anita told him with a small smile, "and both of you are under my protection; anyone gives you any shit, tell me and I'll deal with it."

He had been dealing with his own 'shit' for years and Harry was used to taking care of himself, but he nodded anyway. The last thing he wanted to do was cause trouble on his first visit. He was, however, very glad of the calm presence of Draco behind him. To have at least one familiar thing in such upheaval was a great comfort.

He watched, fascinated, as Anita walked up to the group and was greeted with variations on the theme of the gathered people rubbing their faces on her hand. Harry remembered doing that in cat form when he had first changed, but he had felt no such impulse since, and didn't now either.

When all the greetings were over Anita turned and beckoned him up the drive. He went, slowly, wary of the power in the air that was running over his skin like a breeze. He had been feeling things like this since he woke up, but with so many lycanthropes around it was almost overwhelming. He was short for his age, even though his body seemed to have been trying to catch up over the last few months, and nearly every male in the group was taller than he was, and several of the women as well. That was intimidating, even when you'd been up against Voldemort and won.

"Everyone," Anita said cheerfully, "meet Harry and Draco. Play nice so I don't have to shoot anyone."

For a moment Harry thought she was joking, but no one in the group seemed to think it was funny. The tone had been cajoling, but Harry came to the sudden realisation that Anita had been serious. Being British, Harry was not used to the idea of guns in the first place, but he was even less used to someone talking about using one so easily.

It was obvious that they knew he was the lycanthrope as most eyes fixed on him and Draco was spared little more than a couple of glances. He wondered briefly how much Anita had explained to her pard and how much she had kept to herself. When one of the group moved he started in spite of himself and realised that he was being an idiot.

"Frightened of Nathaniel," one of the larger men at the back laughed and several others joined in.

The young man with long auburn hair whose movement had caused him to jump smiled at him in sympathy and walked forward.

"Hello," the young man said, looking at Harry curiously, "I'm Nathaniel. Nice to meet you."

There was no offer of a handshake, and Harry was very unclear of how wereleopards went about greeting each other except what he had seen between Anita and her pard, so he chose to try a smile.

"Hi," he replied.

"Ah, look at the two pretty little kitties," the snide comment came from a man with a ring in his eyebrow.

Nathaniel looked over his shoulder with a frown and Harry decided that he agreed entirely. The owner of the voice was annoying and something about him was rubbing Harry completely the wrong way. He knew that he sometimes held back because of his childhood with his Uncle, but that did not mean he was weak and the pierced individual seemed to be taking him at face value. In the Wizarding world no one judged him by appearance because they saw the scar and knew who he was; here it seemed quite a lot was done on first glance.

"Ignore, Caleb, he's a dick," a woman said, moving out of the crowd as well, "I'm Cherry."

"Hello," Harry greeted politely.

"Sure you're not too good for us with an accent like that, kitten?" Caleb really didn't know when to let up.

Harry went from nervous to very annoyed in a heartbeat and he didn't do annoyed very well at the moment. Something stirred within him and his eyes zeroed in on Caleb like a targeting sight. The growl that came out of his throat sounded totally alien, but power flowed out of him straight at the surprised looking wereleopard. Caleb looked even more shocked when Harry's power hit him and unceremoniously dumped him on his arse.

"My name is Harry," he said through clenched teeth, "don't forget it."

The wereleopard had gone white and when Harry turned his attention away from Caleb he found every eye on him; most were shocked. He had the feeling he had just done something else he shouldn't have been able to do, but it wasn't like he could do anything about it. Anita was watching from a slight distance with Micah by her side and she did not look as if she was about to do anything about the awkward silence. It seemed that he had dug the hole so it was his job to get out of it.

He looked to Nathaniel, hoping that whatever had moved the young man to be the first to greet him, would move him again. He really did not want to have frightened off the first person to show him friendship in the pard. Nathaniel appeared unsure, but their eyes locked and it was as if they suddenly understood each other. With a quick step forward Nathaniel took Harry's arm and smiled.

"Impressive," the young man said brightly, "why don't we take this inside and then everyone else can introduce themselves?"

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Scene 2

By the time they made it into what appeared to be a nicely furnished living room Harry's head was spinning with names. Draco was a silent shadow at his side, but he knew that the Slytherin would have far more of this worked out than he did. Harry could be very Slytherin when he wanted to be, but right now he was feeling far more a Gryffindor, and rather out of control.

"What's he here for?" one of the other men in the room asked as they made themselves comfortable. "He's not one of us."

Harry thought the man's name was Merle, but he wasn't sure. Now every eye was on Draco.

"Where Harry goes, I go," Draco said with all the superiority which years of being the perfect Slytherin had graced him with.

"Not tonight, pretty boy," another one of the large men said with a frown, "where we're going no human can follow. Unless you want to be food."

It was the same argument Anita had used and Harry hoped it would not become too serious. When he looked at his friend there was a cold smile on the perfectly chiselled features. Draco shared a glance with him for a moment and then the smile became a superior smirk. There was no doubt about what his friend was going to do in Harry's mind and he braced for the reaction.

The Animagus transformation was nothing like shifting; it was fast, smooth and like a morphing effect Harry had seen on Dudley's computer once, rather than the splitting and rending of a lycanthrope change. Draco made a very large and impressive white tiger and when he trotted over to Harry and sat down he'd made his point.

"Shit," was someone's vocal opinion as the whole room stared.

When Draco flowed back into his own shape most of the wereleopards looked even more impressed.

"How the hell did you do that?" Cherry asked what everyone seemed to be thinking.

"I'm a wizard," Draco said shortly, "and so's Harry. We can do a lot of things, but this is what is useful at the moment. Just because Harry is now one of you doesn't mean he's any less my friend, so I will be staying."

That settled that argument and Anita stepped in to give a very short and edited version of the situation. Then they moved on to the business of Harry joining the pard for the evening.

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Scene 3

Harry was trying to work out the structure of the pard, but it was confusing. Nathaniel seemed to be submissive to just about everyone, making sure they had everything they needed, but he wasn't sure that it had to do with lack of power, because there was something about the auburn haired lycanthrope that spoke of ability. Other than Anita and Micah's obvious dominance, there didn't seem to be much difference between all of the others.

As a child he had never been held, and touchy feely stuff wasn't something that happened a lot at Hogwarts, so the fact people kept touching him was creating confusing emotions in him. The touches were casual and unconscious as far as he could tell with most of the leopards, and at the same time they bothered him and comforted him, which was really strange.

Nathaniel had been sitting next to him with his hand on Harry's knee, chatting away about stripping of all things, for the last ten minutes and Harry really didn't know how to react. Draco was standing over by the wall, watching the room as if someone was going to attack at any minute, which wasn't helping Harry feel any more settled either. That they had so recently been in a war and were more than a little paranoid was not always useful.

Harry was considering how to extricate himself without being rude when he lost all interest in Nathaniel and looked over to the doorway. He had gone cold all over and he was still too confused about everything to figure out why. When a pale skinned man with green eyes and blood red hair appeared in the doorway Harry realised what he was feeling. Every cell in his body knew he was looking at a vampire.

It was then that he noticed that it wasn't dark yet, but the curtains to the room had been half drawn. This caused him to wonder two things; where had the vampire come from if it was light outside, and why had the room obviously been prepared for him.

"Hi Damian," Nathaniel greeted with a smile and finally stopped touching Harry, which was a relief and unsettling all at the same time.

"Good evening," the vampire replied, but his eyes were definitely on Harry, not Nathaniel.

"Damian, this is Harry, Harry this is Damian," Nathaniel introduced them as they stared at each other across the room. "Harry's joining the pard for full moon."

That seemed to confuse Damian for a moment and Harry had to wonder how much of his vampire was showing. It was obvious Damian could sense something from the way the vampire was looking at him, but it was also clear that Damian did not know what he was staring at.

"Hello," Harry said politely.

"There is something strange about you," Damian appeared to be as upfront with his opinions as Anita.

"There's something strange about you as well, Damian" Cherry said with a laugh, "but it's not like we keep mentioning it."

Damian frowned, but did not take his eyes off Harry. It was quite clear that Damian found Harry as unsettling as Harry found most of his life at the moment.

"Come and sit down, Damian," Nathaniel said, moving so that there was a large space on the sofa free. "Harry's a wizard, that's probably what you can feel."

Several things had been explained to the pard, but Anita seemed to be leaving it to Harry how much he wanted them to know upfront. It was now one of those moments when his secretive Slytherin side warred with his friendly Gryffindor urges. In this case it was logical that they were going to find out eventually anyway, so there were advantages to telling the truth that brought the internal conflict to an end.

"Actually, it's probably the part vampire," Harry said with what he hoped was a perfect impression of calm.

He couldn't stop his heartbeat speeding up, however, when everyone in the room looked at him.

"You did just say 'part vampire', didn't you?" Zane sounded incredulous and Harry just nodded.

"That's impossible," Damian gave the appearance of being completely sure of himself.

"So far everyone else has said the same thing," Harry replied, "but it doesn't stop it being true."

Even Nathaniel was looking dubious. In an attempt to prove that he wasn't completely insane Harry moved the collar of the top he had chosen specifically to hide the scar of the vampire bite. It seemed damage incurred before he was sprayed with blood had scarred, damage caused afterwards had vanished.

"You don't become a vampire because of one bite," Damian was not willing to budge on that point, but it was obvious that he was no longer so sure of everything else.

"And lycanthrope and vampire are mutually exclusive," Harry replied, a little frustrated that the nice atmosphere they had managed to set up was being ruined by this.

He might have been uncomfortable with Nathaniel touching him, but now that it was gone he missed it. He felt the beast inside of him

stirring and he pushed himself away from the sofa, needing to be in motion to stop the part of him that was hidden away from coming out to play. The vampire was there as well, but as soon as he stepped into the light from the window at least that part stilled and went back to sleep.

"I thought you would like the truth," he said, annoyed more at himself than anyone in the room, "but as usual I should have kept my mouth shut."

He looked at Draco to see what his friend was thinking, but the Slytherin's face was completely neutral. He felt like he wanted to hit something, or preferably rend it into tiny little pieces, an impulse he did not think was a particularly good thing. A moment ago he had been fine, a little uncomfortable, but perfectly fine, now he wanted to damage something or someone permanently. The animal inside of him was prowling like a caged thing and Harry knew if it threw itself against its confinement he wouldn't be able to stop it.

"Shit, he's going to shift," Harry didn't know who had said it, but he glared at everyone anyway.

"Harry, calm down," Anita's voice hit him almost like a physical blow, and his beast reared at the command, snarling its displeasure, but it gave him something to hang on to.

As Anita strode across the room to him, he clung on to his self control and with a supreme effort of will shoved the cage door closed again. It had been closer than he wanted to think about. Anita touched his arm and he was flooded with her power and a sense of security and warmth settled over him. His mind was full of pard instinct: Nimir-Ra; obey; safe; kinship, and he felt the world return to what it should have been.

"Are you okay?" Anita asked, genuinely concerned.

Not trusting his voice yet, Harry nodded, and then Anita turned towards the rest of the room. She may have been small in stature, but she was very large in presence and several of the pard cringed away from her. Nathaniel was so close to being prostrated on the floor that Harry doubted the wereleopard could get much lower.

"Okay," she said, her voice low and dangerous, "who did not understand when I said 'look after him'? I leave you for half an hour and when I come back Harry's about the burst his skin. It's his first full moon, and I know you all remember what that was like."

Anita was just getting warmed up, Harry could tell, and it really didn't seem fair. Before she could really start yelling, he reached out and touched her shoulder.

"My fault," he said as soon as Anita looked at him.

The expression in her eyes softened a little, but not very much.

"No it's not," Anita said and as her eyes travelled around the room this time, everyone appeared to shrink a little.

Anyone sensible might have given up then, but Harry's Gryffindor tendencies were showing again.

"I mentioned the vampire," he said before Anita could yell at anyone, "because Damian noticed it."

Now Anita looked at Damian, who up until that point had been left out of the tirade, and it was the vampire's turn to flinch.

"And?" it was as if Anita was ten feet tall and everyone else was an ant.

"And I failed to believe him," Damian was clearly reconsidering his opinion in light of Anita's acceptance of the facts, and Harry had to give the vampire points for bravery. Anita in this mood obviously frightened Damian.

"We," it was Nathaniel who spoke, even though he still had his face buried in the carpet, "we didn't believe him."

It appeared there was solidarity against the wrath of Anita, which impressed Harry. There did not seem to be a lot that could distract Anita from a path once she had chosen it and Harry did not want to upset the comfort zone in the parlor before the full moon. Something inside him knew that now of all times they needed to be a unit and a shouting match was going to help no one.

"It's not very believable," Harry tried one last time to put out the fuse his lack of control had ignited, "they hadn't seen this."

Without pausing so he couldn't change his mind, Harry pulled his top over his head. The spell had to be obvious on his chest in the afternoon sunlight and every eye in the room zeroed in on it, even Anita's and she had seen it before. Damian's eyes opened in surprise and Harry had the distinct impression the vampire could read the runes. Someone swore quite colourfully.

"What is that?" Harry had a little trouble remembering the speaker's name, he thought it was Gregory.

"That is a channelling spell," every one looked surprised when Damian spoke, "one which requires human sacrifice."

When Anita looked at him questioningly the vampire gave a small shrug.

"She who made me found such things diverting for a time," was the only explanation forthcoming.

Anita's anger seemed to have faded with this revelation, which Harry thought was a very good thing, but her exasperation still seemed to be there if the way she put her hands on her hips was anything to go by.

"Okay," she said with a glare around the room, "listen up, and listen up good. I'm only going to explain this once, and it goes no further than these walls, are we clear."

Everyone nodded and Harry was glad to see that Nathaniel was half sitting up again. It was disconcerting to see a grown man throwing himself to the floor.

"Harry is not a stray I picked up while working on my latest case," Anita told the group, "he is the case. He is the only survivor and

the only witness to a very nasty black magic ritual, so we are going to keep him whole and safe. He was infected with lycanthropy and vampirism, and nobody knows how. His leopard seems to be more interested in coming out to play than his vampire, so that's what we're dealing with first. Damian and Asher will be with us tonight just in case Harry's vampire puts in an appearance, but Jean-Claude doesn't think it will. Any questions?"

There was not a peep out of any of them. If it had not been happening Harry would have found the whole things rather ridiculous: a woman under five and a half feet tall was facing down a pack of lycanthropes and a vampire.

"Good, then I can go back to what I was doing," Anita said pointedly. "Sorry, Damian, you can't go out tonight," she said as she turned and headed for the door, "so you'll need to find a volunteer. Not Nathaniel, he fed the ardeur this morning."

Nathaniel looked rather disappointed and although Harry could guess what the volunteer was for, he could not fathom the rest of the conversation.

"Moon rise is in four hours," Anita said before she disappeared, "and I want us one big happy pard by then."

The moment she was gone, Harry felt terribly exposed. With his top in his hand and almost everyone looking at him again he did not feel particularly welcome. It was a bit like being frozen in time as everyone just stayed exactly where they were.

"Cookies," Nathaniel said suddenly, "who wants cookies?"

For a few seconds everyone then looked at auburn haired wereleopard like he was insane.

"Chocolate chip?" it was Zane who asked.

"Double chocolate chip," Nathaniel said, perfectly seriously.

"Sounds good to me," Cherry said a little too cheerfully.

"I'll put the oven on," Nathaniel responded with a smile and began to stand up.

"I'll help," Gregory offered and suddenly there was movement in the room.

The tension was gone, people were going about their business and Harry was left looking at Damian thinking he had missed something. When the vampire began to walk towards him, Harry couldn't decide whether to be polite or run after Nathaniel and offer to help with the cookies.

"Would you mind if I had a closer look?" Damian asked when they were only a few feet apart.

Harry could see Draco had shifted his position against the wall, moving closer, and he felt a little more comfortable thanks to the back up.

"Not at all," he replied, although he didn't quite feel that way and he waited for the vampire to step up to him.

The tableau held for a while.

"You have to go into the shade," Zane said from where he was openly watching them, and Harry felt like an idiot.

Vampires and sunlight didn't mix, of course.

"Damian's a day walker, but he has these deep psychological scars that we're trying to train him out of," Caleb really was as subtle as a brick, as well as being a prat.

"I'll show you deep psychological scars," Merle said and Caleb did not appear to like his attention. "Congratulations, you just volunteered to be dinner."

"You can't make me..." Caleb's protest died as Merle glared at him.

Okay, so there was structure in the pard, it just didn't show that much until someone pushed the boundaries. Harry was beginning to think this was a lot more complicated than he had given it credit for. He stepped into the shadow of the curtains and hoped that things would not get any weirder.

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Scene 4

Damian was not the most talkative individual Harry had ever tried to have a conversation with; in fact it was like extracting blood from a stone. When Nathaniel and helpers had returned with warm cookies Harry had given up. He received the odd strange look when he tried to rejoin the pard, but oddly, Nathaniel seemed to be in charge when it came to welcoming him back and no one argued once the auburn haired man passed him the plate of cookies.

Harry had just about become used to Damian being around when he felt something else. It was as if the whole ambiance of the house changed for a moment and then shifted back. Something powerful had just arrived, he was absolutely positive, but no one else seemed to have noticed, not even Draco or Damian. Harry was beginning to think that the fact he had a foot in so many different worlds meant he perceived things a little differently than the majority of people around him now.

The cold sensation that ran over his skin informed him that the something that had arrived was a vampire, just before said vampire appeared with Anita in the doorway. Micah had been with the rest of the pard for a little while now, possibly sent by Anita to make sure there were no other incidents, but Anita had been off doing things somewhere in the house and now she joined them.

This new vampire was tall and blond, but where Draco was silver blond this man was golden blond. Harry could see half of what was a perfect face, a face that as he looked into pale blue eyes made Harry think thoughts that he usually left to the wee small hours when he couldn't sleep and he didn't mind dropping into fantasy land. He had felt something similar when in the presence of Jean-Claude, but the circumstances had been so different that it had not had the same effect. The vampire was quite simply breathtakingly beautiful.

What happened next was quite surprising; Anita hit the newcomer on the arm.

"Turn it off, Asher," she said pointedly, "I'll castrate you if you touch a hair on his head."

"But, ma cherie," the vampire replied, "it has been so long since I have beheld such big green eyes."

It was not that Harry could suddenly resist whatever was happening to him; it was that he became aware of it. He could not look away from the pale blue eyes that held him, but it was as if part of him stepped back and observed what was going on. He was being manipulated and it was sort of pleasant, but a fundamental part of him objected to the principle and it kick started his self will. Harry had a very strong mind, he had had to have, and he blinked, freeing himself of the influence. Asher was still beautiful, but he was no longer the centre of Harry's universe.

"I inherited them from my mother," he said, surprisingly unbothered by the whole incident. "What did you just do?"

"He partially rolled you," Anita said, giving Asher a dirty look and appearing to assume Asher had ended the game. "Don't look a vampire in the eyes unless you have to."

Asher smiled at her as if he was enjoying himself; of course Harry knew that the vampire knew it was Harry who had ended their little exchange. There was a question in the blue eyes that looked at him and Harry could only guess what Asher was thinking, but he suspected it was something along the lines of: 'why haven't you told her the truth?'

"Harry, Asher, Asher, Harry," Anita introduced and then very deliberately went and sat in Micah's lap. "No more games."

That caused Asher to raise an eyebrow, but Harry couldn't quite figure out the whole body language thing going on. It was obvious Anita was a little annoyed at Asher's display, but the significance of her going to sit with Micah was a little confusing. When Nathaniel happily leant against Anita and Micah's legs, Harry gave up trying to figure it out. It could be some pard thing, or something else entirely, and he decided to ask Draco later, because he was sure his Slytherin friend would have a much better idea than he did.

"It was not a game, Anita," Asher said, although he appeared somewhat amused by whatever was going on. "I wished to ascertain whether, should anything untoward occur this evening, my influence could be used to resolve the situation."

"Yes, well now you know," Anita still didn't sound pleased, but she did roll her eyes at the vampire rather than glaring. "No more rolling the guests, it's not polite."

Harry was quite surprised when Asher's face became serious and he realised that there was more trust between everyone here than he had thought.

"Actually," the vampire said in what was still a conversational tone, only a much more serious one than before, "it was your young friend who ended the experiment, not I."

There was something strange about the way Asher held his head, the way his hair fell over one side of his face, but as everyone's attention turned to Harry once more he forgot to be curious.

"What?" he asked, used to the scrutiny by now, but still uncomfortable. "I don't like being manipulated. It was very pleasant," he admitted, blushing furiously, "but I'm a control freak."

That made several people laugh and look at Anita. Draco was watching the whole proceedings without even a flicker of emotion, but Harry could tell his friend's fingers were only millimetres from his wand.

"Bet you're not as much of a control freak as Anita," Nathaniel didn't seem to be able to resist and received a light clip round the ear for his trouble.

"Watch it, fur-ball," Anita said in a very convincingly menacing tone, "or I'll have to get a new house cat."

Nathaniel looked up over his shoulder at her, batted his captivating, lilac eyes and pouted.

"Meow," was all the wereleopard said and Harry couldn't help it, he burst out laughing.

Anita finally laughed as well which broke any remaining tension there may have been in the room, after which she reached out and ruffled Nathaniel's hair.

"Stupid cat," she said with a shake of her head.

Harry knew he was missing something, but his mind shied away from what he was thinking. Anita and Micah were clearly an item, Harry had even seen them kiss at one point, but there were other signals going off as well. When it came to relationships Harry had little to no experience, but he could read obvious signs when he wanted to, but so far he had Anita down as connected to four different men, three of whom were in the room, and possibly Damian as well, which meant that his radar had to be completely up the creek. He gave up trying to figure it out and looked back at Asher instead. Then he remembered what he had been curious about before.

"Why do you hide your face?" he asked, his mouth way ahead of his brain.

Total silence descended yet again. The thought that went through Harry's mind was 'open mouth, insert foot', but he refused to look away from the vampire. He had been an idiot now, he was not about to add coward to the mixture. Very slowly Asher straightened and lifted his head, moving until shadow no longer hid the other side of his face.

"Oh," was the most sensible thing that Harry's mind could produce, although it did list everything that DADA had taught him could do that to a vampire, "sunlight, holy water or fire?" he asked in a completely dead tone.

The side of Asher's face was a mess of scars; one half of the vampire's face was the image of perfection, the other was ravaged and all Harry could think of, was how wrong that was.

"Holy water," Asher replied in an equally emotionless voice.

"I do hope the people who did it are dead," Harry said, letting just a little of the outrage he felt slip into his voice. "If they aren't I know some very nasty curses."

He was perfectly serious as well; anyone who could do that to another sentient creature deserved anything he could think of as far as he was concerned. It was not the scarring that bothered him, it was the painstaking way it had been done and the amount of agony it must have caused. Barbarism was simply unacceptable whoever was committing it.

Asher looked at him seriously for several seconds.

"It was a long time ago," the vampire said eventually, "but thank you."

Maybe it hadn't been such a stupid question, Harry felt as if he might have just made a connection.

End of Chapter 6

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Chapter 7 The Way of the Moon

Scene 1

Standing around completely naked with a group of people he had only just met was not something Harry thought he would ever be doing, but then his life was always full of surprises. Asher, tall, scarred and silent watching the whole thing did not really help him feel settled, and Damian, standing just behind Anita, was getting on his nerves because he was more and more worried that his vampire might come out to play. Draco had already changed into his sleek feline form, and had sat down to wash his paws as the others waited for the moon to rise. The moment it did, Harry knew: his skin began to itch. Anita had told him to just go with his instincts and let it happen, but she hadn't mentioned the itch.

It was the type of itch he knew he would never be able to scratch and he had to hold himself still to prevent trying. Nathaniel was the first to go down on all fours, and Harry watched, fascinated, as the wereleopard began to change. The auburn haired man seemed to relish the pain.

Anita and Micah stood amongst their pard and one by one the wereleopards fell to their hands and knees and shifted into their lycanthrope form. Not forcing it was another thing that Anita had stressed and so Harry stood there and waited. The itching was beginning to become a little painful, but he did not really know what to do. It was not at all like the hospital. He could feel the animal inside shifting under his skin, but it was not yet clawing to get out.

It was when Micah finally started to shift that Anita began to look worried. She opened her mouth to speak and then Harry felt it; the pain in the centre of his chest. He fell to the ground on instinct and moaned as he felt his body shifting from one shape to the other.

It was not the most pleasant of experiences, but it did not hurt anywhere near as much as the first time. Either his body was getting used to the idea or his mind was compensating for the agony. In either case it was nothing like as bad as the Crutiatus curse, and he'd suffered that on several occasions.

When he felt the last muscle shift into place he shook himself from head to tail and couldn't help the little huff of pleasure. There was power in his cat form that he did not feel in his human body and he liked it. The beast spoke to him of the hunt and the strength of being a leopard, and his first instinct was to run and find prey, but his human mind overrode the desire. He had had practice keeping parts of his mind separate and it took effort not to give in to the beast, but it was not difficult.

The night was far brighter to his cat eyes and much clearer since he had not brought his glasses with him, and the woods assailed his other senses with so many things that at first he thought he would never sort it all out. His senses were enhanced by the lycanthropy even when in human form, but it was nothing like when he was truly a cat. The overriding smell was leopard and he chose to concentrate on that, feeling the companionship of pard, and he began to sort out the different scents of those around him.

One leopard looked pretty much like another to his human eyes, except for colour, but when he looked around at the others it was as if he was looking with a completely different mindset. His mind recognised each member of the pard, as if the cat in him knew each scent already and catalogued the nuances of coat and eye colour in all those around him.

The only human smell was Anita and he gazed at her as she watched him, waiting for him to react. He remembered the instincts she had pulled from him when he had almost shifted earlier and he still felt them. It was almost as if Anita's power was more obvious when he saw and sensed her with his beast on the outside rather than the inside and he recognised predator, protection, pard; part of him even spoke of potential mate, but he squashed that very quickly. Padding over to Anita he greeted her, as was her due, and then went back to the other leopards.

Only Micah had shifted to catman form, all of the others were full cats and they greeted him in the manner of cats. Head's bumped and bodies rubbed as the pard established itself under the light of the moon. It was almost time to hunt and he could feel the excited anticipation in all the wereleopards around him; it would be a good night. There was only one thing missing and he looked up to see Draco watching the whole proceedings with blue-grey tiger eyes.

Trotting over he sat down in front of his friend and they regarded each other for a while. The wizard magic encompassed the tiger like a glove showing the human part of Harry exactly what Draco was, but it was strangely unimportant to the cat part of him. The Slytherin made a fantastic beast and he greeted Draco properly for the first time.

It was almost as if they had never met before as they rubbed against each other, becoming familiar with the scent and the power of the other. Harry let his magic shift through his body showing his full potential. This was what it meant to be animal rather than human and when Harry led Draco back to the pard no one challenged his right to do so.

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Scene 2

The hunt had been a good one, and Anita greeted her leopards as they returned to the clearing at the back of the house. Most were carrying something small like a rabbit or a squirrel, which they presented to her in deference and she dutifully gave back so they could eat it. Even Micah presented her with a rabbit, although it was not in deference, but more in reverence, and considering he had a raccoon as well, which he kept for himself, this was clear to the whole pard. Micah in catman form was quite an incredible thing to see, even after having known him so long.

They had been going to the lupanar on and off, hunting with the wolves, but it was a different atmosphere when they were just the pard. Their group had structure, but it was much looser than that of the pack, and it was almost informal in comparison. It felt good.

The only thing that was worrying her was that she had not seen Harry yet, or his friend. The pair had gone chasing off into the trees and neither Anita nor Micah had been able to stop them. Harry was about somewhere, she could still feel the strangeness of him in the vicinity, so she was not really worried, but she was still uneasy. She was beginning to think she should go and look for him, when the troublesome leopard virtually pranced into the open.

What made Anita blink was that Harry was dragging the biggest deer she had ever seen, by the throat, and although the shape seemed to be awkward for him, the weight didn't seem to be bothering him at all. The white tiger form of Malfoy was only just behind Harry, and the annoying wizard sat down at the edge of the trees.

Harry dragged his prize into the middle of the cluster of other leopards and then dumped it there, looking rather pleased with himself. In all honesty, Anita thought he had a right to be. Having deposited his catch Harry then looked over to her as if asking if she wanted any, but Anita had the distinct impression that it was a courtesy rather than an admission of her dominance. Harry certainly didn't look towards Micah in the same way before he began licking the blood from the neck wound on the deer.

Anita knew that Micah wouldn't like that in the slightest, not while in catman form at the full moon, and she was not surprised when her Nimir-Raj lunged at the smaller leopard the moment he lay down. Harry was new, he could not be expected to get everything right on his first monthly cycle, and Anita was sure Micah would not hurt him too much, in fact the catman seemed to be about to grab Harry by the scruff. It was the gentlest way of disciplining a kitten.

What happened next shocked Anita to the bone. Rather than being dragged off the kill Harry twisted almost before Micah's claws touched him and the black leopard began to shift. By the time he was facing Micah, Harry was no longer a cat, but a catman like the Nimir-Raj, and he was huge. Micah never really stood a chance as Harry simply flattened him, pinning him down as if the clan leader was nothing more than a kitten.

The really disturbing bit for Anita was when Harry snarled at the wereleopard under him he revealed very white, long fangs that were not exactly what you found on a normal cat. The fact that Harry's

green eyes were glowing did not help to settle her either. For a moment she thought that the stranger she had taken in was going to kill her Nimir-Raj, but with fangs bared, Harry froze.

To her growing shock Micah then turned his head to the side, exposing his throat to the creature on top of him. For a moment this tableau held, and then Harry huffed once through his impressive teeth at the offered neck before climbing off Micah and turning back to the kill. Efficiently eviscerating the deer with seemingly no effort, Harry then took the pick of the entrails, carried them over to his friend, shifted back into full leopard form and sat down to eat. The fact that he was facing away from the challenge and twitching his tail was both a sign that he was not interested in fighting and one that he was not about to take any shit from anyone.

Anita really wasn't sure what to do and she shared a look with Asher and Micah, before she eventually moved. Harry had left the rest of the kill and she was positive he had basically given it to the pard. Not your average thank you, but typically lycanthrope in nature. She knelt down next to the deer and invited the rest of the wereleopards to join her. She wasn't about to eat it herself, but after Harry's display, her presence was about the only thing that would make the others touch it at all. Micah was first, but the rest of the pard followed quickly.

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Scene 3

Harry appeared embarrassed when he woke up in a pile of naked people, and Anita couldn't help but feel sympathy since it had taken her a while to get used to the idea as well. When Micah had invited Harry to join the pard in a customary pile of bodies, Anita had been a little surprised, but had had no reason to object. Lycanthropes always slept in after a full moon, and when Anita was with the pard and not off on business they usually stayed together at her house. When they had not been at the lupanar and just fell into the house she didn't even try and insist on clothing anymore. It was coming on to lunch time.

Nathaniel was wrapped around Harry in what for Nathaniel was simply a welcoming manner, but to someone not used to him, probably said many other things. There had not been a great deal of time for the pard to get to know Harry before the moon had taken them, but Anita could tell that her pomme de sang had taken a liking to the quiet young wizard.

When Anita took part in the full moon ritual, the morning after she was always the first awake, not being susceptible to the shifting exhaustion that took over the lycanthropes. She was quite surprised that any of the pard were conscious yet, even Micah ran until he was exhausted at full moon and she doubted even an earthquake would wake most of them before early afternoon. Then again Harry had already shown himself to be almost immune to the drawbacks of a shift, so he had most likely slept off the exertion of the hunt already.

Joining the huddle of bodies had been the one part of the evening that Harry's friend had chosen not to partake in, and he was nowhere to be seen. The smell of coffee coming from the direction of the kitchen gave her a clue as to where he might be found. Locking eyes with Harry she smiled and then began to disentangle herself from Micah, who was sprawled across her in a very possessive manner. At

least she had the advantage of being clothed, although not in more than a ratty t-shirt and underwear, and she could not help but feel sorry for Harry as the kid began to blush when he followed suit.

A few sleepy grumbles and the odd swear word later, Anita was free, Harry was dressing in the nearest item of clothing he could find, and the pard had closed ranks into one big mass of flesh once more.

"Let's go find coffee," Anita said as Harry pulled a large T-shirt over his head.

She had to stop and stare when she walked into the kitchen since there was a strange looking coffee pot floating above the centre of the table, with steam rising from the top, and no sign that her nice, average, normal coffee machine had been used at all. Malfoy was sat next to the pot, with a cup in his hand, reading yesterday's paper. One of the pard had probably brought it with them since Anita tried to avoid all news. The blond wizard looked up as she walked in and gave both her and Harry a very appraising look.

"I was wondering if coffee would wake the dead," Malfoy said with a slight smile. "I hope you don't mind, I used your coffee, but I could not for the life of me figure out how to use that Muggle contraption, so I did it the old fashioned way."

There was the note of sarcasm to his voice that Anita had begun to expect, but she had to re-evaluate Malfoy from her impression yesterday. He did not sound hostile, and he appeared to have a sense of humour that had been totally absent when Harry had been in danger the previous day. She knew she could be a hard bitch from hell if anyone threatened her people and in a flash of insight she realised that Malfoy was more like her than she cared to imagine.

"From the fact that the pot is floating," she replied with a raised eyebrow, "I assume the 'old fashioned way' would be magic."

"Until last year Draco didn't know there was another way," Harry said in a light, if somewhat, strained tone, and Anita knew the kid was still uncomfortable, but she gave him an 'A' for effort.

"I still think living without magic is barbaric," Malfoy bantered back, "but at least I'm trying."

"Yes, very," was Harry's response.

The two were swapping jibes like it was second nature and Anita had to hide her smile. Instead she walked to the cupboard, picked up two mugs and then turned back to the table. How did one get coffee out of a floating coffee pot?

"Just put the mug under the spout and the pot will pour," Malfoy told her helpfully as he went back to reading the paper.

Looking at the pot dubiously, Anita did as instructed, and to her surprise the coffee poured into one and then the other mug without fuss or ceremony.

"It will stay hot until it's empty," the blond wizard said almost absently as he read whatever article had his attention, "and there's enough in there for twenty or so mugs; I thought the rest of the furry clan might like some."

No way in hell was the pot big enough to hold that much liquid, it barely looked as if it could have held the three mug-fulls it had already produced.

"Bigger on the inside than on the outside," Harry said as Anita contemplated the vessel. "A lot of the wizarding world is like that: what you see is not always what you get."

Anita handed him a mug and shook her head. There was absolutely no point in worrying about the power these two young men seemed to wield like it was nothing, when she could do little about it. There were, she had to admit, perks to being a wizard.

"Good grief," Malfoy said as he finally finished the article he was reading, "Muggles actually come here to see vampires? If they're that stupid, why do they make such a fuss when one of them gets eaten?"

Anita looked at the wizard over her cup and realised he was serious.

"They probably don't understand the forces they're playing with," Harry put in before Anita could reply. "Look at how many witches and wizards they burnt in the middle ages, and the only ones they managed to kill were Muggles."

From the tone of voice Harry used, Anita was pretty sure this was two sides of an old debate, so instead of entering her own opinion, which was actually somewhere in the middle, she sat back to listen to the two chatter. It was amazing what she could learn by just pretending not to be there.

By the time she was on to her second cup of coffee she had come to the conclusion that Malfoy, or rather Draco as her brain insisted on calling him after listening to Harry talk to his friend, did not hold Muggles in very high regard. It used to be more, she was fairly sure, because she had seen the blond wizard censor himself a couple of times. Harry on the other hand was very pro-Muggle, although when Draco had made the mistake of mentioning Harry's Muggle relatives there had been an icy silence that Anita had had to smooth over.

The conversation only stopped when Nathaniel walked in from the other room in nothing but a pair of jeans, saw the coffee pot, and froze. It was like seeing a house cat come across something poisonous that it still wanted to touch and Anita was almost sure that if Nathaniel had had hair short enough it would have been standing on end.

"Coffee?" Harry asked as he eyed Nathaniel warily.

"It's floating," was what Nathaniel said, and he looked at Anita as if to ask if this was her doing.

"I didn't want it to mark the table," Draco said, either wilfully missing the point, or really not seeing what the problem was.

Nathaniel was now looking at the wizard as if he might bite, although he did seem to appreciate the not marking the table part. There had not been enough time to explain everything to the pard the previous night, and this was not a kind of magic the wereleopards were familiar with. In their world people did not throw around magic to heat up coffee, and Anita held her hand out to Nathaniel in support. Her pomme de sang came to her immediately and leant against her,

almost as if sheltering from the strangeness in the middle of the kitchen table. It was often the strangest things that unsettled Nathaniel.

"Harry and Draco have very different magic," she said in what she hoped was a calming manner, "they don't use it like we do."

Harry pulled his wand from somewhere, and Anita was shocked to realise she had been completely unaware that her house guest had been carrying it.

"We use one of these," the green eyed youth seemed to want to explain, and Anita could see the beginnings of a pard bond in the way Harry was reacting. "Draco couldn't figure out the coffee machine so he put a spell on the pot."

"It's good coffee," Anita offered as Nathaniel looked to her again.

The wereleopard appeared dubious, but when she gave him a nudge in the right direction Nathaniel went to the cupboard and took out a mug. When he came back he circled the table, looking at the pot from all sides before he would go anywhere near it. Harry put his mug under the spout and allowed his half empty cup to be filled once more as if to prove it was safe. Nathaniel still did not look happy, but he followed suit, and Anita did not miss the sniff he gave the coffee before he deigned to taste it. It would have been amusing had she not known the life that had led Nathaniel to be so cautious.

"If it's going to cause this much bother," Draco said, his pale eyes watching Nathaniel poised for retreat if the pot did anything strange, "I can cancel the charms and we can use that," the wizard waved his arm in the general direction of the coffee maker, "thing, instead."

"No, that's alright," Anita said immediately, "it was kind of you to make sure there would be enough for everyone, and if there is one thing we don't do in this house, it's waste coffee. Nathaniel is just naturally cautious."

She was not about to go into detail as to why the wereleopard had reason to be, but the implication was left hanging in the air. Nathaniel looked at her in a manner which said he would have been much happier if she had taken the other option, but when she nodded to one of the three spare chairs he did sit down.

"Anyone fancy some chocolate?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Only if you promise it won't go to my hips?" Anita said with a smile as she saw Nathaniel finally take interest in something other than the coffee pot.

"I'll be right back," the green eyed wizard said, and then dived out of the kitchen, back towards the living room.

Anita could not help but notice that Harry was already beginning to move like a lycanthrope. It usually took those infected months to adjust to their new situation, but Harry seemed to be way ahead of the game. Possibly it was his strange magic that was helping him, or it could have been a natural affinity, Anita did not know.

"He was hard enough to keep track of when he didn't have the extra speed," Draco commented dryly, obviously having noticed the change in his friend as well, "now I'm going to have to put a bell on him."

Anita smiled at the joke and Nathaniel laughed, which was quite a surprise. Harry appeared seconds later and dumped a pile of five boxes onto the table. The boxes that were face up read Chocolate frog.

"Please, have one," Harry invited with a grin that told Anita there was something more to this than candy, "there's nothing like Wizarding chocolate, even Cadbury's doesn't come close."

Anita had had Cadbury's chocolate once after rescuing a coach load of English school kids from a rampaging zombie; it had been very good, so she reached for one of the boxes. The moment her fingers touched it she felt the tingle or magic, and she looked at Harry who was still grinning.

"Nothing bad," he said as if he knew what she was thinking, "promise."

The moment she had the box open something jumped out of it. Nathaniel reacted instantly and his hand shot out to catch the projectile, at which point Anita thought his brain caught up with his instincts and he dropped whatever it was on the table. The chocolate frog gave one more little hop and then sat still.

"It's not alive, right?" Anita regretted asking the question the moment she did.

It was chocolate, of course it wasn't alive.

"No, just charmed to look that way when you first open it," Harry promised faithfully. "Go on, eat it, I swear you will never look the same way at the Muggle stuff."

Still not sure, but unwilling to snub her house guest, Anita reached out and picked up the now inanimate frog. It looked far too real for her taste, but taking her dignity in her hands she bit the head off. The moment the flavour hit her taste buds she smiled, it was good. The tingle of the residual magic as it moved around her mouth was rather pleasant as well.

"You may have a point," she said and bit off another bit of chocolate.

Knowing that Nathaniel would not be comfortable with the confectionary on his own, Anita broke off some of her frog and gave it to the wereleopard. As her pomme de sang tucked in to the chocolate, Anita noticed that something else had fallen out of her frog box, and she picked it up. It looked like some sort of trading card, but the frame was empty and she was about to put it down when the name under the frame caught her attention.

"Harry Potter," she read aloud, "the Boy Who Lived and Defeater of He Who Must Not Be Named."

Harry looked up as if he'd been shot; it appeared he had not expected that at all.

"I have a frog card?" he was looking at Draco and his tone was rather strangled.

"Harry," his friend said and Anita thought Draco was used to situations like this, "you rid the world of the greatest threat to Wizards in the last hundred years, of course you have a card. Didn't you know they were the hottest trade item at Hogwarts for the last four months?"

Harry obviously hadn't known if the pale, stunned look was anything to go by.

"No one told me," the young man said rather lamely.

"They probably thought you'd hex them," Draco said and patted Harry on the arm fondly, "after all that Hufflepuff who asked for your autograph when you came back to school didn't come down from the ceiling for four hours."

"So this Harry Potter is you, then?" Anita could not help herself, especially since as she looked at the card, a slightly younger looking version of Harry walked into frame, waved and then walked out again.

"Yes, it's me," Harry replied, looking most uncomfortable.

"And this He Who Must Not Be Named would be the Dark Bastard you've both referred to?" Anita wanted to be sure.

Draco nodded and Harry stared at his mug; this was most definitely a touchy subject.

"His name was Tom Riddle," surprisingly it was Harry who spoke next, but he sounded resigned rather than very willing to talk, "although he called himself Lord Voldemort. No one will say his name because they're scared of it."

There was a pointed look in Draco's direction at that.

"He killed my parents when I was one, but when he tried to kill me the curse bounced back," the way he told the story, Anita knew that the pain of the memories was being pushed away with an iron will. "Hence, the Boy Who Lived. I am the one and only person to ever survive the Killing Curse. What very few people knew was that he wasn't completely gone, and he tried to come back when I was eleven, and when I was twelve, and finally succeeded when I was fourteen. Because of a prophecy it was him or me, and I finally killed the arsehole a little over six months ago. He's not coming back this time."

The last sentence was said with a finality that begged no argument and Nathaniel had obviously picked up on the same distress that Anita could hear, since he reached out and ran a hand down Harry's arm. Lilac eyes met green eyes and something definitely passed between the pair and Anita guessed it was probably shared pain. The fact that everyone around her seemed to be so damaged was not a settling thought.

Micah broke the moment by walking through the door. Harry tensed immediately and Anita guessed that the wizard was remembering what he had done to the pard leader the night before. Harry appeared

somewhere between apologetic and defiant, somewhere between his human and lycanthrope reactions if Anita was any judge. The kid was definitely an alpha, but fighting and defeating 'the greatest threat to Wizards in the last hundred years' was likely to do that to a person.

The longer Harry was a lycanthrope the more alpha he would become, but he was still an interesting mix of human and wereleopard that Anita knew was not a threat to the pard. She tried not to dwell on the fact that there was vampire mixed in there somewhere as well. Micah had come to the same conclusion the previous evening in lycanthrope form or he never would have invited Harry into the huddle, and after a moment he must have come to agree with his initial assessment as he looked away from the possible rival to the coffee pot.

"Nice pot, Anita," was her Nimir-Raj's opinion as he walked to the cupboard, "where did you get it."

"It was a gift," she said with a smile at Draco, "have a chocolate frog."

"For breakfast?" Micah did not sound impressed.

"It's past noon," Anita pointed out and tried to use her eyes to indicate to Harry that everything was okay.

The kid still tensed when Micah picked up a frog box and flopped into a chair in the graceful way only a wereleopard could manage, but Harry was better at hiding it than most people. Nathaniel helpfully picked up Micah's mug from where it had been placed on the table and filled it from the pot. It was a very neat way to avoid having to ask how the magic worked and Anita hid a smile behind her mug at the alpha antics. When the frog jumped from the packet as Micah opened it her Nimir-Raj's face was a picture.

End of Chapter 7

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Chapter 8 The Man in Black

Scene 1

Waking up amongst the pard had been odd, and he had spent most of the morning and early afternoon trying to reconcile the feelings of belonging, the feeling of embarrassment and the feelings of not knowing what was going on, but Harry had been pleasantly surprised by the whole experience. Micah seemed to have forgiven him for swatting the Nimir-Raj like a fly, and Harry did not quite understand why he had done it in the first place. He did not want the position of authority, but he had just reacted. He wasn't sure he'd ever understand it.

When Draco had started making noises about going to the Malfoy residence, Harry had agreed, finding that he needed a little space. Of course that had brought up the question of being able to contact people and Harry had had to admit that Draco's town house had no phone. Which had in turn led to admitting that he owned a mobile phone.

Hermione was every inch a witch, but she still had one foot in the Muggle world and had insisted that Harry buy a mobile so she could keep track of him when he was not near a floo point. His female friend had even gone so far as to have her phone and his phone specially altered so that they were shielded from magic. Harry had just handed over his vault key and not enquired how much the

exercise was costing him since it had been important to Hermione and it was not as if he had any money worries.

That, however, did not mean he knew how to use said phone and he was standing in the living room looking at it stupidly as Nathaniel rattled off numbers.

"Um," he said as Nathaniel paused and looked at him.

"You look lost," the lilac-eyed wereleopard said with a slight smile.

"Had it a week," he admitted with a sheepish grin, "don't have a clue how it works."

"Want me to have a try?" Nathaniel offered, peering at the phone in Harry's hand.

"Thanks," he said straight away and handed the 'infernal Muggle device', as Draco had christened it the moment he saw it, over to his companion.

Nathaniel had it flipped open and beeping in under a second. If he was going to be interacting with it, Harry made a mental note to become more familiar with the Muggle world again. He was not shocked by anything like some of his Wizard friends were, but he had lost touch with Muggle culture after he had been removed from his relatives, and he had missed out on many things thanks to their neglect before that, so he needed a refresher course.

"Some of these are so illogical," Nathaniel said as his fingers moved over the number pad at a remarkable speed, "took me ages to work out Cherry's last one. She wouldn't let Zane use it after he nearly broke it one time. Anita bought us all a phone at Christmas; said she was fed up of having to track us down via pay phones or un-updated pre-paids. The girls got little flip ones that none of the guys can work. This looks like it was chosen by a girl."

"My friend Hermione," Harry admitted with a laugh. "She's Muggle-born so she knows everything about stuff like this. I know most of it, but I've never used it before."

From the look on Nathaniel's face that last statement intrigued the lycanthrope.

"So wizards don't use mobile phones?" Nathaniel asked, very open with his curiosity.

"Don't use phones of any kind," Harry replied honestly. "The reason Draco's house doesn't have a phone isn't because no one is living there at the moment, it's because wizards don't use them at all. At least not in Britain. We use fire talking."

"Fire talking?" was the next question.

"Far more civilised," Draco commented on his way past.

Harry just rolled his eyes and decided not to wonder what his friend was up to.

"Our fireplaces are connected via the floo network," he tried to explain to the perplexed looking Nathaniel. "We can travel between them as well, but when we want to talk to someone we throw this powder in the fire and stick our heads in. I suppose one advantage is that you can interact properly with the person the other end, pass things through and stuff like that, but you get soot everywhere."

The expression on Nathaniel's face clearly indicated that his companion was not sure whether to believe what he was being told. Harry had to admit that it did sound rather outrageous, but then a lot of the Wizarding world did.

"You put your head in the fire?" Nathaniel sounded very dubious.

"It doesn't burn once you use the floo powder," Harry replied with a nod. "I have no idea how it works, though, but trust me, it does."

"Weird," was Nathaniel's considered opinion.

"What's weird?" Anita asked as she walked into the room.

As usual when Anita arrived something in Nathaniel seemed to come alive as the woman strolled over. It was not something Harry could explain, but he had seen it too many times to ignore it, and it confused him. His hormones screamed at him that whatever was between the two was not platonic, but he had seen Anita kiss Micah and only ever hold Nathaniel. It was most odd.

"Harry was just telling me that wizard use fires to talk to each other," Nathaniel said brightly as he smiled at Anita.

"And here I thought smoke signals were in the realms of the Lone Ranger," Anita replied, which made Harry laugh.

Everything was far more relaxed this morning, now that the full moon was over and nothing bad had occurred, and Harry liked Anita's sense of humour. He decided it was better not to wonder how long the peace would last.

"That would be too sane," he said with a grin.

"I get the feeling I don't want to know," Anita replied and draped an arm on Nathaniel's shoulder.

Anita was a good three or four inches shorter than Nathaniel and yet as he watched them both looking at his phone, it was so obvious that Anita was the protector in the relationship. Harry gazed at them, so comfortable touching each other, so at ease and he felt his beast stir. His cat recognised his Nimir-Ra and it was strangely comforting. That would probably have been the sum total of the experience had Micah not chosen that moment to walk in as well and Harry could not help looking at the other man.

There was a reaction between Anita and Micah, something so slight that if he had not been paying attention he might have missed it, but Harry felt their beasts react to each other. He was stronger than Micah, he had proved that the previous night, but in that moment pure strength did not matter. He was alpha, he was strong, but he was not Nimir-Raj, Micah was and something in his head clicked into place as he felt Anita acknowledge her Nimir-Raj.

Something had changed over night, something had shifted inside of him as he slept with the pard and it made what he had done to Micah seem so wrong. Part of him wanted to crawl along the floor and say he was sorry and another part wanted to change the fact that he was not Nimir-Raj, both impulses were tinged with guilt for different reasons. It threw his thoughts into confusion and panic and he couldn't move.

"Harry," Micah's voice was strong and sure and Harry found himself looking into calm, green eyes, "let it go. Breathe, and let it go."

The air that he had not realised he was holding flowed out of his lungs in one long breath and he blinked at Micah helplessly as parts of himself warred with each other. Warm feelings of companionship and safety were coming from around him and he tried to focus on those, but it was difficult.

"I..." he tried to say, but he could not quite work out what words to use.

"It's okay, Harry," Micah said with perfect poise and calm, "the instincts can be disorientating. Just relax and try and let them wash over you. It's perfectly normal to be confused at first."

All Harry could do was obey the instruction and he did his best to breathe and let the conflicting influences run their course. When he had enough presence of mind to figure out what was going on around him he realised that Anita had him by one arm, Nathaniel was pressed up close to his other side and Micah was holding his face and looking directly into his eyes.

"Better?" Micah asked and slowly removed his hands from either side of Harry's face.

Harry gave a little nod and didn't quite know what to do or say. He felt rather embarrassed by his reaction now that it had dissipated to manageable levels.

"I..." he tried again, but he still didn't know what to say.

"Wanted to challenge me and fall at my feet at the same time," Micah finished for him, and Harry just nodded.

To his surprise Micah smiled at him.

"You're feeling part of the pard bond," the shorter man explained calmly as if he knew what Harry needed to hear, "but you're very alpha. You'll get used to the new instincts soon and they won't be too much of a problem."

There was a shadow in Micah's eyes as he spoke, but there was no trace of it in his voice. Harry knew he was upsetting the status quo just by being there; he had challenged the Nimir-Raj and won without even trying and he found that rather unsettling. No one else had said anything when they had found the five of them in the kitchen having breakfast, but Harry now knew why several had looked at him. He could feel the conflict in what he had done, and he knew Micah must have been paying for this anomaly which had walked into the pard.

Without allowing his higher brain or his alpha instincts to catch up he dropped to his knees. He had always been the leader, always in control, and for once in his life he let that go.

"Nimir-Raj," he said very seriously, eyes fixed on Micah's feet.

He was alpha, he was stronger than anyone around him, but he did not want to be Nimir-Raj, and for the first time in any situation in his life he let himself really believe that. He would not be here forever, he would be going home where once again he would bow to no man, but here, here he did not have to be the one in control. It was incredibly liberating.

When Micah gently touched his hair Harry sagged against the other man's legs and found that some of the stress of the last few days finally flowed out of him. He felt safe and protected and for now the conflict in him died.

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Scene 2

Anita parked the jeep in the street outside the address Draco had given her. The two young men had offered to find their own way back to the house, but Anita did not feel right leaving them alone unless they were somewhere safe. After Harry's display of submission she felt even more protective towards him than she had before, and she didn't know whether to curse or cheer. Harry's behaviour before and since had not really changed, but after the wizard had acknowledged Micah as Nimir-Raj something had felt better that she had not even realised was not right in the first place.

When the metaphysical shit really started flying, sometimes all a person could do was accept that they were going to be covered in it before it was over.

It was a very impressive part of town. Although the townhouses were one long block, each one was bigger than her house in the country. This was where the rich and eligible lived while they were in town for the season, and Anita was pretty sure that if she asked she would find out that Draco owned another property in the vicinity of St Louis as well, with grounds and a swimming pool and everything the well to do manor should not be without. She didn't bother to ask because she really didn't want to get into all of that.

Over the morning and early afternoon she had found that no matter how she tried to remember the ass Draco had been the previous day, when he was turning on the charm he was very hard not to like. He was sarcastic and his wit could be acidic at times, but to her chagrin, he appealed to her sense of humour and the way he treated Harry was very telling. She wasn't sure she trusted him, but she definitely liked him.

It was as she was climbing out of the jeep that she noticed something was slightly off about the way the two boys were behaving. The carefree chatter from the car journey was completely gone, and although to the average observer she was sure the pair would have looked completely relaxed, Anita could almost smell the tension.

"We're being watched," Harry whispered quietly as he leant forward as if to pull something from the glove compartment.

Every nerve in Anita's body went from casually observing the world, to full on in a moment and she felt the tingle of adrenaline through her system. It was possible Harry was wrong of course, or the watcher was completely innocent, but the way her companions were reacting made her doubt that either was true.

Anita walked round to the back of the jeep and opened the trunk, pulling out Harry's bag and using to opportunity to take a quick look around. She saw a man in a black suit further down the road and every instinct screamed at her that he was a danger. Sometimes the beast was very useful; she had always been able to read body language, but animals were far better at it than humans and everything about the man was wrong. The road had a couple of small, exclusive shops in it, between the houses, and the stranger was hovering near one of those.

"You two go inside," she said quietly, but with a smile as if she was just passing the time of day, "I'll go and have a word with our mystery man."

Draco's smile was just as easy on his face as it had been all through the day, but there was a spark of something in his eyes that didn't match it.

"With all due respect, Anita," the blond wizard said in a tone that matched her own, "Harry and I would prefer to deal with this. We can take him down, question him and make him forget he ever saw us."

It was said with such confidence that Anita didn't doubt that it was true for a second. They had mentioned a war and they had told her about killing Dark Wizards, but this was the first time she could really see it in Draco's eyes. Even when he had been protecting Harry in his own way, Anita had not seen the Draco Malfoy she was looking at now. It was quite startling to realise how good Draco's camouflage actually was.

"None taken," she replied and looked up at the sky as if checking the weather, "but I don't think you're delusional enough to think that I'm letting you do anything alone."

"Would you mind being backup?" Harry asked politely, leaning down and rummaging in his bag as if he was looking for something.

It looked so natural that for a moment Anita thought he actually was searching for something.

"We've done this before," he said and standing up again produced a small box of something, "but we don't know how you work. Sherbet Lemons," Harry said much louder, "a favourite of the Headmaster of my school. I'm sure you'll love them."

"Thank you," Anita said, taking the box and then lowered her voice. "I suppose I can still shoot him from here."

Just a little of the tension disappeared from her companions' stances and she realised that she had been part of their calculations and her involvement had been for the negative. It made logical sense, but she could not help feeling a touch insulted.

"Nothing personal," Draco said quietly as he offered her his hand, "but it's always difficult working with new people."

Instead of heading for the front door, Draco looked down the road past the man pretending to look in an antique shop window.

"There's a park just round the corner," the blond wizard said in a much louder voice. "I remember it being full of flowers. Fancy a walk before tea, Harry?"

Harry was a consummate actor as a smile graced his face that even Anita couldn't tell was fake.

"No offence, Anita," the kid said with a laugh, "but after that ride, I think I could do with some fresh air."

Then he shouldered his bag as if it weighed nothing.

"None taken, Harry," Anita replied in kind, "just make sure you don't let anyone hit you over the head again. Tourists only get one rescue per trip."

Anita watched them walk off down the road and she could easily see the man in black studiously looking at an old painting in the window of the shop as the pair walked towards him. Harry and Draco were chatting as if everything was perfectly normal and Anita set about opening the box of Sherbet Lemons to prevent her having to get back in the jeep. She was ready to drop them and pull her gun at a moment's notice.

It was not until the pair walked past the man in black that Anita saw anything remotely strange, and the stranger was caught completely off guard. It was the smoothest take down she had ever seen, as both wizards turned together, wands in hands, although she had no idea when they drew them, and each fired off a spell. The man in black was beginning to turn himself, but he thudded backwards into the window of the shop and slid down with a very surprised look on his face. Anita dropped the pretence of not being interested, pulled out her badge just in case there was anyone watching and trotted over the three men.

She arrived just as Harry crouched down and moved the man's jacket to the side, what she saw stopped her short. There was an odd looking leather holster on the man's belt and rather than carrying a gun the man in black was carrying a wand.

"Shit," Harry said and looked at Draco, "he's a wizard."

"He looks very Muggle," was what Draco said and as Anita watched the young wizard moved to rifle their stalker's pockets.

Everything they were doing was probably illegal, but most times it was better to be sure than dead, so Anita let the pair get on with it. It took Draco only a couple of seconds to come back with a wallet and it was quite obvious the young man had done this before.

"Bugger," was Draco's distinct opinion and when the blond wizard showed Anita and Harry the wallet it was obvious why.

There, on full display was an ID which read: 'Kramer Primley, United States Auror Bureau'. Harry and Draco had just stunned a US official. Anita was not quite sure what an Auror was, but she could make a good guess. Harry looked at Draco, Draco looked at Harry, and finally Draco pointed his wand at the downed man. Anita stood back and waited for the fireworks.

"Ennervate," Draco said and flicked his wand in what Anita assumed the appropriate manner.

Since the now identified Primley immediately opened his eyes and blinked up at all three of them, whatever Draco had done had obviously worked. There was complete silence for a good few seconds as they all looked at each other.

"Now I know why this assignment came with hazard pay," Primley said eventually. "Do you two gentlemen make it a habit to stun people you've never met."

"When they're lurking and watching us, yes," Draco said pointedly, and Anita thought, under the circumstances, that she might have attempted to be more diplomatic, but the kid had a point. "It is behaviour that prevented us dying for quite a long time, so sorry if we don't seem particularly remorseful."

"And you, Ms Blake," the Auror asked and Anita went cold at the use of her name, "do you concur."

"I never shoot first and ask questions later unless what I'm shooting at is trying to kill me," she said with her icy, I will kill you in a heartbeat persona firmly in place, "but then I do not have stunning spells in my arsenal."

Harry stood up from where he was crouched down and offered the Auror his hand. Anita liked the fact that the kid did not contradict his friend even though it was obvious Harry was feeling guilty about the incident. Surprisingly the Auror took the offered limb and pulled himself into a standing position. The way Harry just stood there like a rock and acted as a leverage point even though Primley was much bigger than him was quite impressive. Anita didn't think Harry was trying to intimidate the man, but she suspected the kid was doing an impressive job of it never the less.

"Shall we go inside the house?" Harry suggested, and Anita silently agreed that it was not very sensible to have this conversation on a public pavement.

So far there were no twitching curtains or curious bystanders, but in a city that could change at any minute. Although Draco looked unhappy at the idea there was no sensible alternative that Anita could see and the blond wizard did not object when everyone headed for his house.

"You have us at a disadvantage, Auror Primley," Anita said as soon as the front door closed; "you appear to know who we are, but all we know about you is your name."

"Mr Potter here is quite a celebrity, Ms Blake," the Auror said as Draco led them into a pristine sitting room. "When his name popped up in a Muggle police case, all sorts of alarms went off. I was sent to observe the proceedings. And your reputation, Ms Blake, is well known throughout the city."

Anita did not fail to notice that Harry made a face at the mention of being a celebrity.

"I came here for a holiday," the kid said, the sound of bitterness in his voice, "I do not want to be headline news."

"That should not be a problem," Primley said, and actually sounded sympathetic, although his attitude was still rubbing Anita up the wrong way. "The Auror Bureau has the information locked down. Our community in the US is far more integrated with Muggles than yours is in England, but we are separate enough that your involvement in a Muggle case can be kept quiet."

"You make a habit of perverting the course of justice?" Anita did not like the whole cloak and dagger feel to the current conversation.

The Auror looked at her evenly, his face neutral and not particularly friendly.

"Only when we feel it is extremely important, Ms Blake," Primley said and his tone was just a hair's breadth away from condescending. "That is why in this case we are only observing. The general population is having enough trouble accepting people with talents such as yourself, can you imagine what would occur should they suddenly find out there is a population of Wizards and Witches living among

them? They would attempt to use us or abuse us and there are not enough of us to take on every living Muggle, hence we take our secrecy very seriously."

Anita still didn't like his tone, but she could see his point. People had tried to use her on several occasions, and she was not seen as dangerous by most average people. If the way the Lycanthropes were treated regularly it told her that tolerance was not that great even in the land of the free.

"I am a licensed Obliviator," Primley said, looking over at Draco in a way Anita found very disconcerting. "It would make this far easier."

"No," it was Harry who spoke and he sounded ready to do damage if necessary.

Anita was not sure what had just been suggested, but she was rather pleased that Harry was so against it.

"What exactly did he just suggest?" she asked pointedly.

"That he remove the memory of him from your mind," Harry said, and the kid looked annoyed; Anita decided she agreed with him. "The Wizarding world does exist here, like at home, doesn't it."

Primley nodded, although he was the one not looking pleased now.

"We're more integrated, but a subculture does exist," the Auror replied, "and I broke at least two laws saying that in front of a Muggle."

"Anita is not a Muggle," Harry said vehemently, "she uses magic and deserves a damn sight more respect than you seem to want to give her."

Being defended quite so angrily was gratifying, but Anita usually did her own defending.

"You raise that wand to me and I'll shoot you," she said simply.

The sigh that Primley let out was one of defeat and the man sat down as if giving up.

"I meant no disrespect, Ms Blake," the Auror said politely. "We have very strict laws about altering people's memories and I would not have suggested it if I did not feel it would be the best solution for all involved. Until this point we still have deniability; that the European system was so different from the American one was believable. Knowing about us, Ms Blake, makes you subject to a whole series of laws you know nothing about, and if you were to just forget I exist it would be far easier on you as well as my Bureau."

"What laws?" she asked.

"There is an Amendment to the constitution guaranteeing the secrecy of the Wizarding population, Ms Blake," Primley told her, "and what it boils down to is that being a federal marshal, you cannot tell anyone about us without being prosecuted."

She was not about to mention that at least four people had access to her mind and she couldn't always keep things from them, but she did not like the idea of having her memory altered either.

"I do know how to keep a secret, Auror Primley," she said icily. "I would rather be subject to a thousand laws than have anyone try to get into my head."

Primley actually looked her in the eye then and eventually nodded his head.

"Very well, Ms Blake, my people will be in touch," the Auror said.

That seemed to be the point where Harry couldn't take it anymore if his reaction was anything to go by.

"Why is it so different over here?" the kid asked as if he found the whole situation incredible to believe. "If there are so many magical people here, why is the Wizarding world still separate?"

"I suppose it must seem very different to you," Primley said. "I spent a couple of years in England a while back and the old lines between Wizards and Muggles are much more obvious. Of course that's changing a bit, what with the vampires being made legal on your side of the pond as well. The way I remember it from History class, and forgive me if I'm a bit vague, it was a long time ago, when the settlers came over here a lot of magically challenged wizarding folk came with them."

"Are you talking about squibs?" Draco asked and seemed to find Primley's manner of expressing himself rather funny.

Anita wasn't sure what had amused the blond wizard.

"That would be a word to avoid in polite society over here, Mr Malfoy," the Auror said as if offering sage advice. "Contrary to popular thinking, magically challenged wizards are not usually completely without magic, they just don't have enough magic to do what we do, and often their magic is specific to one thing. They married into the Muggle population and certain traits entered the Muggle world becoming dominant over time and interbreeding, giving you what those in Ms Blake's line of work refer to as witches and sorcerers etcetera. We Wizards have our own laws and sections of government, but we still owe allegiance to the flag, and we live in much closer proximity to the Muggles. With all the preternatural activity around, we blend in very well."

Genetics was something Anita understood and it sounded like a rational explanation. She didn't really like the idea that there was a section of society hidden away from the rest, but at least it made sense.

"So what this all boils down to is you won't interfere and you won't allow this to leak to the press?" Draco sounded sceptical.

"Exactly, Mr Malfoy," Primley said and looked the Slytherin directly in the eye as he spoke. "My department do not want a diplomatic incident, or to have to clean up the mess having our two law enforcement agencies interacting would cause. It is in our best interests to see this settled without our involvement."

Anita could not help but think it would not be that easy. Things in her life were never that straight forward.

"Would you care for tea, Auror Primley," Draco asked as Anita tried to find the downside in the whole conversation, other than the huge conspiracy her government seemed to be involved in of course, "or perhaps coffee?"

Draco was being polite which seemed to relax Harry somewhat, but Anita was still on edge. She had no doubt they were about to pump the Auror for any and all information he had, but she had the sneaking suspicion that if the tea service was coming out, Draco, at least, intended to do it in a civilised manner.

End of Chapter 8

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Chapter 9 Like Even Less

Scene 1

They had grilled Primley for over an hour, until the wizard insisted that he had to report in. It seemed that wizards and witches still kept their society secret, but that they worked along side Muggles almost all the time. Harry and Draco had promised that they would not do anything to dispel the idea that Europe and the US were completely different and wizards did not exist in America, Anita promised to just not say anything at all unless it was absolutely necessary, and Primley assured them that he would be watching, but that it would be very discrete and he would not interfere.

Anita had left soon after Primley, leaving Harry and Draco to their own devices at last.

"Right," Draco said as soon as they had checked that their visitor had left nothing behind when he left, "do you want to call your fan club at home to make sure they don't all descend on St Louis first, or do something you're going to like even less?"

Having had to deal with so many other things he did not really want to have to deal with his friends as well. It was the sensible thing to do, but what he would have liked to do more was just relax and forget about it. However, a hoard of worried Gryffindors turning up on the doorstep in the middle of everything would be bad for lots of reasons.

"What did you tell them when you came over?" Harry asked as he headed for the study and the only floo connected to the network.

"There wasn't much to tell," Draco replied. "I received a message to contact the police department in St Louis via the family solicitors; they deal with anything Muggle related. I knew if it involved you and Muggle law enforcement it couldn't be good, so I made arrangements to come over and told Weasley that you'd managed to find some sort of minor trouble. Granger made me swear to call the moment I knew what was going on so they're probably frantic by now."

Harry felt the guilt settle firmly on his shoulders as Draco went to the large desk and pulled out a box from a secret drawer. Flooing internationally was impossible; the network would not work well enough to carry people over large bodies of water, but it was fine for fire talking. They had studied it in N.E.W.T. level charms and it had something to do with translocation of matter and representative translocation of matter that Harry had no intention of ever fully understanding.

"What do I say?" Harry asked as his mind went blank the moment Draco handed him the box of floo powder.

"If you want them all here in under an hour, tell the truth," the Slytherin said rather unhelpfully while he set about lighting the fire. "If you don't want them to worry be creative."

Harry narrowed his eyes; Draco really could be obstreperous when he wanted to be. It then occurred to him that he had just thought a word he had only ever heard out of Hermione's mouth and decided that he must be having a mental breakdown. He threw the powder into the fire, stuck his head in and rattled off the international address of the Burrow before he could change his mind.

It was odd looking at someone's living room from the fireplace, and he hadn't expected Molly, Arthur, Ron, Ginny and Hermione to all be sitting around it. It then occurred to him that there was a six hour time difference between St Louis and England; it had to be late evening at the Burrow.

"Harry," Ron almost leapt out of his chair, "we've been trying to contact you for two days. Where've you been, mate?"

He tried hard not to wince as guilt swept through him, but Harry had never been good at hiding his feelings from his friends.

"Sorry," he apologised quickly, "I ended up in a Muggle hospital and it took Draco's wrath to get me out."

"Oh you poor love," Molly said straight away, "what on earth happened?"

They all looked so worried and Harry did not want to burden them anymore than they already were so he did his best to look as if nothing was wrong.

"Someone hit me on the back of the head when I got out of the taxi at Draco's house," he admitted perfectly truthfully, "and they wanted to keep me in hospital for observation."

"How dreadful," was Arthur's opinion on the matter.

"I'm fine, though," Harry continued before anyone could ask how he was, "you know me; hardest head known to wizardkind."

No one in the room looked particularly impressed with that statement.

"So does this mean you're coming home early?" Hermione asked in a perfectly reasonable tone.

"Um, no," Harry replied, thinking fast, "I'm the only witness to the crime and the police want me to stay for a while. The same gang have killed, so there's a big hunt on to find them, and they need me to identify them when they catch them."

It wasn't completely a lie.

"But you said they hit you on the back of the head," it was just like Ron to notice a detail like that.

"Um, they might have kidnapped me as well," Harry could almost see the hole he was digging for himself, "and I saw them when I woke up."

"Good grief, what kind of Muggles live where you are?" Molly sounded outraged.

"Mostly nice ones," Harry promised and desperately prayed his friends would not ask too many questions. "The police are being very nice about everything, and there's a federal Marshall making sure I'm safe. If they hadn't hit me from behind I'd have hexed them into next week, so you know I can look after myself."

"Don't believe him," Draco leant into the fire next to him, "he couldn't look after himself if his life depended on it, only if someone else's did, but don't worry, I will keep an eye on him. The family solicitors are handling anything problematic and we're trying to keep a low profile."

It was nice to have backup, even if that backup was being sarcastic about you.

"So everything is really fine?" Hermione was looking straight at Harry as she asked the question and he felt as if he was staring into the headlights of a car approaching at speed.

"Of course it's fine," Draco said as Harry stumbled, "what do you take me for? You think I'd let our wayward hero be done in by a bunch of yanks?"

The Slytherin did a beautiful tone of righteous indignation, but Harry found that he could not lie outright to his friends. He hoped Draco's response would cover his little problem.

"We'll have a lot to talk about when we get back," he said as calmly as he could manage, "and then I swear I'll tell you all the little details, but there's not time now. There's stuff we have to do and we're going out later, and I really just want a long, hot bath."

Using his big green eyes and looking tired was something he could manage and he saw Hermione's frown melt away.

"You be careful," was all his friend said, rather than launching into an inquisition.

Harry just nodded at her.

"Sorry to floo and run," Draco took over again, "but we really are a little short on time. See you when we get back, bye."

And Harry felt himself being pulled out of the fire before he could say anything to incriminate them. He just about managed to waved and say goodbye before the connection closed and he was back looking at the fireplace in the Malfoy house study.

"If you would just learn to lie these things would be much easier," was Draco's succinct opinion on the matter.

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Scene 2

Draco let Harry have a cup of tea before he brought up the 'something you're going to like even less' from their previous conversation.

"Time for some testing," the Slytherin announced as Harry tried to put off what he knew was coming by reaching to pour another cup.

He wasn't quite sure what his friend was on about and his face must have showed it, because Draco shook his head exasperatedly.

"With your magic," his companion explained as if speaking to an idiot. "I don't know about you, but I want to know how much you can do without a wand, and what effect this business has had on your other spells."

"Oh," Harry replied, and realised that it was quite a sensible idea.

What with the shape changing and meeting vampires and everything, the fact that he had performed several wandless spells and destroyed the desk when he had meant to dent it a little had rather slipped his mind. It hadn't felt any different to do the spells so it was much lower on his list of priorities at the moment. Obviously it was quite high on Draco's.

"Where would be the best place?" he asked and did his best to sound enthusiastic.

Living without knowing everything that had changed about him was looking more and more appealing, but he was not naive enough to think it made any sense at all.

"There's a duelling room downstairs," Draco replied, looking him over in a very mother hen fashion. "It has wards to prevent anything entering the rest of the house. The entrance is off the wine cellar."

Once upon a time the idea of a house having a wine cellar would have impressed and shocked Harry, but he had spent too long with Draco for it to make him even bat an eyelid. He just nodded and followed his friend when he led the way.

"It shouldn't take long," Draco said as if he realised what Harry was thinking, "but you need to know. We can have a drink and play a game of chess or something when we're done."

Harry didn't bother replying, but he gave his friend a smile for trying. It had been a long couple of days and hiding under a blanket and refusing to come out seemed like a good idea at times, but this was important. He hoped that Draco's prediction would be correct.

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Scene 3

Harry just stared at the hole in the wall with his mouth open. It was about two feet wide and a good six foot deep, which was quite impressive considering that the cellar was carved out of bedrock. The test had been a simple one; Draco had wanted to see how powerful Harry could be in terms of brute force, so he had asked him to cast a banishing charm on an old dilapidated looking bludger they had found in a junk room off the side of the duelling area. Harry had done as he was asked and the bludger no longer existed except as a collection of component shreds and there was the crater in the wall. Even Draco did not seem to have anticipated anything like that.

"How, in Merlin's name, did you not kill Primley when you disarmed him if you have this much power?" Draco asked as he examined the hole.

"I didn't try very hard," Harry said, although he had had no idea quite what he was capable of and the thought that he could have accidentally, seriously hurt the Auror was rather a sobering thought.

He had known that the addition of lycanthrope and vampire traits had increased his underlying magical strength, but this seemed a little ludicrous. The combination of magical sources was not always predictable if Harry remembered the five minutes of theory Hermione had tried to explain to him when she was

writing her final assignment for her Ancient Runes N.E.W.T., but this was a far cry from a little accidental magic. The spell he had been subjected to had changed him at a fundamental level.

"Okay," Draco decided and gave Harry what Harry suspected was supposed to be a reassuring smile, but failed because the Slytherin still appeared a little shell shocked, "we need to find out what your range is like."

It was a better idea than anything Harry's stunned mind could come up with so he let Draco take over completely. He had a feeling this was going to take longer than either of them had first thought.

It had not taken too long to figure out that with a wand Harry's magic was on the dangerous side of powerful, but that he could control it back to normal levels if he concentrated enough. Without a wand he could do most of what he had been able to do before with one and had heard Draco muttering something about fakes wands and keeping the real one in a holster unless absolutely necessary.

Some of the more complex spells did not seem to work without the focusing device, but every day charms and hexes were easy. Before the Slytherin would explain what he was on about Draco has insisted they duel, Draco with a wand, Harry without. They were both good, their lives had depended on their skills, and even without a wand, Harry fought Draco to a standstill. They were evenly matched.

"That's it," Draco finally announced as he stood there breathing hard, and Harry decided that he would like to sit down and the floor was as good a place as any, "we're having a replica of your wand made."

Harry was too knackered to follow his friend's logic.

"Why?" he asked and lay back on the floor, staring up at the ceiling as he tried to recover.

"So that you can cast most of your spells wandlessly without anyone knowing the difference," Draco replied and joined him on the floor. "If people find out there will be too many questions, but waving a stick should fool most people."

Harry wasn't so sure; the wandless spells didn't quite look the same all the time, for example, where coloured light would have erupted from the end of his wand it tended to erupt from all of his finger tips if he cast without the focusing device.

"What about when you can see the spell?" he asked, looking over to where Draco was now flat on his back beside him.

"Magic travels the path of least resistance," the Slytherin said without turning his head from where he was looking upwards. "We can have a crystal core put in the fake wand which will make it look as if the magic's coming from the wand tip."

It seemed Draco had everything covered so Harry went back to staring at the ceiling.

"Okay," he said eventually, "can I go have my bath now?"

Draco was silent and when Harry looked over to his friend there was a thoughtful expression on the Draco's face. He had been so tired after the duel that Harry realised he had forgotten something important. One magical spell had come to

mind the moment he found out he was a lycanthrope, one spell that wasn't really just a spell at all.

"The Animagus transformation," he said as he remembered what Draco had suggested they leave until last.

"We can leave it, Harry," Draco said, sitting up and giving him a patented 'I'm serious about this', expression. "We don't have to do everything today."

"No," Harry said after a few more moments of silence, "I want to get this over with."

This was really the moment Harry had been worrying about. As far as he knew lycanthropes did not have Animagus forms, or at least werewolves didn't, but then everything he had been taught about werewolves seemed to be inaccurate as far as the lycanthropes he had met in St Louis went. The rest of his magic seemed to be working even if it was a little unpredictable at times and appeared a good deal stronger, but the Animagus transformation was something that was close to his heart.

He had not learned how to change into an animal because of the war, or anything to do with Voldemort; he had done it for Remus and it meant a lot to him. If it was lost to him he would feel it in a way he did not want to consider too closely.

Draco climbed to his feet and offered Harry his hand, and Harry used it to drag himself up.

"Ready, Harry?" Draco asked as the Slytherin viewed him, arms crossed and speculative.

"As I'll ever be," he replied, not sure he wanted to try this now, but knowing he had to.

The Animagus transformation was not like another spell. It was not something a wizard cast every time they used it, but more a matter of activating a spell they had combined into themselves at a base level. That was why a wizard could not choose their animal; it had to be compatible with them at a fundamental level and so in a way had been chosen for them before they ever tried the spell at all. With a thought Harry reached out and touched the tendrils of power within himself that were the essence of the transformation.

His body flowed from his human form into that of a wolf so that he was looking at the world through canine eyes and on a magical level it felt perfectly normal. However, on an instinctive level it felt as if he had just entered a completely alien world that was giving him all the wrong signals. It was as if part of him was rebelling against the change and he realised with a start that that was exactly what was happening.

His beast did not like the wolf shape.

The animal part of him was a cat and it had been added to human, so that cage it could cope with, but being a wolf was not what it wanted to be. For a while he fought the urge to change back into human form even as his beast tried to make him, but it was not until he was sure that he could maintain the form no matter how bad it felt that he let himself give in to instincts. When he was once again human he just stood there, breathing hard.

"Are you okay?" Draco moved towards him, obviously concerned.

Harry nodded and pushed his agitated beast back where it belonged.

"I don't think I'll be doing that unless I have to," he said slowly. "My cat doesn't like my wolf."

"Logical I suppose," Draco commented, and the Slytherin mask was back in place. "I think you need to sit down again before you fall own. It's time for that bath you've been harping on about all afternoon."

Right about then Harry decided that arguing was a bad plan and did as he was told. He had only mentioned the bath twice, but if Draco wanted to call that 'harping on' then he was not going to correct his friend. His wolf was not out of his reach, but he also knew that the shape was no longer a comfortable place for him. Silently he prayed that it would become easier, that his cat would accept the other shape, but he had no strength to try now, and all he knew was that failure did not have to be absolute to still hurt.

End of Chapter 9

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Chapter 10 The Way of Vampires

Scene 1

The Circus of the Damned was a very strange place in Harry's opinion. He was beginning to think he could pick out non-humans from the crowd by the slightly strange sensations they caused in him, but he wasn't a hundred percent sure yet. Anita seemed to be a very useful person to know, since the moment the staff at the establishment saw her she was treated like royalty. They were being led down a less travelled, but none the less, still half full corridor when he heard an irate hiss.

{Stupid big creatures,} he looked around to see if he could identify the snake he could hear speaking, {if you step on me I shall bite.}

With eyes that were increasingly good in the dark, Harry spotted a small shape over near the wall behind an elaborate looking dustbin. No one would ever accuse Harry of wilfully leaving anything in distress, and the snake was obviously not happy, so he tapped Anita on the shoulder.

"Just a minute," he requested and turned towards the other side of the corridor before Anita could object.

{Hello,} he said quietly, hoping that no one with normal hearing would pick up on it, {may I be of assistance.}

A green snake head popped out from behind the bin and black eyes regarded him as a red tongue flicked out.

{You do not taste normal,} was the snake's distinct opinion.

{I am not normal, my name is Harry} Harry replied in the tongue that came so easily to him even though he could barely tell he was speaking it. {I will not hurt you. May I take you to a place of safety?}

The snake swayed slightly, tasting again.

{My Mistress lives here,} the snake said and slithered towards him a little, {but one of the fanged ones took me to the wrong dressing room. I wish to return to her.}

{Then if you allow me, I shall find someone who can help us,} Harry replied and held out his hand. {What name shall I ask for?}

{Mistress,} the snake said and slowly slithered up Harry's wrist so he could pick it up.

Snakes could be very simplistic in their outlook on life and Harry knew the name would be no use, but at least he could try and help. Holding the snake gently he stood up and turned to find Anita and the vampire leading her both staring at him. Draco was supporting a knowing smirk and Harry tried not to blush.

"Do you have a snake charmer here?" he asked the confused looking vampire. "He's lost."

He exhibited the snake, stroking the little green creature's head to keep it calm. He had no idea what type of snake it was, but it looked quite cute.

"We have more than one," the vampire replied, seemingly not really very impressed with the question.

"Harry," Anita asked as if she was not quite sure of the whole situation, "did you just talk to that snake?"

He nodded; he had decided last year that he would not be ashamed of being a Parseltongue, and he saw no reason to deny it now.

"It's a talent Voldemort gave me when he failed to kill me the first time," he explained, walking back to the group with the snake. "Unfortunately snakes don't think like us and his idea of a name is Mistress. Seems someone took him to the wrong dressing room."

The snake slithered up his arm and decided to drape around his neck. Anita did not appear to find that particularly appealing and shook her head.

"I'm sure Jean-Claude will know who it belongs to," she said with more than a little distaste in her tone.

So they set off again with the extra member of the group. Harry was impressed when they were led into a large, dimly lit room with a very gothic style.

"Reminds me of the Slytherin common room," he whispered to Draco.

"Too much red," was the dry response.

"Ma petite, Harry, Monsieur Malfoy," Jean-Claude appeared from what seemed like nowhere, "welcome to the Circus of the Damned. Please, come in and make yourselves comfortable."

The power of the Master of the city reached out to him the moment Harry looked at their host and it enveloped him like a blanket. Every cell in Harry's body was made aware that this was Jean-Claude's space, the vampire owned everything within it in a way that had little to do with having bought furniture. Jean-Claude was

resplendent in black leather and a white shirt and Harry felt his mouth go rather dry even as the vampire smiled politely.

Anita seemed completely at ease and walked up to Jean-Claude, accepting a kiss on her hand in greeting. The woman belonged here and Harry was handed another piece of the puzzle that was Anita Blake, with no idea how to fit it with the others he had. He needed something he could actually figure out, so he caught Anita's attention by lifting the snake slightly.

It was almost as if she had forgotten about the snake problem entirely in the space of a few moments as she appeared to blink and recall that there was a situation to deal with.

"Harry made a new friend on the way in," Anita said, and beckoned him over. "One of your residents has lost a snake, any idea who it could belong to?"

The moment Jean-Claude set eyes on the creature around Harry's neck, Harry knew that the vampire recognised it. There was a rather resigned look in Jean-Claude's eye, as if he knew something unpleasant would result in this.

"Panis," Jean-Claude said and shook his head, "my apologies, but I'm afraid I must deal with this personally."

That made Anita frown and Harry could not help wondering what was so important about the little snake around his neck.

"Panis belongs to Melanie, ma petite," was the explanation which was forthcoming, and Harry could tell Anita was immediately on edge, but he was no clearer about the situation.

Something about this Melanie bothered Anita, and she was obviously important enough to warrant the attention of the Master of the city. Both of these facts made Harry wonder if he should have just left the snake where it was and sent someone else to deal with it.

"He was taken to the wrong room," Harry offered, hoping to be helpful.

Jean-Claude looked as if he was about to ask how Harry knew that, but Anita didn't give the vampire the chance.

"Can't you just send someone with the snake?" she asked and the way she took her hand back from where Jean-Claude was still holding it, Harry did not think she was happy at all.

"Regrettably, ma petite," Jean-Claude said and Harry had the feeling the vampire was very used to dealing with Anita's moods, "this has occurred before. When the snake was returned, Melanie attempted to eat the messenger in her anger, had I not been close enough to intervene Mathew would have been dead. Hence I prefer to handle her myself."

A door opened and a new vampire appeared. This one had black hair and piercing blue eyes and he was wearing a similar ensemble to Jean-Claude, except that he had a frock coat over the top.

"Ah, Requiem," Jean-Claude greeted politely, "if you would be so good as to request Melanie delight us with her company, I believe we have something she has lost."

There was no emotional reaction at all from the vampire as far as Harry could tell, and he vanished the way he had come without a word. All very strange in Harry's opinion. Glancing at Draco, Harry knew his friend was analysing everything just as he was trying to do and he suspected the Slytherin would be making far more sense of it than he was. Once again he was very glad of the silent support.

"Please, have a seat," Jean-Claude brought his attention back by being polite, but Harry really didn't feel like sitting.

"Thanks," he said as Anita moved to sit, "but do you mind if I stand?"

"He'll probably vibrate through the chair if you make him," Draco commented as the Slytherin took up the offer and chose a comfortable looking antique chair as if he owned the place.

Jean-Claude offered Harry a sympathetic smile, at least that's what Harry hoped it was.

"Of course," the vampire replied. "Perhaps some light refreshment while we await Melanie's pleasure?"

Harry was pretty sure he didn't want anything passing his lips until the whole feeding on blood issue had been sorted out, but he went along when the other two agreed. He ended up with a glass of wine, and no one seemed to care that he was underage so he took a good swig. At least it gave him something else to do other than watch Draco practice the art of small talk and remember quite how inadequate his education in the subject had been.

Thankfully it was not too long before there was a knock on the door and Requiem walked in, followed by a rather stunning woman. Long black hair fell down her back in rivulets from the most ornate headdress Harry had ever seen in real life, and the dress she was wearing was snug to say the least. It covered her from neck to ankle, but the fact that it was almost transparent meant that Harry had an eyeful.

"Melanie," Jean-Claude said in what Harry was beginning to suspect was his normal charming manner, "thank you for coming."

It was quite obvious that Anita was on full alert the moment she saw the woman and there was something about Melanie that set off Harry's alarms, but he did not know what it was. At first glance she should have been harmless; deadly beautiful, but not deadly anything else, but if Harry had not been routed to the spot by the sight of her he would have been backing away.

"I hope this is important, Jean-Claude, one of your oafs misplaced my..." the woman stopped mid sentence as she spotted the snake around Harry neck. {My baby,} those were not exactly the words he had expected from the woman's mouth, and especially not in Parseltongue, {are you well? Did that infant hurt you?}

The snake raised himself up the moment Melanie started to come towards them, and Harry helped it from around his neck so he could

gently present it to the woman as she swooped down on them. Pretending he was just an errand boy and giving the snake back seemed to be a good idea at the time.

{I am quite well, Mistress,} the snake replied. {I was saved from harm by the one who carries me.}

The woman finally paid him some notice, and Harry gave her a wary smile. He almost felt like prey.

{He is a very beautiful snake,} he decided to attempt to be nice, since she seemed very protective of the snake and was now taking an interest in him.

Melanie looked shocked and then suspicious.

{You speak,} she said bluntly, {and yet you are not of my kind. Explain this young one, I do not like surprises.}

"Melanie, back off," Anita sounded defensive and annoyed, and she had climbed to her feet. "Jean-Claude, tell her to get the hell away from Harry, or we'll see how long it takes her to heal from my bullets this time."

Harry concluded that Anita and Melanie had met before and they were not friends.

{My kind say it is a talent passed down from Salazar Slytherin,} he thought it might be a good idea to diffuse the situation rather than be the cause of a blood bath.

{Salazar, you are a child of Salazar?} Melanie sounded almost wistful.

That was a difficult question because Harry was almost sure she would be able to spot a lie.

{Not exactly,} he told her honestly. {I was passed the talent by one who claimed to be.}

{Salazar was a beautiful man, a lover of snakes,} the woman told him and gave him proof that she was not a woman at all. {Do they honour his name?}

{He is one of the honoured founders of my school,} Harry replied. {He chose the snake as the symbol of his house.}

That seemed to please her and she smiled.

"Thank you for Panis' return," she said, switching back to English. "It is a long time since I have spoken to anyone in my own tongue, apart from my little ones. If you wish to speak again, my door will be open."

The way she looked at him made him shiver, but he could not help and be a little curious. This woman, whatever she really was, had obviously known Salazar Slytherin, and Harry had a feeling she knew the origin of Parseltongue in the Wizarding world.

"Thank you, Jean-Claude," she said, dismissing Harry with nothing more than a glance and then sweeping out of the room.

Harry turned back to the others and found he was once again the centre of attention.

"Harry," Jean-Claude asked politely, "how is it you speak the language of the lamia?"

"I inherited it," he said and decided that now he wanted to sit down.

He felt as if he had just looked down the wrong end of a wand and he needed to process the experience.

"She's not human, right?" he asked as he sat in the chair next to Draco.

"Yep," Anita told him, and was still looking annoyed with the whole situation, "part snake, looks human, and all immortal back stabbing bitch."

Jean-Claude gave Anita a look that Harry thought said 'was that really necessary', and Anita's answering look clearly said 'yes'. There was definitely no love lost between Anita and Melanie, that much was clear.

"Parseltongue, is a talent passed down through the Slytherin family of wizards," Draco it seemed had decided to help Harry out and explain. "It was passed to Harry when Voldemort tried to kill him as a baby."

"She said she knew Salazar," Harry added his own information. "It sounded as if they were friends."

"Perhaps it was she who gave him the gift," Jean-Claude said thoughtfully. "I have never heard another use that tongue."

Harry just shrugged and took another swig of his wine; just at the moment he really didn't care.

"Perhaps we should get to what we came here for," Anita suggested even as Harry did his best not to think about it. "How are we doing this, Jean-Claude?"

"With Harry's agreement I would like to keep a close watch on his first feeding," Jean-Claude replied, looking at Harry for his response.

"I think we'd all feel safer that way," he replied without trying to hide the fact that he was as nervous as hell.

The vampire gave him a smile for that response and Harry felt as if he'd been awarded a couple of points for trying. He just wanted this over and done with. The vampire in him scared him and he did not understand it at all. At least with the lycanthropy he had the Animagus transformation to call on as some sort of experience, but this was completely out of his known range.

"Then I would suggest more comfortable surroundings," Jean-Claude said and indicated the door. "When one is partaking of a new experience I have found that it is far better to be relaxed. You may feel light headed and overcome with a first feeding and a bed is more conducive to the situation."

Now he was being invited into a vampire's bedroom; Harry thought about fleeing for a fraction of a second.

"Would you prefer if Anita and Monsieur Malfoy wait here, or accompany us, Harry?" he snapped back from thoughts of running away when Jean-Claude spoke to him again.

Looking at Draco and then at Anita, Harry wasn't sure what to say. He wanted the support, but he was also embarrassed and he did not know if they would rather stay out of it. Draco regarded him with calm grey eyes and Harry could feel his support.

"What do you..." he began to ask.

"Wherever you need me," Draco said before Harry could finish.

"Likewise," Anita said firmly.

"With then," Harry decided before his embarrassment could take over.

Jean-Claude gave him another smile.

"This way then, mes ami," the vampire said, and directed them to the door.

With a lump in his throat the size of a fist, Harry climbed to his feet and reluctantly headed in the direction indicated. To say he was scared was understating the facts, but he had been scared before and that had never stopped him.

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Scene 2

"Harry," Jean-Claude said with a smile as he brought forward a grinning blond man, "may I present Jason, my wolf and my pomme de sang. Jason, this is Harry."

Harry did not think the possessive language was just for show, and Jason did not seem to mind the titles in the slightest. By wolf he assumed Jean-Claude was implying that the all-American looking man was a werewolf, and he remembered Anita mentioning something about pomme de sang being a vampire's food source. Anita appeared a little surprised which seemed to please Jean-Claude. There were connections here Harry did not quite understand, but they were floating around the room like so much flotsam.

"Normally a new vampire would be taken to one of our private establishments and mentored," Jean-Claude explained in a very patient tone. "There are those who enjoy our attentions. However, I feel that your situation is unique, and as such deserves my individual attention. When this was explained to those who needed to know, Jason volunteered to assist."

"Always up for the weird and wonderful," Jason joked, but the lightness of the young man's tone did not help settle Harry's heart.

He was so out of his depth that it was silly, and he was beginning to wish he could go and hide somewhere and pretend this wasn't happening.

"Hello," Harry thought it was only polite to greet his prospective dinner.

Standing in a vampire's bedroom with the aforementioned vampire, his pet werewolf, the leader of the local wereleopard clan and Draco was probably the most surreal moment of Harry's life, and that was quite a feat. He did not feel the bloodlust Jean-Claude assured him was there, and he would much rather have gone to Draco's house and forgotten about the whole thing. However, the memory of the previous night when he had flattened Micah with something that was neither leopard, human or vampire, but rather all three mixed, was still clear in his mind.

"Do not be afraid, mon enfant," Jean-Claude said kindly, "we will not allow you to be alone in this."

The French caught him rather off guard and he vaguely remembered from one of Hermione's time-to-improve-Harry sessions that 'enfant' was French for child. What the term of endearment meant in the scheme of things Harry was not sure, but when the Master vampire held out his hand, Harry walked towards Jean-Claude without trying to justify why in his head. He needed to do this, he was sure of that, he just hadn't figured out why yet.

"Can you feel the vampire within you?" Jean-Claude asked with a calm, yet serious tone.

That had been something Harry had been trying to figure out ever since the previous evening. He could feel something, but there were so many new sensations going through his body that it was difficult to know what was vampire, what was lycanthrope and what was his over active imagination.

"I think so," he replied, deciding that blatant honesty was the best course in this situation, "but I'm not really sure of anything right about now."

Jean-Claude smiled at that.

"Understandable, mon enfant, understandable," was the Master's response. "You will need to call the vampire to the forefront as you did yesterday afternoon, then I will guide you through feeding. If you will allow me, I may be able to assist with the first task."

Harry looked at Anita just to make sure he was not about to do something stupid, and when she nodded he gave his consent to the vampire.

"What do I do?" he asked with no attempt to hide his nervousness.

"Simply look into my eyes," Jean-Claude replied and held out his hand, which Harry took, "and do not attempt to fight me."

It was easy to look straight into the midnight blue eyes which immediately pinned him down, it was more difficult not to fight the influence he felt as soon as their gazes locked. At first the touch was light and he did his best to hold his mind open to whatever Jean-Claude was doing, but it was so alien to him. Harry had been keeping his mind closed for so long that allowing another access was completely contrary to every instinct in his body.

As the power invading his mind increased and Jean-Claude slowly moved into his mind through his open barriers, Harry thought he was coping well. The Master of the city appeared to be having a little difficulty, but Jean-Claude's power continued into his mind and he knew he could not open himself anymore. Everything seemed to be going well, until the vampire's magic touched something inside him and caused a reaction, at which point rationality vanished in a flash of panic.

"No," he said as his mind dissolved in fear and he tried to throw up every mental protection he had. "Can't let him in. Mustn't let him know."

He continued repeating the mantra which was the only thing that had kept him sane through the hell that had been his summer holiday after his fifth year. He had had no defences against the nightmares and the visions, and Occlumency had failed him, so that all he had left was his will. Harry still did not know what he had done and neither did anyone else for that matter, but one day he had woken up free of the dreams and when he returned to school not even Dumbledore had been able to shake his shields. After that he had been taught Occlumency to help him understand this new gift, but his main barrier against Riddle had always been his own shields. They had softened since Voldemort's death, but now they tried to slam back into place and expel the invader from his mind.

"Harry," an urgent voice made it into his panicked mind, but when he realised someone was holding his arms he tried to pull away. "Harry," the voice repeated, "it's okay, no one will hurt you. You have to let go."

"Can't let him in," was all Harry could whimper, "he'll kill us all."

"He's dead, Harry," the voice told him insistently, "Voldemort is dead."

It was actually the partial stutter on the name that grabbed his attention, and it might have been an irrelevant little moment, but it was all he had and he clung to it. Slowly he began to realise that he was not where he remembered being and time seemed to have passed; for a start he was kneeling on the floor, and he was trying to hunch down with his arms over his head, but someone was stopping him. After a moment or two he cautiously opened his eyes and found Draco looking at him with a very worried expression.

"Harry," his friend asked, "are you back with us?"

Harry blinked at the Slytherin for a few moments as he tried to figure out what had just happened.

"Yes," he replied quietly.

His eyes flicked from his friend's face to see that the other three people in the room had become four, since Asher had joined the group, and they were all looking at him with varying amounts of concern.

"My apologies, mon enfant," Jean-Claude said the moment their eyes met, "I had no idea you would have such a reaction to the touch of my mind."

Harry was pretty sure he should be the one apologising, but his thoughts were far too scattered to allow him to do anything quite that sensible.

"Harry, are you okay?" Draco sounded worried.

"Head hurts," he managed to reply, although it was an ache behind both eyes rather than the throbbing in his scar that he had been used to with his episodes.

"Let's get you somewhere more comfortable," the Slytherin decided and backed up a bit.

Harry did not even try to object as two pairs of hands took hold of him and helped him to his feet. It was only as he swayed in place and ended up leaning against the second person that he realised it was Jason.

"Steady there, kid," the werewolf said cheerfully, "I think you need to lie down."

"Bring him to the bed, Jason," Jean-Claude instructed from somewhere that Harry could not be bothered to look at.

His mind was still not working very well, and as a strong arm wound round him protectively he leant into it without thinking about it. The very male smell that filled his nostrils as he rested his head on the available shoulder was rather pleasant, and the animal musk underlying it spoke to a part of him that only days ago had not existed. He had a sudden urge to lick the skin against which he was leaning, but Jason chose that moment to try and guide him somewhere he didn't much care to go, and he did not have the coordination to walk and lick at the same time.

"Is he going to be okay, Jean-Claude?" he heard Anita ask quietly.

He wasn't sure he was supposed to be able to hear it.

"He threw me out of his mind, ma petite," the Master of the City replied, equally quietly, "the power it took is bound to leave him dazed. We will let him sleep and then try to allow him to feed again."

It was then that Harry remembered what he was supposed to be doing and he opened his eyes from where he had let them fall closed again. There was a very inviting looking neck not two inches from his nose and he watched the blood vessel pulse under the skin as he allowed himself to be manoeuvred towards the bed. With his higher thoughts trapped somewhere behind the haze of magic still in his mind it all seemed much more straightforward than it had before.

As Jason paused at the end of the bed, Harry decided it was time to do something, and he shook off the lethargy with a thought. Turning in the embrace the werewolf was using to hold him up he took hold of Jason's shoulders, twisted them both and pushed his food down onto the bed.

"What the hell?" was Jason's immediate response until Harry climbed onto the bed and straddled him.

He casually threw his glasses somewhere as the room sharpened and brightened in his vision and he looked down at the werewolf with careful consideration.

"Oh," Jason said in a completely irreverent tone, "you decided to come out and play after all. Like what you see?"

Harry just smiled at that, showing the werewolf his fangs quite deliberately, and then he snared the blue eyes with his gaze.

"Leave them," Jean-Claude's instruction made it to the part of his mind that was paying attention to anything but the lycanthrope beneath him, but he gave it little thought.

If someone tried to stop him he might have to hurt them, but it sounded as if the Master of the city had no intention of letting that happen, so he really didn't care who might be watching. Jason's eyes went a little glassy as Harry pushed some of the power he could feel curling through his body at the werewolf. His prey even moaned when he leant forward and licked the spot that had been interesting him earlier.

He could feel the living pulse on his tongue and it was all it took to push him to open his mouth wider and sink his fangs into the willing neck. Jason stiffened below him with a groan, somewhere between pain and pleasure that only added to the strange excited feeling that filled Harry as the blood hit his mouth. Jason was enjoying this, Harry could tell as a connection flared between them through the blood. He could feel the pleasure flowing through the werewolf, tinged with a delicious edge of pain that seemed to excite Jason even more.

There was the feeling of Jean-Claude as well, Harry could sense that in the blood as he drank in the liquid and the arousal from his prey. It was like a perfect harmony that took away just about everything else from his mind. Only when the pain began to outweigh the pleasure did he think about stopping as an instinct told him he had taken enough. Withdrawing his fangs from the pliant flesh he lapped gently as the slowly weeping wound. Jason moaned loudly at the touch, seemingly oblivious to anything but Harry.

Sitting up slowly, he watched the werewolf sprawled below him, head to the side, eyes closed and he smiled. He could feel the healing energy of the lycanthrope trying to remove the wound, but it seemed reluctant to close and Harry reached out with two fingers, placing them on the puncture marks before whispering a quiet healing spell.

As the magic flowed from Harry's hand into the werewolf, Jason's head went back; the lycanthrope keened in an almost wolf like way; bucked underneath him for several seconds and then went totally still. Harry's sexual experience was minimal, but he knew an orgasm when he saw one, and the wave of energy that flowed over him was rather breath taking. Jason was completely out for the count and all Harry could do was blink and stare in a rather surprised manner. He had not been expecting that and now that it was sated his vampire was fading, bringing back reality with its many awkward complexities.

"I do believe you have worn him out, mon enfant," was Jean-Claude's amused opinion on the matter.

End of Chapter 10

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Chapter 11 Identity

Scene 1

Harry had appeared somewhat shell shocked after the hunger had taken him over, and Anita couldn't blame him; she remembered the first attack of the *ardeur* and it had upturned her world. Once Jason had recovered enough to be joking around again, Jean-Claude had packed his *pomme de sang* off to recover properly and sent Harry and Draco, under Requiem's care, to find something to do to take Harry's mind off his recent experience.

Explanations and deep conversations had been promised for later, but Jean-Claude had insisted that some relaxation was in order. That left Anita alone with her two favourite vampires and a sudden desire to feed her own hungers. They headed back to the bedroom with little to no discussion.

Once, if Anita had suspected Jean-Claude of sleeping with another man she would have dumped him faster than it took to be told, but she had mellowed. It had taken her a while to accept the idea, but she knew Jean-Claude and Asher were together in the true sense of the word. They had avoided pushing the issue when Anita was with them for several months, but one night, in the heat of passion they had forgotten themselves, and Anita had discovered why women were known to buy gay porn. They still shied away from full intercourse when she was there, but most other interaction had ceased to be taboo.

Anita could not help being reminded of this when Asher immediately set about disrobing Jean-Claude as soon as they stepped through the door. She noted absently that the bed sheets had been changed since they had returned to the living room earlier, but she was far more interested in the way Asher had loosened Jean-Claude's shirt and was running his hands over his fellow vampire's chest.

The little noise Jean-Claude made in the back of his throat was very enticing. When midnight blue eyes opened from where they had fluttered closed and looked at her, Anita did not hesitate. She walked across the room and stood in close to the side of Jean-Claude that Asher had not possessed and allowed her hands to join Asher's much bigger ones on Jean-Claude's chest.

The power of the *ardeur* was lurking there below the surface for both her and her vampire master, Anita could feel it, but the electricity she felt running down her arms was all sexual energy, not metaphysical feeding. When she brushed against Asher she almost reached for him as well, but managed to hold off for now.

Tag teaming Jean-Claude was quite a new game, but it was one that Anita was beginning to relish. Asher had had decades of practice in making Jean-Claude putty in his hands and Anita was a quick study. As Asher kissed and nibbled his way down the left side of Jean-Claude's neck, Anita mirrored his attentions on the right side. Jean-Claude did not seem to know which way to move, and when Anita ran her hand down over his perfect chest and one finger under the waistband of the black leather pants the moan from his lips was very gratifying.

Jean-Claude turned his head towards her as she lifted her face to look up at him and he leant down to catch her lips with his. Opening her mouth without hesitation she allowed his tongue to slip between her lips and she could not suppress the tiny moan of pleasure as she allowed Jean-Claude access to her body in only the first of oh, so many ways.

They were moving backwards as she wound her arms around him and she knew Asher was lowering Jean-Claude to the bed, taking her with them. As Jean-Claude allowed himself to relax back onto the sheets, Anita climbed on beside him, never allowing the kiss to break. She forced her own tongue into Jean-Claude's mouth and disregarding years of practice she deliberately nicked herself on one of his fangs.

Fear of being food had long since left her, Jean-Claude had already fed, as had Asher, so they could both control their blood lust, but a little blood increased the heat and excitement. Anita would let Asher bite her properly later, but for now it was Jean-Claude she wanted to excite. He arched into her, lifting himself back off the bed as if Asher's weight holding him down on the other side was nothing. Anita's body tightened in response and a throb of desire ran from her head to her toes taking in some very significant areas.

Jean-Claude's hand came up and forced the kiss harder so that their lips were grinding against each other. At that moment Anita wanted nothing more than for the kiss to go on for ever. So enthralled was she by the taste and feel of her lover's mouth that until a hand brushed her hips she had completely lost track of what Asher was doing. When she finally broke away and looked the throb of desire that ran through her almost brought the ardeur crashing to the forefront of her mind; Asher had removed his own shirt and was currently relieving Jean-Claude of his pants.

Giving in to the ardeur would have been easy, but after all the strangeness that had been going on since she found Harry chained to the ceiling, Anita needed to feel in control. Using the ardeur and making it bow to her will was what she needed now and she forced it back, knowing that she would free it later and feed.

She returned to the kiss with Jean-Claude, even as Asher's skilful hands reached around her body and quickly released the buttons on her top. Taking it off would have to wait until she was not otherwise engaged, but she made no move to resist as Asher's hands continued their progress under her clothes and effortlessly released the hooks on her bra. Even Anita couldn't undo her underwear with such ease and it briefly made her wonder how many times Asher would have done such a thing, but when the vampire began to touch the areas of flesh he had freed, she rather forgot about the question entirely.

Moaning into the kiss she moved her position so that Asher had better access, and Jean-Claude decided to join in as well. With two sets of skilled hands on her, Anita could not help shivering as fingertips ghosted across her skin. When the ridged underwire of her bra brushed against a very sensitised nipple it dawned on her that the clothes, although hanging off her were plain in the way and she broke the kiss with Jean-Claude, sitting up and efficiently removing her upper body garments with one pull. Jean-Claude smiled up at her as she knelt beside him for a moment and then he was pulling her back down, brushing his thumbs across her nipples as he demanded more of her mouth.

Anita had again lost track of what Asher was doing until Jean-Claude broke away, putting his head back and making a deep sound of appreciation in the back of his throat. When she turned to find out what was going on, Anita was captivated by the sight of Asher's perfect mouth enveloping Jean-Claude's straining erection. The vision of male beauty and male arousal sent shots of desire all over her body and she could not help the whimper that came out of her own mouth. When pale blue eyes looked up at her through long lashes as that sinful mouth drew more encouragement from Jean-Claude, Anita almost let the ardeur flood out of her.

She had seen this before, but it never ceased to send wonderful messages to every erogenous zone in her body; a reaction that in the cold light of day never failed to make her blush, but in the heat of the night filled her with such desire as to take her breath away. Laying her head on Jean-Claude's chest she watched as Asher knelt between Jean-Claude's legs and moved his head slowly up and down, taking Jean-Claude's length into his throat as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Absently, Anita played gently with one of Jean-Claude's nipples, listening to the sounds of pleasure rumbling through her lover's chest and captivated by the erotic beauty before her.

In the end Anita had not idea how long Asher played Jean-Claude, all she knew was the sounds and the writhing of the body beneath her head, moving with her lover and watching the fallen angel between Jean-Claude's legs as he performed. When Jean-Claude cried out and bucked into Asher's sinful mouth, Anita drank down Jean-Claude's orgasm, shuddering as if it was her own and coming to rest only when her lover had ridden the wave of his release.

Still she held the gaze of Asher's pale blue eyes and when the vampire finally released his prize, having taken everything Jean-Claude had to give Anita was moving as if she could read Asher's mind. She met him halfway as he came towards her and their lips met in a passionate kiss, lips opening and tongues darting through, battling to taste the other. The flavour of Jean-Claude was something very familiar to Anita and in Asher's mouth it filled her with almost overwhelming desire.

She wanted, no, she needed more and even as they kissed her hands scrambled for the fastenings on Asher's pants. Caught in the passion, everything seemed to take too long and when other hands joined hers to relieve Asher of his remaining clothing she moved on to removing her jeans instead. She wanted to keep kissing her vampire lover, but there were certain times when practicality had to take over from passion and she pulled back, pushing her jeans and panties down, fumbling to move them off one knee and then the other before kicking them off the bed. By the time she had finished Asher was kneeling on the bed, proud and erect, waiting for her, Jean-Claude sitting beside him with desire burning in his deep blue eyes.

Asher literally picked her up, pulling her into the middle of the bed and manoeuvring her until she was lying on her back. There was no hesitancy in his movements as he loomed above her and she spread her legs, inviting him in. She did not need coaxing, or preparation, the little show she had been watching had seen to all of that and as Asher moved into her in one smooth stroke she arched into him and moaned her desire.

"Je t'adore, ma cherie," Asher whispered as he pulled back and thrust into her again, grinding their bodies together.

The ardeur beat at the bonds she had placed on it and she wanted to let it go. With Asher buried deep within her and Jean-Claude beside her she felt the need to let go.

"Not yet, ma petite," Jean-Claude's voice was low and demanding, almost commanding in its intensity and she mewed her need. "Hold on and I promise it will be worth it."

The ardeur was rising, but at the promise it was as if it was a sentient thing and knew that the pledge would bring more of what it needed. It burned under Anita's skin as Asher drove into her in slow, urgent circles as he lifted her hips from the

bed and she put her head back, eyes closed, trying to hold on. It was frustrating and incredibly arousing at the same time, however, what was not arousing was when Asher placed her back on the bed and withdrew. Her growl of outrage was very heartfelt and she opened her eyes to glare at the vampire.

What she saw was Asher and Jean-Claude swapping places and Jean-Claude had a knowing smile on his face.

"My turn, ma petite," Jean-Claude said, the heat in his eyes reaching out the swallow her, and Anita could not fail to notice that he had recovered from his earlier exploits.

What surprised her was that he did not move closer and take her as Asher had done, what Jean-Claude chose to do was lower his head between her legs and bring one hand up to join it. As a warm, urgent mouth closed on her so fingers slipped into her and her fit of pique was forgotten. She was reminded sharply that Jean-Claude had over four hundred years experience at this and as his fingers brushed just the right spot inside her she surrendered to him completely.

Jean-Claude used his talented tongue and mouth to push her close to the edge and then bring her back; he teased her and almost seemed to be taunting the ardeur, all the while loosening her with ever moving fingers. When he pulled her back from orgasm for the third time Anita thought she was going to go mad, especially when Jean-Claude sat up, removing his delightful lips from what they had been doing.

She looked up to see both her vampires looking down at her with lust in their eyes, Jean-Claude between her legs and Asher just behind him. In that second she felt more desired than she thought she had any right to be.

"Now you are ready, ma cherie," Asher's voice was husky with sex and spoke to her of secret things only passion could explain.

Lying down beside her, Asher stroked one finger down her body, from her neck to the nest of hair between her legs as Jean-Claude moved away slightly. Then Asher turned onto his back and two pairs of hands were urging her up to straddle him.

"Sink down on him, ma petite," Jean-Claude said from where he was now behind her, "and lift your hips."

Sliding onto Asher felt good, but having had almost Jean-Claude's entire hand in her body it was no longer enough to satisfy her craving and she felt the need for more. When Jean-Claude moved in closer behind her and she felt his erection press close to her entrance she realised what the whole cycle had been about. Before she could be afraid and begin to tense up Jean-Claude was pushing into her as well and if it had not been for Asher's steady arms she would have fallen on him.

"Oh god," was about the most sensible thing she could manage to say as her vampire lovers filled her almost more than she could bear.

"Relax, ma petite," Jean-Claude whispered in her ear, "relax and let us love you."

To have them both was more than she deserved, more than fate should have allowed, and all she could do was give herself to them. As Jean-Claude and Asher began to move in perfect rhythm she let them hold her in place as she

surrendered completely. As both whispered to her of passion and love, the ardeur would be denied no longer and it burst from her, demanding everything her men had to give. She was lost in a sea of sensation and feeding as their three bodies moved together in an ancient ballet. Jean-Claude's need joined her own becoming completely overwhelming, and when Asher's fangs finally pierced her flesh, she screamed and let her orgasm take her.

Vampire powers and hungers all combined as sexual completion took her beyond reality and for what could have been seconds or eternity she was lost to the world. When she came back to herself she was lying on Asher's chest, completely incapable of moving more than her head. Jean-Claude was lying beside them, looking at her, and when she opened her eyes he smiled. There was something sated and happy about him, and she found that she could only agree.

"I believe, mon ami," Asher said as Anita smiled at Jean-Claude in a very contented way, "that our Anita found that pleasing."

If she'd had the strength she might have had something to say about that, since she was not the only one who seemed to have had a very good time, but as it was her bones felt like water and she could not be bothered.

"Je vous aime," she said, looking between both men, "je vous aime beaucoup."

Just for a while nothing else mattered and she closed her eyes, letting herself enjoy the warmth of the body below her. A vampire was only ever quite so warm just after they had fed and, where once the idea of giving blood to a vampire had horrified her, now it seemed perfectly logical. Closing her eyes she basked in the afterglow, letting her mind roam free.

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Scene 2

When Harry walked back in to Jean-Claude's rooms his brain totally failed to process all the information he received. Firstly Anita was sitting next to Asher on a rather nice chaise, as in almost in his lap, and there was an ease between them that told Harry the pair were very relaxed; then there was the fact that both Asher and Jean-Claude had changed clothes since he last saw them; and finally he could smell something on the air, something that made his skin prickle and parts of him sit up and take notice.

In fact, every instinct in his body screamed sex and he came to a halt only a few feet into the room, totally unable to stop looking between Anita and the two vampires. He might have been able to cover it if it had just been Asher and Anita, after all he had noticed something the previous evening, but the way Jean-Claude was lounging in a chair watching the other two made Harry think all sorts of things he didn't really want to think.

While trying to stop himself staring he forced his gaze elsewhere and it fell on the picture above the fireplace. There were three people in the painting, and with a start he realised it was Jean-Claude, Asher and a woman. Their poses were relaxed and happy and Harry could not help looking at the painting and then looking at Anita, Asher and Jean-Claude.

Anita looked up and caught him staring, at which point he blushed, but did not look away. It was when Anita's eyes flicked towards Jean-Claude that Harry felt something even more peculiar. It was almost as if there was a television turned on without any signal or sound as his head tingled with white noise for no more

than a moment. He shook his head and frowned, trying to figure out what had happened, but it was gone.

"Something distresses you, *mon enfant*?" Jean-Claude asked sitting up in his chair.

Harry was used to strange things happening to him, it seemed to be part of his lot in life, but he had fed for the first time that evening, and some of his reactions to the full moon had taken him by surprise, so instead of brushing off the enquiry he decided to answer truthfully.

"It felt like I had static in my head," he said, trying to isolate the memory and analyse it better. "Just for a second, when Anita looked at you."

Jean-Claude's eyes remained fixed on Harry, but the feeling flared again and he had to blink it away.

"There is was again," he said, chasing the feeling even as it vanished. "It's really strange."

Climbing to his feet, Jean-Claude walked over and Harry felt cold power reach out to touch him. Whatever Jean-Claude was doing, the vampire seemed satisfied after a moment.

"I believe you are picking up the connection between Anita and myself, probably because you have fed and your vampire is closer to the surface," Jean-Claude said simply. "There are ways Master vampires may connect themselves to humans and Anita and I are so connected. It is a long and complex subject, which I believe would be better left for another time. If it bothers you, Anita and I shall attempt to maintain our bond at a lower level unless necessary."

"No," Harry said quickly, not wishing to disrupt the lives of those helping him any more than he already was, "that's fine, it was just odd. As long as it's nothing bad, I'm okay."

Jean-Claude really did have the most breathtaking smile when he wanted to and Harry found himself smiling back without thinking about it.

"Come," Jean-Claude said and indicated the empty chairs, "let us sit down. I trust Requiem has entertained you."

"Yes, thanks," Harry replied.

The Circus was still one of the strangest places he had ever been as far as Harry was concerned, but seeing it from backstage had given him a glimpse into a world that worked along the same lines as most other places of employment. One thing Harry had never expected to see was a vampire hopping up and down on one foot, swearing colourfully because someone had stolen the boots that went with his costume and the new ones didn't fit. It just seemed too mundane.

"The young gentlemen decided to sit in on Melanie's performance," Requiem said in the same polite manner Harry had come to expect of the vampire over the last hour or so.

Harry had hoped that where they had actually been would not have come up, but it had only been a faint hope. Quite frankly Melanie scared him, but she also fascinated him for reasons that were not solely to do with teenage hormones.

When they had wandered past the sign advertising her stage performance Harry had been unable to resist, and Draco had followed along with nothing more than a raised eyebrow.

"Melanie is a fascinating monster, is she not?" Jean-Claude said as if the news was not news as all, but Harry could see Anita sitting straighter next to Asher.

"I'd have said scary," Harry replied since the memory of the woman changing into part snake made him shiver.

He liked snakes, something to do with being a Parseltongue giving him an affinity for them, but seeing a woman grow scales had been a little too much even for him. When the performance had been over she had thanked him for coming and reiterated her invitation to talk some time, all in the sibilant hisses of the snake tongue only he could understand. Requiem had seemed impressed that Melanie was taking any notice of anything but her snakes, and considering that reading Requiem was sometimes like reading blank stone; Harry thought it might be significant.

"She's dangerous, Harry," Anita said and sounded very adamant about the subject.

"I know," he replied, choosing to sit on the sofa where Draco had just sat down.

Talking about this was not on the top of his to-do list. He wasn't quite sure what he was thinking himself, so explaining it to anyone else was difficult to say the least.

"Would anyone care for a drink?" Jean-Claude offered, reading Harry's reply as an end to the topic.

It was not long before Harry found himself accepting a glass of the same red wine he had had earlier. He had never been a wine drinker, or a drinker of any sort for that matter, but it actually wasn't bad and Draco appeared to be impressed so Harry just followed suit. It gave him something else to think about other than the scene from when they had first returned, which was a blessing. Jean-Claude had admitted to a connection with Anita and maybe she had one with Asher too and he was picking up on that and interpreting it incorrectly, but it was too much to think about.

"How are you feeling, *mon enfant*?" Jean-Claude asked when everyone was settled again.

"Fine," Harry replied, not liking being the centre of attention, but understanding that it was a sensible question, "and very, very awake."

Having been plagued by nightmares for the last few years Harry was used to surviving with little sleep, usually gained in the early morning when his body finally had to shut down, but when it came to the current time of night he was still used to feeling the effects of over exertion. Considering the fact that he had nearly died, been through a full moon, and had a run in with his subconscious in the past few days he had not been expecting to feel quite so alert. However, ever since he had fed he had had even more energy than the moon had sparked in him.

"That will be the vampire in you," Asher chose that moment to give his opinion. "We have but two states, awake and dead."

"I think it would be far easier if humans had only two states as well," Draco said and the Slytherin was smiling just slightly when Harry looked over, "you should try dragging Harry out of bed in time for breakfast some time."

"Hah," Harry replied before he remembered where he was, "so says Mr I'll-sleep-until-noon-if-I-want-to."

"There is a difference between choosing to remain in a warm, comfortable place, and being comatose," was Draco's come back, and the knowing smirk on his face told Harry that his friend was enjoying this.

"You'd make a better cat than I do," was the only thing Harry could think of to say in return.

That earned him a real grin and when he looked back at Anita and the vampires they appeared amused as well. Asher was observing and barely seemed to be reacting, but both Anita and Jean-Claude were smiling. The look in Draco's eyes as Harry turned to him again was one that said 'mission accomplished'.

"All is well with you then, bon," Jean-Claude said, accepting what Harry had told him. "What you must watch for are signs of the hunger, *mon enfant*. I do not believe you shall be plagued by such things every night, but we shall make arrangements so that should you feel the need a donor will be available."

There was one thing that had been bothering Harry, and he finally plucked up the courage to ask.

"So the feeding was normal then?" he said, trying not to blush in embarrassment. "I didn't do anything too weird?"

"Non, *mon enfant*," Jean-Claude replied, seeming to understand Harry's reluctance, "what you did was quite normal until the very end. You rolled Jason's mind when you fed, a skill that usually comes with age, but in your case is not unexpected. The healing of the bite was the only unforeseen occurrence, and that appeared to increase my *pomme de sang's* enjoyment, so it is unlikely you will ever have any complaints."

Now Harry did blush, but he had to know. Vampires in Muggle books were usually sexual creatures, but everything about them in Wizarding literature was very dry and scientific.

"So, um, his reaction was, um, okay then?" Harry had not had the guts to ask Jason after the werewolf had recovered, or Jean-Claude just after it had happened, but he found that he needed to know.

The smile he received at that enquiry was knowing, but sympathetic.

"I believe Jason would say 'it was more than okay'," Jean-Claude replied with a gentle laugh.

Harry wanted to disappear through the floor, but it did make him feel a little better to realise that he hadn't stepped over any lines. Jean-Claude appeared to be about to say something else, but there was a knock at the door and Jason appeared as it opened. Harry tried very hard not to blush even more.

"Sorry to barge in," the werewolf said and grinned at Harry as if he knew exactly what Harry was thinking, "but the information on the dead vamp just came through."

Jason handed a folder to Jean-Claude and then stood next to the sofa on which Harry was sitting. Harry found this very distracting even though the werewolf's attention appeared to be firmly on the Master of the city. He could smell clean skin and shampoo, and the musky scent that had drawn him to Jason before. That and the fact that he could faintly sense Jason's beast on what seemed to be a lycanthrope and a vampiric level was most disconcerting and he had to try hard to keep from turning to look at the werewolf.

"Philip Torres," Jean-Claude read from the folder and dragged Harry's attention back to the issue in hand, "from New York. He was fourth to the Master of the city and has been missing for three weeks. I did not know his face, but I have heard his name; he was one of Belle's conquests when she reached her influence into Spain. I believe she exiled him for killing one of her favourites in a jealous rage."

Asher nodded as if agreeing.

"It was just before we returned to her," the blond vampire said. "She has been punishing him by leaving him in exile ever since. I did not know he had come to America."

"Well he's not being punished anymore," Anita gave her opinion on the situation. "Is there anything significant about him that might give us a clue as to who the crazies are who killed him?"

Jean-Claude was scanning the document in his hands quickly and Harry was almost ready to ask his own question when the vampire finally spoke.

"Non, ma petite," Jean-Claude replied, appearing apologetic, "I see nothing particularly significant. Perhaps this is where your police friends would be far better than we are?"

The frown that graced Anita's features suggested to Harry that she had hoped for more, but she appeared thoughtful rather than anything else.

"You're sure that giving this information to Dolph won't cause complications?" Anita asked.

"There are two documents, ma petite," Jean-Claude said quite openly; "one with all the details of Philip, and one with the details that may be released to the police. I suggest you read both and give Lieutenant Storr the second."

This did not seem to faze Anita at all, which said quite a lot about the way she dealt with things if Harry was any judge. It was clear to him that even though she was a Federal Marshal, Anita did not play by the rules.

"Then I'd better be going," she decided, standing up. "The sooner Dolph can start on this the better."

Harry wasn't sure what to do, the plan had been that Anita would drop him and Draco off home before she went back to her place, but it wasn't so straightforward anymore. He did not relish the idea of going to the police station, but Anita seemed to want to get the information to the police as fast as possible.

"Do not worry, ma petite," Jean-Claude said when Anita's eyes came to rest on Harry, "we shall see Harry and Monsieur Malfoy safe tonight. I believe Harry and I have some further discussion to make before he is ready to leave us."

Anita's concerned gaze clearly asked Harry what he thought of this and he nodded; he did want to speak to Jean-Claude, especially now they knew who the dead vampire was, and it seemed silly to cause extra hassle just because he was feeling a little insecure.

"Okay," Anita agreed, taking the file from Jean-Claude when he offered it, "but anything happens, anything at all, you call."

She was looking at no one in particular, but Harry had the distinct impression that every man in the room knew if they failed to obey that instruction there would be big trouble. If he hadn't been one of those on the receiving end, Harry would have laughed.

End of Chapter 11

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Chapter 12 Information

Scene 1

Lying was something Anita tried not to do. She would much rather tell someone to their face that she could not tell them something than lie to them and pretend she didn't know anything. However, that wasn't going to work in this case. Glancing at the folder on her passenger seat as she sat in the police station parking lot, she steeled herself for lying to Dolph.

If she so much as hinted that she knew more than she was telling she knew that Dolph would not hesitate to throw her in an interrogation room until she provided what she had left out. Dolph was touchy about things like withholding evidence, especially when it came to evidence about the preternatural community.

Picking up the folder she opened the door, climbed out, locked the jeep behind her and began to walk towards the entrance. She had too many ideas floating around in her head, like how it was that Harry seemed to be able to detect when she and Jean-Claude used the marks, and she didn't need the distraction right now. This case was weird enough without having to worry about all the new revelations that kept occurring.

As she walked into the squad room she barely looked around. Once she had done the same and every desk had had a fluffy penguin on it thanks to Zerbrowski, but these days only Zerbrowski's desk still had a trio of the toys on it. Anita hoped that it was just that the joke had worn thin, but the pessimistic side of her tried to convince her that it was the growing distance between her and some of the police officers. On good days she was sure it was the first reason, on bad days she was sure it was the second. Today she chose to ignore it, and merely nodded greetings to all those who acknowledged her.

Having knocked on Dolph's door she heard a gruff 'come in' and opened it, hoping that her one time friend was in a better mood than he had been last time she saw him.

"Hi Dolph," she greeted with a smile, hiding any disquiet she was feeling behind a mask.

"Anita," the Lieutenant returned, no smile, but at least it wasn't 'Blake' that came out of his mouth.

Zerbrowski was sitting in one of the chairs in front of the desk, which made things simpler, since Anita had no doubt the sergeant would be in on this.

"I have something for you," she said and closed the door before walking over and placing the folder on Dolph's desk. "Info about our dead vamp."

She knew better than to mention it was Jean-Claude's sources that had provided the information. That would have just ruined the mood before they started.

"Any clues as to who's behind this?" Zerbrowski asked as Dolph opened the file.

"Nothing obvious," Anita replied, glad that she could be completely honest, "but then you guys are the experts in detecting. What we do know is who the dead vamp was and when he disappeared."

"What the hell was a vampire from New York doing in St Louis?" Dolph asked before Zerbrowski could get another word in. "Is there some preternatural event going on you'd like to tell us about, Anita?"

That was less friendly than she had hoped.

"No, Dolph," she replied pointedly, "Jean-Claude doesn't know why he would have been here anymore that you do."

Mentioning the Master of the city was likely to be a mistake, but she had had little choice. Dolph's eyes were cold as he looked at her.

"And this is everything your boyfriend knows?" Dolph asked and looked Anita straight in the eye.

The 'your boyfriend' sounded like an insult, but Anita did her best to ignore it. What she would have given for Damian to be beside her calming her down at that moment. The way her vampire servant could give her the edge of self control that she needed never ceased to amaze her and she missed it when he wasn't there. Damian would, however, have made the situation worse simply by being preternatural. When Dolph wanted to rub her up the wrong way he was very good at it. If she hadn't already fed the ardeur and had a chance to relax a bit she would probably have bitten his head off.

"Yes, Dolph," she said without allowing the eye contact to drop, "that's all Jean-Claude knows."

The fact that Dolph blinked and then looked back down at the folder was almost worse than if he had seemed suspicious. Anita decided that she was getting far too good at lying for her own comfort. Sitting down without being asked she settled in for what she suspected were going to be an uncomfortable few minutes as Dolph took apart all the information she had given him. Sometimes she wished she was back to the other side of the line she had crossed into the preternatural world.

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Scene 2

Harry sat in the high backed chair and stared at his fingers, trying to decide what to ask first. He was sitting in Jean-Claude's study where he and the Master of the city had retired only a few minutes previously. There were things they needed to talk about where they would not be disturbed and Harry had reluctantly left Draco with Asher in the living room.

"Perhaps this would be easier were I to ask one of my questions first," Jean-Claude said after the silence had lengthened into something rather awkward.

Harry just nodded mutely; he did not know what to ask.

"I have lived a long time, mon enfant," Jean-Claude continued at his agreement, "and yet I have never heard of wizards. You, however, appear to know of vampires; are my kind well known to yours?"

That was actually quite a difficult question because Harry had been asking himself it since he met Jean-Claude.

"I knew vampires existed," he replied, thinking it through carefully, "we studied them in Defence Against the Dark Arts, but I don't think our references are very accurate. I didn't know vampires were made legal citizens of America or the UK by Muggles, they're classified as dark creatures by the Ministry, and they definitely aren't described like you."

A thoughtful look passed over Jean-Claude's face.

"If you would not mind, how are we described?" the vampire asked.

"Pale, gaunt, unpleasant, basically a monster," Harry replied honestly, "but none of the vampires I have met here are anything like that."

"Bon," Jean-Claude said as if the description had confirmed something, "I believe that your texts describe the older generations of vampires. Once we were creatures of decay and darkness, but that has changed."

Harry preferred the reality of vampires to anything he had been taught and it made him wonder how many other facts he had been given that were inaccurate. With vampires legal citizens of the UK the Ministry were going to have to update their ideas sooner rather than later. It would probably take them a few more years to notice that Muggle culture had changed, though; the Wizarding world was slow like that.

"My subordinates probably believe I have brought you in here to create a blood oath between us," Jean-Claude said after a moment.

"Blood oath?" Harry asked, not sure he liked the sound of that.

"It is a method to ensure loyalty," his companion explained, "it would bind your power to me. Vampires are very volatile creatures, to maintain a structure it is necessary."

Now Harry was sure he did not like the sound of that.

"But that is not my desire," Jean-Claude said just as Harry was about to stand up and walk out. "I can taste your power, mon enfant, and I do not believe I could force an oath on you even should I wish it. Not without damaging us both. That is why I ask you a simple question: do you desire any of mine harm?"

"No," the answer came out of Harry's mouth instantly without him even having to think about it.

Jean-Claude's face was completely serious, but after a moment he nodded his head and smiled slightly.

"Forgive me," the vampire said, "but I had to ask."

For a while Harry just sat there looking at Jean-Claude, his confusion and nervousness forgotten. He was beginning to see exactly what Jean-Claude was; the vampire's responsibilities and power. Harry understood that kind of responsibility and he did not blame Jean-Claude for his question. He wondered briefly what the Master of the city would have done had he not said 'no', but it was not really worth thinking about.

"Why am I a vampire?" he asked, at last finding the question he wanted to ask.

"In truth, mon enfant," Jean-Claude replied, eyes never wavering from Harry's face, "I do not know. The power of the vampire lives within you and yet you are not truly one of us. The spell on your chest was intended to make your blood the conduit for human, lycanthrope and vampire power. Something within you took that power and made it part of yourself."

"Just like I did with Voldemort," Harry said before he realised he was speaking.

He looked down at his hands again, unsure of how Jean-Claude would react to his admission.

"You do not have to tell me, Harry," his companion said and Harry believed Jean-Claude would not push the issue, "but I am willing to listen if you wish to talk."

Harry did not trust easily anymore, but Anita trusted Jean-Claude and for some reason he still couldn't fathom Harry trusted Anita. Peering up through his eyelashes he looked at the Master of the city, not knowing what to do.

"Voldemort," he said, surprising himself as he spoke, "tried to kill me when I was one, but the curse bounced back onto him. It nearly destroyed him and it created a connection between us. I gained some of his abilities, like the speaking to snakes. I always thought it was the curse that caused that, but it's like I've done the same thing again with..."

In his confusion he could not remember the vampire's name.

"Philip," Jean-Claude filled in for him.

"Maybe it's me," Harry concluded, almost afraid of what that could mean.

His eyes searched out details of the room in an attempt to distract his thoughts from their morbid path, but that one question brought up so many others that he felt lost.

"To survive is not a crime, mon enfant," Jean-Claude said, and when Harry looked up the vampire had moved and was standing beside him.

Harry had not seen Jean-Claude cover the distance between them and he was not sure if that was because he was so distracted or if the Master of the city had chosen to move that fast.

"But why me," Harry asked, unable to agree; "why do I always survive? My parents died, I didn't, my godfather died, I didn't, people died in the final battle, I didn't, and now a vampire and a wereleopard died, but I didn't. Why didn't I die?"

He looked up then, into the blue eyes of his companion and for a moment he wished that he could become lost in those depths.

"Some of us are fated to live, Harry," Jean-Claude said calmly, "some of us are fated to die. Your time has not yet come, mon enfant. You have a will to survive and that will is formidable indeed. You may mourn those who have gone before you, but never mourn the fact that you live."

A hand rested on his shoulder and Harry found it a strange comfort. He could feel the vampiric power moving through Jean-Claude as he touched him and it soothed him some way he chose not to try and understand. This was not what he had expected to talk about when he entered the room, but the way the question had come pouring out he realised that he had needed it. They remained still and silent for what seemed like minutes to Harry, but he had no way to be sure as the comforting web of cold magic wound around him.

"You are a master vampire, mon enfant," Jean-Claude said eventually, "however impossible that should be, it is undeniable. From what I have felt from you and what I now know about Philip, I believe that it is possible you directly absorbed that which was Philip when he died. Perhaps it would help to know the vampire which lives on through you?"

Harry sat straighter in his chair and looked up at his companion, turning the idea over in his mind. Jean-Claude had a very poetic way of talking about things and it made it all seem just slightly less terrible. He nodded slowly, giving his consent, and Jean-Claude moved back around the desk and sat down.

"Philip was descended directly from Belle Morte, the *sourdre de sang* of my line, although thanks to Anita I am my own *sourdre de sang* now," Jean-Claude explained as if telling a story. "All of Belle's vampires hold sway over things sexual; from what I know of Philip he had certain talents in these areas. Belle would speak of him, even though she had banished him, and she would boast that his greatest wish was to return to her. She had forbidden him to become Master of his own territory although by all reports Philip was capable of holding his own city. He was number four in New York only because his devotion to Belle made it impossible for him to be completely loyal to the Master of the city, and hence prevented him rising further."

"You mean a blood oath would not have held?" Harry decided that being interested was better than being afraid and roughly forced his worries back where they belonged.

Jean-Claude gave a small shrug.

"Had Belle called him home he would have gone," the vampire replied, "but it is doubtful Philip would have risen up against a blood oath. However, in our society appearance is everything and Philip did not hide where he wished to be."

It was odd the way Jean-Claude spoke about the dead vampire, almost as if he knew him, although Jean-Claude had already indicated that they had never met. Harry could only conclude that the closeness of the bloodlines must be important in vampire circles.

"Philip was a Master vampire with a beast to call," Jean-Claude continued, "and his animal was as mine; the wolf. That is one part of Philip's power I have not seen in you. It is possible that your cat will not allow such an affinity."

"My Animagus form is a wolf," Harry replied and then realised that he was saying things it might better to have hidden, but it was too late now. "When I tried it my leopard didn't like it at all."

Jean-Claude simply nodded as if this made sense to him, and Harry was not sure how much the vampire understood of the situation. He remembered confessing about the Animagus transformation in the hospital room, but he was not quite sure how much information he had given away at the time. It did not seem to be important to Jean-Claude if the way the vampire had reacted was anything to go by. Of course Harry was pretty sure with vampires he'd never be sure of anything. Half the time with people he wasn't sure either.

"It will take time for you to understand that part of you which is a vampire," Jean-Claude said in a perfectly calm voice, "and I would ask that you allow me to assist you. I require only two things in return. Firstly that should it be in your power to protect those around you, you shall do so."

Harry nodded without question; that was in his nature and he could never leave those in danger if he had the ability to help.

"I've been doing that since I was eleven," he said plainly.

"And secondly," Jean-Claude continued with a nod of acknowledgement, "that you will not deliberately undermine the authority of myself, Anita or any in this city that you will eventually leave behind. You are a powerful child and I fear you have it within your power to destroy us if you choose to use it. In a conflict between us, in truth, I cannot say who would emerge the victor, but it would destroy us all, never the less."

That was not as easy to agree to. Not because Harry wanted to hurt any of those around him, or that he wished to take over in any way, but because of the guilt that swam in the back of his mind about Micah. He had undermined Micah's authority by so effectively beating him, and he had tried to make amends, but he was not sure it was enough. He had acted without thinking and he could have broken more than bones with his actions.

Thinking about it he had effectively done a similar thing to Jean-Claude, at the hospital, only that didn't seem quite so personal and a whole host of vampires had not been there to witness it. That had been wizard's magic against vampire power and it was a different type of conflict.

"I will do my best," Harry said eventually, meeting Jean-Claude's eyes and letting his defences fall just slightly.

If request one ever conflicted with request two he knew that he would not be able to keep to the second agreement.

"Mon enfant," Jean-Claude replied, holding his gaze, "that is all I could ask."

It was then that Harry realised the purpose of the endearment. There was a fondness in Jean-Claude's eyes, and Harry was pretty sure that the vampire did in fact like him, but the use of the pet name had a much more important aspect that was suddenly crystal clear. Harry was powerful and he could not hide that with his current state of experience, but by referring to him as 'my child', Jean-Claude was declaring to all that, no matter how gifted, Harry was but a babe under the Master's wing. It made perfect sense to the Slytherin part of him.

"Will the other vampires be able to tell if there is a blood oath between us?" Harry asked as these things became clear in his mind.

"Non," Jean-Claude replied without the slightest trace of emotion, "it is a thing done which is evident due to consequences rather than visible truth."

Harry decided that that probably meant the vampire did not quite know how to take the question.

"Then I don't see why those that want to believe the oath exists shouldn't be allowed think whatever you feel like implying," Harry said before he could change his mind. "I won't deny it, and I'll make sure Draco doesn't deny it either."

There was a momentary spark of surprise in Jean-Claude's eyes, but it was gone almost before Harry had spotted it. They sat in silence for a few moments, just looking at each other.

"My apologies, mon enfant," Jean-Claude said eventually, "I believe you grasp the situation far better than I had thought. I shall speak to ma petite and guarantee that she understands the situation, or she will, I believe she would say 'have my balls', for forcing you into such a bond. Are there any others you would wish to be excluded from our deception?"

"Only those you think need to know," Harry replied, even though part of him wanted to make sure all his new friends knew.

If it meant that he did not destroy something that seemed to be working so well, his pride could take the hit. Jean-Claude nodded and sat back in his chair.

"It is time you understood more of vampire society," the master of the city decided in a tone that begged no argument. "I believe you must here of the council."

Harry didn't know what council Jean-Claude was talking about, but he had a feeling the information would be vital to his continuing good health, so he sat up and prepared to pay attention. Gone were any thoughts of Gryffindor guilt and in their place were the calculating musings of a Slytherin mind.

End of Chapter 12

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Chapter 13 Touch of Evil

Scene 1

Anita watched Draco wiping the mug while continually glancing at the entrance to the living room where she knew Harry was talking to Nathaniel. Harry wanted to learn about wereleopards and hence Anita had invited the two wizards over, but she did not think it was sitting well with Draco. The jealousy in the young man's

eyes was obvious and had been ever since Harry had all but seduced Jason. Anita knew she had to say something.

"You're in love with him, aren't you," were the words she finally chose.

The blond head snapped to her as if she'd shot him with an undisguised look of horror, but Anita was positive it was not to do with the suggestion.

"You're insane," was Draco's hesitant response.

"No, I'm observant," Anita said, making sure he knew she had no intention of arguing about this. "It's part of the territory."

Draco was glaring at her now, but he was not saying anything which she took to be a good sign.

"I'll be blunt," Anita told him openly. "If you want him, stake a claim, or someone else will. Wereleopards are very tactile creatures and they are not shy about sex. Lycanthropes are very strong and they have to learn control during sex or they can hurt a human partner, someone is bound to offer to show him the ropes sooner or later. You need to have made your feelings clear before Harry attaches to someone else as he adjusts."

That caused heat behind her companion's eyes and she could see the jealousy burning brightly.

"He's oblivious," Draco finally admitted. "In some ways Harry has seen everything and in others he's just so completely innocent. How do you tell someone who has probably never even considered men that you're in love with him?"

"With Harry I would suggest blatant honesty," Anita told him with a smile. "From what I've seen of him he's a very upfront guy. If you wait you'll lose him. And the way he was looking at Asher the other night I wouldn't be too sure about the not considering men thing."

Draco made a face.

"I've never been brought up to tackle a problem head on," the wizard said reluctantly, "I plan and I come to a solution in a round about manner. There's no way I can win this one like that is there?"

Anita gave her companion a sympathetic smile; it was not as if she was new to romantic complications. She would have offered some jewel of advice to Draco, but as she opened her mouth a most horrendous scream came from the other room. She and the wizard shared a look and then they moved.

"Anita," Nathaniel sounded panicked and she sped up.

The scene that greeted her as she almost ran through the door was startling to say the least, and she had seen her share of worrisome scenes. Harry was lying across the couch, arms spread and back arched with his head back and his scream had become the most pitiful moan. There was light coming from under the young man's white shirt.

Nathaniel was crouched a few feet from Harry as if torn between going to help his new friend and shielding himself from the light. Neither Anita nor Draco hesitated as they walked straight over to the couch.

"Don't touch him," Anita said as she felt the magic radiating off Harry.

It was cold and dark and she did not like the sensation it gave her at all. This was not a nice spell and she would have known that it was likely to result in bad things even if she had had no idea of its origins. To her great relief and not a little surprise, Draco did as she instructed, even though it was quite obvious that the wizard wanted to go to his friend.

Very carefully she moved forward and knelt beside the sofa, on the alert for any indication that the magic was going to break away from Harry. Reaching out she tentatively touched the cotton of the shirt to try and move it out of the way so she could see the spell. In only moments she felt magic shoot into her fingers, stinging her before she could release the first button that obscured her view. She snatched her hand back and shook her fingers as they smarted.

"Dammit all to hell," she said succinctly and went to try again, but a hand stopped her.

"Let me," Nathaniel said, and displayed a single clawed finger.

It had only been recently that they had discovered Nathaniel could consciously shift parts of his body at will, something to do with the power boost of the triumvirate, but Anita was glad of it now. She really didn't want anyone else near the magic, but Nathaniel was quicker than her, even though she could tap into Lycanthrope speed, and the claw would be a very useful tool. She nodded and sat back slightly to give him room.

Draco was watching intently from the side and Anita noted the wand in the wizard's hand, but he was obviously bright enough to realise that throwing more magic as an unidentified spell was a bad idea. She had no idea how Nathaniel managed it, but in under five seconds the wereleopard was backing away and Harry's shirt was lying open to reveal the spell.

The scar on Harry's chest was literally alight with flame, although from her earlier encounter, Anita knew it was nothing like an ordinary fire. This was magical and cold and moved through the spectrum like an obscene parody of a Christmas light.

"What's happening to him?" Draco sounded in control, but there was an edge to his voice that told Anita the young man was out of his depth with this.

Hell, she was out of her depth with this. She raised the dead for a living; she did not perform complicated rituals to do nasty things with vampires, lycanthropes and virgins.

"He was left for dead," she said as she rationalised the whole thing in her mind, "so whoever's doing this probably has no idea the owner of the blood they took is still alive. Blood is a very powerful magical source and when used in spells it forms a connection. Harry must still be connected to his blood, and those that tried to kill him are performing magic with it."

"Can you stop it?" Draco asked, and when Anita looked at him the grey eyes regarding her were rather haunted.

Her instincts said not to touch this magic with a fifty foot pole, but Harry was suffering. The kid's breathing was becoming laboured and if he hadn't been a

lycanthrope Anita was sure his current position would have been impossible. If his spine arched anymore it was likely to snap.

"I can try," she said and slowly reached out her hand.

As she held out her palm above the scar, the flames reached up to lick at her hand and it made her shudder. This was magic of the blackest kind and it repulsed her, but she could not leave Harry to this alone. Calming herself she tried to focus. This magic had been formed by sacrifice and death magic was woven throughout it; death magic was her magic and Anita began to feel her way to it. Just as she was about to place her hand on Harry's chest the fire went out. Like flicking a switch it was instantaneously gone and Harry collapsed onto the sofa with a groan.

For a moment she knelt there on the floor and just stared, a little shocked at the sudden absence of magic after the overload. Then Harry moved and green eyes opened to wearily look up at her. Those eyes were full of knowledge and pain that one as young as Harry should not have known and they stared into her soul.

"Just once," the wizard whispered in a voice that sounded as if it would give out at any moment, "I wish I could have a scar which didn't connect me to a psychotic madman."

Then those eyes slipped closed and Harry passed out. Now Anita moved. Although she was pretty sure he had just fainted she felt for Harry's pulse. It was strong and sure, and on a quick inspection the young man was breathing normally. There was a faint residue of black magic running through Harry's skin, she could feel it where she touched him, but it was fading and she was sure the connection was dead again for now.

"Help me get him comfortable," she said after she had satisfied herself that it was safe, "he's fainted."

With a lycanthrope and an able bodied wizard it took only a few moments to move Harry into a proper lying position on the couch. He gave no hints that he was coming around so Anita decided to make sure they were ready when he did.

"Nathaniel please make some of the special tea from the caddy in the back of the cupboard," she instructed as she went to collect some things from the other room. "Draco, stay with Harry in case he wakes up."

There were many traditions of magic and many ways to get things done, and Anita did not hold with all of them, but she knew a sure fire way to clear the air. If there was one thing that could purify a room it was burning sage, and she efficiently set up a burner beside the couch and set it alight.

"Sage," Draco said as soon as the smell began to filter around the room, "good choice."

Anita nodded; it seemed wizards knew their herbs as well. By the time Nathaniel walked back in with a delicate looking tea cup, Harry was beginning to show signs of life.

"Welcome back, Harry," Anita greeted when green eyes blinked at her, "how are you feeling."

"I ache," was the simple response, "and I feel like I want to scrub my skin with bleach."

"Know the feeling," Anita replied with a nod, "but I have some tea here that will help dispel the residue."

Harry propped himself up on his elbows and looked at the cup dubiously where Nathaniel had placed it on the coffee table.

"What's in it?" he asked and flicked his eyes around all three people in the room as if it might be a conspiracy.

"Not sure," Anita said, since she had never asked for details, "a friend makes it for me to an old secret family recipe. It tastes like something died in it, but it works."

"Every potion I have ever had that did any good has tasted foul," Harry said and sat up with an ease that belied the stress his muscles must have been under only minutes before. "If you had said it tasted okay I would have known it was useless."

She wasn't sure if he was being serious, but Harry picked up the tea and gave it a sniff. The wizard made a face and then took a sip.

"Ugh," he said pointedly, "I think the dead thing may have passed away some time ago."

Anita had to give a little smile at that, at least Harry seemed to have his sense of humour intact. Her next thought was more sobering, however, and she sighed quietly.

"Fancy telling us what you meant about being connected to a psychotic madman?" she asked, knowing that it had to be done, but wishing for once that she didn't have to do it.

Harry took another couple of sips of tea before he finally nodded. Before he said anything the wizard swung his legs off the couch and sat on it properly; Anita thought he was gathering his thoughts.

"See this," Harry said and lifted his messy fringe.

Anita lent forward and was surprised to see a faint scar on Harry's forehead in the shape of a lightning bolt. It looked old and was so faded that unless she had been shown it she would never have noticed it.

"I've had it since I was one and until six months ago it was very prominent," Harry explained and let his fringe fall again. "Voldemort gave it to me and we discovered in my fourth year at school that it connected me to him. When he was very angry about things or was doing a lot of magic I sometimes saw it. Well the arseholes who kidnapped me aren't finished with my blood and I saw them."

He sounded very angry and Anita could not blame him. This new information, however, was very welcome.

"Did you see their faces?" she asked, the years of helping the police coming out straight away.

She was disappointed when Harry shook his head.

"They were wearing hooded robes," he told her apologetically, "and it was like I was floating above the circle. The only face I saw was the guy they had chained in the middle of their gathering. He had something carved on his chest like me."

Anita did not want to ask, but she had to.

"Did they kill him?" if there was another body out there they needed to know.

It was a strange relief when Harry shook his head again.

"I don't know if they did anything else to him, I only connected to the ceremony when they used my blood," he seemed very sure of what he was saying and Anita found herself confident in Harry's conclusions. "One of them was making some sort of potion and the last ingredient was some of my blood. They have it in a bizarre looking bottle and they kept the rest. Once he added the blood, the potion maker put some in a cup and gave it to one of the others. She held the victim's head back and poured it down his throat. From the way he screamed I don't think the effects were very nice."

Harry seemed to have forgotten his tea now and was staring over Anita's right shoulder looking at whatever image was in his mind rather than the living room. She wanted to reach out and tell him that it would be all right, an unusually motherly impulse, but stopping him was not an option.

"When he stopped screaming they let him loose," Harry continued after a moment. "He just stood there, like the others in the ceremony with me, and they began to tell him something. I heard them mention the Master of the city, but whatever my blood had done must have been finished because the connection broke. I think they might be after Jean-Claude."

Anita went icy and the part of her that was cold bloodied killer woke up and took notice. She was sure that her face had gone blank if what she saw in Harry's eyes was anything to go on. Nobody threatened Jean-Claude; not and lived to tell about it. She felt the marks open as she instinctively reached out for her lover.

[Ma petit,] Jean-Claude's voice and presence flooded into her at once, [what troubles you?]

[Harry just had an episode,] she told him with complete openness, [he saw the people who kidnapped him. They have created some sort of slave and Harry heard you mentioned.]

[They cannot reach me here, ma petit,] Jean-Claude told her, trying to ease her distress. [Tell your police friends what has happened and then bring Harry to the Circus. We will solve this together.]

[I'm not sure telling Dolph will be a good idea,] Anita replied, [he already suspects you.]

[And this is the best way to prove I am not involved,] Jean-Claude assured her. [Should it prove necessary to defend myself and our people then so be it, but if this may be solved by your police friends it will reflect better on our community.]

Anita didn't like it, but Jean-Claude was the perfect politician and she could not fault his logic.

[Okay,] she finally agreed, [I'll see you later.]

[*Je t'aime, ma petite,*] her lover said sweetly and then he was gone.

Anita snapped back to the rest of the world to find Harry looking at her intently.

"The buzzing again," the wizard said simply when she raised her eyebrows at him.

It was rather disconcerting that Harry seemed to be able to tell when she was communicating with another in her first triumvirate.

"I was speaking to Jean-Claude," she said, deciding that there was no point in playing that particular game anymore. "We have a telepathic connection through the marks."

The way Harry accepted that fact told Anita that her guest was close to having too many things thrown at him. She hoped he wouldn't snap.

"We need to let Dolph know what happened," she said, taking charge, "and then Jean-Claude would like to see you if you're agreeable."

Harry nodded, which was a relief because she did not want to have to push the issue, and for a moment Anita let herself wish that the young man in front of her had never come to St Louis. It was an empty wish, but there were burdens hidden in the green eyes looking at her that she did not want to know about, and all her city seemed to be doing was adding to them.

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Scene 2

Waiting outside Lieutenant Storr's office was not the most fun thing to do, especially since some of the looks he was getting were not overly friendly, but Harry tried to look as inoffensive as possible and counted to ten every time he wanted to say something. Draco had taken to staring at anyone who looked their way, which appeared to be scarier than anything Harry could manage, so he left his friend to it. Anita was inside explaining what had happened before Harry had to deal with any of it. He was pointedly refusing to listen even though he could hear just about everything.

Nathaniel had been with them, having insisted that he come as well, but he had gone to find coffee for them all. Harry had never really drunk coffee much at home since tea was the drink of choice with the Dursleys and in the magical world, but he was picking up a taste for it here. He was relieved when he saw his new friend weaving his way back between the desks.

They had connected, that much Harry knew, but he was not completely clear on why yet. When they had been talking earlier, Nathaniel had been surprisingly open about his life, and Harry knew rather more about the other wereleopard than he had ever expected. The fact that Nathaniel was one of Anita's boyfriends had come up, along with the reasons he trusted her with more than his life. It had made Harry very glad he had not come to St Louis before Anita had changed the face of the preternatural community, because he did not think he would have been welcomed by people like Gabriel and Raina. They had not discussed details, but he knew enough to be shocked.

There was a momentary frown on Nathaniel's face that disappeared before he turned towards the desk of one of the detectives. The woman had called to him as he walked past and Harry could tell his friend had been hoping not to talk to her. It wasn't really any of his business who Nathaniel talked to and he tried to look somewhere else and not take any notice, but he had never been very good at keeping his nose out.

Snatches of the conversation made it to his newly sensitised hearing when he wasn't attempting to be good, and he heard something about chains and whips and humiliation that he really would rather not have. Nathaniel seemed to be holding his own, but from the bits he overheard, Harry was pretty sure that his friend was trying to be far too polite. It was only when the detective grabbed Nathaniel's wrist that the wereleopard began to look worried, and there was a little panic in his eyes.

"But she's abusing you," were the words Harry heard and he couldn't help himself, he stood up.

Several eyes turned to him, but he chose to ignore them since Nathaniel needed his help and he was not about to leave a friend in need.

"Harry?" Draco asked all possible questions with one word.

"Stay here," Harry replied and was very proud of the calm, friendly tone he managed to achieve, "I just have to ask Nathaniel something."

Then he began walking, and he knew everyone was watching him, except the two people he was heading for.

"Excuse me, Detective," he read her name plaque on her desk, "Arnet, would you mind if I borrowed Nathaniel for a minute. I need to ask him some things and since he's working later, now's the only time."

For a moment he thought the polite English act might have worked as the detective blinked at him, but then her face hardened. She was obviously on a mission, and from what he had heard, Harry had an idea of what it was.

"We won't be long," she said in a tight voice with what Harry supposed was meant to be a pleasant smile.

The woman still had hold of Nathaniel's wrist and the wereleopard looked very uncomfortable. The pleading look Nathaniel sent Harry was enough to let him know that his friend needed help.

"Please let go of Nathaniel's arm, detective," he switched from polite English school boy, into veteran soldier and lowered his voice so no one else could hear, "you're upsetting him."

For a moment the woman appeared shocked, but that moved to annoyed almost straight away.

"This is none of your business," she said pointedly, still not letting go.

"I heard the whole conversation," Harry said, cutting her off, "and it is my business if you're upsetting my friend."

"If you were his friend you'd let me help him," Arnet said in a voice that told Harry all he needed to know; the woman didn't have a clue.

Part of him wanted to snarl and drag Nathaniel over to the other side of the room with him, but he didn't think that would go down well, so he sat on it. Taking a deep breath there was only one course of action he could think of.

"Have you ever been abused, Detective?" he asked in the most direct manner he could.

Arnet looked shocked.

"No," she said, unsure of the change in tack.

"Then you have no idea what you're taking about," he said shortly. "Because Nathaniel is too polite to pull away you are doing more damage than you could possibly understand by refusing to let him go."

It was probably an exaggeration, but the look in Nathaniel's eyes showed the wereleopard was very upset by this.

"And I suppose you do, with all the money that's flying around since your friend arrived in town," was the counter argument Arnet chose.

Harry had hoped that a little rational argument while he channelled Hermione would work, but it obviously was like talking to a brick wall. He had to laugh because of how wrong the detective was.

"Never judge a book by its cover, Detective," he said, metaphorically taking the gloves off. "I spent eleven years living in a cupboard under the stairs surviving on leftovers because my relatives thought I was a freak. That's one of the reasons I'm not as tall as most of my friends."

He had her whole attention now and he couldn't fail to notice that he had Nathaniel's as well.

"You'd think that I wouldn't like small dark places wouldn't you?" he continued without letting Arnet drop his gaze. "I mean any sane person would assume that having been forced to live in one and being locked in for often days at a time that I'd hate them. Well they'd be wrong. I like small dark places; they comfort me. None of my relatives ever came into my cupboard so I was safe. It's important to me because it was mine. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you, Detective Arnet?"

The woman had gone white, but she slowly let go of Nathaniel's wrist. Harry did not know enough about the whole situation to be completely sure of all the facts, but Arnet's reaction told him that he had hit the nail on the head. He did not know if the woman was finished with her crusade, but at least it was over for now.

Picking up two of the cups Nathaniel had placed on the desk when he stopped, Harry then stepped back and allowed his friend to proceed him back towards the chairs. He wanted to glare at everyone and make them stop looking, but although the conversation had been low enough so very few would have been able to hear it, Arnet's reaction was there for all to see, so he tried to slip back on the unthreatening English school boy mask in the hope that no one would shoot him.

As soon as they sat down, Nathaniel put his head on Harry's shoulder.

"Thank you," the wereleopard said quietly, and Harry found the gesture surprisingly comforting.

"What did you say to her?" Draco asked from his other side.

"Just a little truth," Harry replied and sat on his sudden desire to reach out and touch his Slytherin friend as well.

He did not think Draco would take well to the sudden touchy feely urges he seemed to have every now and then. They were still sitting in their little tableau when Anita finally opened the office door and invited them all in.

End of Chapter 13

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Chapter 14 Understanding

Scene 1

Looking at mug shots and then sitting with a police artist to come up with a face for the man in Harry's vision took hours. Anita might have wanted to find out if the guy was on record, but she was bored by the time Dolph finally let them leave. Nathaniel had been staying close ever since she rejoined the other three, and she knew something had happened, but chose not to voice it until they were in the car.

"So who's going to explain what went on while I was busy with Dolph?" she asked as soon as they pulled out of the parking lot.

Draco was looking out the window and did not react, but Harry and Nathaniel shared a look. The look said so many things.

"Jennifer," Nathaniel said eventually, "she stopped me when I was coming back with coffee."

Anita had hoped Arnet's problem with her would have gone away since she had had to have Zerbrowski make it very clear to the woman that bad mouthing Anita with the rest of the squad was not a good idea. However, the problem seemed to still be festering.

"She thinks you're abusing me," that seemed to perplex Nathaniel if the tone of his voice was anything to go by.

Since the previous October, Anita had made very sure to keep Nathaniel well clear of Arnet because of what the officer had said to her when they were investigating a kiss of vampire serial killers. She had not broached the subject with her *pomme de sang* either since he seemed happy to be kept clear of the woman and Anita had not wanted to burden him with it. It was not Nathaniel's fault Arnet simply didn't understand.

"I'm sorry about that," Anita apologised; she had totally forgotten about it after Harry's attack or she would have insisted Nathaniel stay home. "She saw us when you had me on stage last October. She doesn't understand what she saw."

The wereleopard looked surprised and then as if he understood.

"Now I know what she was talking about," Nathaniel said with a nod. "She never mentioned the club, and I didn't know where she was getting her ideas."

"What did you say?" Anita wasn't sure if this would have made it worse or better, but she needed to know one way or the other.

Either this would have pushed it further and her name would be mud, or Arnet might finally understand.

"There wasn't a lot I could say," Nathaniel told her, his eyes thoughtful when she glanced in his direction. "I was just trying to get back to Harry and Draco until she grabbed my hand."

Anita almost stamped on the brakes; it was a very close thing. She was a possessive creature and the fact that Arnet had laid hands on Nathaniel, all be it in a small way, made her beast sit up and demand vengeance.

"And?" she prompted as her more rational brain talked her instinctive side out of rearranging Arnet's teeth for her.

"Harry rescued me," Nathaniel said calmly, and when she glanced away from the road a second time her *pomme de sang* gave her a small smile.

A quick look at Harry before she crashed the car told her that the young man was not particularly comfortable with their conversation. Part of her felt like saying thank you and leaving it at that, but she never could leave well enough alone.

"Thank you, Harry," she said, trying her best, "Nathaniel can be too polite for his own good."

"I noticed," was the quiet response from the back seat.

It was too much, she couldn't help herself.

"Exactly what did you do?" she justified it to herself that she needed to know just in case she needed to do damage control.

"I gave her an example she could understand," was Harry's careful reply.

The dark-haired wizard sounded very uncomfortable and Anita was not sure how much Harry understood of the situation and whether it was that he was prickly about or if it was personal.

"And she backed off without making a scene?" she wasn't going to push, but she wanted to make sure that this was not coming back to bite her.

There was silence for a moment.

"Personally," Harry said eventually, "I don't understand half of what she was going on about, but I do know that whatever you two are doing, it isn't hurting Nathaniel and it's your business. I sort of gathered he's quite fond of pain from our talk this afternoon. I have a very bright friend at home who had a long chat with me about abuse once, and so I gave Detective Arnet an analogy she would get that wouldn't involve her blind spot about sex."

When she looked at him there were old eyes looking back at her, eyes like Nathaniel's in the knowledge and pain they held. It was quite obvious that the abuse analogy had been personal.

"Support group for an abused childhood anyone?" Draco's tone was scathing and sarcastic, and when she turned her head Anita could just about see him still looking out the window.

Nathaniel's hand slipped onto her leg and his eyes asked her not to push the issue. She gave him a small nod and then looked back to the road. It really was none of her business what had happened to Harry or Draco in their pasts, but she could not help wondering. The pair became more and more complicated the more she knew about them and she did not like being wrong footed by them.

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Scene 2

Parking anywhere near Guilty Pleasures seemed to be more of an art form than a science, and for a while Harry wasn't sure they would ever find a space, but eventually Anita found somewhere to put the Jeep. Then she lead them towards the club that made Harry's palms sweat just by thinking about it. He had never considered going inside a strip club before, especially not a male strip club, and he wasn't exactly sure what he was thinking. When Anita headed around the side of the building he was rather relieved, since the line out front looked enormous and a little rowdy.

"Performers' entrance," Nathaniel said with a smile as Harry looked around the alley. "If we go out front we get mobbed."

No one seemed to be mentioning that Harry was only seventeen, and he was pretty sure that that meant it was illegal for him to go inside the club. With everything that was going on it was quite possible everyone had forgotten.

"Nathaniel," he said quietly, to regain his friend's attention, "am I actually allowed in here? I'm not eighteen until the end of July."

From the expression on the other wereleopard's face it was a fact that had not occurred to him. Harry was beginning to suspect it wouldn't have occurred to anyone else either, and he didn't want to cause any trouble.

"If anyone tries to card you," Nathaniel said after a moment's thought, "just flash your fangs. They'll either assume you're an old vamp turned before the law, or that you're over eighteen because turning a minor is a death sentence."

It sounded like a workable plan, but the fact that it did appear to be illegal for him to enter the club was a little worrying. It was not that he had a problem with breaking the rules, it was that things tended to happen around him and if the police became involved it could be awkward. Nathaniel didn't seem overly bothered, however, so Harry decided to let it drop. When they entered the building the doorman didn't even bat an eyelid, but that was probably because he was a vampire and like recognised like.

The moment he set foot inside his senses exploded. It was like everything hit him at once: his leopard sat up and screamed sex, his vampire sat up and screamed sex, and the semi-naked man wandering down the hallway really didn't help. The Circus was full of life, but it was dead life, or mostly innocent life, but here the very air hummed with sexual arousal and he could hear some of the noise from

out front. Harry had not been expecting anything like it and he seemed to be hypersensitive. It had not escaped him that ever since he had fed his vampire for the first time he was much more aware of all things sexual.

Harry was aroused and embarrassed all at the same time and he tried desperately not to blush scarlet when Anita turned and looked at him.

"You okay, Harry?" she asked with a concerned frown.

"Fine," he replied, although he was sure he didn't sound fine even as he willed his body to behave.

His sense of smell was running in overdrive as scents of leather, sweat, male musk, female arousal and just about anything else that would distract him made themselves known.

"You don't look fine," Draco observed with his usual, detached tone.

Harry was well on his way to mortified.

"It's the smell," Nathaniel said as Harry struggled to come up with something sensible to say, "I forgot, I should have thought. It can be overwhelming until you're used to it. With all the ladies out there and the guys back here and the interaction going on, it's a bit like walking into mating season. If you're not prepared it's a little overwhelming for lycanthropes."

The explanation was given so calmly and reasonably that Harry almost didn't want to sink through the floor and vanish, but only almost, especially when Draco smirked at him.

"Having a little trouble with teenage hormones, Harry?" his friend asked suggestively.

"Sod off, Malfoy," was Harry's distinct response.

Anita was trying to look sympathetic, but was only just holding off a smile, and Nathaniel's lilac eyes were twinkling in an alarmingly similar way to how Dumbledore's often did when he was amused, so Harry decided to glare at them all.

"Can we get on with why we're here?" he asked pointedly, giving them his best 'don't mess with me I'm dangerous' stare.

Unfortunately that caused Anita to lose control of her smile, and Nathaniel to openly laugh; Draco just raised an eyebrow.

"Please," Harry gave up trying to maintain his dignity and went with mortified instead.

"It's perfectly natural, Harry," Nathaniel said, taking pity on him, "just think about boring things like watching paint dry, and you'll be fine. I have to go get ready, see you guys later."

And then with a quick kiss on Anita's cheek, the wereleopard was gone. Harry would have taken more notice, but he was desperately searching through his head for the antithesis to what he was currently feeling. He almost sighed in relief

when he hit upon a memory of Delores Umbridge, and the recollection of the toad-like woman killed any and all arousing thoughts going through his brain.

"The office is this way," Anita said, turning and heading off down the corridor.

"So what did you think of?" Draco whispered as they began to walk, and Harry frowned at him, not following for a second. "You looked so relieved," his friend said with another smirk, "it must have been an effective thought."

"Umbridge," Harry replied, catching on.

"Eewww," Draco said and made a face, "yep, that would do it."

The Slytherin's face was a picture and Harry couldn't help the snort of laughter that escaped him. At least it gave him something else to concentrate on.

"Hello, Anita," the greeting came from a very large vampire who flashed fangs when he smiled as he walked down the corridor.

Harry was not used to feeling out vampires, but the hit he felt off this one was nothing like how he felt in the presence of people like Jean-Claude and Asher. On first impression he did not think the newcomer was very high on the food chain.

"Hi, Buzz," Anita greeted, returning the smile, although Harry was not sure how she really felt about the aforementioned Buzz, "everything calm this evening?"

"As calm as it ever is, Anita," Buzz replied, "but now that you have arrived I think I'll have the door guards doubled."

"But, Buzz," Anita said with a look of complete innocence on her face, "I don't cause trouble every time I come here."

Raised eyebrows were the response to that one.

"I must be thinking of a different Anita then," Buzz said dryly. "Jean-Claude is waiting for you in the office."

"Thanks, Buzz," Anita replied and then pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket. "But seriously, if you see anyone who looks like this, sit on them."

Harry realised that what she handed to the big vampire was the artist's impression he had spent the best part of two hours helping to compile. Buzz had to be something to do with security and the way the vampire was interacting with Anita, Harry concluded that he was probably at least partially in charge.

"Going to tell me why?" Buzz asked, all banter gone from his voice.

"It's possible he'll try and get to Jean-Claude," Anita said and that coldness had crept into her tone again.

When he heard that tone in Anita's voice Harry was instantly sure that the woman had earned her nickname of the Executioner. Anita had scowled when, earlier in the day, Nathaniel had insisted on explaining exactly what she did for a living, but she had not openly objected. Harry knew all about different faces for different jobs and the Anita he saw most of the time was not the Executioner, but for a moment as she spoke to Buzz, she was.

"No one will get past us," Buzz said and Harry had no doubt that what the vampire said was true.

Anita appeared to believe him as well, because she nodded and then continued down the corridor. Buzz looked over both Draco and Harry as they went past, but the big vampire chose not to comment. Harry did not fail to notice that they were still being watched until Anita ushered them around a corner and through a door.

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Scene 3

The fact that Anita walked over to Jean-Claude, allowed him to kiss her hand and then squarely placed herself between him and the door, probably screamed to the whole world that she was being overprotective, but when it came to threats, she had learned to take them seriously.

"Welcome," Jean-Claude greeted the others and Anita felt a little better when Harry closed the door, "I hope all is well."

"Except for someone's out to get you, everything's dandy," Anita said, on edge again thanks to giving Buzz the artist's impression.

She thought she had been doing quite well with not worrying about Jean-Claude, but right now she knew she was failing to play it even remotely cool.

"Have we established that this is the case, ma petite?" her vampire lover asked reasonably.

"As good as," she insisted firmly.

The fact that they had very little to go on did not change the fact that Harry had heard the bad guys mention Jean-Claude, and that was enough to make Anita worry. Funny how she could disregard her own safety in a heart beat, but when it came to others she cared about she was like a dog with a bone. It was a double standard, but quite frankly, she didn't care.

"Perhaps if Harry were to explain what he saw I would understand better?" Jean-Claude was stepping around the subject very carefully; Anita gave him brownie points for not telling her she was being silly.

Harry was still looking a little shell shocked from the effect the club had had on him, but the kid seemed eager to have something else to think about. It was nice to see, however, that Harry looked to her before saying anything.

"It was only a few words," Harry said as soon as she gave him the nod, "because I was losing the connection. I heard them say 'The Master of the city is a danger to us. Jean-Claude must first...', but I didn't hear first what before I was back in my body."

"Ah," Jean-Claude said thoughtfully, his mysterious vampire mask fully in place, "then it is possible is it not, that these criminal may be searching for someone under my protection? I may not be their target."

Anita did not bother to curb her glare; that was not what she wanted to hear Jean-Claude say.

"It doesn't change the fact that they mentioned you by name," she insisted, putting her hands on her hips and looking Jean-Claude straight in the eye. "It could just have easily been 'Jean-Claude must first be killed', or 'Jean-Claude must first be removed' as anything else."

Jean-Claude stepped up to her before she could really get going and picked up her hand, bringing it to his lips.

"Oui, ma petite," the vampire said in his soothing voice, kissing her fingers lightly, "I am aware of the possibilities. All that I was suggesting is that there may exist other targets, not that I was not one. I have made appropriate arrangements."

That mollified her a little, but Anita never liked not knowing where a threat was coming from. It made her uncomfortable thinking that one of hers was in danger and she could not do anything about it.

"Good," she said, letting him keep her hand for now.

"So basically we're not much better off than we were before Harry had his vision?" Draco sounded about as happy as Anita felt.

"At least we know the direction of the threat," Jean-Claude said with a shrug. "Did you perhaps see anything during the vision, mon enfant, something which will help us find where they are?"

Anita watched as Harry pulled up the memory of his earlier experience; she could tell by the haunted look in his eyes how detailed his recollection must be. Eventually, he shook his head.

"It looked just like any other room to me," the kid said apologetically, "but I don't know the city or much about anything that goes on here."

It was not often that Anita felt absolutely nothing from Jean-Claude through the marks, especially when he was holding her hands, but for a moment it was as if his thoughts went quiet. She looked at Jean-Claude closely then and realised that he was considering something.

"Do you believe, mon enfant, that there could exist details in your recollection which could prove useful?" the vampire asked as if it was a perfectly normal question.

It was Harry's turn to shrug.

"Maybe," the kid said, obviously annoyed with himself at not being more help.

"Bon," was Jean-Claude's response, "then it might be of use for one familiar with our city to see what you have seen?"

Harry looked confused for a second.

"Do you have a pensieve then?" the kid asked, and Anita had no idea what he was talking about.

"Pensieve?" Jean-Claude repeated the word. "Non, mon enfant, I do not believe I know what that is. How would this aid us?"

"If we had one," Harry explained and seemed to be warming to the idea, "I could place the memory in it and someone else could go into it and see what happened."

Anita did not bother to hide her shock at the concept. Take a memory out of your head and put it in something so that someone else could see it; the whole idea was absurd.

"I'm not sure it would work for non-Wizards, Harry," Draco did not sound certain. "I think they use your innate magic to get you into the memory. Even if we had one, I'm not sure it would be any use."

"Bugger," was Harry opinion on that.

The kid looked defeated again, but Anita looked at Jean-Claude; the vampire had definitely had something else in mind.

"There still may be a way, mes amis," the Master of the city said calmly. "I hesitate to suggest it because of Harry's previous reaction to our minds touching."

"Are you saying you could go into my mind and find the memory?" Harry sounded interested, but a little afraid at the same time.

Anita had seen the real terror Jean-Claude's attempt to bring Harry's vampire to the surface had caused and she could not help but admire the kid's courage for not refusing point blank.

"Non, mon enfant," Jean-Claude replied and he still wasn't giving Anita any hint of what he was thinking, "but it is possible we may set up a temporary connection through which you may give me the memory."

Draco was not looking happy, but Harry appeared interested.

"How?" the kid asked.

"As blood connects you to your attacker, so it may connect us," Jean-Claude said, but Anita could not help thinking blood rituals between vampires were not that easy.

"How long for?" Harry was not as foolhardy as he might have first appeared, Anita had to admit that.

"If all goes well, no more than a few minutes," it was the 'if all goes well' that bothered Anita.

It bothered Draco as well if the way the wizard crossed his arms and frowned was anything to go by.

"And if all does not go well?" Draco asked in a manner that suggested he was ready to walk out and drag Harry with him.

Anita couldn't blame the wizard, but she shifted, just in case there was any sort of trouble.

"Without deliberate intent the bond could not last more than a few days," Jean-Claude said, "a week at most."

"And with deliberate intent?" Draco's voice was cold.

"A blood oath is formed and can only be broken by the instigator," Jean-Claude replied, and Anita was surprised at the openness. "But I believe you misunderstand, mon ami. For this to be achieved it is I who must drink from Harry, not he from me."

Now Anita didn't like the sound of what was being suggested. Yes she liked Harry, yes she felt protective of him, did she want to risk Jean-Claude to him; hell no.

"I don't think this is a good idea," she said firmly.

"I agree," was Draco's opinion.

The other two men in the room were, however, not paying them any attention.

"You drink from me; I give you the memory; we break the connection?" Harry asked without looking at either Anita or Draco.

"That is the idea, mon enfant," Jean-Claude replied.

Harry was moving across the room before Anita could object again.

"Okay," the kid said, "how do we do this?"

"No," both Anita and Draco objected at the same time.

"All that is required is a small bite," Jean-Claude said as if Anita had not just made her point very clear, "however," the vampire continued, finally looking at her, "I believe we must deal with the objections first."

"This might help us catch these nutters," Harry said, looking from first Draco to Anita and then back again. "They nearly killed me, I want them punished and if this can help I am willing to do it."

Those big green eyes were worse than Nathaniel's lilac ones when he wanted something, but this was not about snuggling for a few more minutes in the morning, or getting into the bathroom first; this was about much more serious issues. There had to be other ways to deal with this.

"Do you doubt me that much, ma petite," Jean-Claude asked, looking her directly in the eye. "I would not have suggested such a course of action if I believed it would risk the triumvirate."

That was below the belt, but it brought her up short. It wasn't her fault that she had to protect most of the men in her life from being idiots half the time, and she realised that in this case maybe she was underestimating Jean-Claude. Her beautiful vampire had not lived over four hundred years by being a heroic fool.

"There's really no danger?" she asked in a much smaller voice than she would have liked.

"If I said yes, ma petite, I would be lying," Jean-Claude replied, "but the danger is minimal."

"I swear I will not do anything to hurt Jean-Claude," Harry said vehemently.

"It's not him I'm worried about," Draco voiced his objection even as Anita considered dropping hers completely.

"For a bond to be created between us that was advantageous to me, Harry would be required to drink from me," Jean-Claude said in a reasonable tone.

"So say you," was the blond wizard's response, and Anita could not help but notice Draco had a point.

They did only have Jean-Claude's word that what he said was true. A few years ago Anita would have been right where Draco was standing.

"Draco," Harry said before Anita could come up with a counter argument, "I believe Jean-Claude. Please, let me do this."

"You don't even know if it will help," Draco pointed out with a resigned shake of his head. "There may be nothing in the vision that will give us any more information."

"I know," Harry replied, "I lived with visions that were completely useless for two years, so I get that this may be a waste of time, but if I don't try and something happens to someone I care about I'll spend the rest of my life wondering if I could have stopped it."

Anita almost grimaced on Draco's behalf; it seemed both Jean-Claude and Harry knew how to make a low blow.

"Okay," Draco said in a very exasperated manner, "but if you end up in some weird blood bond I am hexing your arse all the way back to England."

Harry almost reached out to touch his friend then, but Anita saw him pull back his hand at the last moment. It was obvious that these British young man had not been touchy feely types and Harry was having trouble adjusting to the lycanthrope need for physical closeness. Without saying anything, Harry turned back to Jean-Claude and walked over.

"Wrist okay?" the young wizard asked, and Anita could barely tell that he was nervous.

"Oui, mon enfant," Jean-Claude replied with a slight nod, "your wrist will be perfect. Concentrate on the memory of your vision and when you feel the bond form, push the memory towards me."

Harry nodded once and then held out his wrist, moving to the side so that the angle was easier. Trying to remain relaxed was difficult as Jean-Claude took the offered limb and lifted it to his mouth and Anita had to hold in place to prevent herself doing anything she would regret. Harry stiffened as Jean-Claude's fangs sank into his arm, but the kid made no sound as all.

The coldness of vampire power was spilling from both of them, and Harry's skin had gone very pale. Anita had no doubt that the vampire part of the young wizard was now in control and she had the sudden impulse to reach out with her necromancy and guide what was going on. It was difficult not to obey the instinct when the cold magic called to her own.

Jean-Claude could have taken little more than half a mouth full when he drew back, blood glistening on his lips, but Anita could already feel the power in the room shifting. Both vampires locked eyes and she saw her lover grimace slightly under Harry's gaze. Everything was still as if balancing on the very edge of a huge drop and then she felt it. A power surge like nothing she had experience before flooded through the marks and it almost felt like Jean-Claude, but not quite. It was there for just a moment and then she felt her mind invaded by memories that were not her own and she was lost in recollections of screams and blood.

"Ma petite, Anita," Jean-Claude's voice called her out of it and she came back to herself to find that the vampire was holding her by the shoulders and looking directly into her face.

"I'm okay," she said immediately, "just a bit dazed."

"Forgive me, ma petite," Jean-Claude said, brushing his fingers along the side of her face, "I did not believe that this would reach you."

[Anita?] the voice sounded sleepy and confused, but it was definitely Richard and Anita realised that the marks were still open. [What was that?]

[Vampire business, Richard,] she replied, not wanting to have him running to their side for no reason, [nothing to worry about; go back to sleep.]

If their Ulfric had not been mostly still in dreamland anyway, Anita had no doubt that Richard would have put up more of a fight, but as it was, their werewolf gave a wordless reply and was gone again. Although having Jean-Claude so close was very nice, Anita pushed away from him slightly and did a little mental checklist of herself to make sure that she was as okay as she claimed. Everything seemed to be in working order which was a relief.

There was still vampire power in the room, but it was minimal and more like a residue than anything actually going on. She looked at both Jean-Claude and Harry to see how they were reacting, and although both had an echo of the dazed feeling she felt running through her in their eyes, they looked otherwise normal. Jean-Claude definitely didn't look as if he'd just been blood oathed against his will to Harry Potter, which was a relief.

"I'm sorry," Harry said when she met his eyes, "I pushed too hard."

Anita might have laughed if it wasn't for the fact that she still had screams echoing in her head. Hell, if the kid had to put up with this then she could forgive him a bit of over enthusiasm.

"No need to apologise," she said with a small smile, "now there are two of us who know the territory and have the memory. As they say, two heads are better than one."

[Oui, ma petite,] Jean-Claude said inside her head, [and for so many different things.]

Even though she willed it away she felt her face begin to heat up at her lover's playful reminder of the previous evening. If Jean-Claude was joking about sex then everything was definitely okay.

"I don't want to know what you two just talked about, do I?" Harry said and Anita was reminded that the kid knew when she and Jean-Claude were speaking.

She glared at her vampire lover as he smiled sweetly at her.

"No, Harry," she said, trying to hide her embarrassment, "you don't. Now shall we see if we can sort out this memory?"

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Scene 4

"Okay, so you do not leave until Micah comes to pick you up," Harry would have rolled his eyes if he didn't think Anita might hit him for it.

He was used to overprotective people, but with Anita and Draco around, he didn't think all the precautions were necessary. Draco was nodding as if he agreed whole heartedly with Anita and Harry wondered what they thought he'd do. They had spent half an hour trying to pull anything useful from the shared memory, but although there were little bits that might have been useful as a whole, there had been nothing concrete to help with the investigation. It could still be useful if they had another clue, but right then it was a dead end. Eventually Jean-Claude had called a halt since Anita had to be at work, placating the fiery woman with a promise that they would go over it again at a later date.

"Promise," Harry replied before Anita could share anymore wisdom he already knew, "now go, or you'll be late. Don't want to keep the dead waiting."

He was trying to lighten the mood, but Anita just glared at him, so he mock glared back. There was an energy running through the club that he was beginning to enjoy and the feeling of doom he had had since the incident that afternoon was beginning to lift.

"Okay," Anita said, throwing her hands up, "I'm going, just don't do anything stupid."

"Going without saying goodbye?" Harry turned to see Nathaniel standing just behind him, looking at Anita with the most adorable pout.

It wouldn't have caused him to look for more than a second since he'd seen Nathaniel use that look to get his own way at the house, but it was what Nathaniel was wearing that caught his attention, or rather lack there of. About the only vaguely normal thing the wereleopard was wearing was the pair of knee high, soft sued, black boots.

Nathaniel's trousers appeared to be more holes than material and consisted of black bands down the outside of each leg with large ovals in them, solid black bands down the inside of each leg and closely spaced, horizontal, black ribbons to hold the band together down the front and back of each leg. The wereleopard's top was maroon silk and didn't look to be much more than a couple of handkerchiefs held together by four long ties; one over each shoulder and one under each arm.

Harry couldn't help himself; he stared. Anita, for her part, gave Nathaniel a once over with her eyes, smiled in what Harry assumed was an appreciative manner and walked up to Nathaniel before reaching up, dragging the wereleopard's head down and giving him a decent kiss. When Anita pulled back it was Nathaniel who had a very big smile.

"See you later," Anita said and then headed for the exit.

Harry didn't bother to watch her go since he was still fascinated by Nathaniel's outfit.

"I thought to strip," from his tone, Harry thought Draco was of a similar opinion to himself, "that you had to be wearing clothes first."

"Common misconception," Nathaniel said with a grin, "as long as you have something to take off, even if it's only a pair of glasses; the ladies are happy. I'm on in about fifteen minutes, you can watch and see how it's done if you want."

"I might just do that," Draco replied, much to Harry's stunned amazement.

Being backstage at a strip club was one thing, but Harry had never thought they would be watching the show. Such a weird mix of reactions all occurred at the same time when Nathaniel winked coyly at Draco before turning and walking off, that Harry missed the nuances of just about every one. All he could do was stand there and watch the other wereleopard saunter away.

"We're not actually going to watch are we?" Harry asked as he looked at Draco.

The way the Slytherin smiled at him made Harry begin to worry.

"Why not?" Draco replied with a grin. "Unless you brought something to read there's not a lot else going on around here."

Harry felt like pointing out that he was already reacting to the sex on the air and that seeing the women and men first hand might be a bad idea, but Draco was already on the move and unless he wanted to spend the evening on his own, Harry had no choice.

When they tried to enter the club from backstage they were shown to a booth to the side of the stage. It was obvious that Jean-Claude had left instructions on where to put them and what to serve them when they were both provided with soft drinks in the seats that hid them from most of the clientele.

The man on stage was down to little more than a thong when they took their seats and Harry would have sworn it was Gregory except for the fact that the lycanthrope didn't feel right. He dimly remembered someone mentioning that his fellow wereleopard had a twin brother who was a werewolf, and when the man in question began to shift it became clear that that is who it was. The women around the stage seemed to be going crazy as the lycanthrope changed form and Harry sat back in his seat, trying to ignore the hormone levels in the room.

He managed to concentrate on the weird concoction of fruit juices he had been given right up until the stage went completely dark and a hush fell over the women in the audience. It was almost as if the room was holding its breath and then the lights came on in one blast and the women near the stage screamed as one.

Nathaniel was in the middle of the stage, hand on the back of a chair positioned behind him, other arm across his front, head turned to the side and semi-controlled mane of hair running down over his shoulder, hiding his face. Harry felt his mouth fall open at the wave of sound and pheromones that hit him from the army of women and a few men around the stage.

There was still no music and only when the noise began to die down did the strains of a lone guitar begin and Nathaniel started to move. The lilac eyed wereleopard had a habit of exuding an almost innocent sexuality all the time, but there was nothing innocent about the way he moved across the stage now. Every twitch of muscle and shift of limb said only one thing: sex.

Harry wasn't sure if he was reacting to the women clamouring from his friend or if he was reacting to Nathaniel himself, all he was sure of was that he felt his beast moving under his skin and his vampire peering out from behind his eyes. He sat stock still, watching Nathaniel work the audience, pulling them close as the wereleopard moved around the edge of the stage and keep them there as he used the chair as a prop.

How anyone could make taking off a pair of boots sexy, Harry had no idea, but Nathaniel did it. Every move seemed to be effortless sexuality and Harry was captivated. He had never seen anything like it and there was nothing in his head to chase away the lust this time. Only when he took in a huge gulp of air and realised that he had been holding his breath did he come back to himself in any way and he realised that he had been right earlier; this was a bad idea.

Struggling out of his seat he fled back towards the door, his only communication to Draco something about needing air, and he did not stop until he was in the alley. Breathing hard he leant against the wall, letting the coolness of the brick seep into his back. Holding his head in his hands he tried to bring himself back under control. He knew he had fangs and he suspected it was a toss up whether his eyes were cat green or the deep vampire green that they changed to when one of his alter egos was in control.

"Are you okay?" a concerned female voice asked, and he looked over without thinking and came eye to eye with a blond woman.

She stepped back with a gasp and Harry had to conclude that she had not realised what he was when she asked the question. For a fraction of a second all he saw was a source of relief for the turmoil in his head, but he fought it down in a second.

"Sorry," he apologised, looking away and willing the vampire to retreat and the leopard to be still.

He was concentrating so hard on himself and there was no sound that for a moment he thought she was gone.

"Are you hungry?" the question was nervous, but had a somewhat excited as well and Harry looked over again, careful not to meet the woman's eyes this time.

"Pardon?" he asked, too involved with calming himself down to really comprehend what she was saying.

"You're a vampire, aren't you," the woman said, growing a little in confidence. "I wondered if you were hungry, because, well, I..."

It took Harry brain a while to realise that he was being propositioned, but he was saved from having to deal with it himself as the door thudded open and Draco stepped out.

"Harry, are you okay? You took off like a bat out of hell," his friend said, seemingly ignoring the woman completely.

"I'm fine," he replied, finally managing to force his preternatural side back in its bottle, "just needed some air."

The woman was looking at Draco and almost drooling.

"Are you a vampire too?" she asked, expression glazed in a rather disconcerting way.

"What?" Draco asked, as if noticing her for the first time even though Harry knew for a fact his Slytherin friend would have known she was there the moment he exited the club. "No, I'm his..."

"Boyfriend," Harry said as he suddenly saw a way out of this awkward situation, "he's my boyfriend. So thank you for the offer, but I'm sorted."

The woman seemed to almost wilt and she looked terribly disappointed. Harry decided that they should get while the going was good and dragged Draco back inside before the woman could say anything.

"Boyfriend?" Draco asked the moment the door closed.

"She saw my fangs," Harry said apologetically and began to blush, "and she was offering herself and I don't think she just wanted me to bite her."

Draco let him suffer for a while as he tried to explain, but eventually shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"At least you could ask a chap out on a date before having designs on his body," the Slytherin said and headed back down the corridor.

Harry had no witty comeback so he followed his friend towards the back rooms, just glad that Draco hadn't hexed him and wasn't headed back into the club.

End of Chapter 14

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Chapter 15 Actions and Reactions

[Scene 1](#)

Harry looked up at the knock on his door and was quite surprised to find Draco standing there in pyjamas and an over robe, looking hesitant. Micah had dropped them off back at Draco's house about half an hour earlier and Harry was about to climb into bed.

"Can I come in?" the Slytherin asked as soon as he had Harry's attention.

"Of course," was Harry's immediate response.

Draco appeared somewhat uncomfortable, but that did not stop the blond from walking up to the bed and sitting down, facing Harry from no more than a couple of feet away. There was a very serious expression on his friend's face that made Harry think that this was going to be important.

"I need to talk to you," Draco said eventually and then paused.

Not sure what to say, Harry nodded in what he hoped was an encouraging manner and waited for his friend to go on.

"Actually, I've been needing to talk to you for the past year," the Slytherin continued and Harry thought that maybe Draco was afraid to come to the point, "only before the final battle we were rather busy, and since, we've been trying to catch up to take our N.E.W.T.s."

"It has been rather hectic," he agreed, wondering what on earth Draco could have wanted to say for him for so long.

The Slytherin was not often hesitant in anything he did, and the anxiety on his companion's face was not what Harry expected of his friend at all. If this had been about the whole lycanthrope thing Harry might have had a clue, but since it seemed to go back before that he was struggling.

"Well, with all that's happened," Draco forged ahead and still did not seem to be close to revealing what he was really trying to say, "I have to do something or it might be too late. What with the changes you're going through and all the new people, and what happened tonight, I need to make sure you know everything."

Harry reached out and put his hand on his friend's arm before the Slytherin could find another hundred or so ways to put off actually saying what he came to say. Draco was so into the flow that he started and Harry gave his friend a supportive smile in an attempt to help. He had been in similar positions himself and he wanted to make it as easy as possible for Draco.

"Just tell me," he said quietly, "it will be easier."

The Slytherin looked him in the eye, took a deep breath and then opened his mouth.

"I'm in love with you," it came out in rather a rush, but Harry heard every word.

For a moment he sat there and blinked as his mind tried to catch up with what Draco had said. It was rather a startling revelation, but as he thought about it a warm feeling began to spread through his chest. It was a very nice sensation and he could not help the rather silly smile he felt break onto his face.

"Really?" he asked, not sure he was dealing with this in an appropriate manner, but utterly unable to change anything he was doing.

Draco appeared rather stunned by his reaction.

"You're not angry?" the Slytherin asked hesitantly.

"No," Harry replied, incapable of forming a coherent explanation as he let the feeling around his heart swell a bit more.

"Or disgusted?" Draco tried again.

"No," he responded.

"Shocked? Repelled? Confused? Anything at all that I expected?" his companion sounded as if this was not going how he had thought at all.

"Nothing like that," Harry told him honestly.

If asked in the past how he would have reacted to Draco Malfoy declaring his undying love, Harry might have thought it would be different as well, but as it was the goofy smile he could feel on his face would not go away. In hindsight little things jumped to his attention that should have told him what was going on, and now that it was out in the open they were stunningly obvious.

"I've been completely blind, haven't I," he said as he thought about it.

When he really considered it, he should have noticed that Draco's attention to him was not simply friendly. Just lately he had taken to spending as much time, if not more, with the Slytherin as with Ron and Hermione. It was also becoming clear as the memories began stacking up in his brain, that he had not been interacting with Draco quite like an average friend either.

"You've been busy," Draco said quietly, seemingly unsure about where to go from here.

Harry decided that he knew how to break the awkwardness.

"I love you too," he said with perfect clarity.

Now it was Draco's turn to look shocked. For a moment the Slytherin looked at him in complete silence.

"You're not just saying that?" his friend asked carefully.

"Oh no," Harry replied, still buoyed by the warm feeling in his chest, "I just thought about it and I've been in love with you for ages, I just didn't get it. I think you'll find that Hermione has us both figured out because she sat me down and had this whole talk about how gender didn't matter when it came to love, and that being with whomever I wanted was the best way to go, just after the exams. At the time I thought she was on one of her campaigns again, but now I actually see what she was getting at."

"Granger knows?" Draco did not seem to believe that.

"Hermione tends to know everything," Harry said, since it was completely true, "even when you don't think she does."

"And Weasley?" Draco sounded slightly afraid.

"He's more oblivious than I am," Harry replied with a delighted laugh, at which point the Slytherin looked relieved; "it took him five and a half years to figure out he was in love with Hermione, and even I had that worked out."

"Good," was the immediate response, "because I can imagine that the moment he finds out, I'm going to be surrounded by red haired thugs, threatening my manhood if I so much as deflower a hair on your head."

That made Harry smile even more.

"You want to deflower me?" he asked, his heart beating just a little faster at the thought.

He had never really considered himself as anything to look at, and his ideas of love were a little vague, so that Draco desired him as well rather put the icing on the cake.

"Harry," Draco said seriously, "you have the most expressive eyes I have ever seen, hair that begs to be touched, an arse that cries out to be fondled, and you inherited the best of your mother's and your father's looks. If you didn't have the whole innocent virgin thing going on I would have jumped you months ago."

Now Harry decided to blush. Over sixth and seventh year Draco had grown out of his adolescent angles stage and turned into one of the most sought after boys at Hogwarts. That the Slytherin desired him had Harry breathing rather hard. That his body was suggesting things to him that he had no idea how to follow through did not help his equilibrium and he looked away from Draco, embarrassed by his complete lack of experience.

"Harry," Draco said eventually, voice soft and hesitant, "may I kiss you?"

This finally made him look up again, and there was such nervousness in his companion's face that he would have agreed to just about anything. He nodded and refused to dwell on any thoughts of his only other kiss with Cho.

Draco moved in slowly, almost as if he was afraid that Harry would bolt, and Harry watched him, right up until the last moment. As his friend's lips touched his, Harry let his eyes drift shut and the light touch made his whole mouth tingle. The first kiss lasted only a moment, not much more than a brush of lips, and yet Harry felt his heart jump in a way it never had with Cho.

Opening his eyes he looked at Draco, only a few centimetres away from him and he wanted more. This time he was the one to move forward and the touch of lips was not so light. Arms reached for him and pulled him closer and Harry went to Draco's embrace without hesitation. He knew about kissing, he had heard his friends talk about it, but none of their descriptions had done it justice when it was done right.

When a tongue ghosted across his lips he parted them without thinking and Draco pushed into his mouth as if set to devour him. It lit a flame in him that he had never really felt before and he wound his arms around Draco, wanting to be closer.

It was as Draco kissed his way across his face and then down his neck and he tried to reciprocate that he discovered one problem. His glasses were not meant for intimate situations and he would have gouged a hole in Draco's face if he hadn't caught himself. Snaking one hand over the back of Draco's shoulder he ripped the glasses off and threw them somewhere, unheeding of whether he would need a reparo charm later or not. All he cared about was that the kissing continued and he barely noticed that he was pushing Draco back down on the bed.

The Slytherin did not object, bringing his mouth back to Harry's and Harry felt the power under his skin shifting in response. It felt good, and right, and wonderful, and he did not want it to stop as he used his own tongue to taste the man beneath him.

Harry covered Draco's body with his own, feeling the power moving through him now much more clearly. Every touch of Draco's hand and taste of Draco's mouth was drawing something out of him that he did not fully comprehend. He allowed

Draco's tongue to plunder his mouth and he wanted to reach back with more than physical flesh. He could feel the magic swirling through his companion and hear the blood pumping through the Slytherin's veins and he wanted to be connected to all that life and power.

Willing the power he could sense within himself out of his body he pushed it into Draco. As he kissed the Slytherin he slowly wrapped the tendrils of life through the complicated pattern that was Draco, enveloping his companion's essence in his own. It was the most incredible feeling as he connected to the Slytherin at a fundamental level.

When he opened his eyes he already knew that the world would be in focus despite his lack of glasses, and he drew back slowly, taking in everything about Draco that he could see with his preternatural eyes.

"What did you do?" Draco asked quietly, bringing a pale hand up to touch Harry's face.

"I don't know," he admitted in little more than a whisper. "I touched you," he tried to explain, "the real you underneath. I'm still touching you."

His life-force was withdrawing back into his body now he had broken the direct physical connection between them, but he could still feel the underlying connection that now existed between himself and Draco. It was wonderful and frightening at the same time. He did not understand what he had done, and yet he did not want to consider undoing it, in fact he wanted more, but he was not sure what it was that he wanted.

Slowly Harry felt his vampire fading, and yet the new aspect to his monstrous side kept it closer to the surface than he had felt it before.

"I'm sorry," he said, pulling back, knowing he had done something he could not undo. "I should have asked."

Draco caught him before he could pull away completely.

"I think you did," the Slytherin said with a slight smile. "come back, Harry, I haven't finished kissing you yet."

For a moment he hesitated, but grey eyes met his own and implored him in a way he could not resist. Leaning back down again he allowed himself to be pulled into an embrace and then gentle lips touched his for a second time. His body moulded back to Draco's and higher thoughts were lost in a sea of sensation.

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Scene 2

Anita opened her door to find Harry and Draco standing outside, which surprised her somewhat, because they had expressed a wish to have a day to themselves.

"Sorry," Harry apologised before she could ask them why there were there, "weird stuff is happening, and I think it's my fault. Can we come in?"

There was not really a way to say no to a request like that so she nodded and allowed them both to walk past her into the hall. Even before they were fully over the threshold she felt something from them, a tingle of magic that had not been there before and she knew this was going to be interesting.

"Go into the kitchen," she said as they hovered, "Nathaniel is making lunch and I'm sure he'd be delighted to add you to the numbers."

When she walked into the kitchen Nathaniel had already walked up to Harry, picked up his hand and rubbed his face against the palm. The recognition of a dominant was a fundamental principle of lycanthrope society that always came out in private and Harry accepted the greeting, but looking at his face, Anita knew the wizard still found it very odd.

The fact that Nathaniel looked as if he was only wearing the apron she had bought him, because he was in just shorts under it and you couldn't tell he had anything on from her angle, made her smile, but then she looked over at Draco and remembered that this appeared to be serious.

"Okay, boys," Anita decided to find out what was up, "spill it."

"My magic's changed," Draco said pointedly and sat down.

Harry appeared very guilty and Anita knew it must have something to do with their green eyed anomaly, but she wanted more information before she came to any conclusions.

"Changed how?" she asked in her most upfront manner.

Draco took out his wand, pointed it at the stuffed penguin that Nathaniel had felt the need to bring with him from the bedroom, and muttered a spell. The toy flew into the air, hit the ceiling with a squeak and then stayed there as if stuck.

"I take it that was not the desired result," Anita said as she watched the penguin twitch on the ceiling as if it was trying to get away.

"It should have floated," Harry said quietly.

"And that's not the best bit," Draco said and put his wand on the table.

The blond wizard held out his hand, said something else in Latin and the penguin shot to the waiting fingers.

"I should not be able to do that," was Draco's succinct opinion.

At least he was being brutally honest, it was actually quite refreshing for Anita after dealing with vampires for so long.

"So your magic is stronger now?" she asked, wanting to make sure she was understanding the problem.

"Yes," Harry replied, "like mine."

Harry was obviously one of those people who did guilt very well, because it was coming off him in waves. It was probably another reason why Anita empathised with the wizard so much.

"And when did this happen?" she asked.

The two young men looked at each other and Harry appeared to be doing his best to disappear through the floor.

"We found out this morning," Draco said, no blame in his tone, but he seemed to realise that would make no difference to Harry, "but I'm willing to stake money that it happened last night."

Now this was becoming interesting.

"And what happened last night?" Anita prompted, even though she suspected the answer.

"Your advice," Draco said and crossed his arms across his chest, "I took it."

"So you two..." Anita started to ask and left it hanging.

Harry was blushing so hard he was probably giving off heat.

"No," the young man said, obviously mortified to be talking about this, "it was just kissing."

Nathaniel was watching the proceedings avidly and seemed to find the whole thing fascinating. Anita hoped her *pomme de sang* did not put his foot in it by asking an awkward question, because even though Nathaniel was much better than he had been when he first moved in, the wereleopard still had some interesting ideas about sex.

"But something happened when we were kissing," Draco explained, far less embarrassed than Harry seemed to be. "I can't really describe it, but it was like he reached out and touched me in a really strange metaphysical way. Then I think something happened later as well, when we were asleep. I remember dreaming of green fire, but it's all a bit vague, and Harry doesn't really remember much at all."

"You slept in the same bed then?" Anita asked, more to cover the shock at what she was realising more than anything else.

"Harry fell asleep on me," Draco said with a fond look at what Anita assumed was now his boyfriend, "and I did not feel like leaving him. Do you know what happened?"

For a moment she considered lying until she had had a chance to talk to Jean-Claude, but she put that aside. She did not want to give them a reason to distrust her.

"I think," she said, choosing her words carefully, "that you, Harry, have made Draco your human servant."

Harry looked horrified.

"But, I would never," he spluttered, and Anita recognised the reaction from when she had not really understood the position either.

"It's not bad, Harry," she assured him quickly before he could stress out and lose control of either of his preternatural aspects, "I am Jean-Claude's human servant. It means you have given Draco a piece of yourself and marked him. There are four possible marks and I think you gave Draco two last night. The third mark would require you to drink from Draco, and the fourth for him to drink from you."

If you did that then you would be joined for as long as you live, as it is Draco will be immune to most other vampires and he'll heal much faster than normal."

Harry still did not look at all happy with the idea.

"But Draco is no one's servant," he said pointedly.

"Draco," Anita said, turning to the blond wizard and looking him straight in the eye, "do you feel any compunction to obey Harry?"

To his credit Draco thought about it and did not simply dismiss the idea.

"No," he replied.

"I didn't think so," Anita concluded, and was rather happy about the fact, "I think your magic prevents that part of the bond. Because I'm a Necromancer I'm free of that part as well. Human servants usually have to obey their Master, hence the term, but some of us can get away without that part."

"And that would affect my magic as well?" Draco asked, clearly not sure if he was comfortable with the idea.

"Yes," she told him, although she was pretty sure something else was going on as well because the change was so radical, "there's power flowing between you. The only thing that messes up the whole plan is that vampires really aren't supposed to be able to do anything like that until they've at least had a centenary."

What was bothering Anita really was that she and Jean-Claude had not had a power boost quite so significant until they had formed the triumvirate with Richard. A triumvirate was required because you had three mutually exclusive life forms with their various magic joining together, and she could not help but notice that this pairing had all three as well, even though two existed in one person. This was just going to make Jean-Claude's day when he woke up.

"Is there any way to remove the marks?" Harry asked and brought her out of her thoughts.

"Death," was the simple answer so Anita gave it, "although another master giving the marks did cancel it out for me once, but that involved dying as well, so let's not go there."

Alejandro's attempt to make her his human servant and the consequences were not things she really wished to recall right at that moment. The fact that it had negated Jean-Claude's first three marks had been a plus within a whole lot of minuses which included her heart stopping, so it had really not been her idea of a good time. If Edward had not administered CPR she would be dead right now. Harry did not seem to like her answer, but he did finally sit down from where he had been hovering.

"How the hell do I always do things like this?" the kid sounded exasperated with himself.

Draco reached out and took Harry's hand straight away and Anita felt the power flair between them even though they appeared to fail to notice it.

"Harry," the blond wizard said with a very firm tone of voice, "stop blaming yourself. This is odd, admittedly, but stranger things have happened. For now we can't do anything about it, and I'm not sure I want to anyway."

That startled Harry somewhat if the look of shock on his face was anything to go by.

"What?" Draco asked in a way that made Anita feel warm inside. "You think now that I've got you I'm going to let you go that easily?"

It was rather touching really, and the romantic part of Anita sat up and purred in delight.

"But it's too like ..." Harry trailed off, but his fingers were tracing the inside of Draco's left arm.

Both young men were so intent on each other that Anita did not think they were really aware of their audience. When Draco didn't say anything Harry tried to pull away, but the blond wizard was not having any of it. He caught Harry's hand with his left and almost violently pushed his sleeve up with his right. Anita saw the black tattoo as soon as it was revealed and realised that she had never seen Draco in short sleeves, even though it was mid summer.

"It's nothing like this, Harry," Draco said, displaying the mark. "This was done to me while my father held me down and I screamed. Every time He called it burned. He tried to make me a slave, Harry; this isn't even remotely the same."

In other cases Anita would have disagreed; the marks could be slavery for the human servant, but not between these two. She had seen the interaction between Master and servant and this was not it; this was more the joining of equals.

It was Nathaniel who broke the tableau by reaching out and touching the tattoo on Draco's arm. There was the most peculiar expression on her *pomme de sang's* face as he touched the snake part of the mark with his finger. Anita was surprised when Draco allowed Nathaniel's touch.

"I've seen that before," were the quiet words that made both Harry and Draco look up sharply.

Nathaniel almost flinched away at Harry's stare, but Anita knew the young wizard didn't mean anything by it.

"Recently?" Draco asked with a frown.

The blond wizard sounded worried and Anita did not like it when people looked that worried in her kitchen. It usually meant that people were about to start dying.

"No," Nathaniel said, snatching back his hand and looking at Anita, "from before."

She was not sure which before he was referring to, before her or before Gabriel, but Anita knew that look in Nathaniel's eyes; the person with the mark had most likely been a client. Something about the encounter had scared Nathaniel, and when it came to sex that probably meant it was very nasty. Nathaniel's ability to say no had been round about zero for a long time, although he was much better at it now.

"Before when?" Harry asked, although he seemed apologetic as if he realised he was prying. "It's just there are people with these marks still at large and they're dangerous. If they've been here anytime in the last six months there are people who need to know."

"Before I was..." Nathaniel was very uncomfortable about this and Anita did not like where he seemed to be heading, "when..."

He appealed to her with his eyes and she reached out, pulling him close without a second thought.

"It was years ago," she said firmly, knowing that 'before' in this instance meant before Nathaniel had become a wereleopard.

For a moment she thought Draco would push the subject, but she saw Harry squeeze his arm and nothing was said. She knew that she was going to have to talk to Nathaniel about this since it was unlikely to just go away now, but that would be when they had some privacy.

"Sorry," Draco surprised her by apologising, "we've been through a war and any one with this has been trying to kill us."

Anita didn't want to know about a war that tried to kill children, but she accepted what they said as fact.

End of Chapter 15

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Chapter 16 Pomp and Circumstance

Scene 1

[*Ma petite,*] Jean-Claude's mental presence gently made itself known in her mind and Anita awoke from the nap she had decided to take in the afternoon, [we have visitors, from the council.]

Adrenaline brought her to full wakefulness; the vampire council were bad news. The problem was, they should not have been able to enter Jean-Claude's territory without negotiating it first.

[They're here, now?] Anita asked, knowing the answer, but needing to ask the question anyway.

[*Oui, ma petite,*] Jean-Claude replied.

[Isn't that a declaration of war?] this was very confusing.

Last time they had dealt with the council it had seemed like they had won and there would be peace for a while. They really didn't need this at the same time as whatever was going on in St Louis now.

[Non,] Jean-Claude replied, much to her surprise. [They have invoked an emergency meeting, *ma petite*. It requires all council members to be in agreement and guarantees our safety and the safety of our people throughout their stay. There can be no trickery this time. By declaring the emergency they have severely limited their authority. I believe they may know more about our Harry than we do.]

A protective rush of emotion ran through Anita before she could reply. They may be safe, but it sounded as if Harry was not.

[We cannot abandon him to them,] was her distinct opinion on the matter.

[I do not intend to, *ma petite*,] Jean-Claude told her, and she could feel his regret, [not unless we are forced into it. They have not yet taken the step of declaring him outside all influence, and until then I will protect him. However, if they invoke the final stage of the emergency, to stand against them would be to bring the whole council down on our people. Even we, *ma petite*, would not survive all of them.]

Anita wanted to tell the council exactly where they could go, but something had caused them to take the gloves off, and that meant it was important. If the council came to destroy Jean-Claude they would have to destroy her and everything connected to her as well. St Louis would be a preternatural war zone. Until it came down to the line in the sand she knew they would have to play the game.

[How many?] she asked.

The council were not her favourite people and she did not like them being in St Louis.

[Surprisingly few, *ma petite*,] Jean-Claude replied and her lover did not attempt to hide the fact that he was surprised by this fact, [only the Traveler and a small entourage. He has requested an interview this evening.]

The council did not tend to do things by halves when they felt it was important, and this was important or there would have been more games. That they had sent only one representative was confusing.

[Something's going on here we don't know about,] she said, knowing that it was true. [Do the council know about wizards, Jean-Claude? Do they have the whole picture and we only have half?]

[*C'est possible, ma petite*,] her lover returned with the equivalent of a mental nod. [There is much the council knows that it shares only with itself. If they are aware of wizards as we are not, then they have taken a great deal of effort to prevent our communities interacting.]

What she wanted to do was swear and curse and rant about the complications they did not need, but there were too many other things to think about to indulge that fantasy. With the council in town the danger level had gone up a notch and it was time to play hard ball.

[There has been a complication,] she told Jean-Claude as she assessed her options, [Harry marked Draco.]

For a moment there was absolutely nothing from her lover's end of the connection and it was almost as if he was not there.

[Such a powerful child,] were the words that eventually came back with an undertone of worry. [It was a remote possibility that we may have been able to hide his power from the council, *ma petite*, but that point is moot now. Bring them both to the meeting, and bring your vampire and leopard as well. Tonight

we make a point of our strength. If Richard were in town I would contact him, but he is not due back until tomorrow. We will use Jason as a surrogate for the pack.]

Richard had been away all week, since the full moon, at a seminar in Atlanta and there would be no way for him to make it back in time. He would have to be told in case they needed the power of the marks at any time, but Anita decided to leave that to Jean-Claude, she did not feel like an argument today. She still loved Richard, and he was trying to fit into her life, but she loved all her men and Richard still couldn't handle that too well, which meant they did not see eye to eye on a lot of things.

[What time do you want us?] Anita asked, pushing aside thoughts of Richard for now.

[Around seven, *ma petite*, if you would be so kind,] her charming boyfriend replied.

[We'll be there,] she promised. [I love you, Jean-Claude, don't get yourself killed before we get there.]

[Never, *ma petite*,] Jean-Claude returned with amusement.

Anita extracted herself from Nathaniel, who she was sure hadn't been there when she went to sleep, and headed for the bathroom.

"We're going to the Circus," she said as she walked through the door. "The council representatives are here and we need to make an impression."

"I'll look you out some clothes," was Nathaniel's response, and from the sounds of it she doubted he'd been asleep at all.

It didn't take much of an excuse for the young leopard to crawl into bed with her, whether it was bedtime or not. It was funny how she never chose to object these days.

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Scene 2

Harry fiddled with his collar and Draco slapped his hand away while barely looking at him. The suit and full robes were hot even though Draco had cast a cooling charm on them, but Anita had said to power dress for the evening and Draco had taken it to heart. The black and green brought out Harry's eyes and the paleness of his skin according to his boyfriend, but he felt a little silly, especially in the thigh length jacket. It seemed that Draco had been picking up fashion tips from the vampires. He'd finally decided that what he had suspected since the previous day was a fact and that his eyesight was improving and the glasses had gone too. A mild charm he had always been too blind to use made sure that what was left of his myopia was not a problem, and Draco had seemed very pleased with the overall effect.

They were waiting for Anita and company outside the Circus of the Damned and three people had already propositioned him. The wizard's robes were attracting attention as if they were one of the acts and Harry hoped Anita arrived soon. Draco was in black and silver and he was incredibly handsome with his aristocratic airs and graces, which was, quite frankly, driving Harry insane. He wanted to kiss Draco into oblivion, only his boyfriend wouldn't let him because it would muss his hair.

"Stop fidgeting," Draco said and rolled his eyes in exasperation. "If you're going to be the Defeater of Voldemort for the Ministry when we get home you're going to have to get used to this type of thing."

"Somehow I don't think the Ministry is this dangerous," Harry replied and did his best not to reach for his collar again. "And I'm not sure they'll want me anymore, I'm not exactly a pure little role model, am I?"

"Harry, you were never a pure little role model," Draco said, still looking down the street to see if Anita had arrived yet. "I've never met anyone who can break as many rules as you, get caught and still come up smelling of roses."

"And if they find out about the vampire or the wereleopard?" Harry asked and hoped the girl in the short leather mini-skirt who had just ditched her parents was not going to come in his direction.

"You're the most powerful wizard since ever," his boyfriend replied and finally looked at him, "you say 'jump', they'll say 'how high'."

He would have argued the point, but at that moment he saw three familiar figures coming out of the darkness. To say he was impressed was an understatement. Anita was in a long red dress which split all the way to her thighs on both sides, long knee-length boots with two inch heels and a long leather coat, cut in the most elegant style Harry had ever seen. Her hair was piled on the top of her head in a crown of curls, and her makeup was light but very effective.

Damian's red hair was tied back in a practical-looking ponytail and the vampire was wearing black leather trousers, a white silk shirt with long cuffs that poked out the sleeves of a thigh-length black jacket. He looked the epitome of the regal undead.

Nathaniel completed the trio in a loose white shirt and red silk trousers which matched Anita's dress. These trousers alternatively clung and then billowed in places that at times left nothing to the imagination. When Nathaniel turned his head to Anita as they walked, Harry could see that his long hair was braided in a complicated pattern across the back of his head and was allowed to fall free in a mahogany waterfall down his back. The clasp holding it all in place looked like it was silver, as was the ankh that fell from a plain black suede choker Nathaniel was wearing around his throat.

The three of them together radiated power like there would never be an end to it. Harry found himself standing up straighter just because it felt like the thing to do. He was quite surprised when Anita caught sight of him and Draco and stopped walking, a look of surprise on her face. She covered it quickly and began walking again, but Harry wondered what she had seen.

"I'm impressed," Anita said as the two groups met, "you two scrub up nicely. Do wizards have an equivalent to Armani?"

"What makes you think Armani is a Muggle?" Draco asked with a smirk.

Harry fidgeted; he felt out of his depth. All the people around him seemed to go with their clothes, he felt like a mannequin that had been put in the wrong part of the shop. His clothes fitted these days, but they were high street clothes that every teenager wore, not the designer stuff Draco had put him in.

"You should wear green more often," Nathaniel said with a smile, "it brings out your eyes."

"That's what Draco says," was all Harry could find to say.

"If you'd let me dress you more often rather than that tat you wear all the time, you'd always look this stunning," the Slytherin said without batting an eye, and Harry couldn't help blushing.

He was nothing to look at really and he knew it. That Draco desired him was beyond his wildest dreams and he didn't handle compliments well.

"Shall we go in?" Anita rescued him from dying of embarrassment and swept towards the door.

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Scene 3

Anita was impressed. When she had explained to the wizards what was going to happen that evening she was not quite sure what she had been expecting from them. After all she had no idea what wizards considered power dressing, and after seeing it she decided that Harry and Draco had more in common with vampires than they would probably admit to.

The outfits were a strange mixture of modern and old fashioned. The suits both young men were wearing would have put catwalk models to shame, but the frock coat type arrangements they had over top were straight out of a history book. The gloves and a cane were a nice finishing touch on Draco's part as well, but it looked as if Harry had put his foot down at that since he had neither accessory. Where sometimes it was possible to forget that the two young men were not ordinary when they wore normal clothes, in their current get up it was impossible not to know that they carried power with them.

With Damian on one arm, Nathaniel on the other, and the two wizards following, Anita knew they were the equivalent of a preternatural battering ram and she would have smiled at the effect they were having on everyone who saw them, if it hadn't been quite such a serious situation. Appearing weak in front of the council was not an option.

She realised she had managed to convey this point very well, when as they approached the entrance to Jean-Claude's chambers, instead of waiting for the door to be opened for them, or having one of them open it by hand, Harry held out his hand, muttered something under his breath and the door opened for them. This was all accomplished without any of them so much a missing a step. Anita decided that even she would have been impressed with showmanship like that.

Taking in the whole room in one glance she could not fail to notice quite how different it was from the last time the Traveler had visited. Then everything had been danger and tension, but although there was some grandstanding going on, the fact that Jean-Claude was completely relaxed was obvious. Anita had not been particularly comfortable with the idea of the emergency measures in effect, but they must have meant a great deal to the vampires or Jean-Claude would have been far less casual. There was still danger in the room, but Anita could not help but notice that it was firmly aimed at the wizard behind her.

Asher was sitting down in one of the antique chairs, looking completely relaxed if you didn't know him, but the way he was hiding his face behind his hair and had one hand resting on the arm of the chair as if he would grip it at any moment told Anita that her blond Adonis was not as calm as he appeared. The outfit he had chosen for the evening was tight PVC pants and white poet's shirt that was laced only very loosely from navel to chest. The ensemble screamed sex and confidence.

On the other side of the room was Requiem, dressed in courtly style. He could have stepped out of the pages of a Jane Austin novel except that his whole outfit was dark black and blues. Anita had the impression that Requiem could melt into the shadows whenever he saw fit.

The only non-vampire in the room was Jason, and he was sitting on the chaise near Asher decked out like a powerful toy. It was quite obvious that Jean-Claude had dressed the werewolf and Jason looked like something between a sex slave and a dangerous weapon. Very tight black leather pants disappeared into long black boots, and the only other thing Jason was wearing was a small silver dagger on his belt. The marks where Jean-Claude had fed earlier in the evening were obvious on Jason's neck and announced very clearly his status in the room.

Anita took in the enemy next and was pleasantly surprised. There were only three: Balthazar whom she remembered from the Traveler's last visit and still as striking; a woman she did not know, but who gave off the air of being human; and the vampire she had seen the Traveler inhabiting when he had last visited. The somewhat innocent looking vampire had changed a great deal since she had last seen him, dressed in pale pink silk and sinfully tight pants, and it was completely obvious that the Traveler was in charge of his body. How the Master vampire had convinced the young vampire to leave with him for France was something Anita chose not to think about, since she was not about to go up against a council member because of it.

Lastly her eyes found Jean-Claude. She had left him until last because he often had the unsettling effect of distracting her from everything else and she had needed to know the lie of the land before she let that happen. Asher was stunningly beautiful, but Anita knew why her second vampire lover had thought Jean-Claude would take his place as Belle Morte's favourite at court when they had first met; Jean-Claude was always breathtaking. Anita felt her throat hitch as she looked at him and drank in the glorious sight that was the Master of the City.

Jean-Claude's choice of clothes was nothing out of the ordinary, deep blue pants; pure white shirt with a wing collar; silver cravat and black half coat style jacket, but the way Jean-Claude could wear clothes was stunning. If they had been alone, Anita would have gone to him immediately, but as it was she held herself still and allowed the tight arousal she felt wash over her.

"Anita," the Traveler said with a smile that did not touch the eyes of the body the vampire was inhabiting, "how lovely to see you again."

"If you had given us more warning of your visit we would have been better prepared," she replied, playing the game of words for now.

She was fully aware how her greeting could have been taken in many ways, and it was pointless to try and hide the fact that she was less than completely comfortable with the Traveler in the room. Master vampires, especially old ones could usually smell a lie, so the trick was making sure you could say exactly what

you wanted them to hear without actually lying outright. Anita had never been very good at political games, but she was willing to try for Harry's sake.

"And had this matter not been so urgent the council would have been delighted to accept your hospitality," the Traveler replied, wilfully ignoring the other interpretations of her choice of words, "but when events involve our Wizarding brethren the pleasantries must become secondary."

That shifted all eyes onto the two wizards in the room, and Anita directed Nathaniel and Damian to the available seats and out of the line of fire. She had the Browning in its thigh holster and knives on both her wrists, but she still felt almost unarmed. If it came down to guns she would be very surprised, but she was ready in case it did.

"Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy," the Traveler said and Anita didn't really like the look the vampire was giving the two young men, "your reputations precede you."

"You have us at a disadvantage," Anita was not surprised when it was Draco who spoke first.

The blond wizard had a silver tongue when he wanted to and when backed up by the quiet strength that was Harry, it was an impressive combination. Both young men were almost humming to Anita's preternatural senses and she wondered if they were deliberately projecting or if this was just them when danger was in close proximity.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the Traveler said with a charming smile, "I am the Traveler, and I bring greetings from the vampire council."

"We have had no cause to recognise the vampire council in the past," Draco's voice held a hint of carefully aimed disdain, as if the Traveler was not quite what the wizard had hoped. "Why, if you are as powerful as we have been led to believe, have we never heard of you?"

Surprisingly the Traveler did not appear to take offence at that and merely raised his eyebrows.

"To avoid a war many years ago, our two races came to an agreement," the council member said, in what for a vampire was a very open manner. "We interact only on an individual basis unless exceptional circumstances arise. It would be a shame for the peace treaty which has lasted over a thousand years to be damaged now, would it not?"

The veiled threat hung in the air and Anita could tell that Harry didn't like it. Draco's face was an emotionless mask, but she had no doubt the blond wizard was calculating behind it.

"This has nothing to do with our races," Harry said, stepping forward and putting himself in the forefront of everything, "it has to do with me, so let's drop the acts and deal with it."

"Indeed," the Traveler said, also taking a step forward, "I simply wished to impress upon you that it would be unwise to publish the knowledge of our existence."

"Likewise the other way round," Harry said bluntly.

The momentary flash of worry that flashed across Draco's face mirrored Anita's own, but there was nothing she could do now that Harry had placed himself right in the middle of everything. She was beginning to see why Jean-Claude sometimes despaired of her in these situations as Harry calmly stamped all over protocol. Back in the hospital Harry had dealt with Jean-Claude in only a few seconds, but Anita had no doubt that if the council knew about wizards then they had defences against them. What this would mean in a fight she dreaded to think.

She felt for Jean-Claude through the marks, not opening them enough to alert the Traveler to what she was doing, but enough to be comforted by his preternatural presence and hold them ready should an attack be forthcoming. As the Traveler moved yet closer to Harry, she prayed that they would come out of this without too many dire consequences.

End of Chapter 16

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Chapter 17 Battle of wills

Scene 1

The whole initial meeting procedure had set Harry on edge. He could feel the ancient power moving through the room from the Traveler and it caused all his instincts from the war to resurface. Without a doubt he knew that he had stepped onto a battlefield the moment he entered the Circus, and he was happy to draw the fight to him rather than allow it to touch the others in the room. This was his battle and he did not flinch when the enemy turned all of his attention onto him.

As Harry looked into the eyes of the vampire hosting the Traveler he felt the monster's power reach out to him. It slithered into his thoughts and he just stood there letting it happen as if it was the most natural thing in the world. It was not the same as when Jean-Claude had tried to enter his mind and he found himself strangely calm. It was like a net encircling his mind and he knew that the next step would be to close that net and push his thoughts aside, taking their place.

"Trying to take my body would be a mistake," he said in a voice that barely sounded like him. "I held Voldemort in my mind as he died so his soul could not escape through the Dark Mark, I can hold you as well."

This was the part of him which only came out to play in battle; the part that he had trained and kept locked away. This part of himself frightened him, it was all Slytherin and all about power, but it was the strength he needed at that moment. He squeezed one of the power tendrils in his mind to make his point, snapping it where it touched him. The Traveler flinched and the tendrils began to withdraw.

"You are formidable, Mr Potter," the ancient vampire said, but although his mind retreated the body he was using did not. There was a flash of something in the blue eyes regarding him and Harry thought it might be desire. "I did not truly believe until this moment. Forgive me, but I had to be sure."

"Only part of my reputation is a fairytale," Harry replied, noting that from the corner of his eye he could see Anita trying to cover her astonishment.

"Which part?" the Traveler asked with a smile.

"That I'm a fantastic lay," Harry replied, his tone changing completely, "I have yet to find out."

At that the Traveler threw his head back and laughed, which was exactly what the calculating persona Harry had adopted was counting on. He smiled at the amused vampire and waited for the laughter to stop.

"I like you, Harry, may I call you Harry?" the Traveler asked and Harry nodded; it would be better to be on the monster's good side. "Maybe you would be interested in finding out?"

That almost shook the icy control he was maintaining, but Harry fought his repulsion of the idea.

"I'm spoken for," he said, flicking his eyes to Draco, "and Draco was never taught to share. He's an only child."

If the large grin on the Traveler's face was anything to go by the creature was still amused.

"Ah, such a shame," the vampire said, but did not fight the rejection, "to know the flesh which houses such power would have been exciting."

Harry inclined his head, taking the compliment rather than being repelled by it. They understood each other now.

"You live up to your legend, Harry," the Traveler said and turned away, walking towards his human servant. "It is comforting to know that some reputations are deserved."

When the vampire turned back around his face was serious once more, and Harry knew they were back to business.

"The council wish me to convey to you our thanks for the death of Thomas Riddle," the Traveler spoke with a practiced authority. "His activities were becoming bothersome in the extreme, and he cost us several of our higher ranking Masters in Britain. Your intervention saved us considerable effort."

Harry did not believe for a second that the Traveler had been sent to St Louis simply to say thanks for murdering Voldemort, but it was a nice lie. He had no doubt that had the council member found him vulnerable he would have been eliminated or taken prisoner for further study. That they had sent only one council member said to him that they were being careful rather than anything else.

"You're welcome," Harry replied, still firmly in character, "I was becoming rather bored with his yearly attempts to kill me."

The Traveler laughed again, and this time the sound grated on Harry's nerves. There was only so long Harry could maintain the Slytherin warrior persona; it took selective Occlumency to do it and he was reaching the end of his tether. He still had the power to play the game even without it, but the real Harry was no where near as good with moving the pieces.

"It has been interesting meeting you, Harry," the Traveler said, all humour leaving the vampire's eyes once more. "Maybe we shall meet again under more conducive circumstances."

"Maybe," Harry replied, although not if he saw the vampire coming.

This usurper of bodies made his skin crawl and if he never saw him again, Harry would be very happy. It seemed, however, that this meeting was over as the Traveler turned back to the others, leaving Harry to his own devices.

"Jean-Claude, thank you for your hospitality," the Master vampire said, and Harry had the strangest feeling the sentiment was genuine, "but I believe I have monopolised your guests long enough. If I might have a few moments of your time when you are available, I shall take my leave."

"Of course," Jean-Claude said politely and inclined his head.

And that appeared to be that. With no more ceremony the Traveler beckoned to his two companions and walked towards the door. Even the cold, calculating Slytherin part of Harry that was in charge was surprised by that. Being paranoid he kept his eyes very firmly on the council member as he exited the room with his entourage.

Harry held himself very still until he could feel no trace of the Traveler anywhere near him, then he began to shake. Draco was by his side the moment he let his guard down, and arms wound round him, pulling him close. He buried his face in his boyfriend's shoulder and let the horror of the situation take over. That was the main trouble with this construction he had trained himself to create; there were always consequences of using it.

"You're getting far too good at that," Draco said quietly, stroking his hair in a soothing manner.

"I know," Harry's reply was very muffled, but he did not want to look up just yet.

He did not want to see what people thought of him; he was not ready for that. Draco held him and he shook.

"*Mon enfant*," Jean-Claude's voice was gentle, but there was a trace of something there that Harry had not heard before, "are you well?"

"He'll be fine," he was very glad when Draco did the talking for him. "When he was fifteen Harry found out he was the only person who could kill the Dark Bastard, what you just saw was his way of doing it."

For a while no one spoke, and all Harry had to concentrate on was stopping the shaking. He knew it would take him a while, it always did.

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Scene 2

Anita could not help herself as she stared at Harry Potter. She hid what she was feeling behind the mask she had had firmly in place since the moment they walked into the Circus, but she could not take her eyes off the shaking boy. Harry had just played one of the members of the vampire council at his own game and won, only it hadn't really been Harry. The man, because there had been nothing boyish about him, that had stood there and faced down the Traveler had been a complete stranger.

What scared her the most, was that she had recognised the eyes that had stared out of the teenage face, she'd seen them in the mirror when she wore her killing mask. The personable young man she had come to know over the last few days had been gone and in his place had been a cold bloodied killer. Harry was only

seventeen; seventeen year old boys should not have been able to become something like that.

Dragging her mind back from the shock she felt she turned her attention to the whole evening. It felt like such an anti-climax; the council were never this easy to deal with and the little voice at that back of her mind could not accept that this was over.

"That can't possibly be it," she said, dropping the calm human servant act and slipping back into plain Anita. "Jean-Claude, all of this cannot have been just for five minutes."

"I am as surprised as you, ma petite," Jean-Claude replied, turning to her with a thoughtful expression on his face. "I have never been witness to a visit by members of the council under such conditions, and I have never known them to be this brief."

"It was not what I expected either," Asher gave his opinion, standing up and stretching his long legs as if he had been wanting to do so for some time. "I accompanied Belle Morte and Padma on one such enterprise and it was not as," he paused as if looking for the correct word, "conducive. I believe that this outcome may be directly related to the subject."

Anita looked back at Harry and Draco and all she could see of Harry's face were his green eyes peering hesitantly through his bangs, over Draco's shoulder. The kid was still shaking, although it was little more than a tremble now, and she wondered how much it had cost the young wizard to face down the Traveler.

"It's obvious isn't it," Draco sounded protective and angry, a position Anita understood all too well when it came to matters of the vampire council, "the monster was sent to test Harry. All they wanted to know was how strong he is, and now that they know they'll crawl back into their holes until they can use the information. The Dark Bastard used to do the same thing all the time with prospective allies."

The blond wizard didn't say it, but Anita heard the 'and enemies' tacked onto the end. There was a political game going on here as well that Anita knew she could not fully see, and she didn't like it one bit.

"Please," Jean-Claude said after a moment, "stay and relax. I believe it would be wise for Anita and I to see to the Traveler's request to meet with him as soon as possible. Giving the council a reason to remain is never in the best interest."

The last thing Anita wanted to do was walk back into anywhere with the Traveler; the vampire put her teeth on edge, but she could see the advantages in what Jean-Claude was suggesting. If the Traveler's mission was over, from the way she understood the situation, the council member would be forced to leave or be seen as the aggressor. Mr Oliver had found out that council members did not survive if they were the aggressor in Jean-Claude's territory. The destruction of the Earthmover had nearly killed her, but Anita was willing to risk that again if it removed those who threatened her and hers.

She nodded her consent and followed Jean-Claude to the door. She would have liked to take Damian with her since his calming influence was so useful, but the Traveler had requested only Jean-Claude. As his human servant this included Anita automatically unless Jean-Claude chose otherwise, but to bring anyone else would have been a serious breach in etiquette.

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Scene 3

"You know, Jean-Claude," the Traveler said as soon as Anita and Jean-Claude walked into the room the council member had been allocated, "you should consider taking the seat on the council. With such tools at your disposal, you would make a formidable member."

This was more what Anita had expected as she found herself being given a once over. She had fought off the Traveler before, but this time she chose to avoid his eyes rather than play the game again.

"Ma petite is not a tool, Traveler," Jean-Claude said evenly, showing no outward reaction, "and I take no joy in the political intrigues in which the council delight. I believe we have discussed this before; my opinion has not changed."

"You have become a source of blood since we last spoke about this, Jean-Claude," the Traveler countered. "Do you not feel a responsibility to your own?"

Anita knew she was radiating tension at the conversation, but she did not like where it was going. The council had not bothered them in over half a year and she had been hoping it was a permanent feature.

"I am far more useful to my people here than involved in machinations within the council," Jean-Claude replied, still appearing totally calm. "But enough of this, you came here with the one aim of meeting Harry Potter; this is done."

The Traveler inclined his head, admitting the truth of Jean-Claude's words, but Anita still moved closer to her lover in support of him. When it came to the council, strength was everything, and she could not hide her smile of victory as Balthazar moved into a similar position behind his master.

"So be it," the Traveler replied, "perhaps the council will offer the seat to Harry. I have never seen such strength."

"He's not a vampire and he's only seventeen years old," Anita said instantly, immediately very uncomfortable at even the hint of what the council could be playing at.

"He is not precisely a vampire, no," the Traveler acknowledged, "but the child is enough of one to count, and he has the power to hold such a position, even though all his power is not of us. Raw power such as his should not go untapped, and we may have need of power in the future. My reason for being here is primarily Harry, however, the council also wished to speak to you both and this gave us the opportunity."

That sounded far too upfront to have just come out of the mouth of a council member. Candid and any vampire powerful enough to be on the council just didn't go together, but the Traveler seemed serious.

"Since Belle returned certain investigations have been made," the Traveler continued before Anita could voice any of her opinions. "It is possible that Anita's supposition that the Mother of All Darkness is waking may hold some truth."

If Belle Morte had admitted that to the rest of the council then Anita knew there had to be more to it. It had been Belle Morte's assertion that she had been able

to call some of the creatures of the Mother of All Darkness to do her bidding because she had become so powerful, Anita had pointed out it was because Mommy Dearest was only dozing rather than sleeping deeply as the original vampire had been doing for centuries. Belle had not liked to be told she was wrong, and Anita knew that if it had been reported to the rest of the council then Belle must have changed her mind in a big way.

"And this concerns us how?" Jean-Claude asked in a way that suggested to Anita he was being very careful.

"The older we are," the Traveler said in an equally careful manner, "the more idiosyncratic we become. It is our belief that should the Mother of all Darkness wake, our aims may not coincide."

"What you mean is she'll wander around the world playing with any of you she feels like before killing you when she's bored," Anita said bluntly.

She had felt part of the mind of Mommy Dearest and it had not been fun. The source of all vampires had no trace of humanity in her and her whole thought process had been about what was interesting. The council played with those around them, but they had goals and aims; it was their machinations that kept them in check, but Mommy Dearest needed no games. The sleeping vampire was powerful enough to do what she liked, when she liked without stooping to playing politics, so her waking up would not be a good thing.

The Traveler did not agree, but neither did he disagree.

"She had moved before over the centuries," the Master vampire said eventually, "and has returned to her slumber. It is possible she will come no closer to waking, but it would be wise to be prepared should this occur. Those of like mind should come to agreement don't you think?"

Jean-Claude was silent and still, completely still in that he gave no indication he was alive. It was something Anita had only seen on a few occasions and in this case it meant Jean-Claude was thinking and hiding very carefully.

"I will not join the council, Traveler," Jean-Claude said eventually, obviously choosing his words very carefully, "but I remain ever watchful."

The two vampires stood like statues for a few moments, just watching each other, but eventually the Traveler inclined his head just slightly.

"Then I shall leave you," the council member said, his voice devoid of any open reaction. "We will be in touch."

Anita did not like the sound of that, but when Jean-Claude nodded she did not interfere. Vampire politics were dangerous and volatile, Jean-Claude knew how to play, she did not, so for once she left it alone.

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Scene 4

Harry had taken his outer robe off and thrown it over the back of his seat; he still felt cold, but it was not the kind of cold more clothes helped with. It would take company and probably a glass of firewhiskey to shake the chill in his bones that had nothing to do with temperature. As it was he was sitting close to Draco on

the sofa with Nathaniel sitting on the floor leaning against the sofa and his legs, and for once the contact did not make him feel uncomfortable.

With Draco it didn't feel that odd anymore anyway, although Harry was not used to any type of public displays of affection, and the warm weight of Nathaniel's back leaning against his shin was soothing more than anything else. Nathaniel had not made an issue of where he chose to sit and the wereleopard was chatting away to the others as if everything was perfectly normal, but Harry appreciated the gesture.

Firstly it told him that Nathaniel was not afraid of what he had seen; a great relief to Harry as his paranoia tried to convince him that everyone would hate him now; and secondly it stroked the pard bond that Anita had told him was beginning to form, giving Harry comfort that he did not quite understand, but accepted anyway.

What Harry wanted to do now was talk to Jean-Claude about the marks so that he knew what he had done, and then go home and curl up with Draco. This evening had been a bit much for him to deal with and he wanted it finished. If he never saw a member of the vampire council again it would be too soon. The others were chatting, almost as if nothing had happened and Jean-Claude and Anita hadn't disappeared to talk to an ancient, powerful vampire. Harry was not joining in, but the rest of the group did not seem to mind. Even Draco was adding his opinions from time to time, but Harry was in no mood for chit-chat.

Being capable of murder was not something he was proud of and he had hoped he had left it behind, but it seemed fate had other ideas for him. He was so intent on banishing the sociopathic construction from his mind that at first he did not notice the slight ache in his chest. It was only when Nathaniel turned to him, frowning that Harry realised that anything out of the ordinary was going on.

"Oh shit," he said, as the familiarity of the feeling in his chest made itself known.

Without caring where he was Harry ripped at the buttons on his shirt, heedless of whether he damaged the material in his haste. At least one button flew off in his race to part the material, and then he was looking down at the spell scar which was ever so faintly glowing.

"No, oh no," was all he could say.

He did not need this now, but the madmen who had tried to kill him had other ideas. He heard himself scream as pain ripped through his chest, but it was remote, almost as if someone else was screaming as his consciousness was ripped away from his body. The sound of his own voice was replaced by the sound of chanting and he was consumed with the strange feeling of being bodiless. It took longer for his vision to be anything but a cloudy blur as his metaphysical aspect adjusted to being so suddenly invoked.

Below him there were six robed figures, all standing round a cauldron with their arms raised. Harry recognised some of the words they were chanting because they were in Latin and he had used them in spells himself, but others were in at least two languages he had never heard before. What he could make out were 'blood' and 'sacrifice' being chanted over and over again with whatever else was part of the spell.

The robed figure closest to the cauldron was holding the strange shaped bottle that Harry knew held his blood. Last time the potion being made had only had a

few drops of his blood in it, but this time the potion maker poured whatever was left in the vessel into the cauldron. The mixture which had been a wilted green colour turned a deep blood red and Harry felt the power infused in it as the strange mixture of cold and warm that was vampire, lycanthrope and human magic all mixed together.

As the bottle was put aside he realised his time would be limited; only while these people were doing magic with his blood could he see them, and he suspected the potion was almost finished. Dragging his eyes away from the scene in front of him he looked around the room, trying to find anything that might give a clue as to where this was happening.

The walls were hung with red curtains, making them uniform and there was nothing in the room but ritual objects, but Harry kept looking. There had to be something. The ritual was not underground; it was a normal room with a normal wooden floor, it could not be completely faceless.

Then he saw it; just the faintest flicker of light from beyond the ring of candles. It had to be a window. He was held by his blood having been dragged to this place by his magical connection to it, but with everything he had he willed himself closer to that source of light. It was hard to move away, but Harry was all too familiar with things being difficult and he fought the invisible chains holding him in place. The chanting was slowing, the ceremony was coming to an end and he focused everything he had on reaching the tiny sliver of light before he was thrown back to his body.

It felt like he was stretching himself as he pulled away from his position above the cauldron, as if part of him had to remain there and the rest was being pulled thin over the distance to the side of the room. If he could not find out where this place was the vision was as good as useless, and he had had too many useless visions in his life to let that happen. He felt as if he might break, but he was at the curtain and he forced his awareness to the gap in the material. What he saw was a road and the lights of a motel and a bar with cityscape behind it. It told him very little, but then he had seen very little of St Louis.

Almost as if fate knew he had what he needed, the chanting behind him stopped. As the casting of magic in the room ceased his connection to it snapped and he was catapulted back into his body with what felt like the energy of an explosion. It hurt, in fact everything hurt and all his body wanted to do was pass out, but this was too important. This time he had details and he knew how to give them to someone else, someone who might be able to understand. Fighting against the need to let his physical shell recover he opened his eyes.

He was on the floor of the main room, that much he figured out with one blink and he was surrounded on all sides. Hoping that someone would have called Jean-Claude he searched the faces around him, praying that the vampire was there. As green eyes finally found midnight blue relief washed through him and without trying to do anything else he held out his wrist. Jean-Claude did not hesitate, seemingly understanding exactly what Harry was trying to communicate, and he felt fangs sink into his arm almost instantly.

A connection flared between them and Harry pushed the image from the window down it. It was all he had and his need to pass it on held him strong for just a few moments. He felt Jean-Claude acknowledge what he was showing him and then his strength failed. There was only so much magical stress any one body could take and Harry found his limit like a bludge to the head. Calm, peaceful

blackness reached up to take him and he slipped into unconsciousness with a small sigh.

End of Chapter 17

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Chapter 18 Repercussions

Scene 1

Anita found herself sitting on the floor, head aching and the last few seconds missing from her memory. Nathaniel was holding her very gently, but a quick look at his face explained why, unlike Jean-Claude, who was kneeling and being held upright by Asher, she had ended up on her rump. There must have been some feedback through the second triumvirate from what was going on in the first because Nathaniel appeared dazed.

"What was that?" her pomme de sang asked quietly.

Not sure her voice would work the way she wanted it to, Anita tried to gather her thoughts and found her eyes travelling to where Harry was lying sprawled on the floor. It must have cost the kid dearly to pass on the information he had so soon, and she did not want to waste it. The experience had felt like a flood gate opening and then being slammed shut again as Harry passed out, but she was pretty sure it was as bad, if not worse from his end. Forcing her mind into the closest she could manage to normality she concentrated on the image that had come through the marks.

"Harry showed us where they are," Anita said, shaking her head to clear the last of the backlash. "Jean-Claude, did you recognise what he saw?"

Jean-Claude looked thoroughly dazed and was obviously having trouble returning to normal. There was blood running down his chin and an empty look to his eyes, but as Anita spoke to him she saw life returning to the midnight blue orbs.

"Non, ma petite," Jean-Claude replied slowly, "but I do not believe this city will have many establishments called 'Frankie's Cocktail Bar', especially close to a 'Mama Maria's Motel'."

Anita mentally kicked herself; she had been so busy trying to identify the skyline that the names of the businesses outside the window had completely passed her by.

"Anyone have a computer?" she asked, leaving worrying about Harry to the rest of the room.

"I do," Jason said straight away and offered her his hand.

Time was of the essence; they had no way of knowing how long the bad guys would stay put and Anita's first priority was to find their current hideout. She accepted Jason's hand and then followed the lycanthrope out of the room as fast as she could. When she walked into Jason's room and watched him walk to the corner and pull out a laptop case from behind the table, the warm presence beside her alerted her to the fact that Nathaniel had followed her.

When she glanced at her pomme de sang his face was still paler than normal, but the spark was back in his lilac eyes. With silent accord they moved over to where Jason was flipping open his laptop and turning it on.

"Internet connection?" Anita asked, hoping that this was going to be easy.

"It's wireless," Jason replied as he logged in. "Jean-Claude may not be the most technically minded vamp around, but he knows what this place needs to run smoothly. The technology's not obvious because it would spoil the image of the place if the customers saw it, but it's there."

Anita was impressed, most vamps were technophobes and it took them years to adapt to what humans just took in their stride. She guessed it was something to do with old dogs and new tricks; not that she would say it to Jean-Claude's face any time soon. It was as she opened her mouth to tell Jason what to do that she realised the werewolf was way ahead of her, as a street guide to St Louis popped onto the screen.

"'Frankie's Cocktail Bar' and 'Mama Maria's Motel', right?" Jason clarified even as he was typing.

"Yes," Anita replied as she watched as Jason's fingers flew across the keys.

First he looked up the Bar, and there were actually three. Then he opened another window and looked up the motel; it must have been a chain because there were seven, but when Jason put the searches side by side, only one had the same area code as the bar.

"Gott'em," Jason said with a grin of triumph, and Anita was already reaching for her phone.

"Dolph," she greeted as soon as the other end picked up, "we've got an address on the perps."

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Scene 2

Anita really didn't care how she parked the Jeep as she turned off the ignition, jumped out and just about remembered to lock it before she headed for the building that was crawling with police. There were uniforms as well as members of RPIT around the scene, but she did not waste any time and her badge got her right past the cop on duty at the door. Even as she stepped through the door she could smell blood on the air and the tingle of black magic ran up her spine.

This was definitely the place and she walked into the room where all the activity seemed to be, determined not to be disappointed if they had missed the bad guys. The first thing she saw was a robed man on the ground, cuffed and subdued and she could not help the pleased smile that crossed her face. She chose to ignore the murderous thoughts that occurred to her at the sight of a helpless prey.

She had insisted on coming to the crime scene alone because she had known how Dolph would react to any of the others, but she had not been happy to leave. Harry still hadn't come round by the time she went to do her job, and the kid had looked even more like death warmed over than when his vampire was out. Anita did not take well to those in her care being put into conditions like that.

It was not such good news when she looked around the room to find that the man was the only prisoner and the rest of the space was virtually empty.

"Hi, Anita," Zerbrowski greeted with a smile, and then gave her a once up and down that set her teeth on edge. "Somewhere nice were we?"

"None of your business, Zerbrowski," she growled back.

Going to crime scenes dressed up to the nines was not the most advisable thing to do, because a, you were likely to ruin your outfit, and b, the cops were bound to take the piss. The fact that Zerbrowski looked like he had dressed in the dark at least gave her a come back.

"Maybe if I was a clown I'd take style tips from you," she said and dared Zerbrowski to respond to that.

"You'll never be a clown, Anita," he said sweetly, "but I'll bet money you've been to the Circus tonight."

Anita just glared at her friend and indicated the cuffed prisoner with her eyes.

"Anita Blake," Zerbrowski said, obviously pleased that they had a break in the case, "meet Jon Doe. We caught him trying to wipe the place down, and he had some fun accelerants to play with once he was done."

The prisoner stared straight ahead and did not even seem to be paying attention. If Anita had not seen the same type of fanaticism before it would have been disturbing.

"If you're really lucky," Zerbrowski said, leaning close to the robed man, "we won't leave you alone with the Executioner. She gets upset when people like you set up in her city."

That caused the tiniest flicker in the man's eyes and Anita gave her best, evil smile. Sometimes it helped to have a reputation as a cold, heartless bitch.

"I'm not that annoyed, Zerbrowski," she said, voice as cold as her smile, "yet."

Another flicker; it was fun scaring the crap out of bad guys and Anita was in a vindictive mood. She was about to add to her performance when Dolph walked into the room. Where he had been she had no idea, since she hadn't seen him outside, but she didn't think he'd take kindly to her intimidating the prisoner until after he had had a go.

"The rest are gone," Dolph said shortly, giving her a quick scan with his eyes and then pointedly ignoring what she was wearing.

A 'Hello, Anita, thanks for the tip, Anita,' would have been nice, but the reality was what she had been expecting.

"Any more information that might help us figure out where they went?" Dolph continued, straight down to business as usual.

"You know everything I know," Anita replied with a shrug.

She saw the look on Dolph's face and knew where he was going before he even opened his mouth.

"And don't start," she said firmly. "The kid is unconscious and you can't speak to him. No one, and I mean no one, gets to see him until at least the morning."

She fixed her one time friend with a glare that would probably have killed a lesser man, but only made Dolph glare back. Saying anything else in front of one of the gang members would be foolish and from the look Anita saw in Dolph's eyes, that was about all that stopped him telling her exactly what he thought of that idea. If Dolph could only get over the fact that his new daughter-in-law was a vampire, Anita and his working relationship might improve again, but at least he wasn't trying to throw her out of crime scenes anymore.

Last time she had spoken to Dolph's son, he and his wife were thinking of looking into a surrogate mother so that they could have children. If that happened, Anita was pretty sure Dolph would mellow somewhat. The whole becoming a vampire issue seemed to have gone away for now at least, which was why Dolph didn't yell at Anita on sight anymore. Not that this was her fault, but when you were sleeping with the Master of the City anything vampire came back to your door eventually.

"Let's get Mr Doe here, down to the station," Dolph said after a very awkward silence. "Forensics will tell us if they find anything."

Anita was in full agreement about that. Her expertise might be able to give some details about the ritual, but this scene was not within her realm of speciality, and she did not think this was going to take long. It would give the police just long enough to warm up the suspect and then she would be there to see the results.

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Scene 3

Waking up with Draco snuggled next to him was more than Harry had hoped for, but it rather focused him on the fact he must have been unconscious for some time. Last time it had only been a few minutes, but you weren't put to bed with your boyfriend by your side unless you were out for much longer than that. The fact that he did not feel like scrubbing his skin away was also a good indication that it had been some time.

There was the faint smell of herbs in the air and Harry assumed someone had been burning incense to help clear the residue black magic. It was a pleasant smell and he lay there for a while just enjoying the warmth and comfort of the dark room. It was a change in Draco's breathing that alerted him that his boyfriend was awake.

"Do you know how long I've been out of it?" he asked quietly as Draco stirred.

"You'd been asleep about an hour when I climbed in," his companion replied, running a gentle hand up Harry's body, "but I don't know how long I've been here. Didn't mean to drop off, sorry."

"I don't think it's after midnight yet," Harry decided, not sure how accurate his internal clock was, but knowing that, these days, he could sense dawn approaching and it wasn't even close yet. "Did I steal someone's bed, or is this a guest room?"

That drew a small laugh from Draco and his bed companion sat up.

"Only you would be worried about that," the Slytherin said and Harry could make out a smile on Draco's face by the tiny amount of light coming under the door.

"It's a guest room. No one was sure if you'd wake up before morning, so Jean-Claude found us a place to stay."

That was, at least, a relief. If there was one thing that Harry hated to be it was a bother, and he thought he was quite enough of a problem for those around him as it was.

"Did they find the place I saw?" he asked, finally brave enough to ask the question that had popped into his head the moment he opened his eyes.

"Yes," Draco replied and squeezed his hand as if he knew exactly what Harry was thinking. "They did an, I think they called it 'Internexus search', or something like that, and then Anita went off to find it. She called after we had put you to bed to say that they found the site and caught one of the ritualists."

"Internet," Harry offered helpfully, although he could not help being disappointed with the news.

He had been too slow; if only he had found more information they could have reached the place quicker and caught all the robed figures he had seen.

"Harry," Draco said and he looked up to find his boyfriend looking at him sternly, although he was pretty sure Draco did not see that well in the dark, "I can hear it in your voice, stop being a martyr. They caught one, and that's a hell of a lot better than nothing and all because you managed to give them a location. If they don't get anything out of the arse they have in custody we can always sneak in and dose him with Veritaserum."

"He's a Muggle, Draco," Harry said, although warmed inside that Draco was trying to make him feel better, "or at least not one of us. Veritaserum works using the magical centres of the brain; it probably wouldn't do anything except make him sick."

"Good god," Draco said with mock shock, "there is something between your ears other than air."

Harry swiped at his boyfriend, giving him a friendly slap on the arm, but the comment had done its job, he felt himself smiling. For a few moments he let himself enjoy it, but then he sobered. He had come to the Circus with the aim of talking to Jean-Claude once the Council had been dealt with and he had not yet managed to do that. It was the middle of the night, the most active time for vampires and he hoped Jean-Claude would be available to talk to.

"Do you fancy finding Jean-Claude and seeing what he has to say about the marks?" he asked, flicking his hand at the light switch before he thought about it.

The resultant sparks were very pretty until the switch eventually gave in and flicked on.

"Remind me not to do that again," he decided as he eyed the control suspiciously, hoping that it would not do anything else.

Electricity and magic in the same vicinity was not a good thing, so casting spelling on objects with electricity flowing through them was to be avoided.

"As long as you don't turn on any more lights," was Draco's dry reply.

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Scene 4

It had been easier to find Jean-Claude than Harry had expected; whatever business the Master of the city had had planned for that night seemed to have been put off thanks to the visit from the Traveler, and Jean-Claude had been relaxing with a book when Harry and Draco found him. Harry had to admit that he liked Jean-Claude, even though the vampire was almost unreadable sometimes, and the idea of asking Jean-Claude about things no longer held the apprehension it had when Harry had first met him. Dealing with Jean-Claude was like dealing with a Slytherin, but then he had had plenty of practice with that.

Small talk was not one of Harry's strong points, but Draco had taken up the slack as Jean-Claude played host and made sure they had drinks and were comfortable before the real discussion began.

"Human servants," Harry finally said once they were all settled.

"Quite a complicated topic, mon enfant," Jean-Claude replied with a small smile, "is there anything particular you would like to know, or should I simply start at the beginning?"

It seemed that the master of the city had decided to be straight forward on this subject, which Harry took as a sign that it was indeed very complicated. He had noticed over the years of dealing with Draco and his house mates that if a subject was simple they enjoyed making it sound somewhat more difficult, but if it really was difficult it was possible to extract a straight answer out of them. Snape's teaching methods were a prime example: Harry had found some of his earlier years in the man's class impossible to understand, but once he'd made it to N.E.W.T. level the whole emphasis had seemed to change.

"The beginning is probably a good idea," Harry decided after a quick glance at Draco.

Jean-Claude inclined his head in acknowledgement and sat back in his chair with a thoughtful expression on his face. It was the type of expression Harry had seen on Dumbledore many times and seemed to be half recollections, half innate wisdom. For a moment Harry wondered if there was a class for giving sage advice or if it was just something one picked up when one passed a hundred years old.

"Many who know of our kind believe that a human servant is any human who is bitten," Jean-Claude began eventually. "Much of our power to control is in our eyes and, for some, the voice, but the bite does allow added sway over most mortals. One who allows a vampire to feed may be partially controlled, but is not a human servant. In truth the marks remove the ability of the master to roll the mind of the servant."

Harry felt appraising eyes on him and nodded at the master of the city to indicate he was following the explanation.

"A master vampire must give of himself to bind to a human and, from a certain perspective, a human servant may be considered a liability," Jean-Claude continued. "However, it is my firm belief that the benefits far exceed any perceived disadvantages."

"Why a liability?" Harry asked, wanting to understand the cons before the pros of the situation.

In his experience the cons were usually the most important part.

"A human servant is, most often, not as strong as the master, *ma petite* and quite possibly *l'amour de sa vie* being exceptions," Jean-Claude explained with a gesture of his hands and a smile at Draco. "It is possible that the passing of a human servant would precipitate the end of the master vampire, or such an event could weaken a master enough to allow his destruction by another's hand."

"So a human servant is seen as a soft target," Draco summarised succinctly.

Jean-Claude nodded.

"Oui," the vampire replied.

Well so far the explanation was making sense, which in Harry's opinion was quite surprising. Some vampire ideas seemed almost illogical in their complexity, but the human servant issue appeared to be, at least on the surface, comprehensible.

"So what exactly balances out the risk?" he asked.

From what he had seen, vampires did not place themselves in unnecessary jeopardy.

"Taking a human to yourself and marking them requires power and a certain risk," Jean-Claude replied in what appeared to be a completely honest manner, "but the power is returned many times over."

There was a look in the vampire's eyes that made Harry think Jean-Claude was remembering something about Anita and it was one of those times where he could almost sense the connection between the two.

"Each mark increases the connection between vampire and human," Jean-Claude continued, eyes still fixed inwards as if locked in a memory. "Within the partnership the human is the first to see an advantage. Even should you ever wish to, *mon enfant*, you have relinquished any power to roll the mind of your chosen match. Physical damage is also less debilitating. Only with the gift of the second mark does the power become truly two way."

Since this was where he and Draco were, Harry sat up straighter in his chair to find out the consequences of his actions. He did not mind the fact he could not use vampire powers on Draco, in fact it made him feel at least a little more comfortable with the situation, but with him there always seemed to a nasty surprise around the corner so he was listening carefully.

"*Mon enfant*, have you perhaps, felt unexpected sensations during the day?" Jean-Claude asked, looking Harry in the eye.

Figuring that it was an important question, Harry considered his answer, but he was still not used to everything his change in status threw at him, so it was difficult to tell. When he could feel his beast reacting to everything around him it was not easy to know if anything else was happening as well.

"Not really," he replied eventually, unable to put his finger on a specific sensation. "Maybe a little more, *hmm*, aware."

"Bon," Jean-Claude replied with a nod, "it is possible the true effects are partially asleep along with your vampire nature. The second mark allows you to receive strength from your human servant and to savour the flavours they experience. Food is one of the pleasures in life that a vampire must forgo, but a human servant may return this joy to us."

Since he was only a vampire sometimes Harry could see no advantage in the second revelation, but the first bothered him.

"I can take strength from Draco?" he asked slowly, thinking it through and trying not to imagine the worst case scenario, but not really managing it. "Can he stop me if I try and take too much?"

Jean-Claude appeared thoughtful, his midnight blues eyes regarding Draco seriously.

"I do not know," the vampire replied after a few moments. "In most cases it is an irrelevant question, as the marks remove the ability to resist, but ma petite has the ability to block the connection and it is possible the same may be applied to your bond."

Harry nodded and shared a glance with Draco. At least it hadn't been an outright 'no'; Harry was uncomfortable with the whole idea of taking anything from Draco and he would prefer if his boyfriend had some control.

"The second mark also opens the way for us into our chosen one's dreams," Jean-Claude changed tack and Harry began to pay attention again, deciding he could brood later.

"Dreams?" he was familiar with Legimency, but dreams were a whole other question.

Voldemort had been able to invade his dreams and the idea that he could now do the same with Draco was unsettling.

"It is a skill which not all vampires may master," Jean-Claude replied, "but I find it sensible never to underestimate you, mon enfant. If you choose to complete the marks then your conscious minds will touch also."

"No," Harry said very firmly.

The whole making Draco his human servant had been a mistake born of ignorance, there was no way he was going to make it worse. He could see understanding on Jean-Claude's face as well as a little sadness, when he looked back at the master of the city. It was quite clear that Jean-Claude did not consider the master servant relationship to be anything to be avoided, but Harry was not comfortable with it at all. If Draco showed no nasty side effects then he might be willing to delve a little deeper into the can of worms he had opened, but for now he didn't even want to look over the edge.

"You are bound, mon enfant," Jean-Claude said sympathetically, "until death. The third and fourth marks would strengthen that which you cannot break."

Harry frowned; he was sure it was not that simple.

"If you wouldn't mind," Draco cut in before Harry could say anything, "could you explain the consequences of the marks. I don't think either of us is ready to make a decision as to how to proceed at this time."

Jean-Claude nodded as if he understood, but Harry suspected the conversation would occur again at some point.

"The third mark opens the path between conscious minds as the path of blood is opened between master and servant," the vampire explained without his previous persuasive tone, "and the fourth mark binds master and servant together eternally, giving the servant of the master's immortality and dissuading any corruption of the physical form. This requires the blood of the master to be taken by the servant, sealing the bond between them completely."

It seemed that when Jean-Claude knew he could not win an argument outright he became somewhat more cryptic. Stepping through the big words, Harry tried to make sense of what had just been said.

"So for the third mark I would drink from him, and the fourth Draco from me. Are you saying if all the marks are used, the human servant can't die?" he asked, not quite clear on the details.

"Not quite, mon enfant," Jean-Claude replied, "but the fourth mark raises the mortal to almost immortality. Should the master die, so would the servant. The servant is also endowed with greater strength and resistance to injury, but not invulnerability."

It sounded so good for both sides that Harry was instantly suspicious, but he really did not want to push the issue now. He knew what the marks meant, he even had a vague idea of how to create them, but he needed time to assimilate the information before he could truly comprehend it.

"So what was it Anita wouldn't say today?" he asked, hoping that the change in emphasis would give him time to think. "She avoided telling us something, didn't she?"

Jean-Claude did not seem fazed by the question, not even the tiniest bit, but Harry did find himself on the business end of a very appraising stare. For a moment he thought the vampire might steer the conversation back in the direction they had been going, but then the midnight eyes blinked and the moment of tension was gone.

"Oui, mon enfant," Jean-Claude said after a few moments, "ma petite did wish to consult with me before she mentioned a further possibility."

Harry sat back in his chair, pretty sure that if Anita had needed to talk to Jean-Claude about this then it was serious. If she had told them about the marks and kept something back, the part she had kept back had to be important.

"I know you have heard mention of a triumvirate," the vampire said slowly, looking from Harry to Draco and then back again, "but I believe none has yet seen fit to explain what one may be."

Harry nodded, he had heard the word several times in relation to Anita, but there had never been the time to go into details. Other subjects had so far been far more important.

"I assume it is something to do with three," Draco said from where he was now gracefully lounging in his chair.

There had been tension in the Slytherin through most of the conversation, but now, as far as Harry could tell, his boyfriend had relaxed somewhat. Maybe Draco needed time to process what they had heard as well.

Jean-Claude inclined his head with a smile.

"That would be a correct assumption," the vampire replied. "A triumvirate is a joining of a vampire, a human and a lycanthrope, through the vampire marks. Usually this means the triumvirate is a Master vampire, their human servant and a lycanthrope that matches the master's animal to call. The triumvirate of which I am a member is myself, ma petite and our wolf, Richard. This joining increases all our powers because we may share our strength with each other."

There were times when Harry knew he could be dense, but now was not one of them; it did not take him long to realise the significance of what he was being told.

"And you think Draco and I may be a triumvirate because I'm a vampire and a lycanthrope," he said as Jean-Claude stopped talking.

The vampire nodded again and then turned his head to one side thoughtfully.

"Having ma petite as my human servant strengthened both she and I," Jean-Claude explained, midnight blue eyes flicking to Draco and then back to Harry again, "but it was not until we included Richard that the changes became as significant as I believe Draco's have been already. I do not believe that two marks are enough to warrant the enhancement of ability which you reported to ma petite this morning."

"So we're a triumvirate of two," Draco sounded as if he was quite willing to believe the conclusion, but Harry didn't think it was going to be that simple; "what exactly does that mean? Does it change anything?"

Jean-Claude was looking thoughtful again, sitting in the perfect stillness that only vampires seemed to be able to achieve.

"I once believed that a triumvirate was only significant due to its underlying nature in that it required three beings," Jean-Claude said, shrugging as if putting the notion aside. "I no longer believe that to be true. Ma petite is a most unusual woman, and her position within our three may have something to do with the shifting of the energies within us, but I do not believe that is the only significant element."

"Combining different magic together usually produces a gestalt," Harry offered; yet another fact that Hermione had managed to cram into his head before the final exams.

Jean-Claude nodded and gave another small smile.

"Exactement, mon enfant," the vampire replied. "I believe the combination of the three types of energy causes a truly incredible reaction. I have been a master vampire for many years, but it was the joining with ma petite and our Richard which made me what you see before you. I have gained aspects of both of them through the marks and it is likely you will gain parts of each other as well. The

bond between vampire and human servant can cause a reflection of this, but it is as nothing to what I have experienced from the triumvirate."

Harry looked over at Draco, not sure what his boyfriend's reaction would be to that. Gaining some of Draco's analytical ability did not seem so bad to Harry, but from a Slytherin point of view, gaining anything from a Gryffindor might be somewhat off-putting. To his surprise, Draco gave him a small smile.

"I will resist the urge to jump in front of the next rampaging dragon to save the damsel," the Slytherin said dryly.

"It is possible we are in error," Jean-Claude said as Harry failed to think of a comeback. "This may be a natural consequence of your magical status before entering into this, but I have always found that it is to a person's advantage to be aware of all the facts."

Harry was pretty sure Jean-Claude would never be able to understand quite how much he agreed with that statement. All he did was nod and try to wrap his mind around everything they had been discussing. The first two marks were done; there was no way to reverse them, but at least now he knew exactly what the other two marks required and he could make very sure not to do anything stupid. Whether he and Draco were a triumvirate or not, they had some things to discuss and a lot to adjust to, but now that it was no longer a mystery it did not seem quite so daunting.

"Thank you," Harry said and tried to convey just how grateful he was.

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Scene 5

Anita walked back into the Circus and straight into Jean-Claude's bedroom. The fact that Jean-Claude and Asher were currently both naked and engaged in a very passionate moment did not pass her by, but she was annoyed enough that she didn't care. Well almost didn't care; she would have had to have been dead in a very permanent way not to enjoy the view just a little bit. She saw them break apart and give each other a knowing look before she turned her back and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Ma petite," Jean-Claude asked, moving up behind her, "is something wrong?"

"The suspect isn't talking," she said, expressing her anger by hitting the bed and narrowly missing Jean-Claude. "And by that I mean not talking at all; not a peep. The bastard has been sitting in the interrogation room staring at the wall as if none of us were there."

Asher moved up on her other side and she felt his hand rest lightly on her shoulder.

"Perhaps if someone were to speak to Lieutenant Storr and arrange a short visit with Jean-Claude," Asher suggested in such a way that Anita thought he was being very careful. "He is after all involved in the case."

Anita gave him points for trying, but she really didn't think that was a good idea or would work.

"If I thought that we might have a hope in hell of getting that past Dolph, or that it might work I'd try," she said and leaned in to Jean-Claude as he stroked a

finger along the side of her neck, "but we're dealing with a fanatic. Dolph was so desperate an hour ago that he let me in there alone with the suspect. You know I can be scary, right?"

Both vampires nodded without any hint of hesitation as she looked from one to the other.

"Well he flickered, four times, and that was it," she admitted, perplexed.

Dolph very rarely let her near suspects, it was bad police procedure, but when he was pushed to the line, Anita was his plan B. They had been on plan H at least by the time Dolph had sent her home, promising to contact her if anything came up.

"Then I would suggest, ma petite that this man is more afraid of something else that he is of you," Jean-Claude said reasonably, "or he is under the influence of another mind."

"I didn't feel anything from him," Anita said, thinking back over everything she knew about the suspect.

There had been magical residue on him, but nothing that set off her alarm bells.

"Not all bonds are visible even to you, ma cherie," Asher said quietly beside her ear.

Both vampires seemed to be moving closer and closer as they spoke and Anita was having major trouble ignoring that they were both male and naked. She was annoyed and she wanted to stay annoyed, but she was being distracted.

"Dolph said he'd call if the suspect breaks," she said, trying to keep her eyes on the far wall.

"Then, ma petite," Jean-Claude said, placing a light kiss on her temple, "I would suggest you come to bed. We have time before dawn."

That sounded like such a good idea that she almost gave in there and then, but her rational brain decided to make itself known.

"What about Harry," she asked as worry replaced lust for a moment, "is he okay?"

"Mon enfant is once again sleeping," Jean-Claude replied, without trying to push her away from the subject. "He was unconscious for nearly two hours, but seemed unharmed when he sort out myself once he woke. I and the young wizards were engaged in a long conversation about the marks Harry gave *l'amour de sa vie*. I believe I have given them much to consider. They returned to the room I have set aside for them, and Jason reported that they were sleeping peacefully when he checked a little over an hour ago."

When he had finished his report he nuzzled her hair and gently kissed her neck. For a split second Anita considered remaining annoyed, but her mind filled with the image she had seen when she barged in, and reason lost out to lust. Turning to Jean-Claude she caught his mouth in a passionate kiss and allowed Asher to help her start removing her coat. It seemed it was her turn to be tag teamed.

End of Chapter 18

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Chapter 19 Sexual Tension and Other Matters of the Heart
Scene 1

Anita had just finished her last zombie animation of the night when her phone rang. The number did not look familiar and she considered not answering it, but the little voice at the back of her mind, that tended to kick in when it was important, spoke up so she picked up.

"Hello," she said, ready to put the person in their place if they were a cold caller.

"Anita," the voice on the other end said, "is that you? This thing makes you sound really strange, please tell me I did it right."

"Draco," she said, rather surprised, "what are you doing ringing me? I thought you didn't have a phone."

There was a pause.

"I don't," Draco replied, "I'm at the neighbours, I found your number in Harry's pocket and I didn't know how to turn on the stupid little thing he has so I walked round. I didn't know what else to do. Harry's locked himself in the bathroom and nothing I say will make him come out."

That didn't exactly sound like a major emergency to Anita, but there was something in the wizard's voice that stopped her dismissing him out of hand.

"Why did Harry lock himself in the bathroom?" she asked, not sure she was going to like the answer.

Another pause.

"Graham dropped us home after Harry fed tonight at the Circus, and well it seemed to put Harry in the mood. We were kissing like we've done before," Draco said, sounding as if he really did not want to reveal the information, "and I pushed it a little further. Just a bit of heavy petting, and Harry seemed to be really enjoying it. I remembered your warnings and I didn't go too far, but then I felt claws on my shoulder I pulled back and he'd shifted slightly. Just his fingers and his teeth, and he shifted back to human as soon as he realised, but he's convinced if he so much as touches me he's going to hurt me. I've been trying to get him to open the door for hours."

It was the description of a lover's tiff, but with a sigh Anita knew it was probably not that simple. Draco Malfoy was a survivor; that much she knew, and if he had called her he had had a good reason.

"I take it you told him what I told you?" she said slowly.

"Harry won't listen to me," Draco replied and he really did sound desperate. "People have died on Harry before and he blames himself for their deaths. Unless you can talk some sense into him he may never unlock the door again, and he's powerful enough to stay in there until he keels over."

She had known Harry would snap in the end; the kid had been under too much pressure, and it seemed to have happened. Fearing that you would kill your boyfriend was something that could push a mind that one bit too far.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," she said and tried to keep the resigned tone out of her voice.

She had wanted to go home and fall into bed with Micah and Nathaniel and sleep, or possibly have sex and then sleep, she wasn't sure, but she couldn't abandon Harry. That the kid had lasted this long was quite a surprise.

"Thank you," Draco said with genuine gratitude and then hung up.

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Scene 2

Harry was sitting in the furthest corner from the door, curled into the smallest shape he could manage under the sink. He had no idea how long he had been there, but his feet were numb from the way he had them curled under himself. It was at least a little distraction from the thoughts whirling around his head.

Anita had told him to be careful, she had warned him that strong emotions could cause a shift, but he hadn't taken it to heart. He could have hurt Draco and that would have been unforgivable. What if his claws had sunk into Draco's pale flesh, or he had bitten him while they were kissing? What if the instincts had come out or he had crushed Draco with uncontrolled strength. He could never let that happen, never.

"Harry," the voice from the other side of the door brought his attention back to the outside world, "Harry, you need to come out."

The voice of his Nimir-Ra called to him, but he was not simply an animal and he remained still and silent, staring at the door. He was not going to leave this room; he couldn't risk what he might do.

"Harry," this time Anita's tone was less happy, "don't piss me off, it's been a long night."

"Go away," he said, unable to remain quiet under the threat.

If they would just leave him alone they would be safe. With the monster locked away no one would get hurt.

"I can't go away, Harry," Anita's voice had lost its edge again; "I'm worried about you and so's Draco. You've been under too much stress lately and this is the result."

Stress? This had nothing to do with stress; this was because he was dangerous and could kill someone.

"Draco told you what I did," he shouted back. "I'm a monster, I could have hurt him."

He heard a sigh from the other side of the door and his sharp hearing picked up a whispered conversation.

"He sounds like he's in shock," Anita said in a low voice, although she must have realised he could hear her. "Go and get some blankets and then use my phone to ring Micah. When you're ready just press this button, and when you're done this one. Tell him I need him and Nathaniel over here, Harry's going to need more of the pard to get through this."

Harry felt like shouting his objection to those ideas, he was not coming out and he would not let the others near him. He was a weapon, he had always been a weapon and now he was too dangerous to be let out. Why couldn't they understand that? Why couldn't they see? He was a wereleopard and a vampire for Merlin's sake; he was lethal. Control had been an illusion, nothing more.

"Harry, all you did was get a little over excited and partially shifted," Anita was talking to him again and her voice was calm and even. "It happens to all lycanthes some times, it doesn't mean you're dangerous. You need some practice, but you can control it."

"My claws were so close to his neck," Harry insisted, the mental image of those sharp, pale points only millimetres from Draco's throat so captivating and terrifying at the same time.

It would have been so easy to just flick his fingers and watch red blood trickle over Draco's pale skin. So easy to lean forward and taste the sweet taste.

"But you didn't do anything, Harry," Anita said, her tone firm. "I understand the instincts, Harry, I know what you wanted to do for just a moment. You didn't hurt anyone and you won't. We'll make sure you won't hurt anyone, even accidentally."

"No!" Harry cried, burying his head in his arms.

They had told him that killing Voldemort was for the best, that he would still be Harry afterwards, but he knew that in those moments when the bastard died he had enjoyed watching it. He had revelled in his enemy's death and he could be that monster again. He could not have any more death on his conscience so he would stay here, safe from the world.

"Harry," Anita's voice had a hard edge again, "open this door."

His leopard wanted to obey, this was his Nimir-Ra, and his beast shifted under his skin demanding that he move, but he held himself still.

"No," he whispered to himself, unable to shout his objection as the conflict moved through him.

Then he felt it, cold tendrils of power reaching for him. This was not the warm lycanthe power, this was vampire magic and he understood in a second that Anita was calling him. She was using her animal to call, to pull him from his hiding place, and it was seductive enough that he moved slowly to his hands and knees.

"Don't make me force you, Harry," Anita's voice sounded from the other side of the door, "please, just open the door."

He crawled towards the door, his beast taking him where the human part of him did not want to go. Anita's power called to him, promising things and threatening things in equal measure and part of him so wanted to give in to the power. By the time he managed to stop he was pressed up against the door and the gentle hum of the spells he had thrown up on the wood began to seep into his body, breaking the hold Anita had over him.

"I can't," he whispered at the door, tears slowly leaking from his eyes. "I can't," he said louder. "Don't you understand, I can't," he yelled at Anita and pushed himself off the door, throwing himself to the floor and curling into a small ball.

"I can't," he slowly repeated to himself, over and over again.

He would not hurt anyone else he cared about, he would not.

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Scene 3

Anita almost wrenched the front door off the hinges as she simply knew that Micah had arrived. She had been pacing in the hall for the last twenty minutes and she had left Draco sitting outside the bathroom door before that. Neither of them had heard anything from Harry since he had refused her call and she only hoped that with Micah as well, they might be able to bring Harry out.

Reason didn't look as if it was being of much help, and all they had left was brute force. With Harry in such a state they might have a chance and the way Draco had explained it, the only way the bathroom door was opening was if Harry opened it.

"What's happening," Micah asked, reaching for her hand, but offering no other support.

The warmth of his skin comforted her and she thanked the lord for the chance of fate that had given her, her Nimir-Raj. Micah knew just how to help, but not to push support onto her she would not let herself take.

"Harry's gone over the edge," she said shortly, leading Micah and Nathaniel up the stairs. "He's in shock and he's locked in the bathroom with some very powerful spells. We need to pull him out."

"You could not call him?" Micah asked in an almost professional tone.

"No," Anita replied with complete honesty. "It almost worked, but he broke away. With both of us I think we might have a chance."

She was praying it would, because otherwise she had to involve Jean-Claude, and playing with control and vampires was a lot more dangerous than lycanthropes. Micah just nodded his consent.

"What do you want me to do?" Nathaniel asked from his position behind them.

"Just be you," Anita replied as they walked along the landing towards where Draco was just staring at the door. "As soon as the door is open, wrap Harry in a blanket and hold him. He needs comfort and he seems to react well to you. Once we have him back we'll get him into bed with Draco and at least you two, and hopefully he'll wake up in the morning much calmer."

With no objections from either of her leopards Anita turned her attention to Draco. She knew from her own experience that Draco would want to go to Harry as soon as they had the door open, but she also knew that would be a mistake.

"Draco," she said, trying to find the best way to say this.

"I know," the blond wizard said and looked up into her eyes, "stay back because he's afraid of hurting me; I'll be in his room."

For a moment she was shocked and just watched Draco climb to his feet and walk away, but she shook herself out of it in a moment. The blond wizard was obviously far more practical than she had given him credit for. Looking at Micah she nodded, readying herself.

"Together then," she said. "We try and make him open the door."

Micah acknowledged her with a slight smile and then turned to the door. Anita felt his power almost immediately and her beast reached up to touch Micah's without hesitation. Her beast revelled in being allowed to join with its counterpart and Anita could almost feel the two cats rubbing fur on fur. Warm lycanthrope power flowed out of both of them and with it she sent cold vampire energy as well, seeking the leopard within the room.

"Harry," she and Micah spoke at the same time, in perfect unison, "open the door."

With the words she sent everything she had and she felt the answer of lycanthrope power from the other side of the door. It washed over her in a wave and spoke to her of strength and pain, but also pain and fear. It almost took her breath away as she felt the raw energy that was Harry's cat, but gripping Micah's hand hard she did not waver.

For a few silent seconds she could hear nothing from the bathroom, but after what seemed like forever she heard movement. The hum of magic she could just feel from the door dropped so suddenly that she almost stepped back, and then there was the soft click of the lock. There was the sound of hurried movement as if Harry was retreating from the door as fast as possible, but Anita had no doubt that the barrier was now open. Reaching down she carefully turned the handle and then let the door swing inwards with a little push.

The sight that met her wrenched her heart as she saw Harry as far away from the door as he could get, looking so small that she almost did not recognise him. He was huddled under the sink and he was sobbing into his arms. The sight caused her to pause, but Nathaniel was past her in a second and then, before she could react, the shuddering mess that was Harry was enveloped in blanket and wereleopard.

As soon as she saw Harry lean in to Nathaniel she knew she had made the right call in having Micah bring her pomme de sang along. If there was proof anywhere that broken things could be fixed it was Nathaniel. It took time and love, but it was possible.

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Scene 4

Harry had almost panicked when they had finally calmed him enough to take him to his room and he had seen Draco, but both Nathaniel and Micah had been glued to either side of the wizard and had managed to urge him onto the bed. Moving from bathroom to bedroom had taken over half an hour and then getting Draco onto the bed with the other three had taken nearly an hour.

There was no way Micah or Nathaniel was going to be able to move for a good while yet and so Anita had decided to take a walk around the house. Draco had

told her that if she walked into the dining room and requested food or drink it would appear; she had not bothered to ask how and the cup of coffee currently nestled in her hands was all the explanation she needed.

Harry struck her as the resilient type and she expected him to bounce back, but it wouldn't be instant. The kid needed to come to terms with what he was and not be afraid of it. Being wary of your beast was a necessity, but being afraid was a recipe for disaster. Richard had found that out and she could not help but remember all the pain her one time fiancé had gone through; partly because of her. Richard was adjusting now, at times he almost seemed a peace with his werewolf part, and she only hoped Harry would not end up hating himself as Richard had for a long time.

The young man she had come to know did not seem to be the type of person who would hate himself. Blame himself, yes; demand of himself perfection in control, most probably; but she suspected the breakdown she had been witness to that night was more to do with being overwhelmed by too much, than anything to do with an underlying emotional schism. Anita was no psychoanalyst, but she knew quite a lot about self disgust and a hell of a lot about fear.

Trying to focus on nothing except enjoying her cup of coffee she actually started and almost dropped the mug when her phone went off. Feeling like an idiot she was thankful that no one had been around to see her blunder and then pulled the gadget out of her pocket.

"Blake," she answered, recognising a number at the police station, but unsure who's number it was.

"Anita, it's Zerbrowski," the voice on the other end announced, "we've got trouble."

It had been only just over twenty four hours since she'd last seen her friend, but with everything that had been happening it felt like longer. It was at times like this she wished that St Louis could stay out of preternatural trouble for one night at least. It would be nice to just do her job and go home for once.

"Shit, what's happened?" Anita asked, putting her mug down on the table next to her and dismissing it from her mind.

When Zerbrowski used his current tone of voice, then it was trouble with a capital 'T'.

"Our prisoner is dead," the cop replied bluntly.

Anita swore colourfully and did her best not to turn around and break something in the room where she was standing. For just a fraction of a second she wanted to ask if one of the team had become over enthusiastic with the perp, but she knew them too well to believe that. Dolph had nearly done a suspect serious damage once, but that had been last year and he'd been in counselling since.

"How?" she asked, going for the much more diplomatic question that would still give her the information she wanted.

"That's what we're hoping you can tell us," Zerbrowski replied. "See it seems to be something up your alley. We have a cell which is now a crime scene, and a perp with his insides displayed to the world. When can you get here?"

Anita put her hand to her head and rubbed her aching forehead; this was all she needed now. She had done four zombie raisings, then dealt with Harry, and she was ready to fall into bed and sleep for what felt like a week.

"Give me twenty minutes," she said eventually, planning what she was going to say to the guys even as she spoke, "I'm on my way."

This was the last thing she needed. One preternatural crisis at a time would have been manageable, but a melting down wereleopard and a crime scene were not a great combination. Walking back into Harry's bedroom she was still not quite sure what she was going to say. What she saw made her want to forget the whole second problem and just concentrate on this one.

Harry looked so small next to the three other men. The kid was snuggled in close to Draco and he looked more like a twelve year old than nearly an adult. All she could see of him was his messy black hair and just a hint of pale face where Draco was holding Harry close. The kid appeared to be sound asleep, and she only hoped it would last. Micah was behind Draco, his arm slung over the blond wizard so that his hand was on Harry and Nathaniel was curled up behind Harry as if he was a human blanket.

Anita knew that Micah was the shortest of all the men in the bed, and yet when he looked up at her it was as if he was the largest. Her Nimir-Raj was radiating power and it made Micah appear to dwarf those he was looking after. Micah was also the only one still awake, but Anita suspected it would not take much to wake the others.

"How is he?" she asked quietly, looking at the shock of black hair poking out of the covers.

"Calm for now," Micah replied in an equally low tone. "I think he'll sleep until morning, but I'll sit up and make sure."

Anita nodded. If Harry were to wake and panic he could shift and that would be disastrous. In a deliberate shift there would probably be nothing Micah could do to stop Harry since the kid was an alpha, but Micah could definitely control anything accidental.

"You have to go?" Micah asked as she just stood there watching for a while.

That shocked her out of her reverie and she looked at her Nimir-Raj in surprise.

"I heard the phone ring," Micah explained with a tired smile.

"They need me at the station," Anita replied, as usual grateful that her lover seemed to understand without having to be told anything.

"Bad?" Micah asked.

"Very bad," she told him with complete honesty. "I'll explain when I get back."

Micah just accepted that with a nod, relaxing back onto the bed where he had sat up slightly to talk to her. She was too tired for a meaningful conversation now and she did not want Harry accidentally hearing about the death of their only lead in the case. Having that to deal with as well would probably undo any good they had managed to do that night. Turning she was about to head out the door when Micah spoke again.

"Anita," she looked back at him and his kitty eyes pinned her gaze from across the room, "be careful."

That earned him a smile and then she headed back into the corridor.

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Scene 5

Anita had really not wanted to leave Micah and Nathaniel to deal with the Harry and Draco situation, but when she was shown to the suspect's cell she knew why the cops needed her. The man was on his back on the floor, and from the look on his face he had died in agony, which wasn't surprising when her eyes reached his chest.

When Zerbrovski had said the suspect's insides were on display he had not been joking, what the sergeant had failed to mention was that the damage had not been done from the outside. The gapping wound where the man's chest should have been was very obviously from the inside out. Testament to this was also given by the fact that the walls, ceiling and floor were all splattered with blood and in some places other bits as well.

Anita did not want to make an analogy, but she couldn't help thinking Alien. Not really her type of movie she had made the mistake of letting Caleb choose what to rent one evening when some of the pard had descended for a bonding session, and the man in front of her looked almost exactly like the guy whose chest had exploded.

Her beast stirred at the smell of all that blood, but she ignored it and stepped round the body to where Dolph was talking to one of the forensic guys.

"What happened?" she asked as soon as the big cop turned his attention to her.

"We don't know," Dolph told her shortly, obviously in a foul mood. "The uniform on duty heard screaming and by the time he got here this was what he found."

There was the hint of something nasty, in a metaphysical sense, in the room that Anita had not felt around the man before. Glancing around the room she tried to pinpoint it.

"First guess was something got in," Dolph explain, and his tone was almost accusatory, but then she was used to that from him these days.

"But then someone realised that the wound comes from the inside out," Anita said and gave her one time friend a look that said back off.

She had had enough stress for one day and she did not need Dolph throwing a snit fit and causing any more. She was worried about Harry; she was worried about Nathaniel and Micah having to cope with a potentially deadly wizard without her; god help her she was even worried about Draco and the blond wizard had shown he was virtually completely self sufficient; she could do without Dolph in one of his moods.

"What could have done it?" Dolph asked without any sign of remorse or an improvement in his temper.

Having a degree in preternatural biology meant that Anita was quite familiar with what most of the world considered nasty critters, but this did not seem to really fit anything she could name.

"There are some things that could make this type of wound," she said, leaning over the body and keeping her thoughts to purely analytical subjects.

If she thought too much about how horribly the man had died she might lose what little food was in her stomach, and that would be embarrassing. The fact that from this distance she could tell that something had shredded the prisoner's heart did not help stop the bile rising in the back of her throat. All she could hope was that whatever had done this had destroyed the heart first and put the poor bastard out of his misery.

"But most things are driven by food, and anything I can think of would still be here, munching on the dead guy, or leave obvious signs," she concluded. "Nothing that could do this lives in the continental United States either. China and Russia, in the middle of nowhere, are the only places you would find a monster that could cause wounds like this."

There were two creatures she could think of, off the top of her head, which might produce this kind of damage; one was a small monkey like monster with a very long tongue that the delightful creature would use to implant an egg in a living host, via the throat. The egg would then develop into a miniature version of its parent and eat its way out of the unfortunate creature chose to hold the parasite. Only two human victims had ever been reported for the creature, its usual prey being primates. Humans tended to be able to fight the trance the creature had to put its prey into to complete its task.

The other creature lived in one lake in China and was dangerous only if swallowed in its larval stage. In their adult form the insect like creatures were used for their ability to enhance psychic powers, unfortunately as a larva, if swallowed they broke down and were absorbed into the body, causing so much stimulation to the victim's cardiovascular system, that their heart would explode with the force of a small bomb. The resultant reaction left a bright green residue behind that was unmistakable.

Letting her eyes wander across the wound she began to notice that the mess of flesh was even stranger than she had first thought. There were marks on the ruptured tissue, but they were not teeth or claw marks. Anita knew teeth and claw wounds very well, and nothing about the body was consistent at all. Something had come through the man's chest, from the inside, with considerable force, but it was going to take a lab and someone more versed in science than she was to tell what.

The closer she was to the body the more black magic she could feel, and she would have sworn it was man made, rather than anything natural, but she had no idea what exactly she was sensing. It made her flash back to the original crime scene, when she had first seen Harry. The magic she had felt coming from him was similar to that which she could sense from the dead man in front of her. If pressed she would have said they came from the same source.

"I don't think whatever did this is natural," she said eventually, standing up straight again and looking at Dolph. "I think we might be dealing with some sort of construction, but unless we find it, forensics are the only ones who can tell us what it was."

Dolph looked even less happy at her conclusion and Anita suspected her one time friend had been hoping for a simple, creature explanation. If Dolph had something to hunt down it made his life a hell of a lot easier. Anita wished she could have given him a simple answer, but this was not turning out to be an easy case at all. From Dolph's expression she knew she was not getting out of this any time soon, but she was not sure how much use she could be. About all she could do was point at anything really nasty.

What she wanted to do was turn around, climb back in her jeep and not stop until she was back at Draco's house. Crawling into the overly large bed with the four men she had left there would be comforting and give her a chance to process everything that had been happening tonight, but she doubted she would be allowed to leave in the near future. Dolph was in a piss mood, and unless she did something to get her thrown out, she suspected Dolph would be working on the 'misery loves company' principle.

End of Chapter 19

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Chapter 20 Sexual Energy

Scene 1

Anita hit the toaster in an attempt to make it give up the piece of toast that it seemed hell bent on keeping for itself. She was so intent on her task that when it finally popped up and she turned towards the table in triumph she nearly jumped out of her skin coming face to face with a thoughtful looking Nathaniel. Maybe the bell idea of Draco's was not such a bad one.

"Nathaniel," she greeted, hoping that she had covered her momentary lapse of cool, calm image, "did you want something."

Her *pomme de sang* looked at her, his lilac eyes serious and then he took a breath.

"May I have sex with Harry and Draco?" Nathaniel asked earnestly.

This time Anita made no attempt to hide her shock at all. Her first instinct was to say something along the lines of 'Hell no! You're mine.', but Nathaniel appeared so serious about this that she was sure it was not a passing fancy.

"Why?" was the one word she managed to force between her teeth.

Jealousy was unbecoming, but she really couldn't help it.

"They need my help," Nathaniel replied and looking into his gaze, Anita knew he understood what she was feeling.

It was one of those moments again, when Anita realised that she was underestimating her lover. Nathaniel was a sub, well most of the time, but he was neither a child, nor stupid, and sometimes Anita took his obedience and forgot the rest. Trying to let her shoulders relax from the rigid, steel like posture they had attained the moment her companion mentioned his thoughts, it was her turn to take a deep breath.

"The shifting problem," she said slowly, since the obvious distress Harry had shown the night before last had been preying on her mind.

Micah had spent most of the previous day and today with Harry, talking out his fears, and when Anita had seen him that afternoon she thought the kid was on his way back to what passed as normal for him, but it was obvious things were not all better. Having to tell him that the only lead they had was dead had not helped, but at least that seemed to have given Harry something else to think about.

Nathaniel nodded in answer to her question and sat down. His hair was only loosely tied back and a stray strand fell across his face as he moved, making him look innocent, which rather contrasted with the current conversation.

"Harry needs to learn control," the wereleopard said and it was obvious he'd been thinking about this, "and he won't touch Draco until he knows he is safe. Draco needs to be involved, but he would never allow a dom anywhere near either of them; he's not the sharing kind. Harry needs to overcome his fear soon or it'll become a habit."

That was very true. Anita was not sure Harry was the type to have thought about sex yet; he was strangely innocent in a lot of ways and the two wizards had only been an official couple for a few days, but she could see Nathaniel's point. Fears did become ingrained, and the kid was a lycanthrope and a vampire from Belle Morte's line, so sex was going to come into it soon.

"I'm not a threat," Nathaniel continued in a surprisingly logical manner, "and if Harry loses it I'll heal."

Anita really wanted to say no, but she just couldn't dismiss the idea out of hand. Harry was not technically of her pard since he was not planning on staying and had not been infected by any of her leopards, but, to her, it still felt like he was, and hence he was her responsibility. Once upon a time Richard had been squeamish of doing the correct thing when it came to a new lycanthrope and the woman had killed her husband on their wedding night.

At an academic level she knew that Nathaniel did not mean anything by this, he loved her no less, he simply wanted to help. At an instinctive level she would not want a wereleopard-dominant and a Master vampire anywhere near her lover had they been separate entities, that they were in one person was even scarier.

"Do you think they'll agree?" she asked, unwilling to say yes, but not refusing either.

"Not at first," Nathaniel said openly, "but I'm sure I can talk Draco round and Harry will follow."

Now that was not quite what she had expected to hear.

"You think Draco will be easier to convince?" Anita asked incredulously; she did not think the stubborn wizard was likely to say 'yes' at all.

"Harry will be incredibly embarrassed," Nathaniel told her, "and would never say 'yes' unless Draco agreed first, no matter what it would cost him. Draco will see the necessity, and the fact that Harry won't touch him is killing him, so he's likely to see it quickly. Unless he tries to, um, I think they say, hex me."

Anita frowned at that, sometimes she managed to forget that the two nice young men who kept appearing on her doorstep were in fact possibly two of the most

dangerous people in the city. No one else she knew could kill with just a word; it at least took the others a little more effort than that.

Conflicted was a feeling Anita knew only too well, and the description fitted her right about then to a tee. She was Nimir-Ra and the safety of her pard came first, even if the one she was worried about was more of a foster child than really hers, but she was also Nathaniel's lover and his sleeping with two other men hit the wrong buttons. He was hers and she did not share well.

"I will never be anybody's but yours," Nathaniel said in a firm voice as he rose from his chair and his tone made her look up into his lilac eyes. "I belong only to you, but Harry is ours too, and he needs our help."

She almost thought he was in her head, but she was shielding too well and Nathaniel had been able to read her body language long before he could read her mind for real.

"Show me that I'm yours, Anita," Nathaniel took a step towards her and for a moment he's will was dominant. "Mark me and then send me to them as your envoy."

Her beast knew how to react to that even if the woman was a little behind, and she had reached out and grabbed Nathaniel before her conscious mind caught up. His body moulded to hers as if Nathaniel was liquid and she the vessel into which he was poured. Her pomme de sang was a good few inches taller than she was, but it was Anita who dragged his head down, demanding a kiss, rather than Nathaniel descending on her.

In the back of her mind it occurred to her that moving this to the bedroom might be a good idea, just in case someone decided to drop by, but what little remained of her prudish nature was locked away by her wilder side. Nathaniel wanted to be marked, so she would mark him. Taking a hand full of Nathaniel's beautiful, auburn hair she broke the kiss and pulled his head back, exposing his long elegant neck. For just a moment she let her eyes wander over the perfect surrender in front of her.

Nathaniel was bigger than her and stronger, but he stood in her arms, head back, eyes closed and vulnerable neck presented to her like a gift. There was no resistance in her pomme de sang; Nathaniel was hers and she intended to take him.

Pushing herself against him she slowly kissed her way down the beautiful curve from chin to shoulder, nipping gently as if she meant to bite, and each nip drew the tiniest of shudders from Nathaniel. She could rip out his throat if she wanted to, he wouldn't stop her, and her beast revelled in the power. This cat was hers, body and soul and he awaited her pleasure.

Half the time it was difficult to keep clothes on members of the pard, as if they only felt comfortable in their own skin, but, for once, Nathaniel was wearing a shirt as well as the shorts he seemed to prefer when wandering around the house. It was a light white linen shirt that Anita knew her pomme de sang was fond of and it was only fastened by one button so she released it carefully. Had there been more buttons done up the shirt might not have survived, but she gave herself brownie points for being considerate even when lust and her beast were attempting to make her careless.

Nathaniel gave a little shrug and let the shirt fall from his shoulders; the shoulders Anita had noticed all that time ago when she first met him. She had been right in her estimate of him; he was growing into the wide, athletic muscles and right at that moment her big strong cat was completely at her mercy.

Bending her head she kissed the smooth chest she had revealed, letting her tongue dart out over one nipple, tasting her prey and drawing the most delicious gasp from her lover. Nathaniel had not long showered and he tasted faintly of soap and her senses filled with vanilla and something distinctly male. Always to her Nathaniel smelled of vanilla, so much so that these days she could not even eat ice cream without her mind filling with some recollection of her pomme de sang. She smiled into the chest she was exploring as she remembered a comment from Jean-Claude about her new food fetish.

She was not hungry now though, at least not for ice cream, but she would take vanilla. Without anymore hesitation she opened her mouth wider and bit down hard. Human teeth did not pierce skin as well as fangs or animal teeth, but Anita still tasted blood on her tongue almost instantly. She lapped at it as Nathaniel groaned and shuddered from head to toe.

"My Nimir-Ra," Nathaniel whispered into her hair.

She could feel her beast rising at the taste of blood. The hunger of the animal inside her would go one of two ways; meat or sex, and she wanted to mark Nathaniel, but not hurt him, so she turned her mind to sex. With an almost animalistic growl she pushed him back onto the kitchen table, heedless of the vase of flowers that sailed off its perch and shattered on the floor. She was not as gentle with Nathaniel's shorts as she had been with his shirt and she pulled them off roughly to leave her prize naked and proud.

Once she had thought Nathaniel pretty, but that was far too shallow a word for the sight in front of her. He was docile under her gaze, lounging on the table where she had pushed him, but there was a heat in Nathaniel's lilac eyes and muscles were taught under his smooth skin where he held himself completely still for her. Nathaniel was hers and she was going to have him.

Anita stripped without ceremony; she had no patience for a seduction and Nathaniel clearly required no foreplay. Her pomme de sang was hard and ready for her and she wanted nothing between them. The ardeur had already been fed today, but she could feel it lurking under her skin. Anita did not think it would come out to play as her beast shifted inside her dominantly; this was *pard* business, not simple sex.

Naked she climbed onto the table, pushing Nathaniel down onto its surface completely as she straddled him. Bending down she caught his mouth in a rough kiss, biting him again, but not hard enough to mark this time. It would be sacrilege to mark such a beautiful face. Nathaniel was going to know he was marked and anyone who saw under his clothes would see the evidence, but Anita had no intention of letting a casual observer see the truth.

Moving back to his chest she licked the teeth marks she had already left. The salty, coppery taste made her smile and she moved over to the other side of Nathaniel's chest and marked him again. Her pomme de sang arched up under her, his body pressing close to hers as Nathaniel revelled in the pain. Raking her nails over his flesh she continued to move over his chest, nipping and biting until there was an intricate pattern of welts all over Nathaniel's upper body.

By the time she drew back, her pomme de sang was writhing beneath her, caught in the ecstasy of pain and pleasure that Anita could never fully understand. She could feel his erection pressed against her stomach, leaking against her skin and she could smell his arousal. The blood had excited her beast and the scent of sex had brought her whole body to life. Nerves tingled and she knew she was wet and ready for everything Nathaniel had. Her beast wanted to possess and the rest of her wanted him inside her to feel that delicious cock filling her.

Rising up she positioned herself above Nathaniel and pushed down on him in one sure, firm stroke. Her body opened to him and she ground her hips against him, drawing a slightly strangled sob from his sinful mouth. With all the attention she had given him she knew her lover was close and she could feel Nathaniel trembling under her as their beasts and bodies both pushed against each other.

"You're mine, kitty cat," she said in a voice she barely recognised as her own, "and you will come when I say."

Lilac eyes filled with lust and desire pinned her down, but she knew Nathaniel would do as he was told. Sure that she had him she began to move, riding her lover with powerful thrusts of her hips. Taking her pleasure from his body as Nathaniel mewed and writhed beneath her, clinging to the table as if it was his lifeline. With every thrust her arousal built and she could feel her orgasm coming in only a few strokes.

This was not about stamina or slow comfortable sex, this was about lust and domination and Anita did not hold back. She rode Nathaniel until her body was singing and then she pushed herself down onto him hard, one more time. Digging her nails into his chest she put her head back and screamed one word: "Now!"

Nathaniel cried out her name and bucked up under her, filling her with his seed as both their bodies erupted with shudders and Anita let her orgasm take her.

There was a lot to be said for fast, hot sex and it was a while before Anita regained enough sense to care what she was doing. When she finally did take stock of her position she realised that she was lying on Nathaniel, still intimately joined with her lover, although not nearly as completely as before. Pushing herself up she looked down at the bite marks and scratches on Nathaniel's chest and her beast purred in appreciation. Then she looked further up her lover's body and met lilac eyes.

It was one of those moments where she could not think of anything sensible to say, but as she watched him, Nathaniel smiled. Anita did not always understand her beast, or her current lover for that matter, but she knew Nathaniel was happy and that she could now send him to do what needed to be done. For once deciding not to over think the situation she smiled back.

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[Scene 2](#)

When Harry opened the front door the house elf vanished in a huff, but he needed something to do to distract him from the fact that every time he was in a room with Draco he felt his beast rising. He had woken up in his boyfriend's arms the previous day, but his fear of hurting Draco had still been there and he had had to flee. Talking with Micah had helped, but he had not felt safe anywhere near Draco for the last two days and it was wearing on them both. The shouting match they had had earlier hadn't helped either. Possibly the person he least expected to see was Nathaniel standing on the door step.

"Hello," the wereleopard said with a smile that made Harry think something was going on, "may I come in."

"Yeah, sure," he agreed immediately and stepped aside to allow his friend entrance. "I was just annoying the house elf by making my own tea. Would you like some?"

"What's a house elf?" Nathaniel asked curiously, walking through the door and waiting as Harry close it.

"A small creature with big ears that likes doing house work," he explained openly.

He was about to say 'and enjoys being told what to do', when it occurred to him that Nathaniel would probably get on with Brandy like a house on fire. Somehow it didn't seem polite to say so, however.

"It's this way," he said and pointed towards the back of the house.

As he slipped past Nathaniel and began to lead the way to the kitchen they passed the stairs, just as Draco was coming down them. Harry felt the breath hitch in his throat as the past two days raced through his memory and the beast within him reared in anticipation. Nathaniel gave him a particularly hard look.

"It's getting worse isn't it," the wereleopard said seriously. "That will be because you're trying to repress it. That's why I came. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Harry glanced at Draco and then looked away quickly at frightening feelings that the action caused.

"The den is just through there," Draco said in a rather cold tone; the argument they had had the moment Micah and Anita had left that afternoon was obviously still in play.

Trailing both of the others into the small, cosy room that was so un-Malfoy like to be almost part of a different house, Harry tried to concentrate on Nathaniel rather than his boyfriend. However the moment he found himself admiring the way the wereleopard swayed in such a graceful manner while walking, he looked away from him as well before his libido could cause him anymore trouble.

He had been fine, enjoying the beginnings of a relationship with Draco, but now it was almost as if every time he saw the Slytherin he thought of sex. Something had changed because his cat was now more involved and he did not quite know how to deal with it. Having been a total disaster at relationships in the past he had no idea what he was supposed to be doing on a human level, and his beast seemed to have plenty of ideas. All he needed now was the vampire to put in an appearance and he could cheerfully go insane.

"Look, I don't mean to be rude," Draco said as Harry let his eyes wander anywhere around the room but at his two companions, "but I'm not really in the mood to be nice, and as Harry can tell you, that means I can be a real arse, so it would probably be better if you just get to the point."

Harry risked a glance to see Nathaniel's reaction and the wereleopard was wearing a knowing smile.

"I came to offer my help," Nathaniel said, which made Harry look at him directly in surprise.

"How," he began to ask and then blushed at the thoughts that flashed through his head, "how can you help? Micah said I need to learn to control this and all I need is time."

"I'm a very good bottom," Nathaniel said, and, looking into the wereleopard's wide lilac eyes, Harry almost didn't realise what his fellow lycanthrope was saying.

When his brain finally caught up, about all he could do was splutter and his eyes went to Draco just to make sure his boyfriend was not about to skin Nathaniel alive. There had been hints about Nathaniel's past and his sexual preferences over several conversations and so Harry tried not to take it personally and hoped Draco wouldn't either. This was probably Nathaniel's idea of being helpful, even if it was likely to stir up things instead of assisting with them.

"Your idea of help is to proposition Harry?" Draco's voice was icy.

"No," Nathaniel said calmly, "both of you."

The idea of Draco with anyone else produced rather a strong reaction in Harry and forgetting that he was trying to maintain control he actually growled. Nathaniel's eyes went wide and the wereleopard cringed, hunching down, although he managed not to look away completely.

"I can take a lot of damage," Nathaniel said and Harry could hear the tremble in the submissive's voice; this was taking a lot of courage on Nathaniel's part, "and a vampire bite won't affect me because of Anita. You can do what you like to me, give Harry a chance to learn control before you can be together properly. Talking won't help, only doing, and Harry's beast isn't going to let this alone much longer."

Harry opened his mouth, but Draco surprised him.

"You're offering yourself as a sex toy?" his boyfriend sounded neither as scandalised as Harry felt, nor as cold as before.

Nathaniel nodded.

"And what's to stop Anita killing all three of us when she finds out?" Harry could not believe that the Slytherin was even considering the idea, but Draco's words were not an outright rejection.

"I asked permission," Nathaniel replied, brightening a little. "I remember being new, the only thing that works is practice. Gabriel trained us."

There was a flicker of something in those lilac eyes that made Harry want to hurt Gabriel even though he knew the ex-leopard leader was dead, but that really wasn't the important thing at the moment. Nathaniel was offering himself and that just wasn't right. When Draco laughed Harry nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Merlin's balls! This city is the most screwed up mess of a place I have ever had the misfortune of visiting," the Slytherin said with just a touch of bitterness in his voice, "and I've been to some very bizarre places. You're saying the only way I can ever be with Harry is to let him be with you first?"

"It doesn't have to be like that," Nathaniel said, standing up and walking carefully towards Draco.

The wereleopard was moving with his usual grace in an obviously submissive stance and Nathaniel sidled up to Draco, reaching out to touch the Slytherin's leg, ready to draw back the hand should anything untoward occur.

"I can make it like I'm hardly even there," Nathaniel said quietly, and Harry realised that he was not the one the wereleopard was trying to convince at the moment. "I will do anything you tell me to do."

Harry's breath caught in his throat as he met Draco's gaze across the room. He knew the look in his boyfriend's eyes; the Slytherin was seriously considering this. Harry wanted to object, wanted to say that this was not the right thing to do, but the words of rejection were stuck in his throat. If Draco said yes he knew without a doubt that he would as well.

"Before everything was in balance," Nathaniel was speaking very clearly and slowly, as if he was afraid someone would start shouting at any minute, "you could take it slowly, but that's changed. The other night caused Harry's beast to become fixated and there's only two ways to deal with that: you go as far away from each other as you can get, or you do what the beast wants. Both of you smell like sex, but if you give in Harry could hurt you. You need help."

Draco did not appear totally convinced, but Harry could tell his boyfriend was thinking it through. He could not bear to leave Draco, not when he had only just realised that he had been in love with him for so long. He was afraid, but he wanted a solution to this.

"I can be a buffer," Nathaniel continued. "I can help Harry control his cat and I can get in the way if he shifts by accident. I know what he's fighting against and I know how to tame it."

Harry chest felt tight as Draco looked at him. Part of him wanted to run and hide from this terrifying idea, but part of him was desperate for the Slytherin to say yes. He didn't know if he was ready for sex, let alone ready for sex involving more than Draco, but his beast was becoming more insistent by the hour.

"If we agreed," Draco asked after a long silence, "how would we do this?"

Nathaniel gave them both a small, supportive smile.

"Harry's beast sees you as his mate," the wereleopard said, "he wants you, but if he took you he could damage you very easily. What we need to do is allow the mating drive to be fulfilled by diverting it onto me, and keep him focused on you. We do that by making sure you are in control of everything he does to me."

"And would this just be once, or would it take more than that?" Draco's voice was devoid of emotion and Harry did not try and make out what his boyfriend was feeling.

Nathaniel shrugged apologetically.

"I don't know," the lycanthrope replied, looking at Harry seriously, "it depends. Once Harry has felt what it's like he may be able to control it, but it may take more practice."

Harry held on to his beast with an iron grip as Draco looked him straight in the eye. The part of him that was animal wanted the Slytherin with every fibre of its being and the human part was filled with desire stirred by his more primitive aspect, but he remained very still.

"When?" Draco said and that one word caused so many confusing emotions to run through Harry that he did not even try to catalogue them.

"Now?" Nathaniel asked with a questioning shrug.

End of Chapter 20

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Chapter 21 Hardly Even There NC17/18

Scene 1

Part of Harry was completely terrified, but the part that seemed to have the majority control at the moment followed Draco and Nathaniel out of the den and up the stairs without a word of protest. They had both looked at him after their conversation, but there had been no real words between them and he had simply indicated the door. It was, however, as he reached a different door, the one to the bedroom to be precise, that the gravity of what was going on hit him right between the eyes and he froze.

He was so not ready for this. It was possible he was the most powerful wizard on the planet and put him on a battlefield and he was in his element, but as far as it went with sexual maturity he was about two years behind all his friends. While they had been fumbling under the Quidditch stands and having clandestine meetings in the Astronomy tower, he had been practicing his hexes and having meetings with the Order about Voldemort's movements. In the last two years he had had no time to think about love or sex, even after the final battle it had been the clear up and exams.

Draco was his first real relationship and he hadn't even quite put his head around that yet, and here they were talking about sex. He was pretty sure his boyfriend was experienced, most of his friends were, after all it had been wartime and few had held back what they might have done in peacetime. Even Harry had realised that, although he had had no time for experimentation of his own. He suddenly thought he understood what a virgin bride might have felt like on her wedding night.

"Harry," Draco's voice made it into the panic that had taken over his mind.

He blinked and found his boyfriend was standing in front of him looking concerned. He had to have been frozen in the doorway for some time if Draco's expression was anything to go by.

"It's okay, Harry," Draco said, reaching out and touching him on the arm, "we don't have to do this now."

Harry's eyes flickered to where a concerned looking Nathaniel was standing a few feet behind Draco. Both of his friends were wearing almost identical expressions of worry, but he couldn't find anything to say to help.

"Harry," Draco said, taking hold of his chin and bringing his attention firmly back to his boyfriend, "are you okay?"

Harry just looked at the Slytherin in what he thought must have been a very stupid manner. What was he supposed to say? His beast was moving under his skin, demanding that he do what it wanted of him, that he claim this human as his mate, but the part of him that was just Harry could barely breathe he was so scared. There was the fear that he would hurt Draco even with Nathaniel there to help and there was the fear of the act itself. It was all so overwhelming.

"I..." he tried to say something sensible, but the words would not come.

"We can wait, Harry," Draco said, obviously upset by his reaction. "God, I'm sorry, I didn't think. We don't have to do this now; it's up to you when. This must be terrifying for you."

Draco did not usually babble, but that was the only word Harry could think of that described what his boyfriend was doing now and it had the most remarkable effect on him. It suddenly occurred to him that Draco was almost as scared and confused as he was, no matter the calm Slytherin exterior, Draco was afraid. That was all Harry needed to find his own courage. Draco was scared, but he was willing to do this for Harry so there was no way Harry was going to succumb to his fear and not do this for Draco. He knew that the Slytherin would be mortified about babbling, especially in front of a witness, so Harry did the only thing he could think of at the time to shut him up; he stepped towards Draco, took his boyfriend's face in his hands and kissed him.

His beast reared at the touch and tried to rise, but he held it back, instead putting all his energy into the kiss. He knew Draco's mouth rather well by now and he used everything he had learned until his boyfriend pushed back against him and gave in to the kiss. When he finally pulled back, Draco's face was flushed, but serious grey eyes still observed him.

"Are you sure?" his boyfriend asked, the tone of his voice telling Harry to think very carefully before answering.

"Terrified," he said eventually in little more than a whisper, "but definitely sure."

Looking over to Nathaniel he took all his courage and tried to smother his fear.

"What should we do?" he asked, deciding that up front was the only way to deal with this.

"Have either of you ever..." Nathaniel started to ask.

"I have," Draco replied confirming Harry's suspicions, "but I think I'm right in saying all this is new to Harry."

Harry just nodded when the other wereleopard looked at him for confirmation. There was no point in being coy about his virginal status now.

"Ever thought about it and looked it up?" Nathaniel seemed to be trying to figure out exactly how clueless Harry was and it made him blush.

He was going to have to admit quite how little he knew, but at least he felt safe. He knew neither of the men in the room with him would use this against him.

"No," Harry replied, trying not to go too red, "I've been kind of busy."

"The whole dark wizard thing?" Nathaniel enquired in a sympathetic tone.

Harry nodded and his friend gave him a sympathetic smile as Draco squeezed his hand. He could do this, he really could, if he could just hold off the urge to flee.

"Well there are usually some preparations to make," Nathaniel said, dropping the small bag he had with him on the bed and calmly pulling off his t-shirt.

Harry would have looked to Draco for advice at that, but his attention was taken by the marks that were all over Nathaniel's chest. It looked as if he had been attacked.

"What happened to your chest?" Harry could not help himself as he almost forgot his embarrassment in his worry for his friend.

Nathaniel looked down at himself and smiled fondly in a way that rather confused Harry. His friend seemed happy about the small wounds that were all over his upper body.

"I told you I asked permission," Nathaniel said in a completely open manner. "I am Anita's and this is her mark. I will always be Anita's no matter what we do here."

It struck the human part of Harry as rather barbaric and it must have shown on his face because Nathaniel gave him another sympathetic smile.

"I asked her to do it," the wereleopard said simply, and that seemed to be the end of the matter as far as Nathaniel was concerned. "Since I'm the go-between I already made the preparations; Draco can explain them to you later."

"There are spells for everything," Draco said when Harry looked to him for confirmation, trying to stop himself wondering about the marks on Nathaniel, "I'll teach them to you."

Would he feel the need to do similar things to Draco, or was this just part of the peculiar pain/pleasure thing Nathaniel seemed to enjoy. Swallowing around the lump in his throat Harry gave another nod and put such ideas to the back of his mind. Neither of his companions seemed to think he was an idiot, which was at least one good thing.

"We're going to need to be comfortable with each other," Nathaniel said with a smile as the wereleopard continued removing his clothes, "so now might be a good time to get naked."

It wasn't as if Harry had never been naked in front of Nathaniel and Draco before, but being naked for pard stuff and being naked for sex were two entirely different things. The way Nathaniel just casually slipped out of his clothes seemed so relaxed and Harry wasn't sure how his friend did it. When Nathaniel was naked, the wereleopard hopped onto the bed and lounged as if it was the most natural thing in the world. There was no doubt Nathaniel was beautiful, mostly smooth skin and deep auburn hair, and very male; definitely very male and interested in the proceedings.

Harry had not moved, but he was a little pleased that neither had Draco. Nathaniel didn't say anything; the wereleopard just patted the bed.

Harry looked at Draco who was looking straight back at him, and then the Slytherin moved. Harry really couldn't help staring as he watched his boyfriend

shed his shirt without any sign of the awkwardness Harry was feeling. It was a captivating sight as pale, perfect flesh was revealed, even more so than when Nathaniel had stripped, since Harry felt his beast shifting in response to Draco's actions. The part of him that was animal wanted to take Draco there and then, whether he knew what he was doing or not, but he pushed it back down.

Taking his eyes from the sight in front of him was not an option and he drank everything in hungrily as Draco divested himself of the rest of his clothing. There was strength and beauty in the naked Slytherin that was different from the controlled power in Nathaniel. They were both slim and smooth, but where Nathaniel was lycanthrope warmth, Draco was Wizarding cool. His pale eyes, pale skin and pale hair made him almost ethereal, and Harry could almost sense the wizard's power flowing through his boyfriend's veins. Draco was intoxicating.

"You have too many clothes on," the Slytherin said with a small smile and stepped back towards him.

Harry did not try and resist at all as Draco calmly began to release the fastenings on his clothes. Inside, his beast was moving, shifting under his skin and pushing at its boundaries, and it seemed almost impossible that it wasn't showing on the outside as he slowly let himself be undressed. He watched every move Draco made, followed every casual brush of fingers against cloth or skin with his eyes, only moving to allow an item of clothing to be removed. It felt as if, if he moved of his own will it would be impossible to keep the beast inside, but if he followed it could not escape.

When the last garment had been discarded Draco ran pale eyes over him from head to toe and then the Slytherin gently took his hand. As he was led to the bed, it was as if all he could see and smell and sense at all was Draco. His boyfriend filled his senses and it was not until they moved onto the bed that Harry remembered they were not alone. Looking at Nathaniel he fought the urge to expel the interloper.

Nathaniel's lilac eyes were filled with desire, but there was also a firm grasp of reality in the wereleopard's face. It was that link which brought Harry back from the euphoria he had been feeling and he took control of himself.

"Keep going," Nathaniel said in little more than a whisper; "forget that I am here and if your beast begins to rise, pull back. I won't let anything happen."

Harry turned back to Draco and when his boyfriend gently pushed him down on the bed he did not resist. As Draco lowered sinful lips towards his chest, Harry closed his eyes and let the heady sensation of skin on skin wash over him. His beast moved as his arousal grew, but it seemed satisfied that it was being given what it wanted and his vampire was strangely silent.

Draco's mouth left cool trails on his chest and the little nips his boyfriend gave him made him mew and arch into the touch. They had never come this far before, never without clothes and Harry revelled in the sensation. Draco's skin was warm against his as his boyfriend lay against him and Harry let his mind and body wander through the experience, trying to understand what drew his beast forth with the small part of his brain that could still think.

He was doing well, drowning in the sensations that Draco sent shooting through his body, but keeping his preternatural abilities deep inside and then Draco moved against him, shifting in such a way that Harry could not fail to notice that his boyfriend was hard. The dampness against his thigh had the most incredible

effect on his senses as everything sharpened even further and the scent of sex saturated him. His whole world shrank down to that one smell and his beast and vampire reacted at the same time.

Before he realised what he was doing he was moving and he did not come to a stop until he had Draco pinned beneath him. The feeling of power and dominance that ran through him made him smile as he looked down into the shocked features of his boyfriend. His cat really wanted out and he could feel the vampire pushing at his control as well. A gentle hand on his shoulder brought him back from the edge, but it did not stop him taking a deep breath and inhaling Draco's scent as completely as he could.

"You smell wonderful," he said as he buried his face in the curve of neck and shoulder, rubbing himself against Draco as he did so.

The move actually lessened the demand he could feel inside of him and it slowly dawned on him that when he followed through on some of the instincts running through him it took away the need of his preternatural parts to take over. The pressure below his skin was bearable again and so he tried following another urge. Moving down Draco's body a little, he ran his tongue over one pink nipple, tasting his lover, but in a non-intrusive way. The noise that Draco made drew a silent purr from the cat inside him and he continued, enjoying the feeling of possession and the pleasure he was bringing to his lover.

Exploring, he learned Draco's body as if he was creating a map of his lover in his mind and when he became too lost in what he was doing, a gentle touch from beside him brought him back. Without realising it, he was working lower and finally he was face to face with the erect evidence of Draco's arousal. The smell was almost overwhelming so close and he really wanted to taste the prize in front of him, but he did not dare. The hunger of his beast and the vampire swam through him as he held himself directly above Draco's hips and he knew he could not have what he wanted yet; he did not have enough control to take that step yet.

Pushing himself up, he came to a kneeling position and demanded that his preternatural aspects obey him and remain in their cage. He was hard and aching and arousal thudded through his veins with the heady desires of his beast and vampire, and he wanted nothing more than to devour Draco in anyway he could, but he held himself still. If he acted he knew he would damage the fragile human he desired, and what held him back was that the preternatural sides of him knew that as well and parts of them wanted to do just that.

Harry did not take his eyes off Draco as Nathaniel slowly moved between them; pulling Draco into a sitting position and bringing their bodies close together.

"Make me smell like you," the wereleopard whispered as he nuzzled against Draco, "prepare me for your mate."

The vampire liked it when Draco started to touch Nathaniel; it enjoyed the pure lust that the movements caused, but Harry's beast was not so sure. The scent of another male caused him to growl low in his throat, but Nathaniel brought Draco's hands back to his body when the Slytherin went to break away. Then the wereleopard reached out and caught one of Harry's hands, bringing it to the marks Anita had left on his chest.

"Nimir-Ra," Nathaniel said firmly, allowing Harry's fingers to feel one of the bites, and that Harry's beast understood.

This male was marked; this male was taken by the leader of the pard; this male was not a threat. The cat shifted under Harry's skin, but it was content to just watch and Harry relaxed slightly, much to his vampire's pleasure.

Draco appeared to take this as permission and began to slowly rub himself against Nathaniel. The wereleopard made no sound, but Nathaniel did put his head back and closed his eyes, passively allowing Draco access to his body. As Draco moved, covering Nathaniel in his scent, Harry just watched, enjoying the small noises of arousal that came from his lover every now and then. The smell of Nathaniel was dimming against the heady scent of Draco's desire and Harry held himself still, knowing he could not have what he wanted yet.

Nathaniel went wherever Draco directed and Harry finally lost contact with the two of them when the Slytherin urged the wereleopard onto his hands and knees. The scent of the other male became stronger again, but Draco did not give Harry a chance to react to it. Holding out his hand, Draco summoned something from the bag Nathaniel had left on the bed, and under Harry's watchful eye Draco opened the tube the Slytherin now had in his hand.

When Draco began to slowly rub the clear gel from the tube into the crack of Nathaniel's arse the wereleopard made a noise for the first time. The breathy moan caused desire to course through Harry in renewed vigour and he held himself very still while watching. This was something Harry had never seen and he was fascinated and aroused as his lover worked his fingers into yielding body offered wantonly before them both.

As Draco continued his ministrations Nathaniel's auburn braid slid off his back over his shoulder completely obscuring the wereleopard's face, making him almost invisible in a personal sense. Now Harry understood the 'hardly even there'; with his scent being more and more obscured and his face hidden it was almost as if Nathaniel was not Nathaniel any more.

Looking at Harry with hungry eyes Draco reached out and took his hand, pulling him closer and squeezing some of the gel onto his fingers. Then Harry found his fingers being guided to where Draco's had been.

"Push gently," his lover whispered to him, "feel the muscle giving under your fingers."

Draco had done most of the work, but, as Harry allowed three of his fingers to be guided into Nathaniel's hot body, the resistance made his groin throb. His imagination did not need any help to come up with ideas of what it would feel like to be buried deep in that tight muscle. As he moved his hand against the compliant body he found his eyes running along the hard lines of first Nathaniel's and then Draco's bodies and the small part of his mind that was not completely taken up with sex could not quite believe the perfect specimens of manhood that he was being presented.

Under his gaze Draco reached to cup his own erection in slick fingers and Harry's breath caught in his throat as the Slytherin began to move his hand up and down. The moan that escaped Draco's throat was pure, wanton lust and Harry pulled his hand back for fear of hurting Nathaniel as unbridled desire ran through him. He wanted Draco so much that it almost hurt and yet he would not reach out for fear of hurting his lover. He had not shifted yet, not even slightly, but if he lost control for just a second he could kill or maim Draco and he would not risk that.

Stroking himself Draco moved closer to Nathaniel, so close that for a moment Harry thought his lover was going to take the wereleopard in front of him. His beast rebelled at that, his dominance flaring, but Draco did not close the final distance between himself and Nathaniel. The Slytherin was rubbing faster now, eyes closed and little noises of pleasure falling from pink lips as Draco brought himself towards orgasm. Harry wanted to touch, he so wanted to touch, but he did not dare.

When Draco put his head back and came with a shuddering cry, Harry almost lost it. As white ribbons of liquid splashed onto Nathaniel Harry had to hold on with every ounce of control he had and part of him realised what Draco was doing. His lover's scent slammed into him and Harry needed no urging to move forward as Draco moved out of the way.

The beast needed to own what was his, wanted everything his lover had to give and although the human part of him was unsure and nervous the rest was not. Leaning forward he sniffed at the scent covering Nathaniel's and without hesitation moved to taste it. The taste filled his senses, speaking to him of human, of mate and of sex and it did not matter that Nathaniel's taste was under it all.

When Draco pulled him back into an upright kneeling position he went and as their lips met he shared the taste that had him so captivated. Draco was his; Draco had given of himself, but the beast needed completion. He let himself be guided as Draco urged him into place behind Nathaniel and he took hold of the slim hips in front of him. Draco's hand positioned him at Nathaniel's entrance and then Harry was pushing forward into the tight ring of muscle.

It was incredible; hot, moist and encompassing and his groan of bliss was swallowed as Draco reinitiated the kiss. He heard Nathaniel's quiet moans under everything else, but it didn't matter; as the three of them began to move together it was almost as if Draco and Nathaniel were one being as Draco's dominating scent filled his senses.

The beast wanted out and so did his vampire as he slid in and out of Nathaniel, but he held on. He wanted this, needed it, but he could maintain control; he had to. Each move brought with it ecstasy that he had never felt before, a mixture of arousal, dominance and hunger that tried to take his mind away. He pounded into Nathaniel, eventually breaking the kiss in his need to finish this, and as he felt his orgasm coming it felt as if all his efforts would be in vain. Both beast and vampire were so close to the surface that at the last moment he thought he would lose control.

With a cry he came, losing his body to unstoppable shudders, but with everything he had he clawed onto the creatures that lived under his skin. His grip on the hips under his hands tightened just that little too much, but he did not shift into lycanthrope or vampire as he collapsed over Nathaniel.

His orgasm was mind blowing, but it was hanging on to his beast that was exhausting. For long moments he could not move and only as hands gently pulled at him and helped him sit back did sense begin to return. Nathaniel collapsed to the side with a quiet sigh, the evidence that the wereleopard had found his own orgasm clearly visible on the sheets once he moved, but Harry was more interested in any damage he might have done.

His eyes scanned his friend and there were angry red marks on Nathaniel's one visible hip, but they had been made by human fingers, not claws.

"You didn't shift, Harry," Draco whispered to him as the Slytherin pulled him to lean back against his chest. "You didn't shift."

Harry sagged in his lover's arms, amazed relief joining the heady afterglow of powerful sex. Nathaniel smiled up at him from the bed, a sleepy content smile and for the first time in days Harry could empathise. The pressure inside of him that had been building and building was gone and all that remained was sated contentment as he rested in Draco's arm. He had his mate and his control; two things he had thought were totally incompatible.

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Scene 2 (1631)

That Nathaniel had been gone when he woke had sent a pang of something he couldn't quite identify through Harry and it had sent him on a hunt through the house in nothing more than his boxers, which he had grabbed off the floor. He wasn't sure what he expected to find, but he found himself hovering in the doorway of the den when he eventually tracked his friend down. Nathaniel was curled up on one end of the sofa with a book, his long hair falling into his lap almost obscuring what he was reading from Harry completely.

It seemed he was not the only one who had not stopped to put on many clothes since Nathaniel was only wearing jeans. It was this more than anything that reminded Harry that he was nearly naked and probably looked rather silly. The moment he stopped, Nathaniel looked up and smiled at him, before closing the book and patting the sofa beside him.

"You were gone," Harry said as he took the invitation without allowing his higher brain to object, "I didn't know what to think."

His human instinct was to sit a little away from his friend and hold himself separate until he understood what was going on, but the cat in him wanted to be close to Nathaniel. He was confused and unsure and he needed the comfort, so he chose a spot almost touching his friend, but not quite. Nathaniel shifted almost immediately so that their legs were casually brushing each other and Harry let out an audible sigh of relief.

"I thought you and Draco would like to wake up together," Nathaniel said in a soft voice, "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Draco had woken up when Harry had, and it had been nice until Harry had realised that Nathaniel was no longer on his radar. It wasn't that he felt the same way about his friend as he did Draco, it was that he felt as if he'd somehow driven Nathaniel away, and everything inside him that was pard hated that idea. Harry knew he loved Draco like he would never love anyone else, but he loved Nathaniel as well, the way he loved all his friends, and for a while he had panicked. Draco had seemed to understand and had let him go with a kiss.

"We did wake up together," he said wanting to lean closer to Nathaniel, but resisting for now, "it was good."

He looked straight into the wereleopard's lilac eyes and felt such gratitude that he didn't know how to express it. Nathaniel had given of himself so that Harry could come to understand what it meant to be a lycanthrope in a relationship and Harry did not think he could ever repay that.

"Thank you," he said, unable to find any other words.

Then he gave in and leant in to Nathaniel allowing his beast to rise a little closer to the surface so his friend would feel it. There was tension in Nathaniel that Harry had had no idea was there until he felt it melt away and they ended up half leaning against each other.

"You're welcome, Harry," Nathaniel said quietly, "I was glad to help."

They sat perfectly still for a good few minutes and Harry felt the worry he had been feeling since he woke up slowly seeping away. He was no longer simply human and he felt it very keenly at times like these. He had always had to make his own family, since the one he had hated him, and the pard were becoming as important to him as his friends from home. Leaving and returning to England was something he knew he was going to have to do, but he knew he'd be leaving a part of himself here as well.

"Is it always as difficult as the first time?" he asked eventually, his mind finally turning back to the problem they had been trying to rectify in the first place.

Nathaniel pulled back a little bit now and Harry found himself being watched. It was a while before his friend spoke.

"No," the wereleopard replied, "but you can never let go completely, not unless you are with another preternatural, someone who can deal with your strength."

Harry could not help thinking that it would be far easier for him and Draco if he completed the marks; then Draco would for all intents and purposes be a preternatural. The thought danced across his mind and then he squashed it ruthlessly. He was not about to force Draco into anything simply for his peace of mind, they would manage the way they were.

"Do you think..." Harry started to ask and then paused; he couldn't help feeling embarrassed even after what they had been doing. "Will I..."

He knew what he wanted to ask, but he just couldn't find the right words. When they had had sex Harry remembered fighting against the beast, keeping it inside and winning against its ferocious need to control him, but he was not sure how much of that had been him and how much had been Nathaniel's careful guidance of the experience.

"Will it be the three of us again?" he finally managed to ask.

There was the feel of eyes on him and even though he did not dare look up he knew he was being scrutinised. It wasn't that he didn't desire Nathaniel; the wereleopard was beautiful and sensual and any man who swung that way would be hard pressed not to be attracted to Nathaniel, but Draco was Harry's focus. Draco was the one he wanted for a lover, for a mate and he wanted him alone. It finally dawned on him that the silence was becoming longer than he expected and he had no choice but to look up. Nathaniel was regarding him thoughtfully.

"I don't think you will need me again," the wereleopard said eventually and gave him a small smile. "You will need to be careful, and no sex before a full moon for a while, but I think you have it."

Harry felt his face break into a beaming smile; it was more than he had been expecting. Parts of his first sexual experience had been almost overwhelming, but

somehow he had managed to hang on. He could actually do this and he would be able to make love to his boyfriend without hurting him. It was an almost euphoric feeling.

"And you know what they say," Nathaniel said with a far too innocent expression on his face.

Harry frowned, not sure what his friend was getting at.

"Practice makes perfect."

For a moment he sat there, not quite sure he had heard Nathaniel correctly, and then he burst out laughing. The knowing grin on his friend's face made him blush and he buried his head in Nathaniel's hair to hide his embarrassment. Okay so there wasn't anything of him that the wereleopard hadn't seen, but that didn't mean he could lose the Gryffindor bashfulness all in one day.

"Well isn't this sweet?" the voice from the doorway made him freeze.

Draco's words threw him into a sudden panic as he imagined what he and Nathaniel must look like. The last thing he wanted to do was give his boyfriend the wrong impression. It had taken a great deal for Draco to allow Nathaniel into their bed and if the Slytherin thought for a second that it was more than necessity the relationship would be over before it had begun.

"Well if you will let Harry run around the house half naked, what do you expect?" Nathaniel's casually amused tone made Harry panic a bit more.

Very slowly he turned his head, peering at where he knew Draco was through Nathaniel's hair.

"Maybe I need a lead as well as a collar with a bell," Harry nearly stopped breathing as Draco joked back at the wereleopard.

His lover was rolling his eyes and smiling where he was lounging in the doorway in a pose so languid he almost looked like a lycanthrope. With his heart in his throat Harry pushed himself away from Nathaniel and looked at Draco properly for the first time and he almost let out a slightly hysterical laugh. Draco was amused, but Harry's beast and quite a percentage of his human half as well, had been convinced that the Slytherin would doubt him. It was irrational, but Harry had never been particularly confident when it came to his relationships with other people.

"Harry," Draco said as he finally looked at him rather than Nathaniel, "are you okay? You've gone awfully pale."

"I'm fine," Harry managed to force out from between his teeth, but his heart was still hammering and coherent speech was not easy.

Draco looked worried for a moment and then realisation worked its way across the Slytherin's face. When it came to reading Harry, Draco was an expert and Harry knew he had been analysed in that one moment.

"Oh you idiot," Draco said, walking over to him and dragging him close in a way that left no room for argument, "I was being my normal sarcastic self. I know you would never do anything to hurt me."

Harry melted to the Slytherin without even trying to reply. Draco was his, he was Draco's, that was all that mattered and although he was pretty sure there would probably be idiotic incidents in the future, after all he was a Gryffindor, for now, everything was just how it was supposed to be.

"Now that really is sweet," was Nathaniel's succinct opinion on the matter.

Harry swiped at him blindly with one hand, but missed completely because he was unwilling to let Draco go for a second.

End of Chapter 21

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Chapter 22 Confrontation

Scene 1

Anita was not with them this evening at the Circus, for which Harry was actually glad. Feeding his vampire had gone smoothly since he almost had the hang of it now, and he was pretty sure Anita would not have approved of his other reason for being there. Ever since he had met Melanie on his first visit his conversation with her had been lurking at the back of his mind. This was a being that had known Salazar Slytherin and was, as far as Harry knew, the only other parseltongue in the world.

Jean-Claude had seemed totally unfazed when Harry had asked if it would be alright to visit the lamia, but then Jean-Claude rarely looked anything but completely in control. This time, however, Harry thought that his request had been pre-empted because there had been absolutely no discussion, just agreement. There had been a couple of warnings about Melanie's nature, but that was all.

The fact that Damian had conveniently appeared out of the woodwork to act as a chaperone was not lost on Harry either. He was almost sure he had heard mention of the fact that Damian was supposed to be working at Danse Macabre that evening when he had called Anita earlier. He made it a rule to touch base with her even when they were not meeting up, because she seemed to be making a career out of worrying about him, and it must have been chaos at her house when he phoned, because Anita had been having three conversations at once. Damian had been one of the people she was talking to, and working had definitely been mentioned; yet here he was at the Circus instead.

"Jean-Claude knew I was going to ask to see Melanie, didn't he?" Harry said as he followed the red-headed vampire into the depths of the Circus.

Draco was following silently behind having simply raised his aristocratic eyebrows when Harry had suggested his boyfriend might prefer to play chess with Asher or something. Harry was actually quite glad of the company of both men, since he knew instinctively as well as logically that Melanie was dangerous. Having backup was never a bad idea, but even the uncertainty of the lamia was not enough to deter him from wishing to speak with her.

"I believe it was considered a strong possibility," Damian replied with his usual calmness. "Jean-Claude requested my presence in the eventuality that you did request an audience with Melanie, since I am one of the few vampires she will tolerate."

Well it was nice everyone was being up front today; if there was one thing Harry could not bear it was being coddled and kept from the truth. Being looked after and given the facts he could cope with quite well, however.

"Is she really as bad as Anita makes out?" Harry asked, wondering if Anita's view might be a little skewed on the matter.

"To those she does not like," Damian replied, finally looking at Harry, "yes."

The green eyes that pinned him down were almost completely calm, but at their depths Harry could see something much more alive. There were layers to Damian that Harry became more and more aware of the more time he spent with the vampire.

They turned another corner into a hallway which contained only one door. There was a gauze-like curtain over the door that shimmered in the light and Harry had absolutely no doubt they had arrived. Damian stepped in front of him and calmly knocked on the door.

"Enter," a singsong voice called from beyond.

Harry couldn't be sure, but it sounded as if Melanie was in a good mood. With an efficiency of movement that Harry associated with combat trained people, Damian pulled the curtain to one side and took hold of the door handle. The oak obstruction swung back silently and Damian entered, holding both the door and the curtain out of the way from the inside for Harry and Draco to enter. It was the perfect position for a bodyguard, a fact that did not pass Harry by.

The sight that met Harry's eyes almost sent him straight back out the door again, at first sight Melanie appeared completely naked. The lamia was arranged in a large comfortable chair and looked like some exotic queen. Her dress, because Harry realised to his relief that she was wearing one, was a see through golden gauze, under which there were small patches of material in significant places so close to the woman's skin tone as to be almost invisible. The whole effect was to allow Melanie to be clothed without looking as if she was clothed at all.

A young man was standing behind her in the kind of outfit Nathaniel and co usually wore on stage, but Harry was used to sights like that having been in Anita's house often enough so it didn't faze him half as much as Melanie had.

"Welcome," the lamia greeted with a smile that actually went all the way to her eyes, "I am so pleased you decided to come and visit me, and your companion as well."

Melanie spared Damian a glance, but Harry doubted the vampire would be acknowledged more than that.

"Please, have a seat."

There were two chairs set just to one side of Melanie, so Harry took the one closest to her and Draco the other. It was all very civilised.

"Would you care for refreshment?" the lamia asked as she lounged in her chair, absently stroking the hand of the young man behind her.

"No thank you," Harry replied politely, "we just ate, but please, don't let us stop you."

That drew an interesting smile from Melanie and Harry wondered what he had just told her she could do, but the lamia did not comment on it.

"If only all who visit me were so polite," Melanie said as she looked him over from head to toe. "I do not believe we have been properly introduced. I am Melanie, last of the lamia and this is Zak, my companion, it is a pleasure to welcome you to my home."

"Thank you," Harry had agreed with Draco that it was probably best if he did all the talking in this encounter. "I'm Harry and this is Draco. It is a pleasure to be here."

Melanie practically beamed at him, which was a little unnerving. From what Anita had told him, the lamia was not usually a very personable creature and had a liking for death and destruction, but Melanie seemed genuinely happy.

{I was very pleased when Jean-Claude sent word you wished to visit,} the lamia said and it took Harry a moment to realise she had switched into Parseltongue. {It is so rarely that I find anyone worth talking to.}

It struck Harry as rather rude to speak in a language not everyone in the room could understand, but the last thing he wanted to do was upset Melanie, so he was not about to point this out.

{I have only ever spoken to snakes like this,} Harry replied in kind. {It feels very different talking to someone such as yourself.}

That earned him a small smile.

{The little ones have limited understanding,} the lamia replied and a small green head appeared over her hip from the confines of the chair, {and their conversation skills are not well developed, but they are a boon to me. I have not had another to converse with in such a long time, but maybe soon.}

Harry's curiosity almost had the better of him, but he managed to sit on the obvious question before it fell from his lips. The Slytherin part of his nature pointed out that was one can of worms he was unlikely to want to open.

{If you don't mind me asking,} he said, trying to relax in his chair and appear at ease, {did you give Salazar Slytherin the ability to talk to snakes?}

Melanie picked up the small snake, which was making its way across her lap, before she replied.

{Yes,} she replied, and Harry could not help but notice the sad look in her eyes as she spoke, {he was most dear to me.}

Pausing, she looked up at him as if she was considering something.

{If you would like, it would please me to talk about him,} she said rather wistfully.

{Please,} Harry replied since he had come expecting to have to carefully elicit answers to the questions that had been piling up in his mind about the darkest founder of Hogwarts.

Placing the snake around her neck, Melanie sat back and closed her eyes for a moment, as if preparing herself. When she looked at Harry again there was a small smile on her face.

{I met Salazar when he was no more than seventeen summers old,} the lamia began, {a dear boy, forever curious and wishing to learn. We met at a social gathering and his first words were to compliment me on the snake I was carrying. The moment I saw him I wished to make him mine.}

Melanie's eyes were no longer watching him even though she was still looking in his direction; her gaze was on the memory she was recalling.

{I had not expected to find anyone so engaging among the mortal races,} the lamia continued her story, {and we spent many weeks together. I was not the last of my kind then, but there were few of us left and I found in Salazar someone I wished to spend eternity with. When it came time for me to leave he agreed to accompany me and become my mate.}

That rather surprised Harry since nowhere in the histories of Slytherin did it mention that Salazar had been the mate of a lamia. It seemed rather an important detail to leave out.

{We performed the ritual to bind us together,} Melanie's voice was so sad now, {and we waited for him to change. At first we believed all was as it should have been, and the first time he spoke to me in my own tongue we were so joyful, but after a time we realised that he was not changing. His magic would not allow him to become my mate. We could never be together.}

As the lamia looked at him, Harry could almost feel her pain, although no one who could not hear her words would have known how deeply she was hurt. Harry realised he was being allowed to see something so very personal that there was probably not another person alive that knew it.

{I'm so sorry,} he said and genuinely meant it. {That must have been terrible for both of you.}

Melanie gave him a sad smile.

{It broke my heart,} she replied, {although there are those who would have you believe I never had one. I left him then, in the quiet of the dawn as he slept. I could not bear to watch him grow when I knew one day he would die. I have avoided all contact with your kind since.}

Harry felt so sad for her; he did not want to imagine what it would do to him if he lost Draco. A broken heart had been known to kill, especially where magic was concerned.

{He was a great man,} he told Melanie, trying to ease her pain at least a little. {I don't think we know everything about him anymore and history seems to see everything as very black and white, but he was definitely great.}

Melanie leaned forward in her chair and before he realised what was happening Harry found that she had taken his hand.

{Will you tell me about him?} she asked, almost as eager as a child. {I would like to know what he did with his mortal life.}

Harry nodded, after all he could not exactly refuse. He was not sure how much he would tell her, but he knew he had to offer at least some of what he knew. Glancing at Draco to check to see if his lover was bored he found the Slytherin almost glassy eyed and somewhat flushed. A small shake of the head from Draco made him turn back to Melanie, but he made a mental note to ask what was going on later. If there had been something wrong, Draco would have made it known, but Harry could not help wondering at his lover's expression.

Sifting through his memories and being suddenly grateful that Draco had punctuated every conversation with 'Slytherin is great because...' after they had first become allies, Harry launched into his turn to talk.

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Scene 2

Harry was not sure how long he and Melanie talked, but by the time he finally left it had to have been over an hour, if not two, but surprisingly, Draco did not appear in the least annoyed. If he had had to sit there listening to two people converse in a language he did not understand, Harry thought he would have at least been tetchy, but Draco was not; dazed and a little sleepy, yes, tetchy no.

"Draco," Harry asked the moment they were back in the hallway, "are you alright, you look flushed?"

"I'm fine," was the rather short response.

He might have left it there had it not been for the fact that he spotted Damian smiling slightly. He only caught it out of the corner of his eye and when he looked at the vampire full on the sign of amusement vanished, but it had definitely been there. Now Damian had had a full view of the room the entire time the three of them had been in the room, where as Harry had had all of his attention focussed on Melanie, so it occurred to Harry that Damian knew something he didn't.

"Are you sure?" he pushed gently to see what would happen.

The flush of Draco's cheeks went just a little darker and Harry realised that his boyfriend was blushing. One of the rarest sights known to man was an embarrassed Draco Malfoy and Harry could not help enjoying it. He had been mortified so many times over the past few days that it was a relief to be on the other side of the equation.

"Yes," Draco replied and refused to look him in the eye.

"You've gone red," Harry observed in his most blissfully innocent tone, even though he knew exactly what he was doing.

If Draco looked at him properly the Slytherin would spot what he was up to, but since he was avoiding eye contact Harry had free reign.

"It's just a little warm," was the guarded response.

"You're not coming down with something are you?" Harry put on a beautifully concerned voice. "Anita seemed to think that you shouldn't get things like colds after the second mark, but if you're not well maybe we should ask Jean-Claude some more about it."

"I'm fine," Draco insisted and finally looked up, at which point Harry knew he was caught. "You utter bastard!"

Draco really didn't do embarrassed well, but Harry couldn't help himself, he laughed.

"I'm sorry," he apologised immediately, "but turn about is fair play. Now tell me why you're embarrassed."

He glanced at Damian and spotted the small smile back again, even though it disappeared just as quickly. For a while he thought Draco might storm off in a mood, but eventually his boyfriend sighed and rolled his eyes.

"It's the parseltongue," Draco finally admitted in a very low whisper.

Harry thought it better not to point out that even whispering the conversation would be perfectly audible to Damian.

"It does things to me," the Slytherin finished.

For a moment Harry frowned, not sure what Draco was getting at and then it dawned on him.

"Oh," he said and felt a grin forming on his face, "really?"

"Yes really," Draco all but hissed back at him.

Harry didn't know whether to feel sorry for his boyfriend having to sit through hours of the conversation between himself and Melanie, or jealous that Draco had had to sit through hours of parseltongue. It was always a difficult choice when teenage hormones were involved.

"Maybe we can borrow that room again?" Harry suggested with an innocent bat of his eyes.

It was Draco's turn to laugh.

"I'm going to have to tell Nathaniel he's created a monster," the Slytherin said and took Harry's hand.

"Well what did you expect," Harry replied with a grin, "after all I am two thirds of my own triumvirate."

Then he set off down the corridor dragging Draco behind him with Damian trailing after them like a good bodyguard. Due to some building work Jean-Claude had going on they had to head back into the main Circus before they could enter the other half of the living quarters. It was something to do with a water main, because Jason had been moaning about it earlier, but Harry had not paid much attention.

It was as they were weaving through the crowds of tourists that Harry suddenly came to a complete stop and for a moment he wasn't sure why. Something had caught his attention and he had reacted, but on instinct, and it took him a second or so to figure out what had occurred. Spinning round he scanned the crowd and his eyes settled on one face.

"That's him," he said pointing, "that's the man from my vision."

Empty eyes met his and then the prey was off and running. Harry had gone cold as he realised that the enemy was inside the circus, but as soon as the man began to run so did he. If they had been alone he would have used magic, but there were too many Muggles around and not everything could be explained away by vampiric power. His entire focus narrowed down to the disappearing figure and he ran without thinking about it.

His beast rose towards the surface as it sensed prey, but he did not let it out. Moving through the crowd at speed was ridiculously easy, he just treated them like the trees he had run through at full moon. All that mattered was the prey and he did not even consider what he was doing. What he would do with the man once he caught him was as irrelevant as considering the possibility that he might not catch up.

The enemy disappeared around a corner, heading towards the living quarters and Harry sped after him, intent on stopping the man before he reached anywhere he could do damage. However, as he came around the corner someone had beaten him to it. Two vampires had appeared out of nowhere, one light, one dark, and they had the prey between them.

Harry came up short and had to fight hard not to challenge the pair for the prize. He was so far into the mindset of the hunt that it was almost overwhelming, but he clawed onto his self control with everything he had. The two vampires were vaguely familiar, but he did not know their names.

"Wicked, Truth," Damian's voice behind him made him turn and he saw the other vampire and an out of breath Draco.

For a moment he felt a pang of guilt, but then he sensed the dark magic coming from the prisoner and he turned back to the other little group. The empty eyes that looked at him sent chills down his spine. The man he had seen in his vision no longer existed; there was just a shell with a purpose.

"I believe we should deal with this privately," the blond of the two vampires said calmly, never loosening his grip on his captive.

Reigning in the desires of his beast, Harry kept his mouth shut and just went along with it.

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Scene 3

Harry stood in the corner of the small room and just watched. He had learned that the tall dark haired vampire was Truth and the tall blond one was Wicked and they could both be very scary when they wanted to be. Being a stubborn Gryffindor had worked in his favour since he had managed to end up on the inside of the room with Draco, Asher, Wicked and Truth, but it had been a close thing.

It had been unanimous, however, that Jean-Claude definitely not enter the room since everyone was sure he was the target. The master of the city was currently outside waiting to hear any information those inside could extract from the prisoner, which was so far nothing.

The man was chained to a chair thanks to a spell Harry had cast, which was one of the reasons they'd let him and Draco stay, and was surrounded by the other

three vampires. On a small table off to one side was everything they had found in the man's pockets. This consisted of some cash and a small bottle of blood red potion.

So far the vampires had tried persuasion, mind tricks and brute force and their prisoner had just taken it all and said nothing. What gave Harry the creeps was that the man had not so much as said his name in the entire time he had been under interrogation. It was eerie in the same way the empty stare was eerie; Harry was pretty sure there was nothing really there to ask questions of.

"Let me try," Draco said, pushing himself away from the wall where the Slytherin was standing next to Harry.

Harry looked at his boyfriend to try and gauge what Draco was thinking and from the cold look he saw on his lover's face he knew instantly. When the final battle had been almost upon them, the Aurors had known what was going to happen and they had deputised all those who would be fighting. This had exempted them from the mandatory sentence in Azkaban for using an Unforgivable curse for the duration of the battle. Harry had seen the look on Draco's face when they walked into battle and the first spell his lover had thrown had been the Crutiatus curse.

"Which?" Harry asked shortly.

"Imperius," was the equally terse response.

At least there would not be lots of screaming.

"What do you intend?" Asher asked in a perfectly even tone, as if he had not just spent the last hour trying to terrify the prisoner.

"It's a spell that allows a wizard to completely control another's will," Draco said with a matching tone. "It's highly illegal and should give us answers in a very short time."

Wicked and Truth had not crossed paths with Harry or Draco, except from a distance, but they had obviously heard about their powers because they both stepped back before Asher nodded. Harry would have rather that his boyfriend not cast an Unforgivable, or that he do it instead, but Draco was the better of the two of them at casting such spells. The Slytherin had been drilled in them by his father; Harry had only ever cast them in an emergency.

Draco did not bother with a wand; he simply reached out his hand.

"Imperio," the Slytherin cast efficiently and a blast of light hit the prisoner.

For a few moments all was still.

"Harry, remove the chains," Draco said eventually and with a wave of his hand he did as he was told.

The vampires did not seem comfortable with an unsecured enemy in their midst, but they did not object. Harry was more worried about Draco and quite what the curse would be doing to him. Casting an Unforgivable was not very pleasant.

"Stand up," Draco said firmly.

The prisoner moved to his feet without hesitation.

"Hold your breath," was the next, unexpected instruction.

It would never have occurred to Harry, but Draco had devised the perfect test. A person under the Imperius curse would hold their breath until they died; a person who was faking it would never be able to. It was fine for the first minute or so, like watching a statue, but eventually the man began to twitch. He was still holding his breath, but his automatic bodily functions were trying to take over. Harry made himself watch, but he didn't like it.

Only when the man's lips began to turn blue and the prisoner was swaying on his feet did Draco relent.

"Breathe and sit," Draco said shortly. "Harry, chains."

Without having to think about it Harry replaced the bindings he had previously removed. He could not help being glad that that part of the interrogation was over. Somehow ordering a man to suffocate himself was worse than anything that had gone before.

"State your name," Draco said clearly and evenly.

Not a twitch and absolutely no sound.

"State your name," Draco tried again, but as Harry looked into the prisoner's empty eyes he knew there would be no response.

"Tell me why you are here," Draco changed tack.

"To give the potion to the master of the city," the words were so unexpected out of their so-far silent prisoner that every person in the room started slightly.

"Tell me who sent you," Draco ordered firmly.

Silence again.

"Tell me why you must give the potion to the master of the city."

Still nothing. It was with cold dread that Harry realised what was going on. There were no answers being given because there were none to give. All that was left of the poor wretch of a man he had seen in his vision was a shell with one purpose. He didn't know if the automaton could be given another task by his masters, but Harry knew without a doubt there was nothing else of the man except his task.

"Draco, stop," he said, completely sure of what he was doing, "he doesn't understand. Can't you see, the reason he hasn't told us anything yet is because there's nothing to tell. All he knows is 'give the potion to the master of the city'."

When Draco turned and looked at him Harry realised that Draco knew all too well. With a wave of his hand the Slytherin ended the spell and walked slowly back to Harry.

"I know," Draco said without any trace of emotion in his voice, "I was just hoping there might be something left."

Harry squeezed his love's hand, it could not have been pleasant to be in magical proximity to such a mind. It made him shudder just to think about it. Still holding his hand, Draco turned and looked at the vampires.

"This is pointless," the Slytherin said in a tone that begged no argument, "there is no mind left to question. I could feel it. I think it's safe to let Jean-Claude in here, he," Draco indicated the prisoner, "can't hurt anyone like that."

The three vampires looked at each other and appeared to be having a conversation that involved nothing but body language, but eventually Asher gave a small nod.

"We agree," Jean-Claude's second in command said, "and it is time to make a decision."

Without anymore discussion Asher walked to the door and opened it. Harry had no doubt Jean-Claude had been able to hear everything from outside because the master of the city simply walked in and looked at the prisoner with a rather sad expression on his face.

"Were this simply our business," Jean-Claude said evenly, "I would have this poor wretch put out of his misery. As it is, I fear we must contact the proper authorities."

It seemed to Harry as if all eyes in the room went to the small bottle on the table.

"Mon enfant," Jean-Claude continued and looked over to Harry, "would you perhaps know of anyone who might be in a position to assist us in discovering the nature of the contents of the bottle?"

Looking at Draco, Harry thought about it, but he was not sure if even Snape would be much help in this. This wasn't the type of potion he was used to and he wasn't convinced a wizard or witch was the right person for the job. Draco gave a slight shake of his head and Harry assumed they were thinking the same thing.

"I don't think our experts could help very quickly," he said honestly. "The police's experts are more likely to be useful since they're familiar with this sort of magic."

The fact that the dark magic coming off the bottle would probably encourage a wizard to destroy it more than analyse it was another factor that Harry chose not to mention. He wasn't sure what they were like on this side of the Atlantic, but at home the Ministry was very short sighted in such matters.

Jean-Claude considered the reply for a while and finally nodded.

"Then we shall let Anita's friends have our little collection," the vampire said decisively, "and I shall deduce a way to explain why we did not inform ma petite of our activities this evening."

They had all decided that Anita would overreact to Jean-Claude being in danger and hence they had left her out of the loop. Now they were going to have to face the music.

End of Chapter 22

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Chapter 23 Binding and Unbinding

Scene 1

It had been three days since the incident with the man from Harry's vision and the police still knew little more about him than his name which they had tracked down through missing persons. Anita had been somewhat annoyed for about a day over the whole incident, but something Jean-Claude had done had mellowed her attitude eventually. Lieutenant Storr seemed to be taking much more of an interest in Harry now that two of his leads had paid off, seemingly proving it was not a fluke, but the man did not seem to understand that Harry had no control at all over the link.

It wasn't even as if it was anything like the connection he had had with Voldemort, this one was only there if they chose to use his blood, and for all anyone could tell, that part was over. So when the doorbell rang while Lieutenant Storr was trying to wring out details that he did not have for what felt like the hundredth time, Harry decided that answering it himself would be a fantastic idea.

His still growing lycanthrope sense gave him an inkling of the fact that there was one of his kind outside, and by the time he opened the front door he knew enough to realise that there would be werewolf standing outside. The problem was he had assumed it would be Jason or one of the other locals and it was someone far more familiar.

"Remus," he said, completely shocked, "what are you doing here?"

"Your fire call to the Burrow was cryptic, Harry," Remus said looking at Harry in such a way that he just knew the werewolf sensed something about him. "When you become cryptic we all start worrying and eventually we can't stay out of it. I won the toss to come and find out what on earth is going on. If I don't report back in three days the cavalry will arrive."

Harry winced, he could just imagine the Order descending on St Louis; it would not be pretty.

"Oh," he said and stepped out of the doorway, "come on in then. Everyone's in the front room; first door on your right."

This was going to be interesting, especially since the police were here. As he followed Remus down the hall, something niggled at him. He could not work out what it was, but something about Remus was putting him on edge. Following his friend into the front room he tried very hard to figure out what it was.

"Everyone, this is Remus Lupin," he introduced as the werewolf's eyes tracked around the room. "Remus, standing in the corner is Lieutenant Storr, on the sofa we have Anita Blake and Nathaniel Grayson, and you know Draco."

"Pleased to meet you," Remus said politely, but the werewolf's voice was rather tight and he did not appear particularly pleased.

"Let me take your coat," Harry offered in a bid to break the awkward silence that seemed to fill the room.

The moment he touched Remus he felt pain and anguish and rage. It was the rage that took his breath away and he whimpered, but he could not take his hand

off his friend's shoulder. It was not Remus in pain, well not exactly, it was his friend's wolf, and it was crying out in its fury and its agony.

"Oh god," Harry whispered, "what did they do to you?"

Remus' eyes met his and he could see the battle being fought deep within his friend. Harry sank into those eyes looking further with senses he had barely ever used before and he found what was wrong almost immediately. Silver chains could bind a lycanthrope, but it was not silver which bound Remus' beast it was magic. He saw it as thick magical ropes all over the wolf living inside his friend and it was terrible to behold. No wonder Remus' wolf hated humanity and wanted to destroy it if this was what it had done to him.

The pain was too much and Harry couldn't bear it. He did the only thing a rational human being could; he tried to help. Under the force of his magic the binding shattered in an almighty explosion and he was thrown back into the real world. He could feel tears on his face and Anita and Nathaniel were both on their feet behind him.

Remus was still standing in front of him, a look of complete shock in his expression before his features contorted in agony. The familiar feel of lycanthrope power filled the room.

"He's shifting," Anita said and from the sound of her voice Harry knew that she most likely had her gun in her hand.

He did not want Remus shot, and he knew what was happening. The werewolf's beast was free and having been caged so long it wanted to rage. Rationally, Harry realised that what he had just done was incredibly dangerous and incredibly stupid, but what was done was done and now he had to make sure no one was hurt. There was only one thing in the room powerful enough to stop an enraged werewolf that did not involve silver bullets, and that was him. Without another thought he shifted, clothes splitting like so many rags as he grew into his catman form.

He barely felt the pain when his physical shape changed as he focused entirely on Remus. By the time he was fully shifted there was a snarling wolf in front of him, one that wanted blood and revenge. When the wolf sprang he moved to meet him and they collided with a loud thud, but he did not give ground. As the werewolf scratched and tried to bite him he used his own strength and body weight to throw them down onto the floor with him on top. He had no intention of letting Remus near anyone else in the room and he pinned his friend under him, absorbing the struggles and taking the wounds that Remus' sharp teeth and claws were inflicting.

"He's going to kill him," Dolph sounded ready to inflict serious damage.

Harry was not an alpha werewolf, he was a leopard and as such his beast could not control Remus'. Having Jean-Claude or one of the alphas of the local pack would have been the perfect solution, but neither of those was available. Jean-Claude had told him that Philip had been able to call the wolf as his animal, but Harry had never shown that ability. With desperation born of the knowledge that Anita would kill Remus if she had to and this was all his fault, Harry reached for his vampire and sought the ability he was supposed to have. He had shown so many vampire traits, but his wereleopard nature seemed to have suppressed this one.

Remus was still trying to break free and the wolf had his jaws wrapped around Harry's shoulder, but he was not about to give up. It had to be there, some trace of the power of the vampire he had absorbed. When he found it, it was like the sun coming out after the rain as warmth and power flooded him. A connection opened to Remus in his mind and he pushed his power down it immediately.

The wolf stopped struggling on a physical level and whined, but the beast that had been caged so long did not want to be caged again and tried to resist Harry's dominating presence. Harry knew he could not let it go, but he did not want the distressed part of his friend to be hurt either. Following instinct rather than knowing what he was doing Harry sent calming feelings and a sense of pack and reassurance to Remus, for once finding that his cat was not objecting to the wolf instincts. Remus' wolf had never known pack and power and freedom, or security and the joy of the moon. This wolf had only known fear and pain and Harry showed him what could be.

He could have commanded, he could have forced this wolf into submission, but he knew that then he would never be able to let him free again. He wanted Remus to know the joys of his disease as well as the pains and the only way was to bring the wolf back from the brink of insanity.

How long it took he had no idea, but eventually Harry felt Remus begin to calm. The wolf was wild and angry, but as he calmed it, the man began to come back to the beast and he could feel his friend in the animal. Both Remus and his wolf were in a confused sort of daze by the time Harry used just a little of his dominance to push Remus into a shift back.

He came back to the awareness of the real world to find Remus almost back in human form and as his friend looked up at him he could see confusion, wonder and a touch of fear in Remus' eyes.

"Harry?" the werewolf managed to put every emotion into that one word before he closed his eyes and passed out.

Harry climbed off, shifting back to human form as he did so, and he could not stop the tears that fell as he reeled in shock. The agony of Remus' wolf was so clear in his mind that it cut straight through him, and he retreated into the corner of the room, tucking his legs up in front of him, almost as if trying to ward it off. It was too terrible; too awful to think about. What his world had done to Remus was an abomination.

"How could they do it?" he whispered to himself.

There was blood all over him, he could smell it, but he felt no pain. Either the shifting had healed everything or shock had taken away any reaction to it.

"Harry," it was Draco's gentle voice that made him look up. "Love, what happened?"

For a moment Harry just looked at his lover, the thoughts going round his head too horrible to speak out loud.

"It was in such pain," he said eventually in a tiny little voice, unable to hide any of the revulsion he felt at the idea. "I had to free it. How could they do that? It was ... it was ... How could they do that?"

Draco moved then and gathered Harry into his arms, seemingly unaware of what the blood was doing to his pristine white shirt. Harry did not resist and he buried his head into his lover's shoulder and cried. He let the tears fall for Remus, for all the pain and suffering his friend had been through because a wizard somewhere had decided that it was best to cage the beast inside the werewolf. Everything they were taught was lies. There were not different types of werewolf as he had had to conclude on meeting people like Jason; it was all a fabrication by a world that was afraid of people like Remus. No wonder there were no other Lycanthropes in the Wizarding world; they had probably been wiped out.

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Scene 2

Harry calmed down eventually, but the whole experience had left him so dazed he was no use to anyone. The blood loss probably hadn't helped. About all he figured out was that Anita had called Richard as the Ulfric of the local pack and Lieutenant Storr had had to leave on police business. Harry had never met Richard, but he had heard so many speak about the man that he knew enough of why Anita would bring him in on this. The Ulfric had not arrived by the time Harry had been whisked off to his bedroom when Nathaniel and Draco had insisted on putting him to bed. Anita and Nathaniel, under Draco's direction, had already done the same with Remus by the time they made it to Harry and he really had not had the strength to argue.

All the wounds he had suffered at the claws of the enraged werewolf had gone thanks to some combination of magic he did not want to think about, but the bite, although not bleeding, had still been raw, so Nathaniel had dressed it for him rather than Draco risking a healing spell on him in his delicate state. Personally he had not thought he was that delicate, but that hadn't stopped him falling asleep almost instantly.

It was a pull on his magic that eventually woke him and he realised that the connection to Remus was still there. It was faint, but it was a shift in it that had dragged him back to the land of the living. Whatever it was seemed to be gone after a moment so he had no time to analyse it and he let it fade to the back of his mind.

Sitting up he noticed it was dark and that his shoulder didn't hurt any more. Peering under the bandage he couldn't see anything so he took it off. Most of the wound was complete gone, but he had two lovely round scars where two of Remus' teeth had punctured the skin very deeply. He probably had matching ones on the back, but he was not really interested.

He wanted to see Remus, but he could still detect the faint odour of blood on himself, even after the wash Draco and Nathaniel had given him. First order of business was to be clean; things always looked slightly better when there was not encrusted blood under your finger nails. Anita had told him that and he had to agree.

Climbing out of bed he padded towards the bathroom and turned the shower on, moving back to the sink as the water warmed up. He studied himself in the mirror for a few moments letting his eyes run over his own naked body. The spell was still easily visible in silvery lines across his skin, but it looked months, possibly years old rather than the days it had been. Other than that and the other scars he had gained over his stay in St Louis, he looked exactly the same as he had when he stepped out of the taxi. Mid-height, wiry build, still growing thankfully; messy black hair; a face that was the picture of his father's at the same age; and

eyes the colour of a forest on a summer's day. Nothing he could see indicated at all what lurked underneath.

Picking up his toothbrush he shook the philosophical contemplations out of his head and brushed his teeth. If he wanted a deep and meaningful discussion he'd track down Jean-Claude later.

When he finally stepped into the shower he walked under the spray and just stood there letting the water rain down on him in massaging waves. The Wizarding world was very fond of baths, but there was nothing like a good shower sometimes. He was enjoying the sensation so much that he quite lost himself in it and it was only a hand sliding around his waist that brought him back.

"Feeling better I hope," Draco all but purred in his ear and he moved back against the body which pressed against him.

They had been together for such a short time that every touch was still new and exciting and Harry let himself focus only on the now. There was a heat between them that had nothing to do with the warmth of the water. It felt wonderful, but then he felt his beast stir. Doubt entered his mind and he realised this probably wasn't a good idea. His self control was good, but not that good and he could not help the moan as Draco ran one of his hands a little lower.

"What with... oh that's good ... Remus and every... ah," his lover's other hand had been missing for a few moment and when it returned it was covered in suds that Draco began spreading over Harry's abdomen, "thing, my control is... oh god... wrecked."

It took a lot of effort to speak when someone was moving slippery hands over your nether regions, and Harry didn't think he deserved the laugh he received from Draco. He was a teenage boy and he was trying to do the right thing, but his hormones were speaking just as loudly as his brain, it wasn't his fault.

"Then I'll just have to make sure I do all the work," his lover whispered in his ear.

One hand moved up to lather his chest and tweak his already erect nipples and the other slipped between his legs so that skilful fingers could play with his balls. Harry's mind almost deserted him completely.

"But what... mmmmmn... if," the sensations were so good he really didn't want to argue, "I go... don't stop... furry?"

"Then we find out what wet cat fur smells like," Draco said and for the first time Harry realised that his lover really wasn't bothered at all. "I want to see you come, Harry, and I don't care if you're furry or human."

With a moan, Harry leant his head back onto Draco's shoulder and gave up fighting against the inevitable. His body wanted this and he was through trying to convince himself he didn't. Draco's body was warm against his back, and his lover's clever hands seemed to be everywhere at the same time as they washed and teased him with equal measure. The water pounding down on them did nothing but heighten the sensations and as his body became more and more aroused Harry could feel his beast moving under his skin.

Sex fed the hunger of the beast, but not quite as well as meat and as Draco brought him towards climax Harry could not help the images of the hunt that occasionally invaded his thoughts. Rather than detracting from what he was

feeling they heightened the experience and as his lover coaxed him higher and higher he knew he was not going to be able to control this one.

"Let go, Harry," Draco whispered in his ear. "Let the passion out."

One of Draco's hands was working his balls and the other his shaft and he was so close that all Harry could manage in reply was a growl, somewhere between human and cat. He was almost there and it felt wonderful.

"I love you," the sound of those words in Draco's sincere, sexy voice, were all Harry needed.

With a cry he came, shuddering into his lover's hand, and he shifted. At his release his beast broke free and fur erupted all over his body, but he felt surprisingly little pain. What he did feel added to the experience rather than taking away from it and he did not try and analyse that. The spasms throughout his entire body took a long time to die away and he came back down very slowly. When he finally had enough brain power to take stock of the situation he realised that Draco was still holding him close and they still fitted together almost perfectly, which was odd.

That caused him to look down at himself and was quite surprised but what he saw. Yes he was covered in fur and when he stretched out one hand and flexed it, claws erupted from the tips of his fingers, but mostly he was not that much different. A bit bigger in some areas, but nothing like the huge creature he had become when he had flattened Micah at the full moon.

"You make a very cute pussy cat," Draco said, running hands through Harry's rapidly soaking fur.

Harry wasn't really sure what to say to that. He had rather expected to be a full cat or possibly the huge beast that had so effectively swatted the Nimir-Raj of the pard and Remus without even trying. That he was mostly his normal self with extras was quite a surprise.

"I think I need to see myself," he decided quickly, the afterglow forgotten in his shock.

"As long as you don't stop me looking as well," Draco said playfully, "I have no problem with that idea."

Backing off a little, his lover gave Harry room to turn off the water and then walk out of the shower. The glass of the mirror had an anti-fogging charm so Harry had no problem seeing himself in it.

His green eyes were the more golden kitty green he had seen on other wereleopards and now they looked out of a furry, slightly feline face, complete with whiskers. He had cat ears, but the shape of his head was still human and it was almost as if he still had normal hair. The rest of him was bulkier, but mostly human covered with fine black fur. He could definitely see why Draco had called him a pussy cat.

Looking over to Draco he saw his lover smile at him and there was desire in Draco's eyes. Letting his eyes travel lower, he could see that desire was not only encapsulated in Draco's grey irises. Harry might have reached orgasm, but his Slytherin lover was definitely a little behind and still standing to attention. He felt his own body respond to the sight and had to wonder at lycanthrope stamina.

Nathaniel had mentioned something about going all night, but Harry hadn't really believed him.

The only obstacle was that he was furry, and shifting back now, even for him, was likely to dampen his sex drive to only just above zero. He really didn't want to leave Draco stranded, but he didn't dare go near his lover's more delicate areas when he had claws and teeth that could easily do damage.

"You're beautiful," Draco's voice pulled him back from his thoughts and the sight of his lover striding across the bathroom towards him was almost enough to banish sensible thought.

If Harry was ever beautiful then Draco had to be godlike, Harry knew it. Draco had always moved with a grace beyond his years, showing his breeding in every breath, where Harry had fumbled his way through adolescence with the rest of the boys his age. It seemed Draco had barely become wet as his platinum hair fell around his face in soft tresses. The Slytherin's chest glistened in the light and, as Harry's sharp cat eyes watched several droplets run over pale sculptured flesh, it was all he could do not to lick his kitty lips.

Draco picked up a towel from the rail to Harry's left and after brushing it lightly over his own chest, seemingly fully aware of the scrutiny Harry was giving him, the Slytherin pushed it against Harry's damp fur and began to dab lightly. Fur was designed to resist water and it was already drying, but Harry held himself very still while Draco saw to the rest. With his beast whispering in one ear and his libido in the other he felt it best to keep his claws a long way from his lover.

"Draco," he said as the towel brushed his already sensitised cock for the umpteenth time, "I have claws, I should shift back."

He didn't want this to end, but he didn't know how much longer he could control himself.

"And lose all that lovely fur," Draco said with a seductive smile, "that would be such a shame. We'll just have to find you something to occupy those claws. You need to learn, Harry, and this is a perfect opportunity."

There was no arguing with Draco when there was that look of determination in his eyes, and Harry was only a whisker away from forgetting sense anyway.

"Turn around, kitty cat," Draco said, dropping the towel on the floor, "turn around and grab the rail."

It was do as he was told or have to exert his own control, and right about then, following instructions worked better for him. His beast was alpha, dominant, but there was danger in Draco; there always had been and Harry had seen his lover fight and kill some of the strongest wizards. They were equals, at least as far as Harry's psyche was concerned, and he could make his beast submit to that. He gripped the rail, curling his fingers round it tightly and waited.

When Draco moved up behind him he could not stop the low rumbling in his throat as he perceived a possible threat, but it rose in pitch as his lover pushed up against him and rubbed up and down. The hardness of Draco's erection pushed against him and any thought of danger turned to sex. When a hand slipped between his thighs he shifted his legs apart without even having to be asked.

Draco was moving against his fur and making the most delightful noises and Harry had to make himself keep hold of the rail. He wanted to see his lover, help him find his peak, but he knew he could not let go for fear of damaging what he loved. Fingers danced lightly over his entrance and he mewed, the smell of arousal in that air pushing at his control.

"Merlin, I want you," Draco sounded as if he was almost beyond thinking as well.

"Then take me," Harry all but growled back.

For just a moment the movements stopped.

"Do you mean that?" his words seemed to have brought Draco back to his senses, but there was still heat in the Slytherin's voice.

They had done many things, but so far neither of them had had penetrative sex with the other. They had used Nathaniel as a substitute as each of them found their way through this, and they had worked each other with fingers, but they had never taken the next step. Harry could understand Draco's hesitance, but he was not in the mood for it.

"Yes," he said and turning to his lover without taking his hands from the rail he flashed his teeth.

It was part challenge, part come on and Draco took it.

"Hands and knees," his lover said without ceremony, and Harry did as he was told.

He heard rather than saw Draco reach for something on the side and then his lover was rubbing their bodies together again. There was trembling in Draco's muscles as the Slytherin pushed against him, and Harry could feel every tiny shudder.

"If it's too much, tell me to stop," Draco told him even as eager fingers, now slick with something, began to play at his entrance.

Harry just growled in response, claws ripping out of his fingers and scratching at the tiles of the floor. His beast was free and he did not need gentle handling, he needed power and passion. When he pushed back against the massaging fingers Draco took the hint and he mewed as his lover breached his entrance. Spreading his legs he lowered his head and lifted his arse further into the air, accepting the intrusive fingers and giving in to the penetration as Draco worked him loose.

He was fully hard again and aching already and he could smell Draco's arousal. His beast was rippling above and below his skin, demanding to be fed and he was running out of patience as Draco tried to make sure he was ready.

"Now," he growled, letting his need into his voice, "take me now."

However hesitant Draco may have been when they began, Harry's impatience must have been rubbing off, because the Slytherin removed his hand immediately. What pushed against him next was a lot bigger than a finger and it burned as Draco eased into Harry. The pain excited the beast and he pushed back wanting everything Draco had to offer. The feeling of being taken and dominated conflicted with the alpha need in him and adrenaline flooded his system, but the arousal and pain fought with the need to be in control and he all but purred.

"God, Harry," Draco sounded breathless and only just hanging on.

Harry was beyond words and he opened himself to the sensations running through his body. The mewling that came out of his mouth as Draco slowly began to move was completely involuntary and he was quite incapable of stopping it. It did not help that the gasps and small moans coming from Draco were adding to the fog of arousal in Harry's brain. Time vanished in the confusion of sensation as he held his beast in balance with the human part of him and allowed Draco to make love to him.

Although afraid of hurting Draco with an accidental claw, he was not so worried about himself and he braced his weight on one arm and reached for his aching cock with the other. As he touched himself Draco sped up and he could feel the sexual power building up around them. They were both close and Draco's breathing was becoming erratic. Harry began to stroke himself hard and fast as Draco pounded into him.

Draco was becoming more and more vocal and the Slytherin was losing some of his poise and perfect timing. So lost in his own body was Harry that it almost came as a surprise when Draco moaned very loudly and shuddered against him, buried deep within his body. Something of his vampire finally took notice, and although not cursed with the *ardeur*, Philip had been of Belle Morte's line and Draco's release woke up the part of Harry which was Master vampire. The heightened sensation of the vampire threw him over the edge as he changed yet again. As he came he felt his perception of the world change completely and the now familiar ache in his gums told him his fangs would now be longer and whiter than those of a cat.

He braced himself as Draco slumped against him and tried to reassert his equilibrium. That had been quite literally mind blowing and for a little while there he could only just about tell up and down and anything more complicated was a lost cause. With his vampire out he could feel the need to feed and he realised he needed to change back to normal as soon as possible. In his current position, however, he was pretty sure he would end up face first in the tiles if he tried so he moved his hips slightly in an attempt to move Draco.

"Mmmnn," was the only response; Draco seemed to still be enjoying the post coital haze.

"Draco," Harry insisted, and moved again, "I need to shift back."

"But I like you soft and furry," Draco complained, but he was very grateful when his lover did pull back.

"Well I'm hungry," Harry replied as he pushed himself onto his knees, "so staying like this is a bad idea."

At that, Draco sobered and nodded. If there was one thing the Slytherin took very seriously it was Harry's needs and Draco did not even try and argue.

"I'll put the shower back on," Draco said, pulling himself up on the towel rail, "we need to clean up. Will you be okay?"

Harry smiled, which was quite difficult with cat features and very large fangs.

"As long as I shift," he replied.

Vampire hunger combined with lycanthrope physique was not a great idea, but he was not afraid. Fear was bad for his control; he had learned that much and he definitely did not want another breakdown. Concentrating hard he found the power inside of him and he quite firmly caged it. There was a little pain, but nothing that remotely bothered him, and he grinned triumphantly when he looked down at perfectly human hands and body. He cast a quick cleaning charm on the floor with his hand and then pulled himself to his feet. It was time for another shower.

End of Chapter 23

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Chapter 24 Lycanthrope

Scene 1

Harry checked on Remus on the way from the bedroom to the living room where he knew the rest of their house guests were. Draco had put spells on Remus' room so the werewolf would not be able to get out without being let out, but after their tryst in the shower he had also explained that he hadn't let anyone else into the room either. Draco did not like Richard one bit, that much was obvious, but then the Slytherin didn't like a lot of people so Harry chose to reserve judgement.

The moment he walked into the front room a tall man he had never seen before met his eyes in what could have been taken as a challenge. Something flared between them and Harry went weak at the knees. If Draco had not been there he would have fallen over.

"Harry, what happened?" his lover asked urgently.

"Haven't a clue," Harry replied quietly as he dragged back his scattered thoughts.

"He tried to summon me," the unidentified man had to be Richard and he sounded annoyed. "I am Ulfric, no one summons me."

"Didn't do it on purpose," Harry promised as Nathaniel scooted from the sofa to take him by the arm Draco did not have. "Haven't got the hang of this yet."

Master vampires had decades over which to learn their power, Harry was faced with everything in days and it was all a little confusing, especially when he was hungry. Draco and Nathaniel helped him over to the sofa and he sat down gratefully, although his legs no longer felt as if they were going to give out.

"Get that rod out of your ass, Richard," Anita said pointedly, and when Harry finally looked up she was looking at the werewolf in a somewhat unimpressed manner. "I explained about Harry so don't get on his case because you're pissed that Draco won't let you in to see the werewolf."

Richard looked even less impressed with that, but the big man did not comment. Harry studiously avoided the Ulfric's eyes in hope that nothing untoward would happen.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" Anita asked in an entirely different tone.

"I was feeling fine, a little hungry, but it can wait," he replied and shook his head in an attempt to rid it of the last fuzz.

"Since you tried to summon Richard I assume your animal to call is the wolf," Anita said moving closer. "What happened earlier? It's not everyday a polite werewolf from England shifts in the middle of the living room and goes crazy."

Harry couldn't blame her for the sarcasm since it had been rather an exciting visit.

"I knew Remus wasn't like any of the werewolves I've met here," Harry decided he had to start from the beginning, "but I thought he must be a different type or something."

"How do you mean different?" Richard sounded suddenly very interested.

"Remus does not have a pack, he could not shift at will, and he locked himself away every full moon or he'd kill anything human," Harry said bluntly. "He had no control over his beast at all."

"Had, being the operative word I assume?" Richard appeared taken aback by the facts and for the first time the man looked as if he was listening properly.

Harry nodded.

"I found out the truth when I touched him," he did his best to explain while pushing away the emotion that came with the memory; "his wolf was in agony. There was so much magic binding it that it's no wonder our werewolves go crazy at the full moon. It must tear them apart to break through it when they can't do anything else."

The horror made him shudder even as he tried to distance himself some more.

"I just reacted," he admitted after a moment, looking at Anita guiltily. "I should have waited and thought about it logically, but his beast was in so much pain. I shattered the bindings, let his wolf free."

It had really been an incredibly stupid thing to do, but Harry could not regret that it was done. The torture Remus had been put through since a child was just so wrong.

"And Remus' wolf was itching for a fight," Draco concluded and when Harry looked at him his lover seemed to understand.

"It was insane with rage," he replied honestly. "It's been in agony for thirty years; I'd be insane with rage too."

Why he was defending what could have been the death of them all he had no idea, but it seemed the right thing to do.

"So you decided to put yourself between us and it," Anita sounded as exasperated as Draco looked; they seemed to have found common ground when it came to their opinion of his stupidity.

"I couldn't let you kill him," Harry wasn't about to deny he had been an idiot, but he was going to justify his actions. "It was my fault so I had to fix it. I'm a cat, he's a canine so the only hope I had was Philip's power to call wolves. I didn't know if I could do it but I had to try, and I found it, and I used it to calm him down."

"Are you saying without you Lupin becomes a raving psychopath?" Richard did not appear happy about the situation at all.

"No," Harry replied and made the mistake of looking up at Richard again.

Their power clashed, but this time he was ready for it and the backlash was simply uncomfortable.

"Sorry," he said, but even to himself he didn't sound particularly apologetic. "What I'm saying is that I used it to calm him down. I gave him a chance to be sane and he took it. The thing is I threw the on switch, but I don't seem to have turned it off properly."

"Jean-Claude will be here in half an hour, I'm sure he'll be able to help you," Anita offered and her tone sounded awkward somehow.

Harry did not bother to wonder why; he was too busy with his own problem.

"Who bound his wolf?" Richard sounded very unhappy, but the man had moved closer and Harry did not want to risk looking up at the Ulfric again to see how angry Richard was.

"Well it had to be a wizard, and I can tell you that no one would do that to themselves," he replied while trying to reason out the situation.

"I'm willing to bet it was the people Remus' parent took him to when he was attacked," Draco said, and he was clearly as angry with the situation as everyone else seemed to be. "I'm also willing to bet they do it to every new werewolf that comes to them."

Richard growled.

"That's barbaric," was Nathaniel's succinct opinion.

Coming from Nathaniel, that was something indeed.

"Tell me about it," Harry said vehemently and found that he was in fact even more angry about it than he had thought, "and when I get home you can be damn sure I'm going to find out what the hell's going on and do something about it. If I find out who's responsible I will have them hanging from the nearest tree by their bollocks."

"The sentiment is noble," Richard sounded somewhere between pleased and reticent, "but exposing yourself to your government given your condition is likely to work against you."

"They won't know," Draco said with a certainty Harry could not argue with.

If he'd had a chance he would have worried about Richard's statement, but as it was he looked up at his lover and believed the Slytherin without question.

"It's the law," Richard said and Harry could hear the bitterness in the man's voice, "our bureaucrats have a full disclosure agreement with your bureaucrats."

The smile Draco graced the room with was rather scary.

"The advantage of having a family that has been dealing in illegal activities for generations is a network of paid lackeys who can surmount most problems set to them," the Slytherin said as if he was teaching a class. "The moment I realised what was going on I contacted certain people and Harry's condition will remain very secret. The Harry Potter involved in a ritualistic murder case in St Louis will never be connected to the real Harry."

Anita looked as if she didn't quite believe Draco, but Harry did. When Slytherins set about doing something, they always followed through, and the Malfoy family had very long arms when it came to making deals.

"Not even if he makes himself a nuisance?" Anita asked sceptically.

"That's just his role in life," Draco said with a much friendlier smile.

Harry didn't even bother to argue.

"I still don't see how one kid, no offence," Richard was obviously genuinely puzzled, "can hope to take on what has to be a conspiracy of some kind."

"If I wasn't me, I'd agree," Harry replied, trying to remember not to look up, "especially with the Ministry, but I think I just figured out why being famous can be a good thing."

"Fudge will still try and stop you at every turn," Draco pointed out.

The Malfoy family influence was still good in shadier circles, but with Lucius' betrayal of the light their political clout had been clipped. Harry, however, had a plan forming in his mind even as they spoke.

"Not if I tell him that if he helps we'll be seen as a united front, and if he doesn't I might just take an interest in politics," it was his turn to give rather an evil smile.

Draco looked at him for a minute and then laughed.

"If he calls your bluff you'll hate being Minister," was the Slytherin's succinct opinion.

"Probably," Harry agreed, still liking his embryonic plan, "but I could just leave you and Hermione to run the country and enjoy the perks."

"I suppose it would cut out the middle man," Draco replied with a grin.

When Harry looked up at Anita again it was clear she was not sure what to make of the conversation at all. Had he been anyone else, Harry had to admit that it would have been a ridiculous plan.

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Scene 2

They had talked for some time about various details, and it had become clear that the American contingent were never going to believe quite how incompetent the UK Ministry was. A phone call had informed them that Jean-Claude had been unavoidably delayed, but by then Harry had found he could just about look at Richard without anything happening, so he was happier than he had been. He still needed Jean-Claude's advice, but it could wait. Anita's input on the subject had

been not particularly helpful since she seemed to do everything by instinct and her instinct was working fine, where Harry's was not.

There had been some discussion about Harry feeding and Jean-Claude sending someone round, but Nathaniel had had a quiet word with Anita and then volunteered his services to make things easier. Having had practice at the whole thing now, Harry was better at controlling it and Nathaniel seemed to have enjoyed the whole experience, but had not ended up unconscious like Harry's first two meals.

It had been about three quarters of an hour after Harry had been woken by Remus stirring that he felt it again, and this time it stayed.

"I'll go in first," Harry said resolutely when they all arrived outside Remus' door.

"Why you?" Richard really could be a pain in the arse and Harry had had enough.

"Because he's mine," he hissed and gave the werewolf a good look at vampire fangs.

He didn't really think of Remus as his, at least he didn't think he did, but he was beginning to understand that there were certain ways things worked in St Louis and the pack was an alien place.

"And I'll take great pleasure in hexing you into next week if you make trouble," Draco added his voice to the persuasion. "Remus is the closest thing Harry has left to family and if you mess that up you answer to me."

Surprisingly when Harry looked at the Ulfic to see if there was going to be a row, Richard actually appeared to understand. Something of what Draco had said obviously touched the right nerve and the werewolf did not argue. Turning his mind back to the situation behind the door, Harry took hold of the handle and opened the barrier just a crack to make sure everything was okay inside.

What he saw was Remus sitting up in bed looking at the far wall with a rather astounded expression on his face. Slipping through the gap, Harry closed the door again, but Remus did not seem to notice him until he was almost to the bed. Once he was into the room he could see what Remus was looking at and he realised the werewolf was staring at his own reflection. Only when Remus finally turned towards him properly did Harry understand why.

"I've lost ten years," the werewolf all but whispered, and it was true.

Remus' hair had always been peppered with grey, but it seemed to have actually changed colour, back to its natural brown, and the wear lines Harry had been used to seeing on his friend were greatly reduced or gone completely.

"I don't ache," Remus continued in what sounded distinctly like awe. "Harry, what did you do to me?"

"Took away what they did to you as a child," Harry said evenly, refusing to give in to any of the confusing emotions that were moving through him. "Your wolf was hobbled. I let him out."

Remus looked horrified.

"But it kills," the werewolf whispered.

"No," Harry said urgently and took another step towards the bed, "no he doesn't. They taught you to be afraid of part of yourself, and they bound him with magic so he was always in pain, but it can be wonderful, Remus. The moon doesn't chain us, it sets us free."

It was obvious that Remus did not remember his arrival particularly clearly, and the man looked confused.

"I changed without the moon," the werewolf said, completely at a loss to explain it.

"We can shift when we want," Harry told his friend, trying to express the joy he found in his animal form. "They made it so only the moon could free your wolf, but it doesn't have to be like that."

Now Remus frowned and he must have remembered something about the attack because he looked aghast.

"Did I," Remus asked in a terrified tone, "did I bite you?"

"Yes," Harry replied honestly, "but it doesn't matter. Don't you remember what I looked like when you bit me? I was a lycanthrope already."

"Werewolf?" Remus seemed very confused.

Harry decided that half of what he was saying was not getting through to his friend and a demonstration was in order. Pulling his t-shirt over his head he then pushed his jeans down and forced his body into shift before he was even completely naked. It hurt, it always hurt, but there was an incredible feeling of power that came with the change in bone and muscle that Harry would never be able to explain to anyone who had not been through it. When he was the glossy black panther he jumped onto the bed and nuzzled at the completely stunned werewolf's neck.

Almost as if it was more an automatic reaction more than anything else, Remus rubbed Harry's head while looking into his eyes with a bemused expression. The low rumbling started in his throat without his conscious consent and he flopped down into a sprawl.

"Harry?" Remus did not quite seem to believe his eyes, and Harry knew that his friend would have felt the lycanthrope power, that had been denied him so long, in the room.

In reply he bumped his head against the werewolf's chest. He knew Remus was afraid of his wolf and that was something he wanted to end as soon as possible. They were not safe in animal form and they could not be complacent, but being afraid was not a good place to be. He knew that in all likelihood if Remus shifted now he would sleep again for a least a couple of hours, which would piss off Richard, but Harry knew his friend had never shifted consciously before and would be afraid until he did. Pushing out a little of his buried vampire power he did not exactly push Remus into shifting, but rather, he invited the wolf out to play.

For a moment Remus seemed as if he might control himself and refuse, but when Harry stood up, the werewolf's eyes changed to deep amber and Remus came to all fours. Remus was still naked under the sheets from his last transformation and

a moan of surprised pleasure left the werewolf's mouth as he began to shift. After so many agonising transformations where the wolf had had to fight past the magic holding it a natural shift seemed to delight Remus.

Being a wolf Remus did not bring out exactly the same instincts in Harry as the pard did, but he still rumbled a greeting and then rubbed himself along the complete length of the surprised looking werewolf. There was human intelligence in Remus' wolf eyes and a wonder at the first true joining of wolf and man. Harry could not help his growl of approval when Remus stuck his head back and howled.

The door opened shortly after that and Harry bounded off the bed to greet first Draco, then Anita and finally Nathaniel in a very friendly manner, and bob his head at Richard since he did not want trouble with the Ulfric, but he was not quite sure how he felt about the werewolf yet. He sat down next to Draco and waited for Remus to make a move.

The wolf stood slowly and jumped off the bed, never taking his eyes from Richard. It was obvious that Remus was aware of what Richard was, but there was no suggestion of submission in the werewolf's stance as yet. Even though Harry had seen Remus in wolf form before it had never been like this. With the magical bonds released there was something very powerful about the wolf his friend had become and it was starkly obvious in the way he moved that Remus was an alpha. Not an alpha experienced in his power like Richard since Remus had never been free before, but the underlying wolf showed none-the-less.

Whether Remus would have been an alpha had he not had to fight his condition all these years was something that occurred to the human part of Harry's mind, but the animal part was far more interested in what was going on in front of him. Remus trotted up to Richard with an easy stride and sniffed at the Ulfric curiously. For his part Richard stood there and allowed himself to be examined, radiating power and authority like the wolf king he was.

Eventually Remus looked up and wagged his tail, turning his head slightly in the manner of submission; it appeared wolf and man parts of the werewolf had both decided to recognise Richard's authority. It was not a move of submissive wolf to alpha, but Remus seemed to understand instinctively what was required of him. Richard reached out at that and rubbed the offered neck in acceptance of the move.

Remus sat down and let himself be scratched behind the ear, tail still wagging. It was that which distracted Harry as his sharp eyes watched the movement. He couldn't help it really, he was a cat, and cat's liked moving objects no matter how big there were. For about five seconds he managed to hold himself back and then he pounced. Remus yelped in surprise and whipped round as his tail was swatted by a very large black paw.

Harry could hear Nathaniel laughing as Remus stared at him with a vaguely hurt expression in his wolf eyes. Harry tried his best innocent look, but he wasn't sure it would work in cat form and he butted his head lightly into Remus' chin to show he was sorry, before rubbing along his friend again. At that Remus wagged his tail again, which was what had caused the whole problem to begin with. The werewolf need to lighten up, Harry was convinced of it, and he really couldn't stop himself. With a bat at the moving tail he turned his head and twitched his tail in a manner to say catch me if you can before shooting out the door. He heard Remus moving after him in only moments and he dashed for one of the other bedroom.

"Yes, okay," he heard Anita say as the chase began in earnest, and when he shot through one of the en suite bathrooms back into the hall Nathaniel was waiting for him in mid change.

He paused for a moment until he heard Remus closing in and then he haired off towards the stairs.

"Claw marks in the furniture will be taken out of your fur," Draco's parting warning barely made it to his ears.

He was having far too much fun to take much notice.

End of Chapter 24

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Chapter 25 Relationships

Harry had gone out of his way to show Remus that being a werewolf could be fun, and he, Nathaniel and Remus had played like two kittens and a puppy for literally hours. They had only broken one priceless antique and a quick spell had fixed that before Draco noticed. The fact that Harry could do magic wandlessly in his cat form had surprised the hell out of Remus, if the sitting down with a stunned expression was anything to go by. A stunned expression on a wolf was quite amusing. After that they had headed into the enchanted back garden that was a lot bigger than should have been physically possible, and they had hunted.

When they had finally shifted back, Remus had gone back to bed at Harry's insistence, once Harry promised to explain everything in the morning, and had fallen straight asleep. Richard had had to leave by that point and Anita left soon after she had Nathaniel back in human form.

It was now 'the morning' and Harry really wasn't quite sure where to start. They had made it through breakfast in a terribly British, civilised way and were now in the lounge with instructions from Draco not to come out until they'd talked everything through. Draco had privately offered to stay with Harry, but he had declined, wanting to sort out the whole preternatural issue rather before having to deal with the 'I'm gay and sleeping with Draco' issue as well. It wasn't that he thought Remus would disapprove; it was just that he felt it better to deal with one thing at a time.

"So," Remus finally broke the silence that had descended, "care to explain what's going on, Harry?"

That was it, the last nail in his coffin, so Harry put down the mug of tea he had been nursing and tried to figure out how to begin.

"When I said I was kidnapped I left out a few details," he said, deciding that being upfront was probably the best policy.

"You lied to us," Remus was also in a blunt mood, it appeared.

"No," Harry replied, and he was rather upset by the accusation, "I just didn't mention some things. I know you lot, you'd all have been on the first portkey out here and that would have made things worse. You mean well, but a hoard of British wizards and witches barging into a delicate preternatural situation wasn't going to help anyone. I didn't want you to worry."

Remus did have the grace to look a little cowed by that response.

"I'm sorry," he apologised and Harry knew his friend meant it, "we do tend to forget you're not a child anymore."

There were many things that jumped into his mind in reply to that, but Harry refused to say any of them. His friends only ever tried to help him, that sometimes their attentions were unwelcome was not their fault. Dredging up such things would not help.

"That's okay," he said instead, giving his friend a small smile, "I do have a knack for finding the worst trouble."

Unfortunately that did not draw an answering smile from Remus.

"Like now," the werewolf said in a perfectly serious tone.

"Like now," Harry had to agree.

Taking a moment to gather his thoughts, he took a calming breath and tried to ignore the fact that he had tuned into Remus' steady heartbeat. It was a comforting sound, but if he let it he could easily be distracted by it.

"The Muggle world over here is a lot less Muggle than at home," Harry decided that he had to explain that, or the rest would probably not make sense. "Some of the Muggles over here have magic, but it's not broad like our magic, it's more like they have a specific talent. You met Anita last night, she's a Necromancer; she raises zombies for a living. That's her magical gift. She can't use a wand or transfigure things, or use charms, but she can raise the dead, and there are other people who can do other things."

He looked at Remus and tried to gauge if his friend was following what he was trying to say.

"So they aren't witches or wizards," Remus said as if the werewolf realised Harry needed some reassurance, "but some of them have a dedicated power."

"Sort of," Harry replied with a nod. "They have what they call witches as well, people who can call on certain types of magic. They seem to have people who can channel power, but they need complicated rituals and symbols and you get a very different type of result."

Remus just nodded at that.

"When I was kidnapped I was taken by a group who wanted me for a ritual," he continued, his voice losing a bit of its strength as he recalled the memories he was speaking of. "I was the human sacrifice. They had a vampire drink my blood and a wereleopard bite me, then they killed them and covered me in their blood before they opened an artery in my leg and tried to drain me dry. We think they were trying to use my blood as a conduit for human, lycanthrope and vampire power, but they didn't know about wizards so they didn't know I wasn't a run of the mill sensitive. I didn't die and you've already seen that I'm a wereleopard, what you don't know is that I'm part vampire as well."

There was a shocked and saddened expression on Remus' face, but Harry was glad he did not see horror. If Remus had been horrified Harry wasn't sure he could have taken it.

"How is that possible?" Remus asked in an almost reasonable tone. "I never read anything that would suggest anything like this could happen."

"But we both know how accurate the books are," Harry said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice, "they've been lying to you all your life, Remus. They bound you and then made everyone afraid of you when there was no need, and I know for a fact that most vampires don't know we exist and the ones I've met are nothing like we studied in school. Our little world seems to like lies."

When he had finished, Harry just sat there looking at his friend. Remus did not look angry and Harry couldn't understand why. Didn't he understand that the Wizarding world had stolen half his life.

"Did you know that it's legal in the Muggle world to be a lycanthrope or a vampire now, even at home," Harry tried again. "The Ministry haven't bothered to tell us that. Muggles have it better than we do and we're the magical ones."

Still little more than a flicker from Remus.

"I gave up being angry a long time ago, Harry," his friend finally said. "If I hadn't I would have self destructed. I'm not happy about what they did to me, but I understand fear and if we lose control we let them win; we prove what they've been saying. Now we know the truth we can do something about it."

Remus' calm words cut straight through Harry's righteous anger and the werewolf smiled at him. How Remus could be so collected was beyond Harry, had it been him he would have wanted to kill someone, but Remus seemed to be at ease with that part of the situation.

"But back to you," his friend said before he had a chance to reply. "Are you okay, Harry?"

It was so like Remus to be worrying about him and not himself and the last of Harry's anger melted away.

"I feel better than I have since the final battle," he admitted, trying not to think about the werewolf situation at home, "and the people here have been very helpful. The vampires are ruled by the master of the city, Jean-Claude and he has been making sure my vampire side is under control. Anita, who isn't one of us, is the Nimir-Ra, the leader of the local wereleopard and has all but adopted me. She's also a Federal Marshal and is investigating the kidnapping with the police. So far I don't think I've done anything completely stupid, except for freeing your wolf without the proper precautions, and I'm adjusting with everyone's help."

Remus looked at him steadily as if trying to gauge the truth of what he was saying and then the werewolf smiled.

"You look better," his friend said, "there's been a weariness in your eyes since the battle and it's gone now."

Harry managed a small smile at that as well; there was an upside to all this chaos.

"How about you," he asked, uncomfortable with the attention being all on him, "how are you feeling?"

"Like I've never really been alive before," Remus replied with a distant expression in his eyes.

It was a moment before the werewolf snapped out of it with a small shake of his head, and then he looked Harry straight in the eyes.

"I don't quite know how to thank you," Harry felt a lump in his throat at the depth of gratitude he saw in his friend's face. "I can never repay you for what you have done for me."

Harry didn't know what to say; how could he respond to that?

"Anyone else would have done the same thing," he said eventually, lowering his eyes to the floor.

People thanking him for things that any sane person would have done always made him feel awkward and he never knew how to react. Accepting with grace was not something he understood how to do and it all rather embarrassed him.

"Harry," Remus' voice was so close by that Harry looked up sharply.

When the werewolf had crossed the room he had no idea, but Remus was stood in front of him.

"You gave everything you had to save our world," his friend said, "and yet you still find ways to keep giving. Thank you."

Then before Harry could think of anything remotely sensible to say he found himself being dragged to his feet and enveloped in a strong hug. At first he stiffened, but Remus refused to let go and eventually he relaxed into the embrace and accepted the love and thanks that went with it. He didn't think he deserved it, but it felt nice all the same. When Remus finally pulled back Harry found himself on the receiving end of a huge smile and he tried not to feel too embarrassed by the whole thing.

"Now," Remus said cheerfully, "tell me all about your new friends and how long you've been involved with Draco."

It took a moment for Harry's brain to catch up with what the werewolf said and he blinked in shock.

"You know?" he asked rather stupidly.

"Werewolf nose," Remus said, his smile becoming a grin, "and the fact that several of the older members of the Order have a pool on when the pair of you would finally recognise what you had."

Harry decided that silence was the better part of valour and chose not to ask.

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Scene 1 (1390)

Having had to abort Jean-Claude's visit the previous evening it was postponed until the following night and Anita found herself walking around the front room of the luxurious Malfoy townhouse yet again as night fell. She had not had much chance to talk to Remus Lupin yet, since Richard had arrived before her and had

been talking to the other werewolf before she came in. They appeared to be talking about the conditions werewolves had to live under in the UK Wizarding population and Anita could feel Richard's anger almost as if it was her own.

They had worked miracles on the lycanthrope situation in St Louis and she had a feeling they might be extending their influence overseas at some point. From what she'd picked up from overhearing some of their conversation, Lupin was a pleasant, well educated man, but she could feel the dangerous edge to him as if he was barely controlled.

New lycanthropes could be unpredictable and dangerous, and although Lupin was not new he was new to having control and Anita was a little worried about the air of danger she felt from him. Lupin himself seemed oblivious to it; either that or he was a good actor.

Draco was being the perfect host, but she could not help but hope that Jean-Claude would arrive soon. She had other appointments tonight which she had put back slightly for this meeting, and she did not want to stay too long. She was here because of Harry, and because, quite frankly, she was a control freak and needed to know what was going on for her peace of mind. Lupin was a wild card and Harry's new ability to call wolves was only one of the consequences of the werewolf's presence.

"Our apologies," Anita's breath caught in her throat as she turned to see Jean-Claude walk into the room, "yesterday's business attempted to rise again this evening, but it has been dealt with."

The vampire was resplendent in white and deep blue to match his eyes, and Anita walked over to him without thinking. She leaned forward and was rewarded with a kiss and a smile from Jean-Claude.

"Good evening, *ma petite*," he greeted warmly, "I am sorry I was unable to answer your request last night."

"We managed," Anita replied.

"What, don't I get a kiss too?" Jason chose that moment to walk in the door behind Jean-Claude and Anita felt something change in the room instantly.

Warm lycanthrope energy spilled into the room and Anita felt her beast shift in recognition. She smelt wood and dust and dank, dark forest and it brought forth in her thoughts of sex and heat and wolf. Jason's eyes had gone wide as he froze on the spot as if he was caught in a spotlight and Anita could feel her friend's beast answering whatever was in the room.

Jean-Claude was staring over her shoulder at something behind her and she turned to find out what was happening. What she found was Remus Lupin on his feet, staring at Jason with a hunger in his eyes that she had rarely seen on anyone before. That look had been deep within Jean-Claude's eyes when he marked her; it had been in Richard's eyes when he had chased her after she accidentally declared herself Freja; it had been in Micah's eyes when they first had sex; and she saw it in Nathaniel's eyes whenever he came to her.

Passion was burning in wolf coloured eyes and it was directed completely at Jason. It was as if there was no one in the room except the two werewolves, and Anita did not know whether to feel like an intruder or a protector. This was the

type of passion that could burn and leave nothing but a burnt husk in its path, or it could also warm and thrill a heart like nothing else in the universe.

Jason made a small whining noise in the back of his throat, part fear and part something from the other end of the spectrum. It made Anita want to help him and shield him, but there was something going on here she did not quite understand and she looked to Richard to see if he knew what was happening. If the Ulfric had been in wolf form she was sure his hackles would have been raised.

When Lupin took a step towards Jason she went to move and bar his way, but Jean-Claude's hand rested on her shoulder and held her back.

"Non, *ma petite*," he said quietly as Lupin walked straight past them both, as if he did not even know they were there, "it is not our place to interfere."

"What's happening?" the feeling of lycanthrope power had not dimmed at all, in fact it was becoming stronger.

Part of her wanted to go to help her friend, but an instinctive part held her in place as firmly as Jean-Claude's hand. Jason was still standing stock still as Lupin walked up to him so that they were almost nose to nose. Such a mixture of lust and fear answered what had to be Lupin's power, that Anita could not tell if Jason thought Lupin was going to eat him or jump him.

"I believe, *ma petite*, that you have felt something similar when you first encountered your Nimir-Raj," Jean-Claude whispered to her.

"It wasn't like this," Anita replied; the power in the room was breathtaking, "and they're both male."

"Compatibility does not always require the opposite sex, *ma petite*," even Jean-Claude's voice sounded tight, "it requires only a match. Our Jason has always sought someone whose love will consume him, and if he accepts, he may have found him."

Anita had to remember to breathe as the werewolves stood nose to nose. Lupin was much taller than Jason and the younger man seemed small somehow, as if he was about to be devoured.

"How can it be love?" Anita had very distinct ideas about love, and she did not believe in love at first sight; lust yes, love no.

"It isn't," Jean-Claude said very simply, "but I have seen this only twice in my lifetime, and both times that is what it became."

There was such fear in Jason's eyes, and yet such longing as if he knew what was happening at more than an instinctive level. His eyes had shifted to wolf gold as well and he was shaking as if he might lose control completely at any second. Lupin and Jason were rooted to the spot as they stared into each other's eyes and then Jason moved. It was such a small move and yet it caused such power to fly around the room that Anita thought her teeth would vibrate out of her head. Jason turned his head to the side, eyes closed and neck bared to Lupin.

The tableau held for just a second and then Lupin was on Jason like a predator on prey and for a moment Anita thought Lupin was about to rip Jason's throat out. Lupin's mouth attached to Jason's throat and the whine that answered the touch was half pleasure, half terror as they ungracefully fell to the floor. The impact

separated them and they ended up kneeling on all fours beside each other. Jason's face was a picture of bewildered wonder, and although Anita could not see Lupin's expression, from his body language she had no doubt his face would be the same.

Neither of the werewolves seemed quite sure what had just happened and finding herself finally able to take her eyes off the pair, Anita glanced around the room to see what everyone else's reactions were.

Richard's eyes were wide and shocked, but there was also an acceptance that Anita rarely saw in her Ulfiric. In this the beast had spoken and the human had listened. Harry was looking rather dazed, almost as dazed as the two werewolves involved and Anita wondered if the wizard had felt more than she did thanks to his connection to Lupin. Nathaniel was wide eyed and if Anita knew her leopard well, aroused, and Draco seemed shocked, but was recovering fast. The look in the blond wizard's eyes was far more sentient than the rest of the room.

"Remus meet Jason, Jason meet Remus," Draco said sarcastically.

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Scene 2

If it had just been hormones Harry thought he might have been able to think straight, because after all he was a teenager and teenagers had to deal with hormones on a daily basis, but this wasn't simply a matter of lust. He'd thought he had a handle on the calling wolves problem since he'd been able to shut it down to almost nothing over the day, but it had flared into a kind of feedback circuit the moment Jason had walked into the room.

Part of him had remembered Jason as food, part of him had looked on Remus as a pet and both had sat up and taken notice the moment Remus' lycanthrope power had surged into the room straight at Jason. It had been a bit like being hit with a stunning hex at low power as his vampire nature reacted, the lycanthrope power coiled under his skin and they hit each other head on.

"What was that?" Anita asked bluntly, putting into words what Harry suspected most of the room were thinking.

"Werewolf bonding ritual," Richard said shortly, and Harry could not help but notice that the Ulfiric's voice was low with power.

At least, he realised, he was not the only one in the room to be having a problem.

"You've seen this before?" Anita was clearly uncomfortable with not knowing what was going on and appeared to be trying to take it out on those around her.

"No," Richard replied with a shake of his head and Harry thought the werewolf was trying to gather his wits, "heard about it. I thought it was a myth."

"It is, mes amis," Jean-Claude said with his usual flare for the dramatic, "usually."

So far no one had made a move to help either Remus or Jason off the floor and Harry was in no condition to do so. It was only when Draco moved to offer his assistance that those in the dark discovered why those who understood what had just gone on had not moved. Remus actually growled, and it wasn't a playful human sound it was very much all dangerous werewolf. Almost immediately

Remus looked shocked and apologetic, but that didn't change what had happened and Draco did not move forward any further.

"Well if you're going to be like that you can stay there," was the Slytherin's offhand reaction and Harry was glad when his lover stepped away.

Remus' reaction had brought his own beast to attention as his boyfriend was threatened, which was about as alien a feeling as he had felt so far. Remus had never been the enemy, not even when the werewolf had been in a killing rage, not like this.

"I..." Remus seemed to be at a loss to respond; the werewolf appeared totally confused, and his eyes kept moving to Jason who looked equally dazed.

"Can I get off the roller coaster now?" Jason asked, although the young man made no move to shift away from Remus.

There was a clear and definite bite on Jason's neck where Remus' teeth had bruised the delicate flesh and in one spot broken through it. Harry watched, fascinated as the werewolf ran his fingers over the spot and looked at Remus with a kind of awe in his features. Lycanthrope power was still shifting in the room, Harry could feel it, but it was more of a settling than the explosion of strength he had felt earlier. The fact that Remus' and Jason's beasts were metaphysically rubbing against each other had to be clear to every person in the room sensitive to lycanthrope power.

"What happened?" Harry found his voice and tried to ignore the desire to reach out and harness the power he felt coming from the two werewolves.

It was intoxicating in its intensity, especially since it spoke to his lycanthrope side and his vampire.

"As ma petite and her Nimir-Raj are a match on a metaphysical level," Jean-Claude said with a wistful smile, "so it would seem are Jason and Monsieur Lupin. I believe the events of yesterday may have led Monsieur Lupin's reaction to have been a little stronger than it would otherwise have been."

"Remus," the still kneeling werewolf said in a reflection of his usual polite self, "please call me Remus."

Harry would have laughed if he hadn't been so bemused; it was typical of Remus to manage to find his manners even in the middle of all of this. As the werewolf dragged himself to his feet it was almost as if Harry could feel the power in the muscles that moved Remus, and when his friend turned and reached out to offer his hand to Jason and the younger werewolf took it, it was like being blasted by a furnace. The two werewolves were just staring at each other after Jason came to his feet in one graceful move and Harry had great difficulty not reaching out to the power he could feel.

Everyone's attention was on the werewolves, and Harry really didn't want to be the centre of attention again, but he needed some assistance.

"Jean-Claude," he forced between gritted teeth, "help."

Keeping his vampire from the surface was very difficult and Harry was very glad when Jean-Claude appeared in front of him. He wasn't sure if the master of the

city had moved very fast or if he'd just missed the whole thing. When it came to the metaphysical sometimes perception of time did funny things.

"Mon enfant," Jean-Claude said calmly making him look into midnight blue eyes, "concentrate on me."

"What's going on?" Anita sounded worried and Harry felt awful for causing yet more anxiety.

"He is attempting not to call the wolves," Jean-Claude said without breaking eye contact with Harry for a moment. "Bring your focus onto me, mon enfant, concentrate on my presence, not that of the wolves."

Jean-Claude burned so brightly as a source of vampire power that his presence almost swamped the power coming from the werewolves just by being there, but not quite and it took a little work for Harry to focus only on the vampire.

"Bon," Jean-Claude said when Harry managed it, and Harry had no doubt that the vampire could feel exactly what he was doing. "Now reduce your awareness back to yourself, mon enfant, let everything else fade."

That was easier said than done, but slowly Harry reigned in his preternatural senses and the pressure on his mind dimmed. It wasn't like shutting a door, he could not just turn off the preternatural world in his awareness, but it was more as if he found himself again. It was an incredible relief.

"Thank you," he said eventually, eternally grateful that Jean-Claude had been there to help.

He did not know what would have happened had he called Remus and Jason to him, he had just felt that it would be wrong.

"My pleasure, mon enfant," Jean-Claude replied with a smile.

"Would someone please start from the beginning and explain to me what is going on in my lounge and why it had such an effect on Harry?" Draco did not sound as if he was in the mood for an argument and Harry could not help feeling guilty for worrying his boyfriend.

"Um, I'd like to know as well," Remus' polite tones sounded from the other side of the room.

Everyone's attention turned back to the pair of werewolves, and although they were no longer touching they were very close together. It seemed to Harry as if that was where they were made to be, even though before today Remus and Jason had never met. Harry looked to Jean-Claude, and it seemed it was unanimous as everyone else did the same for an explanation.

"It is said," Jean-Claude began, taking the mantle of teacher easily, "that once all pairing for those of a lycanthrope nature occurred the same way; two would meet, their beasts would reach out to each other and they would be declared bonded. Over time, and as lycanthrope populations grew and spread out this became rare, but never the less, possible. I feel it a blessing to have seen it twice in my lifetime. Remus is alpha, Jason is not and hence mon pomme surrendered to the stronger wolf."

The vampire looked around the room as if to make sure he still had everybody's attention, and Harry doubted Jean-Claude needed to have bothered.

"As for why is affected mon enfant," Jean-Claude continued with a fond smile. "The power of the wolves is intoxicating, especially to a master vampire who has just discovered his power to call them. Had he so desired, mon enfant could have had both our friends grovelling at his feet, but such is not in his nature. When one is inexperienced, stopping such a thing can be difficult."

"You call wolves now?" Jason was looking at Harry as if the werewolf didn't know what to think; Jean-Claude had obviously not seen fit to enlighten the young man of Harry's new ability.

"Since yesterday," Harry admitted with a nod, "it was sort of an emergency."

That drew a snort of laughter from Draco.

"What he means is, Remus was about to eat people and Harry decided to expand his repertoire in a desperate attempt to stop him," the Slytherin said in an exasperated tone.

Now Jason was looking at Remus as if he didn't know how to react to that either.

"It's complicated," was all Remus found to say.

Remus' usual eloquence seemed to have deserted him and Harry did not want Jason to get the wrong idea.

"Remus' wolf was bound against his will when he was a child," he said quickly before Jason could step away from Remus or do anything equally as wrong in Harry's eyes, "I set it free. It was really angry, I calmed it down. He's fine now."

As explanations went it left out a lot of details, but it had the pertinent information. Jason looked shocked and then kind of sad.

"Your wolf was bound?" the young werewolf asked as if it was one of the most horrific ideas he could think of.

Remus nodded.

"It appears my community has been doing a great deal of lying about werewolves," Remus said, almost back to his usual calm self.

"That stinks," was Jason's succinct opinion on the matter.

Harry was in total agreement.

"So what does the bonding mean?" Nathaniel spoke up for the first time.

"It means, mes amis," Jean-Claude said with a knowing smile, "that it would be a very good idea for Remus and Jason to come to know each other better."

Harry was pretty sure there was a double entendre in there, but he chose not to comment. The way Remus blushed told him that his werewolf mentor had most probably been having some very impure thought about Jason anyway. Knowing how it had been for him when his beast set its sights on Draco, Harry had no doubt that the two werewolves would probably know each other extremely well in

a very short space of time. He only hoped that both of them were happy with the idea.

End of Chapter 25

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Chapter 26 The Public Eye

Scene 1

Anita had found it vaguely amusing when Lupin had spent a good half an hour apologising for growling at anyone who so much as went near Jason. She wasn't sure quite how she felt about the whole situation, but Jason had seemed to be enjoying himself, even going so far as to see what was setting his companion off. It was typical Jason, but what was most telling to Anita was the fact that her friend had always returned to Lupin's side every time. Jason liked to play, but there was a serious undertone there as well, and Anita did not think anyone in the room had missed it.

Jean-Claude had seen fit to explain that Lupin's state of agitation was a perfectly normal reaction and that it would pass and when Richard had concurred that sometimes werewolves were over protective with their other halves after stressful situations everyone had accepted the behaviour calmly. Anita had been itching to put in a few sarcastic comments after Richard's announcement, but had managed to hold off.

Everything had been rather civilised since, quite unlike most gatherings Anita was used to when it came to the preternatural. Jean-Claude had taken Harry aside to have a quiet word about the wizard's wolf problem; Richard had managed to get close enough to Lupin and Jason without setting off Lupin to talk to them before the pair had disappeared to have a private chat, which had left Anita playing piggy in the middle with Nathaniel and Draco.

Draco, it seemed, had polite conversation while keeping an eye out for any possible situations in the room, down to an art form, but luckily for Anita they had not had to keep it up for long. Once Jason and Lupin had requested the use of the next room the rest of the group had come back together and the conversation had turned to current threat to the preternatural community. Richard hadn't been pleased about being out of the loop for so long, but after a little snit fit had calmed down.

When Lupin and Jason had returned from their private talk they had seemed much more relaxed around each other and had joined the other conversation as if everything was perfectly normal, well almost. It was when it came time for Jean-Claude to leave that things became interesting again.

"My apologies," Jean-Claude said as the conversation broke, "but I am afraid I must take my leave. There are other matters which require my attention this evening."

"Me too," Anita agreed, looking at her watch and realising that she had stayed longer than she had planned, "I was supposed to be in the office half an hour ago."

The idea had been to meet up with everyone here, then drop Nathaniel off at Guilty Pleasures so he could get a lift home with Micah when Micah had finished a Coalition meeting. The problem was that taking a trip to the club would make her late for her first client and if she was late one more time Bert was going to blow a gasket.

"I'll get a cab home later," Nathaniel said before she could broach the subject.

He gave her a knowing smile and for the thousandth time she wondered how it was Nathaniel seemed to be able to read her like a book. It wasn't as if she was broadcasting; she knew her defences were in place, but sometimes it was as if her pomme de sang could see right through them.

"I have classes to prepare for," Richard appeared to have decided to join the exodus, which really only left one person.

Anita looked at Jason who appeared a little awkward, which for Jason was unusual. The werewolf seemed to be able to fit in anywhere and was usually hanging around with a cocky smile no matter what. The only times Anita had seen him completely lost was when in the presence of very powerful vampires who were playing games.

"I will see you tomorrow, Jason," Jean-Claude said as if everyone wasn't trying to figure out what would happen now. "I believe it would be wise for you to remain here tonight. That is of course if there is a room available."

"The house elves have made up all the spare rooms just in case," Draco said with a nod. "They don't have much to do usually and they keep hoping for more guests. You're welcome to take you pick."

Jason gave a small smile of thanks, but it was obvious the werewolf was still not quite comfortable about the idea. Anita suspected it had something to do with being Jean-Claude's pomme de sang and being away from the Circus. Jason was not usually insecure, but Anita could tell that her friend was a little bit confused about the situation.

"We will talk tomorrow, mon ami," Jean-Claude said and Anita suspected the vampire was thinking along the same lines she was, "once you and yours have had a chance to adjust to this new arrangement."

Somehow Jean-Claude managed to make it sound as if it was some carefully laid out contract rather than Lupin having jumped Jason in the middle of the living room; Anita always wondered how her vampire lover did it. Possibly it was just the French accent.

Standing up she gave Jason a supportive smile and hoped that this was going to all work out for the best. The conversation she had once had with the werewolf, where he had told her what he wanted from love, kept coming back to her and she could see that with Lupin, Jason might find it, but it made things so complicated. Lupin being from England; Jason being Jean-Claude's pomme de sang; and Lupin being quite possibly unstable were just a few of the complications she could see to any long lasting relationship.

With a sigh she could come to only one conclusion; right now it was none of her business. If Lupin hurt Jason then she would be there to help pick up the pieces and exact revenge, but as it was the werewolves were on their own.

"Well, thanks for an interesting evening," she said looking at her hosts and trying to sound cheerful. "I'll see most of you tomorrow."

There were goodbyes of several descriptions from those staying and Nathaniel bounced out of his chair to give her a peck on the cheek as she headed for the

door. Over thinking the situation was likely to agitate her and she didn't need that for work, so she gave Jason and Lupin a smile and tried to put it to the back of her mind. She had zombies to raise; she could worry about this later.

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Scene 2 (1045)

It had been quite an evening and Harry still couldn't quite believe everything that had happened. He never would have guessed that Remus and Jason were a match, not in a million years, but when it was there in the open it made a weird kind of sense. Harry had felt the fierceness of Remus' love, experienced the depth of feeling his friend was capable of first hand. After he had killed Voldemort it had been Remus at his side first as he recovered; Remus who had bodily removed a misguided reporter from the room when the man had tried to sneak in; and Remus, along with Draco who had told the Ministry where to shove their celebration plans when they wanted an exhausted Harry to give a speech of all things.

Under the calm, placid exterior of Remus Lupin there was a passionate, active human being, and Harry knew Remus would never abandon Jason. In this equation it was more Jason that had him worried. He didn't know Jean-Claude's *pomme de sang* well, even though they were casual friends and Jason had allowed him to take blood. Jason was a flirt of the highest order and a mischief maker and Harry didn't know him well enough to figure out how the younger werewolf would be handling the whole situation.

The evening had been promising even though Jason seemed to be pushing the envelope the whole time. After Anita, Jean-Claude and Richard had left, Jason had plonked himself into Remus' lap and refused to move, much to Remus' embarrassment. However, it hadn't escaped Harry that Remus had not been trying too hard to rectify the situation.

Being semi-nocturnal these days they hadn't retired to bed until the early hours of the morning, which had given them all plenty of time for talking. Not much had been remotely deep conversation, but Harry knew a lot more about Jason and a lot more about the Marauders thanks to the topics of conversation. Jason's eyes had lit up at some of the tales Remus had told about Harry's father and friends, and he suspected that Jason might be considering lightening the atmosphere back at the Circus sooner or later.

When they had finally decided to go to bed, Nathaniel had headed home, Draco had shown Jason to one of the spare rooms, Remus had gone to his room and Harry had followed Draco to his. Sometimes they ended up in Harry's room and sometimes in Draco's, but they no longer slept alone. Given that it was late, or early depending on your perspective, and the fact that it had been a rather exciting evening, Draco had gone straight to sleep. Harry, on the other hand had tried, and failed to do the same.

Having highly sensitive hearing did occasionally have its disadvantages, like the fact that lying in bed Harry could hear all sorts of noises coming from around the house. For a start, he was pretty sure one of the portraits on the landing snored, and at times like these when his brain did not seem to want to turn off it meant he couldn't get to sleep. Even with Draco's warm body and soft breathing a few centimetres away he could not make himself drop off.

He was going over the evening's events for what felt like the hundredth time when he heard a door open. Any remote semblance of sleep that he may or may

not have been heading towards vanished and he listened more closely. The noise had been too faint to be Remus' door, but in Harry's estimation it was just far enough away to be Jason's. Now in a normal house this wouldn't have been particularly unusual, after all people did have to use the loo in the middle of the night from time to time, but Harry knew for a fact that every bedroom in the Malfoy house had an ensuite bathroom.

There was a bathroom off the hall as well in case of emergencies, the one he had locked himself in when he'd had his breakdown, but unless Jason had managed to destroy his already the werewolf was not out of his room for that. Harry wasn't really suspicious of his friend, but he was curious. It was possible Jason was in the same state he was and just needed to walk it off, but Harry kept listening anyway; ears strained for any sound.

Lycanthropes could move very quietly and he heard nothing else until the sound of a light tapping on a door reached him. It was a very quiet tap, only designed for the person inside the room to hear, but Harry recognised it and he knew where it was coming from. Remus' room was only two doors down and that was where the knocking was originating.

"Yes?" he heard Remus' surprisingly awake voice answer the knock.

The door opened a little way and Harry could imagine Jason leaning around it.

"Can't sleep," Jason said in what had to have been little more than a whisper, "mind if I come in?"

"No," Remus' reply sounded almost relieved, "not at all. Please do."

The sound of the door opening further and then closing was all Harry heard for a while. With two closed doors between him and the sounds he couldn't hear that much, but he was sure there was no more conversation. Jason didn't appear to be visiting Remus to talk and Harry had almost convinced himself that he shouldn't be listening anymore when he heard it. It was so faint that he almost missed it, but it made it through and he understood the sound instantly. It was a contented sigh; the sound of someone finding the spot they felt best about and Harry recognised that feeling.

With a small smile he looked at his sleeping lover beside him. Oh yes, he knew that feeling well. Putting his arms inside the covers he turned on his side, snuggled down under the blankets and insinuated his arm over Draco. He thought that maybe he'd be able to sleep now.

"Harry," Draco's said in a sleepy voice.

"Hmm," he replied, looking up to see that the Slytherin had not bothered to open his eyes.

"Your hand is bloody freezing."

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Scene 3

Something woke Harry, but when he first opened his eyes he wasn't sure what it had been. Draco was still deeply asleep if the Slytherin's breathing was anything to go by and did not appear to have moved recently, so Harry didn't think it had been Draco that had dragged him from dreamland. He lay quietly for a moment

trying to puzzle out the answer to the question, but he hadn't quite escaped sleep completely and he gradually began to dose again.

It was in this half waking and half sleeping state that he heard it: a groan, and it was not a simple groan, no, it was the kind of heartfelt groan that sent blood rushing to his nether regions. Someone somewhere was having something incredibly wonderful or excruciatingly painful done to them and since there was a distinct lack of screaming Harry's autonomic nervous system had come to only one conclusion. There was sex occurring.

Being half asleep he had absolutely no defences and his morally correct brain didn't even have a chance to tell him off for listening.

"God, Remus," Jason's voice was so full of lust that virtually all the blood drained out of Harry's head and into his groin, "I don't care what you're doing, just don't stop."

There was a chuckle somewhere near the voice, tinged with power and dominance and it was all Harry's beast needed to sit up and take notice. The sound of skin on skin reached his ears and he breathed in deeply, taking in Draco's scent and holding it. Rational thinking had no place in the bed with him and he pushed himself up, rubbing his body against Draco's as he did so.

A sleepy mumble was the only response from his lover, but the little gasps of pleasure he could hear from the other room urged him onwards. He was hungry for sex and he wanted to hear those same sounds coming from his lover. Even as he moved his mind was strangely focused, split between the noises that had first woken him and the sight of Draco's lithe, pale body as he moved the blanket further down the bed, making a strange mixture of remote and near experiences.

Jason was breathing hard and Harry could hear the sound of lips on skin and he bent to mirror the movements he could hear. The moan from Draco made him smile as he swiped his tongue over one pink nipple and then kissed the same spot. In his mind's eye it was almost as if he could see what he was listening to and strange abstract forms that were a little Remus-like and Jason-like played out the sounds in his head.

"Harry?" Draco's voice was sleepy and confused as if the Slytherin didn't really know what was going on.

A little lingering dreamland was not going to stop Harry though, and he continued what he was doing until he was drawing little noises from his lover in time with those Jason was making. Part of his mind was horrified that he was listening to the closest person he had to a father figure making love to his chosen mate, but the rational part of Harry's mind was not very loud at the moment. That he seemed to know far more than he should do from just sounds also entered his head for only a moment before being thrust out by lust and desire.

In his mind Remus was moving lower leaving small trails with his tongue on taught, shivering flesh and Harry followed suit on Draco, almost as if they were all in some strange dance. It didn't matter if the images in his mind were his imagination interpreting what he was hearing or if somehow he was connected to what was going on, all that mattered was that he follow the pattern.

"Oh," Jason sounded about as in control as Draco looked, writhing under Harry as he found sweet spot after sweet spot of flesh to worship.

The tight little hitch of breath and then another low moan translated as only one thing in Harry's mind and Draco made virtually exactly the same noise when he swooped on his lover's erection and took it into his mouth as far as he could.

"Harry," Draco groaned into the pillow, his head turning to one side and his fingers weaving through Harry's hair.

Jason's whimpers muddled with Draco's so that Harry could barely tell the difference and what he was doing and what he was hearing became one big muddle of experience. Taste and smell and sight were full of Draco as he ran his tongue over the head of his lover's shaft, but his ears were full of sounds from everywhere, seemingly equal in strength. He could feel the lycanthrope energy from the wolves almost as if they were in the same room and it was almost as intoxicating as his own mate.

"Remus, I'm going to... if you keep... oh god!"

Jason was not being loud, but his whispered words were as clear as day to Harry. The constructs in his head were sprawled on the bed with Remus almost lying between his lover's knees as Jason clung to the sheets, head back in ecstasy.

As Harry listened to Jason barely holding on he increased his pace with Draco, sucking and moving his mouth to draw equal sounds from his lover. Draco seemed far more conscious that there were sharp eared lycanthropes in the house and was making small desperate noises, trying to keep his voice down. It was almost more exciting than the louder sounds of appreciation coming from the other. The way Draco whimpered and writhed under his touch caused his beast to move under his skin and his vampire to stir sleepily at the back of his mind. This was real dominance; the ability to take away a lover's will and to leave them shuddering with pleasure.

The sounds from the other room were becoming louder and part of Harry's mind wondered if Draco could hear them yet, but he felt no embarrassment about his behaviour or that of their guests. As Jason's voice abandoned him completely and his breathing came in sharp, throaty gasps Harry knew the werewolf was almost there. He could feel the sexual energy as if it was tangible and when Jason let go a cry of release Harry felt white hot energy flood his system. Without even thinking about what he was doing he opened the marks between himself and Draco as he sucked his lover as hard as he could.

Draco put his head back and keened, bucking into Harry's mouth and releasing his seed onto the waiting tongue. Harry drank down everything Draco had, taking all there was on offer and feeling his lover's release wash over him. It was wonderful and satisfying and Harry only released his prize reluctantly as Draco began whimpering when he continued to play.

Laying his head on the pale thigh next to his cheek he looked up and gave a smile that he suspected looked very self-satisfied. Draco was a boneless sprawl on the bed and when those grey eyes opened and looked down at him the Slytherin appeared rather dazed. They might have just lain there a while looking at each other had not Harry's hearing decided to continue to inform him of what was going on in the other room.

There was a quiet mew from Jason and a dominant growl from Remus as Harry realised the encounter was not over. His beast shifted inside him as his own arousal became prominent in his mind and he knew that the animal part of him liked the idea of continuing. The sound of a body being flipped reached his ears

and the low groan of someone on overload being taken even farther. His brain provided him with a detailed visual on what it thought Remus was doing and about to do to Jason and unfortunately the few moments of post coital bliss had given his sentient brain time to catch up with his hormones.

He was actually quite horrified by what he was thinking as reality made itself known and his beast suggested that he flip Draco and follow Remus' example. When there was the sound of slick skin and his libido informed him of several things that could be he sat up and tried desperately to think of something else.

"Harry, you okay?" Draco asked, waking up as Harry prayed for deliverance as Jason started to become more vocal again.

It was as if he was tuned in and he couldn't switch off the radio.

"Um, I..." Harry really didn't know what to say and he blushed furiously.

The sound of skin against skin reached him and Jason gave an almighty howl that even Draco heard.

"Oh, that explains the early morning wake up call," his lover said with a smile, "you can hear our lovebirds can't you."

Harry just blushed more and tried very, very hard not to hear the noises that two bodies made contact with each other time and again.

"Shower," he finally said desperately, "need something loud."

He didn't think it was fair when Draco laughed at him as he bolted for the bathroom.

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Scene 4 (1012)

Neither Jason or Remus had shown up for breakfast and Harry had tried very hard to make sure that there was enough noise so he couldn't hear anything going on upstairs. Draco had thought this was very funny considering what they had been getting up to before they came down that morning, but there were just some things that Harry did not need to witness when he did not have the distraction of Draco's body very close to his own. He was very grateful that he did not have to face his friends because he knew without a doubt, that if he had heard them, they had heard him. Jason, at least, was bound to tease him mercilessly.

He had been almost glad when the phone call from Lieutenant Storr came through and requested his presence at the station. The excuse had been that they needed some clarification on one of his statements, but Harry had suspected and subsequently been proved right, that Storr had wanted his some place he could interrogate him about the visions without being interrupted. It was after explaining for the fifth time that he had no control over what he saw or when he saw it that he'd had enough.

"That's it," he said, standing up and about one breath away from losing his temper, "I am going to say this once more using very short words that I'm sure you'll understand. I do not choose what I see or when I see it. I may never have another vision or I may have one five minutes from now. Just because you want a thing to be true does not mean it is true and I am not some toy you can turn on

and off. Now I'm going home and if you want to ask anymore questions you can bloody well do it there."

"Walk out that door and I'll have you arrested as an accessory," Storr was not in a rational mood.

Zerbrowski winced where he was standing against the wall and Harry had a simple choice; he could go off the deep end and scream at the man in front of him, or he could fall back on the coldly logical side of his personality. Through most of his adolescence the former would have been the most likely option, but lately it could go either way.

"By all means please try, Lieutenant," Harry said in his best impression of Draco, "and I will guarantee that this department will be digging itself out of paper work and lawsuits until Christmas. I'm the victim here, and just because I have been infected with lycanthropy and vampirism, against my will I might add, it does not mean you can treat me like the dirt on your shoe just because you don't happen to like it. I have been patient, I have been helpful and you just pushed it too far. I'm only seventeen, Lieutenant, and believe me I know quite how illegal you having me in here without a legal adult actually is."

There was only so far goodwill would take a person and Harry had found his limit. It was obvious Storr had decided that now that Harry was spending time with the preternatural residents of the city he was not to be trusted, which was completely ridiculous. He'd had enough of the veiled insinuations and Draco had to be bored out of his mind sitting in the squad room. It was time to leave before he really did lose hold on his temper; that would not be pretty and then the police might actually have a reason to arrest him.

Storr was definitely annoyed, but when Harry walked towards the door, neither police man moved to stop him. He walked swiftly down the corridor, back to the squad room and straight over to where Draco was reading a book.

"Time to go home," he said in a very tight voice as Draco looked up.

His boyfriend did not argue at all and stood up, placing a calming hand on his back as they made their way to the exit. Harry would much rather have just Apparated back to the house, but disappearing in the middle of a police station would not have been a good idea. What he really wasn't expecting was the person who fell against him almost the moment he stepped outside the door. It was almost too fast to follow and almost innocent enough to seem like an accident, but not quite.

The woman had stumbled just in front of him and fell towards him, making as if to grab anything to break her fall. What she managed to grab was the neck of the old T-shirt he had thrown on that morning and not bothered to change out of for the police station. Had it been new the result might not have been so spectacular, but it was one of Dudley's cast offs that he just happened to have kept and the neck was big to begin with. Under the extra strain the cloth stretched so far that it revealed a good portion of his chest.

At that moment some instinct made him raise his hand in front of his face and then a flash went off. It all happened so quickly that for a moment Harry thought about helping the woman and forgetting the flash and then his brain caught up and he realised that he had just been set up. Someone had just taken his picture with the spell clearly visible and it had been deliberate. He looked up, but the

photographer was already hightailing it into the car park. Without making an even bigger spectacle of himself, Harry knew there was no way to catch the man.

The woman whom Harry was sure was part of the set-up was sitting on the floor looking dazed. She was a good actor if nothing else, and looking at her perfectly schooled features Harry felt his beast shifting under his skin. He had had just about all he could take and he grabbed Draco's hand and dragged his boyfriend around the side of the building. Not really caring if they were completely out of sight he took hold of Draco and Apparated them both back home before he killed someone.

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Scene 5 (1272)

Anita had thought she had seen Harry angry before, like when he had had his first vision, but she realised that she had been wrong. Then the young wizard had been annoyed, now, as he paced around her kitchen, he was angry. The fury was coming off him in waves and the mix of lycanthrope and vampiric power that was flying around the room was rather disconcerting.

The number of expletives that had fallen from Harry's lips had also been rather alarming. Anita had heard her English guests swear before, but never in a long stream of words that sounded as if it changed languages on the way several times as well. When Harry and Draco had arrived, the younger of the two had been a silent seething mass of anger, but it hadn't been long before he exploded, and no one could do anything about it.

Looking around the room Anita was pretty sure no one was going to try either; there was such a thing as self preservation. Nathaniel had pushed himself so far back in one corner that she thought he might be trying to disappear through the wall and Anita was sure he would have been gone from the room if leaving hadn't meant moving closer to Harry in some way. Micah was sat at the table trying to look calm and in control and Draco was standing in the doorway with his hand surreptitiously in his clothes where Anita was sure he kept his wand. Since Draco had exhibited the fact that he did not need a wand for most of whatever it was the wizards did to achieve their ends, Anita was worried by his posture.

"I cannot believe someone printed that," Harry ranted, the paper in his hand giving a quiet ripping sound as he shook it. "They all but printed my sodding name."

The wizard was walking up and down beside the table as if stopping would cause the stored energy to explode out of him. It was like watching a ticking bomb moving back and forwards and Anita was not quite sure how to defuse it.

"I thought the press at home were bad," Harry continued, seemingly oblivious to the affect he was having on the room, "but this tops anything Rita Skeeta managed even at her best."

The paper landed on the table with a thump and Anita had her first clear look at what had Harry so wound up. She had spoken to an agitated Draco the day before and had heard about what Dolph had tried to pull and the photographer incident, but she had not yet seen the result of these occurrences.

There in the middle of the front page of the local paper, all be it with his arm in front of his face, was Harry; spell scar clearly visible where a hand was pulling his T-shirt down. The headline read 'Police Quiz Survivor of Black Magic Sacrifice'.

Now Anita understood exactly why Harry was so worked up. Harry's existence and connection to the case was a secret; for his safety and for the integrity of the investigation. That he was front page news could be devastating.

"What the hell happened to confidentiality?" Harry was still ranting. "Do these people have no idea what they're doing? This isn't some bloody game. People could get hurt. They ever printed where Draco lives, for god's sake. How the hell did they know?"

There was only one way Anita could think of that the whole photo scenario could have been set up and the details of the case could turn up in the press, and that was a leak in the department, but she didn't think it would be a good time to tell Harry that.

"If this is some scheme by Storr to get these madmen to show their hand I will make him regret it," Harry was gesticulating so wildly that if anyone had been standing next to him they would have been hit, "and if anyone gets hurt because of this someone will pay."

Now that was one idea that had not occurred to Anita, but then she knew Dolph. He could be an ass when he wanted to be, but endangering witnesses and a case was not his style. Anita could see the situation turning very nasty if Harry continued with that train of thought.

"Harry," she snapped with all the authority she could muster.

The eyes that pinned her down were cat green and glowing; Harry really was about to lose control and he was vibrating in place. This had gone far enough and Anita was going to do something about it.

"Dolph wouldn't have done that," she said firmly, holding the eerie gaze without flinching even though the majority of her wanted to back away.

"But I'm one of the monsters, Anita," Harry replied, voice vibrating with anger, "and so my state of health doesn't matter anymore."

Anita knew Dolph had a problem with preternaturals, but she also knew that no matter how riled up he was, Dolph would never have leaked information to the press. Not without using it as part of a deliberate plan that had been discussed with all those involved.

"He's prejudiced," she said firmly, "but he's not the leak. You can be sure he is trying to find it even now. Harry, this was not Dolph's doing; he wouldn't have hidden it if he intended something like this, he would have just told you."

It would not have been unlike Dolph to decide something like this needed to be done, but it would have been handled very differently.

The green eyes looking at her were still angry, but the almost feral snarl that went with them was fading.

"You're staying here," Anita said, broking no argument. "You and Draco can have Nathaniel's old room; Lupin can stay at the Circus with Jason. Until these lunatics are caught I don't want any of you near that house. If they know where you live, you don't live there anymore."

She watched as the glow slowly faded from Harry's eyes. His anger was still palpable, but the fury was dying.

"Why here?" it was Draco who asked the question. "Wouldn't it be better if we all stayed at the circus?"

"The press keep an eye out there whenever there is a preternatural crime in the news," Anita said in what she thought was a very reasonable manner. "Here no one should be able to find you and I think its time to use the muscle we have available. It's time for a pard get together."

The energy coming from Harry was no longer anywhere as strong and the young wizard had stopped shaking, but he was far from calm. Anita could see that her point had been made, but there was distrust in Harry's eyes that had not been there before. She did not think that it was aimed at her, but it was clear Harry had had experience with this type of thing before. As she watched Draco came up behind Harry and put a gentle hand on the other wizard's shoulder. There was a moment where Harry tensed, but as Draco gently moved his fingers Harry slowly began to relax.

The crisis had been averted, but Anita knew she had many people to talk to, to sort this out. She wanted Harry and Draco where she could keep an eye on them, and she wanted to know what the hell Dolph was doing to plug his leak. If anyone was hurt because of this Harry would not be the only one looking for blood.

End of Chapter 26

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Chapter 27 Attack

Scene 1

Harry held on to the remote doggedly as Draco from one side and Nathaniel from the other tried various plans of attack to relieve him of it, including bringing up the whole listening to Jason and Remus thing, which Jason had made sure to tell everyone about, in an attempt to embarrass him into surrendering. He had never had much opportunity to watch TV, and he had definitely never found himself in possession of the remote before, ever, and he was enjoying it. The fact that when the adverts came on he had found the joys of channel hopping was driving everyone else crazy, but he was having a great time and had no intention of stopping.

Staying with Anita was decidedly odd, especially when the pard seemed to have taken up residence as well. It wasn't as if Harry hadn't been the centre of attention for the bad guys before and he knew the signs of a group of people who had been told to keep an eye on him, but try and seem as if they weren't keeping an eye on him.

So far he and Draco had not been alone, apart from the one time that morning they had locked themselves in the bathroom for a few minutes. They had not even been alone to sleep since there were only so many places to lay one's head in the house and with so many people in residence Zane and Cherry were sleeping on the floor of Nathaniel's room.

Draco had point blank refused to give up the bed, pointing out that lycanthropes took much better to sleeping on the floor than humans, but Harry had felt so guilty that there had been a compromise reached. Nathaniel's bed was large, but by the end of the night it had been quite cosy with four people in it; just as the sofa was very cosy with five people somehow ensconced on it.

Harry had no idea what they were watching, it was an American cop show of some description, but it was entertaining. It really did give him a chance to turn his brain off and forget about everything that was going on for a while.

"Harry," Draco said as the screen went black for yet another ad break, "you touch that button and as much as I love you, I will let the others kill you."

There were mumbles of playful agreement from around the room where most of the pard were arrayed in various states of relaxation. Harry enjoyed flicking channels, and he'd never had a chance before so he pouted and looked at Draco with his most mournful expression. It took his boyfriend three seconds to break and then Draco put his head back and groaned.

"Not fair, Potter," the Slytherin said in a rather helpless tone, "but I will defend you to the death."

"Shit, if he doesn't have the big eye thing down better than Nathaniel," was Caleb's take on the matter, which drew a laugh from around the room.

"We'll have to have a contest when Anita gets back," Cherry said with a grin, "see which one of them can get her to do what they want the fastest."

Anita was out for the evening, first with Jean-Claude and then working, so it was unlikely she'd be back in time for any sort of game before the rest of them all piled into bed. That didn't stop Harry looking at Nathaniel though and they made doe eyes at each other.

"Lord help us, they're a tag team," Zane said dramatically.

"I think that should be, Lord help Anita," was Micah's dry comment from where their Nimir-Raj was sitting in the corner.

Harry lifted the remote to groans from his companions, but instead of flicking channels he hit the mute button. He wasn't overly fond of adverts, but he could live with them if he didn't have to listen to them. He was settling back against Draco when something made him frown. At first he wasn't sure what it was, but he felt strange and it made him very uncomfortable. It was when his chest twinged that he realised what was happening and he felt his awareness slipping away from normal.

As his mind shifted and the connection between himself and his blood opened, what he did not expect was to hear singing. It was a haunting and strangely beautiful sound without words and it filled him and flowed through him like water in a pipe. Each note captivated him and held him, keeping him in a dreamlike state, unaware of his body or anything but the music. The voice sang so high and so low that it seemed impossible that the same person was making all the sound and Harry became lost in it. Time had no meaning, only the haunting tune in and around him, pulling him and holding him like nothing he had ever felt before.

"Harry!"

It was a desperate cry full of pain and fear and it was Draco's voice. Nothing else could have broken through the hold of the singing, but that one word did and it woke so many things in him. Suddenly there was pain and the song was not so beautiful anymore. It's enchantment broken he could feel the evil that was

forcing its way into his body and hear the torturous sounds that he had not been able to recognise before. It was agony and he could not stop it.

His mind flashed with the image of robed figures in the woods outside Antia's house, a woman dressed in black with them, urging something evil on, and then Harry slammed back into his body fully. Pain filled him as the song all but vanished into horrendous sounds that clawed at his ears. The screams of the pard and the moans coming from Draco called him back to reality and he could feel the evil pouring through him into the room.

The spell on his chest burned and he knew he was the conduit. This power in him and around him wanted him dead and those with him were an added bonus. Putting his head back he screamed, unable to stand the agony in his body, only the sounds of distress from around him allowed him to hold on to sanity and consciousness. He knew evil and this was it, and he also knew he had to stop it.

The hideous song was killing his friends and he had to block it. With everything he had, Harry tried to throw up a barrier within himself, tried to build a wall to keep out the evil that was flooding him. For a moment he felt the power slow as his own magic reached up to stop it, but the clash of energy was worse than he could possibly have imagined. It hurt and it caused a backlash that sent waves of white hot agony all over his body. He could do nothing but scream again as every nerve felt like it exploded.

This was too much; it was killing him and he couldn't take anymore. He needed to be away from here, away from the danger, safe with his friends. This place was no longer a refuge, it was a battle ground and there the enemy was winning. To stay meant to die and in desperate need Harry reached into the reserve of power he had only ever tapped once; the reserve that had allowed him to kill Voldemort and live. The pard needed to be safe; Draco needed to be safe; he needed to be safe, and he knew with whom safety could be found. Anita was the point of safety for them all and he knew exactly where she was. On fire with pain, but consumed with purpose, he let his power loose and thought of one place; the Circus of the Damned.

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Scene 2

Anita was on her way out of the door; sure that something terrible was happening, when there was an almighty crack behind her. She turned in time to see virtually the whole pard appear out of thin air in Jean-Claude's living room. Several of her cats were bleeding from their ears and Micah was supporting Nathaniel as if without the assistance her *pomme de sang* would fall over. This was bad, this was very bad, and she couldn't explain any of it. What was she supposed to do?

"Harry," Draco's voice sounded completely desperate and Anita made her decision.

Most of her leopards were moving even if they looked dazed, and moving meant they'd recover, but at some point, whether either of them had consciously agreed to it, Harry had become one of hers as well. Anita recognised the tone in Draco's voice and she knew that what she was about to find would not be pretty.

Confused eyes followed her as she moved quickly towards what she could see of the two wizards. Zane and Merle were both in front of the pair, and all she could make out was that Draco was on the floor. When she moved between the

were leopards she found out why. Draco was cradling Harry in his lap as if he'd caught his lover as he fell, and Harry was bleeding. The kid was bleeding from his eyes and his nose and his ears and his mouth. There were red streaks under his t-shirt and on his arms as if blood vessels had burst and Harry was barely breathing.

"Draco," there was no response when she tried to gain the blond wizard's attention.

He was almost as pale as Harry and he had the same dazed look in his eyes as all the others. Anita knew she needed answers and she needed them now, so she chose to use her Nimir-Ra authority to good effect.

"Zane," she snapped, knowing that being gentle was not going to work at the moment, "tell me what happened."

The order worked instantly as the pard hierarchy sliced through the haze in Zane's eyes.

"There was this noise," he said, not as together as he usually was, but Anita could tell he was doing his best, "almost like singing. It wasn't bad at first, but then it started to hurt. Harry began to glow and it seemed to be hurting him the most, but by the time we realised something was happening it was like we were stuck. It was like pressure in my head. Then we were here."

It gave her half of the picture, but not all and Anita had the nasty suspicion that the only person who had it all was unconscious in the arms of his lover. That left Draco, who might have a better understanding of any magic involved.

"Draco," she tried to gain his attention again, and this time reached out to him, "I need you to tell me what you know."

Glazed grey eyes looked at her and for a moment she didn't think her words had made it through, but then Draco blinked and there was more life in his gaze.

"The noise," Draco said slowly, "it was trying to kill him. I felt the dark magic, they want Harry dead and anyone they can take with him. He ... impossible..."

She was losing him again, Anita could tell, and she didn't think it was just shock from the incident. Draco was Harry's human servant even if they shared only two marks, and if Harry was dying it was bound to have an effect on the other wizard.

"Draco, what's impossible?" Anita asked firmly. "How did you bring everyone here?"

"Wasn't me," Draco replied, his face becoming a desperate mask, "was Harry. He Apparated us all, but that's impossible. Felt... trying to block his magic..."

It seemed to be difficult for the young man to explain.

"Harry fought it," the young wizard said as if becoming lost in the memory. "Damaged his magic, needs more to heal it."

This did not sound good at all.

"Draco," his name seemed to be the only way to keep his attention so Anita used it again, "did it damage you as well?"

"Some," the rapidly failing young man replied, "but not too much."

There wasn't much time, that much was obvious, and Anita was out of her depth, but she was not about to give up. She knew something about physical healing, but this was not physical, not exactly and she knew the munin would not help. What Harry needed was magic and the best way to transfer that was blood and physical contact.

"Take him to the bedroom," Jean-Claude said as she looked up at him.

It was as if he knew exactly what she was thinking, which was quite possible given her panicked mental state. Merle moved to obey the instruction, but when he tried to pick up the unconscious wizard Draco refused to left go. For a man in shock Draco turned out to be very strong and after a few moments Merle simply picked both of them up. It looked awkward but Merle had long arms and lycanthrope strength. No one spoke, but everyone moved as Anita followed Merle and Jean-Claude into the bedroom.

"Strip them," Anita said without the slightest trace of the embarrassment that she would once have felt.

Draco still wouldn't let go, even though most of him appeared to have no strength, and Anita remembered the desperation when bringing Damian back from revenant state. Stripping the two wizards down consisted of holding them up and ripping their clothes to pieces; Anita remembered that as well, only she'd been suffering from heat exhaustion at the time not magical damage.

Jean-Claude knew exactly where she was going with this and dropped his robe without further pretence. Climbing onto the bed he then allowed Merle and Micah to place Harry in his lap and Draco by his side.

"Micah, how do you feel about donating blood?" Anita asked as she began to remove the clothes she had just so recently dragged herself back into.

"Which vein should I open?" was the immediate response, and without having to be asked her Nimir-Raj began to strip as well.

"Cherry, look after Nathaniel," Anita decided quickly.

Nathaniel looked pretty rough, but she'd seen him bounce back from worse very quickly, so she was more worried about Harry and Draco.

"Caleb, strip."

Caleb would not have been her first choice for bed partner, even though he did not take so many liberties any more, but he seemed to be in the best shape of the leopards, and Anita did not want to put strain on those healing anything major. She did not think this was going to be quick so they would all have their turn, but for now she needed the strong ones.

When she climbed onto the bed, Jean-Claude moved to allow her access to him and Harry and by the time she had found a vaguely comfortable spot the other two members of the pard had taken places on the bed as well. Jean-Claude opened the marks without question and Anita connected to her people, then she focused the whole shebang on Harry. As the magic hit him she felt the faintest answer from the fading wizard's own power and she closed her eyes to

concentrate on what she was doing. The smell of blood made it to her nose and she knew Micah was feeding Harry in a different way.

Anita had no idea if this would work or if it would be enough even if the principle was correct, but all they could do was try.

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Scene 3

Everything was very confused and distant as Harry tried to make sense of what was happening around him and to him. His body was rather vague in his awareness and it did not seem anywhere near as important as the magic he could feel around him. It blanketed him in a protective covering that moved through him and over him and he reached out to it, wrapping it closer in a comforting mantle. Some of the magic was cold, some warm and one part glowed so brightly that he wanted to be as close to it as possible.

He allowed himself to drift, basking in the feel of the brightest magic and although he was aware of the other magic changing, this was constant and he knew he was connected to it. Occasionally he felt his body and he recognised that he was surrounded by warm skin, but it was not important to him as he accepted the strength from the magic blanketing him.

Eventually he began to realise that the magic surrounding him was not the same as the magic at his core and it was feeding parts of him that was not his central being. The outer parts of his magic were in turn feeding his core, but only the bright magic fed his core directly. The stronger he became the more he could feel the connection he had to the bright source and the more he came to realise that he wanted to be one with it.

As he needed the power being fed to him less and less, the want to join with the brightest source became an ache in his soul. The connections seemed to pull on him more and more and it was as if he could almost touch the entity to which the magic belonged. He had no idea how long he had basked in the light or if it had been minutes or days that he had been floating and recharging, but one moment he was disconnected from the world and the next he realised that the light was Draco and he came back to his body with a start.

Opening his eyes he looked straight into intelligent grey irises filled with knowledge and need. In that instant Harry knew what he was feeling and what he wanted to do, and he also knew that Draco was experiencing it as well. He moved without considering anything else and the shift of bodies around him meant nothing as he reached out and pulled Draco close. His fangs sank into his lover's neck with barely any effort and the noise that came out of Draco's mouth was half groan of pain and half relieved sigh.

Part of the power that hovered around his core, attached to it, but not the same, reached out as he drew blood into his mouth and fed. He remembered reaching out to Draco before and leaving part of himself behind, but this time he welcomed his lover in rather than simply pushing his own power out. It was as if he was melding them together rather than insinuating himself into Draco. The weaker Draco's life force became the closer they moved until there were not two burning entities of power, but one with two cores.

The physical meant little except for the blood and he barely felt the pain of teeth against his skin when he finally stopped drinking. All he knew was that Draco was his and he was Draco's, and as lips attached to his neck his power constricted

around them both so that for the first time the cores touched. The resulting explosion was raw power and it ripped through him taking away any sense that he had left. Spiralling into darkness he felt more complete than he had ever done in his entire life.

End of Chapter 27

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Chapter 28 Possibilities

Scene 1

After a few hours it had been unnecessary for Anita to act as facilitator for the power exchange as Harry had unconsciously reached out to take what was offered himself, at which point they had set up a rotation system. The only two who had remained constant were Harry and Draco, neither of whom gave any indication that they were aware of anything around them.

For sixty hours they took turns in making sure that there was enough power around Harry to sustain him. Asher and Damian had subbed in for Jean-Claude when necessary, even going so far as to remain in place when dead for the day; Anita and one of the human witches from the Circus had provided the human element; and the whole pard as well as several of the werewolves, including Richard, Remus and Jason had swapped in and out for the lycanthrope part of whatever magic was being woven.

Feeding of whatever persuasion, be it blood lust, the *ardeur* or simply food had been handled with pragmatic efficiency, and people ate, slept and helped in seamless rotation.

Harry, and through him Draco, seemed to have been able to absorb anything that was offered, and hours had run into days in a confusion of eating, sleeping and donating magic. They had all been exhausted by the time Harry had finally moved, as every person gave everything they had to save the wizards on the bed.

No one had expected Harry's first move to be latching onto Draco and drinking blood like a drowning man and it had only been Jean-Claude who realised what was going on. If it had not been for him, Anita might have tried to separate the two wizards as they wound around each other like two snakes in a mating dance, but Jean-Claude had stopped anyone interfering when the power woke him early from his day's slumber. The noises that had been coming from Draco had been filled with a deep pleasure that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with finding exactly where you wanted to be, so Anita found she could not object.

When Draco had bitten Harry the look of reverence on Jean-Claude's face had almost been enough to make her wonder what she was missing in not allowing him to give her the fourth mark. Then the power had hit her and she had had no ability to think at all. That had been four hours ago, and Anita was standing at the end of the bed in a robe, a cup of coffee in her hand, looking at the two wizards still wrapped around each other as if they would never let go.

Members of the pard were still curled around them, but it was more to do with a sense of security than any magical need now. Harry and Draco had given back any power shared with them, with interest, as vampire marks bound them together for eternity. Every vampire and preternatural being had felt it, so much so that all vampires in residence at the Circus had woken hours early and several lycanthropes had shifted and then shifted back with no ill effects.

All those who before the blast had been about to drop were back to their normal selves, or in some cases had even more energy, and it had not been a momentary spike either. Anita felt wide awake and energised in a way she usually felt if she, Jean-Claude and Richard opened the marks.

Jason and Remus had disappeared shortly afterwards, and so had Cherry and Zane, and if what she had been feeling every time she looked at any of her men was anything to go by, she knew what they were up to. The *ardeur* was being strangely well behaved and she was hoping it would not suddenly try and consume her in the middle of something important. If it had not been for the fact that she felt she could not leave she would probably have taken one, if not all of her men up on the promise she saw in their eyes. After all, the other two couples hadn't come back even four hours later, so Anita thought she could handle several of her boyfriends at least and it never hurt to make sure the *ardeur* was well fed. Not that everything would be smooth sailing if she had tried, but it was only a fantasy after all.

"They appear so peaceful, do they not, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude said quietly as he slipped an arm around her waist.

"Unless you look at them without using your eyes," she replied and leaned into him.

Remnants of the power that had filled them all still danced around the two wizards, reaching out to those around every now and then, and Anita could sense every move. Some of it was lycanthrope warmth, some vampire cold, and some the strange tingling power that she had never felt before she met Harry, but it all came from both of them now. She finally knew how odd it must be to see her or Jean-Claude or Richard when they opened the marks between them, or her, Nathaniel and Damian, because it was like sensing three entities in one.

"I have never seen a fourth mark release such power," Jean-Claude whispered in her ear. "It made me wonder what would be released if you were ever to allow the fourth between us."

Once she would have moved from his embrace at such a suggestion, reacted in anger when she had so firmly refused in the past, but Anita found herself moving into Jean-Claude's body even more.

"Me too," she said quietly, being completely honest because she was no longer completely sure she knew what the fourth mark meant.

Jean-Claude did not say anything, but his arm tightened on her slightly. There was a confusion of emotion in him that Anita could sense as Jean-Claude held her close, but his control was too good to allow her to understand much of it. They stood in silence and Anita wondered what Richard would think if she ever said yes to the fourth mark. Would it unbalance the triumvirate, would Richard have to say yes as well? Would it drive them apart again?

It was all too complicated and she banished the thoughts as passing fancy. In the light of a new day the wonder might fade anyway, but for now there existed the tiny glimmer of new possibilities.

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Scene 2

Something woke Harry, but he wasn't sure what. He found himself curled over a nice warm chest, which he knew without looking belonged to Draco. Their legs were also tangled together and where he was lying against Draco's thigh he could feel the familiar sensation of a being happy to wake up beside his lover. There was also a nice warm body curled behind him and he was very comfortable, so for a moment he considered waking up properly and then discarded the idea.

"Harry," Draco sounded somewhat disgruntled, "wake up. I've been waiting for at least twenty minutes and I need the loo."

It was not the most romantic way to wake up, but it brought Harry out of the light doze he was falling into. Lifting his head off his breathing pillow he blinked up at Draco.

[Sorry,] he apologised and attempted to move off his lover.

The body behind moved obligingly to give him room and he had managed to untangle his legs from Draco's before he realised what he'd just done.

[I know,] Draco replied in kind, his lips never moving as Harry stared, [we'll have to ask Jean-Claude later. But right now I'm bursting.]

Then his lover was gone, far more quickly than a normal human could move, and Harry was left looking at a grinning Jason. He turned slightly to see Nathaniel leaning up on one elbow behind him. They were very cosy and he could not really fail to notice that Nathaniel had reacted to him moving where they were closely pressed together. He did his best to remember that it was impolite to pay attention to such things in this type of situation, but the memory of him, Draco and Nathaniel was a little too clear for him to be totally successful. Draco must have noticed his distraction because the Slytherin turned on the way to the bathroom.

"Molest him and I kill you," was the simple, clear instruction and then Draco was gone.

That left Harry in bed with two attractive men, a raging hard on and a desire to find out if Draco would mind company in the bathroom. He didn't really feel comfortable now that his lover had left the room and he wasn't exactly sure why. It didn't actually have anything to do with the company, just the absence of Draco.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Nathaniel asked, moving away from him and sitting up.

It was then that he realised he was staring at the door through which Draco had disappeared and frowning. Shaking his head Harry tried to ignore the feeling and sat up to distract himself. The light sheet that had been covering him pooled around his waist and he was very glad it hid his modesty. Now that he was properly awake his memory was beginning to work and it felt somewhat dreamlike, but he remembered his previous awakening.

He knew what he'd done because he'd spoken to Jean-Claude about what the other two vampire marks entailed, but he had been against doing anything and had not wanted to talk about what they would mean. The only thing he was sure of was that he had bound Draco to him forever and the only thing that would separate them was death. It was a daunting thought, but part of him found it strangely comforting as well. What exactly forever was for him no one could tell him, but he and Draco were now in it together.

"I'm not sure," Harry answered Nathaniel's question, feeling just a little lost.

A hand touched his shoulder and he looked around to see his friend gazing at him sympathetically.

"It was beautiful, Harry," Nathaniel said with a small smile. "Whatever you're thinking, remember that; we all felt part of it and it was beautiful."

Nathaniel was a romantic when it came down to it, under all the sub/dom things he had going on, the wereleopard believed in love, so Harry looked to someone who was a little more pragmatic. When he turned his head, Jason's usual grin was gone and there was a fond smile in its place.

"He's right," the werewolf said simply, "it was beautiful, and it made me hornier than a lupa in heat."

That knocked the romantic feelings on the head and Harry felt a smile form on his lips despite himself. It was difficult to stay dark and angsty when Jason was around.

"I thought you were always horny," Draco said from the doorway.

Either his lover had been very fast or Harry had been staring after him longer than he had imagined before Nathaniel interrupted him. Draco was completely naked still and the Slytherin walked into the room with complete confidence in a way Harry was sure he wouldn't manage for years. The lycanthrope instincts helped, but he had never been one to show off his body, not like the others seemed quite happy to do. Naked no longer felt vulnerable, but it was still very odd.

"Not that horny," Jason replied with a laugh, "thank god for werewolf healing or thanks to Remus I wouldn't be able to sit down for a week."

Harry made a face; Remus was too close to a father figure for him to be comfortable hearing about his friend's sex life. He would have politely asked Jason not to talk about it, except just as he opened his mouth Draco decided to climb back on the bed, move behind him, sit down with legs either side of him, and pull him close. All he managed was a grunt as power flowed through him in a wonderful wave; it was the most incredible feeling and he could quite easily have lost himself in it.

"Bloody hell," was what he eventually said in a rather absent, breathy voice.

"Hmm," was Draco's reply and Harry thought possibly his lover was having more trouble than he was.

The power was still moving through him and all he wanted to do was touch Draco and never stop. It was consuming and spoke to all of him, and underneath the magic there was a healthy dose of lust. What he wanted to do was turn, push Draco down on the bed and make love to him there and then. From the moan he heard as his lover buried his face in the back of his shoulder and the answering lust that came from Draco, he was pretty sure they were in agreement, but he was not quite far enough gone to forget that they had company.

Looking at Nathaniel, he could see that his friend's eyes were contracted with desire so that almost all of the black was lost in lilac, and glancing at Jason, the

werewolf was no better off. Whatever was going through him and Draco was permeating the room, and Harry did not want them to do anything they would regret.

Taking a deep breath he drew in his formidable will and brought his Occlumency shield down as well as he could. They weren't as sure and as stable as they could have been, but they worked. Some of the tension ran out of Draco and his lover relaxed against his back with a sigh. Whatever was happening between them, neither of them was the sort to relinquish control.

"Oh," Jason said, seemingly coming back to himself, "I think I need to find Remus again."

Nathaniel was just sitting there looking at them, and Harry hoped he had not done something to damage the friendship. He was trying to figure out what to say when the door opened.

"What's going on in here?" Anita's tone was a little off and Harry concluded that maybe their little breach of etiquette had not been confined completely to the bedroom.

"Nothing, more's the pity," was Jason's cheerful reply.

Anita looked to the rest of them for a sensible answer, but Harry wasn't quite ready to give one.

"Draco went to the bathroom," Nathaniel came to all their rescues, "when he came back he sat behind Harry and when they touched power flared. It was an accident."

Harry sent his friend a thank you glance because he wasn't sure he was up to saying much just yet. Occlumency had never come easily to him, although he had trained himself to use it well, and shutting off Draco was more difficult than he cared to admit. He knew it would become easier, when he practiced, Occlumency always did, but right about then what he wanted to do was reopen the marks, drown in the power and shag Draco senseless. It was quite hard not to obey his impulses.

"Are you alright?" Anita asked, looking at Harry now.

He really wasn't sure. He'd felt out of control one way or another since the moment he had woken up chained to the ceiling in someone's black magic ritual, but this was a little worse than that.

"I'd be better if you'd all leave and let me get my hands on Harry," Draco spoke before Harry had a chance and he sounded a little put out.

"I do not believe that would be a particularly good idea, *mes enfants*" Jean-Claude entered the conversation from where he was standing behind Anita. "The power of the marks is very seductive and if you control it now when it is new, it will be much easier for you later on. It is easy to become addicted to the touch."

Harry had to agree, it would be very easy. It took everything he had to pull away from Draco, and the whimper of disappointment from his lover was almost more than he could resist, but he slowly sat away from Draco and put his feet on the floor.

"How long before it becomes easier?" Harry asked, taking a deep breath and trying to steady himself.

"A few days," Jean-Claude replied with a sympathetic smile, "a week at the most, probablement."

The 'probably' was not particularly settling, but it was better than nothing. Making a quick decision Harry decided he needed some distance for a little while and he knew just the way to get it.

"I need a shower," he declared to the room and stood up.

He was more worried about jumping Draco there and then than his dignity so it barely occurred to him that he was naked and he walked quickly to the bathroom. With a door between him and Draco he might have a chance of holding it together.

End of Chapter 28

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Chapter 29 Battle plans

Scene 1

Harry was standing by the fire place and he looked every inch a Master vampire, even if Anita had to say so herself. There was not much of the kid she had first met showing in the figure dressed in a mixture of Jason and Jean-Claude's clothes. The fact that Draco was all silver hair and pale eyes next to, but not quite touching him, in an ensemble of Asher's wardrobe did nothing to dispel the picture. It was obviously taking a lot of effort for them not to touch each other and they had both retreated behind masks that were almost impossible to read through.

Everyone who had been brought to the Circus of the Damned by Harry and those who had helped during the emergency were also in the room. This was a council of war and all the soldiers were present.

"*Mon enfant*," Jean-Claude said as soon as he had everyone's attention, "would you care to enlighten us as to what occurred three days ago?"

Harry had his arms folded across his chest, almost as if it was the only thing preventing him reaching out to Draco, but he turned to Jean-Claude as soon as the Master of the City spoke. There was just a hint of the scared kid in his eyes and Anita could not help but feel for him. Harry was not hiding behind the cold, calculating persona that had faced down the Traveler, but she could tell he was close.

"Because of the bloody photo in the paper they know I'm alive," his voice was full of irritation, "and since I was one of the sacrifices the spell they're planning won't be as potent unless I'm dead. They opened the spell on my chest and used it as a conduit for something nasty. I think it was some sort of minor demon, but I've only met one once so I can't be sure."

"It was a demon," Draco added his opinion, "not a powerful one, but definitely a demon."

Anita scowled; she did not like demons. This had gone from a case of black magic to sorcery and that was not good.

"How do you know so much about demons?" Asher sounded as unhappy as Anita felt, but then most preternatural creatures did not like demons any more than humans did.

"My father used to raise them and leech their power," Draco said matter-of-factly. "It was a Death Eater hobby; once the Dark Bastard came back they needed all the dark magic they could lay their hands on. I saw it on several occasions; one of the reasons I really didn't want to join the club."

"Messing with demons is sorcery," Anita said, not liking where this conversation is going. "The people who do it are insane."

Harry just gave her a look.

"That would cover most of the Death Eaters," he said plainly and walked away from the fireplace, clearly agitated.

"Sorcery is the art of controlling a demon," Draco said and it seemed to Anita that the blond wizard barely managed to stop himself from following Harry immediately. "My father was a fanatic, but he wasn't stupid. They used powerful binding spells and curses to transfer power from one creature to another. Once you bargain with a demon you're lost, even dear Daddy was not that insane."

The bitterness in Draco's voice was obvious and once again Anita was reminded that most of those around her had anything but normal lives. If she looked at the faces in the room she knew each had a tale to tell, something in their past that was not exactly pretty. It had nearly destroyed a few of them and for a moment Anita was quite surprised that they had all made it this far. Shaking her head she turned her mind back to the problem in hand.

"The magic I've felt in this case has been evil, but it had no demon taint," she said, knowing that this was a new development.

"Then at least, ma petite," Jean-Claude said without much relief in his voice, "if we are lucky these people have obtained themselves a sorcerer rather than having one of their own."

It was a small comfort, but a likely scenario. Demon magic was powerful, but it was addictive and unstable and if those they were after had had access to it before there would have been traces. That there had been no sign of it meant that the group had probably hired themselves some extra muscle.

"They're afraid," she concluded as her mind worked out the facts. "Their master plan must be in jeopardy with Harry still alive, so the likelihood is that they'll try for him again."

"Only this time we'll be better prepared," Harry said very decisively.

"Don't get any Gryffindorish ideas," Draco said and finally moved away from the mantle piece towards Harry. "We are not using you as bait. Been there, done that, not doing it again."

Anita wanted to agree, but even as her protective instincts kicked in she knew that there might be no other way. There weren't that many sorcerers around so they might be able to find something that way, but certain demon raising practices like human sacrifice were highly illegal so sorcerers were very good at

covering their tracks. If they could not find the demon trash then they were back to square one and flushing out the bad guys was going to be difficult.

"It's a big city," Harry sounded agitated and defensive and it looked as if they'd had these kind of discussions before, "how else are we supposed to find the nutters who are doing this? They came for me once, they'll come for me again, and maybe this time we can set it up so no one else is in the firing line."

Draco's eyes hardened and Anita could see an all out fight coming on.

"Yes, well this time its not just your life on the line is it," the blond wizard said in a voice that could have chiselled stone. "You die, I die."

Anita almost winced; that was below the belt and Harry looked stricken. It was almost as if the pair was completely unaware of everyone else in the room. For a moment they just looked at each other and Harry almost reached out to Draco. The power shift in the room was tangible.

"I would never..." Harry's voice trailed off.

It was like some sort of Greek tragedy as he began to turn away from Draco who stood there like a statue. Anita wanted to step in, but this was almost a private conversation even though it was being held in front of an audience. At the last second Draco moved and his hand reached out, touching Harry's shoulder for just a moment. There was no overwhelming power spike this time, but searching the faces around her, Anita knew everyone had felt the ripple the move sent round the room. For his part Harry turned back as if compelled and reached out to Draco, but stopped short.

"I know," Draco said with a shake of his head, "I know you wouldn't, but I also know that you have a hero complex. This isn't like home; you're not the only one who can finish off the bad guy. Look around, Harry, we have an army here."

Green eyes skimmed the room, but Anita was not quite sure if Harry was convinced. Something about him seemed to be alone even among the crowd and she had the distinct feeling that Harry had been doing everything for himself for a very long time. Since Harry was only seventeen that led her to a lot of questions, but now was no time to ask.

"Exactement, mes enfant," Jean-Claude finally stepped in, walking towards the pair. "Placing anyone in danger is not an option I will allow until all other avenues have been explored. Ma petite," the vampire continued, turning back and looking at her, "how would you suggest we proceed?"

They had had a brief discussion about possibilities before the meeting began, but Anita was surprised that Jean-Claude handed the initiative over to her. Jean-Claude was the master of the city and she had expected him to take charge, and she'd even been willing to let him in this case, but obviously he had other ideas.

"Police channels may help us find the sorcerer," she said, thinking quickly, "and they already know about the attack. Dolph is still looking for the leak so I don't suggest we tell them everything, but we need them on this. The other main resource we have is man power with very good noses."

"I've already sent the word round the wolves," Richard said from where he was leaning against the wall, flanked by Jamil on one side and Shang-Da on the other. "If any of them catch the scent of demon the news will come straight back here."

"With the vampires also," Jean-Claude put in.

Anita was not surprised that wheels were already in motion, but it did please her that Richard and Jean-Claude seemed to be in agreement on something at last. When it came to preternatural politics there was always tension between the two, even more so than around her these days.

"There are not as many of us," Micah spoke up from his position with members of the pard, "but the leopards will be looking as well, and I will talk to the other communities in the coalition."

"I'm sure the wererats will lend us some muscle as well," Anita added.

Rafael's people were the second largest group of lycanthropes in the city and she had no doubt that they would help. She had enough trouble getting rid of wererat bodyguards that showed up when people decided that she was in danger, that she knew they would not duck this one.

"But what if all the searching comes up with nothing?" Harry seemed to have recovered his composure and when Anita looked over to him she was met with an emotionless mask. "Whoever is doing this seems very good at hiding and they seem to know what they're doing. Somehow they found out that I was with Anita and where she lived. They've been one step ahead of us all the way."

"We cross that bridge when we come to it," Anita said firmly.

She did not like being reminded that her home and people had been attacked. These people were lunatics, but they were clever lunatics and there was clear planning in everything they had done. So far their only real mistake had been leaving Harry alive.

"Oui," Jean-Claude agreed. "For now, mon enfant, you stay here, safe, and let the remainder of us worry about how to proceed. You have been through much over the last few weeks; it is time for you to recuperate and for us to clean up our city."

It was said with such finality that Anita did not even open her mouth to add anything. Harry did not look happy about Jean-Claude's announcement, but he did not argue either. Anita had no doubt that the peace would not last for long, but at least now they had a battle plan.

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Scene 2

Harry paced his and Draco's room, moving from one side of it to the other and back again. He felt like he was being coddled even though he knew that everything was being done to try and find a solution to the situation. The madmen who wanted him dead may have chosen him at random, but now it was personal and Harry wanted to do something about it. He had spent months being protected by the Order, cooped up in Grimauld Place during the holidays when he could not stay at Hogwarts, and this felt just the same.

He was a doer and sitting back letting others deal with everything was something he had never been good at. The fact that he couldn't just forget himself in Draco was also driving him to distraction. He'd retreated to their room because he had

begun snapping at everyone and he really didn't need the whole Circus annoyed with him as well.

He knew before the door opened that Draco had come to find him, but he continued to pace even as his lover entered the room.

"You look like a caged animal," Draco said after a moment's silence.

"Good, because that's what I feel like," Harry replied and immediately regretted the harshness in his voice.

His beast was shifting restlessly under his skin and his vampire was not quiet either, both of which were making him jumpy and short tempered. He hadn't felt quite like this since the disaster that had been his fifth year at school.

"Everyone is doing everything they can," Draco said in a patient tone, but with an underlying note to his voice that told Harry he had almost run out of rope.

"I know," Harry replied exasperatedly, "that's part of the problem. They're all out there trying to catch the enemy and we're in here being completely useless. You'd think I could at least have another vision or something. That might actually help."

There was no reply from Draco and Harry continued pacing, staring at the floor. It was only after a few long seconds when there was still nothing from the Slytherin that Harry glanced up and found that he was being given a stern look. It appeared that Draco might have just about run out of patience.

"Drop the self pity," his lover said pointedly, "it doesn't suit you. We're not being useless, we're being normal. People don't run out and face their enemies alone you know, they rely on the professionals to do their job. This is not our city, Harry, we're not at war anymore. All we'd be out there is a liability and a target. I am not risking you unless everything else has failed, do you understand?"

All of this was said with such vehemence that Harry actually stopped walking and just stared at Draco. His anger and frustration did not go away completely, but they dimmed as he realised that his lover was just as frustrated, but handling it better. The whole sexual tension thing going on probably wasn't helping matters either.

"I'm sorry," he said eventually, and he meant it, "I know I'm being a royal pain, but I'm going crazy. Its like the walls are closing in."

It had only been a day since the council of war, but there was no news and the Circus was beginning to feel like a prison. If Harry didn't get out soon he knew he was going to go stark raving bonkers, and considering quite how powerful he was, that would not be good.

The draw between himself and Draco had faded a little, but he still craved his lover's touch and it was uncomfortable to stay apart. Jean-Claude had tried to tell him how well he was doing at one point, but all that had earned his friend was a snarl and words that should probably not have been repeated. Harry would be the first to admit that at the moment he was worse than a dragon with stomach ache. The only person who wouldn't put up with his nonsense was Anita and they had had a loud slanging match earlier in the day after which they had both apologised and walked away from each other. Harry didn't think Anita dealt well with waiting either.

"I think," Draco said, looking at him thoughtfully, "that you need a little outing."

That was not what Harry had expected at all and he must have looked quite shocked because Draco gave him a smile.

"Out of here?" he asked, just to make sure he wasn't getting the wrong end of the stick.

Draco nodded.

"There had been no sign of activity at all since the last attack," the Slytherin said, "and Jean-Claude seems to think the people doing this are regrouping. I'm not suggesting we go shopping or anything stupid like that, but we need some more things from the house and if we're careful we shouldn't have a problem."

"When?" Harry asked, almost heading to the door immediately.

That earned him an amused expression from his lover.

"Not tonight," Draco said with a shake of his head. "I already broached the subject with Asher to see what he thought and we're agreed that daylight would be preferable to darkness. If nothing has come up by tomorrow morning then we can go and pick up our things."

Harry couldn't help being a little disappointed, for a moment he had been so excited and now he had to wait, but at least he had something to wait for. Without his conscious consent his feet began their pacing again.

"If you keep doing that it's me who is going to go mental," Draco said in an exasperate voice.

That drew him to a halt again, but he felt like he was going to burst at any moment. He had so much pent up energy and if he couldn't pace he didn't know what he was going to do with it.

"I don't care if we're not supposed to touch," Draco said, taking a step towards him, "if we don't do something you're going to explode. To hell with it, come here."

It was like the order lanced straight into his brain and bypassed his good sense as Harry moved towards Draco immediately. Arms reached for him and he reached back, pulling Draco into a kiss before his conscious brain had even caught up. It felt like pure heaven and Harry let himself sink into the sensation without caring about the consequences. So it might take them a little more work to deal with the touching issue, but right now both of them needed this far more than an easy life.

"Make love to me," Draco said breathlessly as the Slytherin pulled back from the kiss, "make love to me now."

Harry had never been so glad to obey an instruction in his life and it never occurred to him to hesitate as he set to removing Draco's clothes in earnest.

End of Chapter 29

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Chapter 30 Hunter or Hunted
Scene 1

They were only going to pick up some things from Draco's house, a simple errand that should have been easy. Jason was driving the car and Harry followed Draco out of the door to head up the steps to the front entrance. He had reached the bottom first step and Draco was headed up when he heard something that sounded like strong wind. Turning he felt something thud into his chest, taking the wind from him and throwing him backwards.

It was so sudden that at first it didn't hurt and the way he hit the pavement was worse, but it did not take long for his mind to catch up. White hot agony shot through his chest from the point of contact, burning and stabbing at his nerves taking away all other thought.

"Harry!" he heard Draco's voice, but he felt strangely disconnected from reality as his body tried to process the pain.

Looking up he could see the shocked and worried face of his lover gazing down at him and he found Draco beautiful even as he tried to comprehend what was happening. It was almost as if everything was in slow motion as he saw first one and then another bolt thud into Draco, throwing his lover sideways. For a moment it was almost as if all he could see was red as the world came back to normal speed.

Harry reached out to Draco, with his mind and body, feeling his lover's pain as he fell and desperate to do something, but it was as if they were frozen in time as the world went on around them. The shaft in his chest felt as if it was on fire and he could feel something seeping into his system making the world around him fuzzy. Draco was in danger; Draco was hurt, but Harry couldn't do anything. Everything was dimming and his magic was sluggish and would not do what he wanted it to. He could feel Draco, but his thoughts would not work properly to connect with his lover's.

He heard Jason's shout and he wanted to help, to protect those he cared about, but nothing seemed to work quite right. Moving hurt and seemed to take more energy than he had in his whole body. Even as his preternatural aspects rose to the surface it did no good. As his cat tried to break through it was as if it was shackled and the bolt in his chest flared with heat. It lanced through his beast like lightning causing it to shrink back like an injured kitten and it occurred to his sluggish brain that he had been shot with silver. His human part was only slightly allergic to the metal through association, but to his cat it could be deadly.

His vampire was no better off and his instincts wanted to reach out for strength from his human servant, but hurt was coming from Draco as well. Draco was injured, badly injured and there was a need in Harry to try and heal him, but he had no ability to do so. Every time he reached out with anything he was engulfed in agony and fear and even his eyes were beginning to fail him.

A shadowy figure was leaning over him holding something, but he couldn't tell what. It was as if his eyes were back to how they had been and he didn't have his glasses as everything took on a surreal tone. Rough hands reached down to him and he could do nothing as he was hauled to his feet. The world vanished in a wave of negative and the only thing that kept him upright was the pair of hands holding him up and they were not gentle.

Another of his captors dragged his hands behind his back, pulling on the wound in his chest making him groan with pain and then roughly handcuffed. The way the metal tingled against his skin he knew his shackles had some silver in them.

He could not see much, but being held on his feet he could see more than when he had been on the ground. There were at least five people near him and three of them were between him and Draco. That was not right and somewhere in his rapidly fogging brain he needed to do something about it. Draco needed his help and he managed to focus enough energy to try and pull away from the hands holding him. Almost instantly he was dragged back towards his captor and one of the figures in front of him reached out and took hold of the bolt in his chest. The person twisted it viciously and Harry could not stop the howl of pain that was wrenched from his body as his knees went weak.

"No!" it was Draco's voice, filled with agony and desperation.

There was also snarling from further away and even cowed the cat in Harry recognised a fellow lycanthrope.

"Put that one out of its misery," a male voice said from close to him, "and let the sorcerer's pet eat the wolf."

"Leave him alone," Harry tried to say, but all that came out was a jumble of sounds.

They meant to kill Draco. They were going to hurt his beloved and he couldn't do anything about it. Pure despair welled up in him as he was dragged away from his fallen lover and he had no strength to fight back. There was a sickening thud and the sound of pain as Harry felt the reflection of agony from Draco. He knew without a doubt that the moment Draco died so would he and it was the one thought he welcomed. These madmen obviously wanted him alive for some reason and they would not get their wish.

"Jesus, he's still alive."

Harry did not know who spoke, but all he could do was pray that something would happen before their meaning was lost. Draco was weak, he could feel it and there was little strength coming from him. Too much confusion and pain prevented any sensible thought, but Harry had one last thing he needed to tell his Slytherin.

[I love you,] he threw at Draco with all the mental strength he had left.

He heard the sound of something being loaded and he knew it was the end. They were going to shoot Draco again, and this time it would kill him. Yet, even as he braced himself for the cold touch of death there was the loud sound of snarling. There was the sound of a bolt flying from a bow of some sort and then a thud, but there was no answering pain from Draco and the whine that followed was lycanthrope.

"Shit, there's more than one," the voice sounded panicked, but Harry could not tell what was going on.

All he knew was that he was suddenly being dragged away faster and he felt the essence of pure evil seeping into his bones. There was the sound of fighting, but the fast movement and the waves of pain coming from Draco and his own wound

were too much. Knowing that he might never wake up again he could do nothing to stop the darkness from reaching up and taking him.

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Scene 2

Anita was trying to be calm and professional, but on the inside she was frantic. Harry was missing, Draco was only just this side of death and it was only thanks to two unknown lycanthropes that Jason had not met his maker. As it was, one of those lycanthropes, a werewolf, was dead and the other, a weretiger, had been in surgery for only just shorter than Draco. The doctors had given them word that both had survived that far, but those waiting had no other word.

The only reason Draco was still alive was because one of the Wizarding healers had turned up at the hospital and offered his assistance. Anita did not know how the man had known, or where he had come from, but she had not argued when it was clear that the normal doctors had given up on the injured wizard. It had seemed to take just as long as the kind of treatment she was used to, but she had heard something about counteracting a potion before she was thrown out of the area like everyone else. She had been pacing the corridor with Nathaniel, Jason and Lupin ever since. Jason had a bandage on his arm to show for his brush with death.

How could a day have gone downhill so fast and so far? It was almost incomprehensible. They had had their plan of attack and everything had seemed to have a new energy, but now this. The enemy had been brighter than they had thought and using weapons and a demon on a public street had not been anything they had expected. Anita had been kicking herself for the last three hours as they waited to hear about Draco and she had shooed Jean-Claude out of her mind when he had tried to comfort her. She didn't want to be comforted; she had been an idiot and people were hurt so she wanted to hurt too.

When a doctor in green scrubs and the Wizarding healer in his odd looking clothes walked through the double doors in the corridor it was all Anita could do not to grab them and demand answers.

"Well?" she said pointedly when both men stood there looking solemn.

"The weretiger is stable and awake," the doctor said in a very serious voice. "He insists that he must speak with you, Ms Blake, or the Master of the city."

At least that would good news; she would have some answers.

"And Draco?" Remus sounded as agitated as Anita felt.

"We are waiting to see if the stabilisation spells are successful," it was the healer who spoke this time. "The silver bolts have been removed and the potion has been purged from Mr Malfoy's system, but he is in magical and physical crisis. I'm afraid we won't know either way for several hours."

And they wouldn't have to wait if his kidnappers killed Harry, but Anita managed to stop herself voicing that. At least the blond wizard was not dead; it had been a very close thing. That was about the only good thing Anita could see about the whole situation, but maybe now she could start to do something.

"Can I see the lycanthrope?" she asked bluntly, determined not to dwell on the knowledge that they might have already lost.

"He's weak," the doctor did not look happy, "but I do not think he will settle until he had seen you, so yes, but only for a few minutes. If you can, we would like his name."

Anita nodded. She was determined to have some answers even if she did have to agree with an official to get it.

"This way," the doctor said and indicated the doors behind him.

Nathaniel stood up from where he was huddled in a chair next to Jason and went to follow her as Anita walked as directed.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said almost instantly, "but only one visitor at a time. The stress on the patient must be kept to a minimum."

Those big lilac eyes were not happy when Anita indicated that Nathaniel should stay put, but he did return to his chair. She knew Nathaniel just wanted to be there to support her and it gave her a little comfort.

"I'll be back soon," she promised and then followed the doctor down the hall.

The weretiger's room was not far down the corridor and she followed the physician into the dimly lit room, not sure what she expected to see. What greeted her was a pale eyed, dark haired man who looked completely exhausted, but never-the-less awake. He met her gaze as soon as she walked in and she knew a powerful lycanthrope when she saw one. This was no wandering good Samaritan, of that Anita was very sure.

"Five minutes," was all the doctor said before he backed out and closed the door.

There was silence for a while as Anita contemplated the man in the bed and he did the same in kind. It was almost like assessing a possible threat, but both of them knew they were on the same side.

"I believe we have you to thank for preventing two deaths," Anita finally spoke. "I'm sorry about your friend."

"Karl knew it was a dangerous assignment when we took it," the man in the bed replied in an accented voice, "he would have been glad to die in a good cause."

Anita had spent enough time around Jean-Claude to know a French man when she heard one and she had a suspicion she knew what she was about to be told.

"Now that my presence had been revealed I wish to apologise for any deception and offer my allegiance for the length of my stay," the man in the bed said formally.

It wasn't how Anita would have started a conversation, but they did things very differently in Europe, and she thought that this lycanthrope probably associated with people with very long memories.

"You can start with your name and why you are here," she said calmly. "Then we'll talk about allegiances."

"As you wish," the man replied, leaning his head back on his pillow here he had been looking up. "My name is Michel Ravione, and I am here in the employ of the Council, but I believe you had guessed that already."

Anita inclined her head to agree, but did not speak. Sometimes if you gave someone enough rope they would hang themselves without you having to do anything.

"Our instructions were to protect the hybrid and his human servant at all costs," Ravione continued with regret in his voice. "I can only apologise for our failure; I would have given my life if it would have helped."

"They are both still alive," Anita replied, not in the mood for a martyr to the cause, "that's better than it could have been. Why is the Council protecting Harry?"

Ravione looked back at her again and she was sure he would have shrugged had he not been bandaged over his whole chest and one shoulder.

"I am but a soldier, Ms Blake," he told her, "I am not privy to my masters' reasoning. My instructions were to remain hidden and if discovered offer my services to the Master of the City or his human servant, so that is what I am doing."

It was always games when the Council were involved and Anita was very sure that if they had gone to the trouble of leaving bodyguards behind then they felt Harry was far more important than even the Traveler had made out. Maybe they really were convinced that Mommy Dearest was going to wake up. She shook her head; guessing games with the Council were not going to help now.

"Right," she said shortly, "you've done your duty, great. Now can you tell me anything useful?"

Ravione's face was blank for a moment and Anita was pretty sure that she had managed to annoy him, but she was not in the mood to be nice.

"We were instructed to stay close to our charges," Ravione said eventually, "but I believe we may have seen more than your people. Your enemies were using a pair of sorcerers, one female for the attack at your residence, one male for that attack today. The female is dead. Whatever happened at your house, her demon turned around and killed her for it. The man was with the group who took Potter and he's powerful; he controlled the demon with lesser bindings."

Anita did not know much about sorcery, but she knew enough to know that took experience. An average sorcerer would only raise a demon in a circle to prevent escape, but it was possible with other bindings. Not as guaranteed as the name suggested, but it could be done. Anita hated demons, but at least she now knew something about what they were up against. It wasn't much, but when she looked back at Ravione she saw his eyelids drooping, even though he tried to cover it as soon as he saw her watching him.

It seemed that all alpha lycanthropes were macho on some level, but this one was half dead, and it was beginning to show.

"Do you know anything that could help us find Harry?" she asked bluntly, aware that she was running out of time.

Ravione shook his head and looked very apologetic.

"We were bodyguards," Ravione said slowly, "we did not have the resources to follow the enemy."

It wasn't what Anita wanted to hear, but it wasn't exactly a shock and she nodded.

"Then get some sleep, Ravione," she said firmly, "before you pass out and the nice doctor yells at me. The longer explanations can wait until you're stronger."

For a moment she thought the lycanthrope would object so she gave him her best don't-mess-with-me face and eventually the man nodded just slightly. Unfortunately he was not a get out of jail free card, but at least he had been there to make sure Draco was not dead. Anita studied him for a moment and then she turned and walked out; there was nothing more to say.

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Scene 3

It hurt just to breathe and Harry could barely convince his abused body to drag in enough oxygen to survive. He knew he was drugged, but what was worse was the barely existent life force next to his own. Until Draco had almost been killed he had had no idea quite how closely they were connected, but now he knew the meaning of their bond. His whole body was shaking and there was no strength in any part of him. The chains that his captors had all but cocooned him in seemed ridiculous.

The wound in his chest still burned, as did the spell scar and he vaguely understood that those who had him were preparing something, but his mind would not stick to any particular thought. He did not know how long he had been lying on the floor and he could barely tell that he was in some sort of storage room; all that his mind could concentrate on was the distant heart beat of his lover. It was if he was listening to Draco sleep in a bed next to him as the sense of life trickled through his mind, seemingly ever on the verge of stopping. It was all that mattered.

{Death}

The sound of a voice brought him just a little way out of the shock that was taking over his entire system.

{Nasty death.}

He had no idea where the sound was coming from, but it triggered something in his mind. Something that was not waiting to die woke up and realised that this was not the voice of the enemy.

{Wha..at?} he asked, his voice unsteady and barely there, but managing the simple word.

The familiar feel of parseltongue was almost too much for him in his weakened state. It caused his throat to tighten and the need to cough filled his chest, but he clung on to his control. There was no reply for a few moments, but he could hear the quiet hiss of scales on a wooden floor and as he stared ahead, almost unseeing, a small blob appeared in front of him.

{You smell of death,} what he had to assume was the snake said matter-of-factly. {Will you depart soon?}

{Don't... don't want... to die,} was what Harry managed to force from his reluctant mouth.

{Yet you lie here,} the snake replied with the blatant honesty he had come to expect from the animals.

That was a fact he could not refute, but snakes had a very limited comprehension of anything that was not natural.

{Need help,} he said, trying to make the creature understand.

Every word caused the pain in his chest to build, but he was more awake now than he had been since the attack. With something to focus on his survival instincts were taking notice.

{I cannot help you,} the snake replied, {you are too big. I have venom if you would like a quicker death.}

{No,} Harry replied, trying to sound polite even as the strength to speak was leaving him, {I cannot... take that path.}

The snake made a few hisses that did not translate into words; Harry thought the serpent found him confusing.

{Do you,} Harry began again, forcing the words from his lips, {know the place where the Mistress of serpents is?}

He had tried to say lamia, but it obviously had another meaning in parseltongue. The blob in front of his face reared up and swayed.

{All know of her power,} the creature said reverently, {but her place is out of my territory.}

{She can help,} Harry tried to convey the urgency he was feeling. {Could you...} the desire to cough almost took away his voice, {could you go to her?}

{Her place is not within my territory,} the snake insisted and Harry's hopes began to fade.

How could he explain that this was more important than territory? To a snake there were three priorities in life: food, territory and mate. Dying was just a matter of natural course and his companion clearly wasn't following him. Searching his mind he tried to find an argument that the snake might understand, but before he could speak there was a loud slamming sound and light flooded into his little room.

"I heard something," a voice said vehemently.

{Please,} Harry whispered to the snake as if ducked away from him.

"He's trying to do something," the voice said, and he could hear fear in the tone.

"Then shut him up," was the cold response, and Harry had no time to even say anything before hands were grabbing him.

The pain of movement took away any voice he had left and the world faded out as his captors manhandled him to keep him quiet.

End of Chapter 30

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Chapter 31 Curtain Call

Scene 1

Anita looked up from where she was trying to eat dinner even though she did not feel like food at all. She had learned to her cost that if she didn't eat bad things happened and she took feeding in all ways very seriously. What little appetite she had vanished completely when she saw who had just entered the room. Every so often she still had nightmares about Raju, Melanie's partially transformed mate from when she had been forced into the cave containing the mutated human. If it had been possible she would have preferred Melanie dead, but the lamia was truly immortal and nothing would kill her, well nothing Anita had control of anyway.

Why the preternatural creature had decided to visit Jean-Claude's living space was a mystery and Anita wished she did not have to find out. She and Melanie would never see eye to eye and they usually stayed as far away from each other as possible. Jean-Claude stood politely as soon as Melanie entered. The lamia was carrying a small brown snake and Anita shivered at the way she was stoking the thing.

"Melanie, this is a delightful surprise," Jean-Claude greeted with a smile. "How may I be of assistance?"

Anita knew it was good politics to keep the lamia happy, but she didn't have to like it. She tried to look at least non-hostile.

"You are missing the young wizard," Melanie said, holding up the snake as if it was important, "he has sent me a messenger."

Now Anita stood and for the first time ever she believed that the lamia might be worth her skin. If Melanie could help them find Harry, Anita was willing to bury the hatchet for good.

"You know where to find Harry?" she asked, not caring at all how her eagerness would affect the situation.

There was bitterness in Melanie's eyes as she looked at Anita and for a moment she thought the lamia would not answer, but eventually Melanie nodded.

"I do not normally concern myself with such matters," the lamia said coolly, "but I find this child of Salazar captures my attention. I ask only that you tell him I would value his company for a short time when he is safe, and I will help you find him."

Melanie was not usually helpful with anything she did not have to be. Anita had heard Jean-Claude complain about the lamia on several occasions, but as they looked at each other Anita had a revelation; the creature was lonely. It was rather a shock and she doubted that Melanie would ever voice what Anita thought she knew, but in the depth of her soul, Anita knew it was true. For a moment she regretted killing Raju, but it had been a kill or be killed situation and Anita was a survivor and she had had no choice.

"We will tell him," Jean-Claude said with his calm face in place.

"The small one has come a long way out of his territory," Melanie said as her price was met. "He speaks of death in the place that is his, but he only knows how many territories he had travelled through, not how far he has come as we would measure it. The only method of returning to Harry is to follow the small one home."

It sounded like a long laborious task, but what else could they do? Anita nodded without trying to object; in this she was helpless.

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Scene 2

Cogs were moving, Jean-Claude was preparing people should they be needed, and Anita was trying to work out how much and when to tell Dolph what was going on. So far they had a snake that they had to follow, which the Mobile Reserve would like about as much as a hole in the head. She was also wondering when to call Richard because she knew he would want in on this, but he was even less patient than the cops. Calling in Richard too soon could result in a pissing contest between him and Jean-Claude, and calling him in too late could result in manly sulking, which in Richard's case meant bad things. If Anita hadn't been quite so worried she might have been amused.

Standing up she decided that whatever the hell anyone else was going to do, she was going to get moving. The members of the pard who weren't at the hospital with Draco were scattered around the room and they all climbed to their feet as she did. There was a feeling of complete support as they all looked to her and she knew that where she led they would follow. However, she was also aware that they could be walking into a demon confrontation, and she was not about to take anyone into that she did not have to, especially when she knew several of the pard were atheists and hence had no protection in prayer.

She glanced at the clock and then swore colourfully, as she realised that luck was not on her side. So much had been going on that it never occurred to her to keep an eye on the time; dawn was less than an hour away which ruled out all vampire assistance.

"Ma petite," Jean-Claude said, his eyes flicking to the clock face as well and then back to her, "there are other resources upon which I may call, other than our vampires."

Anita tried not to glare at him, she really did, but she was now out of patience. One of hers was missing, another was lying in the hospital near death; she could not sit still a moment longer.

"No time," she said firmly, completely adamant about what she was thinking. "You round up the cavalry, but some of us need to start the search now."

Even as she spoke she began to plan properly and a clear idea of what to do formed in her mind. Surprisingly, when she looked at Jean-Claude, ready for an argument, all he did was nod.

"Micah," she continued, since everyone, including Lupin seemed to be looking to her and not objecting, "you, me, Lupin and Jason are the search party. There's no point in more than that, it'll just frighten the snake."

Melanie had made it very clear that the snake was wild and not fond of humans, or anything that didn't speak its language actually. A small party could move faster and not frighten the damn thing away. She knew that Micah would insist on going as would Lupin and having a wizard on hand would be an extremely good idea. Since Jason and Lupin were all but joined at the hip, or should that be groin, she was not about to try and futilely protect the younger werewolf.

"Everyone else gets to be backup when we find the bastards who ..." she faltered as alarm shot through her.

A fear that was not her own leapt at her and she was no longer looking at Jean-Claude's living room. Stupid, stupid, she'd been so stupid! Only it wasn't her who had been stupid, it was Richard and all around him there were figures, their faces in shadow. Her lover's regret and fear swamped her as he berated himself for leaving the safety of his house without bodyguards when there were madmen on the loose with an unspecified goal.

Richard's beast was rising, Anita could feel it; he would not go down without a fight, but Anita felt so helpless as all she could do was watch. Her body and mind opened to her Ulfric and she could feel a tinge of Jean-Claude's power in the mix as well. She offered Richard everything she had if it would save him, but she did not know what to do.

Her own beast rose with that of Richard and she was peripherally aware of it pressing against her skin trying to break bonds with nowhere to go. It hurt, but it cut nowhere near as deep as the fear coming from her lover. Anita knew he was about to attack, she could feel it, and then there was a sharp stabbing pain. It was in Richard's chest and yet it almost felt like her own; then another and another.

Almost instantly Anita became more aware of herself, as if the link to Richard was fading. Her last glimpse was of her Ulfric looking down at himself and seeing three silver darts sticking out of his body, and then blackness reached up to engulf Richard. The connection was severed like a piece of elastic and she slammed back into her own body, her legs going weak as the overwhelming experience ended. If Micah had not been there she would have fallen, but strong arms held her up.

She glanced over to where Asher was hovering next to a stricken looking Jean-Claude. Obviously her vampire lover had been just as affected by the experience, but even as she watched his usual mask of vampire calm slipped back into place and he waved off Asher's helping hand.

"Oh god," Anita said as the reality of the situation span round her mind, "they've taken Richard."

Consequences piled into her head and all the facts began to make sense.

"Ma petite," Jean-Claude said, walking towards her and taking her from Micah's safe embrace, "we will find him."

But Anita's mind was moving too fast to accept any comfort, even if it was sincerely meant.

"Don't you get it?" she asked as the whole thing began to become clear. "The ritual used the elements of a triumvirate, Harry's blood had the power of all three

in it and they used it to create some sort of potion. They were never going after just you, they want all of us."

The implications of such a move were enormous and she began to realise that this whole case was not about a vendetta, or small ideas. If someone could control the triumvirate that was Jean-Claude, Richard and herself, they would have the whole preternatural community of St Louis at their beck and call.

"We have to find Harry and Richard," she said resolutely as she realised that this was a covert war, "and we have to find them now."

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Scene 3

Following a snake was not as bad as Anita had feared. They were using a car, climbing out every now and then and following directions from Melanie. The snake had taken a straight line, and it was more difficult using roads, but they were making headway far more quickly than Anita had expected. They weren't there yet, but they were definitely making good progress. As soon as they were close she would phone back for support and Jean-Claude would contact the police.

Jason was driving, which turned out to be a very good plan when Anita felt her world lurch for the second time that evening. This one was not so sudden, but she felt Richard waking up and he seemed to be instinctively reaching through the marks. He was groggy and uncomfortable and at first that was all Anita could make out since there was no clarity from her lover at all.

Her skin felt like it was hot and burning slightly, as if out in the sun too long and it took her a while to realise that Richard was chained to something, and she had no doubt that the chains were silver. She had never experienced a lycanthrope's allergy to silver from the inside before and she could not understand why some of her cats insisted on wearing it if it felt like this.

Richard's beast was stirring lethargically, but there was little fight that Anita could feel in him. Whatever his captors had shot into Richard was wearing off, but not enough to give him any clarity of thought and Anita tried to send him some of her strength to speed up the process.

[Together, ma petite,] Jean-Claude's voice filled her mind and she could feel him through the marks.

It was very close to dawn and Jean-Claude's strength was beginning to wane, but Anita did not argue and together they fed their power to their third. Anita could feel Richard beginning to come back to himself, but he was still weak and there was not much more they could do. It was possible that there might be some clue to his whereabouts in his immediate surroundings so Anita tried to keep Richard as mentally close as possible as he began to recover.

"Take his head," she heard through Richard's ears and she could see a blurry person in front of her as her lover's presence washed over her, but she could not tell what was going on.

Mild pain of someone viciously pulling Richard's hair made it to her and then she could feel him struggling. Something hard hit him across the face and Anita felt as if she had been slapped and she felt as trapped as Richard. Hands were holding his head and then he was choking as something was poured down his

throat. It burned and filled his senses with the smell of blood and death and Anita had to hold on to her beast as it rose in recognition, wanting to know what was going on.

As Richard screamed so did she and there was an answering cry from Jean-Claude, but it was not the physical pain the noxious liquid caused that made them cry out, it was what the potion was doing on a metaphysical level. Anita could feel the tendrils of magic worming their way into Richard from the blood-laced liquid, seeking out the werewolf's power and the marks. Part of it reached for her, shrinking away only at the last moment and winding around the connection between her and Richard. It was evil and insidious and it squeezed at the power connecting them, throttling it and insinuating itself into her place.

She found herself aware of only herself and for a moment it terrified her. All that was left was the tiniest link between her and Richard so that she could tell he was still there, but could not touch him. She felt bewildered and lost and so very alone, and she did the only thing she could; desperately she reached out for Jean-Claude.

The marks between them opened wide and she clung to him as she felt his own sense of loss and despair.

[They've taken him,] she all but wailed; [Jean-Claude they've taken our Richard.]

She was almost hysterical. Once she would have done anything to be able to break the marks, to end the pain that Jean-Claude and Richard caused in her life, but now that someone had almost taken one of them away from her she could not cope. Jean-Claude's mental presence held her as they shared their pain at the separation.

[You will return him to us, ma petite,] Jean-Claude said, his mental voice sure and full of confidence that Anita did not feel. [I have seen you overcome more than this. We are stronger than they, and they shall feel the depth of our anger.]

They held to each other for a few moments more and then Anita slowly began to pull back.

[He will be ours again,] she said simply, her will hardening again and then she withdrew back into herself.

She found that she was hunched up between the seat and the window of the jeep and her face was wet. Three worried men were surrounding her and they had obviously been trying to get her attention since all looked relieved as she blinked at them. This was no time for hysterics and no time to fall apart and taking a deep breath she slowly sat up properly.

"Are you alright?" it was Jason who voiced the question that the others were obviously all thinking.

"They used the potion on Richard," Anita said, her voice far less strong than she had hoped, "but now we're going to get him back."

"The small one indicated north," was the only reply she received and it came from Melanie where the lamia was sitting calming in the back of the car.

All the lycanthropes still looked worried, but when Anita glared they all took their seats again. As Jason gunned the engine Anita looked out into the predawn city

and sent up a quiet prayer that it was possible to retrieve Richard's mind once they had his body.

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Scene 4

Waiting for the Mobile reserve unit would have seemed like a sensible idea, but Anita was far beyond sensible. Fear and loss had morphed into silent fury and she had never been good at sitting still when there was work to be done. She was also one hundred percent certain that her companions were not about to wait around either; the look in Lupin's eyes was a scary thing to behold. The police had been called and they would arrive when they arrived, but Anita was not about to let Harry or Richard die while the rescue party hung around and talked about tactics.

The old warehouse was the epitome of clichéd venues for the black magic that Anita could feel in the air, and she crept through the door slowly with her gun drawn. Lupin was directly behind her with his wand in hand and they were followed by Jason and Micah, both of whom had chosen to shift into their half and half forms. They were not a huge rescue party, but they were a very talented one.

Sending out tendrils of her power, Anita could tell that there had been death magic used in this place, but so far she felt no demon taint. Two shifted lycanthropes, one wizard and a federal marshal were easily a match for a bunch of human ritualists, it was the demonic involvement that was worrying Anita. It was possible they had only hired a sorcerer to help them catch Harry and they were back to their own brand of magic now, and that was what she was hoping. Very few, even the darkest witches, would use demon magic unless they absolutely had to. It was like a line human beings as a whole dreaded to cross.

Melanie had refused to do anything to help in the actual rescue and was waiting outside. For once Anita did not blame the lamia, Melanie might have been immortal, but demons were bad news even if you couldn't die. Having your soul eaten was likely to finish off even the hardiest creature.

As Anita paused to gather her bearings she heard Lupin whisper something behind her. When she turned the wizard had his wand flat on his hand and it was moving like a compass needle. Their eyes met and Lupin pointed in the direction the wand was indicating; no words were needed.

They were headed for the back of the building where there was an ominous looking door. Dawn was beginning to lighten the sky and Anita could just pick out the details of symbols on the wood as twilight turned darkness to grey through the big windows. She and Micah took one side of the door and Remus and Jason the other before she reached over and turned the waiting handle. A faint tingle of magic ran up her arm as she touched it, but it was nothing she had not been expecting.

There was no noise or indication that they had been seen from inside so she let her gun lead her into the room. What she saw stopped her dead. It wasn't the dark red walls that caught her attention or the altar to one end of the room, it was the four x-shaped racks with silver chains, and two were occupied.

Against one wall there were three of the racks, to one of which Richard was chained, spread-eagled and helpless. He had been stripped naked and his skin was red where the silver chains used to bind him were burning whatever they

touched. His head was hanging forward, his medium length hair falling over his face making it impossible for Anita to tell anything about his expression. On his chest was an angry red brand of a sign of three – it looked fresh.

The fourth rack was in the centre of the room, nearly horizontal with the floor in the centre of a ritual circle. Harry was attached to this one in the same naked state as Richard, but with even more chains than were on her lover. It was obvious to Anita who the perpetrator of this crime feared the most, and it was not the Ulfic of the local pack. Harry's face was towards the door, his eyes were closed and there was tape over his mouth, but what made the bile rise in Anita's throat was not the fact that whoever was doing this had silenced Harry, it was that they had made very sure he could not cast any spells. They had nailed his hands to the rack with large, iron nails through the centre of both palms.

It was obvious these people knew about Harry's lycanthropy and magical skills, at least in part, but Anita could not see any precautions against the vampire in the young man's nature. She forced herself to concentrate on the good not the bad, or she would be useless for anything. Both men were alive and their injuries would heal and Anita repeated this to herself over and over again as she pushed her body into action.

There was a quiet growl from behind her and when she glanced back Lupin was surveying the room from the doorway. His usually blue eyes were wolf golden and Anita could tell he was holding himself from shifting by a huge feat of will. She could not really blame him, she felt the same, but she motioned for silence and began to move into the room.

There was another door on the other wall, near where Richard was restrained and she motioned Micah and Jason to go and check it out. What she did not want was a room full of black magic users popping in while she was trying to free either of the captives. Both lycanthropes moved to obey and skirted around either side of the room, alert for any traps under Anita's watchful eye. Once they reached their destination she turned her attention to the other problem at hand; extracting Harry and Richard from their bonds. From where she was standing Richard looked bad, but Harry looked worse, so she moved towards the unconscious wizard with Lupin only a step behind her.

The moment she set foot in the circle she knew she had been baited and the trap had just been sprung. Lupin was half in and half out of the circle being just behind her when the whole thing flared with power, and the unfortunate werewolf was thrown backwards like he was in an explosion. Anita saw all this out of the corner of her eye and when she turned Lupin was laying against the wall in a heap, very much unconscious from the impact. What was worse than the loss of a powerful ally was the feeling that crept over her skin; she sensed demon.

The amount of shielding it must have taken to stop her sensing it before had to have been incredible, but it had fallen the moment she stepped into the circle and she could feel the power in the room. Both Jason and Micah tried to reach her, but there was a glow to the air around the circle and both lycanthrope's froze the moment they touched it. The mew that came from Micah told Anita that the experience was not pleasant at all.

The power in the circle was building and the other door opened as Anita tried to decide what to do. If she touched the barrier it was possible she would end up as helpless as Jason and Micah, or it could be even nastier from the inside, so to escape she had to break the magic first. Ignoring the six robed figures entering the room as something to deal with once she could be sure bullets would be

useful she felt the magic around her. This was a combination of human and demon power, she could tell, and she had a nasty suspicion she was about to meet the demon.

A seventh figure entered the room as the robed ritualists took up positions around the circle and began to chant. The newcomer was not dressed like the others, in fact he looked like an ordinary business man unless you looked into his eyes. Where there should have been whites and irises there were black pools of nothing. Anita knew she was looking at the sorcerer.

"Good morning, Miss Blake," the stranger said in an aristocratic British accent and if Anita's hackles hadn't been fully risen already, the 'Miss' would have done it, "it is a pleasure to meet you. I have heard so much about your exploits and long wanted to meet you, but alas, my employers wish this finished as quickly as possible."

"Doing other's dirty work how you get your kicks?" Anita shot back, hoping to distract the man long enough to come up with a plan, but he simply smiled and then lifted his arms.

The stream of Latin that fell from his lips was unfamiliar to Anita, but she got the gist and was not surprised when a misty shape began to appear just in front of where Harry was laid out; terrified, yes, surprised no. Without even considering it she began to pray, speaking the words of the first prayer that came to her mind. The prayer of St Francis was not exactly appropriate to the situation, but it was the thought that counted, not the actual words.

"You can pray all you like, Miss Blake," the sorcerer said as if he was discussing the weather, "but it will not stop the Master of Pain for long. Perhaps I will feed your pets to him first."

Desperately Anita tried to think of some way out of this, but the feeling of evil as the demon slowly became real was almost overpowering. She scanned the room, and when she looked at Richard the words of the prayer faltered on her lips. He was no longer hanging limp from his chains and he was looking straight ahead, but his eyes were red pools that stared at nothing. She reached out for him through the marks, but the same barrier that she had felt before pushed her back. It was as if he was behind glass and she could see him, know he was there, but not touch or interact with him. It was worse than if he had been gone completely.

Tearing her eyes away, she shared a gaze with a terrified looking Jason and a stoic Micah before looking down at Harry. The kid was still out cold and the spell on his chest was shining slightly, but as she saw him she knew that they might have one chance. Harry was powerful, very powerful and he could wield magic in ways these people had probably never dreamed of. They had tried to bind him, but the vampire might just be a way to reach him. As the demon became whole she let her necromancy free and she called Harry to her.

At first there was nothing, after all it was dawn and they had found that Harry's vampire was as reluctant to show itself in the day as a normal vampire, but it was possible and she felt the cold spark awaken to her call. Harry's eyes opened, glowing softly and his skin went ghostly pale as the master vampire in him came to the surface. Their gazes met and for a moment Anita almost stopped breathing. There was so much pain and suffering in Harry's eyes and the prayer faltered on her lips again.

The demon lunged at her and she fell to her knees, gun grasped between both hands as she began to pray with everything she had. The power in the circle was soaking into every pore and she wanted to be physically ill, but she could not risk halting her prayer. At the moment the only thing between her and being demon bait was the power of her faith.

"Give in, Miss Blake," the sorcerer said, "he will not hurt you... much. My employers want you alive and he has been promised the boy once you are subdued."

It was the 'much' that was the most worrying bit. A demon's idea might be a lot different from a human's. Not that Anita would consider surrendering anyway; she'd rather die than give up to whatever these lunatics had in mind.

"Kill the wolf," only when the sorcerer spoke again did she risk looking up and the demon had looked away.

Jason's expression was a frozen as the rest of him, but his eyes held so much terror that Anita had to do something. Bullets might not kill demons, but Anita had nothing else and she might be able to distract it. Lifting her gun she stopped praying and fired, three times.

It might only have been annoying to the demon, but it did the job and the creature turned back to her. It stopped still only a moment and then it swiped at her with long vicious claws. They froze millimetres from Anita's face and she found herself staring at a motionless demon only inches from her. It was the moan from Harry that finally dragged her eyes away from the creature as it loomed over her.

Harry's eyes were glued on the demon and Anita felt the power shift in the room. Something was happening, something she could not see, but could feel, and it had completely immobilised the demon. When she glanced at the sorcerer even he looked confused.

The spell on Harry's chest was beginning to glow now and Anita could sense the energy growing, but she dared not move. Anything could upset the balance of what was going on, and she knew that this was their only hope. It would of course have been that moment that the cops chose to arrive. The door she had used earlier smashed open and members of the Mobile Reserve crashed through, guns drawn.

"Police, nobody move," the command was strong and clear until the very end when it was clear to Anita that the speaker had seen the demon.

Cops trained to spot men with guns and knives tended to miss the supernatural on first glance as the human mind tried desperately to ignore it. No matter how well re-trained, the Mobile Reserve all came from backgrounds which were primarily dealing with human crimes.

At least the chanting stopped.

The creak of metal brought Anita's attention back to the scene in front of her and she looked at Harry. Cold flames were dancing on his chest and his head was back as his body tried to arch away from the rack even though it was held down from joint to end by chains on every limb. There was a moan from Richard; the design on his chest was glowing as well, and then she felt it, something coming from her Ulfric. It did not feel like Richard, but it was definitely coming through

the barrier that stood between them. At first it was only a trickle, but like a damn bursting it went from virtually nothing to a complete flood and Anita sagged at the onslaught.

She attempted to protect herself as the hot energy forced its way into her body through Richard, but she could not stop it and she felt as if she was losing control. The magic burned as it curled into her very being and it was as if she might explode. It was possible she was going to lose anyway.

[Yours,] the word forced its way into her mind and it was Richard, but not Richard, [use it.]

For a moment she did not understand and then she knew where she had felt this power before; it was Harry. Somehow Harry was channelling his magic through Richard the way he had briefly with Jean-Claude when they shared memories, and it was flooding into her. No longer afraid she stood tall and she reached out her hands to the frozen demon. Eyes the colour of deepest red looked at her and recognised their own destruction. In normal circumstances touching a demon would get a person killed, but this was anything but normal.

There was only one thing that a demon understood and that was power. As the magic continued to pour into her through the marks she felt as if she was glowing with it and the moment her flesh connected with the demon she let it free. She was nothing but a conduit and she opened herself completely to the power, letting it flow through Richard, into her and then into the demon. The creature screamed and the glowing barrier faltered, but the rest of the room seemed to be stuck in place, as if they were afraid to break whatever spell was happening.

"Die," Anita said in a voice so cold that it even chilled her to hear it, "there is no place for you here."

She felt alive and free and euphoric, even as the demon's scaled face began to burn from the inside, skin melting into itself as if it was nothing more than a plastic doll. As its throat collapsed and its cry died she could hear another one and she cast her eyes onto the sorcerer who had thought to destroy them. The man was on his knees, clutching his head as he bled from the eyes and nose and he was screaming. He reached out to her, seemingly begging to be released as black eyes danced with flame. The part of her that knew mercy stirred then, but at her core she was far more practical than that. Sorcerer and demon were connected and for it to be completely gone so did its summoner. Looking back at what was left of the demon she continued to pour magic into it. The energy burned through her and she let it flow until there was nothing between her hands but ash.

As if Harry knew the moment she knew it was over the power cut off and she staggered. She would have fallen, but Micah was there to catch her as what she had done hit her full force. She had just stood up to a demon and lived and what she wanted to do was lose it completely and melt into her Nimir-Raj's embrace. The sound of a gun cocking brought her back to her senses.

"Federal Marshall," she said just in case there were people on the team who did not know her by sight. "Everyone in a robe is a bad guy. Arrest them."

End of Chapter 31

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Chapter 32 Cleanup

Scene 1

Parker was being a complete pain in the ass. The man was decidedly unhappy that his Mobile response unit had been called in and had only arrived in time to see Anita pulverise the danger. Hudson had been in charge of the operation, but it was just her luck that Parker had decided that coming down to see the clear up of this one was a really good political move. At least he was keeping the press, who had appeared out of nowhere, at bay by answering some of their questions. Anita wanted to just shoot them, but then she was not happy with reporters just at the moment, because if they hadn't blown Harry's cover none of this would have happened.

So far Parker had let the ambulance take Harry and Richard, but he had refused to let Lupin leave even though Anita suspected the werewolf had a concussion. It was unlikely to bother Lupin for long, but she'd have been happier if Parker had let him go with the others. She hadn't been let back into the crime scene or to see any of the suspects since she had followed the paramedics out to the ambulance. She had wanted to go with Richard and Harry, and Parker had been happy for her to leave, but Micah, Jason and Lupin were still being eyed suspiciously. Since she had deputised them she was staying to make sure no one saw fit to incarcerate them for some imagined crime.

So far she had had one phone call from Nathaniel to say that the healer was working on Harry and that Draco had made a miraculous recovery. It seemed that at the same time Anita had been channelling Harry's magic some of it had been working through the marks on Draco and that healing seemed to be a common theme. Richard had been unconscious when he had been taken away, but any and all wounds had been nothing but scars. The only one who had had any physical injuries left out of the victims seemed to be Harry, and Anita had distinctly heard the paramedics marvelling at how fast he was healing as well.

"Blake," finally it was her turn as Parker half walked, half marched towards her.

Technically she could have forced her way back into the crime scene since she was a Federal Marshal, but quite frankly she felt a lot safer in Micah's arms even if he was in catman form. That had caused a few sideways looks as well.

"Would you care to explain to me exactly why you chose to go in without backup?" Parker sounded annoyed to the nth degree.

She wasn't quite sure if the captain was worried about what could have happened to her or just plain worried about what a mess he might have had to clear up, but she didn't really care. She needed to go home and scrub at her skin until at least some of the feel of the demon was gone. Unclean was a good way to describe how she felt and she wasn't sure a shower would do the trick, but at least it would help.

"I had backup, Captain," Anita said plainly, not really in the mood to discuss this. "I was trying to make sure no one was killed, including two of my friends. Preternatural creatures are far better at dealing with other preternatural creatures so I deputised some of my other friends. We won, and since we were up against a demon and in mortal peril we didn't do anything wrong."

"You could have been mincemeat, Blake," Parker said and glared at her.

She was surprised, he was actually worried for her. Not worried in the same way Dolph would have been, and she thanked her lucky stars that he had not decided to come to this crime scene, but worried none the less. It was nice to know she wasn't classed as one of the monsters yet. Cops tended to be less inclined to worry about monsters.

"We survived, Captain," Anita said and did not try to hide the weariness in her voice. "I feel like the devil himself shit upon me, so would you please let me go home. I swear I will give a full and complete account to Lieutenant Storr as soon as I am clean."

It had been a very long night and she was willing to beg. Parker looked at the other three and the man was clearly unnerved by Micah and Jason's half and half forms.

"Captain Parker, this is Micah, my boyfriend," she decided to make the relationships very clear.

Relationships tended to make lycanthropes seem much more human.

"And this is Jason, a very dear friend and Remus Lupin, a friend of one of the victims and a magical practitioner," she continued the introductions.

Telling the cops that Jason and Lupin were an item would be okay for some of them and a stumbling block for others so she decided to gloss over that. More hassle was not what they needed.

"I deputised them before we went in and they assisted in the apprehension of the suspects," Anita said slowly and clearly.

From the look on Parker's face it was obvious that he had been told what really happened, but the man did not try and argue.

"Micah and Jason cannot shift back because they'll go to sleep as soon as they do," she said plainly, even though in Micah's case that was not true. "They would if they could, but they can't so I think the sooner I take them home the better it will be for all concerned. We don't want anyone jumpy, do we?"

She had never been so keen to leave a crime scene in her life. The bad guys were locked up, the demon was dead and all she wanted to do was go home. Normally after something like this she was pretty sure her eyes looked like those of a complete psychopath as she distanced herself from all emotion, but she had no will for that now. Quite frankly she metaphorically got down on her knees and begged with her eyes.

"A full report as soon as you're clean," Parker said gruffly, "and I expect statements from everyone involved by the close of play tomorrow."

Anita just nodded she was so relieved. She might have been a Federal Marshal, but the police could still make her life a living hell, especially since she had not been acting on a warrant.

"Thank you, Captain," she said, completely sincere. "I promise all the paperwork will be in order by tomorrow."

A shower and then going to see how Richard was would have been the perfect solution, but a shower, talking to Dolph and then going to see how Richard was would work for her.

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Scene 2

After that hullabaloo with the police, Anita had driven them all to her house where Micah had shifted back to human, showered and put some clothes on. Then she had left him to drop Jason at the Circus so that he could remain in wolf form to prevent collapsing, and drop Lupin at the hospital to be with his fellow wizards.

Anita had showered as well, in a different bathroom to Micah or they might never have made it back downstairs, and she was on her way into the station. This was still RPIT's case and she wanted to find out what the hell was really going on. Someone had threatened the triumvirate and she needed to know why. Word of how she had faced and defeated a demon had obviously done the rounds because when she walked into the precinct she received several awed looks. Even Arnet failed to say anything to her.

Walking up to Dolph's office she knocked on the door.

"Come in," was the short response.

The scene inside was not exactly inviting as Dolph glared at her, but Zerbrowski gave her a weak smile. For once she thought that Dolph's attitude might have had more to do with worry than anger, if the way he was looking at her was anything to go by. People could stay mad at people for a long time, but life threatening situations tended to change that for at least a little while. Anita knew this quite well since she had been in one or two life threatening situations in her time.

"The perps are in custody and the demon is dead," she observed in what she hoped was a light tone, "why the long faces?"

"Having the perps in custody is one thing," Dolph said in a terse manner that underlined his mood, "but getting anything useful out of them is another matter."

That surprised Anita, after all the ritualists had been caught red handed. Usually when faced with capture, lunatics such as these tended to want to explain their grand plan and convince those around them they were not insane.

"Are you saying they're not talking at all?" she asked, not bothering to hide her surprise.

"Oh they're singing," Zerbrowski said, but he sounded exasperated rather than pleased. "In fact some of them won't shut up, but mostly they're begging us to save them."

That was not what Anita had expected at all, and it did not sound like their last prisoner at all.

"It seems that not all of them are true believers," Dolph said and sounded as if this was far too complicated; "they were forcefully converted."

"And there's no going home to mom, either," Zerbrowski took up the explanation. "Seems they were invited in by 'the Master', brainwashed and then implanted with something magical that if they don't, and I quote, 'take the sacrament' from 'the Master' every twenty four hours this thing eats its way out of their chest, munching on their heart first. Before you ask, no we don't know what the sacrament is or what is in them."

"But we did figure out who 'the Master' is since he's the only one without a scar and the only one not talking," Dolph said and it was obvious he was not best pleased.

Anita grimaced; she had not met this particular form of murder before, but she had learned long ago never to underestimate the supernatural.

"Anyone ever tried to remove one of these things before?" she asked, knowing that it couldn't be as simple as just going to see a surgeon.

If it was that easy someone would have tried it, and magic never made things straight forward.

"One of the prisoners swears that a cult member tried it and ended up like our first detainee," Zerbrowski looked and sounded very tired.

To find out the whole story they needed someone willing to talk. For a moment Anita considered pretending that they had a cure and then bargaining for the truth, but even she was not that callous. It sounded as if these people had been stupid, but not all of them were in it for the faith. There was only one solution she could think of at such short notice and she pulled open her phone.

"Hello," she said politely, holding up her hand to stop Zerbrowski's question, "I need to speak to Remus Lupin. This is Federal Marshall Anita Blake and it's an emergency."

She took the phone away from her ear and covered the microphone.

"I think I know someone who can help," she said to prevent both cops from bombarding her. "I'll explain in a minute."

She waited patiently and it did not take too long.

"Ms Blake?" Lupin's voice was as polite as usual.

"Hi, Lupin," she greeted quickly, "how's Harry?"

"Sleeping," the werewolf replied, "as is Mr Zeeman, but I do not believe asking me that is sufficient motivation for an emergency."

"No it's not," Anita admitted, "I need to speak to your healer. We have a situation with the prisoners from the ritual and our science is not going to help them."

There was a pause on the other end.

"He will not be particularly willing," Lupin pointed out in an apologetic tone, "he is breaking several laws just by being here."

"I wouldn't ask unless it was life or death," Anita replied. "They are all going to die unless someone can stop it. I will guarantee that his help will be need to know and will not be placed in the official record."

Dolph's face darkened at that, but Anita ignored him.

"There is no other way?" Lupin sounded most reluctant.

"In under twenty four hours their chests get eaten from the inside out," Anita decided that blunt was best.

Silence answered her.

"I will bring him myself if I have to, Ms Blake," was the eventual reply.

"Thank you," she said and hung up.

Dolph did not look impressed in the slightest.

"Care to explain the 'not be placed in the official record', Anita?" the big man asked coldly.

"You remember the whole wizard debate about how they do it so differently over there?" straight to the point was the only way with Dolph in a mood. "Well there is a Wizarding culture here as well, only it's better integrated, but it still exists in secret. They came out of the woodwork when Draco Malfoy was attacked, and they have a magical healer at the hospital now. Since surgery won't work, maybe he can do something. It's against their laws to interact with us so you cannot tell anyone about him."

Dolph didn't seem to be convinced, but Zerbrowski was looking a little happier.

"So this guy can save our perps from a messy end?" he asked in a much more cheerful tone.

"Probably," Anita replied. "Malfoy was a complete mess when they brought him in and their healer patched him up as if it was nothing. No scars or anything, and the kid had been skewered with crossbow bolts."

"No scars at all?" Dolph sounded incredulous.

"Nothing," Anita promised.

She wasn't a hundred percent positive about that, but she was not aiming for halfway here. There were a few tense moments when she thought Dolph might start demanding things, but eventually her one time friend just nodded. It seemed Dolph was as fed up of this case as she was and he just wanted it over.

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The Wizarding healer had been heard cursing barbaric practices and magic of the dark ages after he saw his first patient, but it seemed that there was hope for the conscripts. Not all were willing to talk or even wanted to be examined since it seemed that some really were true believers, but allowing people to have their hearts eaten out was not something the St Louis police were in the mood for, so all the cultists with scars were looked at.

Anita did not bother to find out what exactly the healer was doing, she had bigger fish to fry and lots of secrets to keep to herself. So far she had heard the word 'triumvirate' mentioned once and werewolf in association with Richard once as well. A quick phone call to the hospital had revealed that Richard's condition was not suspected since he had had no injuries from the silver chains; point one for magical healing. She knew she had to stop both truths from being believed, so it was time to play diversions.

One glimpse of "The Master" had assured her that, although a powerful magician, the man was a complete lunatic; she could see it in his eyes. This was to her advantage, but she had some work to do. Convincing Dolph to let her in on the interview had been relatively easy; a little emotional blackmail about ex-fiancés and mental patients in robes, along with pointing out that she was an expert in this type of thing had been enough.

"Hello," she said, sitting down opposite the suspect in the interview room.

For good measure she gave him her completely psychopathic stare; the one that had been known to send monsters running away. "The Master" really wasn't all that impressive; he was short, completely bald and not anyone she would have picked out of a crowd. The only thing that made him remotely remarkable was the robe he was wearing and the almost religious fervour in his eyes.

"I know you know who I am," she continued as Dolph took up a position by the back wall, "would you care to tell me who you are?"

The man regarded her for a while and surprisingly, given the contempt he had treated the cops with, he gave her a small smile.

"The Master," he replied without any sign that he believed differently. "It is a pleasure to be able to sit down with you Ms Blake; I have been studying you for a long time."

"I suppose everyone needs a hobby," she said, keeping her emotions well in check.

What she wanted to do was push this asshole up against a wall and pump him so full of lead that there wasn't much left of him, but she had lost her chance to do that at the crime scene. Once the police were involved she couldn't exactly play the executioner on this madman.

"Your followers," she continued, "or should I say, your conscripts are cooperating nicely. With the physical evidence and their testimony you're facing the death penalty."

That just made the man smile a little more.

"Oh and if you think they won't be around to testify, you might want to reconsider," she really enjoyed this bit. "You're little surprises have been rendered harmless. Interesting bit of magic that, Chinese wasn't it."

Somehow the Wizarding healer had produced a picture of one of the devices, even though they were going to have to be removed the old fashioned way, and the department's spell expert had gone into raptures about the design. About all Anita had been able to follow was the fact that it used ancient Chinese magical techniques. The effect on "the Master" was satisfyingly abrupt as the smile vanished and the man's eyes became almost as cold as hers.

"Who are you really?" Anita asked in a clipped, short tone. "We'll find out eventually anyway so you might as well tell us."

Not a word came in response.

"You're delusional, you are aware of that aren't you?" she continued, fully intending to reduce the man to his lowest ebb.

What she wanted was for him to start ranting. If he did that then he would be labelled a lunatic and locked away; he'd probably avoid the death sentence, but no one would take him seriously. Right now, that was all Anita cared about; there were other ways to deal with him if he became a problem later on.

"What did you hope to gain by taking Richard Zeeman?" she asked. "Jean-Claude has power, removing him would have unbalanced the vampire population in this city, but why Richard?"

Lying was not her favourite pastime, but she could do it like a master when she wanted to.

"The Ulfric of the werewolves has power as well," the prisoner sounded annoyed, but she hid the smile that threatened as she realised she was getting to him.

"You think Richard is a werewolf," she said in her best incredulous tone, "and not only that, you think he's the head werewolf?"

She managed a perfectly disbelieving laugh; even she was proud of her acting.

"Please, do tell me what you're taking, it must be good stuff," that earned her a frown from "the Master".

Sometimes having a side she could completely detach from her emotions helped a lot; she didn't think she could have pulled off the complete disbelief if she had been feeling too much.

"We had him for hours, Ms Blake," the prisoner said coldly, "and we've been watching all of you. Do not try and deny the truth."

"Truth?" Anita replied, letting a little annoyance into her voice. "You want truth? Okay, how's this? Richard is about as far from a perfect Ulfric as you can possibly get. He's a boy scout, believes in truth, justice and the American way; he's a school teacher for heaven's sake. He's a naturalist who doesn't like to kill things. How exactly do you think he'd be able to be a werewolf, let alone the Ulfric of the pack?"

Since all of those things were actually true it was much easier to make them sound convincing. What she failed to mention was that deep down inside Richard was a born leader and he was slowly getting over his hang-ups.

"He is part of your triumvirate with the master of the city," the prisoner said loudly in a very sure voice.

Anita opened her mouth as if she was shocked.

"You really are insane," she said shortly.

There was just the tiniest flicker of doubt in "the Master's" eyes and she scored herself a point. She wasn't sure she could have done this with any other subject, but this was very important to her and if she could undermine the prisoner's beliefs then her job was done.

"You cannot possibly believe that old vampire legend, even vampires don't believe that," she continued as if she was speaking to a three year old. "Richard was my fiancé. Through me he met several werewolves who are almost as big boy scouts as he is; they're friends. He's squeamish about vampires; runs away if anyone opens a vein for one of them."

That had been true as well, but Richard was definitely adjusting slowly.

"You really think he could be part of some mystical bond with me and Jean-Claude?" Anita sat back in her chair as if she was amazed that anyone could believe it. "I am involved with Jean-Claude, I was involved with Richard, but can we please leave the mystical bonds out of it? Do you want to know what I think actually happened?"

She was on a roll now.

"The moment you dosed Richard with that potion you connected him to Harry," she had worked out a very plausible story in her head. "Harry, by the way, is the name of the kid you've tried to kill, twice. Now Harry is a very powerful young man; he's sensitive to magic; he's a lycanthrope; and he's part vampire with the ability to call wolves. That last bit was what you didn't seem to realise. Harry was throwing off power left right and centre and some of it ended up in Richard. You just saw what you wanted to see. Not everyone that hangs around with the preternatural community is one."

"We would have had the triumvirate," the prisoner all but growled, "we would have had control of this entire city."

"If it wasn't for you meddling kids?" Anita put the last nail in the man's coffin.

She saw rage enter "the Master's" eyes and she stood up before the man tried to pull at the cuffs which were attaching him to the table. Giving him a cold smile she turned to Dolph.

"I think he may rant for a bit now," she said as if she was pleased with herself. "If you want clarification on his delusions let me know, but now I want to go and see Richard."

She looked Dolph straight in the eye and did not so much a flicker. When he nodded she knew she had him and the tiniest bit of her soul shattered; she hated lying to people she called friends.

End of Chapter 32

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Chapter 33 The Right Way

Scene 1

It had been two days and neither Richard nor Harry had woken up yet. Neither one had given any indication that they were about to open their eyes either. According to the regular doctor and the Wizarding healer there was nothing physically wrong with either lycanthrope anymore, but something was preventing them returning to the land of the living. Amazingly Richard's secret was still safe;

the cops had completely bought into the story of the burn on his chest healing because of the explosion of magic which had so thoroughly won them the battle and healed Draco, and the Ulfric had done nothing else to indicate he was anything but human.

Zerbrowski had mentioned the silver chains more than once, but Anita had reiterated her story of Harry's power infusing Richard and pointed out that all four sets of chains had been silver. She thought that her friend had accepted that it was over zealous lunatics that had used silver-plated chains rather than steel ones, but she knew she was going to have to keep an eye on the situation.

Anita had been at Richard's side as much as possible, leaving only to feed the *ardeur*, sleep and answer questions to keep the police at bay. She and Jean-Claude had tried to wake him using the marks, but neither of them could feel much from their third at all. It was still as if something was blocking them from each other even though the barrier had let Harry's power through from the other way.

She had rarely been alone with her unconscious lover as her people and various of Richard's wolves came in and out. Nathaniel had been with her a few minutes previously, but had gone to see how Draco and Harry were doing as well. That was why when the door opened and she saw the lilac eyed wereleopard she was somewhat surprised.

"Nathaniel?" she asked, standing slowly.

Her *pomme de sang* appeared worried, but sure of what he was doing and when he moved out of the doorway into the room, Anita was in for an even bigger surprise: Harry was following Nathaniel. The kid's eyes were open and wide, but the way he looked at her, Anita was completely sure she was not being seen, or at least not comprehended. From Harry's left arm there trailed a plastic tube; the regular doctors had insisted that an IV was necessary, even though the Wizarding healer had offered other methods, and it looked as if the kid had simply walked off without noticing he was attached to anything. The eeriest thing was the fact that his wide green eyes were just slightly ringed with red.

"Don't touch him," Nathaniel said as he kept carefully out of Harry's way, "I tried; it hurt."

That explained the excited little light in the back of her *pomme de sang's* eyes; pain did funny things to Nathaniel. She was distracted for a moment when Draco, Lupin and Jason all appeared in the doorway. Not one of them was trying to stop Harry, which made her pause where she had been ready to test out Nathaniel's warning. She found certain impulses hard to resist, and protecting Richard was one of them, but if no one else was willing to dive in then she could hold off as well.

"Harry," Anita said, knowing that it was probably useless, but hoping that with her influence he might respond.

As it was, even as she exerted her power to call the leopard part of the young wizard, it felt as if it was just bouncing off. Harry gave no indication that he had heard her, or was even aware of her presence as he just stood a few feet into the room. There were barely any indications that Harry was alive; the wizard's breathing was so shallow that you had to really look to see it. What made Anita's skin crawl was the fact that Harry's eyes just stared; so far the young man hadn't blinked once.

It was almost as if time had decided to stand still for a while and then Harry moved. Once he began to walk there was no hesitation in the wizard's step and Harry was beside the bed in a very short space of time. Anita had no chance to decide if she had made a mistake not trying to stop Harry, because before she could do anything the wizard had reached out one hand, dragged the sheet covering Richard back so that it gathered at the werewolf's waist, and ripped off the token bandage on the brand.

By the time her mind caught up with what was happening it was too late. Anita tried to reach Harry and find out what was going on before she let the wizard touch Richard further, but as she tried to step forward she met an invisible barrier. It was not hard like a wall, but it seemed to absorb any force she put into it, as if she was walking into an elastic surface. Where she touched it there was the smallest hint of sparkling blue.

"Harry," without resorting to the metaphysical, which could have had seriously unexpected consequences, gaining Harry's attention verbally was about the only option left, "what are you doing?"

Anita really didn't expect an answer, after all Harry had ignored everything else so far, but she had to try.

"Cleansing," was the unexpected reply, and it did not do a lot to reassure Anita.

Harry's voice was low and tinged with power; it was like listening to a vampire trying to bespell a mortal. There was little or no humanity in that voice at all, and it was more chilling than reassuring. The one word also seemed to be the sum total of an explanation forthcoming as Harry spread his hand over the brand on Richard's chest. The scar from the nail that had held the hand down on the rack was white in the light. Anita began to struggle against the barrier, desperately trying to reach Richard through the marks as red light appeared below Harry's palm.

At first Richard gave no indication that anything was happening; he just lay there as he had for the last two days as if in a deep sleep. It was almost as if nothing was occurring, only a slight twitch of Richard's eyelids giving anything away, and then it happened all at once. Richard's eyes shot open, he gasped and his whole body tensed.

There was no difference between what should have been the white of Richard's eyes and the iris as he stared up at the ceiling. It was as if each whole eye was covered in a red coating and it was what frightened Anita the most about the current situation. It felt as if Richard's humanity was gone whenever she saw those eyes, and she stopped struggling as she saw them again. She was helpless against the magic in this room and it made her feel useless.

[We can not win this fight for him, *ma petite*,] Jean-Claude's voice sounded in her mind and the cold tendril of his power wrapped around her like a blanket.

Her affinity for the dead might have seemed strange to some people, but it had always comforted her. Ever since she had destroyed the demon, Jean-Claude seemed to be able to wake and move around earlier in the day. That it was only the afternoon and he was aware was not so much of a shock as it once would have been.

[Stand strong for if our Richard calls us,] Jean-Claude said. [It is all we are allowed today.]

It was hard to watch and not understand. Usually she could discern something, but what she could feel coming from across the room was nothing she had any knowledge of. Harry's back was ramrod straight and the wizard was not even looking at Richard as something passed between them. Small noises of resistance came from Richard as his hands dug into the mattress and it was as if the two were fighting an almost silent battle. The problem was Anita did not know who she wanted to win.

Harry's hand began to shake; the only indication he was making any effort in whatever was going on and then the stillness broke. Richard's back arched, he screamed and the red glow between the brand and Harry's palm became a raging torrent. Only one thing kept Anita from drawing her gun and throwing everything she had at the virtually immobile wizard; Richard's eyes began to change. They went from solid red to a cloudy, amorphous red, which as she watched began to fade away to reveal the eyes she had come to love.

It was over almost as soon as it had begun and Harry snatched his hand away as Richard collapsed back to the bed in a seemingly exhausted heap. The barrier between the pair and the rest of the room dropped in the same instant and Anita moved forward quickly, going to Richard as Draco and Lupin went to Harry. Tired, confused eyes blinked up at her and all she could do was smile at her lover as relief washed through her in waves. Her attention was only diverted when Harry groaned and started to collapse to the floor.

Both Draco and Lupin moved to help, but the other wizard waved them off as he knelt on the floor on all fours and Anita knew what was about to happen before it did. Harry made one small noise and then vomited in the corner, bringing up deep red liquid that spilled messily onto the floor. Anita would have bet her life that it was the potion that had been forced into Richard.

Draco had his arms around Harry by the time the other wizard was finished, and Anita could see that the whole process was distressing Harry. It was not quite normal in that every time Harry heaved up more of the liquid his whole body convulsed as if it was expelling something so nasty that it took every muscle to do it, and it sounded torturous. When Harry finally stopped, Anita suspected that every person in the room was grateful.

[What happened?] Richard sounded as tired and confused as he looked when Anita shifted her attention back to him.

That he was using mind to mind communication rather than speaking out loud said a great deal about his physical well being. If he'd been able, Richard would have used his vocal chords, because that was just how Richard was.

[What's the last thing you remember?] Anita asked in kind.

For a moment there was no reply, but she could feel Richard thinking about it.

[I was bound with chains,] he said eventually, [and someone was forcing something down my throat.]

[That was the potion we've been hearing so much about,] she explained, stroking his hand in what she hoped was a comforting gesture. [They never intended to kill us; they wanted to control us. We, that is, the cavalry, charged in and saved

the day, and you've been unconscious for two days. I think Harry just removed the potion from your system, which is why he's making such wonderful noises in the corner.]

The fact that Harry had an affinity to the potion made of his blood was the only thing that had saved them. Having gone over everything that had happened it was the only sensible conclusion Anita and Jean-Claude had been able to come up with. The potion, once used on Richard, had given Harry a connection into the triumvirate, which in turn had allowed him to channel his power via Richard to Anita. She wanted to talk to Harry about it once the kid was recovered, but it was the only explanation she could come up with that fitted the facts.

[How?] was the next question.

[How what?] Anita asked and couldn't help but smile slightly. [How did we find you? How did we get you out? How come you've been unconscious? How did Harry remove the potion?]

Richard at least managed to give her a look for that.

[All of the above,] he replied, but Anita could tell he was fighting to stay awake. Whatever Harry had done had exhausted them both if the way Richard was falling asleep and the way Harry had to be held in a sitting position were anything to go by.

[That's a long story,] she told him and brushed a stray strand of hair from Richard's face, [and you need to sleep. I promise to fill you in and leave nothing out as soon as you can stay awake. Your secret is safe, and I will make sure I am here for the moment you wake up. So don't argue with me, and go to sleep.]

[It is pointless to argue, mon ami,] Jean-Claude's voice joined the conversation, [you know who will win.]

Richard was just stubborn enough to try, but he was obviously very tired because he just gave Anita another look.

[Don't think this means I'm going to make a habit of giving in,] he said, but even as he made his thoughts known, Anita could feel Richard letting sleep reach up to take him.

[I love you, you stupid wolf,] she said as his eyes drifted closed completely, and she felt a little spark of warmth as Richard fell asleep with a smile on his face.

The room had gained two nurses and a doctor when she turned around and Anita realised that the female doctor was looking at her rather sternly. She had a sneaking suspicion that possibly the woman had been attempting to gain her attention and she cursed herself for being so involved that she had failed to see the possible threat enter. As it was she stepped away from the bed, letting the doctor and the male nurse get to Richard and walked around to the other side to see how Harry was doing.

Lupin had one side of the young wizard and Draco had the other, as the other nurse tried to ascertain Harry's condition. There was a pallor to Harry's skin that Anita found very familiar.

"He needs to feed," she said without having to think too much about it.

The nurse looked shocked and ready to step away hastily if necessary. Harry's unique condition was on record, but it appeared that the woman had not been thinking about that.

"It's the middle of the day so he'll need some encouragement," Anita said as she was pinned down by both Draco's and Lupin's eyes, "but make sure he does before he sleeps."

A look was exchanged between the two men that said far more than words and then they both looked back at her again. Just occasionally it was completely obvious that the two had worked together in life threatening situations.

"We'll handle it," Lupin said calmly and with another glance at Draco, hoisted Harry into his arms.

There was a murmur of discontent from Harry at the move, but that was the only protest as the werewolf headed for the door.

"We'll talk when they're both awake again," Draco said as he followed closely, and Anita just nodded.

Taking stock of this situation was going to take some time and she had no doubt they would be talking for quite a while.

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Scene 2

Harry felt as if his insides had been turned inside out and rammed back down his throat, and all he wanted to do was go to sleep and forget how much he hurt, but every time he tried, Remus called his name and brought him back. When he had tried to ignore his friend once, Draco had touched him and refused to let him sleep. He knew he was being carried and he didn't understand why they wouldn't allow him to drift away.

"Harry," Remus's voice dragged him back from yet another moment of almost sleep and he found that he was sitting on a bed.

The werewolf was in front of him, standing beside the bed, and he felt the mattress dip just behind him before arms wound around his body. The familiar tingle of being in contact with Draco felt good, but all he really wanted to do was sleep.

"Harry, you need to listen to me," Remus told him, but it was difficult to focus on the words. "You need to feed. You're two day overdue for taking blood and you must feed before you go back to sleep."

Harry could feel sun on his face from the window and he would have laughed if he had had the strength. Making his vampire respond during the day was not easy anyway; convincing it to come out when he was in this state was preposterous.

"Can't," he said, trying to drift off again.

"Draco," Remus wasn't speaking to him anymore and he hoped that the werewolf had given up, "can you bring him back a little more?"

"I'll try," Draco replied, but Harry didn't really comprehend what was being said.

Only when the marks between him and Draco opened and power flooded into him did he open his eyes and gasp. It was wonderful and incredibly painful at the same time as his abused body lost its comforting haze and he felt every ache in minute detail. The groan from Draco told him that his lover was feeling it as well.

"Harry," Remus said, holding his chin so that he was looking directly into the werewolf's eyes, "do you understand?"

"Yes," he said slowly, his body responding very sluggishly, but no longer pulling him down into unconsciousness.

As they talked, the sunlight was cut out of the room as Jason closed the blinds on the window. It did not counteract the effect of daytime on his vampire, but it did remove the power of the sun from the equation.

"Can you bring your vampire out?" Remus asked in a very patient tone.

Harry shook his head; he could barely move, let alone force his magic to do anything. Even with Draco's strength it would be incredibly difficult to convince his nocturnal aspect to come to the forefront.

"Then we'll do this the hard way," Remus said as if he'd figured it all out.

He was beginning to flag again, but Harry managed to follow the movement as Remus drew his wand. Aiming the tool at his wrist the werewolf cast a quick charm and the smell of blood prickled at Harry's nostrils. Remus moved to one side and faster than Harry could follow in his current state he found a wrist presented to him just in front of his face. He did not even have the strength to reach for it and a gentle hand cushioned the back of his head as the bleeding limb was pushed gently against his lips.

As the blood touched his tongue his senses exploded with the flavour and it caused both his cat and his vampire to surge towards the surface. With what little strength he had he managed to push the vampire into the lead, leaving the leopard to coil beneath his skin as the other preternatural aspect took over his body. It was still long seconds before he had the strength to use the features given him by the change and he hoped he was not hurting Remus too much as he sank his fangs into his willing victim.

He drank, relishing the strength the blood poured into him, but as soon as he felt it seep into him it was almost gone. It was as if he was a sponge that had been without water too long and simply soaked up everything that was given to him. Remus' blood and power flowed into him, but his abused body put the strength to use rather than giving him any to fully focus on the world around him.

He took his fill, but even as he withdrew his fangs and tried to focus on Remus he felt himself relaxing into Draco's arms. He wanted to say thank you, to express his gratitude properly, but he couldn't even do that. The blood had sated his vampire hunger, but he was in no state to enjoy it.

"Go to sleep, Love," Draco said quietly into his ear. "Everything is okay now; just rest."

Falling asleep seemed rude, but as his lover held him and the power he had just taken in slowly moved around his body, he felt the world drifting away. He was safe, he was warm and sleep demanded that he obey its call. He tried one last

time to say thank you, but he could not be sure if what he said was anything more than an unintelligible mumble.

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Scene 3

Anita felt completely drained; it was as if with Richard no longer needing her, the last of her strength had deserted her. She had promised to be there when he woke up, but the doctor had told her Richard was unlikely to be awake for a few hours so she had headed home. The further away from the hospital she drove the more and more distant she felt from the world and she walked into her house in a daze.

Throwing her keys onto the hall table she glanced into the living room and found half a dozen faces looking at her. Half the party seemed to have taken up residence and she suddenly felt as if she was being swallowed by their eyes. Micah stood up and walked towards her with a smile of greeting on his face and it pushed exactly the wrong button at the wrong time, or possibly the right one depending on your point of view. She had been calm and strong for the last two and a half days and that serenity vanished in an instant.

As Micah came close Anita burst into tears and in a second she was enveloped in a warm hug. Gentle arms held her close and she cried into Micah's shoulder.

"What's wrong?" her Nimir-Raj's calm tones asked as she could do nothing but sob. "Did something happen to Richard of Harry?"

For a while all Anita could do was sob as she let the tension of the last few days run out with her tears. Why did Richard always make her cry, even when he wasn't trying to?

"Anita," Micah's words were still gentle, but he pushed her when she failed to answer.

"They woke up," she managed through her sobs and couldn't help feeling a little ridiculous.

She had been so stoic while the crisis was actually happening and now that it was over she was falling apart. There were a few moments silence and she suspected Micah was wondering if he heard correctly and then her wereleopard lover pulled back slightly so that she had no choice but to look at him.

"You're crying because they woke up?" Micah seemed unsure, but not surprised.

Anita just nodded and then burst into a fresh round of tears. It was stupid and silly, but she couldn't help herself. Micah responded by pulling her back into the hugs properly.

"Cherry," Micah said as he held her, "would you mind rustling up something to eat, I'm going to take Anita upstairs for a bit."

"Sure," was Cherry's immediate reply.

"Have to... go... back," Anita said between sobs that had become more like hiccups, "promised..."

"You need down time," Micah said calmly, but firmly as he manoeuvred her towards the stairs.

She had planned to take a quick shower and then grab something from the kitchen to eat on the way back, but Micah's arms were so comfortable and he made her feel safe and loved, which she needed right about then. For once she didn't argue and as Micah steered her towards the bedroom she went where she was guided. She didn't argue as he undressed her and then himself either; or when he led her into the bathroom and turned of the shower; or when he helped wash away her tears; or when he gently dried her off with a white, fluffy towel. In fact she didn't object at all, not even when he took her back into the bedroom and gently lowered her onto the bed.

Micah kissed her slowly as if savouring the taste of her lips before moving on to work his way around the curve of her chin and down her neck. His kisses were light and soft with an underlying passion she could feel as her beast stirred to meet his. They were Nimir-Ra and Nimir-Raj, perfect partners to each other and for a while Anita let that be all that mattered to her.

She had been so on edge for so many days that it was difficult to let go. She had nearly lost Richard; if it hadn't been for Harry her ex-fiancé would still be lying in the hospital in a spell-induced coma, and she had nearly lost Harry. All the tension of the case, the fear of the demon and the anger at being a victim came bubbling out of her in little shudders as Micah kissed his way over her body. It was almost as if he was swallowing her anxiety and pain with each tiny touch and undoing the tight knot of tension that had lived inside her belly for days with every caress.

Jean-Claude was a skilled lover, but even he could not touch her quite like Micah, as if her Nimir-Raj knew what she needed even before she did. Sometimes their lovemaking was hot and almost brutal and sometimes it was soft and tender like now. Anita lay on the bed with her arms and legs splayed and allowed Micah any access he wanted. At that moment the power was his and Anita surrendered to it without condition.

She did not know how long he touched and stroked her, drawing little sighs of passion from her with only the slightest contact. It seemed to be one long experience of sensation and by the time Micah's fingers finally ran up the inside of her leg she was completely relaxed. As he gently brushed his hand between her legs the warmth of arousal seemed to spread through her body from her centre like a wave, taking with it any last care and causing her to moan quietly.

All that existed now was Micah; all that she cared about was the way he was touching her and she moved into the caress. His fingers gently spread her, dipping into the liquid heat and then drawing back to slowly slide each side of her clit as his mouth suckled at her breast. She moaned again as she lost herself in the arousal moving through her body and she spread her legs further, encouraging Micah to continue what he was doing.

Her beast was hungry and it was continually moving under her skin as Micah rubbed himself against her, allowing her to feel his arousal as he pushed against her hip. She wanted nothing more than to lose herself in him completely and let him own her as they played out this primeval dance. She was his as he was hers and Anita needed Micah to possess her.

"Now," she moaned, opening her eyes and looking at her lover as he caressed her, "I need you now."

In response he moved up her body again until they were face to face and he was pinning her to the bed. She smiled up at him, feeling the damp warmth of his arousal against her stomach as he looked down at her.

"Turn over," he said, before pushing himself up and away from her.

It was not a suggestion and Anita was a little surprised by the heat in Micah's tone. It seemed that his activities had sparked something dominant in Micah as well as arousing her almost more than she could bear. Hooking her arm underneath her she did as she was told and came to a stop resting on her arms on the bed. Micah was touching her again almost straight away, rubbing himself against the groove of her buttocks and layering kisses on the back of her neck.

She moaned again as his hand slipped back between her legs, sliding into her and opening her body further. It was another surprise when Micah's other arm slid under her waist and she found herself being pulled into a kneeling position, but she did not resist. As the fingers still inside her were withdrawn she understood; Micah rarely took her like this because of his size and the fingers had been a test to see if she was ready. Her lover must have believed she was as she found her legs forced further apart and her entrance being breached.

Micah slid into her in one swift stroke and she could not stop the small cry that escaped her as he stretched her so quickly. It burned as he filled her, but it felt so incredibly good and there was nothing in the world but the stab of desire that flew through every nerve. Her Nimir-Raj had her now; she was all his and nothing else mattered.

It was only a moment before Micah began to move; a small amount of time for her to adjust, but she did not mind the slight pain that came with the pleasure. As their bodies moved together so their beasts reached out to each other, mixing in metaphysical sex and causing Anita to whine in the back of her throat as she was taken.

Nimir-Raj and Nimir-Ra, male and female, dominant and submissive; that was what they were now, primitive and full of abandon as Micah pushed into her time and again. There was no other reality and Anita could feel nothing except her body relinquishing control to the invader and enjoying every second. This was truth, this was ultimate forgetfulness and she let her mind sail free.

The arm that was still wrapped around her waist moved lower and then there were fingers touching her, moving in time with the thrusts from behind. Her arms gave way and she ended up on her elbows, Micah coming with her as he continued to move. Her beast was screaming inside her and her arousal was consuming her as Micah's hand and body moved in perfect synchronisation. This was the pain/pleasure mix she needed and wanted and when her orgasm exploded over her she screamed her completion to the world.

Pleasure filled her in every cell and she collapsed forward onto the bed completely, unable to maintain any control. She was barely aware of Micah's deep moans of release of his body shuddering next to hers as reality became one long wave of arousal. It was wonderful; it was incredible and it was exactly what she needed. This was sex at its most raw and it took away any ability to think.

When the real world finally began to seep back into her mind she found that she was lying on her front with her face buried in the pillow and there was a warm

body lying to her right. Turning her head she found Micah looking back at her and in that moment she remembered all the reasons she loved him.

"Thank you," she said, not just trying to express her gratitude for the sex, but for everything that he was to her.

That earned her a smile and Micah reached out to brush the hair away from her face.

"You're welcome," he said and in that moment Anita knew that she was completely loved.

End of Chapter 33

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Chapter 34 Life Goes On

Scene 1

As Harry opened his eyes he was not quite sure how long it had been since his first awakening this time round. He knew it was night, even before he opened his eyes, because he could feel his vampire inside him much more awake than it would have been during the day, but he couldn't be sure if it was the night after he had gone to Richard's room or the night after that. He was pretty sure it wasn't any longer, unless he'd been sleeping much more between moments of consciousness than he thought.

The first couple of times he had woken up he had barely been able to keep his eyes open, but this time it was almost like waking up normally. He was not surprised to see Anita standing beside his bed when he opened his eyes because his other senses had already informed him who was there. That Anita was alone, since every other time he had woken Draco or Remus had been there, was the surprise.

"Isn't this where we came in?" he asked as he tried to push the sleep from his mind.

That earned him a genuine smile from his companion.

"But this time you're the victor, not the victim," Anita said, and she seemed more relaxed than he had seen her before.

He concluded that when there was an immediate danger in her city, Anita never properly relaxed and only now that it was over was he seeing her as she could be. Not that Harry thought Anita was a particularly relaxed person at all, but she was definitely looser than she had been.

"Is everyone okay?" he asked, pretty sure of the answer already.

His previous awakenings were rather fuzzy and he wasn't sure if he'd had this conversation before with anyone. Anita, at least, didn't seem to find the question strange.

"Yes," she replied, clearly pleased about this fact, "even Richard's back to his usual difficult self. They discharged him this afternoon. I think they're willing to let you go as soon as you can stay awake for more than five minutes as well."

Harry managed a big smile at that, but it turned into a yawn which made him laugh.

"I think I can manage five, but I'm not sure about ten," he joked, although he was pretty sure he could last much longer.

Hospitals were not his favourite place and if he could leave he would be most happy. He was so busy planning that for a few moments he did not notice that Anita was looking at him rather intently.

"Do you mind talking about what happened?" she asked when he finally looked at her.

Thinking back to what he had been put through was not the most pleasant of experiences, but he nodded anyway. Anita would not have asked if it wasn't important to her.

"Official or unofficial?" Harry asked, vaguely remembering a police officer trying to talk to him before, and falling asleep on the poor man.

"Unofficial," Anita replied; "the cops have enough to keep the bad guys locked up for a while and Draco threatened to remove the intestines of anyone who bothered you in an official capacity until you were recovered."

That sounded just like Draco and Harry rolled his eyes. The best threats always came from over anxious Slytherins.

"What do you want to know?" he asked, not wishing to delay the conversation any further.

"How," Anita sounded a little hesitant, "how did you give me your magic?"

Anita never seemed to ask easy questions, but it wasn't as if Harry had been expecting to be able to dodge that one. His memories were a bit mixed up, but he remembered that alright.

"You called me," he said after gathering his thoughts for a few minutes, "even with everything going on I felt that, but it was like you were just out of reach. I knew you were there somewhere, but I couldn't push through the binding they'd put on me to reach you."

He paused, trying to stop his memories from running away with him.

"I could feel Richard as well," Harry continued when he'd calmed himself down again. "When they used the potion on him they connected us together. I don't know if they didn't realise or if they didn't care, but it meant I could sense him and when you called me it was as if part of it came through him."

"I had the marks open," Anita told him as if that made sense, "but I couldn't reach him."

Harry nodded, filing away the information.

"I think my vampire instinctively knew what was going on," he said, going over the experience in his mind, "because I started reaching for the connection with Richard without understanding what I was doing. When I did I could feel you more, but it was weird, almost as if there were two yous and one kept getting in the way of the other. I think the potion took your place as far as Richard was

concerned, but I could feel past it. It wasn't enough though, I tried to help you, but the connection wasn't strong enough. Nothing happened."

Anita was frowning now, and Harry didn't blame her, after all that didn't make a lot of sense considering what had happened.

"Then how?" she asked, clearly confused. "Richard doesn't remember much of what happened."

"Richard let me call him," Harry said simply. "He let his guard down and let me call his wolf so that the connection strengthened. It was like opening a pipe between us and suddenly there you were, still calling me and I threw everything I had at you through Richard. I don't know how exactly, I just did."

He really couldn't explain it, he had just followed the instincts running through him. He knew he hadn't been really conscious, not completely aware of what was going on, but he had been sentient to the metaphysical battle being waged in the room at the time.

"Richard let you call him?" Anita sounded more shocked about that than anything else.

All Harry could do was nod.

"He was still there, inside his mind, but he couldn't break through the power of what they'd done to him, so he let me do it instead," he wasn't sure where that explanation came from, but he knew it was true even as he said it.

He had not known Richard long, and he didn't know the Ulfric well, but he had had a glimpse into the man's mind that day. He wondered if he should mention quite how much the werewolf loved Anita, because he had seen that as clear as day, but it wasn't really his place. Anita's relationships were complicated to say the least and sticking his nose in did not seem like a good idea. He would explain to her what had happened and let her infer her own interpretation; maybe she would see the truth for what it was.

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Scene 2

When an owl flew through Anita's kitchen window, even Harry was a little surprised. It wasn't the fact that it was a delivery owl, it was the fact that it was at Anita's house that confused him. When the large brown bird landed in front of him and stuck out its leg, he shrugged rather helplessly at Cherry and Nathaniel who were staring at the owl and relieved it of its package.

Having his own owl, Harry habitually carried owl treats around in his pockets just in case, and even though he had not been expecting any owls while in the states, he had not broken the habit. The bird actually looked surprised, if it was possible for an owl to show shock, when he gave it a treat, and then it flew back out the way it had come.

"Harry," Cherry eventually said, as Harry read the name on the front of the package, "why was there an owl on our table?"

"We use them to deliver post," Harry replied, looking at his and Draco's names, but unable to find anything more detailed on the brown paper. "But I don't understand why it came here. There's no address."

Draco chose that moment to walk into the room.

"Oh, good, they're here," the Slytherin said brightly and swooped on the package.

"What are here?" Harry asked, intrigued as Draco ripped into the parcel like a kid on Christmas morning.

"Our fake wands," was the reply.

It did not take long for Draco to reveal two wooden boxes. Harry did not know where Draco had gone to have these made up, or how anyone could make a copy of a wand they did not have, but he thought it was probably better that he did not know. Technically what they were doing was illegal since authorities liked to know when their citizens were capable of wandless magic, but Harry really didn't want the whole world to know, which is what would happen if the Ministry ever found out. The fact that the son of a former Death Eater was also capable of this would not go down well even though Draco was a decorated war hero, and it would raise far too many questions.

"I charmed the paper for them when I ordered these," Draco said as he passed one box to Harry, "so that the owl would come straight to us wherever we were. It was the only way to make sure they'd find us."

Harry hadn't been aware that was possible, but he didn't argue. The box in his hand was plain and unassuming with a small branded HP in the corner. Since Draco was already opening his box, Harry did the same. Quite frankly what he saw inside amazed him and he pulled the wand out of the box and put it down so he could look at it. The workmanship was incredible.

Reaching into his sleeve Harry pulled out and placed his real wand on the table next to the fake wand and he was very impressed; they looked identical. Even the grain on the wood was exactly the same, down to the last ring line. Whoever Draco had found to make the wand, they were an expert craftsman and looking over to where Draco was holding his real and fake wand in either hand it was obvious that just as good a job had been done on those. Picking his real wand up in his right hand and the fake one in his left they were even the same weight.

It was quite incredible, and the only way he could tell them apart was the comforting warmth he always felt from his wand was missing from the fake. The fake wand was merely a channelling tool with no inherent magic of its own so it did not interact with his power, but his own wand always sent a hum through his fingers and a content feeling to his heart.

"So that one's real," Nathaniel said, looking at the two objects Harry was holding, "and that one's fake?"

Harry nodded as his friend pointed at each wand in turn.

"But they look exactly the same," the wereleopard said and didn't quite seem to understand.

"That's the idea," Harry replied with a grin, "here, see if you can tell them apart by feel."

He handed Nathaniel the fake wand first and his friend passed it from hand to hand, finding the feel of the wood. After a few moments Nathaniel passed it back

and Harry gave him the real wand. Lycanthropes had much sharper senses than human beings and it would be interesting to see if Nathaniel could tell any difference with his greater experience. Harry couldn't, but then Micah had told him that it would be a few months before his lycanthropy had completely finished changing him.

"That tingles," Nathaniel said in a surprised voice as he held the wand in his left hand.

Harry hadn't really been expecting that, wands were usually completely inert for Muggles. He was wondering whether Nathaniel's lycanthropy was causing some interaction when his friend swapped the wand to his right hand and to everyone's shock a tiny group of sparks shot off the end of the device. Nathaniel dropped it like he had been bitten and Harry's hand shot out to grab the falling wand before it hit the table.

"Are you okay?" he asked immediately, far more worried about Nathaniel than he was about the wand.

Nathaniel was looking at his fingers and then the wand and then his fingers again; he appeared confused and not particularly happy.

"That was weird," the wereleopard said eventually, not actually answering the question.

"You can say that again," Draco said from the other side of the table, "wands are not supposed to do that for anyone but wizards and witches."

"Has anyone ever tested them with Muggle lycanthropes?" Harry asked, looking for a reasonable explanation.

The problem he was having was that he had seen sparks like that before, most notably when he had been fitted for his own wand and had not yet found the right one. Draco frowned at the question and Harry had the feeling that he might not be looking at this the correct way.

"It's to do with a person's magical core," Draco said slowly, "so I suppose lycanthropy could have an effect on that."

"One way to find out," Cherry said and held out her hand.

Harry looked at Draco who shrugged and handed his wand to the female wereleopard. Cherry held it for a moment and then raised her eyebrows.

"Feels like a stick to me," she said and gave the wand back to Draco.

"Maybe it has something to do with it being Harry's wand," Nathaniel suggested, "after all he is one of us and he may have infused it with something when using it."

It was a reasonable suggestion so Harry handed his wand over to the Cherry. The young woman took it and held it, absolutely nothing happened.

"Draco, lend Nathaniel your wand for a minute," Harry was beginning to think something very odd was going on that didn't have much to do with lycanthropy at all.

When Draco held out his wand, Nathaniel took it tentatively with his left hand. From the look on the wereleopard's face, Harry did not have to ask if it tingled as well. Almost as if he was holding high explosive Nathaniel swapped hands; a similar, tiny puff of sparks flew from the end of the wand, only this time they were blue where they had been silver.

"Okay," Nathaniel said, very slowly putting the wand on the table and backing away, "what's going on?"

Harry shared a look with Draco.

[The only time I've seen sparks like that is when a wizard is trying to find a wand,] he said silently, totally unsure about what he was thinking.

He had no idea how the American system dealt with Muggleborn wizards, but even if it was possible that they just left them to it, he hadn't felt anything from Nathaniel to suggest he was one of them.

"Nathaniel," Draco looked over at the wereleopard and Harry felt sorry for his lycanthrope friend as he gazed back, thoroughly unsettled, "did anything strange ever happen around you as a child?"

Nathaniel looked completely lost and he stammered for a few moments, clearly not knowing what to say. It was then that Anita appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"What's going on?" she asked and Harry was sure she had picked up Nathaniel's distress. "Nathaniel, are you okay?"

There was no hesitation in the wereleopard's movements as he crossed the kitchen to her as soon as she held out her hand. Harry could almost feel Nathaniel's distress as the young man fell to his knees and buried his face in Anita's side as she stroked his hair.

"Someone explain," Anita's voice was cold and the order cut straight through Harry.

"Sparks," he said, as if the answer was dragged from him, "when Nathaniel touched my wand, sparks came out and we were trying to understand why. The same happened with Draco's wand, but nothing happened for Cherry at all."

"Which means?" Anita's tone was a little softer this time, but it still demanded answers.

"It's possible he has some Wizarding magic," Draco replied this time, much more in control than Harry.

Now Anita frowned.

"But surely we'd have known something by now," she pointed out. "I'd have felt something. Neither of you have felt anything from Nathaniel before. Could it be residue left from the magic you gave me to fight the demon? Nathaniel is part of my second triumvirate."

Draco didn't bother replying and as Harry watched his lover calmly picked up his wand from the table and threw it at Anita. As expected she caught it without missing a beat.

"No sparks," Draco said after a few moments. "If it was residue, surely it would be strongest in you."

Harry could not fault his lover's logic, and it seemed, neither could Anita, since she did not appear happy. Throwing the wand back she turned her attention to Nathaniel and Harry couldn't resist the urge anymore and moved towards her. Cherry seemed to have been having the same problem because she went as well. Nathaniel was in distress and Harry so wanted to help. Something about Draco's question had really upset the wereleopard, but he had no way of knowing what it was.

Sinking to his knees he leant against Nathaniel, giving his support in the best way he knew how. Beside him Cherry did the same, and Anita joined them only seconds later until they were like a protective shell around Nathaniel. His friend was actually shaking and Harry knew that this went beyond a little shower of sparks from the tip of a wand.

"Nicky," Nathaniel's voice was so quiet that Harry could barely hear it, "Nicky told me strange things used to happen when I was little. It happened once after I ran away too, a client tried to rob me and he flew against the wall. But not for a long time."

"It's called accidental magic," Harry said, almost as quietly, "we all do it as kids. I ended up on the school roof once."

When Nathaniel lifted his head and lilac eyes filled with too much pain looked at him, Harry almost couldn't hold his friend's gaze. Whatever memories Nathaniel had had to drag up to answer the question, they were hurting him.

"But I'm not like you," the tone was so confused that Harry just wanted to comfort his friend, but this was too important to let it go.

"What happened when you met the man with a mark like this?" Draco asked and Harry looked behind him to see his lover standing only a foot or so away with his sleeve rolled up.

[Draco what...?]

[There is a way to take the magic out of a wizard,] Draco did not let him finish his question. [It takes a very powerful wizard to do it and it usually kills the one being drained, but it can be done. It lowers a magical core until it cannot maintain itself. Voldemort wanted to do it to all the Muggleborns before he made them slaves.]

Harry looked back at Nathaniel and saw such fear that he wanted to end this now.

"Enough," Anita said, moving to pull Nathaniel away and Harry suspected, out of the room.

Part of Harry agreed with her, but the rest of him reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. He did not apply any pressure, he just placed it there.

"This could be very important for Nathaniel," he said as calmly as he could manage and then turned his attention solely on his friend. "Nathaniel, please."

He looked into terrified eyes and he could do nothing to help.

"I don't remember," Nathaniel whispered.

"Was there pain?" Draco asked bluntly, but Harry could hear the reluctance in his lover's tone.

Draco was a practical Slytherin, but Nathaniel's distress was so obvious and even Draco did not want to do this.

"Did he cast a spell on you that seemed to pull your heart out of your chest?" Draco continued as Nathaniel stared at him. "Did he say anything to you? Did he leave you for dead?"

"Yes," Nathaniel finally screamed. "It hurt. Nothing has ever hurt that much. He yelled at me: 'Filthy little mudblood, now you won't contaminate the rest of us.' It was weeks before I could even walk. If Felicity hadn't found me I'd be dead."

Then Nathaniel buried his head in Anita's shoulder and Harry knew there would be no more information from the wereleopard. His hand was rubbing Nathaniel's back and he wanted to offer all the comfort he could, but there was one thing he needed to know first. Twisting he looked at Draco.

"Why now?" he asked, using his voice because he thought the others would want to know as well.

"The magic you let Anita use," Draco said, obviously far ahead in this matter. "Some of it must have reached Nathaniel; it would have recharged his magical core to a point where it could sustain itself. His magic has probably been getting stronger ever since, returning to what it's supposed to be."

It was just such a huge concept; people didn't just suddenly turn out to be wizards when they were nineteen. Harry didn't have the first clue what this would mean for Nathaniel, but he was bloody sure he was going to make sure none of it was bad.

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Scene 3

Nathaniel was curled up on the corner of the bed with Sigmund, her favourite stuffed penguin, wrapped in his hair as if the auburn blanket was a barrier to the world. Anita had sent him upstairs a few minutes earlier, knowing that he was in no shape to deal with the discussion about Wizards and what to do next that was going on. Anita had stayed to make sure no one was planning to do anything horrendous and then she had excused herself as quickly as possible to go and make sure her pomme de sang was okay.

Walking over to the bed she sat down and stroked Nathaniel's mane of hair back from his face so that she could see him properly. Her pomme de sang had been crying again and he did not even look at her, just stared ahead at the wall. She had not seen him this distressed in a long time.

"Hey," she said quietly, leaning down and kissing him gently on the side of the face, "let me help, please."

It was a long tense few moments before Nathaniel actually looked at her and there was so much pain in his eyes that she wanted to just take him in her arms and never let go.

"I will always be here for you," she said; the promise dragged from her by the need she saw in the man-child on her bed. "No one will ever hurt you like that again if I can stop it."

"I didn't remember," Nathaniel said in little more than a whisper, "not until today. How did I not remember?"

She stroked the side of his face again, wanting to take away his pain, but not sure how. Nathaniel had seen so much, lost his innocence so early, and now this; it was more than any human being should be asked to bear.

"We all block out things that are too horrible to remember," Anita told Nathaniel. "It's how we stay sane. For a long time after my mother was killed I couldn't remember everything that happened. When I did, remembering was one of the hardest things I had ever done. I know it hurts, but it will get better."

The memories of her mother's car accident were still some of the most painful she had, but that pain had dulled a little with time. She only hoped this would not scar Nathaniel anymore than it already had. His completely submissive nature made more and more sense the longer she knew him and the more she found out about his past. Gabriel had chosen his leopards well and Nathaniel had been the perfect damaged goods for his perverted intentions.

"I think I saw them once," Nathaniel said after a few minutes quiet which had only contained the sound of her fingers moving through his hair, "people searching my street with wands. Maybe they were looking for me. That was before... before..."

It was a bad sign that he could not even say it, but Anita did not let him struggle long.

"Before the Death Eater took your magic," she said calmly, continually trying to stroke the tension out of Nathaniel's body.

Her pomme de sang nodded, snuggling against her leg slightly for comfort.

"Could they have been looking for me?" Nathaniel sounded so small and confused.

"Harry was surprised that his people hadn't come for you," Anita told him, "it seemed to upset him that they hadn't. So maybe they did and they didn't look hard enough."

"They frightened me," her pomme de sang said, moving closer to her again and almost crawling into her lap, "but not like he did."

If it was comfort he needed it would be comfort she gave and Anita continued to sooth Nathaniel as best she could.

"Draco says that all the Death Eaters with the power to do what was done to you are dead or in prison forever," she said, although she was not quite sure she believed it entirely. "They are being punished for their crimes and they will never be able to hurt anyone like they hurt you. It's over Nathaniel; no one can do that to you again."

"But it's not over," he whispered in a very distressed tone, "I'm one of them."

"You're like Harry and Draco, Nathaniel," Anita said with a little more force than she intended, "nothing like that monster who tried to kill you. You will be a great wizard and I will love you the same no matter what powers you have."

He looked up at her properly then and the gratitude in his eyes was almost heartbreaking. With a catch of her heart Anita realised that she had just said the right thing. All her rationalisations and explanations and she had been missing the point. All Nathaniel had needed to know was that he was still loved. It almost broke her heart and she gathered him up into a tight embrace and did not let go for a long time.

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Scene 4

It was full moon and Anita could barely believe it had been a month since the whole mess of ritualistic sacrifice and wizards had started. So much had happened and so many things had changed that in some ways it felt like far longer. The case was in the hands of the legal people now with all the perpetrators safely locked up. Most of the cult members had pleaded down their crimes in return for still being alive and testifying against "the Master" which meant that a conviction was almost a dead cert. It turned out that the man's real name was the very boring Dwight Miles and he had a history of crime. It seemed he had turned to magic when incarcerated for the first time as an adult. If or when the case would ever come to trial was another matter, however, and Anita wasn't holding her breath for that one since Dwight was clearly deranged. All she cared about was that the bad guys were behind bars and weren't getting out any time soon.

There was still a leak somewhere in Dolph's department that had yet to be plugged, but no other stories had turned up in the papers so Anita was beginning to think it was a personal grudge or Dolph on the war path had scared the leak dry. She was not about to say anything to anyone, but it would not have surprised her if Arnet hadn't had something to do with the whole issue. The detective would take some watching, of that she was sure, but there was no proof one way or the other so Anita was reserving judgement. She could have just been projecting her dislike of the woman onto the situation.

Then there was the fact that Nathaniel was a wizard of all things and they'd even been to pick him up a wand the previous day. Having met a little of the Wizarding bureaucracy in the guy at Draco's house, Anita had thought it would take jumping through all sorts of hoops for them to acknowledge her pomme de sang as one of them, but it seemed the opposite.

She wasn't clear on the details, but Harry had tried to explain something about a book that registered magical births, including those born to Muggle parents, and Nathaniel's name being in it, but him being lost because of what the Death Eater had done. According to Harry, Nathaniel's name had reappeared in the book and hence there was no argument from anyone.

Nathaniel was standing very close to her, and had been very reluctant to let her out of his sight since the incident that had revealed his past. Even with Harry and Draco doing everything to help, like arranging for a private tutor to teach Nathaniel everything he needed to know about magic, and introducing the pard to the idea of their society and the concept of secrecy, Nathaniel's confidence had still taken a blow. The independence that he had been showing for months was somewhat cowed, and Anita was sure her pomme would bounce back eventually,

but it was going to take a little longer. She could deal with a clingy Nathaniel for a while, if it helped him adjust.

Reaching out she brushed a stray strand of hair from his face and gave him a smile. Nathaniel smiled back, but the slightly haunted look in his lilac eyes was more pronounced than usual. Looking around the room she took in all those she had chosen to take responsibility for and it made her feel just a little older than her years. She would die for any of her people, even Caleb, and she would kill for them as well. This was not a place she had ever expected to be, but it felt right to her now and Anita knew, if given the choice, she would not change it.

The plan this month had been for the pard to join the wolf pack since Anita needed to keep her ties with the pack strong and Jason had expressed the desire for company, but things hadn't worked out quite like that. Casting her gaze over at where Lupin and Jason were talking quietly in the corner of the kitchen, Anita could not help but wonder what the future held for the pair.

Everything had been going fine with Richard carefully introducing Lupin to the St Louis pack. Nothing had been decided as to how the whole business with Lupin and Jason being from opposite sides of the Atlantic was going to work out, but everyone seemed to have assumed that Lupin would be staying around for a while. Lupin, being a powerful alpha, was therefore likely to cause friction in the pack and so Richard had taken a personal interest and had been trying to smooth things over. Everything had been going fine, since most of the alphas in the pack had taken one look at Lupin and recognised his dominance, but then they'd reached the top few.

It had been okay at first, Lupin had made it clear he had no intentions of challenging the hierarchy of the pack and the first two meetings had gone fine. Since her house seemed to be neutral ground, Richard had brought over Shang-Da and Jamil to Anita's place and introduced them as enforcers of the pack. It had been a little tense at first, but a few ritualistic indications of submission had smoothed things over. Everything had been fine.

The second meeting had been a little bigger and at the lupanar, and Anita had not been there for that one, having clients to catch up with thanks to the chaos of the previous month. According to Richard there had been one minor scuffle, but nothing that werewolves didn't seem to think was normal. Looking over at Lupin, Anita could still see the faint pink line down the werewolf's neck where someone had taken a swing at him. By all account Lupin had put down that challenge very fast.

The real problem had arisen when Lupin had met Sylvie. Being Richard's second in command Sylvie had been busy with other pack business during the previous two meetings, and since Lupin was not challenging anyone Richard had assumed their meeting was a formality. Luckily, in Anita's opinion, Richard had had the good sense to make sure the first meeting did take place before full moon, or the lupanar could have been short one werewolf.

The thing was, no one was quite sure why, since both Lupin and Sylvie had expressed no conscious dislike of each other on a human level, but when they had met things had been very nasty. It had been at Anita's house again since they had been working out the whole pard going to the lupanar issue to make sure there were no misunderstandings, and Anita could not help shuddering as she remembered what had happened.

Lupin had been making tea since the werewolf had decided, all be it very politely, that those from the US side of the Atlantic lacked something in the art, and Jason had gone bounding out to meet the visitors. Jason and Sylvie were friends and Anita knew for a fact that Jason had been dying to show Lupin off to one of the few members of the pack the younger werewolf really liked. Unfortunately Lupin and Sylvie's reaction to each other had been similar and opposite to that between Lupin and Jason; similar in that initially neither had seemed to have any control over what they were doing and opposite in that they had clearly wanted to kill each other.

Only Richard grabbing Sylvie and Harry calling Remus had prevented bloodshed. It had been nearly fifteen minutes before either of the werewolves had been rational enough to talk about it and even now, two days later, no one was going to leave the pair alone together or let them within a mile of each other at the full moon.

Even Jean-Claude couldn't explain this problem and the working hypothesis was that it had something to do with the combination of Sylvie having to be a hard bitch from hell to maintain her position in the pack and the fact that she was one of the few alpha wolves on friendly terms with Jason and hence Lupin's wolf viewed her as a threat.

The way Jason was standing very close to Lupin, Anita hoped that the boisterous young man had come to terms with this added complication, but she could not help feeling sorry for the younger werewolf. It hadn't been openly discussed, but she suspected that this would mean that Lupin and Jason would be returning to England with Draco and Harry. Lupin had seemed quite happy to stay in St Louis, possibly permanently, since he could claim residency thanks to some obscure Wizarding law recognising a mate bond between magical creatures as legally binding, but Jason did not seem quite so comfortable the other way round.

Jason was an all American boy and Anita knew that England would be a big break for him, but she was almost positive that Lupin could not stay in St Louis for much longer without having to challenge Sylvie. While Anita thought that Remus would probably make a good pack second, being patient and strong, but under the polite veneer as hard as nails, she was not so sure Sylvie would survive or that she wanted such a threat to Richard in the pack. Lupin was after all a wizard and he had resources the rest of the pack didn't. Anita had the nasty suspicion that if Lupin so chose, Richard would fall in a battle for Ulfric. Richard was the stronger werewolf, but magic gave anyone the edge.

"Okay, guys," Anita said, banishing her contemplations, "fifteen minutes to moonrise, everyone ready?"

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[Scene 5](#)

Harry could quite honestly say he was having a wonderful time. This moon he was no longer a stranger and the pard were an extremely playful bunch when nothing serious was going on, and running around with them had been fun. It had taken some coaxing from him, Cherry and Zane with the others hanging back, but they had eventually managed to convince Nathaniel to play as well. The newly discovered wizard had been subdued ever since the incident in the kitchen, but Harry was determined Nathaniel would not be subdued for long.

They had played for what seemed like ages, even drawing Anita into a game of tag by bowling her over and then daring her to retaliate. Harry thought the hose

pipe had been bad form, but Anita had soon learned that wet cat was even worse than dry cat and every body had ended up a little damp. Micah had looked utterly hilarious completely drenched after Anita had taken revenge for a particularly soggy hug from the Nimir-Raj's catman form.

It had been fun and they had bounded around until the play had become a little too serious and Micah had sent them all to hunt. Then they had divided into small groups. Harry had seen Remus and Jason disappear into the trees together as he had trotted over to Draco's side. It had seemed perfectly natural to slink into the trees with his lover by his side and begin the search for prey.

Small prey had been easy to find and the taste of blood was still in his mouth from his first meal, but Harry was after larger game. Draco moved through the wood beside him like a silent ghost and they were of one accord as they scented their current prey. It was a deer, a big one, and even as his beast moved him in the hunt, he had plans at the back of his mind.

Harry had never been taught to hunt like an animal, but he had been trained for war and this was little different, merely more primeval. Silently he and Draco separated, circling their prey from either side. He could see it now, his cat eyes picking up the sight of the skittish creature in the dim light. It was standing stock still, listening as if it knew it was being stalked, but it did not stand a chance.

Pushing his muscles into action in a huge burst of speed Harry rushed forward, a bullet of black fur in complete contrast to the white blur that was Draco from the other direction. The white tiger leapt onto the back of the deer, beginning to pull it down and Harry went straight for the throat.

His teeth closed on soft flesh and fresh blood burst into his mouth, wiping out his mind as instinct urged him to hold on. Nothing else existed as the smell and taste of blood swamped him and he crushed the throat of the beast between his jaws. The creature's struggles excited him and he enjoyed feeling the life flowing out of the deer and into his mouth. This was what his beast was meant for; this was the ultimate design of the cat and he revelled in it. Only as the prey finally died did his human mind slowly come back to him.

It was hard to release the grip he had on the deer, but he made himself and slowly stood up, looking down at the lifeless creature in front of him. Draco was sitting beside the deer with one paw on a haunch, just looking at Harry. In this, where Harry led, Draco would follow and Harry had no intention of eating just yet.

Instead of ripping the prey apart he carefully rubbed his chin along it, scent marking it quite deliberately. With a huff and a nudge he invited Draco to do the same. This was their kill and he wanted everyone to know it, but it was also a gift. Once the deer smelt of them to his satisfaction, Harry sank his teeth back into the throat and patiently began to drag it back towards Anita's house.

At the last moon he had been new, confused by the instincts and overcome with the power of his beast. He had done something that in a different pard could have been seen as unforgivable, and he intended to rectify that as completely as he could. Never in his life had he been allowed to just muddle through and learn slowly, and he refused to do so now either. He was a wereleopard and he was not going to be a bad one.

As they walked back into the garden he saw most of the pard around the place, although a few were still missing, and Micah was with Anita in the middle. It was

possible for a cat to look surprised, but no one seemed particularly startled that he was dragging another deer. There were a few looks, however, when he dragged his prize straight towards Micah and Anita.

He was aware of Draco behind him, but as he took the prey forward, his lover held back. Once he was at his destination Harry carefully put the deer down and then stepped back slightly, before lying down and rolling half onto his side. It was a sign of submission and almost more powerful that when he had fallen to his knees as a human being.

This was Anita and Micah's pard, they were Nimir-Ra and Nimir-Raj and Harry recognised their authority, however, they both looked surprise at his complete surrender. For a moment both just remained where they were and then Micah moved forward, offering his furry hand to Harry. Without hesitation Harry licked it and if he'd been able to he would have smiled. His and Draco's gift had been accepted in the spirit that it was meant.

End of Chapter 34

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Chapter 35 Home is Where the Heart Is

Scene 1

Originally he had only been intending to stay in St Louis for a couple of weeks, but with everything that had happened he and Draco had extended their stay to over a month and a half. Harry had learned so much and found a place in the city that was very different from the one at home and he was torn about the idea of going home. Only one day left and then he would be back with his old friends, but also embroiled in the politics of the Wizarding world. It was the politics which had made him decide to stay in the States for his birthday. When he had spoken to Hermione last she had mentioned something about Fudge talking about a national holiday, or some other such rubbish, but it was difficult to have a national holiday when the subject of it was out of the country.

Harry knew something odd was going on because he could feel that there were several members of the pard in Anita's house as they approached it, but he couldn't hear anything. He and Draco had spent a leisurely morning in bed celebrating his 18th birthday and then there had been a phone call on his mobile, which Draco had actually picked up, and he'd been dragged over to Anita's house. Draco had said it was something to do with Nathaniel and his tutor throwing a hissy fit about something or other, and since they were going home the next day they needed to sort it out immediately.

Since he had been hoping to spend the rest of the day in bed as well, before going over to say goodbye to the pard, he was feeling a little put out, but when it came to Nathaniel he was willing to drop just about anything. After all Nathaniel had given him and Draco just about everything the wereleopard had to give so that they could have a normal relationship which rather paled losing an afternoon in bed in comparison.

"Let's hope Anita doesn't have the poor bugger cornered with that gun," Draco joked as they walked through the empty kitchen.

"Or has blown his balls off," Harry replied, letting any annoyance he had left go, "because those are difficult to reattach."

Draco laughed and dragged him round the corner into the living room and it was as he stepped through the door that he felt the familiar sensation of stepping through some sort of spell. He soon realised it had been a silencing charm.

"Surprise!"

It was like the whole room exploded with noise and he was so shocked he almost had heart failure. The room was full of people and it brought him to a complete standstill. Looking around he could see every member of the pard, Remus and Jason, Richard, a couple of other werewolves who had connections to the pard and even Sergeant Zerbrowski from RPIT, and it rather knocked him for six.

"Well say something, you ninny," Draco said with a laugh, but the problem was Harry had no idea what to say.

There was a banner over the table that read 'Happy Birthday Harry' and a large cake surrounded by mountains of food. Last year the Weasleys had thrown him a 17th birthday party, but he had been expecting that since Ron was incapable of keeping a secret, and this had taken him by complete surprise and shocked him into total silence. He hadn't even known that anyone had told the others it was his birthday, that they had all come together and thrown him a party made him feel rather emotional.

"Thanks," he managed in what turned out to be a rather squeaky voice.

"Ah, isn't that sweet, he's embarrassed."

One day Caleb would learn when to keep his mouth shut, but as it was, Harry waved his hand and reduced the whole room to laughter as the wereleopard suddenly sported green and silver hair.

"Like the choice of colours," Draco said with a grin.

Then everyone descended on Harry and he had no chance to reply. He found presents shoved into his hands and lycanthropes who forgot their own strength patting him on the back and it was all thoroughly overwhelming. He didn't know quite how to react as he was pushed onto the sofa with all the gifts and then everyone watched him expectantly.

"I guess you want me to open these, then," he said with a sheepish grin.

"No, Potter," Draco said in his best scathing tone, "they're admiring the artistic intent of the wrappers."

There really was no comeback to that so Harry picked up the first present instead and began to carefully unwrap it. First of all he gently pulled off the ribbon, in a manner which did not damage the bow, and then he painstakingly began to remove the tape without ripping any of the paper.

"Oh god," a voice said from the back of the crowd and Harry thought it was Gregory, "if he's this slow on every one I think I'm going to drown myself in the punch."

Harry scored himself a point; it had taken less than five minutes to break someone and he grinned impishly.

"Bastard," followed by a groan was the response as he ripped into the present like he had wanted to do in the first place.

He had not expected presents from anyone and the more he opened the more he wanted to be all sappy and give everyone a hug. There were sweets from several members of the pard; a child's detective kit from Zerbrowski, which caused no end of hilarity; a silver necklace with a jumping leopard from Nathaniel; a book on the myths and legends surrounding lycanthropy and a sex manual from Remus and Jason, no prizes for guessing who had picked which; and a pair of silver knives in wrist holsters from Anita. That left only one present, wrapped in silver paper and fastened with a green and silver bow.

It was a very small parcel, no more the two inches cubed and this one Harry opened very carefully. Inside was a velvet box with some silver runes on the top, and Harry's heart skipped a beat as he realised what it was. To a Muggle it might have looked like a ring box or a necklace box, but Harry knew it was a spell box. Opening it reverently he saw three small jewels mounted on a simple pin and he could feel the magic on them.

"A memory pin," he said in a small voice, looking up at Draco and not knowing quite how to express his joy.

This was a gift only given to a person the other valued above all else. Harry knew that Molly had one from Arthur and Dumbledore had once shown him his and told him of a young woman he had lost as a young man. It had been a sad story, but one so full of love that the memory of it and the significance of the gift made Harry's heart brim over.

A memory pin contained a copy of three memories from the giver; the first was usually their initial meetings; the second the moment the giver first realised they were in love; and the third was often something intimate between the two. By touching the jewels the wearer could experience those memories from the perspective of the giver and it was considered one of the most intimate gifts any wizard or witch could give to another. Usually they were charmed so that they would only work for the person they were designed for, and Harry had no doubt that Draco would have bought only the best.

"Thank you," he said and reached out to his lover, "I will treasure it forever."

Then he dragged Draco down and kissed him very thoroughly.

"Y'know I could get the hose pipe," were the words that eventually brought them up for air.

Harry smiled sheepishly at Anita; he wasn't about to explain the significance of the pin to everyone in general, but he had had to express his thanks.

"Cake," Nathaniel decided as an awkward silence threatened to descend, and since the wereleopard had mastered Wingardium Leviosa already and was quite proficient in dropping ice cubes down people's back, no one argued.

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Scene 2

Anita found that, without her conscious permission, Harry and Draco had taken up a place in her heart and she was going to miss them. Not quite as much as she was going to miss Jason, but they were definitely on her 'people I care about'

list. Harry, Draco, Lupin and Jason would be leaving by portkey, whatever exactly that was, from Draco's house in only a few minutes and a select few were gathered to see them off. They had all said most of their goodbyes the previous evening, so the only ones in attendance were Nathaniel, Richard, Micah, herself, Jean-Claude and Asher.

Nathaniel had already been around the room hugging all the leavers and making them promise to write and call, and he looked as if he wanted to do it all again, but they really didn't have the time. Harry had given Nathaniel some sort of charmed notebook that was a twin to one Harry and Draco had that would allow a limited conversation as well, so that Nathaniel could talk to them if he needed advice without having to find an open fireplace. It seemed that for one of those at home Anita would have to jump through some hoops.

Richard and Micah had given much manlier goodbye speeches and had quiet words with their respective pack/pard members. The casual touching that had gone on said far more about the parting than the words had since Anita was now well versed in lycanthrope body language. Even Richard seemed unconsciously distressed that one of his wolves was leaving, although Anita suspected he was barely aware of the signs he was showing.

That left her and Jean-Claude, and she let the vampire go first. Since she had been the first to welcome Harry to St Louis it seemed logical that she would be the last to say goodbye to him and his friends.

"Mon pomme," Jean-Claude it seemed was starting with Jason, "you have served me well, and it gives my heart great joy to release you into bonds of a different kind."

Jason had still been Jean-Claude's pomme de sang even after connecting with Lupin, once Lupin's irrational possessiveness had faded, but as soon as the decision was made that Jason would be leaving Jean-Claude had begun looking for another. It was strange, but from where Anita was standing it appeared to her that it was this which was the hardest for Jason to let go.

"Another will take your place," Jean-Claude said in an almost ritualistic manner, "but know that you will always be welcome in my house."

With a flick of his wrist the vampire produced what appeared to be a small plastic wallet, which he presented to Jason with his usual flourish.

"A parting gift," Jean-Claude said with a smile and then moved forward to embrace the somewhat overcome werewolf.

It never really occurred to Anita how much Jean-Claude's influence had changed Jason over the years, but now she thought back to the man she had first met and there was a great deal of difference. Then Jason had been more like a playful kid, now he was still playful, but there was nothing juvenile about the way he dealt with the world. Anita wondered if maybe this was what it was like to watch your children grow up and fly the nest.

As soon as Jean-Claude drew back from the earnest embrace he turned to Lupin, whom Anita realised had been holding himself very still throughout the entire exchange. It seemed that Lupin still had some possessive issues and Anita wondered how they had managed the pomme de sang thing if a simple embrace put the werewolf that on edge. Lupin was obviously a lot stronger than she had given him credit for.

"He is very dear to me, mon ami," Jean-Claude said quite seriously, "please look after him."

"With everything I am," Lupin replied without a trace of hesitation.

Only then did Jean-Claude offer his hand, which was taken in kind, only Anita didn't think Lupin expected to be dragged into a very Gallic hug. The werewolf looked a little shocked when he was released. Anita scored one point to French touchy-feeliness and no points to British reserve.

"Mes enfants," Jean-Claude said, turning to Harry and Draco, "I will miss both of you. You are most welcome in my city whenever you wish."

Since Harry was a vampire and Draco his human servant Anita was impressed with Jean-Claude's pronouncement. Giving a vampire the freedom to come and go as he pleased from a city where he was not bound was a big thing in vampire society.

"Thank you," Harry said, clearly aware of what Jean-Claude's words meant. "If you ever have need of us, please call."

It was Jean-Claude's turn to look surprised since if Anita understood it correctly Harry had just countered with an equally binding statement. Simple words could have such huge meanings when it came to vampires and Harry had just promised his support to Jean-Claude even if he became master of his own city. Not that Anita thought Harry had thoughts of such grandeur, but things tended to happen to Harry, so she hadn't dismissed the idea.

"Merci, mon enfant," Jean-Claude said with genuine emotion in his voice.

Draco and Harry were then treated to similar embraces as Jason and Anita wondered if Jean-Claude's grip had cracked any ribs. When they parted Jean-Claude produced another item from his jacket and handed it to Harry.

"A small birthday gift," Jean-Claude said with a smile. "I would have liked to have thrown you a party yesterday, but ma petite had 'first dibs' on you."

The fact that more than one person had wanted to help him celebrate his birthday seemed to embarrass Harry, since he turned pink and mumbled a thank you. Anita thought it was rather endearing. Jean-Claude and Asher had arrived in the evening with more alcohol than Anita had seen in a while, but Jean-Claude had obviously kept the gift back for dramatic flare.

It was then that there was a small choking sound from Jason's direction and Anita looked over to see that the werewolf had just looked at the booklet in the plastic wallet Jean-Claude had given him.

"Jean-Claude, I can't take this," Jason's eyes were wide with shock.

"Too late, mon pomme," Jean-Claude said with a smile, "those funds have been in your name for over a year."

Anita had suspected the wallet contained details of an account, now she knew she was right. The question of how Jason would support himself in England had been mentioned, but rather glossed over and Anita could not help but smile as Jean-Claude took care of it.

"But," Jason tried to protest, and Anita briefly wondered how many noughts were in the account.

"No buts, mon ami," Jean-Claude said and dismissed the protests with a wave of his hand, "for what you have been to me, that is but a trifle."

Jason shut his mouth, but passed the booklet to Lupin whose eyes opened in shock. Anita decided it had to be lots of noughts, which wasn't really surprising since Jean-Claude had had several hundred years to become very wealthy and seemed to enjoy overly dramatic gestures.

Argument over, Jean-Claude took Harry aside to have a quiet word with him and in doing so made her the centre of attention for everyone else. She figured it was her turn.

"I'm going to miss you, you randy mutt," she started with Jason since he was the easiest. "Promise me you won't get yourself into any nasty trouble, because I won't be there to dig you out."

"I promise," Jason replied with a ready smile, but she could see the sadness in his eyes.

Once upon a time she had believed that Jason was a frivolous young man with no thoughts beyond the immediate, but she had learned over time that he was far from the image he projected. He was playful and he liked to find peoples' Achilles' heels and wind them up, but there was a very philosophical side to Jason as well. She felt as if she was losing a great confidant.

"If you're having any major moral dilemmas, just ring me and I'll put you straight," the werewolf said with a grin.

"Like I'd take advice from a beach boy," Anita replied, but belied her words by dragging him into a hug.

A lot of people saw the blond hair, heard that Jason stripped for a living and assumed he was dumb, Anita knew very different and they clung to each other for a minute, not wanting to part.

"Make sure he doesn't do anything stupid, Lupin," she said, determined not to cry as she stepped back. "If anything happens to him it's your balls on the rack."

The threat could have been taken as something of an insult, but Lupin seemed to realise that Anita was just expressing her distress and nodded with a smile. Over the last month she had come to know one thing at least; the two werewolves were in love. Oh it had started as lust and hormones, but she had watched it grow very quickly and she had no doubt they were supposed to be together. Keeping them in St Louis would have pleased her more, but with Sylvie it was impossible.

Before a tear could escape she turned to where Jean-Claude had finished talking to Harry.

"Next time you visit I don't want either of you to be kidnapped, understand?" she said, doing her best to sound nonchalant.

"We'll do our best," Draco said with a smile, "but this is Harry we're talking about, I don't think we should promise the impossible."

It was hug or cry so Anita moved in quickly and gave the blond Wizard a big hug. She really hadn't liked him when they first met, he and she were far too alike, but she was going to miss him a lot. Draco's scathing wit could be caustic if you got on the wrong side of him, but under what Harry called 'the Malfoy exterior' was a young man Anita was glad to call friend.

"You'll have to come and see us some time," Draco said as they parted. "We could show you all the dangers of Wizarding Britain."

Anita managed a laugh at that.

"Not if I have to fly," she said resolutely.

"Just ask Nathaniel to arrange a portkey," Harry said a little too brightly.

She turned to him and really didn't want him to go. She was used to having Harry around and she did not want to lose a member of her pard, because no matter how many times either of them had mentioned that he would be leaving and was only an adopted member of the pard, he wasn't; Harry was one of hers now.

"Don't get killed; don't do anything stupid; and don't forget to write," she said before finding herself enveloped in a hug.

"Likewise, ditto and also," Harry replied before they pulled back.

They just looked at each other a while and Anita could not help marvelling how different Harry was now than the first time she had seen him. She had first met a confused, pale although powerful young man and he was going home tanned, together and, from what she could tell, far happier. He had far too many things on his plate, but she could not deny that Harry seemed far more complete than he had done before Draco made his feelings clear. Looking at it a person might be forgiven for thinking that becoming part lycanthrope and part vampire would ruin someone's life, but Harry seemed to have simply adjusted.

"Thank you," Harry said quietly, "thank you for everything."

"Thank you as well, Harry," Anita said and meant it. "I'm glad you came here, even if I would have preferred different circumstances."

Anita wasn't sure how much longer they stood there, but Draco clearing his throat brought her attention back to the here and now.

"We have just under a minute," the blond Wizard said apologetically, "it's time to get ready."

For a moment Anita had the mad notion of grabbing them all and stopping them going, but she stepped back and let them form up around what looked like an airline ticket. Their luggage had already gone by another route as Harry had explained it so it was just the four men. Standing in front of the others she watched as Lupin whispered quiet instructions to Jason and then the four waved. One second they were standing in Draco's living room and the next they were gone, and Anita felt bereft. Although she hated flying she liked the airport idea better; it gave a person longer to say goodbye.

"Excusing me," a small voice said from beside her and she looked down to see a strange looking creature that Draco had said was a house elf.

"Yes?" she said, still trying to come to terms with the loss she was feeling.

"Would the masters and the mistress be requiring anything before they is leaving?" the house elf asked.

Anita just stared at the creature for a while, not really processing the words. A hand on her shoulder snapped her out of it and she turned to see Micah giving her a sympathetic look.

"Um, no, thank you," she said as she shook herself out of it, "we won't be staying."

It was time to get back to normal and she swallowed the emotions and pulled herself together. The wizards would be back, of that she was sure, and with their magic they weren't that far away. Wanting to cry was ridiculous and she gave Micah a smile before heading to the door. Now she just had family in England.

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Scene 3

Harry hated portkeys; no matter how many times he used one, or how safe they were supposed to be, the moment he felt that tug on his navel his mind jumped back to the Triwizard tournament and part of him was convinced he was about to land in Voldemort's trap. The fact that Voldemort was dead had not helped with this fear and even though he could feel Draco close to him as they landed it took him long seconds to calm down his heart rate.

Official, international portkeys worked in that the passengers could depart from anywhere and would arrive at the international arrivals lounge at the Ministry, but Harry could have sworn that at first all he could see was a graveyard. The trials he had been through at Voldemort's hand would probably never leave him, but he wished fervently that portkeys would not always make him think of Cedric dying and Voldemort returning to life.

"Wow," was Jason's only comment on the whole enterprise and the way the werewolf's eyes were quite wide and round gave Harry the impression that his friend had actually found something that rendered him speechless.

They were quickly ushered out of the arrivals area towards passport control by an official who had obviously had her sense of humour removed when she took up the position. Harry thought there had to be some rule that customs and immigration officials had to have their funny bone removed before they could accept a post, or at least put any happy thoughts into a pensieve before they came to work.

Dressed in Muggle clothes, without his customary glasses and with his scar hidden under his fringe, Harry was pleased to find that no one looked at him twice. He'd tanned somewhat while in the States and thanks to house elf and Nathaniel's cooking he'd broadened enough that he didn't actually look much like the tired young wizard who had departed for a holiday all those weeks ago. Neither Remus nor Draco looked the part of Wizards either and Harry thought anyone would have been hard pushed to link them to the pictures of the war heroes that had appeared in the papers so often.

Waiting in line he and Draco let Remus and Jason go first. Harry wasn't sure what would happen when the official on the desk read his passport and realised that a celebrity had just arrived, but he wanted to be out of the Ministry as fast as possible once it was known, and bringing Jason into the country was bound to take longer than just coming home.

It was Jason and Remus who filled his thoughts as he glanced, aimlessly around the room. What Jean-Claude had wanted to talk to him about was choosing a pomme de sang. After the ritual Remus had been acting as his donor every two days, but nothing had been made official and Harry hadn't wanted to say anything because of the questions about who had been staying and who going. Now that they were all back on British soil Jean-Claude had suggested that he needed to make the arrangement official or chose one that was.

A pomme de sang had status and protection in vampire society, simple donors did not, and it was likely that Harry would have dealings with other vampires. Jean-Claude had also mentioned that it was not done to have two pomme de sangs, but that a bonded pair was the exception being considered as one entity due to the nature of the relationship. It was quite obvious who Jean-Claude wanted Harry to make his pomme de sang, but it was a little more complicated than that, which was why Harry was thinking about it as his eyes wandered.

He had counted all the little wooden ornaments around the dado rail of the room twice and had moved on to the flagstones in the floor when he heard a growl coming from Remus. Flicking his eyes over at the Auror on duty behind the clerk at the desk he could tell that the man was suddenly decidedly nervous.

[I think it's time to do something,] Harry said silently to Draco.

A small nod was the only reply since Draco had his eyes firmly fixed on the jumpy Auror. Harry had plans to use his celebrity to good use in the near future, so standing up straight he decided to start early. Pushing his hair out of his face in as casual a gesture as he could he smiled at the Auror and made sure the man had a good look at his scar. Against his tan the faded scar was quite pronounced, one of the reasons he had arranged his hair over it very carefully and he saw the Auror's eyes open in recognition. Then he gave it a few seconds, as if he had only noticed what was going on at the desk after he had made eye contact with the Auror, and finally he walked towards where Remus and Jason were standing.

"He is my mate," Remus' voice was very much un-Remus like in that it held a hard edge as if he was barely keeping his temper.

All in all Remus was doing a remarkable job of coping with his wolf considering the fact that the werewolf had been bound so long, but the one issue he was very touchy on was Jason.

"Hi, Remus," Harry said conversationally, as if he wasn't now standing just behind a werewolf about to lose it. Not of course that the oblivious official was aware there could be a room full of wolf at any moment. "Is there a problem?"

"He," Remus said, still glaring at the official behind the desk, "doesn't believe Jason is my mate. He wants to lock him up until we can prove it."

Harry patted Remus on the arm supportively and used just a tiny amount of the influence he had over wolves to calm his friend somewhat.

"I'm sure there's been some mistake," he said as if it was the most normal thing in the world. "I was there when the bond was made, Mr," he read the official's name plaque that was sitting on the high desk, "Banaquot, I can assure you it's definitely a mate bond; couldn't separate them for days."

"And you might be?" the immigration official asked as if he didn't really care.

Harry smiled at the man.

"Me?" he asked in a good impression of a man totally oblivious to how many rules he was stamping on. "Oh I'm Harry Potter."

He handed over his passport in a manner which suggested the official's mouth had not just dropped open like a fish out of water.

"We've all been on holiday in America," he continued, doing his best to sound like an excited tourist, "which is where Remus met Jason. Isn't it wonderful? I had no idea werewolves could form mate bonds until I saw it for myself. Quite amazing, don't you think?"

The Ministry employee really hadn't stood a chance and the man just nodded mutely as he looked down and checked the passport. Having confirmation that he was in fact insulting friends of Harry Potter, the defeater of Voldemort, and hence could find his career severely curtailed, the man went positively white.

"Thank you, Mr Potter," the official said in a very small voice and handed back his passport. "Mr Schuyler, sorry for the mix up; you'll need to register if you stay in the country more than fourteen days."

"Draco," Harry said brightly, turning and looking at where his boyfriend was still calmly standing behind the red line, "why don't you come and do your passport now as well? That way we won't have to wait for you the other side."

He had seen people sent to the back of the queue for doing similar things since the rules were only one person at a time unless you were a parent with a minor or connected to your companion in a way that needed to be explained for immigration, but the official just meekly took Draco's passport, didn't even open it, gave it back and waved them through. As they walked on Harry gave Draco a big, satisfied grin and the Slytherin rolled his eyes.

"You're going to become the terror of all Ministry employees," Draco said with a laugh; "I can just see it now."

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Scene 4

The conversation about just how much of a terror to the Ministry Harry intended to be had gone on through baggage claim and out the other end. So much so that the first Harry realised there was someone waiting for them was when he had an armful of female.

"Harry," Hermione said as soon as she pulled back, "thank god you're alright. Why didn't you call more often?"

He had fire called his friends twice since the first time, but obviously Hermione had not quite believed a head in the fire. Maybe she had thought his body hadn't been attached.

"Oh, and thank you for the postcard," this was tacked on the end with Hermione's impeccable politeness and Harry managed to hold onto the laugh, but not the amused grin.

"You're welcome," he said and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "I didn't know anyone was meeting us."

"No one was," Ron's wry tone said from behind his fiancé, "but you know Hermione; she wouldn't believe you were fine until she could check, and she wanted to make sure you didn't think you were getting away without a birthday party even if you were away for the actual day."

"I can't help caring, Ronald Weasley, someone has to worry about him," Hermione said a little hotly.

Harry saw his friend roll his eyes, but he did step up behind Hermione and wrap his arms around her. Ron might have been a dolt when it came to women through most of his school life, but no one would ever say that the chess king could not learn strategy when he had to.

"I know," Ron said, "but I think waking Albus in the middle of the night the other week, to demand an emergency portkey, was a bit much."

"You didn't?" Harry said, as the probable scene played out in his mind.

He should have known that his best friends would be worried until they could actually get their hands on him. Hermione had the grace to go a little red.

"I was worried," was all she would say on the matter.

"With you," Jason commented from just behind him, "I'd be worried too."

"Thanks," Harry said sarcastically.

Jason gave him an unrepentant shrug as he looked over his shoulder at the younger werewolf.

"You are the guy who stepped into St Louis and managed to get kidnapped in under an hour," Jason said with a grin and Harry couldn't really argue with that.

Trouble with a capital 'T' did seem to follow him around like a lost puppy until he knelt down to pet it and ended up hit on the back of the head with something hard.

"Yes well we can talk about that somewhere more private later," Harry decided, not really wanting to discuss this out in the open, "and then Hermione can scold me about it without the whole Ministry hearing."

Hermione glared at him for that, but did not try and deny that she was indeed going to give him a proper talking to.

"Just so long as it's you she scolds and not me," Draco said in true Slytherin fashion, "because I refuse to accept that any of this is my fault."

"No, it couldn't be," Harry said in an innocent tone, "you just gave me the ticket."

A long cool stare greeted that revelation.

"So, aren't you going to introduce us?" Ron broke into the conversation again, much to Harry's pleasure.

It had been decided that most of what had happened in St Louis would only be passed on to those back in England once everyone was back as well to prevent any international incidents. People who had been at war tended to overreact about certain situations so the group who had been away had a lot of explaining to do, and Harry could not think of a better place to start than Jason.

"Ron, Hermione," Harry introduced, "this is Jason. Jason, these are Ron and Hermione, my two best friends."

"And the bane of my existence," Draco said dramatically, but with absolutely no venom.

Hermione gave the Slytherin a playful slap on the arm for that.

"Nice to meet you," Jason said and offered his hand first to Hermione and then to Ron, "I've heard a lot about you from the guys."

"I'm afraid you have us at a disadvantage," Hermione replied with a smile, "because none of the 'guys' has told us anything about you."

"Jason's a werewolf," Harry explained rather enjoying the anticipation and looked to Remus for permission to go on.

His friend gave him a small nod and a little smile; it seemed a Marauder's love of mischief never waned.

"And Remus' mate," Harry finished as if it was a perfectly normal thing to say.

Hermione was nodding politely before what Harry had actually said seemed to catch up with her. For his part, Ron looked amazed straight away.

"Mate?" Hermione did not very often come across something she did not know about, but Harry could tell this was one of those times. "I didn't know werewolves had mates."

"Neither did I," Jason said in his usual cheerful tone, "but I walked into the same room as Remus and bam, it hit me between the eyes, so I guess some of us do."

"It's rare," Remus provided in a much more helpful manner, "a throw back to earlier times."

Harry had watched Hermione all through the explanation and he could see the little light going on in her eyes. It was similar to Albus' twinkle, but it happened to Hermione when she found new knowledge. She was going to launch into all sorts of questions, he could tell, and here was not the place.

"There's lots about werewolves that isn't in the books," Harry said, cutting Hermione off before she could start, "and that's something I would like to talk to you about. I need some help with some research."

"Why?" his friend asked, and he could tell she was intrigued.

"I'll explain somewhere more private," Harry replied, becoming serious for a moment, "but suffice to say, I think something very bad has been going on."

True to Gryffindor form Hermione accepted what he said at face value. If there was one thing they had learned over their years together it was to trust each other. Instead of questioning until she had every last scrap of information, which Harry knew she would do as soon as they were on safe ground; Hermione gave him an appraising look. The expression on her face almost worried him.

"You look," Hermione paused as she spoke, as if searching for the right word, "healthy," she concluded, "and did you break your glasses again?"

He turned to Draco.

"Did I really look that bad when I left?" he asked, wondering if he really looked that different.

"You were exhausted," Draco replied in a manner that suggested to Harry his lover was being completely honest. "Why do you think I made you go?"

There wasn't a lot that Harry could say to that so he didn't try.

"I had my eyes fixed," he said, turning to the other topic, "I don't need my glasses anymore."

Hermione looked surprised, almost as much so as Ron.

"I thought your eyes were like Percy's, mate," Ron commented, "beyond magical healing."

"Me too," Harry replied with a smile, "but seems we were wrong. I'll explain everything at home, and then you can yell at me to your hearts' content. There's quite a lot we left out when we talked."

He received two almost identical looks for that.

"Let's get to the Manor and then Draco can play host and you can ask all the questions you want to," he said, trying not to feel as nervous as those expressions made him.

There was so much to explain and it was going to take a lot for his friends to accept everything, but he had faith in them. Ron was still volatile and Hermione was still the knowledge seeker, but they were also the same two people who had stood by him in second year when it was revealed he was a Parselmouth, and the same two who had been at his back in the final battle. They would understand and they would help him, he knew that in his very soul.

"Okay," Hermione finally agreed.

Without thinking what he was doing Harry reached for Draco's hand and then headed towards the exit and the public floo points. They would normally have Apparated, but Jason couldn't travel that way, where as he could use floo powder since all the magic was in the compound. It took him a moment or two to realise that Ron and Hermione were not following and he turned back to them. Hermione had a surprised little smile on her face, Ron looked utterly confused.

"Harry," Ron said slowly, "what's with the hand holding?"

Harry looked down at where his fingers were entwined in Draco's and realised what he had just done. Oh boy, was he in trouble now.

The End