

The time that is given us

How love can change lives

Von Gepo

Kapitel 17: Seventeenth chapter

Everyone was quiet. Most of the kids seemed to have picked up Margret's mood of tense queasiness. Those that didn't notice it immediately went quiet after a few questions and comments. Breakfast had never been this strained.

"So ... the police were here last night," Harry began after sipping his coffee. He wasn't sure he could stomach food yet, even though the eggs with mayonnaise looked inviting. He knew he was stalling. "I will talk to Richard about their accusations later. We'll go down to the police station after breakfast." Which was why he had waited for the boy to eat a bit before beginning to talk. "Personally, I don't think it is about him. I think someone is trying to attack us as a family by picking the easiest targets before moving on to the harder ones."

The kids exchanged looks.

"In the next few weeks, I think that every weakness that can be exploited will be. So, if any of you have some dark secrets or wrongdoings they need to confess, please find me later and do so. We'll look for a solution together. I promise not to get angry. Even past criminal acts that can be dragged up, social blunders that people will remember, please tell me all of them."

A few of the kids began to fidget and Harry took notice of them. If they didn't come to him, he would go to them.

"The same goes for Margret, Edgar and me. There is one glaring fact that can be exploited and it is that Edgar and me are both men and everyone knows I am not having an affair with my maid. No one here knew my wife. It is too easy to make up stories about us." He looked at Edgar at that point, seeing the hurt in his eyes.

"Do I need to go?" It was no more than a whisper from the other man.

"I would never do that to everyone. By now, this is your home too. You are part of this family. I will never leave any one of you to fend for themselves. I won't ever throw someone out against their will, except for intentionally causing harm to this family."

"But I harm you by being here." Edgar averted his gaze. "I know what I am. If it hurts anyone—"

"Stop your thoughts right there." Had he really overlooked how bad his friend felt about himself? "You are not intentionally harming this family."

"But my existence is a threat to you!"

Well, that was hard to argue with. "I don't plan on giving anyone the opportunity to threaten us."

"How?" Edgar's voice was laced with desperation. "I know only one way and that is not

advisable in times of peace."

Shooting every threat or sending them to their deaths as their commanding officer. Harry did not need more than a moment to know what Edgar remembered. He had listened to the other man's stories about a person Harry couldn't help but resent. Grenmore Horten had been a despicable human being.

"Brea came up with a plan." He had asked her again before breakfast. She seemed even more determined than yesterday, totally at peace with herself except for the excitement about becoming a wealthy lady. "The only way to finally lay rest to the rumor that you are secretly my lover is to create a rumor that is even more scandalous."

Edgar blinked.

"Before Edgar came here, the going rumor was that I was a pedophile that adopted all of you for some kind of girly harem." Two of the girls began to whisper, Loretta shook her head as if to dislodge that thought. "But when you all started working and went to school, that rumor dissolved. Which harem master sends out his concubines for most of the day? Also, people could see you weren't scared of me. Especially when you started making friends, meeting boys and growing confident, people found something new to theorize on. But Brea is right that when I want people to stop thinking about Edgar and me, I need to resurrect that first rumor about my love life. People need to have evidence that they were right after all, I was into young girls all this time."

"No one that knows you would believe that." Edgar looked around the table and most of the kids nodded.

"The general public doesn't know me though. This is about appearances. Rumors and false accusations, this is what we will be faced with. I need a perfect image with one obvious flaw. One imperfection why I do my best at everything else. No one should be too perfect, that always invites envy. Your weakness needs to be something people can look down on you for. When everyone knows that you are despicable on one account, they stop looking for other things to exploit. At the same time, it needs to be something most people don't actually find revolting. So people gossip but don't shun you."

"Being a pedophile is something people shun you for."

"But what if I never act on it until it was legal? Enjoying to look at young girls is accepted in this era, even if I find it completely revolting. Lusting after girls is ... disgusting in my opinion but alright in the eyes of a lot of men."

"So what evidence do you want to present that makes everyone think that?" Edgar looked doubtful.

"I proposed to him", Brea suddenly interrupted.

Edgar just blinked stupidly and Margret sighed deeply.

"It is my plan." She looked around, especially at the other girls. "Let's say he basically adopted us to have his free pick. We all know he would never do that but people love to think bad of others and almost everyone will believe it when he marries me."

"People do that?" Mary looked at Harry with big eyes.

"Sadly, yes, they do. It is the connection most people will draw. Everyone will talk about this marriage. Take the fact that a lone bachelor adopted five girls and later married one of them without knowing more than that. You'll stop thinking he might have an affair with a man. If I marry a normal woman of standing, people will believe I did it as a cover-up. But marry some impoverished orphan that basically has no choice when you make moves on her, it does not make sense as a cover story anymore. Too

scandalous. Why would anyone ruin his image like that?"

"Why would you?" Dorothea asked. Normally, she was a quiet one, even though she was older than Brea. "Are rumors really that dangerous?"

"Homosexual men go to jail." How he wished that were different. "Rumors become beliefs, beliefs become truth. Suddenly people see things they take as evidence. They way people look at each other, a touch of a hand, all of that suddenly becomes wild public kisses and unclothed encounters at other people's homes. Suddenly, people swear they have definitely seen this or that. How do you prove that you never did something? It is easier to prove that you did something."

"What prove?" Edgar sounded disbelieving. "I know you, you won't touch her, you won't impregnate her. So what's your prove?"

"I think a ruinous marriage is enough prove. Who in their right mind would marry someone without money or connections if not for legally doing what was forbidden before? People love to believe the worst of others. They will want to believe in this truth."

"Then why not me?" Dorothea sounded petulant. "I already turned sixteen."

"Because I would never make one of you do this. I tried to talk Brea out of this but she had great arguments. She really thought this through. A loveless marriage is not for everyone."

"Well, I'd do it." The older girl sulked openly. "Who wouldn't want to be lady of this house? Lots of money, never having to work again, I'd jump at the chance."

"I don't plan on being a trophy wife." Brea actually sounded insulted. "This is for protecting this family. So I'll go study in London and come back to manage the factory. You are aware that we are sewing uniforms for the next war? Those two are military officers. Come war, they'll be gone. The only one allowed to administer an estate and it's belongings – which the factory is – is a wife. So I'll get some education to do a good job. Most of us lost their parents due to the war and it's consequences. Bad working conditions, hunger, sickness, that is what war means for everyone. Men not coming back, women finding no jobs, young girls going into prostitution. We don't need to repeat what happened to our parents. Sewing uniforms is a good job, even in wartime. We'll make it but we'll need someone that can do what Gren and Edgar do right now."

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Even Dorothea looked queasy.

"Thank you, Brea." Mary took one of her hands. "You're my hero."

"Yes, thank you." Helen smiled at her. "That's a good plan."

"It's why I finally acquiesced in her proposal. We both want to protect this family. She's not quietly suffering, we both know why we are agreeing to this. I can continue to be faithful to my late wife."

"So what do we need to do?," Loretta asked. "Should we make up stories about how you always liked to watch us and how scary that was?"

"No, better not. Let's stay with the gentleman with dark desires he is ashamed about. I didn't pant after you, I didn't stalk you or stared at you scarily. Actually, Brea wants me to do the routine of romantic gestures, flowers and admiration. You all have access to the library. Think of those cliché stories of rich, perfectly well-behaved young masters falling in love with their maid."

"Everyone knows that those are fiction." Dorothea snorted.

"Well, pretend that it is happening right before your eyes. A flower in bloom, rose color painting her cheeks, an innocent maiden ... well, I have never read those stories, I am no good at trying to quote them." He shook his head. "Also, I need all of you to

help Brea with her wardrobe. Cinderella-style, she needs to look the part where I spoil my young love interest rotten."

"Oh!" Helen clapped her hands. "Will she get jewelry?"

"I will have to go through my late mother's stuff."

"It will be like in our plays. You'll be the heroine." The young girl grinned at Brea.

"I'll turn into a princess."

Some girls cooed and cheered. Even Margret smiled. Richard and Edgar though looked not so well, both in their own way. Richard was pale, most likely fearing what awaited him. Edgar ... he looked like he was trying his best to keep from crying. Swallowing his pain, keeping a straight face, waiting until one could allow oneself to fall apart.

"Right now, this is all still a secret," Harry told the girls. "You'll finish the current uniforms while Brea buys the stuff for her dresses. You can plan them together. You'll start on them after our next shipment. Then you can start telling people how I am courting Brea. I will actually do that, you don't need to come up with stories. Just do and say what you would if it were really happening."

"Wouldn't it be safer if you hadn't told us?," asked Loretta, always the voice of reason.

"Most likely. But I wanted you to know. I didn't want you to think I was breaking a promise I made to you."

"What promise?" Dorothea looked first at Harry, then at the other girls.

The one to answer was Helen: "That he would never desire any of us. He promised that on our first evening here. When Brea, Mary and me came here, we thought he was ... well. We had all seen it before. We thought his plan was a harem with girls, just like he said."

"He would never," Loretta deadpanned.

"Did the thought not occur to you when he got you two from the orphanage?"

Dorothea and Loretta looked at each other but both shook their heads.

"They came from a better orphanage than yours." Harry sighed remembering the orphanage's conditions. "It had a roof for example."

The girls began to talk about their respective orphanages. For a moment, Harry watched with a smile, but Richard's uneasiness permeated the room. The older man lay a hand on Edgar's shoulder and announced: "We'll need to have some manly talks now. See you later, everyone. Richard, are you coming?"

The boy may have looked pale before but he became chalky when he stood. Should he offer him a hand? The boy did not look steady on his feet. Edgar looked slightly better but ... only a bit. Still, they followed Harry without complaint. Tom slipped from his seat as well, so Harry turned to him for a moment and said: "You, young man, will go to school. Protect the girls on your way."

His son scrunched his face and not in a cute way.

For once, Harry didn't care, he could sort that one out later. He knew that Richard had to be top priority but he suddenly felt like he should have talked to Edgar beforehand. Had the other man harbored hope? Was it even possible not to? He looked crushed by the revelation. Harry tried a hand on his shoulder which wasn't shrugged off. That had to be positive, right?

Edgar's eyes were lost and desolate though. Crushed, devoid of all hope, not even able to cry. Harry remembered seeing those eyes on Ron once. Day by day, they had filled with anger until his best friend left them in the forest. Would he lose Edgar the same way now? Or would the hopelessness turn him suicidal again?

"Richard, please go sit in my study, alright? We'll be there in a moment."

The boy hesitated only for a moment before nodding and closing the door of the room behind him.

"Talk to me, Edgar."

The man slowly opened his mouth but nothing came out. His eyes lost focus before he shook his head and lowered his gaze.

"I am still the same. We are still the same. This doesn't change anything. It is a front, an image. It's a bitter pill to swallow. Even more the fact that we need it at all, I know. Just ... I don't want you in danger. Neither you nor him." Harry nodded in the direction of his study.

"What has he done?" It was no more than a whisper.

"Kissed a boy ... maybe. Maybe not. The other boy is one of the sons of Mister Smith's friend."

Edgar sighed in annoyance. "I'll sort out my feelings later." He turned to the study.

Harry stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. At least he planned to grab the shoulder. In his haste, it was more chest than shoulder. Edgar shuddered as if he had been electrified. As if burned, Harry pulled back his hand. In the time it took to blink, Edgar's arms were around his shoulders, the other man's lips right beside his ear: "I just hate the fact that it can't be me."

"Marrying me? I am not marrying her because I want to. I don't love her, I don't desire her."

"I know." Edgar leaned back to look in his eyes. "You won't love or desire me as well. I am the same. Still, she gets to marry you and I don't."

"2014." Harry sighed and hugged Edgar as well. "We'll both be dead when they legalize it."

"Hm ... if we get to live that long, will you marry me? Just for the heck of it."

"You think I'll make 118?" Harry smiled crookedly. "Alright. If we live in 2014, I'll marry you."

"Good." Edgar grinned and finally took a step back. "I'll hold you to your word."

"Can we save our foal from prison now?"

The other man sighed deeply. "Can we skip about fifty years or so?"

"Where would be the fun in that?"

Edgar just rose an eye-brow before entering the study. This time, Harry let him go. Had that been enough? Had he assured Edgar that nothing had to change? Because things would change ... Brea would sit in his seat on Harry's right side. She would be on his arm at parties. Later, only Harry and her would be invited and Edgar would have to stay home. Harry wasn't blind to all of that. He would not be able to promise that everything would be the same.

Edgar knew that.

He also knew how much every reminder would hurt.

Harry took a fortifying breath and entered the study.

"Do you know if Ian is alright?" Richard had a bit more color on his cheeks.

"Ian as in the Conner's boy?" Harry brought the boy back to the sofa. "So it is true that you were caught kissing?"

"By his father." Richard lowered his head in shame and pain. "He screamed and used swear-words. He got so angry, he hit Ian. I ... I ran away." He hiccuped and his eyes teared up. "I am so sorry."

Great. Well, it was more in line with what he had expected but it complicated things a lot.

"Ian will be okay but he is most likely hurt. Men like Conner, they ... they are very impulsive. They can do a lot of damage in their rage."

"I didn't know what to do!" Richard hid his face behind his hands.

"You come and talk to me, Richard. We could have gone to the police and made this go away before it became an issue. You don't have to do things by yourself. Come to talk to me or Edgar."

The boy just cried. God, he was only fifteen. He was still half a child.

"I need you to explain in detail what happened."

Edgar went over to Richard and put an arm around the boy's shoulders. Harry gave them a handkerchief. It took a few moments before the boy calmed enough to talk.

"Ian and I ... I knew he was like me. Like us. We met sometimes. Out in the woods or in the garden shed. No one knew. He's learning to be a carpenter. His family owns a workshop, he just wanted to show me what he was working on. It was a Christmas present, a little table for the shed. I made a joke or maybe said something flirty, I don't know, I don't remember, just that we were kissing. His father should have been with a client, it should have been safe."

"Well, it happened. Go on." Young innocent love, spoiled viciously.

"His father screamed bloody murder. He beat Ian, really beat him, with fists and all. I screamed and when his father turned to me, I ran." He hung his head in shame. "I am so sorry."

"I hope you'll be able to tell Ian some day." Harry sighed deeply. Most likely Richard wouldn't be able to. "Either Ian told his father that you initiated that to save himself or the man is forcing Ian to implicate you. They went to the police and reported you. Two against one and the public against you is not a good position."

Richard went pale again and whispered: "I'll go to prison?"

"We'll try not to let that happen. But for the best outcome, we need Ian on our side."

"Ian is very, very afraid of his father."

"I feared so." What to do? "We won't be able to talk to him before we go to the police. We need a story."

"The truth will bring both of you into prison." Edgar squeezed Richards shoulders.

"Then it's better if I take the blame?" Richard's nose was clogged again.

"No, we need something where both of you are innocent and Conner had an overreaction. How exactly were you standing when Mister Conner walked in on you?"

"Ah." The boy cleaned his nose. "Err, the door was two meters away and we were a bit sideways."

"Show me." Harry stood and went to the door. "Let's say that I am Mister Conner. Place Edgar as Ian and then yourself."

They reenacted the scene with both Edgar and Harry asking for clarifications.

"We'll say that you roughed around." Edgar finally decided. "This hand position, it can also be used in a rough tumble. The youthful sort, not the tumble in the hay sort. Ian stood with his back to the door and with how tall you described him, it's easy to misunderstand the situation. Let's say that there was no kiss, you were just fooling around and Mister Conner misunderstood. The rest of the situation will be the exact same. Screaming, hitting, you running away and being afraid."

"You can even say how you were not only afraid of Mister Conner but also of my reaction. Recount the story of the stolen wine and my severe punishment. Recount how Edgar and I sometimes talk about our time in the military and how we had to shoot homosexuals as disciplinary measures."

"What?" Richard looked up with big eyes full of shock.

"War is a horrible thing." With a sad face, Edgar patted the boy's head. "In the trenches, you need to make fast decisions. Sending people to their deaths, keeping them from rebelling and running away in the face of bloody destruction ... yes, we had to shoot them. If they were caught, there was no other way."

"But ... but aren't you-"

Edgar placed a finger on Richard's lips. "What I am is not as important as who I have to be."

God, why? Why did people have to discriminate like this? You couldn't help what you were born with. This whole situation, it was such a ... Harry couldn't believe people ever thought like this. Making homosexuals into criminals, giving no rights to women or children, waging war instead of finding compromises for their differences. Why was this so hard for so many people? Even in his own time, people had been like this. Just a bit less hostile with not as much support behind them. In this age, the state supported them. What a horrible thing.

"Richard? Do you think you can tell the story like that?"

The boy cried again. Edgar held him, dried his tears, whispered words of comfort. Finally, Richard quieted again and nodded.

"We should go down to the station now. Edgar will go about his day as usual. Later, we'll make a plan how to get Ian to say the same as you."

For a moment, it looked like Edgar would argue but his words never left his lips. He nodded, knowing the wisdom in this course of action. They couldn't go as a team this time. It would only implicate them. If Edgar had learned one thing in all his years with Gren, it was that your image was everything. Sometimes you had to make sacrifices for it. Sometimes you had to kill for it. They would try to save Richard but not to the point of self-destruction.

It hurt to think what might be needed.

"Mister Horten." Officer Derbrow nodded at him.

"Officers Derbrow and Kanderly." He removed his hat. "Let me introduce Richard Burstone, a worker at my factory and our gardener."

"Good morning, son." The older officer nodded, not exactly inviting but also not hostile. "Seems there's no hole in his head."

"It turned out to be a misunderstanding, just like I expected. One with a lot of negative consequences but let Richard tell you himself. Hopefully, I didn't frighten him too much with my interrogation."

"Leave police matters to the police-" Officer Kanderly was interrupted by his partner with a pinch to his arm.

"Of course, officers. Officially, Richard may only be an employee but he has been with me for years, I watched him grow up. He is something like a honorary son. Finding out that I have been harboring a criminal for years would have been ghastly."

Richard paled and trembled slightly. Harry hoped that he didn't overdo it.

"Well, boy, let's take your statement. Follow us." Officer Derbrow made a hand gesture to follow and took the lead.

Harry didn't leave Richard's side. Of course that became a problem at the door of the interrogation room.

"You may wait outside, Mister Horten." Officer Kanderly seemed to be losing his tact.

"Outrageous! He is a minor, you cannot take his statement without adult supervision. If you don't want me, I can call our family lawyer but that would take a few days. He resides in London."

"That won't be needed." It seemed like Derbrow had already made his peace with the fact that he would not stop Harry. Kanderly bristled – without his partner though, he was more like a barking chihuahua.

They went inside with Harry taking a seat slightly behind Richard. So far, so good. He had worn down at least one of them. Maybe that would spare the boy. They took his personal information, asked about his youth, his family. Finally, they asked about yesterday. Richard told the same story with the same emotions, the same fear and shame, the tears. He remembered their little story quirk well enough. Harry offered him handkerchiefs that he had packed in advance. All in all, it was perfect.

Of course, it would not be that easy. They tried to wear him down, to break him. They let him recount the story again and again, do a placement themselves, asked invasive questions. Harry let out all of his annoyance unfiltered, so that his looming presence would give him the opportunity to cut the interrogation short. He did so after the third retelling, playing the businessman who had better things to do to listen to some youthful idiocies more than four times in a morning. Kanderly argued that he could go and the interrogation could continue which made Harry grumble and fidget, so the officers got another retelling but Richard didn't stumble on the details. The best lie was always the one that had as much truth as possible. The officers finally gave up.

"This will go to court."

"Court?" Harry used all of the anger that he normally kept behind massive walls of deescalation training. "Whatever for?"

"Mister Conner and his boy said something different."

"That boy will say what his father tells him to. Did he actually tell you that Richard forced him? Or was that all his father?"

Derbrow and Kanderly exchanged a look. The younger spoke: "Well, anyway, a judge needs to make the decision. These are delicate matters after all."

"Well, if you insist on it." Arguing more would have only made matters worse. Time to change tactics. "So I will need to call our lawyer?" He did his best to look like he had an epiphany. "Wait ... if you already knew this would go to court anyway, why did you tell me that no lawyer was needed? If you knew this already, Richard should never have been interrogated without legal representation." That would have led to dropped charges in his day and age. Sadly, that was in the future as well. "So you tried to get some hurried confession out of him not only once but twice? First turning up in the middle of the night, then ... no, thrice! You even tried to keep me out of the interrogation room. I will need to have a stern word with your superior. Those tactics are despicable for people who uphold the law."

Too many purebloods that had tried to take him apart in his years as an auror. It was something that had been used against him and it had flustered him again and again in the beginning. Now, he was thankful for the experience – he knew how to turn tables. Kanderly flustered, even Derbrow fidgeted.

"I expect better from you in the future, gentleman. Now be so kind as to tell me where I can find the superintendent."

He had a sudden flashback to Lucius Malfoy stalking the Ministry floors with an upturned nose and a haughty gaze. Really, what was his life coming to?

Malfoy Manor looked exactly the same as the last time he had been in it. Which was at seventeen years old, bound and bloody, losing a friend that had been mistreated by pureblood culture all his life, still hearing Hermione's tortured screams filling the halls. Not a good memory.

"Dad?" Tom seemed to have noticed his faraway look.

"I'm ... not all here right now. It sometimes happens when bad memories haunt you. This place reminds me of something in my youth that wasn't pleasant."

Tom, who had his hand in his, watched him for a moment and asked, "Do you need a hug?"

"Yes, please. May I carry you?" He picked the boy up. Tom was actually getting heavy now but the weight helped to ground him. Harry had to put him down halfway to the door.

"You need to train more, dad."

"Sure ... well, okay, you might have a point there." It had been the same when he changed from active missions to desk work. Now, how to get a magically fired broom that a Muggle could ride? Wait, didn't the Malfoys have a breeding empire for flying horses? It should still exist in this age. There! He was sure he had heard a horse nigh. Maybe he would get to fly one?

"Would you like a calming draught?" Dumbledore offered.

"No, thank you. It's alright. There's horses instead of peacocks and stuffy purebloods instead of murderous madmen. Also, having you with me is a good reminder where I am."

"So it was after ..."

"Yes, after." They arrived at the door which was opened by a house-elf that was thankfully not Dobby. "Let's not talk about the past." Future. Whatever.

Tom let his gaze wander, eyes sparkling while taking everything in. It was actually a nice mansion when your life wasn't threatened. Still a bit cold and rather dark with the big halls only lightened by candles and magical illumination. It had a cosy atmosphere though. There were flying candles that parted when you passed them and an enchanted ceiling just like in the great hall. This one did not show the sky but rather a ball, as if dancers were using the ceiling as their floor. It was a bit disconcerting but also pretty. Harry wasn't surprised that Voldemort had banished the enchantment in his time.

"Welcome to Wiltshire manor." Of course, Arcturus Malfoy stood near the top of the grand staircase. Like every good manor owner, he needed to make an entrance from a higher place.

"Thank you for having us, Mister Malfoy." He would not continue though. It would place him like a beggar, so he waited for the other to come down to his level. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you. My name is Grenmore Horten. This is my son, Tom Marvolo Horten."

"Marvolo? A peculiar name." The regal blond man eyed the boy.

"After my grandfather, sir. Marvolo Gaunt." Tom bowed like the purest pureblood one could imagine.

"A Gaunt?" As expected, Malfoy ignored Harry in favor of someone more in his league.

"How does the offspring of one of our oldest and purest lines end in the hands of a Muggle?"

"You would have to ask my mother, sir. She died in childbirth and decided to leave me in a Muggle orphanage."

"A bastard, then?"

"I am unsure if my parents married or not." A lie but certainly a well-placed one. "I carried my father's name, so maybe they married. I do not know him though. She did not place me with him, so I will have to draw my own conclusions. Those aren't favorable."

"Surely you would like to know him at least? Or know of him? Merope Gaunt would not have married a fool, her grandfather would never have allowed it. He was a proud man."

"So I have been told." Tom left a pause that clearly unsettled Mister Malfoy in it's insolence but continued before his patience ran out. "My mother also decided not to place me with him. For her to choose a Muggle orphanage, it does not reflect well on either my grandfather nor my father."

Malfoy seemed thoughtful for a moment. "It must have been a scandal ... curious that I never knew of it."

"No one knew. No one came to get me. My mother must have gone to some lengths to keep me secret. For the heir of a line as old as the Gaunts, that must have been quite some work."

"To hide you with Muggles is certainly unexpected." His gaze flickered to Harry. "Curious indeed. So your entrance back into this world is at the side of a man trying to prove that blood is the most important ... but not it's purity but it's diversity?"

"My adopted father acts in my interest. As a half-blood, you would not deign to talk to me otherwise."

"A half-blood?" Malfoy recoiled in disgust. "Merope! How could she?"

"She owned a mirror." Tom kept his composure, continuing to speak like a politician rather than a small child. "She knew what inbreeding let to, she only had to look at her own face."

"Well ... she was as ugly as a thestral's behind, I give you that. So breeding with a Mudblood led to this?" Malfoy seemed to study Tom's face. "The looks have certainly improved, the intellect as well. But how is your magic?"

Suddenly, the hundreds of candles flouting in the room slowly turned upside-down. It was creepy as hell and one by one, they extinguished. Of all things to happen, Harry had not expected this – it was a perfect statement. It was powerful to overrule an adult's magic and the light drowning from the room was screaming the nature of Tom's magic without offending Dumbledore as the only light wizard in the room. Even though extinguishing lights in front of a light wizard known to fight dark lords may be a bit over the top after all.

"Lumos," the older man mumbled after a moment. The dark made him uncomfortable. Malfoy's face seemed ashen in the harsh light. That might also have to do with being as pale as a vampire but maybe he was impressed as well. He held his countenance unwaveringly. "A remarkable performance of magical mastery. Also one of which I am sure that our dear headmaster had no hand in."

"He seems rather partial to light." Tom! That was a joke far beyond your years!

"I am very proud of my son's development," Harry decided to intervene.

"Of course." Malfoy couldn't help a snicker. "How do you foster his talent?"

"He got a beginner's potions kit and started brewing this year. He also has access to an extensive library that I stocked with some elementary books. I started teaching him the mind arts as an extracurricular."

Malfoy hesitated for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "I thought you were a Muggle?"

"So?" Harry raised an eyebrow. "Are you one of those purebloods that think Muggles are unable to read?"

The other man actually seemed unsure how to answer that, so he stayed silent.

"Magical theory is just that – a theory. You do not need magic to read about it. The same applies to the mind arts. Imagining and mentalizing do not need magic to work."

"Fascinating." It actually sounded honest. As Malfoy was staring into Harry's eyes, he was most likely trying to break in right now. "Utterly fascinating."

"It is also rather rude to try to break into someone's mind."

"Indeed." Dumbledore coughed. "No attacks, you remember?"

"Oh, it was basically an invitation." Malfoy made a grand hand gesture. "You are right none the less, where are my manners? Please follow me to the drawing room. Let us discuss your scientific evidence."

Thank God, they were getting somewhere. So the man deigned to listen to them after all these impressive displays of power. Harry patted his son's head and nodded at him when Malfoy had his back turned. Tom grinned for a moment, falling out of character, before the haughty expression was back.

The drawing room was exactly as Harry remembered it. High ceiling, portraits of Malfoys lining the walls, a marble fireplace and a long table. On the other hand, it wasn't as bleak and dark as in Voldemort's time. There was a fire and the curtains were open. It had a bit of a morbid feeling to walk in here hand in hand with Tom. He had a sudden flashback of Burbage being eaten by Nagini on this table. His son most likely noticed his shudder. Hopefully, it would never come to pass now.

"Our ancestors watch our every move. This room reminds us of those that have come before us and whose ideals we have to uphold." What a clever move and what an obvious try at intimidation.

"Magic above all," Harry quoted Merlin's credo.

"All hail those who stay superior," Tom continued with a quote from Salazar Slytherin.

"Exactly." For a moment, Malfoy grinned as if they were men of worth. After a short moment, he turned, most likely remembering he was talking with filth. "The worth of a man has changed over time but might always held the same value. Those with power should hold the power."

"As well as the responsibility for future generations to come," Dumbledore added.

"To keep and to hold magic, to further research and to protect all wizardkind from extinction," Malfoy continued as if he had not heard the man.

"The first and third will be a challenge in the years to come," Harry interjected.

The blond man turned to him, not a hair out of place but his micro-expressions spoke of unease.

"You see the signs. The Sacred lines are declining, their offspring weaker and less sharp every generation, their madness and bloodlust increasing. Dark wizards turning to black magic, fanatical dark lords on the rise. Gellert Grindelwald was actually someone most purebloods placed their hopes on. More powerful, more stable and with a better plan than all the ones that came before him for decades." Harry continued, ignoring Dumbledore's fidgeting, "He was right about some things. Muggles are a threat. Their technology is advancing, their weapons far surpass a wizard's capability of mass destruction."

Malfoy turned to him, a man with a body full of strain. His gaze flickered to Dumbledore.

"Know your enemy." Harry placed a hand on the older man's shoulder. "To defeat someone, you have to know where they are coming from. Albus knows this better than anyone. What he projects to the outside world and what he thinks are different things, just as with you. At least I guess that no Malfoy would ever admit to having invited a Muggle to their home? I am aware of the honor you have bestowed upon me ... in your view."

"I guess I did not expect a Muggle to quote Merlin nor Grindelwald, especially not in

his presence." Malfoy's gaze remained on Dumbledore. "Most people would not dare."

"He was a horribly misguided man, but only because he was ill-informed. With the right kind of knowledge, who could have stopped him? Imagine a dark lord not opposing those in power but rising within their ranks."

Dumbledore averted his gaze.

"You would not call them a dark lord." Malfoy seemed to get the hint. "But a visionary."

"A dark lord is a feared individual but ultimately, a failing one. Light shall always triumph over dark ... unless they agree with the other side's view. Then you only need a few skilled individuals to realize something people have never thought possible. Hogwarts is a prime example of different people following the same ideal, ending with something grander than ever imagined."

"I see." The other man sharpened his gaze. "So you imagine me as part of your plan?"

"I am a Gryffindor at heart, it makes me unable to be subtle," Harry deadpanned. "As much as I love my son, he does not have the skills of an expert on politics like you do."

"That could be ruinous."

"It could also be the greatest honor, a showing of leadership in hard times, going down in history as one of the men that saved magic when hope dwindled and the old blood died." Which sounded like a rather Gryffindorish thing to say. "A path to save your family. How much have you fought for that one boy?"

One corner of Malfoy's mouth actually twitched. That seemed to be a rather sore topic. Time for a diversion.

"The Gaunts have exactly this one boy that refuses to carry their name. He is the last true heir of Slytherin. I don't see Morphin Gaunt saving the family line anytime soon. Tom has the looks, the magic, the skills not found in other families. He is living proof of what we are trying to show people. Offer me all your doubts and let me disperse them. You need not make a decision now. I only wanted you to know my motives."

Malfoy regarded him for a moment, his gaze suddenly filled with suspicion. "It is a lot of work for one boy."

"Would you not do the same for yours?" Harry smiled with a sad undertone. "Merlin may have taught us magic above all – but did he have a family?"

"No ... he didn't." The other man took a deep breath. "There is nothing I wouldn't do for my son. Including challenging centuries of history, centuries of values passed from my forefathers onto me."

"A brave man indeed." Harry nodded. Certainly braver than some Malfoys before and after him. So the ferret had actually taken after his great-grandfather. Cautious but not too set on something. Not as set as Lucius, not set to the point of facing madness rather than change.

Malfoy seemed to wage an inner war, no matter his words. His values needed to reject them and their words but his logical mind knew that they were right. How much truth would he allow? How many actions would he let his convictions follow? Keeping oneself ignorant was a choice that kept someone from making further choices. On the other hand, he was too far gone to back out and he knew it. Letting Dumbledore in had been a wrong move if his ways were comfortable enough, if he did not have enough to worry about.

"All this brooding makes me think of tea." Dumbledore smiled in a way that sharply reminded Harry of the cunning old man playing the fool too often. "A few cookies would also not go amiss, don't you think?"

"My feet hurt," Tom grumbled under his breath but loud enough to be heard.

"Of course." Malfoy clapped his hands. "Milfy, set out some tea in the sun room. Delby, fetch my son and have him join us there."

Two plops sounded through the room, informing Harry that the elves must have been invisible or very well-hidden. His inner Mione screamed at him to say something but his few Slytherin tendencies warned him not to offend Malfoy over this matter. But after all this talking, his inner Slytherin was losing some steam. Hopefully they could finally lower the tension and the need for grand speeches and hyperboles. Diplomacy was not his strong suit and he really wanted to go back to simply stating opinions and annoying people long enough until they gave up.

They went out into a hallway, past some doors and finally took one near the end. It opened into a light and airy room with high windows that offered a beautiful view into the garden. Tom sat down on a chaiselongue with Albus next to him, leaving a wicker chair to Harry. Malfoy took another one of those which left a second chaiselongue to the still missing son. In between offers of tea, sugar and lemon, a probably ten-year-old boy arrived. To Harry's surprise, he had light brown hair instead of blond. With Lucius extremely fair blond hair, he had expected a blond child.

"Abraxas, please join us." His father made a hand gesture that bid him to approach.

"This is my son and heir, Abraxas Malfoy."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, young Mister Malfoy." Harry stood to shake his hand, proudly noticing that Tom copied him. "This is my son and heir, Tom Marvolo Horten."

"I fear I never heard your name." God, the boy was as snotty as they come. No wonder that a man like Lucius had sprung from his loins.

"Young Tom is the Gaunt heir, Abraxas," his father explained patiently.

"Then why would you consort with a Muggle?" It seemed that Abraxas deigned Tom important enough to talk to.

"Figure it out for yourself." Tom's gaze was icy, clearly annoyed enough to leave behind his charming persona.

"Tom, that was rude," Harry admonished him.

"Well, he was rude first."

"I don't care about that. I care about your conduct and it was shameful."

"Yes, dad." Tom nearly rolled his eyes but held himself back. "Please excuse my rudeness, Mister Malfoy, I hold my father in high regard. Therefore I shall not let a slight to him go unchallenged."

Abraxas looked taken aback for a moment and checked with his father which reaction was expected of him before saying: "I did not want to sound disrespectful and I offer my sincerest apology if I did. I was merely baffled, not trying to imply any disregard."

"Sure." Tom said down again, still glaring at Abraxas.

"Mister Horten and his son are our guests today, Abraxas. They may be unusual company but I deign them worthy enough to talk to. Disregarding them is disregarding my estimation in this matter."

"I am sorry, father, I never wanted to imply that I was doubting you." The boy was actually bowing to his father! What a strange sight. Not even Malfoy – Draco, that is – had been as formal with his father.

"Mister Horten and his son are here to further our knowledge on what Mister Dumbledore already explained the last few times he was here. Do you remember about dominant and recessive traits and how our unique hair color came about?"

Abraxas lowered his gaze, one of his hands slightly clenching. It was a hair color he did

not share, so Harry had an inkling how that question hurt. Everyone of us but you – even though it was something Abraxas was born with.

"We also learned about genetic penetration. I am curious what you have for me this time." Malfoy turned to Dumbledore.

"Well, yes ... I think I skimmed the topic of hereditary flaws. I mentioned that inbreeding was bad but never elaborated on it. I hoped that Mister Horten could give us some insight."

"Of course. What is your current knowledge on the origin of hereditary diseases?" Harry looked at Arcturus Malfoy.

The man kept quiet for a moment before answering carefully, "It is common knowledge that the more squibs occur in a family, the more likely they are to have more. It is why a lot of families hide their squib children, some even kill them. It is the only hereditary disease that does not have a cure yet. There were others but potions were invented to cure those."

"So your magical prowess also kept you from finding a solution to squibs earlier, I see." Harry nodded as if that was a new thing. "Muggles have a bit more knowledge on this due to the fact that they are unable to cure most hereditary diseases. So they occur more often and are easier to identify, therefore easier to study. If you had not found cures for most diseases, you would most likely already have found out how squibs come about."

"Is that a theory or do you have proof to base it on?" Malfoy's eyes narrowed.

"I shall present the theory first and if you have the real Black family tree at hand – not the one where they blasted off all their killed infants – I can show you the proof as well."

"How would such knowledge come into your hands?" The grey eyes of the Malfoy lord were cold as steel.

"You may know that Hogwarts registers every child born to magical parents as well as any magical child born to Muggle parents. So the headmaster is basically the keeper of records for the true history of magical families. Some families' exploits are ... hard to face. I asked Dumbledore to approach you because the Malfoy family actually seems rather reasonable and well-managed over the centuries. Neither madness nor mental retardation have occurred often. Due to your ancestor's wisdom, you have been spared a lot of risks regarding your health."

"So madness and mental retardation are also hereditary?" Both Malfoys exchanged a quick look. "Marrying wives from families with those seems undesirable."

"Which is why your ancestors declined such offers time and time again. Your family's penchant for marrying foreign aristocrats has proved fortunate." Did he need to puff up Malfoy's chest even more or was that enough flattery that they could get to the point?

"So being a squib, madness and mental retardation are recessive genes?" Finally, they could tackle the point.

"No, it's not as easy as that. As a wizard, you know that there are people with darker and with fairer skin." He waited for both Malfoys to nod. "Those with dark skin originally come from a place where the sun was very intense. So their skin color protected them from being hurt by sunlight. Most people living in England have fair skin, because our sunny days are very numbered. That is a development over thousands of generations. Those with fairer skin than others lived healthier in our cloudy land, so they had more children and therefore the skin color got lighter and lighter over thousands of generations. You could say that genes specialized. Does that

make sense?" Again, he waited. "This process is continually happening. Genes have freak mutations and some are good, most are bad though. Most mutations are not an improvement. Thankfully, we always have two copies, so if one doesn't work, we have another to fall back on. It's because we always get one gene per parent."

Still, both Malfoys seemed to listen. Arcturus looked a lot more reserved than his son who could not keep his haughty exterior but looked rather intrigued.

"Now, when there is a lot of inbreeding, which occurs when people that are closely linked genetically marry one another, it happens more often that their children get two mutated copies. In that case, you have a hereditary disease. It doesn't happen fast but it happens. Most Muggle countries had monarchies, so they were ruled by one royal family. Royals were only allowed to marry other royals, so royal families intermarried for centuries. Last century, that had led to a lot of specific hereditary diseases. The Romanovs, royal family of Russia, could only have daughters in the end. Their sons had a hereditary blood disease which killed them. The Habsburger, royal family of Austria, all had a specific nose and chin. The nose was very long, the chin as well, so sometimes it was more prominent than even their nose."

"They must have looked very strange," Abraxas muttered.

"Indeed they did. The Wittelsbacher, royal family of Bavaria, were known for their madness. The list goes on and on, the reason for it was intermarriage for centuries. Now, you may have already guessed where I am going: The Sacred twenty-eight have been intermarrying since the time of Merlin."

"So hereditary diseases have increased but we did not notice because we have cures for most of them." Malfoy nodded slowly. "The cure for squibs, madness and mental retardation is therefore to stop intermarrying?"

"That has an immediate effect in most cases, yes." Harry pointed at Tom. "As you can perfectly see in my son's example."

"It makes a lot of sense, yes ... Merope Gaunt had a hunch, her facial features were unproportioned, she was not the smartest and barely able to follow the school curricula. Her magic was close to a squib's. It was a shame because the Gaunts were the purest of them all. But madness had slowly taken a hold of them for a few generations. It was why I was so fascinated to see a boy not only handsome but smart and well-mannered. Not even to speak of your magic, young man, which is amazing. So you want to tell me that the reason for that is Merope's decision to defy her father and elope with a mudblood?"

Tom smirked and answered, "Even worse, she eloped with a Muggle."

"A Muggle?" Malfoy nearly spat the word. He even shuddered in revulsion. "She lay with a Muggle like a sodomit?"

"It would be a lot less scandalous if you did not put Muggles on the same level as goats or dogs." It did not faze Harry at all, he had done all this before. "Muggles are humans and some of them have genes that code for magic. When two such people come together, you have a Muggle-born. A Muggle-born is the most potent genetically, because they have all genes with complete penetration. Marrying a muggle-born secures that there won't be a squib for many generations to come. You can see that frequently in less well known light families. The Bones for example, the Diggorys, the Weasleys. I know that your family has a feud with the Weasleys going back decades but look at it objectively – have you never been envious of the number of potent magical children they produce?"

"They are blood traitors!"

"They are able to see that marrying Muggle-borns every few generations is a sensible

course of action. They have practiced it for three centuries by now. How many of their children are squibs, insane or retarded?"

Malfoy glared at him as if he were a personal enemy. It made for a nice change to see some emotion on his features.

"Feel free to bring every family tree you own and we can check if my words hold true."

The reply was nearly a hiss: "You want me to go explain to my fellow purebloods that they need to marry their kids off to mudbloods? Have you lost your mind?"

"You could start by calling them Muggleborn instead of Mudblood. That might make the idea easier to swallow." Harry lazily shrugged his shoulders. "I asked you what you would do for your son. You said that you would defy convictions and your ancestors if it meant a better future for him. Now I challenge you to prove your words."

"Insolent!" Malfoy stood and began to pace. "It is not possible for so many people to go so wrong. We began to shun Muggleborns to preserve magic. The answer cannot lie with them."

"The catholic church launched the so called inquisition. Wizards and witches were hunted down, tortured and burned alive. Magical folk began to gather and hide, to keep to themselves. In the 17th century, the Statute of Secrecy went into practice to protect magical folk from Muggles. Muggleborns were shunned because of their close ties to Muggles, because purebloods feared for their lives. For most families that are now called the Sacred twentyeight, it's been six- to seven-hundred years of intermarrying which are only now showing their ugly faces. That's how long it takes for several mutations to take root."

"There must be another way!" Malfoy's eyes burned with fury.

Well, he hadn't expected this to be easy. Harry took a deep breath and sighed. "There is."

"There is?," the other man echoed in surprise.

"Your own family already practices it. Marrying from abroad. It will widen the gene pool and stave off the hereditary degradation for another few hundred years. But you also know it's side-effects."

"We do?" With a searching hand he grabbed for his chair while standing behind it.

"The more divergent the genes, the less specialized they are to their environment. Some children aren't suited to the weather, the climate, the diseases, some children never come about. When was the last generation that had more than three children in the Malfoy line?"

Abraxas seemed to think about this as if it was a serious question. Due to Hermione's research, Harry knew the answer.

"In the 16th century, Lucius Malfoy the first tried to marry Queen Elisabeth the first but was rejected. He married a half-blood by the name of Catherine Abercromby instead, they had seven children. He was the last in line to marry a half-blood spouse, so it was also the last time your line had an abundance of children."

"We tried to marry into the Muggle royal line?," Abraxas asked his father in surprise.

Arcturus Malfoy clicked his tongue as if he had bitten into a lemon.

"It's a family secret for many generations now which you will be told upon marriage, young Mister Malfoy. The wealth of your family comes from hundreds of years of secretly working for the Muggle crown and investing in both magical and Muggle businesses. Your ancestors were smart people. The Gaunts, the Blacks and the Lestranges kept to themselves, never intermingling with anything remotely Muggle and look where it got them. Poor, frail and mad."

"Is it true?" Abraxas turned to his father.

"I wish I knew your sources, Mister Horten." The older Malfoy took a deep breath. "I'd like to strangle them."

"It's books, Mister Malfoy. Most of the Sacred twenty-eight own them, not only Hogwarts. I bet you still own your investment books from the 14th and 15th century." Again, he knew because Hermione had gotten them from the Malfoy library with Draco Malfoy's permission after finding some in the Black library that hinted at it. "Some other old families will have copies of them. Tergus Malfoy even wrote a widely-known book about investing in the 15th century. Not all copies are lost."

Arcturus Malfoy slowly shook his head and sat down again. "Of all people to unearth our family secrets, it has to be a Muggle."

Muggleborn actually but Harry knew he could not give credit to Hermione. In his head, he thanked her profusely. At the time, she had annoyed him with her tales of what she had read where and what it meant while now, he was infinitely grateful that he knew. "The Lestranges are nearly extinguished. If Tom does not accept the Gaunt name, they will die with Morphin. The Blacks may have a few more generation but they get madder every century. One day, they will simply kill one another and that will be that," Malfoy concluded. "The Crabbe and Goyle family barely have any functional members left. They are either squibs or mentally retarded. Greengrass, Nott and Parkinson, they are still holding on but we have married their family members for four generations now. I already knew from my family tree that I would have to find a French, German or Scandinavian wife for my son. I had my eyes on the d' Eon, Grindelwald or Stauffenberg family. But all eligible members perished in the last war. I will most likely have to settle for Letizia Lundberg. Even with our European focus, it is not easy to find suitable spouses. I even debated looking at Russian or American wizarding families."

"Far be it from me to make suggestions but if you allowed half-bloods again, you would have a variety of choices. Hermione Lovegood is a lovely girl with the exact hair tone you like." A person he only knew about because Hermione had been fascinated by women with her name and looked up all of them to tell Ron and Harry about.

"They have inbred for generations."

"But the current head decided to break with the tradition and married a Muggleborn." Marrying Hermione would keep her brother from marrying her which would keep Luna's father from being born. The man had been mad as a hatter, so Harry did not feel bad about suggesting it. With the way things were going, Lucius Malfoy wasn't about to happen as well.

"Hm." Malfoy slowly nodded. "I will have to think about this and consult the books. There are some family trees I need to study."

"Of course." Harry smiled. "Thank you for the lovely tea. I look forward to our next meeting."

"Is there more?" The other man looked up sharply.

"There is the question of how to make this public without overturning the world as you know it. As well as the question as how to keep the wizarding world safe once they welcome Muggleborns into their society. Muggles are a threat. Grindelwald was right in fearing what is about to happen, of how powerful Muggles are getting. Eradicating them is not an answer though. You need them for the Muggleborns they produce. So other answers need to be found."

"Which is a topic you are looking into? As a Muggle?" A blond eyebrow was raised.

"Who better than a Muggle? I know what we are capable of."

"How does Albus Dumbledore feature into this?" What a surprisingly open approach

for a Slytherin!

"I guess it is an open secret that Gellert was my lover before he became an enemy of the state," Dumbledore stated with surprising calmness. "I opposed his opinion on killing Muggles. I shared his other thoughts and concerns though. I am a light wizard but not a blind fool."

"Allow my surprise after doing your best to distance yourself from him for the last twenty years."

"I feared that people would implicate me with him. I did not want to lie about our affair but I also feared the conclusions drawn from it. I decided to stop running away from my past. I was a great part in what Gellert became and I need to face that and it's consequences. We worked together on most of what he presented before the Wizengamot."

"But you opposed him there," Malfoy's voice lowered.

"You know best how beneficial it is to play the pro and contra side at the same time, to have an influence on both. You want something done, you need an in on all sides."

"So this time I am to be your scapegoat?" His eyes narrowed. "This falls through as well and I am your fool?"

"It's why I decided to face this. I lost my lover due to my fear of the public opinion, Malfoy. Never again. This way of using others as pawns to save myself, it has to stop. It only ends in loneliness." Dumbledore slowly shook his head. "I discredited my own lover and left him to die just to save myself. I persecuted Slytherins for their self-sufficient backstabbing for twenty years when in reality, I hated my own cowardice most."

"So for you, this is some noble quest to make it up to your dead lover?" Malfoy could not hide his disdain. "You are such a Gryffindor at heart, it sickens me."

"You wanted to know my motivation, now you do." Dumbledore smiled but without humor. It rather looked like a threat. "Love is the most important of all and I betrayed it. Remorse is a strong motivator."

"I see." The blond man nodded. "I shall think this through and owl you about my decision."

"Great." Tom jumped from his seat. "Can you go and look at the flying horses before we leave? They look really cool." He pointed at the white pegasi that could be seen in the distance.

"Abraxas, please present our flock to our guests before they go."

"Yes, father." His son stood and bowed before the man. "Please follow me, sirs."

God, yes. Definitely. Flying horses were a lot better than parleying with Slytherins. It was exhausting. How had his life become like this? He really wished for Tom to grow up to take this duty off him. The boy would most likely even have fun with this.

Harry stood, nodded at Malfoy and followed the younger one. As long as it got him out of here, he was fine with anything.