
“I will admit that I am disappointed with your choice, however, I cannot force you to change your mind. Nor, I can say with honesty, do I particularly regret your choice,” Arcturus said as I walked with him towards the Floo connection in Dunscaith Castle. “You were under no obligation to reveal your decision to me, at least beyond how it pertained to House Black.”

“I’m aware of that, Lord Arcturus. However, given all that you and your House have done for me since the Massacre, I felt I should speak with you directly and explain my choice,” I replied, a relieved smile on my face. “Again, this has nothing to do with Narcissa or the other available daughters of House Black. It is simply that I find myself drawn to another and, since I have the very fortunate ability, unlike almost every other wizard in our country, to have full control over this matter, I am exercising it.”

Arcturus had arrived at Dunscaith a little over an hour earlier so that we could discuss the matter of my betrothal. I could have, as I’d done with every other offer that had been presented to me over the last six months, rejected his suggestion of marriage to a daughter of House Black as my first wife via owl post. However, given the strong relationships that I had with him and others in his House, I had chosen to deal with the matter personally. Now that the Summer Break had begun, it was the perfect time to do so.

“Indeed. While I am certain that Narcissa will be disappointed to not become the next Lady of Clan MacLeod, I am grateful that you place such importance on the bonds of friendship between Clan MacLeod and House Black.” He paused and looked down at me. “Like her sisters, Narcissa was raised with the expectation that they would become the Lady of a powerful Clan or House, so she would not be currently accepting of becoming a second wife. However, if you ever consider taking another to be your bride, I believe that she might be willing to reconsider the matter. As would Ursa, Lyra, and Vega,” Arcturus added, “provided, of course, that you continue to distinguish yourself.”

It still struck me as odd that, of the six daughters of House Black that could claim a connection to Arcturus’ grandfather, Phineas Black, it was the more distant trio that was held in higher regard. Given that Ursa and Vega hadn’t been accepted to Hogwarts, instead learning at Wirmorth Academy, and that Lyra – who was in my year – wasn’t standing out in any particular way, there was some logic to this. Howeverunusual it might have been, I didn’t involve myself too heavily in the matter since it was an internal matter for House Black. My focus, if it was on any daughter of House Black, was on Bella.

“It is conceivable that I might seek a second betrothed,” I said coolly, not wishing to let slip my thoughts on the matter too easily. I might trust Arcturus, but his interests were centred around House Black and not Clan MacLeod. “However, it will be some time before I think that way, and I’m not childish enough to think that I could easily handle two women.”

“Older and supposedly wiser men than you have made that mistake,” there was a hint of amusement in his voice as he spoke, “be that with remarrying or taking a paramour. It pleases me that the idea of having two or more women bonded to you hasn’t filled your head with any ill-conceived notions of grandeur or enjoyment.”

“I’m far too young to seek enjoyment from a lady, Lord Arcturus,” I replied with snark, “never mind the thought of having multiple ladies wishing to entertain me.”

“Strange, from what I have heard from others, you have a rather large cohort around you, several of which are girls that seem… attached to your presence.”

I shrugged as we reached the fireplace for the Floo. “I have friends who are girls, but I’ve not shown any hint that I am interested in them.” I paused and scratched my chin. “Well, not many of them,” I added. I had grown closer to Vesta Malfoy over the last few months, a factor in my logic for today’s meetings.

“Would that number include Bellatrix?” I blinked, a little caught off-guard by the comment, and looked up at Arcturus with a quizzical expression. “I have not forgotten our discussion on your last birthday, nor that you seemed overly interested in the conditions of Bellatrix’s betrothal to Heir Rodolphus.”

“I will admit that Bellatrix is… an impressive young lady,” I answered cautiously, mindful that she was, at least for now, a claimed woman. “However, even if I felt something for her, I would be a fool to pine after one unavailable to me.”

Arcturus lifted a single eyebrow, and I swore that he was finding my reaction amusing. “Yet after the last year, she is one step closer to extracting herself from her engagement to Heir Rodolphus. Something that I know you are pleased to hear about.” He fixed me with a firm glare and I felt the slightest of brushes against my mental defences. “If she were able to extract herself from her betrothal, if she were interested, and if you and your intended first wife were accepting, would you consider the idea of her becoming your second bride?”

I held his gaze while making sure my thoughts, at least pertaining to Bella, remained deeper within my mind. If he wanted, Arcturus could extract such information from my thoughts with ease. However, doing so would not only be a breach of trust but, as we were within the walls of Dunscaith, would see the castle’s defences react to his seeming attack.

While I quickly formulated a response, I found myself wondering if he had browsed my thoughts regarding Bella and others during times when we met out with the protections of Dunscaith. I had no way of knowing, as even with the torc on my wrist, I didn’t have a foolproof defence against mental intrusions. However, I also understood that he shouldn’t be attempting to do such a thing, and had likely only browsed my surface thoughts whenever we met and spoke with each other.

“I do not think Bellatrix would be open to such an arrangement. She is a remarkable witch and worthy of becoming almost anything she wished. To be a second wife is a position that I would feel was beneath her stature.”

“Hmm.” There was something in Arcturus’ hum that suggested he was thinking on a matter, no doubt one related to Bella and myself, however, he turned back to face the Floo without offering any further words on the matter. “You are accurate in saying that Bellatrix is impressive. Of the members of House Black of her generation, I believe that she is the most powerful save, perhaps Sirius. However, for my son’s firstborn to reach that level, he would need to commit himself with a dedication that I have yet to see displayed.”

I stayed quiet, keeping my thoughts on Sirius and those around him to myself. As much as I wished to hear Arcturus’ stance on the matter, it was an internal matter for House Black and asking about it would be an overstepping of our relationship.

Arcturus picked a pinch of Floo powder and tossed it into the fireplace, the flames turning green in quick order. “Le Domaine Noir.” With the address for the Black Estate spoken, he took a step towards the flames only to stop and look back at me. “As you know, Bellatrix seeks to extract herself from her engagement. What you might not know is that her drive to do so has grown stronger since the Winter Break. I find myself wondering, among several things in the first half of this year, what exactly caused her increased desire to be free of Heir Rodolphus.”

“I couldn’t say what has caused the change in Bellatrix,” I responded, making sure to stamp out the small flame of interest I felt spark at his words. “Nor would I be brave enough to ask her directly.”

Arcturus chuckled. “A wise choice.” He turned back and stepped towards the flames. “I will send an owl with the time when we are to depart for the Free States. Until we meet again, Chief Dòmhnall, may magic itself watch over you.”

Before I could reply, Arcturus was swallowed up by the green flames and sent hurtling away from Dunscaith through the Floo network. A few moments later, the flames returned to their normal colours, which left me safe to consider my thoughts.

Turning with the intent of returning to the main sitting room, I pondered Bella’s increased motivation. As much as I might wish that I was the reason for it, I couldn’t dwell upon it. Not when I had had other matters regarding my future to attend to today. Still, I couldn’t deny that I didn’t find myself slightly conflicted over what I’d just been told.

Still, the matter wasn’t one I could influence, and as such I pushed them away, not expecting to return to it any time soon, if ever. I wanted Bella, not just because of her power, but because of the young woman I’d gotten to

know over the last few years. However, I wasn't a fool who would pine away after someone I might never manage to be with.

All that said, I found myself conflicted. Not just over when I headed to the Black estate before departing again for Sparta with Arcturus, Sirius, and Regulus and the chance I might see Bella again, but over the meeting I had after lunch. One that would determine some of my path forward in this world. My choice was, I felt, the right one to make at this time. All I could hope was that a better path that might reveal itself in the future would not be denied to me because of my actions today.

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"On behalf of the Ancient and Noble Clan MacLeod, I, Dòmhnall Fionnlagh MacLeod, the MacLeod of MacLeod, welcome you to my hearth and offer you the full protection of my Clan while you are here. No harm shall befall you, from within or without, so long as you present no threat to my Clan."

After speaking those words, I raised my head and looked at the quartet who had stepped through the Floo and entered Dunscaith for the first time. Lord Abraxas Malfoy stared back at me, offering a smile before he and the trio with him lowered their heads. "Chief Macleod, on behalf of the Ancient House of Malfoy, I thank you for the offer of protection on this day and graciously accept it. I hope that today's discussions prove fruitful and lead to a long-lasting relationship between our families."

I offered him a small smile as he and his party lifted their heads and waited for Abraxas to begin the introductions.

"I'm sure, Chief Dòmhnall, that you know my heir, Lucius, and my daughter and the apple of my eye, Vesta," I gave the pair nods which they returned, though a smirk of excitement danced at the edges of Vesta's lips. Abraxas extended his hand to the fourth member of his party. "This is my wife, Katia Malfoy, nee Wessex."

Katia was a beautiful lady, though not a particularly tall one. Her hair flowed down behind her shoulders and her face was angled almost to perfection. With the crystal-clear blue eyes, she'd have made any supermodel in the muggle world look plain in comparison. It was clear to see where Vesta got her looks from, and what sort of beauty she would grow up to become which, while not a major part of my reasoning for today's meeting, certainly had me feeling better about my choice.

"Lady Katia," I said, moving forward. I lifted her hand and gently kissed the back of her knuckles. "I hope that you find your visit to my home rewarding."

“If what my husband and children have told me about you is true, Chief Dòmhnall, I expect I will,” Katia answered with a warm smile, though I noted it didn’t quite extend to her eyes. “This is actually my first time visiting a castle belonging to a Clan. It isn’t as different as I had expected.”

I smirked at her words. “While built by my ancestors who, like myself, are proud of their roots, the styling was influenced by fortifications from England and the continent. Or at least the major renovations that took place over five hundred years ago were.”

“I have heard that this castle has some connection to the legends of the Ulster Cycle,” she remarked, her eyes shifting around to take in the decor. While she seemed interested in my home and her husband was listening intently, their children had different expressions.

As always, Lucius seemed almost unreadable, though there was a flicker of arrogance to him; no doubt in response to his victories over me in both duelling tournaments. Vesta’s expression was calm, but there was a spark in her eyes and even though it was subtle, I sensed she was eager and nervous about today. An entirely understandable choice.

“That is what the legends say,” I replied, keeping my response vague. While I trusted my mental defences and ability to regulate my expression, the less information I granted them the weaker the chance they might discover something I wasn’t prepared to reveal. “If you will follow me, I have prepared the sitting room for our meeting. Kadic,” I called out and a second later my head elf, resplendent in clothing marking his status, appeared before us, “please have the hors d’oeuvres and refreshments brought to where we’ll be meeting.”

“Kadic obeys The MacLeod.”

The elf disappeared with a click of his fingers, and I glanced at my guests hoping to gather some insight into them based on their reaction to Kadic. Sadly, none had displaced any telling reaction, or in the case of Vesta, seemed preoccupied with other matters. “This way.”

Abraxas moved to stand beside me, though half a pace back. His wife followed behind with the children bringing up the rear. “Given the castle’s location, would I be accurate in saying there are temperature-controlling runes built into your home?” He asked as we passed a window offering sight of the Loch Eishort, which led into the Sea of the Hebrides.

“It does, and they extend into the grounds if I so wish,” I replied before chuckling softly. “It is possible to bathe in the sun on the beach below even in the harshest of winter though I’ve never done so myself. Such a scene would be quite visually jarring, I’d expect.”

“Yes, I imagine it would. How close is the nearest muggle settlement?”

“There are small crofting hamlets to the south and north-east that lay just outside the boundaries of the wards. There’s a larger village on the other side of the land facing towards the mainland which serves as a transport link for the muggles, while the largest settlement on the island is no more than a large village.”

“That would be Portree, correct? Where the Quidditch team is based.”

I turned and offered Katia a nod. “It would. While I hold half-ownership of the team, I rarely attend any matches. The sport, while enjoyable to many, doesn’t hold major appeal for me.” I paused outside a large door. “If you would,” I said, gesturing to the group to enter the room. They all did so, though as Vesta passed by, she offered me a small smile and I swore I felt her fingers brush against my arm.

It took only a few moments before we were all seated, with the food and drink Kadic had prepared there for any who wished to partake. “Now,” I said once I had a glass of butterbeer before me, “shall we begin?”

“Certainly, though I would be remiss if I did not ask if you have any experience regarding contracts such as what we will be creating today?”

I nodded in thanks for Abraxas’ concern and gestured towards the walls to my left and right. “I do not. However, while not a perfect stand-in, these paintings of my grand and great-grandparents have enough magic imparted in them that they can offer opinions. They assure me that they will provide opinions if they feel I require assistance.”

The paintings on the walls would appear to the Malfoys to be nothing more than the normal magical paintings that existed in most wizarding homes. However, these were the Dealbhan Nas Motha. That way they could observe the proceedings carefully though they had to be cautious about how they responded to anything that was discussed.

If something major arose, either my grand or great-grandmother would depart her frame which was a sign for me to leave the room for a few moments so we could speak privately. I didn’t expect that to happen as my grand and great-grandfather had schooled me on the terms of the contract being discussed today – even going so far as to cover conditions that might not normally be required – but I was going to use every resource I could to ensure I wasn’t tricked into terms that limited me in the future.

“A wise decision, though I suspect not the only support you have had before today’s meeting.” I nodded in response to Abraxas’ comment, which earned a small smile from him. “Good, then let us begin.”

I clicked my fingers and a contract appeared on the table before me while a duplicate did so before Abraxas. “I had these crafted, based on our correspondence, as the framework for us to work from,” I explained, ignoring the need to mention that Kadic had made them appear when I clicked my fingers. “As I’m sure you’re aware, if any change is made to one, then the same is done to the other.”

“And once we attach our magic and seals, they become binding,” Abraxas finished with a nod of understanding. He chuckled and scratched his cheek. “I’m pleased to see that my children’s reports on you have proven accurate.”

A single eyebrow rose on my forehead, and I looked at the pair, Lucius gave no response to me while Vesta shrugged; dismissing my apparent concern as if it wasn’t a big thing. It wasn’t, but it did confirm that the Malfoys had been watching me carefully over the last two years at Hogwarts, and probably not just in reference to today’s discussion.

It was irritating that they would do so, but I knew that everyone else in Slytherin, and potentially elsewhere in Hogwarts, was doing the same. There was logic in learning about the important children of the other Clans and Houses and reporting it back to the family elders. The difference I had was that I didn’t report to anyone, though I had brought up a few issues with my ancestors.

“First, might I ask Lady Vesta a question?” Abraxas nodded and I looked at the girl. “I want you to be clear with me. Is this something you want? I don’t mean simply because it makes you the Lady of an Ancient Clan, but because it is something you desire in your heart.”

Vesta blinked, taken aback by my question. Her brother and father remained impassive but I saw a flicker of what I thought was amusement appear in Katia’s eyes. “I…” Vesta stopped herself and took a breath. “Yes. It is. I won’t say I love you, Chief Dòmhnall, as I’m not foolish enough to think such feelings can develop before either of us have matured, but you’re smart, determined, and I sense you have a plan for the future. Because of that, I believe that you are someone I’m willing to spend my life with.” She smirked. “Besides that, you’ve not got your head in the wrong places like some of the other boys I could consider.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “I don’t know whether to be insulted or pleased by that.” My comment had her smirk evolve into a grin. Her mother also offered me a warm smile. Turning back to Abraxas, I continued. “Very well, we can begin.”

Abraxas nodded and looked down at the contract, his eyes scanning everything that was stated on the first page. The contract was based on the discussions I had held with Abraxas via Owl Post, though there were a few alterations that I’d added after discussing the matter with my ancestors.

There was a flicker in Abraxas' eyes as he caught something in the document and looked up at me. "You have not specified a time by which your heir is to be born?"

"No. I don't wish to place pressure on myself or Vesta over having a child right out of Hogwarts." I leaned forward. "I do intend to have children, and it's stated quite clearly in the contract that any child I have with Vesta would be above those of any other I might take as a bride. There is also a clause in there such that, if I die before my heir has graduated Hogwarts then Vesta would become the regent of my house. If she was also dead, then influence over my heir would be shared between you, or Heir Lucius if he has become Lord Malfoy and any other wives I might claim. However, there are clauses regarding how that might not happen in reference to how I might die, and what, if any, role you or a member of your House played in my death."

"You intend to take a second wife?"

"At this time, no, I don't, my Lady," I replied to Katia with a slight inclination of my head. "However, as I have the right to do so, I would be remiss to not include clauses covering such issues within the engagement contract between myself and your daughter. I don't want to give her any impression that, if I find someone I desired, I would cast her and our children aside for another."

"I'm pleased to hear that you are considerate of the trouble a second wife, or even a paramour, might cause my beloved Vesta," Katia said slowly as her husband continued to examine the contract. "However, it does concern me that you have not dismissed outright the notion of claiming a second bride."

I tilted my head, taking the complaint in stride. "Unlike Houses that follow the main European concepts, Clans that retain their loyalty to the Celtic ways are allowed such things. It is a law that has existed since before the Statute was passed and the Wizengamot itself. That most have forgotten or failed to use it is irrelevant, and given the greatly weakened state of my Clan, even though I am not inclined towards it, I would be a fool to ignore the potential such a path might offer in strengthening the coming generations of my Clan."

"I have learnt that such arrangements are common outside of Europe," Lucius offered, his voice offering no hint as to his opinion on the idea that I could claim a second bride, and thus offer less support to his sister and any children she might have. "Such cases seem to only occur with extremely powerful wizards and are often used to cement bonds of alliance between important families."

"I have heard the same, as have others." All four looked at me cautiously, though only Vesta displayed any hint of emotion on her face. "Several Clans and Houses have, almost since I turned thirteen, offered me a daughter not from the Chief's or Lord's line as a secondary bride. I have rejected all such offers because, as I said, I have no interest in such things currently. However, because of that, after considering the matter carefully, I felt it wise to add clauses to this contract to make clear that Vesta's children would be those first in line to inherit from me. Something that is important because, as you are no doubt aware, my heir will, when he takes my place, see Clan MacLeod rise to Most Ancient status."

“Yes, I am aware of that,” Abraxas remarked calmly, “as are many others I suspect.” Only Vesta seemed shocked by my reveal, though I suspected that Lucius wasn’t in the know and was simply better at hiding his reaction. “It is why I was pleased to hear that Vesta had started developing a friendship with you at the beginning of the last school year.” He glanced at his daughter who seemed caught between shrinking into her seat and puffing out her chest in pride. “There have been offers for her hand for several years now; many from Houses and Clans we are far closer to, or had more wealth or influence than yours. However, she was adamant that she be allowed to determine if you were interested in her, and my wife was willing to grant her that chance.”

I was interested in which Lords had offered up a match for Vesta for two main reasons. First, so that I knew which boys at Hogwarts I had to be wary of, and who I could gloat in the face of once my engagement became official. Secondly, with the knowledge of who had sought House Malfoy’s hand in alliance, I could determine which might be swayed over with the Malfoys to my side, and which wouldn’t and thus likely fall under the influence of Voldemort.

“Then you have my thanks, Lady Katia. I admit that when Vesta began sliding into the circle of friends I held, that she was seeking to in some way undermine my influence. I came to learn that was not the case, and while I, like her, can’t say I love her, I do find myself… happy when we are nearby.”

Vesta offered me a smile, one that suggested she was both pleased with my words and felt the same way. However, my focus was on her parents and she understood this and remained silent.

“Vesta is not the most outspoken when it comes to her feelings. However, I will state that her mentions of you in our discussions have become more supportive than they were in First Year.”

I chuckled at Katia’s words and looked at my intended. “I assume your issues were, among other things, my interest in a handful of students outside Slytherin?”

“Well, yes,” she replied with a smirk that I often saw dancing on her lips and enjoyed seeing. “The idea that someone from a Sacred Seventy-Seven Houses and one in Slytherin at that, would be willing to support muggleborns felt wrong. I mean, I understood it to some degree with those who bear your family name, but Cooper was a shock.”

“I met him the same day I met Bickerstaffe, and he made a far better impression on me than Francis,” Vesta grunted, possibly to bite back a snort as she was aware of Francis’ arrogance in First Year. It had settled, but it still lingered, which was to be expected of an heir of a seated House. “That he was willing to learn the customs and ways of our world and understood his place within it was something I was happy to encourage.”

“And I’m sure the fact he’s better than you at Potions and Herbology had nothing to do with it.”

I chuckled at her comment. “Well, I’m not saying it was a bad thing.”

“Learning of your interest in muggleborns was something that concerned me last year,” Abraxas cut in, and as he did so I watched Vesta fall silent – almost submissive – again, “for much the same reasons as my daughter. I’m aware that you had minor confrontations with others in Slytherin because of it, though, from what my children have stated, it seems your position regarding those not born into our world isn’t the openness I was initially concerned with.”

A grunt came from my right. Thankfully that was the only reaction my grandfather made; probably because his wife had elbowed him as they stood in their frames. Abraxas’ gaze shifted to the portraits, but when nothing was said he returned his focus to me.

“I know that you are still several years from appointing someone to sit for you, to say nothing of claiming the seat for yourself, but where do your opinions lay?”

“I seek the truth, Lord Abraxas, though not by clinging resolutely to the current ways nor foolishly embracing those of the muggles. Change is needed, I feel, though I’m not childish enough to believe I know what that change should be.”

I felt something brush against my mental defences, which was entirely expected. If I allowed something important to slip from my surface thoughts such that it could be used against me, then that was my fault. So long as there was no direct attempt to force their way past my defences, Abraxas was doing nothing wrong.

“Interesting,” Abraxas said softly before giving his head a gentle shake. “Moving on, I also note that there is no insistence for a son to be born. I assume that is because, according to Celtic custom, a female can become the head of a family?”

“It is. If you would like there to be a term for a son to be born of my marriage to Vesta, I am not against it. However, I won’t disown my eldest simply because they might be female.” There were, I was informed, potions and rituals that could be cast to ensure a child’s gender though I didn’t know the specifics, nor did I wish to. “Leadership in any situation belongs to those strong enough to take and hold it.”

Abraxas’ brow twitched at my choice of words, which was interesting. Not that my words, chosen on purpose, had an effect on him, but that he allowed it to show. “Well spoken.” He lowered his head and resumed looking over the contract, quickly shifting to the third page.

“You do not wish to make the betrothal public until one year from the date we sign this contract?”

“I do not.” I looked at Vesta quickly, expecting her to take that reveal the worst. “I enjoy your company, my lady. However, I feel it would be better if we got to know each other beyond the confines of Hogwarts before we fully committed to marriage.”

“Yes, I see what you are implying,” Abraxas cut in, his focus still on the contract. “A, using the term in the contract, test period of one year to determine if both of you are at least comfortable in each other’s presence.” He pointed at the section he was referring to, and I waited as Katia read through it.

“This is most unexpected,” she said slowly after about half a minute, “but I find it pleasing that you have made sure the ability to end the agreement extends to Vesta as well as yourself.” I lowered my head, accepting her praise even as she turned to her daughter. “Chief MacLeod is proposing that you have a series of private engagements, no less than five, over the coming year. If either of you is unsatisfied with the other, then the arrangement can be terminated.” Katia’s gaze shifted back to me, a hint of curiosity in her eyes. “I do note that Vesta and our House would not be punished if she chose to end the arrangement while, if you were the one to do so, you would be.”

“Since I was seeking the insertion of the clause, I felt it right that I was the one who would be most punished by using it.” The penalty wasn’t massive, only a quarter of a million Galleons, but it was significant enough to serve as payment for wasting House Malfoy’s time without, I hoped, insulting them.

Abraxas chuckled and scratched his chin. That drew a sharp glare from his wife, but he ignored it. “I would have insisted on such a penalty if you had not proposed it today. That you already realised that and prepared for it is enough to satisfy me regarding the matter. The offered dowry is also acceptable,” he added, referring to the placing of half a million Galleons in an account with Gringotts that would be Vesta’s personal finances to spend as she pleased once the betrothal was official.

Currently, that amount would be a minor issue. Most of my finances were locked in muggle items, specifically gold and oil, not that any but my Account Manager, Ranlor, knew about it. I could easily gather the money needed for the dowry in a few weeks as there were many valuables in the Clan vaults, but I would prefer not to do that. According to Ranlor, the first of several investments in the magical world he’d made on my behalf would see returns later this year, and those should be adequate for me to pay the dowry without having to liquidate anything.

“I’m pleased to hear that,” I said with a smile, letting some of the tension in my body slip away. “Still, take time to read over the contract again, perhaps even letting Vesta view it. Once you’re satisfied, we can sign it and celebrate the union between our families.”

There was nothing else in the contract that hadn't already been discussed. If Abraxas seemed willing to accept the additional clauses I'd added without issue, then by the time he and his family left today, I'd be betrothed to Vesta. Which, judging by the smirk she wore, and the way her eyes had returned to wandering over the décor of the room, I suspected was something she was happy about.

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I stood on the balcony of my room, looking out in wonder at the city of Venice as the sun rose slowly to the east, casting long but warm shadows over the city and canals below. I wasn't in the muggle city of Venice, but the magical version which, in much the same way as the Egyptian city of Memphis was, was separate from the muggle city. In fact, it floated over the muggle city, and I could recall the amusement and wonder that lingered several days later that I'd felt when I'd stood at the edge of the city and gazed down at the unsuspecting and ignorant muggle city below.

The entire city was a marvel of design, with everything decorated in vibrant, powerful colours. Much of the city was off-limits to outsiders, with the powerful trading families of the city, and the wider Trade League, residing in villas, mansions, that from what I'd seen of them from a distance had an opulence and wonder that shamed almost everything I'd seen in so far in the magical British Isles.

In my former life, I'd never had the chance to visit Venice even though it had been a place I'd always wanted to go. The reason, beyond the obvious cost, that I'd never travelled there, was that it was all but gone. Sea levels had risen in the early Twenty-Thirties, though not at the doomsday rate many had scare mongered about back when I'd been a child. The changes had been gentle and gradual, with most coastal cities able to adapt to the changes.

Venice had been one of those cities, however, in the middle of the Twenty-Forties, an earthquake in the Adriatic Sea had caused a tidal surge. It hadn't been massive, no more than a handful of metres high by the time it reached the famous city, but with the increased sea level, and damage down to the sea around the city by cruise liners and other vessels, the city had been helpless.

I could still recall the images of the great places in the city being inundated with water. Many had called it a travesty with so much history lost, but the worst had come in the following days. With the supports underneath the city already struggling because of the increased sea levels, the surge had done more damage than many had realised and within a few months of the earthquake and tidal surge, much of the city collapsed, being claimed by the sea.

That was something the magical city of Venice would never suffer, as while everything was still connected by canals and waterways, the city floated in the clouds, resting high above the Adriatic Sea and the coast of Italy. The water flowed freely through the city and at the edges, fell away encircling the great mercantile city with waterfalls that put anything created by nature to shame.

The falling water created a mist around the city, which from what I'd learnt was part of the magic used to both hide the city from muggles and keep it afloat. The exact details were, like with much of the larger scale magic I'd seen in Sparta and Memphis, restricted knowledge, which was entirely logical. One didn't, after all, want potential enemies to learn how they could destroy a wonder such as magical Venice.

Of course, I was disappointed about not learning much about how they made the city float in the sky, but in the few days I'd been here, I'd accepted that it was something that I'd probably never learn. When I'd become who I was, both parts of me that had existed before had wanted to know everything there was to know about magic. However, with age and perspective, I'd come to realise that was a pipe dream. There was simply too much that could be learnt over several centuries of life, and that was when just considering what existed within the Isles. When one brought in Europe, to say nothing of the rest of the world, then I knew I could spend a thousand years and still not come close to learning even a quarter of the mysteries and wonders of the magical world.

Yet for all that, there were mysteries of Venice that I knew I'd never learn, and I was fine with that as I was enjoying this trip immensely. The offer to come had been extended to me by Vesta at the end of the last school year, and after Abraxas and I had sealed the betrothal between myself and his daughter, Katia had extended the offer again.

I'd taken some time to consider the offer as I had a standing agreement with Arcturus to return with him, Sirius, and Regulus to Sparta. Thankfully, there was little overlap in the dates of the Malfoy family holiday in Venice and the Black voyage to Sparta. That was because, as the Junior Wand Duelling Champion for Hogwarts, Lucius had earned a spot at the European Junior Exhibition Tournament, which was taking place in the middle of July.

Bella would also be attending that as she was the Senior Wand Duelling Champion, though her event wouldn't be an exhibition, but a tournament against the top duellists from each magical nation's elite education institution. Part of me wished to head to see that, not least as it would be a chance to see Bella again, however, I was accepting that I couldn't.

Beyond the potential issues that might arise if my support for Bella was a little too passionate, the reason the Malfoys had come to Venice went beyond a simple family retreat. The Biannual European Duelling Tournament was due to start in a few days, and Abraxas had secured a private box overlooking the main arena for the entirety of the event.

From what I'd learnt, the event was taking place in a coliseum. While not as grand as the Coliseum of Rome, or other arenas built for combat at the heart of current or former great magical empires, the Coliseum of Venice

was still a marvel of engineering and design. Shifting floors that could become almost any environment, barriers around the arena so that an errant charm, hex, or curse didn't massacre dozens of spectators, and other measures meant the venue was meant to be a masterpiece. Given the places I'd visited so far in Venice, that was almost to be expected.

I shifted, turning my focus towards my room as I heard a door within it open. Well, it wasn't so much a room as an apartment that would put to shame all but the most exclusive and expensive such things in the richest areas of major muggle metroplexes. Beyond a sleeping area, there was an ensuite bathroom that was almost the size of the dormitory room I had shared with four others at Hogwarts the last two years and a central seating area that doubled as a dining section. The couches around that table could seat eight people with ease.

I moved inward, stepping off the balcony and letting the wonderous sight that I had been enjoying pass as something more impressive had emerged into my room. "Good morning, my intended," I said with a warm smile and an unnecessary bow as Vesta, through the recently opened door, moved towards the central seated area of the room.

The door she had emerged through connected my room with the one being used by her parents. Her room, which she shared with her brother, was connected to the other side of her parent's central room. I had no idea how much the Malfoys were paying for this massive, connected suite, but I had little doubt it would be over a hundred Galleons a night per room.

Vesta smiled warmly at my words and behaviour, adding a radiance to her features that, ever since our betrothal had been confirmed, I was coming to appreciate more with each passing day. Her fingers lifted to her chest, closing around a necklace there. It was one I had bought for her two days ago on our first day of exploring the wonders of the city and had been made by one of the finest artisans of Venice.

The necklace slid around her neck, held together by a series of intricately woven series of links made of white gold. At the centre, now within her palm, was a small sapphire, one that matched perfectly with the shade of blue in her eyes. The sapphire was a one-point-five-carat stone with diamonds around it that were shaped, according to the seller, like a sea serpent. The design implied that the serpent was protecting the sapphire within which had been cut in the shape of a heart.

The piece had been relatively expensive, costing a little over six hundred Galleons, or the equivalent of the local currency, but I felt it was perfect for her. She'd spotted it while we were moving around several high-end artisan shops near the Campo San Giovanni e Paolo and had been enthralled by the piece. I'd not bought it for her at the time, choosing to head back a little later with Katia and purchase it. Needless to say, Vesta had adored the gift, and her mother had teased her last night that she'd not taken it off since I'd gifted it to her on that evening two nights ago.

“Good morning, Dòmhnall,” she replied, a softness in her tone, as she stood in the centre of my room, waiting for me to approach. “I was wondering if you’d had breakfast yet?” She asked as I spotted Xenocrates lounging on the bed, having reburied himself into the covers after I woke.

“Not yet,” I said, gesturing at the central seats, “would you care to join me here, or shall I escort you to the banquet hall?”

If I had the choice at every meal, I would prefer to remain in my room and eat than enter the hall. The hotel we were staying at was one of the finest in the city, which meant the guests were from the more important and richer families from Europe and beyond. Conversation with any of the other guests was a simple matter as we’d all be given attachments that looped over the back of our ears when we arrived at the International Portkey Station, which was housed in the Punta Della Dogana.

The issue was that many were, to be blunt about it, arrogant pricks who acted as if they owned the place. Hardly a shock given that the ones Abraxas or Katia had pointed out or introduced us to came from the older and richer families of their nations, but the airs they put on were grating. That said, it served as a reminder to me that I’d be dealing with such behaviour on an almost daily basis once I graduated Hogwarts and took up my seat in the Wizengamot and after I’d taken down Voldemort and Dumbledore. That was perhaps why I could tolerate the attitude of some of those I’d been introduced to since it was excellent practice for maintaining my composure when dealing with people who irked me.

“Of course,” Vesta answered, though she made no move to sit until I had done so. Once I had, she settled in beside me, keeping just enough distance between us to maintain an air of respectability. Still, as she sat, I noticed her fidgeting, with the edge of her dress with the hand that wasn’t still touching her necklace.

“Is something the matter?” I asked as I picked up the menu that rested on the table and began pursuing the options.

All we had to do was tap a marker under any item we wished for and it would be added to our order. Once everyone had selected something, there was a sigil on the front cover for the hotel that we had to lightly push our magic into. That would confirm the order and have it sent to the staff – which I assumed were elves though I’d yet to confirm that – who worked in the hotel’s kitchen. The food would appear in order on the table within five minutes of the order being placed.

Vesta looked at me, her smile returning as our eyes met. She held my gaze for a few moments before looking down at the table. “It’s nothing.” I knew there was something, and with the benefit of having experienced a far longer life than I should’ve, I knew I just had to give her time.

I browsed through the menu, selecting several items for a light but filling breakfast to give her time to ponder whatever was on her mind. She took the menu from me with a warm smile, but I could tell it didn't reach her eyes.

"Are there any set plans for today?" I asked, generating some light conversation in the hope it might eventually prod her to reveal what was on her mind.

Ever since I'd met her and her family at the Ministry's international portkey facility, she'd seemed a little off. Nothing major, just a hint that something was lingering in her thoughts that had her distracted. I hoped the necklace might settle whatever nerves she seemed to have, but while she was overjoyed by my gift even now, it hadn't yet helped pry open the door to whatever pestered her mind.

"My father has a meeting with some partners for a business he has in the Trade League this morning, and we will be having dinner at the home of Barone Negri this evening, but otherwise no," Vesta replied without looking up at me.

"Hmm." I rubbed my chin as I considered the details for the day, working through a few ideas in my head. "Then perhaps, if you'd be willing, might we have one of our assigned dates this morning? A private stroll around the city by ourselves."

Vesta's head lifted from the menu, a flash of shock or surprise in her eyes before she schooled her features. "I… I would like that."

"Good. But first," I shifted to face her better, in the process causing my knee to brush against her leg, "I know we've only been engaged for a fortnight, but I thought we were friends. Won't you tell me what's on your mind?" Her lips opened but I kept speaking. "Please don't tell me there's nothing. I might not know you as well as I wish, but I think I know you well enough already to see when something is bothering you."

One had lowered the menu to the table, the other shifted to once again grasp her necklace. "It's…" She paused as I sat there silently, offering only a small smile in reassurance. "I feel like I'm not the one you want."

"Why do you think that?"

Her eyes dropped, seemingly unable to meet my gaze. "You talk about others… about her, with more warmth than you do me."

“Who?”

“Black.”

I kept my face calm, not letting any hint of my reaction show. Internally, however, my mind raced wondering when I had said something to suggest I wanted Bella in front of her. At least I assumed it was Bella she was speaking about.

“I mean the eldest one. Bellatrix,” Vesta continued, still looking down at the gap between us. While it was caused because of how we sat, I suspected she saw it as a physical representation of the gaps she felt we had emotionally. “I get why you like her. She’s beautiful, shapely, and powerful,” she continued, the words spilling from her faster than they normally would, “but I don’t like it. I’m jealous that you speak so proudly of her to others, to me. You want her more than me, don’t you?”

The question came with her lifting her head so she could look me in the eyes. I saw the hint of redness at the corner of her gaze and lifted a finger to softly brush the prepubescent tears away. “I’ve known Bellatrix and other members of House Black almost since I lost my family. I owe them so much for their help.”

“You do like her?”

“Yes,” I replied honestly, “and not so much for the reasons you have suggested, but because of the help she’s given me. I don’t think I’m old enough to say with certainty that Bellatrix is the sort of woman I find nice to look at, but I’d be lying if I said that over the last year, I’d not started thinking about her as something beyond a cousin.”

Vesta moved to speak, though she was startled from whatever she wished to say when Xenocrates, having risen at some point from his nap and come over, leapt into her lap. Vesta seemed to brighten up as my familiar settled into her legs and placed a hand behind his ear to give him a scratch.

“It was Bellatrix that found Xenocrates for me,” I said, and Vesta’s had instantly still, “and I owe her for that. However, Xeno was with you when I was attacked, and when I fought against your brother in the tournament, it was you he chose to head to, not Bellatrix.”

She looked down at Xeno, who had pushed his head into her fingers when she stopped scratching him. A hint of a smile crept onto her face as she stared at my familiar, and I waited to continue until she resumed scratching him.

“I won’t lie to you and say that, if we were the same age as Bellatrix and she was unattached, I wouldn’t have considered a betrothal to her. Just as I know that if someone like Heir Dalcassin was our age and free, you wouldn’t reject the possibility of marriage to him. However, just because I might’ve thought about Bellatrix in such a way doesn’t mean you're not her equal.” I lifted the hand I’d used to brush away her tears a few moments ago again, this time using it to touch her chin and lift her head so I could look at her properly.

“I chose you, not because your House is rich or powerful, or because you’re the daughter of the current Lord. There were other offers for similar people.” I leaned closer, slipping inside her personal space. “I chose you because, at the end of the day, you’re powerful, smart, and I feel that walking the path I’m creating with you by my side is what I want to do.”

Vesta blinked, her eyes flicking from mine to my lips and then back. I smiled at her behaviour, aware of some of the thoughts going through her mind as she pondered my words.

“You are amazing Vesta Malfoy, and I’m honoured to be your friend, and I hope, to one day become your husband.” I moved my hand from near her face, and with both of my hands clasped one of hers. “If that is, you’ll still have me after a year has passed and we’ve gotten to know each other better.”

This was the first time I’d seen Vesta display any vulnerability, and while I was not surprised at it happening, or being the cause of it, a part of me felt sickened. With others, be they Bradley, Lily, Áine, Aífe, or my yearmates I was manipulating them to gather forces for the coming war. With Vesta, I knew she would be by my side, but the fact I was not entirely intentionally toying with her emotions felt wrong.

Her eyes shifted from my face to our hands. As she looked at the way I was cradling her hand within mine, she seemed to take strength from it. Her shoulders straightened, and when she ordained to once again meet my gaze, there was strength in her eyes. The same strength and determination that I’d been drawn to over the last year as we’d become friends. Even if we hadn’t become betrothed – though there was an out for either of us, if we so wished – and beyond simply wanting Lucius on my side to take away his House from Voldemort, I wanted Vesta there as well.

“I think,” she began slowly as I felt her fingers of the hand I was grasping squeeze while her other came to rest on top of my hand, “that in a year’s time, I’ll only be more certain that this is the right choice.” The smile that had spread across her face was amazing, potentially rivalling the sight of the sun rising over Venice that I’d just been watching. There was no hint of it being fake, nor held back as I was used to with Vesta and most others, and I felt a slight shift inside myself at seeing her display such a sight so freely.

“Vesta is Dòmhn… Oh, have I interrupted something?”

The sound of Vesta's mother as she stepped through the door from her room into mine caught me by surprise. Sharing the same instinctual idea, our hands snapped back to our sides, and I leaned back and kept myself from turning to face Katia.

"No Mother," Vesta replied, her voice cool and controlled, making it clear to all three of us that she was relying on her Occlumens skill to push her emotions far from the surface of her mind. "We were simply discussing plans for how to spend the day while awaiting our breakfast."

"Ah. And here I thought you would both be joining us in the main suite." A hint of amusement lingered in Katia's tone, and I didn't need to face her to know she was amused by what she'd walked in on. "Very well, it would do you good to spend the day with your betrothed. However, I would ask you Chief Dòmhnall to be mindful both of the age of yourself and my daughter and that we are not in the Isles. Neither my husband nor myself wish to find ourselves summoned by the head of the city's DMLE because of a failure on the part of either of you to respect the local customs."

"I am aware, Lady Katia," I replied, glancing from the corner of my eyes at Vesta. "But thank you for the reminder."

Katia chuckled. "Then I will leave you two alone. You should learn to become comfortable, within reason, around each other, after all."

A moment later I heard her turn and walk away, her shoes clipping against the warm marbled floor of my room with each step she took. There was a flicker of annoyance inside me that I'd failed to hear her steps earlier, but it was a minor matter. What mattered more was the smile that slipped onto Vesta's face when our eyes met, and I found myself realising that while I might be interested in Bella, Vesta was just as intriguing and worth getting closer to.

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I watched as Kadic appeared, Bradley at his side. At first glance, the muggleborn appeared fine, but the rings under his eyes and the slight paleness of his skin made clear he wasn't. Others might miss those issues, or dismiss them as nothing more than minor problems, but based on his last few letters to me, I knew there was more to them than that.

"Bradley," I began, moving towards him even as he offered Kadic a word of thanks for transporting him to Dunscaith, "what is so important that you sought a meeting a week before we returned to Hogwarts?"

Bradley's face, usually one of curiosity and warmth, was down while his shoulders slumped with worry. "It... It's my family," he began slowly, seemingly unable to meet my gaze. "They… they dislike me having magic."

"What?" I asked, my brow creasing as I moved towards him. "I thought they were thrilled about your acceptance to Hogwarts?" I added, placing a hand on his upper arm for support.

"They were, or," he lifted his head, letting me see the fear in his eyes, "I think they were. But now…" his head dropped and I heard and felt him sob quietly.

I moved closer, tightening my grip on his arm to let him know I was there. I knew exactly what had happened, after all, it was my doing – via Kadic – that was the root cause of this. However, for my intentions to work, I had to display no hint of understanding of what was going on. Since Bradley was slipping inwards in despair, even if I let a little of my pleasure that the plan seemed to be advancing as I hoped crept onto my features, he wouldn't detect it.

As his sobbing grew louder and stronger, I was caught over how exactly to proceed. At least in this moment. He needed support, but there was a limit to what I could offer as even though we were friends, I had maintained a slight distance from him and others, though, after recent events with Vesta, she might be the first in our year to get past that distance.

Moving to his side, my hand shifted to his shoulder, and as his sobs turned into crying, I slowly guided him towards a nearby room. "Kadic," I said to the elf who remained behind us, "get something soothing for Bradley to drink along with a few snacks."

"Kadic obeys." With a familiar crack, he apparated away.

Reaching the door of the room I'd guided Bradley to, the same one that we'd always used any time he came over, I pushed it open and led him inside. No sooner had I eased him into a chair, than the food and drink I'd asked for appeared on a nearby table, along with a box of tissues.

I smiled at the air, hoping Kadic sensed my thanks, and lifted the box to Bradley. There was little I could do to learn the exact details of what was going on until he recovered, so I moved to a nearby seat and settled in. Almost as soon as I sat, Xenocrates appeared, leaping into my lap as if he sensed something was amiss.

As my hands scratched Xeno behind his ear, I sat there waiting patiently for Bradley to recover enough that he could explain what had happened. Now, I knew the general details, as this was exactly what I'd intended to happen, but I'd expected it to occur at the end of Third Year and not a few weeks before the year began.

Eventually, after going through about half the box of tissues, Bradley seemed to regain some of his control. "Sorry," he mumbled as he reached for a mug.

"It's fine," I replied as he sipped the drink. If Kadic had been smart, he'd have placed something in the mug to ensure that Bradley regained further control of his emotions. As much as I didn't have any plans for today, I'd rather not have to sit here waiting for Bradley to give me the full details of what had happened.

"So," he said after placing down the mug though his gaze was on his hands or the floor beneath them, "my family…" He took a long, deep breath. "They… they no longer like that I can do magic."

"What makes you say that?" I probed, continuing to scratch Xeno and doing my best to ignore how a muggle might look at me and think I was some sort of villain just because of my posture and actions.

"It started last year. My dad, he… he started getting angry when I wanted to plant a few magical herbs in the greenhouse. Then when I told him about what I'd learnt, and even said I'd show him, he didn't want to listen. My mum…" he paused and wiped his nose with another tissue. "At first, she was fine, but this summer she was as bad as dad was, and now he's worse.

"On our holiday, if I even mentioned anything to do with magic, Hogwarts, or our world, he'd get angry. He... he threatened to…" Bradley stopped there and retreated into himself again. I continued to wait, using Xeno's purring to calm myself. I wasn't sure where this was going exactly, but already I had an idea and if I was right, then I'd be paying a visit to Bradley's father in a few years.

"He said that if I kept using or doing magic he'd hit me," Bradley eventually whispered, his voice barely carrying to me. "My.. my mum, she didn't try and tell him not to. A-and when we went to my grandparents, they acted as if I was at a school for troubled boys. I mean, I know they can't tell anyone I go to Hogwarts, but they changed the story from a private school to a place for… for evil children."

"Did they call it evil?"

"My mum did." Bradley lifted his head, and I saw his face. His cheeks were soaked with tears and in the depths of his reddened eyes, I saw confusion, loss, and uncertainty. "She said that I'd been bad so they'd sent me to special school with others that needed correcting."

I growled, only just struggling to maintain my composure. I'd wanted this break to happen, but this was too far and too fast. Even as I leaned forward, readying myself to speak, I made a note to have Kadic dial down the spells cast on the Evans and muggle MacLeod households. I didn't want things to go south in the former too quickly nor for a sudden shift in opinions for the latter to draw the attention of anyone at Hogwarts or beyond. There was, after all, only one common link between all three households and if people started investigating, they'd discover Kadic's work.

"You don't need correcting, Bradley. Magic is not a curse, it's a gift and anyone, be they friends or family, that says otherwise is either a moron, deranged, or not worth your time." Perhaps I could've been gentler, but after hearing what had been said to him, I needed to vent a little. "Magic is a wondrous thing, and those without a gift often resent those with it. Even when those people are members of their family or people they care deeply for."

"But they're my family!" Bradley wailed, his head falling into his hands. "Why? Why? Why?"

I stood, shifting an unhappy Xeno from my lap and moved over to my friend. Once there, I knelt and placed a hand on his back. "I can't say why they've changed, nor would I suggest simply using a charm to make them forget their feelings. That path carries a risk they might break free of the charm, making things a million times worse."

"What I can do, if you want it, is offer you haven within Dunscaith." His crying decreased a little at my words. "In time your parents will learn to accept you and your gifts, but, until they do, you're free to stay here for as long as you wish."

I knew his parents wouldn't get better, as while Kadic would be lessening the spell he'd cast on their home, he'd not be removing it. Bradley breaking away from the muggle world was something I wanted, and while earlier than intended, I wasn't going to stop that plan because the outcome had been reached quicker than intended.

"B-but what about my things? I…"

"Kadic," I called out, and without breaking my attention on Bradley spoke to the elf once he appeared, "I need you to head to Bradley's house and get his things. Bring everything he needs for school here and place it in a guest room."

Kadic vanished as soon as I finished and Bradley looked at me in confusion. "Why? Why are you doing this?"

“Because I’m your friend.”

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I moved forward slowly, my eyes alert to anything that might shift around me and my wand at the ready. Movement to my right drew my attention. The tip of my wand glowed, the quick-fire bolt a mere fraction of a second from being cast only for me to stop. The target that had appeared had a light-yellow colouring. That marked it as one not strike.

My focus returned to the path before me, though even as I did that I sensed light from my left. A streak of green was inbound for me.

Dropping low I let the hex sail over my head and flicked my wand out. The quick-fire bolt, one without any hue, shot from my wand. Even as a ping sounded in the room, I was moving forward again, seeking the next stage of the course I was on.

Currently, I was in one of Dunscaith’s training rooms. This one, however, had been reshaped by my will. Whereas before it had been little more than an open duelling room, now, after speaking with my ancestors, finding someone skilled in the creation of such a room, learning more about my control over the ward core and magic within the castle, and then some help from Kadic for actions I wasn’t skilled in doing, the room was now more akin to a magical obstacle course. Well, if such a course sought to injure you enough that you’d require either a potion to accelerate one’s natural healing or time to rest and recuperate when placed on a higher setting.

With the Redcap Gathering destroyed, and few if any of the beasts left in the forest around my home, I’d lost a method of training myself in situations that required quick-thinking and casting. I needed a way to push myself to my limits regularly.

I could, in theory, simply engage in training duels with several dummies capable of casting weakened versions of various charms. However, the issue was that those dummies could never move beyond the limits of the initial rules placed upon them, nor act in a manner that would be unbecoming for a duellist.

What I needed was a training facility designed to push me in ways that began to approach combat; places where an attack could come from any location at any time, and where there might be innocents and allies that I had to avoid targeting. That was what this room was designed for.

My wand flicked, another quick-fire bolt racing out and striking a red target. Two more bolts followed the first, and the target lost its colour signifying it had been defeated. Yet even as that was happening I was forced into a roll forward and to my right.

An orange target had appeared behind me, my senses just able to hear the movement of the target as it powered up. Before it began casting whatever painful hex or curse its colour allowed, I had moved.

As I came out of the roll, my wand was up and a pair of bolts shot from the tip. I frowned at seeing the pair carrying a faint purple hue. I could feel the whispers of Destructive Magic within me at work. My magic had reacted to the sudden move and rush of adrenaline and the outlawed branch of magic that I could wield had reacted in kind, empowering my bolts. While in real combat I knew I'd likely have to draw on that branch, the fact it was able to seep out into my casting while on a training course, even one that carried a decent degree of danger and difficulty, was irritating.

I needed to retain my control when in battle. If I didn't, then I risked losing sight of my surroundings and opponents which would leave me open to attacks I would otherwise have seen and been able to counter. That point was proven as, while I pushed myself back to my feet, bolts of red and yellow came at me from both sides.

My mind processed the situation as quickly as it could. I had to track the incoming bolts, plot their vectors, determine my surroundings and react before they reached me. Even with my mind able to work faster than any muggle's ever could, I wasn't yet as advanced in doing this as I wanted to be, nor did I have access to the full breadth of my magic. Because of that, my movements were a touch slow.

"Argh."

The grunt of annoyance slipped from me when one of the incoming hexes struck me. I had managed to shift enough to avoid the others, but even a single strike from a weak hex was enough to force me to my knees.

My wand was casting even as I dropped, firing off more quick-fire bolts at the targets. The hue around them grew darker and more visible, signifying control was slipping further. Both targets were struck and disabled, yet I didn't have any time to savour those targets losing their colour as something struck my back and I fell face-first to the ground.

"Son of a…"

That was as far as I got before more bolts struck me, and my body shut down.

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I woke up groggily sometime later, finding myself resting on a chair. As I blinked, processing the last few seconds before I'd passed out and lining things up with my memories, I understood where I was.

"You okay?"

Looking up at Bradley as he and Kadic stood nearby with concern showing on their faces, I nodded. "Yeah. The course is only at the third level so the magic it uses is on par with ours." I groaned as I shifted, feeling some pain from my lower back on my left side. "Thankfully, the effects wear off pretty quickly and the course shuts down when I've been hit enough times."

Bradley's concern melted away and he leaned back so he was standing properly. "I still don't know why you created something like this," he said as he glanced into the room, towards where the obstacle course began. "It's not like this can help you with duelling."

"It can," I countered as I stood. Kadic wore a small frown of increased worry at my action, but I smiled, hoping that would alleviate his concern. "For Third and Fourth Year we'll remain limited in how we duel, but from Fifth Year we'll be competing in variable and shifting environments with more magic available. It's better to get a head start on preparing for that now than waiting for it to be unleashed on us and finding ourselves struggling from the get-go."

Bradley turned back to face me; a flicker of amusement mixed in with something darker. "I get that. It's just…" he shook his head. "There has to be an easier way to do it than that."

"I'm sure there is, but with this, we can also push beyond simply duelling and prepare for something approaching real battle." I raised a hand, stopping him from responding so I could continue. "I'm not expecting a war to break out, but even with the Wizarding World War having long since ended, minor conflicts are occurring in various countries across the globe. There are also reports in the Prophet and other places of attacks by werewolves and giants."

"The Ministry said it was nothing major and that they'd committed resources to the DMLE and other departments to counter the attacks," Bradley countered, though I could hear a hint of uncertainty in his tone. That was hardly surprising as given what had happened with his parents this summer, his trust in authority figures and adults had been weakened. Still, it presented me with opportunities, some of which I'd taken.

“They have, but I fear there’s more to the increased attacks than a potential change in leadership of some giant clans or werewolf packs.” I stood and moved towards him. “My trust in the world was shattered six years ago when my family was killed. I almost died in that attack, and then again when I was tossed into that muggle orphanage, and I refuse to let myself be unprepared for whatever will happen next.”

Not being able to speak directly about the approaching storm that was Voldemort was irritating, but I couldn’t let slip to anyone, even Bradley who now couldn’t willingly betray my word. The slightest chance that Tom would discover I was aware of his intentions would see him seeking to either forcibly recruit or remove me. Neither option was acceptable.

“Anyway, I think it’s time for you to try the course,” I said as I walked towards a panel on the wall. It looked out of place against the brickwork of the walls, but from this, I could control the various settings for the course. “I’ll set it to the first level,” I continued as I turned a dial to the left, and thus to the lowest level, “so the spells will come slower, hurt less, and only from one target at a time. You should be able to handle something that easy, right?” I asked as a teasing challenge.

“Yeah.” Bradley sounded certain but I sensed a hint of concern from him slipping into my mind.

I blinked, pushing away the sensation that I was still getting used to and walked towards him. “Good. Survive ten minutes to complete the level.”

I watched as he turned and moved towards the arch that signified the entrance of the course. Once he stepped inside a chime rang out in the room signalling the start of the course and the archway hardened into a solid wall. Stepping back to my chair, I glanced at the small magical display on the wall. That would allow me to see how he performed at the starting level. A level that I had breezed through so easily that I’d been bored after barely half the time had passed.

I placed my hand against my head as I sat.

“The MacLeod is well?”

I looked at Kadic and nodded. “Yeah. Just getting used to the feedback,” I replied.

After what had happened with Bradley’s parents turning against him and magic, Bradley had moved into Dunscaith, though at first, it had been a temporary arrangement. Once he’d been feeling better, I’d spoken with him about his options. The normal choice would be for him to approach Lord George Cooper and ask to be

formally adopted into House Cooper. That would see him come under Lord George's control, and once he had a son, see him made head of a new cadet branch of the House.

Bradley had not chosen that option and instead, without me prompting him, asked if I could adopt him into Clan MacLeod. Since he wasn't a MacLeod, I couldn't do that, at least until he passed his NEWTs and was able to change his name legally. Instead, I'd offered him something called a retainer contract.

He'd accepted the choice instantly though I'd asked him to take a few days to consider becoming my retainer. There was no way for him to end the agreement once it was signed and it would make him a servant of mine akin to Kadic and Aien, though with seemingly better rights since he was a wizard and not an elf.

The agreement had been signed a few days ago, and so far he seemed to have no regrets. The only downside was that I could sense his thoughts and feelings in my head. Not to the degree they might overwhelm or incapacitate me, but enough that when he was nearby, or if he was in an overly emotional condition I'd experience some feedback.

From what my ancestors told me, the sensation would become tolerable in time and I'd have complete control over the sensations, but until then any time he was nearby and had a shift in his emotions and thoughts, there was a small risk I might sense it. Such as had just happened when he'd moved to enter the course.

I'd been warned that forming the retainer contract with him while both of us were young carried a slight risk, but I had done so anyway. Beyond it always being my intention to see if I could manipulate things with Bradley to break him away from his parents as a test for Lily Evans, it had happened earlier than I'd expected. I had to take responsibility for that, and since Bradley had a clear talent for potions and herbology, he would be of use to me in the war that I knew was coming.

This course was designed to train me for that war, and since Bradley was now linked to me, it was only right that he also used it. I planned to see if Vesta would like to try the course as well, though that could wait. For now, I was content to simply spend more time with her and strengthen the growing bond between us.

Outside of the holiday to Venice, we'd not had much time to interact, though since I'd returned from Sparta about ten days ago, we'd met up twice. Both times had taken place at Malfoy Manor as her mother was reluctant to allow her to travel to Dunscaith without an escort and with Bradley now living within the castle, I'd prefer it remain secret that he'd become my retainer until we returned to Hogwarts. That said, I did intend to inform Vesta tomorrow as, because she was my betrothed, I felt she had the right to know. It seemed she wasn't as averse to Bradley as I expected.

My mind shifted to the attacks by werewolves and giants. None had been major, just targeting a few minor magical hamlets or isolated households where those not closely connected to a Clan or House lived. The

articles were minor ones, not getting anywhere near the front pages of the papers, but the fact they were happening now was a sign that Voldemort was beginning his rise. The question now was how long would I have before he emerged into the public eye and began open conflict with the Ministry and Dumbledore.

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