The Seventh Day Seer

by lyraonyx

Summary

Harry and Severus are thrown together in hiding after Severus is outed as a spy and Harry escapes the Dursleys’. Another prophecy about Harry surfaces, one that’s been around since Merlin, dragging painful, terrifying truths from Dumbledore’s shadow. Together, they set out to destroy the evil hiding in both darkness and light and build a new wizarding society from its ashes. And, through it all, they manage to find a home in each other along the way.

Notes

This is SLASH, so if that isn't your cup of tea, look elsewhere. The major warnings are in the summary.

This is a sweet and emotional fic, though it does have some brutal scenes. It’s romance heavy, but not erotica. In other words, if you’re looking for dark and gritty or a slash-fest of gay porn, you’re not going to get it here. This concentrates on the romance and story first, so there will be no straight-up smut. What few sex scenes are present focus on the love and emotional connection between the two characters, not the physicality of the moment.
Okay, so having finally written one of those scenes, I think I lied a little bit. There's a smidgen of smut. It's still plot-driven, though, so don't expect it to be 300K words of lead up to the big-bang. This story isn't about the sex, and it goes on long after they finally get busy.

Also, fair warning, James and Sirius in this fic are MUCH worse than they were in canon. Lily's not as bad, but here's the thing. Even if I did carry on the assault further than JK did, what James and Sirius did to Severus even in canon is still sexual assault. As a rape survivor, I'm not going to brush that under the rug. I'm not going to downplay it like, unfortunately, JK herself did. Harry's going to figure it out in every story I write.

So ... with that said, onto the AU.

EXPLANATION OF AU: It’s (mostly) canon up until the beginning of sixth year. Well, besides the fact that Harry is aged up a year to avoid underage issues. (And that will also be true of every Snarry story I write.)

The first AU event is that Dumbledore is not cursed by Slytherin’s ring. (This all happens prior to the story’s start, so don’t go looking for it mentioned in much else but flashback.) Also, Harry apologizes to Severus about the pensieve at the start of sixth year, though Severus doesn’t quite believe it. Upon learning of Malfoy’s task to kill Dumbledore, Dumbledore and Severus plan to have Severus ‘kill’ the headmaster with an archaic curse that mimics the effects of the Draught of Living Death. Harry is in on this, as they need a third person to revive the Headmaster and Harry is always right in the thick of things anyway.

The Headmaster later drops the bomb on Severus about Harry being a horcrux. Knowing that Harry must die starts the process of tearing the veil of prejudice from Severus’ eyes. He still acts like an ass to Harry, but it’s mostly an act after that. He’s still not a Golden Boy devotee, but he doesn’t hate Harry like he used to.

Besides that, the only AU events that happen prior to the story involve Dumbledore’s deceptions, and they’ll be covered in the story.

***AN: I’m writing this while trying to adjust to new, heavy pain meds that affect my cognitive ability and memory and trying to raise a hyperactive 9 month old (He's almost 14 months now. Man, I've been working on this for awhile.). Between side-effect short circuits, pain fog, and mommy brain, my thought process isn’t as coherent as it could be (to say the least). I’ve tried my best to edit my stupid mistakes, but please be patient if I’ve gotten details backwards or forgotten a word or something. Just point it out in the comments, and I’ll fix it.

I hope you enjoy the story!
Professor Severus Snape grabbed a quill from his desk, strapped a katana on under his cloak, and pelted toward the Astronomy Tower, cursing with every step. Damn it to hell, somehow the Malfoy brat had managed to bring Death Eaters into the castle despite all Severus’ work against it. How? How had the little swot outsmarted him, a man brilliant enough to play the spy right under the Dark Lord’s non-existent nose? It defied all rea—

A blast overhead cut through Severus’ internal rant, and the man spat curses and bolted toward the Astronomy Tower staircase. Bellatrix’s insane cackling created a strange cacophony with the thuds of his boots against the creaking stairs and the distant sounds of battle. He shoved his fury aside—there would be time in the future to discover Draco’s plot, but only if he hurried. If the brat actually followed through with the Dark Lord’s plan, Merlin help them. The Order would perish without its head.

Severus kept a tally of his ‘allies’ as he climbed staircase after staircase. Dolohov, Rowle, the Lestrange brothers … this would get messy fast unless he could somehow deflect the plan before Draco finished it, or someone else finished Draco.

A shudder worked its way down Severus’ spine. He had little hope of preventing either outcome, not with the Death Eaters watching his every move. He could only pray that Potter showed more intelligence than his usual idiocy suggested and pulled off another miracle.

He had little hope of that, too. Even Potter’s infamous luck had to run out sometime.

The screams and booms faded to a muted thrum as Severus reached the final staircase before the balcony. A reddish-silver barrier shimmered before him, Selwyn and Gibbon holding it steady with a bored air while Bellatrix observed the happenings from the landing.

“About time you made it, Snape,” Gibbon said. “We ain’t got much time. Order’ll be here any minute.”

“Indeed.” Severus stepped through the barrier, his thoughts whirling and his heart beating against his ribs. “I assume Malfoy has yet to accomplish his task?”

“Aye,” said Selwyn. “Acting a fool, he is. Best you go and knock some sense into him.”

Bellatrix let out a mad cackle. “Itty bitty baby Malfoy is a fraidy-cat. Don’t worry now, dearie. Auntie Bella will play with you later, make you feel all better.”

Severus suppressed a shudder and scowled at the insane woman. Merlin, how he detested the bitch. Even Potter didn’t compare, but he buried that fact deep under his Occlumency shields. All would be in vain if the Dark Lord ever discovered his true leanings.

With a deep, bracing breath, he shoved all emotion under a cold facade and swept up the last few stairs, fingers wrapped around a spare quill in his pocket. Relieved he hadn’t misplaced it in his hurried ascent, he glided into the shadowed edge of the landing, his wand out and cloak billowing behind him.

At the top of the tower, Albus stood beside the far parapet, disarmed and greenish thanks to the sickly light of the Dark Mark hovering above. Greyback and the Carrows flanked a shaking Malfoy as he faced the Headmaster, the moonlight glinting off his eyes and suspicious silvery trails on his cheeks.
“Draco, you are not a murderer,” Albus pleaded in a low voice.

Draco fired back, “What would you know?” His voice broke somewhere in the middle. “You don’t know what he, what he’ll—”

A threatening bark from Greyback cut across Draco’s pathetic plea. “Shut it, idiot! We’ve already wasted enough time listening to your moaning. Get on with it!”

Amicus Carrow gave Draco a rough push with the end of his wand. “Do it, or I’ll do it for you. Then we’ll see how terrible your fate is, hmm?”

Draco closed his eyes and shivered, but aimed at Albus’ heart. “Av—Avada—”

From under Albus’ robes, a wand twitched into the old man’s hand, glowing green with spell light that froze Severus’ heart to his ribs. No. Severus couldn’t allow Albus to taint his soul like that. Not like his own. He had to act now, before Albus was forced to ruin them both.

Severus leapt forward and shot a curse from the dark, one Albus was well aware had only one antidote—the potion he had given Albus to carry earlier in the year just in case Severus had to ‘kill’ him for show. Albus gave a soft moan and thumped to the floor, unconscious and, if the Death Eaters took the chance of checking his vitals, apparently dead.

A barely audible gasp and slight shimmer from the fallen Headmaster’s side warned Severus of Potter’s presence. He suppressed a wince and hoped the idiot boy would obey his surreptitious signal to stay put. There was no answer, thankfully.

Greyback came out of his shock with a growl. “You bleeding idiot! The Malfoy brat was supposed to do him in!”

Severus put his practised sneer in place. “You know as well as I that you have to mean the Unforgivable curses, wolf. Malfoy’s pathetic attempt at the Avada wouldn’t have so much as bloodied the fool’s nose. We had orders—if Malfoy could not finish him, we would. He is dead now. What is your issue?”

The werewolf bared his teeth. “I was gonna finish him! Now you’ve gone and ruined it.”

Severus sneered. “Well, it seems as though you will need to find another way to ingratiate yourself upon our lord.” He swung his cloak around him and stalked to the stairs. “Come. They will find him sooner than we shall like, and we will be outnumbered and trapped if we are caught here. We must flee—quickly!”

“Don’t think this is over, Snape,” Greyback growled.

“Indeed? I await your pathetic and no doubt entertaining attempts at vengeance with bated breath.”

Greyback snarled and stormed past the spy, a pair of glaring Carrows following in their wake. Bellatrix grabbed Draco’s arm and whispered something in the boy’s ear that made him go even paler than before.

Severus frowned and grabbed Draco’s arm away from the madwoman. “I shall take him to the Dark Lord, Bellatrix. I completed his plans—it is my right of conquest to punish him how the Dark Lord and I see fit.”

Bellatrix gave another high-pitched laugh and grinned. “Wouldn’t be you for all the kingdoms, Drakie-wakie. Our dear Severus is quite … creative with his punishments.” Her jeering mirth rang all
the way down the stairs as she made her escape.

Draco shuddered and struggled to hold back a sob.

Severus shot a scowl at the woman’s back and watched as they disappeared down the landing. When sufficient time had passed for them to have cleared the immediate area, Severus dragged Draco to the doorway and peered down through the shadows. A quick flick of his wand revealed the Death Eater barrier had been dissolved and there was no sign of the others. The spy breathed a relieved sigh—they were safe, for the moment.

“It’s all right, Malfoy. I won’t hurt you. And you can come out now, Potter.”

Beside him, Draco reeled back as if struck. “Potter!”

“Yeah, been here the whole time.” The messy-haired boy removed his invisibility cloak and gave Severus a grim look. “I didn’t hear you cast, sir. Was that the curse we discussed?”

Severus growled at the implication. “Of course it was, you idiot! Hurry now, he will need the antidote within fifteen minutes if he is to survive past the dawn.”

He marched a thunderstruck Draco to the parapet near Albus’ toppled form and shoved the spare quill in the boy’s hand. “Hide it well. It is a portkey, set to take you to Île Saint-Honorat off the southern coast of France. The activation word is ‘fidelis.’ Wait to activate it until I take you into the cells of Malfoy Manor—I will place you with your parents so they are able to escape with you. Give it a few moments after I leave, so my loyalties are not questioned.”

Malfoy’s jaw dropped. “Bloody hell! You really are a spy?”

“I am trusting you to keep that information secret, Draco. Occlude it well, or I shall use you as a test subject for poisons.”

Malfoy gulped. “Y-yes, sir.”

“Good.” Severus gave him a hard look. “Do not come back to Britain until this war is over, Draco, unless you learn the truth about your traitorous former master and decide to fight on the right side.”

Potter cried, “Oi! Who said anything about letting that slimy git on our side regardless?”

Severus gave him a frosty glare. “I did. Grow up, Potter. Your childish prejudice against Slytherins is quite as dangerous and misguided as Draco’s views of Muggleborns.”

Potter’s cheeks pinked and his eyes widened. “I, I … damn.”

Severus took Potter’s heartsick expression as proof that the boy might one day rise above his father’s prejudice. He could hope, at least.

“I’ve no intention of fighting with Potter anyway,” the Malfoy brat said with a lofty tone. “I have taste, unlike some I could mention.”

Severus dragged Malfoy to the parapet edge and jerked out his wand. “Then you had best stay out of Britain.”

He looked back over his shoulder and motioned to the Headmaster’s fallen form. “The antidote to that curse should still be in his breast pocket, Potter. If he is not carrying it, I have another in my office, second drawer from the top under a false bottom, in a red vial. The hidden panel will open
with a password: ‘veritas.’ My office password is ‘asphodel.’ Do try and remember. I’ve no time to write it on your palm.”

Potter scoffed. “I’m not an idiot, sir.”

“Then hurry with the antidote. You have perhaps ten minutes to save the Headmaster’s life, not that I have high hopes with you in guardianship of it.”

With a terse nod, the boy leaned down to Albus and fumbled in the man’s pocket. “Ah. Yes, he has it. Come on, Professor Dumbledore. I have some medicine for you.”

“He can’t hear you, genius,” Malfoy snapped.

Potter glared at him, but continued with his work anyway. Severus jerked his eyes away as soon as he saw the vial against Albus’ paper-white lips.

“Come, Draco, we must go before the others suspect. Hold tightly to my neck.”

“Your neck? Why?”

Severus grabbed Draco around the waist and hugged the boy to his chest. “This is why,” and he leapt from the tower.

Draco let out a strangled gasp, but before the boy could shout, Severus’ spell took effect, and the two marked wizards soared into the sky.

Potter’s shocked cry rang in his ears. “Professor!” His messy head poked over the parapet and, in the light of the Dark Mark, his saucer-wide eyes glowed killing-curse green. “What the hell?”

Severus snarled, “Stop gaping, Potter,” and soared toward the gates. The gobsmacked boy shook himself and disappeared over the edge of the parapet once more.

Once Potter had gone, Draco gasped out, “Holy shite, Severus! Are you trying to scare me to death?”

“I had considered it.”

Draco shuddered and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “You, you wouldn’t have had to try hard. I was already almost there.”

Severus acknowledged his comment with a nod. “Murder is not as easy as you thought, is it?”

“No,” the boy breathed. “I, I couldn’t do it.”

“Be glad. After, it is even worse. There is a reason the Avada is the darkest magic. It tears your soul.” Severus closed his eyes and willed the old pain away, the burn across his chest that cut deeper each time the Dark Lord’s mad quest forced him to take another life. “I would not wish that fate on you.”

Unbidden, the image of Potter’s glowing eyes entered his mind, superimposed with Albus’s lit wand. Killing-curse green. An icy shard of worry niggle its way into his belly. Would Albus have truly killed Draco to spare his own life? He had surely known the boy’s curse would fail—Albus knew more magic than most master spellcrafters could ever hope to imagine. He understood every aspect of the Unforgivables, or Severus would start giving out compliments for free.

So why would Albus, the Lord of Light and defeater of the Dark Lord Grindelwald, have needed to
kill a terrified teenager whom he knew couldn’t hurt him? Perhaps he might have been aiming for Bellatrix or Greyback, but the man had been staring at Draco the entire time. The question left him unsettled, though he hid his disquiet behind his Occlumency shields. It would not do to let Albus see his doubts, not at all. Nor his other colleagues.

A sharp voice brought him out of his musings.

“Oi, Severus! Hurry it up! Order’s here.”

Gibbon. Shame he hadn’t been killed yet, though it appeared at least Selwyn hadn’t made it away from the school unscathed. He allowed himself a small smirk for the Death Eater’s fate.

Then the ground met Severus’ feet, and he shoved his thoughts to the back of his mind. The time to resume his act had come.

“Let us go, then.”

He grabbed Draco’s arm, swung his cloak around him, and bolted into the night.
Harry Potter hated the Dursleys, he really did. He hadn’t been back a week, and already Vernon had blacked his eye and broken his collarbone. As of late, Dudley had been making a bit of an effort to change for the better, but not enough to bring Harry food or an ice pack for his pain. No, he merely didn’t join in with Vernon’s abuse any longer. Harry supposed he should count his blessings as Dudley was reckoned a champion boxer at Smeltings, but he still wished the bugger would grow a spine and put Vernon in his place.

Night had fallen over Privet Drive. Harry lay on his too-small bed, enjoying the peace of the blessedly cool air. It seemed Dementors were good for one thing, as their breeding mist took the punch out of summer. And since the Dursleys would join a wizarding circus before providing Harry with any kind of climate control, anything that mitigated summer heat was good. If only his makeshift air conditioning didn’t require the creation of soul-sucking monsters and his face and chest didn’t throb like a lorry had smacked into him, he might be content.

He had just started to drift off when pecking at his window brought him awake with a jerk. Trying not to make a sound, he rushed to the window and unlocked it with a bit of wandless magic. Thank Merlin the Ministry couldn’t track wandless spells, or Harry wouldn’t survive his summers here. Molly’s weekly food packages were all that kept him from starving to death most of the time.

Harry slid up the sash as silently as he could. Hedwig wriggled in through the bars along with an explosion of water, spraying him the rest of the way awake.

“Gah. When did it start raining?” Harry rubbed the water from his face and cleaned his glasses on his sleep pants. “Guess it’s too wet for you to hunt, huh, girl?”

Hedwig replied by shaking the water from her feathers and spraying Harry again.

“Oi! None of that.”

Vernon gave an almighty snort and a gargle, and Harry went stock still. Merlin help him if the man woke now for no better reason than a wet owl. Especially since the great lump had forbidden Hedwig to be inside in the first place. After a moment, Vernon’s snores picked up rhythm again, and Harry breathed a sigh.

“Too close, that,” he whispered. “Come, girl. I have a clean shirt of Dud’s here that’s big enough to dry you even if you’d brought in half the Atlantic with you.”

Hedwig gave a sort of snickering chatter and flew onto Harry’s lap. She certainly looked miserable, poor old girl. Feathers all bedraggled and sticking up in every direction. Harry went to work on her with a smile. He missed her during the evenings when he had nothing but staring at the walls to occupy his time. Having company, even what little an owl could provide, took the edge off his misery.
Her feathers soon took on a more normal appearance, and Harry’s need for rest reasserted itself. No
doubt Petunia would be banging on his door at the crack of dawn, demanding her breakfast. What
did they do when Harry wasn’t there to wait on them? Perhaps they hired a butler during Hogwarts
terms because they sure couldn’t do a bloody thing for themselves.

Half-asleep already, Harry yawned and rubbed his face. A shock of pain like an ice pick into his
skull brought him awake again with a vengeance.

“Ah, dammit. Forgot my eye.”

Hedwig nuzzled his face and gave an owlish sigh as if to say, “I can’t leave you alone for five
minutes.”

“I know, girl. I know. You all right to finish your feathers now? I’m exhausted and my shoulder’s
killing me.”

She nipped his ear in a friendly fashion and flew under his bed, a safe place to hide in case one of
Harry’s horrid relatives came in. He bid her a quiet good night and climbed into bed. Despite his pain
and the beginnings of a raging headache, Harry dropped off quickly.

When Harry opened his eyes again, he found himself seated on a throne-like armchair on the
musicians’ dais of the Malfoys’ ballroom. His skeletal, corpse-white hands caressed a length of
chestnut, the wand he must use for the time being. Pettigrew’s wand.

The rat was a worthy servant, if he had little else to recommend him.

A knock sounded at his throne room door, and Harry scowled. Who dared disturb his quiet time?

“Enter,” he called in a cold voice.

A feral-sort of man came in dragging an unconscious woman. He had more scars than face and
wild amber eyes.

“Ah, Fenrir. What have you brought me? I hope for your sake you are not disturbing me for some
trivial—”

Fenrir jerked the woman’s head up, revealing her face, and elation spiked through Harry’s chest.

“Ah, so you’ve brought me our dear Missus Vance. How delightful. I see she has already been
interrogated?”

“Aye, m’lord. And what tasty bits of information she had, too. Seems one of our own ain’t as loyal
as he’d like to appear.”

Harry gripped the wand tighter. “Explain.”

“Already did, didn’t I? Snape. He’s been working with the Order for twenty years. This bint had a
lot to say about that, with proper … persuasion.”

Harry glared. “He is supposed to be with the Order. He is my spy there.”
“Then why is he telling them the truth and us lies?”

“Is he now? Hmm. That would indicate a change of loyalty. Of course, you understand I will wish to see the proof myself.”

Greyback’s leering grin set Harry’s nerves on edge. The wolf would not look so pleased unless he was sure of a favorable response.

“Go on, then. Mind’s a bit wonky, what with all the Cruciatus it took to break her, but the interestin’ bits should still be there.”

“For your sake, you had best hope so.” Harry grabbed the witch’s chin in skeletal fingers and forced her eyes open with a spell. “Legilimens.”

Images rushed past, garbled and broken in the mess of what remained of the woman’s mind, but Harry had seen enough. Severus informing them of his plans at every turn and altering the Order’s just enough to spare them defeat. The address of the Order’s safehouse. Potter’s home address, and the knowledge that the wards broke on the thirty-first of July.

Well. Severus had been busy indeed. Harry broke the spell and threw the witch down with disgust.

Greyback was grinning like a fool. “Told ye he was a bleeding liar, didn’t I? You saw it, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Your proof stands. Severus is indeed a traitor.”

Harry’s magic exploded in a rush of fury, and Greyback found himself the unwitting victim of a full-power Cruciatus. When his mind cleared, Harry lifted the curse and flicked up Greyback’s left sleeve. The werewolf lay panting and twitching, unable to resist.

“Let us see what our dear Severus has to say for himself, hmm?”

He pressed a finger to Greyback’s mark and delighted in his screams.

Six days had gone since the fiasco at the tower, and Severus was brewing a light blocking potion at the Dark Lord’s behest and brooding over the week since term had ended.

The Malfoys had safely hidden themselves away, and only Severus himself and Harry-bloody-Potter had any idea as to their whereabouts. As the Potter boy had not sold the Malfoys out despite their mutual hatred, Severus dared hope Draco might pull through his ordeal more or less intact. Better than if he had spilled blood and rent his soul at any rate.

Severus had spared Draco that pain, if he had failed the boy in everything else.

With a sigh, he added a dash of moonstone and watched the simmering red liquid take on an opalescent sheen. So far so good. Still, he had best take care. One misstep, and the cauldron was as likely to explode as to melt.

With the way his luck had run lately, he wondered if he should double up on his shield spells. A flick of his wand and a hasty potion calming charm later, he felt a bit safer.
The Dark Lord had demanded this potion three days before after gathering what little stores Severus had as a gift to potential vampiric allies. Severus had agreed graciously and under no small threat of bodily harm, then, on his way home for dinner and to start the potion, he sent a Patronus to Shacklebolt as soon as he could without being observed. The head auror had been quite pleased to learn of the upcoming meeting and sent a reply that he would be there with his best. The hope of a few less liabilities to fear had cheered Severus all the way to Spinner’s End.

At least until he walked into the kitchen and any traces of appetite vanished. Gods, he hated this house. All the banishing spells in the world could not remove the bloodstains from its walls. He had ordered in and choked down a few bites in the backyard, hiding under enough spells to conceal a drunken giant.

Severus scowled and ignored the way his potion reminded him of all the blood. It would only result in a thorough round of *Cruciatus* should he ruin his potion and be forced to start again. With a sigh, he stirred and watched as the liquid in his cauldron changed to dark violet.

Thank Merlin, at least one thing had gone right this week.

The raid on the meeting had ended in utter catastrophe. A young auror had panicked at the sight of a vampire on the Goyle property and his subsequent screech had alerted every dark wizard, creature, and ward for miles. Between the vampires, Death Eaters, and traps, the light had lost three aurors and, worse, Emmeline Vance had vanished without a trace. No one knew if she was dead or injured or had taken leave of her senses somewhere. Severus had to hope the Death Eaters didn’t have her, for more than just her own sake. She had too many secrets.

Just as Severus went to add the nightshade, a fierce burning sensation raced up his left arm. Only years of practice enabled him to keep hold of his stirring rod rather than dropping it.

Ice churned in Severus’ gut even as his mark seared his arm raw. That the Dark Lord would choose to interrupt the brewing process of a notoriously dangerous and finicky potion did not bode well for the light. Severus could only think of one possibility: Emmeline had indeed been captured. He hadn’t heard of her since the raid, but if the Dark Lord had tortured the truth out of her, Severus would be the last to know.

He shuddered. Best to take precautions in case he had to make a quick escape.

Severus put a stasis charm on his potion and held his breath, hoping the unstable mixture would not explode. The potion settled, and he rushed from his personal lab into his Hogwarts quarters. He jerked open his nightstand drawer and rummaged through his belongings until his fingers met with cool metal, a plain silver band. With a shaky sigh, he jammed the ring onto his finger and disillusioned it with a tap of his wand. If Severus found himself summoned into a trap, the ring portkey would take him straight to the infirmary … assuming he still had use of his hands and time to activate it.

Drawing a steadying breath, Severus gathered his strength and raised his Occlumency shields. As he bolted through pouring rain to the apparition point, he prayed to Merlin, Circe, and any deity that would listen.

‘*Please, keep my secrets safe. Protect me, so I can protect them, even if just for one more night.*’

He wrapped his courage around him like a cloak, wiped his expression, and apparated—

‘*Shite.*’
—Straight into a circle of waiting Death Eaters. They stood in a circle around him, leering and gripping their wands, and Severus suppressed a flinch. This looked bad, but he could not risk going for his portkey, not yet. He had a duty to the Order, and he could not fail them. They needed what information Severus could bring back. He would not let them down because of a little fear.

‘Merlin, watch over me now.’

Severus gathered his wits and hoped his silver tongue would keep him from the fire one more night, if only for Potter’s sake.

“Welcome, Severus,” came the high, cold voice of the Dark Lord.

Swallowing his terror and revulsion, Severus bowed and kissed the monster’s robes. “You called, my lord?”

“I did indeed. I am glad you have come so quickly.”

The sinister smile that snaked across Voldemort’s lips froze Severus’ blood. A sick, cold terror raced through his veins. This meeting would not end well for him.

No help for it. Severus had to keep up the act for the Order’s sake. He clenched his fists to hide his trembling hands and threw all of his emotions into strengthening his shields.

The Dark Lord stood and peered down the length of his wand—Pettigrew’s wand, rather. “I have heard some … distressing news, Severus. Distressing in the extreme.” He paced around Severus, watching the spy’s every move. “I have been informed that you were seen conversing with Malfoy after the others fled the Astronomy tower.”

The werewolf gave Severus a predatory leer. “Thought you was slick, eh? Forget the full moon was around the corner, did you? Heard you talking with them. Malfoy, and another brat. Sounded a lot like Potter, he did. Come to think of it, I smelled the brat, too.”

Severus’ stomach dropped into his feet. Merlin. He had forgotten about the heightened senses of werewolves before the moon. How much had Greyback heard?

He forced his voice steady and faced Greyback with a sneer. “Of course I spoke with Malfoy. I told him what would be expected of him in no uncertain terms, bound him, and flew him to the gates so I could bring him here. As for Potter, I have no idea of what you speak. No one was present after you left save Malfoy, myself, and Dumbledore’s corpse.”

“Liar! I heard ‘im! And smelled ‘im, too!”

“You heard what you wanted to hear, Greyback. And as for the scent, Dumbledore is often seen with his precious Golden boy, so it likely has permeated his nauseating wardrobe.” Severus shot him a cold glare. “So angry that I killed him first, aren’t you? I stole your glory, and now you want to see me brought down. A fool’s dream, wolf. Even if you should kill me, you shall never achieve my power.”

Sharp, crooked teeth flashed yellow in the torchlight and a feral growl resounded through the chamber. “He ain’t dead, you idiot. Checked on your work, I did. Imagine my surprise to see the old codger up and about as if nothin’ had happened to him.”

Severus forced an expression of shock onto his face. “He survived? But I, that curse ….” He shook his head and recovered his stance. “I am unsure how the old fool survived, but regardless, I attacked, and you did nothing. You are only angry that I achieved what you could not!”
Greyback moved as if to attack, but the Dark Lord stepped in front of him without the slightest show of fear.

“Enough. You shall have your turn, wolf. Until then, sit and keep your teeth to yourself.”

Greyback snarled, but returned to his place in the circle. “Yes, lord.”

The Dark Lord turned to Severus, wand drawn, and eyed him across the length of dark wood. “Such skill at defending yourself, Severus. Tell me, how long have you been practicing?”

The red eyes flashed with an eerie light, and the Dark Lord pointed his wand at Severus’ chest. Severus tensed and pressed his limbs in tight to still his shaking.

‘Shite! He knows. Merlin, keep me safe until I can escape!’

“M-my lord?”

As he had hoped, Severus’ shaky words brought the blood-red gaze to his face and away from his hands. With the Dark Lord’s attention diverted, Severus inched one hand closer to the other using movements so slow and measured, they would not register to the naked eye.

The Dark Lord’s voice was cold and low. “The accusation about Malfoy and Potter was not the only thing Greyback brought me. Oh no. Just a few moments ago, he brought me one of your false colleagues, Severus. One of the loathsome thorns in my side I asked you to spy on. Only, when I examined them, I found that my spy was not merely a double, but a triple agent.”

The wand sparked, and Severus flinched.

The Dark Lord’s eyes glowed blood red. “You have been a traitor for twenty years! Let us see how you talk your way out of that, hmm?”

Severus could not hide the hitch in his breathing. “I, I do not understand, my lord. I am only loyal to one master.” He moved his hands faster. Perhaps, if he timed it right, he could make a sudden reach appear like a protective motion.

‘Just a bit more ....’

The Dark Lord cried, “Crucio!”

The spell whipped toward him so fast, Severus had no time to grab his ring. His bones lit ablaze and every nerve ending in his body exploded with sheer agony. Bolts of electricity riveted him over and over, and he dropped to his knees, writhing and trembling under the Dark Lord’s brutal, raw power. Tears coursed down his face and screams ached to tear from his throat, but he refused to release his cries. He would not give the bastard the satisfaction of hearing him cry out. Not if he had strength left to resist.

As the spell ended, the absence of pain left Severus shaking and sweating. He dared not rise lest Voldemort curse him again, and any movement of his hands would be instantly noticed with post-Cruciatus tremors racking his body. He could not escape yet.

‘Merlin help me endure.’

Cold fingers gripped Severus’ chin and forced his face up to meet glaring red eyes.

“Oh, Severus. My dear Severus. We could have accomplished such great things together. You had
so much of my trust.”

A sharp crack sounded against Severus’ ear, and pain shot through him, down to his very soul. Despite his earlier resolve, a cry tore from his lips. When he was able to open his eyes, Severus found himself staring at the broken halves of his wand, lying snapped at his feet.

“No,” he whispered.

His wand, the mark of his wizardry his long-dead mother had given him for his twelfth birthday—gone. He was half a man without it. Tears welled in his eyes, but he blinked them back. Weeping would blind him, and that was suicide while at the Dark Lord’s mercy.

A cold, rough hand threw him back by his face and sent him sprawling. “Goyle, Rowle! Bring the informant.”

Two masked Death Eaters broke from the circle and returned dragging what appeared to be a woman’s corpse. Her head hung lifelessly under a carpet of matted graying hair and her clothing hung in bloody tatters. Goyle tossed her into the circle with a jeering laugh and Rowle yanked her head up by the hair. Severus’ heart plummeted at the sight of her face.

Merlin, no. Emmeline! Gods help them, they had murde—

Emmeline’s eyes fixated on some point above Severus’ head, and he swallowed a gasp. No, she was not dead, nothing so merciful. They had destroyed her mind.

Thank Merlin the Order hadn’t told her too much, but even that was enough to devastate them. Grimmauld place was compromised. Potter’s home, too, though no Death Eater could touch it until the blood wards failed. Had Vance known they would drop the day of Potter’s birthday? Gods he hoped not, but for their own safety, the Order would have to assume she did. They would have to make many assumptions, given Severus survived long enough to warn them.

The Dark Lord grabbed Vance’s arm and dragged her to a sitting position. She slumped over like a broken doll.

“This pathetic excuse for a witch gave me many secrets, Severus. Among them was the identity of the Order of the Phoenix’s spy.”

He kicked the witch into Severus, where she gave a whimper and lay still. Severus gathered the broken woman into his arms and stared at the Dark Lord, eyes wide and fearful without his wand. He could protect neither of them, but he could perhaps get them away, if only he could reach his ring without raising suspicion. If he could only hide his escape with a hug—

“Avada Kedavra!”

Severus flinched back from a bright green flash, heart pounding in his throat, but the Dark Lord had aimed for Vance, not himself. He tried to hold her tighter and at least get her body back to the Order, but it was not to be. The Dark Lord tore Emmeline from Severus’ arms and threw her aside.

A mantra of ‘too little too late’ ran like poison through Severus’ veins. Another one he couldn’t save. Merlin, did this nightmare ever end?

The Dark Lord’s voice jolted Severus out of his shock and grief. “Oh, you did not truly imagine I would let you off so easily, did you, Severus?” The scaly face twisted into a cruel smile. “No, no. If I could glean so much from a lowly guard, just imagine how much I could pry from your fertile mind. I will enjoy watching you break.”
Thirty wands raised and pointed at him, and terror keened through Severus like the cry of Emmeline’s lost soul. He stepped back from the Dark Lord, but everywhere he could turn he stared down the end of a wand. It was hopeless.

‘Please, no.’

He considered one more last-ditch escape attempt, but he was unarmed, surrounded, and outnumbered thirty to one. He would be dead before he reached his ring, and if he failed, he would reveal his secret and lose his one prayer for escape. His only hope was to endure whatever they had planned until he could reach covertly for the ring and spirit himself away.

Merlin, how much would he suffer before then? He could not school his terror from his face, but it hardly mattered, not with his secrets blasted open and his role revealed.

The Dark Lord’s cold voice cut through Severus like a sword. “I believe a little party is in order. Bellatrix! Perhaps you would like the first round?”

“My lord is too kind,” she responded with a gleeful cackle.

Severus blanched. Sweet Circe, not Bellatrix. The woman was a pure sadist, and had no conscience or filters whatsoever. She would destroy him utterly. He swallowed bile and crawled back a step, the only sign of his all-encompassing horror he allowed.

She approached with a wild glint in her eye, and he steeled himself for pain.

‘Gods help me endure.’

Bellatrix laughed like a maniac as she drew her wand and threw Severus against a wall, forcing his arms over his head and into chains—too far apart to allow his hands to touch.

‘No! Oh, Merlin, no!’

Until the Death Eaters released his hands, Severus was trapped. But, Gods help him, they would not likely unshackle him until his mind shattered. He had no hope.

Through a flood of tears he could not stop and a wash of mind-numbing fear, Severus prayed for the first time in twenty-five years. He had to reach Potter somehow before his death, and if divine intervention could cross the gap, so be it. Pride had no place here.

“Please, Merlin, I can’t die without delivering my last message to Potter. _Merlin, Circe, whomever is listening_—” The fiery, melting pain of Bellatrix’s knife down his chest ripped his attention away for an instant, but Severus forced his mind back onto his prayers with steel-tempered resolution.

“Help me, please. I must reach him, through whatever means possible.” Another cut tore down his temple, and his spirit screamed with his soul-shattering desperation.

“Potter! Merlin help me, hear me, please. Harry, you must hear me! Please, trust me.”

The knife continued down his face in a slow, methodical fashion, and Severus’ vision dimmed to black.

Fighting unconsciousness, he called, “Please, Harry. Let me in. Please. I beg you.”

Cruel fingernails clawed at his cut cheek, and Severus knew no more.
Harry woke with a headache the size of Russia, but he had no time to spare for his own pain. Any moment, Snape would be discovered as a traitor, and Emmeline—Harry didn’t know if they could save her, but someone would need to be notified either way.

How long had he been unconscious since the vision ended? Merlin, he hoped it wasn’t too late for Snape, too.

He rolled out of bed and rushed to the window. The rain poured down heavier than ever, and wind bowed trees half over. Lightning streaked the sky and thunder cracked like the breaking of the earth. Hedwig couldn’t survive in that mess.

Harry shook himself and dashed away. She would never have reached the Order in time regardless.

Shaking, Harry sat on the bed and struggled to think of other means to reach Snape in time. A phone? No, they didn’t work at Hogwarts. A floo? Oh! Harry bolted to his feet. Yes, a floo would work, but where could he find one? Wait, Missus Figg had one, didn’t she?

He had made it halfway to the door before a low, desperate voice echoed in his mind.

“Harry, you must hear me!”

Harry froze, ice water pouring down his spine. “S-Snape? How?”

“Please, trust me.”

Harry drew in a shaky gasp. Never in all his life had he heard Professor Snape sound so desperate, so broken, so terribly afraid. It was that which made him reach out and answer his cruel professor, despite having no idea how the man could communicate with him while they were hundreds of miles apart.

“Professor Snape? I’m here. I hear you.”

There was no reply other than a sense of coldness and pain. Shite. It must have been Harry’s imagination. He scowled and stalked toward the door again. He had no time to waste on wishful thinking—Snape’s life hung in the balance.

“Please, Harry. Let me in.”

“What the hell?”

“Please. I beg you.”

Let him in? In what? His mind, maybe? Perhaps Snape had mastered some kind of long distance mind magic. It wouldn’t surprise Harry, and it was worth a shot. He frowned and let down his Occlumentic barriers, what little he had learned anyway, and tried to reach out to his Professor with Legitimency.

“Professor, can you hear me?”

Nothing happened, and Harry could have kicked himself. Of course nothing would happen. Legitimency only worked when the users were close enough for eye contact, or at least to hear each other speak. Certainly not across the country, and not with a user barely capable of blocking untrained students, much less telepathy.
With renewed determination, Harry again started towards the door, but before he’d taken two steps, a wave of dizziness enveloped him and spun the world out of sight. He dropped where he stood, his consciousness dimming.

‘Shite! Not now!’

Harry tried to break free, but the grey, fuzzy aura he knew only too well took hold, and he winced. He had only seconds before the vision struck, and no way to reach Snape.

Well, no way that he knew of, but ….

“Let me in, I beg you.”

Harry struggled to stay awake. If he hadn’t imagined that voice, then Professor Snape had reached him somehow. How? They couldn’t use mind magic over such distance, and Harry knew of no other way to speak telepathically.

Shite. He still had no idea, but he had to try something. Snape would die if Harry didn’t contact him in time, and for all he knew, Voldemort might already have the man. Harry had no other option but to reach out to his professor with mind and magic and pray it connected.

Well, he wasn’t a Gryffindor for nothing. Heart stuttering and vision fading, Harry closed his eyes, opened every barrier and channel he could think of, and hoped his voice could reach across the gap.

“Professor! Can you hear me?”

Nothing happened, but Harry refused to give up.

“Professor, please, you’ve got to run. Voldemort’s going to kill you.”

Still nothing. He was failing.

“Damn it, Snape! This is a really bad time to Occlude.”

Harry’s vision faded to grey, and with a desperate burst of energy, he screamed with all the mental power he had.

“Professor Snape! Severus! Let me in, for Merlin’s sake!”

Oblivion took Harry and washed away any further hope of reply. It was too late.

Harry knew he had fallen prey to another vision, but this one felt different. For one thing, he was aware of his own consciousness as well as his unwitting host’s. For another, his head didn’t hurt though everything else did. In such condition, he couldn’t be channeling Voldemort. What had happened?

Before he could consider further, a blow knocked his head around while people jeered and laughed. Bellatrix’s insane cackle pierced the din and Harry shuddered. Death Eaters, and they were torturing his host, whoever it was. Harry tensed in preparation for another blow, but it seemed his— their—torturer was more interested in mocking them at the moment.

He took the time to get his bearings and find out who he had accidentally channeled. All around
him, Death Eaters stood and laughed. Some were covered in blood, particularly the mad bitch, and Harry suspected it was his host’s. Gods, the poor man.

Another blow to his jaw sent his head flying back, and when the stars cleared from his sight, Harry’s eyes traced the lines of slender, elegant hands with stained fingertips. Not corpse-white, not skeletal, not Voldemort’s hands.

Harry gulped, or his mental form did, rather. His host was just struggling to breathe.

Even bleeding, trembling, and shackled, Harry knew those hands. He had watched them point out his every failure and flaw for the past six years.

Snape. Somehow he had fallen into Snape’s mind, and shite! The Death Eaters already had him.

Harry shuddered mentally and took stock of his—Snape’s—injuries. His left side was sticky and cold. His right eye had all but swollen shut. Broken ribs, judging by how badly it hurt to breathe. And the side of Snape’s face felt as if someone had torn it off. With the quality of people surrounding them, that was a distinct possibility.

As the snake-faced bastard ordered Gibbon off and sent in Goyle, Harry’s host dropped his head in exhaustion and despair. Blood dripped down the front of his torn-up robes and smeared the entire left side of his body. No wonder he felt sticky—Snape’s face was bleeding all over the place.

Merlin! The bastard deserved a swift kick in the trousers for how he had treated Harry all those years, but this, no. Never this.

A thought alien to Harry’s mind crossed his hearing, and he froze.

‘Potter must, I must survive. Must fight. Potter. Must get to Potter.’

Harry sniffed, indignant and more than a little hurt. Even dying, Snape thought only of revenge. Couldn’t the man put his grudges aside for a moment?

Wait. No, something was off. Harry could feel his host’s emotions, and the feelings flooding him had nothing to do with vengeance.

Gods, the power of them, the desperation, it hurt more than Goyle’s whip. Snape wasn’t angry, he was absolutely terrified. He didn’t want to die, but under that, he felt he had a duty he could not fail, no matter the cost to himself.

Harry didn’t understand. What duty? The Order could find a new spy, and Harry sensed that Severus knew this. Why was he so determined to fight, if not to continue spying?

Another of Snape’s thoughts merged with his own.

‘Potter, I, I must help … the boy. He cannot … do this alone.’

Harry gasped. Snape was holding on for him? It was for Harry’s sake that he fought death so hard?

Tears flooded his vision, and he was no longer sure if they sprung from Snape’s suffering or his own. Harry’s chest ached, not from physical pain.

Gods, he had misjudged the man.

In their valley of shared anguish, Harry saw Snape for what he truly was: a hero in the guise of a villain, one who had to act evil or risk discovery, and one who acted entirely alone. Snape had no
one to support him, save perhaps for Dumbledore, and Harry knew all too well how spotty the Headmaster was when it came to others’ welfare. The greater good always trumped individual pain.

How could Snape face it? Every single day, the man trudged on alone, knowing one wrong move could end him, could leave him in suffering like this. What kind of bravery did it take to stare your own death in the face for twenty years?

Snape’s mind-voice was broken and pleading. ‘I don’t want to die alone. I am always alone.’

In that moment, Harry forgot all their hatred and wished he could help the man, touch him, if only to hold his hand.

“Professor,” he murmured. “I’m so sorry.”

“Potter.” With a shattered sob, Snape rallied and resumed his tireless fight against death. “I, I wish you were truly with me. I wish I could tell you …”


“…But it’s no use. You’re only in my mind, and I’ll die a failure. Alone.”

“Oh, Snape, no. I’m here. I won’t leave you.”

Harry tried to reassure him, but Snape either could not hear him or didn’t believe his own ears. Meanwhile, the torture went on. Goyle gave his position to Crabbe, then to Pettigrew, and Harry thought he would die with Snape before the night was through.

“Well, I can give you one of your wishes, Snape. I’ll be dying with you soon. So you’re not alone.”

“No,” Snape moaned. “No, Harry. Can’t, can’t die. Not … final battle.”

“Professor? What about the final battle?”

But Dolohov approached before Snape could answer, and judging by the increase of the spy’s despair, death wouldn’t wait long. For either of them.

“I’m here, Professor. I’m with you.”

Harry would stay with Snape through the end of their suffering. Besides having no choice in the matter, he could offer the dying man no better comfort than to stay by his side. Harry hoped it helped, at least a little.

Agony seared every bone in Severus’ body and his blood painted the floor crimson. His skin hung open in places, the long flap along the side of his face a harrowing mark of how close to death the man had come before Bellatrix was ordered away. Men without faces could not talk, after all, and the Dark Lord wanted Severus’ secrets.

Yet, even after hours of torture, Severus held firm against the Dark Lord’s mental attack. Perhaps Potter’s spirit, voice, whatever was talking to him lent him the boy’s innate protection against the monster. That he had endured so long relieved Severus however it came about, but soon it wouldn’t matter. He had simply lost too much blood. Exsanguination loomed ever closer on the horizon, and
with every passing moment, his consciousness flickered. He would perish before long.

Potter’s voice comforted him from time to time, reaching out to him, soothing him and telling him he wasn’t alone. The irony would have made him laugh if the action wouldn’t have risked unhinging his jaw. Potter would never show him kindness. The boy still hated him, after all, even if Severus’ hatred had paled upon hearing the boy’s task in the final battle.

Merlin, he would die long before that day ever came. He didn’t want to die. Not alone, and not like this.

Potter’s voice muttered, broken and bitter, “I can grant one of your wishes. I’ll be dying right along with you soon. So you won’t die alone.”

‘No,’ Snape moaned in his mind. ‘No, Harry. I can’t let you—you can’t die. It’s not time yet. Not until the final battle.’

Yes, Potter had to live now so he could die later. How fucking perfect.

“Professor? What about th—”

The Dark Lord cut across Potter, “Peter, that is enough. Let another play.”

With a skittering sort of titter, Pettigrew handed Severus off to Dolohov, and the spy’s remaining blood congealed into a freezing mass in his belly. He had hoped the brutal man would be on a mission—the others used purely physical torture to break their victims; Bellatrix even got off on it, but Dolohov demeaned his victims as well. Male or female, it made no difference. The man got his kicks from power, and to him, rape was the ultimate form of dominion.

Severus had never yet cowered, but as the huge man approached, a sickening leer on his face, the spy could not hide his trembling. Merlin, would he truly have to suffer this too?

Again, Harry’s voice filtered through his mind. “I’m here, Professor. I’m with you.”

Severus shuddered. He must be closer to death than he’d thought if he imagined Potter would stay with him through this.

He gritted his teeth as Dolohov stroked his still-whole cheek, barely restraining the urge to bite the man’s fingers off. It would only make his pain worse later.

“Gods, Professor, he, he’s not going to … is he?”

Severus resisted the urge to laugh bitterly. Even his hallucinations feared Dolohov.

The Death Eater jeered, “Not much to look at, are you, Severus?”

Severus cringed inside. Who would be, covered in blood and spit and Merlin knew what else? And even at his best, Severus knew the truth of himself. He had never been beautiful, not that Dolohov cared about such things. The more he could humiliate his victims, the more it excited the twisted little shite.

“You’re not ugly, Professor. Not to me. He’s a liar.”

Severus ignored the hallucination and focused on his breathing. He would need all his strength to endure now.

“I’m scared, Snape. I’m, I’ve never—I’m a, a ....”
Even in his terror, Severus could hear Potter’s embarrassment. “A virgin?”

Fuck. He was talking to his hallucinations now. He had fallen far indeed.

Potter gasped. “You can hear me! And … yeah. I am. I’ve barely even kissed someone before. Does it hurt terribly?”

Did rape hurt? Severus laughed bitterly. “Like hell, Harry.”

“Oh gods, sir. I’m so sorry.”

So was Severus. Dolohov began cutting at Severus’ robe, and the spy whimpered in spite of his resolution to keep silent. Merlin help him, Severus was afraid, too.

Potter’s voice broke as he whispered, “I’ll be with you, Snape. I’m here. Reach out for me if you need to. I, I’ll need you.”

Severus blinked tears down his face as Dolohov ripped off his robes and revealed his scrawny body to the Death Eaters. They laughed and jeered, and Severus lifted his knees as best as he could with them flayed raw by Goyle’s whip. Dolohov tore off his pants, too, and Severus couldn’t help a quiet cry of despair.

“Gods, you’re ugly, Snape,” said Dolohov with a laugh.

Potter’s voice murmured into his mind, “He’s blind. I, I didn’t want to see you like this, Professor, but I can’t close my eyes, and, gods, you’re gorgeous. And I’m sorry. Merlin, I’m so sorry, sir.”

Potter was probably trying to help him, but the knowledge that the boy had seen him, even in a hallucination, made Severus shrink into himself with a bitter cry. Gods help him, he didn’t want this. He could endure the physical pain, but the humiliation … that was not to be borne.

Wait … humiliation? Severus whipped up his head. Dear Merlin, there might just be a way out of this mess after all.

His eyes flicked to the blood-spattered stones under their feet, a look Dolohov no doubt interpreted as submission, but the spy had other ideas. If he could enrage Dolohov enough to throw him on the floor, he might have a chance of escaping with his honor intact, if not his body. Dolohov would have to unlock his chains to throw him, and if Severus could arrange his fall just right, he might just be able to reach his ring without rousing suspicion.

It was a terrible risk, and, if it failed, Dolohov would tear him to pieces, but it hardly mattered as Severus would not live long either way.

Again glowing green eyes flashed through his mind, and Severus’ resolve strengthened. He had a duty to protect Potter and secrets the boy needed to win the war. Severus had to survive, no matter the cost, or all was lost. At least, he had to try.

“Yes, Professor! Fight! I’m with you. I swear, you’re not alone.”

Hallucination or not, Potter’s words gave him courage. It helped to know someone was supporting him, if only in his mind.

Through a red haze of agony, he registered the jeers of the surrounding Death Eaters and Dolohov’s stream of insults, and a spark smoldered in his chest. He would not go down without a fight.
Though Severus’ saliva mostly consisted of blood, he managed to gather enough of it to spit straight in Dolohov’s face.

“Get on with it, cretin,” Severus rasped. “I’ve better things to do with what little time is left to me than listen to you yammer on.”

“Hah! You’re braver than I am, Professor, but damn, am I ever proud of you for it.”

Severus wished he might hear those words from an actual person, just once before he died. Perhaps if Dolohov took the bait, he might still live to have the chance.

“I’ll tell you someday, Professor. Please survive, so I can.”

Severus hoped he could.

“Well?” He rolled his eyes at the stunned, spit-drenched idiot before him. “Are you waiting for an invitation, Dolohov? Or are you simply having … performance anxiety?”

Harry’s snicker joined those of several of the Death Eaters.

Dolohov jerked a hand across his face and barked, “Be quiet!”

At the bastard’s murderous expression, Severus’ fear eased. It was working. Even as a fist crashed into his face and pain exploded behind his eyes, the spy’s relief remained.

“You always were a weakling,” said Severus through coughs.

“You filthy little half-breed,” Dolohov roared. “I’ll tear you apart!”

Severus smirked, but dropped the expression at the sharp tearing across his cheek and ear. Still, even without the use of his face, he could make his meaning clear. He let his eyes flick to the Death Eater’s groin and back to his scowling face.

“You’ll have to put some effort into it, I fear, if you expect me to feel anything. Perhaps a bit more force should make up for, well, a certain … lack.”

“Bloody hell, Snape! You’re brave as a fucking dragon, you are!”

Dolohov’s nostrils flared, and his eyes flashed. “Oh, you’ll feel it, all right. In fact, I—”

Severus tuned out the rest of the man’s crude threats and forced himself not to tense when the chains above his head unlocked. His arms dropped to his side with a rush of staggering anguish, and for a moment, he worried he would not be able to manipulate his incoming fall so he could reach his ring. Then rough hands dug grooves into his shoulders and dragged him from the wall, a hard boot connected with the small of his back, and his body pitched forward with another fiery shockwave of agony. Severus had but to throw his hands forward as if to catch himself, and his deception fell into place.

“Yes! Merlin, get out of there!”

The stones crashed into his knees and palms, and Severus swore he heard something snap inside at the same time fire shot through his thigh, yet before Dolohov could so much as touch him, he spun the ring on his finger, whispered the activation word into his hands, and vanished into the night.
Harry opened his eyes in the Hogwarts Infirmary with a horrified Madam Pomfrey standing over him. Still stuck in Snape’s mind, apparently.

“Severus! Good heavens! What happ—”

Pain surged through his entire body, focusing on his left arm, and Harry—Snape—cut her off with a sharp cry. The pain grew and grew until Harry was on fire, and he could barely breathe for the agony.

Dumbledore appeared at the foot of the bed—how did he always know what was going on?—just as Snape’s piercing screams began to ring off the walls.

“Albus, help him,” Pomfrey cried. “It’s his mark. We have to remove it!”

Dumbledore took Severus’ hand and prodded around with his magic, but Harry felt no appreciable change. Was he even trying?

“Alas, I am afraid I cannot help him.”

“Move then, and I will try!”

Pomfrey shoved Dumbledore out of the way, and Harry noted a flash of fury in the old man’s eyes before it faded to his usual genial twinkle. How the hell was he twinkling when Snape was screaming and dying right in front of him? Harry could feel the poison spreading from the mark, freezing and sick and wrong, and Dumbledore just looked as if it was a regular tea party.

Pomfrey’s magic poked around, too, but she pulled back gasping. “Oh gods. It’s tied to his magic. If I—"

Harry didn’t care. It was either cut Snape’s mark off or let him die, and after the ordeal they had endured together, Harry could not let him perish. Terror jangling his nerves to high alert, Harry built his magic under Snape’s skin, praying his help would work even through his agony, and tried to stop the flow of death into Snape’s broken body.

The poison kept flowing, and Harry gasped in pain. He had found the mark’s source, he was sure of it. So what was he doing wrong?

Maybe “the power he knew not” would work. Dumbledore thought it was love and that it was proof against Voldemort, though Harry had his doubts. Still it was worth a try. If he wanted to heal someone, to protect them, it made sense that loving magic would work best.

With a deep breath, Harry focused all the love he could manage into his magic. All his warm feelings for Hermione and Ron. Sirius and Remus. Tonks. The Weasleys. And after living through a night of hell with him, even love for Severus Snape.

The poison stopped and slowly began to withdraw.

With a shudder, the mark came to life and warred against Harry’s gentle magic, its darkness rearing up in fury, spitting like a cobra—then, as Harry kept pouring love into it, hissing like a dying snake. He was pushing back Voldemort, forcing his influence from Snape’s body.

Yet, Snape was weakening, and Harry feared without encouragement, he might give up.
“Snape, hold on. I’m here. I’m fighting him off for you.”

“Potter,” Snape sobbed in his mind.

“Shh. Hold on. It’ll be okay.”

“I’m s-sorry. For everything.”

Those broken words filled Harry’s chest with a powerful shard of emotion, gave him the power to fully forgive Severus, and his magic burst forth under the tortured man’s skin. A white light surrounded Snape’s arm, and the man cried out in anguish and fear.

“It’s okay, Professor. You’ll be okay now, I promise.”

“S-so sorry, Harry.”

“Shh. Hold on, sir. It’s all going to be okay.”

Harry poured everything he had into fighting Voldemort’s power and thrilled as the last bit of darkness surrendered to his light. Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed, Pomfrey gasped, and Snape’s body arched in the throes of pain, but the poison had gone. Harry had won. The mark remained, but Harry’s magic had rendered it inert.

Snape would live. At least he had a chance, anyway.

Harry panted, “Professor, it’s okay now,” but there was no time for Snape to answer before Harry’s world went black.

Harry awoke this time in a sweaty, screaming mess on his floor.

“Shut up, boy! Do you want the neighbors to know what a nasty freak you are?”

Vernon. Harry hadn’t time to cut his shriek off before a meaty fist pounded into the side of his skull and his vision dimmed again. Damn. Right out of a vision just to be knocked out by his uncle. He wouldn’t be able to contact Hogwarts and ask if Snape had made it. With the last of his strength, he prayed Snape would survive somehow, then let the darkness overtake his agony once more. Perhaps he’d be able to talk to Snape again in his mind. He wasn’t sure when talking with Snape had become a tolerable option, but it sounded good compared to dying in agony or enduring one of his uncle’s beatings.

His mind remained silent, however, and within the depths of his dreams, Harry prayed that Snape was just sleeping it off and not dead. After everything they had endured together, to lose Snape before he’d even had the chance to make amends or keep his promise to the man would be more than Harry could stand.

The next week passed in a daze of pain and fever dreams. After his terrible vision, Vernon had
locked Harry in his bedroom with nothing but a stale hunk of bread for food, a bucket of water from the hose for drink, and another bucket to use as a loo. The first two days, Harry could barely crawl to the loo bucket and didn’t bother with the bread. He had to plunge his face into the bucket to drink, and even that did nothing to ease his aching throat, raw from screaming.

When he could move more than a few feet, he scribbled a quick note asking Dumbledore if Snape had survived. He sent it with Hedwig as soon as he could and awaited a reply with bated breath. After digging a healing potion from the space under his loose floorboard, Harry felt better by the time it arrived.

Dear Harry,

How terrible that you had to experience Severus’ torture. Yes, he survived, and is healing in the infirmary as we speak. He has a long road ahead of him, but I am sure he will soon return to his lovable, irascible self.

I do apologise about your uncle’s ill treatment. Unfortunately, there is little we can do until the blood wards necessitate it. You are safer there....

Harry tossed the letter with a scoff, not bothering to read further. “Oh yes, perfectly safe. Unless Uncle Vernon kills me, that is. Not that I expected better from Dumbledore. His little weapon must be made strong, after all.”

Hedwig gave him a sorrowful look and nuzzled his hair.

He hoped Snape was doing okay. Dumbledore couldn’t be trusted, not fully, but he hadn’t known who else to ask. Pomfrey wouldn’t have told him anything about a patient, but at least he knew that if anyone could pull Snape through it, she would. The woman could heal anything.

Harry sighed and leaned back in his chair, wondering how long his uncle would hold him prisoner this time before the smells forced him to relent.

Three weeks after his attack, Severus jerked awake from yet another heinous nightmare, the taste of blood still fresh in his mouth. If he closed his eyes, he still saw Bellatrix hanging over him, her knife having cut through the skin all down one side of his head, her fingers gouging under the flap as if to peel his face off. Had the Dark Lord not insisted she learn to share her ‘toys,’ she very well might have done. He drew a shaky hand across his face, his palm coming back wet with sweat and tears.

The man rose to a seated position on his living room couch and laid his head in his hands. Merlin, what a horrible dream. He stood and caught his reflection in the glare of a picture frame, and a shudder passed through him. Not a dream—a memory. The gruesome scar along the edge of his cheek from hairline to chin revealed it for the harrowing truth it was. He hastily dragged his hair down over the sides of his face, covering the worst of his scars from the public eye, if his nightmares would not let Severus forget for a moment.

Cold descended on Severus’ insides, and he moved to the fire to banish the chill from his bones. A
frown crossed his features at the sight of an envelope with familiar loopy writing lying askew on the hearth. With a scowl, the man summoned the letter—his once-shattered femur had yet to fully heal.

Severus,

*Please come to my office at five to discuss Harry’s coming of age and upcoming change in accommodations.*

*Albus*

*P.S. I find I often crave pumpkin pasties this time of year.*

Severus grumbled and tossed the letter in the flames. A quick glance at the clock revealed he had but fifteen minutes to make it to the Headmaster’s office, and the man rushed to compose himself.

Severus limped through the castle to the gargoyle, spat the password at the stone beast, and tightened his Occlumency barriers on the way up the stairs.

After the obligatory offering of tea and sherbet lemons, which Severus refused as usual, the Headmaster met Severus’ eyes and twiddled his beard.

“How are you, my boy?”

Severus fixed him with a glare. “Not dead. While we’re at it, the weather is quite foul, my colleagues are still insufferable dolts and I still do not care for their day-to-day lives, and I would wager England has no chance at all at the Quidditch World Cup. Now, do you think we could possibly dispense with the trivialities and discuss the matter at hand?”

“Hmm, as you wish. Then, how well can you walk?”

Severus crossed his arms over his chest. “I arrived here with no further injury, did I not?”

“And can you fight?”

That gave the younger man pause. “I am … uncertain. My leg is not yet healed. It might collapse in a pitched battle.”

“Your other injuries are healed, however?”

Severus narrowed his eyes. “Indeed they are, but what is this about? Surely you do not intend to send me back into the Dark Lord’s camp? They would owl you what remains of my corpse in a matchbox.”

Albus gave a solemn nod. “You escaped them before, but no, that is not my plan. Your health was only something I had to take into consideration.” He leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands. “I would like you to transport Harry to the new Hogsmeade safehouse on the thirtieth of July. There will be others there, but I want Harry with you.”

Severus glared harder. “And just how, pray tell, am I to accomplish this? I am hated by both sides, Albus. The light oriented wizards hate me for the mark I bear and my shameful past, and the dark hates me for betraying them to the light. No matter who finds me, my life will be at risk, even if I were able to get to Diagon Alley and purchase a new wand. And when you put the Boy-Who-
“Bloody-Well-Won’t-Die beside me, both sides will come at me even harder. The light will think I’ve Imperiused him, and the dark will see their two most hated targets, practically gift wrapped with a bow on top. This is suicide, Albus!”

“No one can find you within Harry’s blood wards, Severus.”

“Oh, of course. So we shall be perfectly safe, right until the instant we stick our heads outside of their protection. Should I bring along a couple of silver platters, Headmaster?”

Albus gave a wry chuckle. “No, no. That shan’t be necessary, Severus. I believe it is not so dire as you think. Recall that, as far as the Death Eaters are aware, you apparated out of a warded manor while seriously injured and surrounded by no less than thirty Death Eaters. What’s more, you then survived Tom’s rather ill-timed attempt to kill you through your mark. Thank the gods Poppy was able to neutralize your mark without destroying your magic.”

Severus glared. Albus was hiding something, but the man had made a career of keeping secrets. Severus would not pull the truth from him until Albus decided it was convenient for him to know, if the old meddler ever did.

“Yes, yes,” Severus said with an irritated huff. “The students will be quite disappointed that their evil git of a potions master managed not to be killed yet again. And your point is …?”

Albus popped another lemon drop. Severus wondered what kind of potion the man laced them with. Sanguine Solution, perhaps.

“You have demonstrated remarkable power, my boy,” Albus said with a smile. “They will think twice before challenging you again.”

Severus choked on his tea. “T-think twice? The Death Eaters would think twice?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

Shock thrummed through Severus’ veins, but he kept it schooled from his expression. Was Albus truly suggesting the Death Eaters would simply ignore him? The old man knew better. The scars on Severus’ face alone proved they had no qualms trying to murder him at the first opportunity.

Something was off about Albus’ behaviour lately. First the almost-murder of the Malfoy boy, then this.

“Albus, please. I, this is a terrible idea.”

Severus wrapped his arms around himself, letting his fear show and hoping his obvious reluctance would change the man’s mind. Albus simply smiled and popped another lemon drop.

Lovely.

So Albus didn’t care if Severus was terrified or not, so long as he got his way. A shard of ice lodged in the younger man’s chest and pierced his heart.

In retrospect, Severus shouldn’t have been surprised. After all, when had Severus’ real, bone-deep terror ever changed the man’s mind in the past?

Albus toyed with his beard and twinkled, as nonchalant as always. “We shall take Harry from Privet Drive two days prior to his birthday. Tom will not expect the transfer to occur until July thirty-first, so in this and in your power over them, we have the adva——”
Severus leapt from his chair so fast, his bad leg wobbled under him. “Has what little remains of your sanity finally joined your fashion sense and died a swift death? You are not seriously suggesting the Death Eaters will let an injured traitor go, are you? Because I may well have to revise my opinion of your intellect should you suggest it a second time.”

Albus gave a wry chuckle. “You are the only person I know who can give a compliment and an insult in the same sentence. But back to the matter at hand, no, I am not suggesting they would ignore you, simply that they would hesitate to challenge someone of such apparent power.”

“Apparent power? Did you forget that Dolohov had me half-naked on my hands and knees and would have buggered me through had I not possessed a hidden portkey? What about that suggests power to you?”

Albus flinched. “Oh, Severus. Forgive me for putting you in so much danger.”

The man looked genuinely sorry, so Severus let his wrath calm somewhat and slumped back into his chair. “I chose my path, Albus. The fault is none but my own.” He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, the posture he would use if he was truly feeling defeated rather than sounding out the Headmaster. “This idea of yours is pure folly, Albus. The Death Eaters will not hesitate to attack should they find me. On the contrary, I fear they will target me yet harder for my betrayal and escape. Not to mention, I have no wand.”

“I will take you to Diagon Alley myself to replace your wand. No Death Eater would dare attack you in my sight, nor would the Light.”

Severus snorted. “I am grateful, but it does not change the fact that they will attack me the moment I am removed from your presence. My worries still stand, Albus.”

Albus sighed and leaned back, steepling his hands at his chest. “Severus, I fear you are a bit blinded as to the natures of your former associates. You insist on seeing them as monsters—”

Severus snarled and slammed his fist on the desk. “Then it’s a mercy that one of us can still see without those bloody rose-tinted spectacles! What part of nearly being buggered against my will or having my face half ripped off did you not understand?”

Albus lifted a quelling hand. “I never said they aren’t ruthless, Severus. However, they are still human, and still prey to human fears. I believe the fact that you were able to escape right under Tom’s—well, not quite his nose—will have affected them, dear boy, more than you are willing to admit. We can use that to our advantage.”

Severus’ stomach churned as he considered the possibility. Perhaps his hatred of them had coloured his judgement, though a voice in the back of his mind insisted this plan was likely to end in another catastrophe.

Yet, a part of him—a large part—wanted to be wrong. The alternative terrified him deep in the cinders of his broken soul. If Albus was losing his mind, or, Merlin forbid, was working actively against the light, they could not hope to survive. And Severus was caught between sides with no sanctuary but Hogwarts. Without Albus’ protection, he would be the first to die.

How bloody inconvenient.

He had better tell Potter the full truth sooner rather than later. Since Albus wanted Potter warned at the final battle and no sooner, that meant Severus would have to go against a direct order. He would need to step up the boy’s Occlumency training or Potter would give the game away the first time he
saw the Headmaster.

Joy of joys.

Still, the alternative wasn’t to be borne. If they had enemies on all sides, Potter had to be prepared. Now. The war couldn’t wait.

For the moment, however, Severus had little choice but to go through with whatever half-baked plan the Headmaster had concocted. He could not yet afford to tip his hand yet, not until he was sure what had gone wrong with the Headmaster. Once he had Potter alone somewhere even Albus could not sniff them out, then he would tell the boy everything he knew.

If they survived that long.

“Severus?”

The quiet call brought the younger man back to the present. He swallowed hard and gave Albus a curt nod.

“As you wish, Albus. I will bring Potter to Hogsmeade. How shall this be accomplished, though? I cannot walk any distance, and the Ministry is watching all the travel networks. You know the Dark Lord has spies in the Ministry, so what is to be done?”

Albus’ eyes twinkled behind his spectacles. “Ah, my dear boy, that is where the fun truly begins.”
July twenty-ninth was Harry Potter’s last night on 4 Privet Drive. No more going days without food, no more being a freak for existing, no more beatings. At the stroke of midnight, thanks to an early emancipation order Kingsley forced through, Harry’s beloved wand would shed the trace, and he would—finally—have access to his magic whenever he had need of it. He might have rejoiced if he didn’t know the Death Eaters and Voldemort would be waiting for him the second he poked his head out of the door. At least his relatives had taken the Order’s advice and relocated earlier that afternoon. His friends and allies would be spared any awkward goodbyes, and he would escape their pity.

Thank Merlin for small mercies.

He read over Ron and Hermione’s latest letter again—received earlier in the week—and sipped a Coke nicked from the Dursleys before they had moved and left him with nothing to sustain himself.

—We’ll be there early, evening of the 29th. That way we’ll be breaking the wards instead of waiting, and we’ll be able to get you out before You-Know-Who suspects.

—Call him Voldemort, Ron. It’s just a name, for Merlin’s sake.

—Nothing doing, ‘Mione. Not tempting fate until we’ve got Harry safe and sound, see? Anyway, the big day’s coming, eh? I hope you hex those Muggles good—

—Ron! Don’t listen to him, Harry. Even if they do deserve it.

—Leave off, Hermione! Cripes. Let a man finish his letter in peace. Oh, she’s sulking now. I’ll be hearing about this one later, yeah? For weeks, I’ll wager.

Anyway, as I was saying, when you’re done hexing the Muggles, look out for your integration illness. It’s something what happens to all wizards when we come of age. Remember when Hermione was sick right at the beginning of school last year? She’d gotten her inheritance then. It’s worse as your power level increases, so, knowing you, you’ll be down for a week.

That’d be funny, actually. There’s this legend, see, about this really powerful wizard prophesied since Merlin’s time. He’s supposed to have a seven day long integration illness and then prophesy at the end of it, foretelling the end of a great war or something. It’s just a fairy story, but you might as well expect to turn into Trelawney soon because everything barmy, weird, or impossible happens to you, mate. Cheers.

—Ronald Weasley! Harry has enough to worry about without you filling his head with nonsense. Go do your summer homework already. The dust bunnies are eating it.

Harry laughed, thrilled beyond measure at the prospect of seeing them again tonight. Gods, he loved them. Silly as they were. Hedwig perched on the back of the sofa and peered over Harry’s shoulder at his letter, as if she were trying to determine what was so funny.

He rubbed her head. “It’s nothing. Just Hermione threatening Ron with dust bunnies.”
Apropos of nothing, he wondered if there were actual dust bunnies in the Wizarding world. With fur and teeth. He’d have to check his Care of Magical Creatures book some time.

A rap at the door made him leap three feet in the air and spill his Coke down his front. With a grumble, he sopped the excess liquid up with a napkin and trudged to the hallway, his heart thundering in his chest.

“This is it girl,” he muttered to Hedwig. “We’re never coming here again. Think you’ll miss this place?”

The owl gave a hoot that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

“Thought not. Be right back.” Harry dropped his napkin in the bin and took a deep breath before opening the door.

At least ten people stood all around the stoop, most wearing smiles either grim with worry or bright with joy at seeing Harry once more. Harry gaped at the sight of them all—Ron, Hermione, the Weasley twins and their father, Bill and his fiancée, and several Order members all huddled around a beaming Hagrid. Before Harry had time to react, a cloud of bushy brown hair blinded him and no less than six pairs of arms hugged his middle, squeezing the breath from his lungs.

“Oof,” he gasped. “Let a man breathe, will you?”

Hermione pulled back, laughing softly, and wiped her eyes. “Oh, Harry! I’ve missed you so much.”

“So’ve I, ‘Mione, but—”

A powerful hand thumped his shoulder and all but winded Harry. “Oi, mate,” said Ron. “How’re you doing? The Muggles didn’t starve you again, did they? At least you look better than last time we picked you up.”

Several of the adults sucked in a sharp breath, and Harry winced.

“Good one there, mate,” Harry said. “Might’ve gone without the entire Order knowing that, thanks.”

Ron’s ears turned crimson. “Oh, er, sorry.” He cleared his throat. “But, well, look at you, Harry! You’re finally taller than Ginny now.”

Hermione smacked Ron across his head. “Idiot,” she said, though her tone was fond.

Ron gave a sheepish smile and stepped back so the others could greet Harry and squeeze inside the Dursley’s parlor. Hagrid had almost to bend double, but once they were all gathered in, Harry shut the door and gave his allies a bemused look.

“Right, everyone. I’m glad to see you of course, but I wasn’t expecting so many of you. Mind telling me exactly why we need … twelve people to escort me out of Little Whinging?”

“Thirteen, Mister Potter,” came a low voice from behind him.

Harry gasped as Severus Snape limped past, his coal-colored eyes sweeping the house, lingering on the many pictures of Dudley and the door to the cupboard under the stairs.

Harry’s chest warmed and he swallowed an unexpected lump in his throat. “Professor Snape? I didn’t think you’d be here. I, Merlin, I’m glad you’re safe.”

Snape turned away from his perusal of the mantle’s assortment of pictures and gave Harry a
calculating look. “You are glad of my safety? Odd. Of what do you speak, Potter?”

Harry frowned. “Don’t you know already?”

The temperature of Snape’s glare dropped fifty degrees. “Would I be asking if I did? Use that thing between your ears, boy!”

Harry clenched his fists. “Never call me ‘boy.’”

“I will call you whate—”

Arthur stepped in front of Snape. “That’s enough. Harry, Severus, you will have to work together tonight, so keeping the peace between you is no longer optional.” He gave them both his best “I-will-ground-you-forever” glare until they nodded. “Good. Now, Harry, be kinder to Severus tonight. He is more, ah, sensitive than usual due to his injuries—”

Severus cut across him with a barked, “Weasley!”

Arthur ignored him. “Greyback captured Emmeline Vance and dragged the truth about Severus from her. You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters tortured them both brutally. Emmeline is dead—You-Know-Who killed her right in front of Severus—and Severus barely escaped with his life. His position as a spy has been compromised, obviously.”

Harry gaped. “Did Dumbledore tell you anything about my letter?” He clenched his fists and swore. “No, of course not. Why would he give information freely when he can use it for the greater good?”

He snarled the last bit from between clenched teeth.

Ron gave him a worried look. “Harry? You okay, mate?”

Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Fine. It doesn’t matter anyway. Are you all right, Professor?”

Snape sneered. “Would you be all right if the Dark Lord had come after you?”

Harry toyed with his arm, where Pettigrew had cut into him in the graveyard. “He does every year.”

Snape snarled. “You impertinent little brat! You have no idea what I went through, what I am still ….” He turned away and gripped the mantle, knuckles white and shoulders heaving.

Harry raised conciliatory hands and stepped into the professor’s line of sight. “Professor, forgive me. I didn’t mean it like that. I know it’s not like what you endured, and obviously you’re not okay. I’m not either. No one would be. All I wanted to know was, with your injuries, will you be well enough to fight if we must?”

Snape turned, his eyes narrowed. “It is only my leg, Potter. I have fought for my life in far worse condition. Your own hide is in far greater danger.”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. “Is it? Professor, you’re a traitor to him. He’ll be furious you escaped his twisted version of justice and want to kill you twice as much as before. Sir, I think you’re in as much danger as I am, if not more.”

To his surprise, Harry’s honest statement appeared to frighten Snape. He wrapped his arms around his chest and shrank in on himself.

“So I thought as well,” he whispered. “But, but Albus ….”
“Professor?”

An icy chill crept into Harry’s bones. He knew firsthand the extent of Snape’s bravery. Nothing ordinary could shake the spy—the man had bollocks of steel. He had even spoken of his own brutal torture with cold disdain, and Harry would never forget how he had, while broken and bleeding, baited his would-be rapist to create an opportunity to escape.

What could possibly terrify such a man?

Moody gave Snape a sharp look with both his magical and normal eye. “What’s got your knickers in a twist?”

Snape paced, his arms still wrapped around himself and his face stormy, then whirled about and hissed through clenched teeth. “I warned Albus, I told him this was folly, but he insisted.” He leaned on the banister for a moment, then straightened and sighed. “Never mind it. I will manage. We have more important things to discuss.” The man took a vial from his robes and held it beneath the light, giving Harry a piercing look. “You recognise this, surely? I am sure you have had ample … opportunity to acquaint yourself with its properties by now.”

Harry peered at the vial. “Polyjuice, sir? Who will you be impersonating?”

Snape shook his head. “This is for Granger. You might have surmised that yourself, considering she is the only one here besides yourself living with Muggle relatives.” He passed the vial to the girl with a glare. “I will not be under disguise. The Headmaster seems to believe the fact that I escaped Malfoy Manor under torture and through apparition wards will be enough to warn the Death Eaters away.” He said the last in such a sardonic tone, Harry knew Snape thought Dumbledore’s suggestion just as barmy as he did himself.

“He thinks … what? That your power is going to scare them off?” Harry scoffed. “Because they all respect each other’s power so well.”

“As I said myself, but Albus’ strateg—”

Moody gave Snape a sharp look. “Enough. Dumbledore is an excellent strategist. Yes, it sounds a bit wonky, but my guess is that he’s led the Death Eaters off our trail. Harry is too important to risk—”

“Oh yes,” Harry shot across him. “Must keep your dear little weapon in good working order, right?”

Harry was expecting a scathing remark from Snape for that, but the man only gave him a shrewd look, like he wanted to figure Harry out.

“Boys, please,” said Arthur with a sigh. “I’m sure Albus knows what he’s doing.”

Harry turned to him, fingernails cutting his palms and gaze sharp. “You mean like when he hid the prophecy from me so I led Sirius straight to his death? Like he knew then?”

Twelve pairs of eyes looked away. Snape eyes met Harry’s dead on, and if the younger man hadn’t known better, he might have thought he saw curiosity in their dark depths.

Hermione shuffled her feet, but spoke up in a clear voice. “Harry, Sirius’ death wasn’t your fault. How many times must we tell you?”

“Tell me all you want; it doesn’t change the facts.” She opened her mouth to protest, but Harry cut her off with a wave of his hand. “It doesn’t matter. This isn’t important now.” He turned to Snape and frowned. “Professor, if I know anything about you at all—”
“You don’t,” Snape said with a huff, but Harry continued over him.

“—Then I know you will have prepared for this despite Dumbledore’s oh-so-brilliant and obviously infallible plans. Do you have a way to protect yourself?”

Snape glared but, after a moment, gave him a curt nod.

“And if we should we be ambushed, they won’t home in on you like a niffler on gold?”

“So I hope.”

“Good. Then this discussion is moot for the moment.” Harry turned back to Hermione “Moving on, what do you need polyjuice for, ‘Mione?”

Hermione shook her head. “Not just me, Harry.”

Ron, the twins, Fleur, and Tonks all pulled out vials of their own and grinned.

“Erm ….” Harry looked between the vials, bemused. “What on earth are you planning?”

“Already planned, mate,” said George, coming up behind Harry’s right.

“Script’s finished,” Fred added from his left.

“And we’ve just the ticket—”

“For the final act!” Twin pricks of pain pierced both sides of Harry’s skull, and he clapped his hands over the injured spots.

“Oi! What’s that for then?”

The twins held several unruly black hairs up and grinned.

“The last ingredient, mate,” said Ron with a wink and plucked a hair from George’s tuft and dropped it in his potion. It sizzled and turned a vibrant kelly green. “Hmm. Looks better than essence of Crabbe at any rate.”

Snape shot him a sharp look. “And you would know that how?”

“No reason,” Ron mumbled.

Before Snape could start on a tirade, Hermione stepped between him and Ron. “I’ll just take one of these then.” She picked a hair from Fred and let it fall into her potion.

Harry’s stomach dropped into his feet. “Oh, no. No-no-no-no. You are not impersonating me! It’s too dangerous!”

“No reason,” Ron mumbled.

Before Snape could start on a tirade, Hermione stepped between him and Ron. “I’ll just take one of these then.” She picked a hair from Fred and let it fall into her potion.

Harry’s stomach dropped into his feet. “Oh, no. No-no-no-no. You are not impersonating me! It’s too dangerous!”

“No! No!” Harry reached for the hairs in Fred’s hand, but Tonks batted him away and took one for herself.
“I am not letting you do this! I don’t want, if any of you die because of me—”

Snape cut him off with a dark glare. “All except for yours truly, of course. No doubt you would celebrate my demise with a party to be remembered in legends.”

“Sod off, Snape,” Harry shot back. “I don’t want you to die! You don’t deserve that.”

Snape’s eyes widened a little, then narrowed into a glare. “I thank you for your sincere concern, I’m sure. Somewhere.”

Harry scoffed at the sarcasm, but held back further retorts in favor of shouting down his companions’ idiotic plan.

“Come off it, you lot. This won’t work. You all have different wands than me, for one thing. Voldemort knows my wand and so do his minions. They’ll notice the difference.”

“Taken care of,” said Fred with a wink. He pulled out what looked like a Muggle eraser and scrubbed it on the polyjuiced Harrys’ wand tips, then tossed it to the real Harry. “Catch!”

Harry’s seeker instincts kicked in before he could think better of it and his fingers closed over the small bit of pink. As soon as it touched his palm, a blast of orange sparks erupted from the others’ wands, and, when the smoke cleared, they had all shifted to look like Harry’s.

“Keep that in your pocket, mate,” said George. “Need it to change them back later.”

Harry held out the rubber. “You’ll change them now. It’s too dangerous.”

Remus gave him a gentle smile. “Harry, if we believed the Death Eaters were already lying in wait, do you honestly think we would have suggested this plan? Severus has already fed Voldemort information that we will be leaving tomorrow, not today.”

“And he’s going to trust the information of a known spy, is he?”

Remus’ smile faltered. “Well, no reason to doubt it when we have fed other informants the same information.”

Harry shook his head. “Bollocks. You know as well as I do that Voldemort’s a fool if he doesn’t at least have a guard set on this place. And what will they think when said guard sees one Harry with glasses and six without, eh?”

“We’ll be out of dodge before said guard can report anything.” Hermione gave Harry a sly smile and started walking away, then whipped around before he could blink.

“Gemino sextus!”

She tapped Harry’s glasses with her wand, and six identical pairs of spectacles appeared before her, floating in a line. A flabbergasted Harry watched as she tapped each pair in turn, altering the lenses somehow so they wouldn’t blind their wearers.

“We’ve even got your clothes taken care of,” said Remus with a smile, and passed out several pairs of worn-looking jumpers, smalls, jeans, socks, and trainers, all in Harry’s size.

Harry stammered, “But … but—”

“Sorry, Harry,” said Tonks. “You’re right that there’s a high potential for ambush, but either way we go we’ll run into the same problem. We have to get you out of here somehow, and the Ministry is
keeping tabs on the floo and apparition networks. Too many spies in the Ministry these days to risk it. One wrong move, and we’re not only caught and trapped, but we’ve given away our safehouse location, too. We don’t have a backup, Harry. The one in Hogsmeade is it. So, we thought this was the best option for getting you there safely, since our remaining option is by broom.”

“Ahem,” Kingsley said with a smirk.

“Or thestral,” Tonks added. “Or Sirius’ old motorbike, which Hagrid and Ron will be in.”

Harry ignored the sharp pang of grief at Sirius’ name. “There’s no way you can ride a thestral or a broom clear to Scotland. That would take weeks.”

Tonks shook her head, sending her myriad fuchsia braids into disarray. “We’re riding to Mum’s house and apparating to Hogsmeade from there. The wards prevent the Ministry tagging us if we apparate from the property, but we have to get you there first. As it’s only fifteen miles from here, we can make it on brooms in one night. Won’t be a pleasant ride, but it’ll be safer than trying to apparate from here when the Death Eaters got the address from—” Her voice faltered. “From Emmeline. They’re no doubt watching this place like sphinxes.”

Harry hugged his chest. “And you think it’s brilliant to just waltz out of here when, as you said, they’re watching for it?”

“That’s what disillusionment charms are for, Harrykins,” said one of the twins.

Harry rubbed his forehead with a defeated groan. None of them were listening save for Snape, and that fact alone was giving him a bit of a headache.

“Harry,” Hermione said with a sad smile, “It’ll be okay. Really.”

He sighed. “Somehow I doubt it. And Tonks, you’re taking polyjuice? Does Professor Snape know?”

She looked at the man and blinked. “Obviously, since he made it.”

“No, does he know?” Harry flicked his gaze to her belly.

Her ears turned as pink as her hair. “Oh. Oh. Yeah, he knows. It’s okay. It won’t hurt the baby.”

Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I can’t decide whether to be disappointed or relieved. Because I don’t want you risking your life, not because I want you to hurt the baby. You understand.”

Tonks gave him a sad smile. “Yeah. But we don’t want you to die either, kiddo.”

“No, I suppose not. Well, since everyone but me and Professor Snape is set on this disaster of a plan, who is taking me?”

“Ironically, I am,” Snape said with a smirk. “We will be on a thestral, since your broom is too recognizable and the Dark Lord will expect you to be on it.”

Harry groaned. “Who came up with that brilliant idea? Though I suppose it is rather convenient. Voldemort wants us both dead and he won’t even need to lift a finger—we’ll have killed each other before we’re clear of Surrey. Two birds with one stone, packaged nice and neat for him. See? Convenient, like I said.”
“Harry,” said an exasperated Hermione.

Snape’s lip twitched. “Do try to control your murderous urges, Potter. I would prefer to return to my newfound life of leisure—” He spat the word like it tasted foul. “—with all my limbs intact.”

Harry snorted bitterly. “I have no choice in this, do I?”

“None at all,” quipped Tonks.

“So it’s nothing new.” Harry slumped against the banister and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Well, let’s get this over with.” He dropped the twins’ wand rubber in his pocket and hoped they would all end the night in one piece.

Fred raised his vial. “Cheers!”

Six vials went up, and six people bent double with the pain of Polyjuice transformation. Harry watched in dismay as his friends’ features shifted to match his own.

Fred and George grinned at each other.

“Wow, we’re identical,” said Fred.

“Now Mum won’t be able to tell us apart,” George agreed.

“Like that’s anything new.” Ron banished his vial and grinned. “Well, you don’t taste so bad, mate. Like tea. Guess it’s all that time you spend in the trees chasing snitches instead of witches.”

Harry retorted, “Take you all night to think of that then? Naff off.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Ron moved as if to yank off his trousers right then and there, but Harry was faster. Before Ron had moved his now baggy jeans an inch, the young man found a wand pointed between his eyes.

“Don’t even think about it,” Harry snarled.

Ron held his hands up and gulped. “Blimey. It was just a joke.”

“It’s not funny.” Harry lowered his wand, but his cold glare didn’t budge an inch. “I will castrate you if you try it.”

“Merlin,” Ron covered his privates with his hands. “All right, all right. I’m sorry, okay?”

“Good.” Harry glared at all of them in turn, hoping the warning sunk in.

Hermione stepped up and spoke in Harry’s voice. “Everyone split up and change, and do be careful not to look. Don’t take advantage of him like this arse tried to.” She shoved Ron towards the parlour. “Have some class, Ron. Honestly. Harry would have been in his rights to carry out his threat. It would be equivalent to sexual abuse. Don’t do that to him.”

Ron paled. “Bloody hell. I’m sorry, mate. I’ll go change where they can’t see. And I’ll do my best not to see … anything.”

“We will too, little brother,” said George, serious for once in his life. The other doubles murmured agreement.

Harry gave him a shaky nod. “Thanks.”
Ron turned and shut himself in the parlor. The other doubles divvied up the remaining rooms and went to change.

Harry groaned and buried his face in his hands. He hoped they would keep their word, or they would all see him, every mole and imperfection on his body. And gods, his scars! Thankfully they were all on his back, but if any of his doubles dared look at their behinds ... A choked sort of sob worked its way through his throat, and Harry covered his mouth with a shaking hand.

“I d-don’t want them looking at me. I don’t want to be seen like this.”

Merlin, he felt violated. And what a strange way for it to happen, too. Only in Harry’s mad life would someone escape rape—albeit via a vision—only to have his body put on display like a house elf at auction. The odd desire to cry overwhelmed Harry, and another aborted sob came out as a squeaky kind of laugh, tinged with despair.

A strong hand fell upon his shoulder. “You have endured worse, Potter. And I believe your threat to Mister Weasley will make the others think twice about breaking their word.”

It took Harry a moment to register that Snape had just attempted to comfort him, in his own way. Merlin, what a strange night.

“T-thanks. I’ll be all right.”

Snape gave him a short nod and went upstairs, presumably to escape the chaos. Harry tracked him around the corner landing, barely registering that the man had moved toward Harry’s former room. Gods, this was a horrible idea. He was shaking and sick with the entire situation, yet like every hell forced upon him, he could not escape it.

Remus shrunk the young man’s trunk and let Hedwig out of her cage.

“Fly to Hogsmeade, little one,” the werewolf said, holding a window ajar for her. “We’ll be right behind you.”

The owl nipped his finger gently, nuzzled Harry’s hair, and flew into the night. Harry felt a twinge of fear watching her go.

“Be safe, Hedwig.”

“She’ll be fine.” Remus peered out the window, then closed it. “No sign of trouble yet.”

Moody grunted. “Were you expecting a map? ‘Death Eaters here!’ They’re evil, not dim. They won’t give a sign unti—”

Snape’s voice cut across him. “Potter! Get up here. The actual Potter, before any of you imbeciles get ideas.”

As Harry climbed the stairs, George poked his head out of Dudley’s room. At least, Harry thought it was George.

“Aw, Professor, have a heart. You’re ruining our fun.”

Fred poked his head from the loo right after. “Right you are, Gred! What’s the point of being identical—”

“—if we can’t milk it for all it’s worth?”
Snape did not dignify this with a reply. Harry winced as he arrived on the landing and realised the man stood before Harry’s bedroom door, scowling at the locks like he might a ruined potion.

“Potter. Explain this.”

Harry lowered his eyes. “Welcome to my bedroom, sir.”

Your bedroom.” Snape pushed the door open and frowned at its contents. “This is no bedroom—this is a prison!”

“You saw it during Occlumency, didn’t you?”

He pursed his lips. “I assumed they used it as a punishment.”

Harry gave a bitter snort. “My entire life with them was one big punishment.”

Snape huffed. “Perhaps if you were not insolent—”

“Insolent? They punished me for existing, Professor. For no greater crime than having magic. For Merlin’s sake, I lived in a bloody cupboard until I was eleven.” Harry gave him a defiant glare. “You cannot pretend I deserved that.”

Snape stared at the array of locks and the catflap on the door, his expression blank, but his eyes revealing his consternation.

After so long Harry had decided the spy had no intention of replying, Snape whispered, “No. I cannot.”

Harry watched him a moment, searching his face for any sign of mockery, but saw none. He nodded and headed back downstairs.
Severus stared at Potter’s ‘bedroom’ long after the young man had gone. Bedroom, paugh. What he saw could barely be qualified as such. A tiny bed, old and thin and hardly big enough for a child, let alone a grown man. A rickety wardrobe with one broken leg. A desk so small, he wondered how Potter fit even the shortest of his school assignments on its surface.

The thought triggered a niggling worry in the back of his mind. The room was bare, its walls not only empty, but bearing no sign of ever having held a poster or photo or anything besides paint and dust. Surely a teenager would have laid some sort of claim to his own space, however inadequate. And … what was that?

A tiny brown splatter behind the desk sent Severus’ heart into his throat. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder and, seeing no one, flicked his wand at the spots. They glowed red and faded back to brown.

Blood. And not just blood, but castoff. Someone had been hit here, and hard enough to send blood spatter flying. Probably from a busted lip or bloodied nose, but who had hit whom? Given that Potter lived in this room—as a prisoner judging by the thick iron bars blocking the window—it was likely Potter’s blood. But why would someone have hit him so hard in his own home?

A sickening sort of empathy squirmed in Severus’ gut. Potter had been abused here. Was it the fat cousin he’d seen pictures of all over the walls? Was it a sort of sibling rivalry, or something more sinister?

The cold in Severus’ chest doubled. This did not look like simple sibling rivalry.

For all Severus had seen of him, Potter had no presence in his own home. Where was the evidence of Potter’s existence? There hadn’t been a single photo of him on the walls downstairs, and even in the boy’s sham of a bedroom, Severus could find nothing to show Potter had ever existed. There should be something. A Gryffindor pennant, a forgotten photo of his friends, a left-behind candy wrapper. But Severus could find nothing. No sign Potter had ever lived here.

He bit down a curse at the thought that perhaps Potter’s relatives had wanted it that way.

Severus closed the door and knelt beside the bed. If Potter had missed anything, it would most likely have fallen under the bed or in the crack between his bedspring and mattress. Only there wasn’t a bedspring. A quick sweep under the mattress met only a steel wire mesh. Severus winced as a sharp edge cut his fingertip and healed the wound with a flick of his wand. A drop of blood fell to the floor, and as he wiped it away, the floorboard under his hand moved.

A-ha! A loose floorboard made a perfect hiding place. Severus smirked as he pulled the board up, expecting a stash of wizarding porn or perhaps a stack of steamy letters. Instead he found a handful of toys, all broken and mended badly, and an empty bag of owl treats. Why would Potter need to hide his owl treats?

Severus looked under the bed, and his question shifted—why would Potter need to hide his owl? The space under the bed had nothing but a wrapper from a piece of Muggle bubble gum and a veritable nest of snowy feathers and fluff. Surely the wardrobe would make a better perch? The owl had no reason for nesting there ….

Except Severus had seen this situation before. Spellbooks hidden in a drawer under a stack of tatty y-
fronts. Wand tucked behind a loose brick in the garden wall. Even the cat hiding among nondescript potions ingredients behind the shed because witches historically took them as familiars, never mind that Severus’ mother kept the cat as a mouser and it had no kneazle blood. It was just a Muggle cat, and Severus’ father had terrorized it because of erroneous superstition and the slim possibility that someone might out them as ‘freaks.’ The bastard.

Severus felt as if he had stumbled into his own bedroom from twenty-five years prior. Damn. He couldn’t deny the truth when it stared him in the face.

Potter’s relatives hated all things magical, just as Severus’ own father had. A wizard’s owl would not hide in such an inhospitable place for any other reason. They were sentient, after all, and preferred higher perches and open roofs. Certainly not dust and springs.

“Shite,” the man whispered and rocked back on his heels.

Details began to slide into place. The lack of wizarding paraphernalia. The cupboard. The dozens of pictures on the walls, all devoid of Potter. The shabby state of this room when the rest of the house spoke of upper-middle class affluence. Harry’s defensive nature, rail-thin frame, and even his short stature. Severus was tall despite his own suffering, but then his mother had always managed to feed him well despite their poverty. Clearly, Potter hadn’t a soul here. And hadn’t Weasley mentioned something about Potter’s relatives starving him?

Merlin. If the scenario building in Severus’ mind held water, Potter had been even more abused than Severus had.

Severus muttered to himself as he paced about. “What kind of monster is this Dursley? Gods. I thought Petunia envied Lily’s magic, but all this because of simple jealousy? Fuck. How could she watch a child starve, a baby if Potter’s height is safe to judge by, and do nothing?”

These were the people Dumbledore had given Harry Potter to year after year? Why was nothing done to help him? Albus couldn’t have known about Potter’s abuse, not and have insisted the boy return every summer. Oh, but if he’d known and sent Potter here anyway, that might explain the boy’s hateful attitude towards the old man.

‘Damn!’ Severus had to shove his hands in his pockets to stop himself from putting his fist through the nearest wall.

Either way, why had no one ever checked on Potter’s well-being? Why had no one even thought to ensure the Dursleys were decent guardians? In eleven years, no one saw a thing? Preposterous.

Wait. Didn’t Albus have a magical guardian next door? Right. Old Missus Figg.

Why hadn’t she reported anything? Surely the woman would have noticed such terrible neglect, would have seen bruises and bloody noses. Why didn’t she involve the authorities? She could have taken it up with the Muggle police if she didn’t trust the Ministry, and even that would have been better than just leaving Potter here.

Severus couldn’t understand how kind, but batty Arabella Figg could leave Potter here to suffer. Unless ….

‘Mother of Merlin, the bastard must have confounded her!’

Severus flopped onto Potter’s bed, shaking and sick with the revelation that Albus had most likely been complicit in the boy’s abuse. Not only complicit, but responsible for. After all, Albus had left the boy here after the Potters’ deaths. He must have had some idea how they would treat him, if he
had given them nothing but a note and never bothered to explain in person.

He must have known that, given the choice, the Dursleys would have turned Harry away.

“Shite,” Severus whispered, shaken to his core.

Why would Albus do this? Why hurt Potter so?

A memory of Potter’s voice whispered into Severus’ mind. “Your dear little weapon must be made strong after all.”

Severus shuddered. What didn’t kill the boy, well ….

Cold leached into his bones and spread throughout his gut. Albus had betrayed Potter all for the purposes of making a weapon out of a child. A weapon against the Dark Lord.

Severus laid his head in shaking hands and tugged at his hair. Gods, he should have seen it. Should have at least suspected, but prejudice had blinded him. Merlin, he was a fool.

All these years, he had assumed Potter acted defiantly out of inherited arrogance and a hatred of Slytherins. Armed with new knowledge, Severus realised the boy must have defied him out of a mixture of bravado and self-defence. No wonder slights against Potter’s parents hurt him so when no one but the Potters and Weasleys had ever loved him. Severus would have reacted the same way had someone insulted his mother. In fact, Potter behaved just as Severus had done twenty-five years before, when he had endured Hogwarts without a soul to trust besides Lily.

Harry wasn’t a spoiled celebrity; he was an abuse victim.

And Severus had added to his pain.

Numb and sick to his stomach, Severus swept from Potter’s miserable room and didn’t stop until he’d left the house altogether. The scent of roses and daisies in the backyard offered some solace for his troubled and guilt-laden spirit, and he breathed it deep into his lungs.

Gods, he had treated an abused child like utter shite. He had never made Potter bleed, but damn, he might as well have with the number of times he had cut the boy to ribbons with his tongue.

When had Severus become his father?

Had the backyard not held two thestrals and seven Order members, Severus might have borrowed the nearest rose bush to use as a vomit bin. As it was, he stayed in the shadows and hoped the darkness concealed what he couldn’t keep from his expression. Severus doubted even twenty years practise could hide the pain from his face in that moment.

Merlin, he had much to make up for. Too much. Harry would never forgive him.

Severus turned to the door just as Potter, the real one, walked out with Lupin. Out of habit, he glanced to the moon, just visible through a fairy ring of dementor mist.

‘Crescent phase. Good.’

Had it been anywhere close to full, Severus would have leapt in front of the wolf himself. He owed Potter that much and more. Perhaps he could start with giving the boy his respect. With everything Potter had endured, he had surely earned it.

Severus watched the boy with a sad little smile. Harry, despite his past, looked happy and well. Like
the strong, brave young man everyone said he was.

Severus finally believed them.

‘What doesn’t kill you, indeed.’

Harry stood in the backyard, catching up with Remus and searching for the thestrals. He saw nothing out of the ordinary among Petunia’s prissy rosebushes and Vernon’s overdone lawn, but they had to be somewhere. He sighed and looked to the skies. It didn’t matter. Regardless of how they took to flight, once again his friends would have to lay their lives on the line for him.

He half wished he’d remained friendless as an adolescent so no one else would have to die for his sake. Witnessing Snape’s suffering while he struggled to help Harry had been torture enough.

Beside him, Moody and Arthur were discussing Emmeline Vance in low voices, and Harry listened out of one ear, half-ignoring his conversation with Remus. Harry had only met her a few times, but he had liked her, and the others held her in great respect. Her death left a sickening decay in his gut, cold slime creeping through his veins. She was yet one more sacrifice for a scrawny teenage boy with little more than raw magic and a talent for flying.

Even Snape, acerbic personality and acid tongue included, had more to offer. Much more.

Harry froze as Moody brought up Snape just then. Could the man see thoughts with his magical eye along with everything else? Still somewhat shaken from the idea of his friends seeing his body, Harry covered his genitalia with his hands. He knew the man would never take advantage of him. Still, he felt safer with his privates covered.

“—I know what Snape said, but she still might not be dead yet,” the grizzled auror was saying. “We ought rather to be searching for Emmeline than taking the word of a traitor—”

Arthur gasped and cried, “Alastor! We have no reason not to believe Severus.”

“Other than the fact that he’s a lying, dirty Death Eater, you mean?”

“Alastor, please! After all Severus has sacrificed for our cause, you cannot possibly still believe that, can you?”

The auror grunted. “Man’s marked, isn’t he? Once a Death Eater, always a—”

Snape’s silk-steel voice sliced across Moody. “I’ll thank you not to place me in the same category with beasts such as Dolohov and Bellatrix. Yes, I was a Death Eater once, but even at my worst, I have never been so terrible as those … creatures.”

He looked away and touched his ear, drawing a long finger through lank hair, and his eyes glazed over with remembered pain. Harry’s gaze followed his finger down the side of Snape’s face and gasped at the brutal scar across his jaw. It looked as though someone had tried to gouge off his cheek.


Snape turned and fixed a piercing stare on Harry, but said nothing.
Moody scoffed and shook his flask at Snape. “I know what you’ve done, Snape. How many died by your poisons, eh? How many are still dying?”

Snape’s eyes fluttered closed, and he drew a hand to his chest. When he opened them again, his face was blank of emotion, but anguish burned in the darkness of his eyes.

“I have … done what I could to stop it.” Snape’s voice was hard, but Harry had seen past the guise. The man was suffering. He stepped closer in spite of himself.

“Bah. You let others pay for your sins and think it’s fair penance.” Moody’s fingers inched to his wand holster. “If it were up to me, you’d pay for them with more than that.”

Snape drew himself to his full height and raised his wand arm, and Harry felt a war approaching. Rallying his Gryffindor courage, he stepped between the men, facing Moody and reaching a protective hand back towards Snape, though he had likely turned his back on an angry dragon. A dragon with a wand.

“Moody, stop it. Professor Snape has done enough. You’re wrong to attack him like this.”

Moody reeled back as if struck. “You’re defending him, Potter? You are? He hates you!”

Snape started to speak, but Harry cut him off. “Yes, he does. And yes, I am. How he feels about me doesn’t matter. The fact is that he has suffered too much as is, and I won’t stand for you adding to it.” Harry rubbed the back of his neck and gave Arthur a sheepish smile. “Though he’ll probably disembowel me for saying this later.”

Arthur just looked between Harry and Snape as if they’d grown Devil’s Snare in place of hair.

“Humph,” Mad-Eye said with a shrug. “Your funeral, Potter.”

Moody growled under his breath and stalked away, and Harry’s shoulders slumped with relief. With a wince, he recalled the dragon behind him and slowly turned to face his fate, but the expression on Snape’s face wasn’t the blind fury Harry had expected.

The man looked utterly gobsmacked.


Snape’s expression turned assessing. He met Harry’s eyes, all traces of hatred absent in his gaze.

“Why?” He whispered so low, Harry might have mistaken it for the wind. “Why would you … protect me?”

Harry gave a small shrug. “Because I wanted to. Because you deserve better.”

Surprise and softness passed through the man’s expression for an instant, then he drew himself up and glared at the few onlookers daring enough to stare. Save for Harry, they averted their eyes. Harry smiled a little.

As Snape gave Harry a short nod and walked away, a whisper filled the young man’s mind. Snape was speaking telepathically through their Legilimetic bond. It didn’t work at long distances, however; so Harry still had no idea what had linked them during Snape’s torture.

Snape said, “Disembowelment, Potter? I would prefer not to sully my fingers with your excrement if
it's all the same to you. Decapitation is much cleaner."

Sensing the man’s amusement through their mental link, Harry released his tension in a nervous chuckle.

Merlin, what had come over him? Championing Snape, of all people. Well, the man did need a champion, regardless of his aloof persona. Harry had seen it. Still, he hoped he didn’t pay for his decision to stand in as Severus’ guardian in actual blood. Or with his head.

Harry jumped as the door opened. One of the Harrys—Ron, perhaps—looked around the yard, mouth agape and brow furrowed.

“Er, did we miss something?”

That was definitely Ron.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape tense. No doubt Snape feared Harry would mock him; the younger man read it in Snape’s closed off posture and tight expression. Well, Harry wouldn’t let him down, not this time. He gave Snape a discreet smile before he turned back to Ron.

“No,” he said with a wry laugh. “Just the usual.”

Snape relaxed, and Harry could’ve sworn he heard him sigh. The former spy must have been more afraid than Harry had realised to show such an obvious display of relief.

If Snape had come to trust Harry enough to show any sign of emotion, to tease him a little, perhaps there was hope to establish a truce between them. Maybe a little kindness and faith would bring the laconic man out of his shell. It was worth a try.

For the moment, Harry decided to just let the man be. Snape wouldn’t trust any efforts of reconciliation here, where Harry’s friends and family filled every available space. There would be time enough to work on him later, when they were alone.

Harry stuck his hands in his pockets and scanned the skies. “Looks like decent enough flying weather. Clear, not too cold, and this dementor mist, sickening as the thought of it is, might give us a little cover.” He dropped his gaze back to Ron-Harry. “So are we ready then?”

Another Harry stepped outside, dragging two more by the ears—Hermione and the twins, no doubt.

“Once these two idiots start acting their age and stop hexing each other with spots and the like. Honestly, boys! Your mother would be furious.”

Definitely Hermione.

A devious smile curved Hermione-Harry’s lips. “Perhaps I’ll tell her tomorrow,” she said with mock innocence.

A horror-stricken expression crossed the twins’ faces.

One cried, “Wash your mouth out!”

The next twin replied, “Listen to Forge, Hermione.” Ah. That was George, then. “Don’t give us nightmares—”

“—Mum does that well enough on her own.” And Fred.
“She does at that.” The fourth Harry’s hair turned red briefly. Tonks.

So the last Harry coming out behind her with Bill was Fleur. Well, at least he knew who everyone was.

Harry met every double’s eyes head on, but no one appeared to be treating him like glass or looked appalled, so he reasoned they had kept their word. They could never have pretended not to have seen Harry’s scars, not as bad as they were. He relaxed, feeling a little safer now that he knew his trust hadn’t been abused.

‘Thank Merlin my friends are honest.’

Tonks-Harry said, “All right there, Harry?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. I think I’m okay.”

“We’ll cheer you up,” said George-Harry.

“Right, mate. Watch this!” Fred-Harry aimed for Ron-Harry and turned him pink all over, even his hair.

Ron shouted among a chorus of snickers, “Oi! Turn me back!”

Hermione rolled her—or Harry’s—eyes. “Grow up, children.” She fixed the jinx on Ron and moved towards Kingsley’s side. “Can we stop the antics and be serious now? There may well be Death Eaters waiting for us to poke our heads past the wards. This is not the time for pranks.”


Harry shot him a look. “She’s right, Ron.”

“Cor, mate! How’d you know it was me?”

Harry tapped his temple. “You’re as clueless with my face as you are with your own.”

Ron-Harry scowled. “Oi! Why’s everyone having a go at me?”

“Because you make it too easy,” Fleur-Harry said with a giggle.

Harry rubbed his scar out of irritation. “Right. Don’t talk if we’re ambushed, Fleur. Your accent and laugh give you away. All of you need to stop taking the mickey anyway. This isn’t one of our adventures or a game—this is war. Actual war where people are captured and tortured and killed. We just lost one of the Order earlier this month and another was grievously injured. Unless you want fourteen more deaths on your conscience, including mine, the time to be serious is now.”

A low voice sounded at his side and made Harry jump.

“Loath as I am to admit it, Potter is actually right for once.”

Snape laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder briefly, as if trying to calm him or apologize for startling him. The gentle touch had Harry gobsmacked.

“I tried to feed the Death Eaters falsified information,” Snape continued, “but my cover is blown. We are likely walking straight into an ambush. So, we will not leave until everyone has their wands drawn and heavy disillusionment charms in place. You will all be on your guard. You will not make foolish jokes or prank each other, and you will not fight with your partners.” Here, Snape shot Harry
a glance. “If we are attacked, you hex hard. They will not hold back against you. Are we all in agreement?”

Thirteen people nodded. Harry held Snape’s gaze and whispered, “I won’t fight you, sir.”

Severus inclined his head. “I shall endeavour not to anger you as well.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

“About time you two stopped sniping at each other,” said Kingsley, startling Harry again.

Merlin, why was Harry so jumpy? Snape placed a soothing hand on Harry’s shoulder, and the young man gave him a bemused sort of smile.

“T-thanks,” he murmured.

Snape gave him a short nod and let his hand drop.

Kingsley grinned at them and continued. “Seeing you two work together without trying to murder each other makes for a nice change. But, getting back to the plan, if it all goes pear-shaped and we’re ambushed, head for the nearest Order house. Once you’re safe, use a Patronus to let Molly know where you are and if you’re okay or in need of help. She’s standing by with extra aurors and a medical team. Once I’m able, I’ll take over and send my Patronus to the rest of you, which will appear after you’re in hiding if I get there first. Once you receive that message, relay help requests and status reports to me, not Molly.”

Snape added, “And do give your Patronus instructions to hide from the Death Eaters. Best not to make our enemies’ job too easy.”

Arthur sighed at his sardonic tone. “We’re not complete fools, Severus, but you do make a good point. Everyone, do as they say and try to stay together unless we’re ambushed. Then we must all scatter and hope for the best.”

A cloud of worry settled over Harry, thick and chilling as the dementor mist clouding Little Whinging’s skies. “I still think this is a terrible idea.”

Snape snorted. “For the second time tonight, we are in agreement, Potter. Someone call the Prophet.”

Harry gave him a wry smile. “Indeed.”

“Hmm.”

Harry smiled at the amusement in Snape’s tone. “Well, let’s get this over with, then. But—wait a tick! If we’re all disillusioned, how are we going to keep from flying straight into each other?”

“This little beauty.” Mad-eye held up a green, ghostly-looking lantern. “This is a hide-and-see lantern. It allows those in a team and under disillusionment charms to see one another, with the aid of a few spells.” His magical eye settled on each of the students in turn, even those behind him. “This is a secret among the auror corps, so I’d best not hear of them being used to avoid detention.” He fixed both eyes on the twins. “Nor to use as pranks. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly,” said George with a wicked grin.

“Crystal,” said Fred. “Right good idea, though.”

“Reckon we can make up our own?”
Fred laughed. “Indubitably.”

“Stow it, you two,” Harry said. “Save the prank planning for later. It’s time to go.” He frowned and looked around the yard. “But, er, where exactly are we taking off from?”

Moody flicked his wand towards the shed and muttered, “Here, of course. Couldn’t leave thestrals about in a Muggle area in plain sight.”

Harry blushed and eyed the pair of skeletal horses. “Er, could they even see them?”

“Maybe not the thestrals, no, but they could see ten brooms and a motorcycle together. And this is the kind of neighbourhood where people are too damn nosy for their own good. Best to be prepared.”

Harry winced. “Too right, they’re gossips. And Aunt Petunia is the worst.” He gave Snape a questioning glance. “So which thestral should we take?”

“Understood, sir. Does she have a name?”

Snape frowned. “They are from the forest’s wild herd, so I doubt it. Hagrid only told us they were the least temperamental of those available and, therefore, the most likely to obey orders even in the midst of battle.”

“Ah. I hope they’re used to riders.”

The thestral gave a snort and flicked her head up and down, as if to remind Harry that she could hear him.

“Right you are, girl.” Harry petted the mare’s bony forehead. “Hello there. We’re most likely in for a bit of a bumpy ride, but Professor Snape and I will do our best to keep you safe. Thanks for helping us.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “They aren’t sentient.”

The thestral snorted and glared at Snape.

Harry stroked the creature’s forelock. “They’re smarter than you think, Professor. She understands me as much as my owl does.” He moved around to her side. “Besides, it doesn’t matter. It soothes them, and we’re about to go into a mess of danger. She knows it, even if the humans in charge of this disaster don’t.” He patted her shoulder and started to mount, but a soft call of his name stopped him.

“Potter.”

He turned and noticed Snape motioning him away from the mare. “Yes?”

“You make a fair point about the danger. Come with me and watch my back. I’ve a mind to alter my features to look like one of the Weasleys. I cannot go out there with this face and hope to survive, and there are enough in their overlarge brood to offer me no small amount of anonymity.”

“True enough, but there’s no need to poke at them. I like the idea of a big family.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?”
To Harry’s surprise, Snape said it with no malice. If he didn’t know better, he could have sworn Snape was showing empathy. And wasn’t it strange how happy that made Harry?

As Snape took position behind the shed, Harry drew his wand and stood behind him, watching for any disturbance other than his friends preparing to leave. Over his shoulder, he caught flashes of spell light and the sizzle of magic, but it was only Snape casting glamours. When he turned back, Snape had shoulder-length waves of strawberry-blond, bright blue eyes, and a smattering of freckles on his nose, now without the identifying hook. He looked like a thinner version of Charlie Weasley. The only indicator of his former identity was the long scar running down his jaw. Harry gasped as he realised it ran all the way up to the man’s hairline.

“Mother of Merlin,” he whispered. “What did they do to you?”

Snape tensed and clapped a hand over his cheek. “It, it is nothing. Cease ogling me.” He ran the wand along the side of his face, and the horrible scar vanished. Harry wondered if the skin would still feel rough under the glamour and promptly blushed.

“Ah, well, that’s better at any rate,” said Harry with a wan smile.

Snape’s glare could have incinerated the sun. “If you find my appearance so ghastly, you are free to look elsewhere.” He stormed past, but Harry called him back.

“Oh gods, that was ill done of me. I’m sorry, it’s not, I didn’t mean that.”

Snape said nothing and kept walking, but Harry laid a gentle hand on his forearm and stopped him cold.

“Wait, sir. Please. I didn’t mean that the way it came out. I’m just an idiot with these things. All I meant was, ah, you’re less recognizable now. There’s not a thing wrong with your looks, I swear.”

Snape scowled and threw off Harry’s hand. “Yes, well, you have shown a proclivity for Weasley red.”

Harry frowned. “I’ve no idea what you’re on about. Besides that, I meant your natural appearance.”

If possible, Snape glared even harder. “Do not mock me, Potter.”

“I’m not! I—look.” Harry ran a hand through his hair and puffed out a breath of frustration. “If you wanted to, you could tease me about my looks just as easily. Scrawny, short, glasses like soda bottles, eyes the colour of pond muck, and a rat’s nest for hair no matter what I do with it. So, no. I won’t mock you about your appearance. I have no ground to stand upon.”

Snape’s mouth fell open a bit. “No ground—what are you on about, Potter?” He closed his eyes and stood tall, visibly pulling himself together. “We are wasting time. If only for the purpose of staying alive, we must not be at odds tonight. To that end, I will … overlook your indiscretion if you forgive my outburst.”

Harry offered Snape his hand. “Done.”

Snape stared, sending a hot blush up the young man’s face and a crawling sensation into his gut, but eventually the spy sighed and took Harry’s hand.

“Will you accept a truce, Potter?”

Harry grinned, stunned, but also thrilled. “I gladly accept your offer, Professor Snape.”
Snape gave him a tiny smile and released his hand. “Good. Then let us put this bickering behind us and ready our mare.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry led them back to their thestral and mounted behind the creature’s batlike wings. Snape shrunk Harry’s trunk and tucked it in his pocket, then leapt behind Harry and wrapped an arm around his waist. Harry squirmed at the proximity and fought back another blush.

Snape whispered, “Calm yourself. I won’t harm you.”

“I, I know. I just, I’m not usually this close to anyone.”

Snape sighed. “I cannot move any further back and stay on our mount, especially if we encounter the mob I anticipate we will. Can you endure it for a time, until we are safe?”

Harry laid a hand over Snape’s. “I didn’t say it was bad. I was only a bit nervous.”

“Hmm.”

If Snape’s sudden trembling was any indication, Harry was not the only one feeling the proximity. If he was honest with himself, he felt protected with Snape’s long legs wrapped around his own and the man’s surprisingly strong arm tucked snugly around his waist. He closed his eyes and, just for a moment, allowed himself to feel the comfort of having someone hold him.

When Moody called for them to gather, Harry leaned up, taking Snape with him, and sank his fingers into the thestral’s mane. He really should give her a name. Maybe he could call her ‘Bat.’ The thought conjured an idea of Snape’s billowing robes and Harry suppressed a snort.

He felt horrible for it the next instant, too. Snape deserved better, and Harry refused to make fun of him any longer. The man deserved his honour and respect, even if he could be a colossal arse at times.

Hmm. Perhaps he could call her Freya? Yes. He liked that name.

“Disillusionment charms up,” called Mad-Eye.

“I am going to hide us now,” Snape murmured.

The sudden chill of a disillusionment spell washed over him, and Harry shivered. All around him, the others vanished, too. Then Mad-Eye turned on his lantern and muttered a few incantations, and the lantern’s light whooshed out and settled on their team. Everyone glowed a ghostly green that put Harry too much in mind of the killing curse, especially with the way the light from their bodies illuminated the dementor mist in proximity. He shuddered, and Snape held him tighter.

“It’s all right, Potter. They are well; it is only the way the lantern makes them appear.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I, too, was disconcerted when I saw it the first time.”

Of course Snape would understand.

Harry squeezed his hand. “Thank you.”

Snape replied only with the briefest of nods.

Harry called to the others, “Er, so are we ready then?”
“Not quite, Potter,” said Mad-Eye as he mounted his broom.

Snape motioned ahead, where Kingsley’s viridian hand raised his wand aloft. “Wait.”

Harry nodded and buried his fingers in Freya’s warm mane again, his heart pounding a wild beat against his ribs. A flare of light burst from the wand.

Snape whispered against his ear, “Now!”

With a prayer for whatever was out there to watch over them, Harry dug his heels into Freya’s sides and took off into the mist.
Safe Harbour

Chapter Summary

The romance part starts moving pretty fast from here on out. I’m not really happy with this chapter, but I’ve edited and rewritten it probably five times. It’s as good as I can make it, I guess.

Chapter Notes

Warning for a description of brutal violence.

The moment the first flyer breached the wards, a cacophonous wail pierced the night. Severus’ heart skidded to a halt. ‘Shite!’ A caterwauling charm, but how had it slipped past the detection spells of three aurors and his own formidable skills? No matter now. It was too late to do anything, and with any luck, their disillusionment charms would hold.

Severus trained his wand below and scanned the skies for spell traps, but he found only stars and dementor mist. Ahead, Potter tensed, then ducked low to their mount’s neck and urged her on, skating the rooftops. Besides the glowing forms of their compatriots, the sky revealed nothing dangerous. The real threat was on the ground.

He peered over the edge of their thestral’s bony back and watched a group of black-cloaked figures swarm like ants around 4 Privet Drive, looking bemusedly for their quarry. It seemed they had yet to deduce flight as a method of escape, but it would not take long. Severus gritted his teeth and prepared to do battle.

“Potter,” he whispered, “we’ve to turn east at the end of the street here. We must go higher.”

“But we’ll be in their line of sight,” Potter hissed over his shoulder.

“We are still invisible to those not in our group. Just stay quiet and move fast.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry pulled on the thestral’s mane, guiding the beast above the treeline.
Severus kept his wand on the Death Eaters. Just a few more metres, and they would be beyond their enemies’ range. As they closed on the end of the street, he began to relax.

A sudden thump into their mount’s flank caused the beast to jerk and let out a startled whinny. A dazed-looking owl fluttered away, but not before a piercing cackle plunged Severus’ blood in ice water.

“There!” Bellatrix shot red light towards them, and Severus gasped as Harry’s messy head and six others appeared before him, not in ghostly green but full colour.

Their disillusionment charms had dissolved, and the Death Eaters were coming.

A curse zinged by Severus’ ear.

“Damn! Fly like you’re after the snitch, Potter!”

Their compatriots gave similar orders and scattered. Harry jerked forwards and urged their mount faster just as another group of Death Eaters apparated in, this group carrying brooms.

Afterwards, chaos descended. Bright flares of curses streaked through the mist, shouts of friend and
foe alike pierced the quiet, and Severus’ pulse boomed like a timpani in his ears. Harry led their thestral at a blistering pace, ducking this way and that as spells flew too close through their shields. A sudden scream, a man’s scream, pierced the haze of battle, and Severus shuddered, overwhelmed with memories of his torture and when screams flayed his throat raw.

Harry called, “It’s all right, sir. Focus on the moment.”

Severus swallowed a retort and forced his memories behind his mental shields just in time to duck a jet of green light whizzing by his shoulder. At the sound of another scream, this time Harry tensed and trembled.

“I, I’m sorry,” he murmured, but Severus had no time to spare for his grief.

“Potter! Save it for when we’re safe!”

The boy shook himself and gripped the thestral tighter. With renewed determination, he pitched forwards and brought the beast low along the treeline.

“Right. You’re right. I won’t let you die, Professor.”

Had Severus more time to think, Potter’s sentiment might have stunned him. As it was, he could do little beyond grip the boy tighter and shoot curses like mad.

Severus’ heart pounded into his ribs. Fuck, this was bad. Red, green, and purple streaks shot all around them, setting trees ablaze, bouncing off autos, shattering windows. Any moment, a curse would hit home and they would both die.

A spell crashed through the windshield of a lorry nearby and a blaring alarm rattled Severus’ eardrums. He gasped in the scent of ozone, petrol, and heat, and forced the thestral to turn by jerking Potter’s arm.

Severus screamed, “Move!” Gods, he hoped any nearby Muggles took the warning, too.

“Bloody hell!”

Potter pressed them low over the beast’s back and guided her at a breakneck speed from the smoking lorry. A moment later, an ear-shattering boom and blast of orange heat set their mount shrieking with mad terror. The thestral’s ears lay flat against her skull and the whites of her eyes swallowed her eerie blue irises.

“Ah!” Potter trembled and hugged the thestral’s neck. “It’s okay, girl. You’re okay.”

The beast whinnied fearfully, and Potter gave up trying to calm her as another curse split a tree beside them down the middle.

Severus called, “Potter, I don’t think we’re going to—”

A curse hit Severus on the back and a hoarse cry escaped his lips before he could hold it back. A metallic scent of blood, a sharp cracking sound, and the feeling that someone had ripped the flesh from his bones overwhelmed him. A whipping curse. Merlin help them, he couldn’t fight like this. His wand arm drooped, pain overwhelming him.

“Professor!” Potter shrieked and grabbed Severus’ hand, half-turning. “Shite! Are you hurt? Are you dy—”
Another curse zinged over their heads.

Severus roared, “Stop coddling me and move! I’ll survive, unless we’re caught.”

“No, no, no.” The boy was crying, and the sound rattled Severus’ nerves more than his pain. “I’m sorry. You, you didn’t deserve—I’m so sorry.”

Severus held Harry tight. “Calm yourself, Potter. Can you see?”

The boy nodded and jerked a hand across his face. “Yeah. Have to.” He rallied and pushed the thestral into a nearby strand of beeches and maples. “Maybe the woods will give us some cov—”

Another curse ripped the ground up just behind them.

“Or not,” Potter wailed. “Fuck! They just keep coming!”

They careened through the trees, Severus desperately trying to hold on and cast with his back on fire and bleeding heavily. He was sick and dizzy with pain, but he couldn’t afford to rest. If he stopped casting for a moment, the Death Eaters would overtake them. Yet, even with his best efforts, the insane bitch’s cackle kept drawing nearer.

“Potter,” he called, “if I don’t survive this, your sca—”

Potter cried, “No! Don’t even think about giving up. I won’t let you die!”

“But, Potter, please. You must know—”

“Then tell me later when we’re both safe.”

“We might not—”

Another curse set the brush under their mount’s hooves ablaze, and the creature let out a horrific scream of terror.

“Shite-shite-shite!” Potter held on as the thestral bucked, and between trying to keep their seat and dodging the Death Eaters, it was a long moment before either of them could speak again.

“Listen to me, Harry,” Severus pleaded. “I have to warn you. Your scar—”

“Shut it! I’m not letting you die!”

“Itty bitty baby Potty,” rang in Severus’ ears.

Bellatrix was right behind them.

Cold grief and bitter shame overwhelmed Severus. He had failed. He couldn’t keep Potter safe, and Harry wouldn’t listen to his warnings. Still, Dumbledore knew about the scar, and even if the man was cruel, he would not keep information so vital to the Dark Lord’s defeat from Harry. Even if Severus no longer trusted the man, he was certain of that much.

“Harry ….”

“No! Stop talking! I can’t concentrate.”

It was no use. Harry wouldn’t listen, and Severus couldn’t defend him much longer with his back so injured.
Maybe, if he sacrificed himself for the boy?

Yes. He would throw himself and pray his sorry life gave the demons behind them enough
distraction for Potter to get away in one piece. It was the best gift he had to offer the boy he had hurt
so long. The only end his cruelty deserved. He only hoped Potter could heal from the trauma.

Severus permitted himself a sad smile. Of course Harry would heal. He would survive and come
back fighting. He always did.

Severus only wished they had more time together. They might have reconciled, given a few weeks
instead of mere moments. Perhaps Severus might have earned Harry’s forgiveness one day.

Perhaps, with his death, he still could.

But gods, he was so afraid. Of death, of failing, of Bellatrix-fucking-Lestrange. The bitch laughed
behind them, and inexorable, icy-cold terror gripped Severus’ heart.

He wasn’t ready to die, and no doubt the Death Eaters would make it painful. Bellatrix would get to
finish what she’d started. Her fingers had hurt so much, her nails cutting into his open wounds like
white-hot swords. He would never forget his soul-deep horror or his hoarse, shrill screams when she
grabbed the open flap of skin on his cheek and pulled.

He hadn’t known what fear was until that moment.

Severus trembled so hard, the thestral’s breathing could have bucked him had Harry not had a death
grip on his arm. He couldn’t endure it again. Not her. Not Bellatrix. He didn’t want to die like that.

Yet, this wasn’t about him. He would earn absolution, true, but more importantly, Harry would
survive. A small measure of peace mitigated his paralysing terror. The sounds of battle, of Bellatrix’s
cackling, Harry’s rushed breathing, their thestral’s whines faded to a dim buzzing in his ears. The
sacrifice of his pitiful life would keep the boy alive, and nothing else mattered.

Severus had promised to spend his life protecting Harry. It seemed fitting that it would end the same
way, and perhaps his sacrifice would wipe some of the stains from his soul. Burn the darkness away
so he could meet Lily with no evil marring his spirit.

With that thought, his terror quieted enough to shove it to the back of his mind. It would be all right.
He wouldn’t survive to see the end of the war, but Potter would, and that was enough.

‘I hope, after this, you can finally forgive me, Lily.’ He held Potter tighter. ‘And you, Harry. I’m
sorry. Please, forgive me someday.’

No. That wasn’t good enough. Harry deserved to hear it out loud, at least once. Severus swallowed
his pride and forced his voice to work.

“Potter, I, for all the ways I have—” They ducked under a cutting curse. “—h-hurt you, I am sorry.”

Potter growled. “Don’t you dare. Don’t say goodbye.”

“I apologize. I don’t think we can escape.”

“I am not letting you die for m—ah!” Potter cried out as a curse clipped him.

“Harry!” Severus caught the boy close against his chest and prayed it hadn’t been the Avada. “Oh
gods, are you alive?”

Severus breathed again, his horror abating a bit. “Potter, we’re not—” Another spell streaked by their heads. “—going to make it unless—” They ducked under a blasting curse. “—unless we do something!”

“Oh really?” Potter called, “Well then, let’s see—” A rock burst into pieces beside them. “—How well they can follow the best seeker in a century, hmm? Hold on tight, sir!”

Severus’s stomach lurched as their mount dove and swerved through the trees, Harry yanking her about like mad. Severus’ balance faltered, and he threw both arms around the boy, mentally cursing him to oblivion and back. Out loud, he couldn’t help but curse at the pain the wild ride sent tearing across his back.

“Fuck! What are you doing, you idiot? You’re—agh—going to kill us both like this!”

“Better than letting you throw yourself to them! I didn’t save your life just for you to toss it away.”

“When did you save my li—?” Severus ducked a low-hanging branch and cursed again. “So help me, Potter, if you give me another scar—”

“Yes, yes, you’ll give me octopus tentacles for legs and curse off my bollocks. Just hold on, Snape! I know what I’m—”

Voices rang out behind them, and Severus’ blood froze in his belly.

“It’s him! That’s the real Potter!”

“Shite,” Potter breathed, and jerked their mount to fly behind a warehouse.

Severus groaned. “Are you satisfied now, Potter? Your arrogance has officially killed us both.”

Potter flinched. “Please. I, I just … I was trying to …”

Severus sighed and bound himself to Potter with ropes so he could use his wand hand. He couldn’t sacrifice himself now. No distraction would be enough to keep the Death Eaters off Potter, not now that they knew which one to attack. He would have to hold on and fight as best as he could.

‘Merlin watch over us now.’

“Don’t slow down,” Severus ordered, “and if you know any prayers, now would be the time for them.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

They finally lost the Death Eaters around midnight, after a terrifying mid-air duel with the Dark Lord himself. Somehow Potter had managed to blast apart Pettigrew’s borrowed wand like a stick of dry wood, and the ensuing confusion provided just enough chaos for them to escape.

What felt like hours later, they passed a pond that looked familiar to Severus. He racked his brains for a place and gasped when it came to him.
“Potter, head straight for the forest ahead. I know where we are.”

“Thank Merlin,” the boy muttered. “I’m so exhausted, I can barely hold on, and my arm really hurts where they cursed me.”

Severus checked the arm, but he could see nothing beyond a bit of flesh through a bloody tear in Potter’s shirt. A cutting curse, most likely. “I will heal you once we are inside.”

“Thanks. How badly are you injured, Professor?”

Severus pursed his lips and pretended not to feel the fire between his shoulder blades. “It is nothing.”

“I heard you cry out. You don’t cry out for nothings.”

Severus squirmed. “Cease your infernal prattling and focus on getting us to Squire House alive, Potter.”

“Fine, but I’m taking care of you, sir, whether you like it or not.”

A tendril of warmth snaked through Severus’ chest, but he ruthlessly squashed it.

After a moment, Potter murmured, “Squire House?”

Severus’ jaw worked. “My … maternal grandmother’s home.”

“Oh. It’s not an Order house, is it?”

“No. It is empty now, but the wards are strong and attuned to Prince family blood, so we will be safe there.”

“I’m not a Prince. Will I be able to enter?”

“Yes, once I key you to the wards. Now do shut up and hurry along.”

“I’m trying. Freya’s tired, too.”

Severus frowned. “Freya?”

“Well, I couldn’t just keep calling her ‘the thestral.’”

“Whyever not?”

Potter chuckled and waved it off. “Not important. Where is this place? Are we close?”

“Yes. Just follow this stream here.”

“Okay. Come on, Freya. Just a little longer.”

‘Freya’ whickered and bobbed her head in weariness. Lather covered her flanks and wings, and she flew low, too tired to risk much height. Severus worried the beast wouldn’t make it, but just as he wondered if they should dismount and lead her on foot instead, the trees gave way to a short patch of lawn dotted with an overgrown herb garden. The sight of the squat cottage nestled between two fluffy lavender patches made Severus weak with relief. They were safe, at last.

“Thank Merlin,” Potter repeated, and urged Freya through the gates.

The wards tingled as they passed the barrier, and Potter slumped back against Severus, resting his
head on the man’s shoulder. Severus gasped and tensed at the close contact. The smell of Potter’s shampoo and the musk of his sweat tickled Severus’ nostrils and flooded his chest with an odd sort of warmth. His fingers twitched, anxious both to pull Harry closer and shove him away.

Could Severus afford to risk some humiliation and catch Potter up, to hold him tighter and soothe both of them? Potter had changed. Their former animosity had melted away, and he hadn’t rejected Severus’ touch before. What if Severus just—No. He couldn’t do it. The walls slammed back down over his vulnerable heart.

Potter would only hurt him in the end. They all did, if they did not start out hurting him.

With a scowl, Severus pushed the young man away and hissed, “I am not your pillow, Potter! Kindly refrain from lounging on me.”

“Hmph. Wasn’t, wasn’t intentional. I just can’t … so tired.”

Harry did indeed look exhausted, and guilt tugged at Severus’ heart. Without a word, he nudged Potter back against his shoulder and kept his eyes up and away. Even so, he still saw the soft smile that smoothed the pain and fear from Potter’s face.

“Thanks,” Potter whispered.

“Hmm.”

The young man rallied after a moment, and with a deep breath, pulled himself up and led Freya towards the cottage. The exhausted thestral stopped near the front door and hung her head. She gave a faint whicker, and Potter leaned over her neck, patting her flank.

“Good job, girl. You got us here safely. Thank you. You can rest now.”

Severus dismounted and rubbed the wobbles from his knees and not-quite-healed thigh. The ride from hell had not exactly helped his remaining injuries and his back and thighs felt as if someone had lit them ablaze, but it could have been worse. At least they were alive. He released his glamour to conserve his magic, though he kept the one covering his scars, and stood as tall as his pain would let him.

“Can you dismount without assistance, Potter?”

“Mmhmm.” Potter swung his legs around and swayed as he slid down the thestral’s side. He fell as soon as his feet hit the ground, but Severus caught him and dragged him back up.

“No sleeping out here, Potter. Come. I won’t carry you.” Severus neglected to mention that, with his injuries, he was incapable of carrying the boy.

“No, of course not. Couldn’t have that.”

Severus ignored the sarcastic tone and checked the thestral for injuries. He found none beyond exhaustion and muscle soreness from overexertion. With a pat to her flank, he performed a few healing and cleaning spells and sent her on her way.

“There is a small lean-to out back,” he said in a low voice to the beast. “Rest for the night. If you are hungry, there are plenty of rabbits in these woods. I daresay you could catch one after a bit of rest.”

Freya gave a tired whicker and dragged her hooves towards the lean-to, just visible beyond the cottage wall. When Severus turned around, the young man was watching him with an amused
“I thought you said they weren’t sentient?”

Severus’ cheeks heated. “Potter, I, I was playing a part. They expect me to be harsh, and I—” He shook his head and glared. “It matters not. Stop loitering and come inside already.”

“You’ve yet to key me into the wards, and I’ve no desire to test their strength with my hide, thank you.”

Severus jerked his head towards the front door. “Until you actually move your arse to the door, I cannot key you into anything.” He refused to admit that he had forgotten the wards in his exhaustion. Thank Merlin Potter had remembered, but it galled Severus that he himself had failed to. Tired or not, he could ill afford to forget such important details.

With a soft sigh, he led the boy to the door, pricked Potter’s finger with a spell, and let three drops of the boy’s blood fall on the stoop before sealing the tiny wound.

“There. Now you are recognized as a Prince, in blood if not in name.”

Potter’s eyes widened. “What? That little prick just added me to your family line?”

“In terms of inheritance, no, not unless every true Prince dies before you. I believe there are still a few in Romania. In terms of being able to access the Prince properties, yes. Welcome to my estate, Potter.” His sarcasm cut like a whip.

Potter just smiled and opened the door. “Thank you, sir. I’m honoured for your trust, and swear not to abuse it.”

Severus stared, stunned at the boy’s respectful answer, and needed a moment to recover his poise. “Oh. Yes, I’m honoured to have you and all that rot. Now get inside already and stop impersonating a lawn ornament.”

Severus cursed himself and his sharp tongue. Why must he drive everyone away?

But Potter only snickered and led the way inside, holding the door open for Severus.

With a dark glare that bounced right off the boy’s infernally cheerful demeanour, he limped into his grandparents’ foyer, each step like a sledgehammer down his thigh. Come hell or high water, he was resting after this. Dumbledore could hang if he thought he was sending Severus on further missions for a long time.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Shacklebolt’s lynx Patronus bounded in and announced that he had taken over as point of contact and would be sending them updates soon.

“Well, that’s something,” Potter said, his face sorrowful. “At least Kingsley made it.”

Severus didn’t know what to say, so he simply laid a hand on Potter’s uninjured shoulder. The boy gave him a sad smile.

“Thanks, sir.”

Severus swallowed a sudden rush of nerves. “Go on, Potter. I will be right with you.”

Potter nodded and left the tiny foyer, moving into the living room.
After locking up and re-warding, Severus followed and watched, belly squirming with anxiety, as Potter glanced around the quaint decor and rustic furnishings. His grandparents hadn’t had much, but their home had been a refuge for Severus after he was orphaned. The green felt couch had a tear on one cushion, the floral carpet was threadbare and dated, nicks and scratches decorated the dark wood furniture, and the handmade doilies and throw blankets on every available surface had a few snags and lumps from an uneven hand, but his grandparents had loved him. They were the last people to do so, and Severus hoped Potter could see it in the home’s character.

Why wasn’t Potter saying anything? Did he hate it? Severus hated himself for his anxiety, but he couldn’t help prodding the young man along.

“Well? Does it meet with your undoubtedly high standards?”

Potter smirked. “High standards? Hang about, I think you’ve confused me with Malfoy.”

“Potter!”

The boy gave Severus a beaming smile. “It’s nice, Professor. It looks like somewhere a kind grandmother would live, I think. It feels homey and full of love.”

Severus squashed another rush of warmth, though he feared a hint of a smile sneaked through his defences. “It was in the area, though I’m … pleased that you like it.”

Potter grinned. “Really?”

“No. I couldn’t care less.”

Severus’ conscience muttered, ‘Liar.’ He resolutely ignored it.

Potter snickered again. “You’re lying! I can’t be—oh!” Eyes wide, he ran past Severus to an old upright tucked against the front wall. “I’ve never seen a real piano. Did your grandparents play?” He traced a finger lightly along the keys, face alight.

A sharp pang shot through Severus’ chest down his legs and made his feet cold and tingly. Crossing his arms over his chest, he turned and stalked towards the kitchen.

“What does it matter?”

Harry winced. “Sorry, Professor. I didn’t mean to offend. I just thought there wouldn’t be a piano here unless someone could play.” A wistful expression crossed his features. “I always wanted to learn something musical. Piano or guitar, or maybe to sing. But with the Dursleys fighting me at one end and Voldemort at the other, I never had much of a chance to develop anything beyond a lucky streak, fast legs, and a reputation for trouble.” He pressed a key down and smiled at the sound.

Severus watched his face for signs of deception, but Potter was too busy testing different keys and grinning at each note. He appeared honest in his enthusiasm, and it baffled Severus. Didn’t he worry the mean old dungeon bat would mock him for his eagerness?

A snide voice forced its way into his mind. ‘Piano’s for girls. No wonder you’re such a pouf.’

Would he never forget Potter the elder’s cruelty? Or his own father’s?

‘God, even more freakishness from you. Men work in factories and construction and business. They don’t twirl fancy batons and twiddle keys. For fuck’s sake, you don’t even look at girls like you should. You should’ve been a girl. I’ve no sons, I’ve a dau—’
No. He had to tamp that thought down, or he would shatter right in front of Potter. With a snarl of pain and desperation, he shut his father’s hateful voice behind his mental shields and dug his nails into the bookshelf beside him, struggling to regain control.

“Professor?” Potter’s voice trembled a little. “Did I say something wrong again? I, I’m sorry. Whatever it was, I’m sorry. I was only curious. I, I won’t bother you again.”

Merlin, was the boy crying? Why? Simply because he feared he had bothered Severus?

Two months ago, the cantankerous older man would have ribbed Potter up and down for such a display of weakness. At that moment, however, Severus could only see Potter’s innocence and trust, and it made something in him ache to protect the young man.

“Potter. Wait.”

Harry gave him a fearfull glance. No, he wasn’t crying, but he did look upset.

“I, it was nothing you had done,” Severus said. “Not all my memories of this place are pleasant.”

Potter nodded, his eyes sad. “Then don’t worry about the piano thing. It’s not important.”

He sounded so disappointed, Severus’ chest panged with a strange need to soothe him.

Perhaps he should. Potter had certainly soothed Severus in his darkest hour. Hallucination or not, the young man’s voice had pulled him through his torture alive, and Severus could no longer even pretend to dislike him. What did childhood grudges matter when monsters like the Dark Lord still haunted their world?

Besides, hadn’t he made a promise to give Potter his respect? A peace offering of music might go some distance towards healing the breach between them. He sighed and leaned against the bookcase. Though he feared Potter would mock him for it, he decided to honour Potter’s display of trust with his own.

“No, Potter. My grandparents did not play.”

Severus turned away, running a finger along the spine of a book for comfort. His hands were shaking, but the smell of his favourite books eased his fears a little. Even if Potter lived up to his father’s legacy and rejected Severus’ trust, at least the spy still had his books. Sometimes, the more familiar ones could feel almost like a friend.

He swallowed a lump of fear and braced himself for pain. “I did. Do.”

Potter’s entire face lit up with unabashed joy. Joy?

“Brilliant! That’s just brilliant!”

Severus gripped the bookshelf, hardly daring to believe his ears. “You, you’re not going to mock me for it?”

“Mock you? Gods, why would I? I love music, and knowing you can play is fantastic.”

Hope spiraled in Severus’ chest and limbs and washed away the despair. Potter was impressed, not appalled. The amount of relief that brought embarrassed Severus. He turned his head towards the bookshelf to hide a blush.

“You truly find it, as you say, brilliant?”
“Oh yeah, it’s absolutely wicked. I’ve always wanted a par—” He flushed and shook his head. “Er, never mind. Professor, could you, um, if it’s not too much trouble, would you play for me before we leave?”

“What? You actually want me to pl—” Severus whirled around as he spoke, shocked, but the sharp movement opened the wounds across his back, and he arrested his turn with a soft grunt of pain.

Potter frowned and came near. “You are hurt.”

Severus forced his anguish expression into a scowl. “I am nothing of the sort.”

“Professor, don’t lie to me. I saw you flinch. How bad is it, sir?”

Severus glared. “Why do you care? Do you not hate me?”

Potter shrugged with one shoulder—the left hung limp. “After everything I’ve seen? No. There are worse things than a snarky professor, sir, and we’ve both been hurt by them.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Snarky?”

Potter smiled. “Er, maybe it’s not snark. More like fire and brimstone, yeah? Come to think of it, I imagine I’ve used up your supply of Potter-patience today, perhaps for the next few years or so. Should I be on the lookout for guillotines stashed in dark corners around here?”

Severus’ lips twitched upward in spite of himself. “I believe the Order might have a few choice words for me if I deprive them of their dear saviour before he can fulfil his destiny. Also, I could take off your head much more easily with my katana.”

Potter chuckled. “I suppose you could, but I’d prefer you didn’t. I’m rather attached to it, you know?”

“Thankfully so, or I fear the Dark Lord would have a much easier time defying you.”


Severus motioned to a hallway along the back wall. “I will heal you now. Come.”

Potter nodded and followed Severus into the hall.

Severus motioned to the downstairs guest bedroom, where he had slept as an orphaned teenager. “You will sleep through here.”

Potter peeked into the bedroom, a dusky blue room with white furniture. A painted brass daybed with a blue and white quilt sat against the far wall, under twin windows and sheer blue curtains. A brown wingback chair sat beside the bed and an armoire against the other wall. A painting of horses by the sea above the chair and a deep blue and brown braid rug tied the room together. A Slytherin pennant still hung above the headboard, the last remnant of Severus’ school days.

“Was this your room when you lived here, Professor?”

“As a young adult, yes. As of late, I have moved into my grandparents’ old room.”

“I like it. I can still feel a bit of your presence here.”

“Well, I am standing right behind you.”
Harry snorted. “Not quite what I meant.”

“I know.” Severus took a step towards the door. “Remove your shirt and wait on the bed. I will come to aid you in a moment.”

Potter paled and hugged his chest. “T-take my shirt off all the way?”

Severus gave him a bemused look. “Yes, unless you’d rather I not heal you.”

“Oh.”

He looked down, and Severus was surprised to see hard tremors rack the young man’s frame. Severus laid a gentle hand on Potter’s shoulder.

“I will not hurt you, Potter, nor mock you. You have my word.”

A hesitant smile tugged at his lips. “O-okay. Um, but since you’re treating me, it’s only fair that I heal you too, right, sir?”

Severus hesitated. He hated to show weakness, but then, the boy had offered him an out. It wasn’t weakness to accept repayment for a debt.

“I suppose that is an acceptable arrangement. Now, go and change, and I will let Kingsley know we are safe. Or do you anticipate that you will need assistance with your shirt?”

Potter flushed and lowered his eyes. “Um, no, I think I can handle it.”

“Good. Then go on, and I shall return in a moment.”

“Thanks.”

“Do not mention it. Ever.”

The boy gave him an amused smile as he shut the door. Severus let his breath go as soon as it closed, his emotions a jumble and his body aching all over. Merlin, what a night. Between Potter’s strangely kind behaviour and the mad chase through London, he was exhausted.

It took him a moment to conjure his memories of Lily and the swings long ago, but soon, with a swish of his wand, his doe appeared and stood before him with an expectant look.

“Go and tell Shacklebolt we are safe at one of my familial properties and will give him more information in the morning. Potter and I are both injured, but nothing serious, and we should be able to treat it ourselves.” He paused. “Also, there was an … incident with Pettigrew’s wand over Reigate Station. Perhaps it might be possible to locate the fragments and form a case proving Black’s innocence, late though it is.”

The doe nuzzled Severus’ scarred cheek and bounded away. The ethereal touch broke something within him as he realised he would never feel anything more substantial, not from a human at least. His scars rendered him even more hideous. No one would want to touch him now.

With a shake of his head, he cursed himself for his foolish sentimentalities. No one had wanted to touch him before Bellatrix tried to take off his face. His scars changed nothing.

Schooling the lingering pain from his expression, Severus knocked on Potter’s door and entered at his greeting. The boy sat on the bed as directed, back flat against the wall, hairless chest bare and one arm about his waist, his eyes tracing patterns in the quilt. Severus could not help glancing over his
figure and wondered where Potter got the idea that he wasn’t attractive from. True, the boy had a lithe frame, but plenty of wiry muscle and gorgeous golden skin.

Another annoying burst of warmth formed low in Severus’ belly, and he forced his attention to Potter’s injured arm, hanging limp at his side. Coming near, Severus noted several dark bruises and a deep gash across his bicep, but no evidence of broken bones. Blood had trailed all the way down his arm and dried.

“Clipped with Sectumsempra, I think,” he said with a frown. “Be still and I will heal it.”

“Thank you.”

Severus flicked out his wand, but hesitated as he came near. Potter had other injuries, older ones. Deep bruising across his shoulder had gone greenish with age, and in this light, a cut on one temple and dark rings around one eye were visible. Purple and yellow bruising in the shape of a boot decorated his ribs—each one sticking out as if he hadn’t eaten in weeks—and closer inspection revealed a badly healed cut half-hidden by his hair.

_Damn_. The abuse was even worse than Severus had imagined.

After a quick charm to banish the blood and clean the injuries, he murmured his healing chant over the cut on Potter’s arm, observing as the wound slowly pulled together and sealed. Potter closed his eyes and let his head loll onto his other shoulder, a soft smile on his face. Bemused at the boy’s expression, Severus shook his head and moved the wand over the boy’s frame until the injuries he could see had vanished.

His work finished, Severus stood and gave Potter a once over. “Do you have any other injuries? On your legs or back, perhaps?”

“No. I feel brilliant.” The dreamy smile hadn’t left Potter’s features, and he looked as though he might fall asleep any moment. Had a stray curse rendered him a bit mad?

“Just what are you grinning about, Potter?”

The boy started and flushed deep red. “Oh. Ah, your voice, sir. It’s … nice.”

Severus snarked, “Thrilled to be of service.”

“No, really. You sing very well. I was just enjoying hearing it.”

Severus gave a hesitant nod. “I have been told my voice is my best feature.”

“Oh? By whom, if I may ask?”

“A former … acquaintance.”

Potter gave him a sad smile. “Too personal?”

“Indeed.” Severus gave him an appraising look. “Since you have expressed a wish to learn music, I will teach you that chant. If you show aptitude for it, perhaps I can teach you chanting as a skill. It is rather uncommon in these times.”

The boy grinned. “Really? Brilliant.” He paused. “So, that means I should help you with your injuries now, right?”

Severus nodded, though the idea of another person seeing his scarred, scrawny body left him cold
inside. He shook it off and sat on an armchair beside the bed. “Listen to me, Potter. The incantation is *Vulnera Sanentur*. It takes several repetitions to close the wounds, and another round afterwards to remove any traces of dark magic. There is no need to worry about the tune—your magic chooses it, and it corresponds to the nature of the caster.”

The boy cocked his head in curiosity.

Severus ran a fingertip over his lips in thought. “How would you describe my earlier chant, Potter?”

He rubbed his shoe along the carpet. “Er, you won’t be angry with me?”

“No, so long as you are being serious and truthful. Tell me what you thought.”

“Well, it was … sad. And a bit dark. But warm, too, if that makes any sense.”

Severus blinked. “Warm? That is surprising.”

“It seemed so to me. At least, I felt warm when you sang it.” The boy tried and failed to suppress a yawn, and lifted a hand to his mouth to cover it. “Oh, excuse me. Apparently it was soothing, too. I’m quite sleepy.”

“Soothing? That and warmth are qualities I would not have attributed to myself, but never mind it. As far as the sorrow and darkness, well, that is not so farfetched, is it?”

Potter shook his head. “Sorrow, no. You often look sad to me, and given what you’ve just endured, I’m not shocked by it. But darkness? Professor, you aren’t dark. You’re not evil.”

“One can be dark without being evil. I use dark magic frequently, Potter, as a method of defending myself and those I care about, short as that list is.”

“Oh. Then perhaps it does fit, as long as you don’t think you’re evil.”

Severus looked away. “Many are dead because of my folly.”

Warm pressure squeezed Severus’ hand. “Many more are alive because of your bravery and sacrifice.”

The heat against his palm shocked Severus, and at first he couldn’t understand it. Then he saw Potter’s hand wrapped with his, and his breath came short.

Why was Potter holding his hand? Severus took some comfort from the soft caress, but what could Potter possibly gain from it? He searched Potter’s features for any sign of mockery or deceit, but, though it confused him, he had no choice but to admit the boy meant only to ease his pain.

The soft vulnerability that thought evoked left him reeling.

No one had ever touched him like this, not to heal the hurts Severus’ cold facade buried in layers of ice, not to share his burdens, not even to acknowledge his humanity. The tenderness in Potter’s hands melted the ice on his heart, eased the pain of his burdens, and made him feel human again.

Harry had laid Severus’ defences bare with a mere touch, and, lost in the feeling, Severus could do nothing but stare and tremble.

“Professor, are you all right?”

Potter’s voice brought Severus out of his daze. Heat flooded the man’s face and he moved back. He
couldn’t think with Potter’s touch branding his hand.

“I am … well enough,” he said in an emotion-roughened voice.

Potter’s eyes filled with understanding, and Severus looked away, embarrassed.

“I’m well, Potter. Stop looking at me like that.”

Harry touched Severus’ hand lightly. “Hey, Professor, it’s okay.”

Severus closed his eyes at the softness in Potter’s tone. Gods, how long had it been since someone had been so gentle with him? So tender? He had to swallow several times before he could speak, and even then, his voice would hardly rise above a whisper.

“Are, are you ready to try the chant?”

Potter had his wand out almost before Severus finished speaking.

“Good. Then we will practise it first. Close your eyes and reach into your mind. Ask your magic for a healing chant, and let the song flow through you.”

“All right.” Potter’s eyelids fluttered shut, and a white canine bit into his lower lip. He stayed still for several long moments, the furrow between his eyebrows digging deeper.

A whisper escaped the boy. “Please … please ….”

Severus sighed. “Potter, it’s all right. It’s a difficult chant, and it is gone midnight on the day of your coming of age. You have, most likely, begun the magical maturing process, and, with the chase and strain of coming of age, have likely drained your reserves a bit. A good night’s sleep should be enough to recuperate, at least until your integration illness begins.”

Potter gave him a worried look. “But your injury—how bad is it?”

“Not so grievous that I cannot pass a single night without expiring. Conjured bandages wrapped tightly will suffice for the evening.”

“But you’ll still suffer because of me.”

“No, Potter. Because of Voldemort and the Death Eaters. You did not curse me. I suspect it was Rookwood. He favours the whipping curse.” Severus shuddered at the horrid memories that thought evoked.

Potter wrapped his arms around himself and stared at his feet. “Still, I’m sorry. Will you be able to sleep?”

Severus frowned. “If I am unable, it would not be because of the pain.” Shite, why had he said that?

Potter winced. “Nightmares. Of course you would have them too.”

“Too?”

“Never mind it. Just, no silencing charms tonight, Professor. Please. If you suffer, I want to be able to help you.”

Severus took a step back, tense and on guard. “Why would you want to help me?”
“Because you’re too brave for your own good. Because you need it, even though you’re far too proud to admit it. Because I rather like this version of you and don’t want you to hurt. Or because I’m a sentimental prat who makes saving the world his business. Take your pick, really. Whatever the reason, I don’t want you to be beyond aid tonight, especially when you’re hurt.” He touched Severus’ hand and met his gaze. “Please. I don’t want to be alone either.”

Severus stared at their joined hands and found he could deny the boy nothing like this. Voice low and shaky, he murmured, “I … I suppose it would be prudent, in the event someone should happen to break down the wards.”

Potter grinned and Severus knew the boy had seen straight through his defences.

“Yes, in case of attack. So we’ll hear them.” He let Severus’ hand go, and the man sighed, half from relief and half out of a sense of loss.

“Correct.” Severus sighed. “You are impossible, Potter, but I will leave my charms down so you don’t worry yourself into a frenzy. Merlin forbid Molly Weasley should find you worked into a lather on my account. The woman is like a nesting dragon over her children. They would hear her haranguing me clear to Scotland, silencing charms or no, and then where would we be?”

Potter snorted. “Too right. Wouldn’t want Molly to worry.”

Severus nudged the boy towards the bed. “Go to sleep, Potter. You can try again to heal me in the morning, when you’re rested. And if you still cannot, then one of the Order can.”

The boy smiled sadly. “True, I suppose.”

“The lavatory is down this hall, behind the last door should you need it. I will be in the room next to yours. It is the only other door, save a closet on the other side of the hall.”

“Thank you. Goodnight, Professor.”

Severus inclined his head by way of reply.

After Potter closed his door, Severus trudged to his own bedroom and closed the door. He leaned his forehead against the wood, weary to his soul and confused about Potter, but was simply too tired to work through his thoughts that evening. He undressed and set his katana beside the headboard. After a few thorough cleaning spells on his wounds and binding conjured medical gauze tightly across his ribs, Severus could move with greater ease. At least it didn’t hurt as much.

Relieved, he dug through his old dresser for something to wear to bed. A dark tee and cotton sleep pants would do until he had access to his full wardrobe again. He had just eased his head through the shirt when a lynx Patronus burst through the wall and landed at his feet.

The beast said in Kingsley’s deep voice, “Glad to hear you and Potter got out. I’ve sent aurors after Pettigrew’s wand. George took a Sectumsempra to the face, but he’ll pull through. Everyone else made it safely back, save one—Mad-Eye. Alastor is missing. We’ve no idea if he survived or not. George had already been cursed, and all he could tell us was he heard Moody scream. He searched for Mad-Eye, but with his face so injured, he couldn’t see anything, so he apparated to Molly and got the auror team looking for him. They didn’t find anything either. I wish I could say otherwise, but I don’t think I need to tell you that it doesn’t look good for him.”

Severus let out a sorrowful sigh and waved the Patronus on.

“Damn,” he whispered. “How on Earth did they manage to take down Mad-Eye?”
He finished dressing and went to Potter’s door, having every intention of sharing the news with the boy, but stopped with his hand poised to knock at the sound of a soft snore. Severus sighed. Potter needed rest desperately, and if Severus told him about Mad-Eye, neither of them would sleep well that evening. With a shake of his head, he lowered his hand and returned to his bedroom. The news could wait until morning. He crawled into bed and, after a numbing spell on his back muted his pain, soon fell asleep.

Piercing shrieks woke Severus an hour or two later. He bolted to his feet, wand in hand and posture alert, but with no idea where he was. A hasty *Lumos* revealed his surroundings, but the green duvet and dark wood bedstead looked nothing like his quarters at Hogwarts, nor the room he used on the rare occasions he slept over at Grimmauld place. Another cry ripped the sleepy fog from his brain, and Severus’ chest turned to ice.

Potter. He was in Squire House after the thestral ride from hell, and Potter was screaming bloody murder.

Merlin! Had someone managed to break the wards down after all?

Heart thundering in his throat, Severus burst into the room across the hall, shooting a stunner immediately over the bed in case someone was hurting the boy, but the red glow revealed only Potter, tangled and thrashing in the sheets. Unconvinced that they were alone, Severus cast a revealing spell which again showed no one but himself and the boy present. He wondered if someone was somehow cursing Potter from afar when it clicked.

A vision, Merlin help them.

Another shriek from Potter confirmed it, and doubly so when his body arched tightly as a bowstring pulled taut—the *Cruciatus*.

“Bloody hell!”

Severus stashed his wand in his waistband and bolted for the bed. With gritted teeth, he climbed in and caught Potter up, confining the boy’s thrashing so he could not injure himself. His own injuries shrieked in protest, but the pressure bandages across Severus’ ribs would keep the lashes from bleeding too badly, he hoped.

“Potter! Wake up! Potter, come! It’s only a vision. A dream.”

A broken sob ripped from the boy’s throat, and Severus held the messy head against his shoulder.

“Potter—Harry, wake up!”

The boy sucked in a gasp like a drowning man and shoved back from Severus’ chest. He struggled a moment, but Severus’ low voice soon broke through the remnants of his vision, and the boy slumped against the older man with a sob.

“Potter, what is it? What did you see?”

The boy whispered, “Moody. He’s … gone. They k-killed him.”
Severus winced and let out a sigh. “Damn. I had hoped ….”

“They targeted him on purpose. Voldemort wanted his eye.”

Severus blanched and held his stomach, trying to pin his insides in. “He, he was alive when they took it, wasn’t he?”

Harry gagged and nodded. “Moody got the best of them, though. His paranoia, well it came in handy. Seems he put a curse on his eye after Crouch. Anyone but himself who touched it lost whatever body part they used.” Harry gave him a grim smirk. “Pettigrew is not the only one-handed Death Eater now, and when Dolohov tried to … subdue him, well, let’s just say he won’t be raping anyone else anytime soon. Stupid of him, really.”

Severus let out an exclamation that would embarrass him later. “Merlin! That’s the best news we’ve had all month.”

Harry chuckled bitterly. “Yeah. They got smarter after that. Had Pettigrew use his false hand. But as soon as it left Moody, the eye disintegrated. Another precaution added after Crouch. Voldemort wasn’t pleased. You can imagine what happened after that.” He hugged his chest and wept.

Severus sighed and laid his forehead in his hand, weary and heavy with sorrow. “I never liked the man, but he was a good auror, and he fought hard for our cause. He deserved better.”

Potter’s face screwed up with grief. “Yeah, and he died because of me!” He broke into heartsick sobs, and Severus’ chest ached with his pain.

“Pott—Harry, it’s not your fault. Mad-eye knew the risks. He even said so before we took off, remember?”

To his distress, Potter wept harder. “I, the last thing I said to him—we were fighting. I should have thanked him. I should have … my fault.”

His words dissolved into incoherent sobs and pleas for forgiveness, and Severus couldn’t bear the young man’s pain. Whether Potter knew it or not, he had given Severus strength during some of the darkest hours of his life. Severus could not then leave him broken, not when Potter had held his hand when his guilt overwhelmed, defended him against sworn friends and allies, laughed with him and gave him genuine smiles, had touched his very soul in his valley of shadow.

Severus recalled how the touch of Potter’s hand had disarmed him, and laid his own atop the weeping boy’s. “I, I know little of comforting others, Potter, but I am here.”

To his shock, the next instant found him holding an armful of sobbing young man. Potter wrapped his arms about Severus’ neck and buried his head into his shoulder.

“Potter?” His voice was breathless. He had not felt a hug in over twenty-two years, and never from non-relatives. He only wished Potter’s embrace didn’t hurt his injured back so badly. “Potter, please. My injuries.”

Potter winced and whipped away, weeping even harder. “Oh, oh Merlin. I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

“I am well enough. Come, why do you cry so?”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s stupid, but I can’t, can’t stop. I feel so bad. I shouldn’t have fought with him. Now the last thing he knew of me, I, I was yelling at him.”
“No, no. You did not yell.”

His words did nothing to ease the boy’s pain, and Potter’s sobs cut Severus deeper than he would have thought possible. It seemed only touch could help him, as much as Severus feared it.

Well, Severus had faced torture, had he not? Would he now back down from the thought of a simple embrace for an ally in grief?

No. A coward he was not.

With a sigh, Severus forced his hands forwards and to Potter’s shoulders. Potter tensed and gasped when Severus then pulled him against his chest and surrounded him with strong, if trembling, arms. Severus gritted his teeth against the softness of having Potter in his embrace. As soothing as it felt, surely Harry would reject him any moment.

Potter murmured, “Sir, um, am I hurting you like this?”

Severus shook his head. “My back is injured, not my front.”

“Oh. Are you scared?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“You’re tense. I thought I was hurting you.”

“No, Potter. I am only trying to comfort you. I, I do not know how.”

Harry relaxed in his embrace and held Severus’ waist instead of his shoulders. “Is this okay?”

Severus swallowed at the intense feeling of belonging Harry’s touch inspired. “Yes. Does this help you?”

Potter gave him a watery smile and embraced him around his waist. “Yeah. Don’t let go. It still hurts too much.”

Severus let out a shaky sigh and held Potter tighter. He couldn’t believe it. Harry hadn’t turned him away. He had asked Severus to stay, and knowing that he was wanted, needed, having Harry in his arms, had relieved a deep, bitter ache in his soul, one he had lived with so long, he had almost forgotten its existence. How strange to find such comfort in the presence of one’s former enemy, yet, Severus could not seem to resent it. Potter had healed him, somehow, of a pain he’d carried far too long.

“I am here, Potter. It’s over now.”

“Thank you, Professor,” the young man murmured.

“You’re welcome.”

Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder, and the older man’s palms moved across the pale expanse of Potter’s back almost of their own accord. Harry’s bare skin warmed Severus’ hands, and the scent of him was like coming home.

Gods, how could a simple embrace feel so good?

Yet, the soothing heat in Severus’ belly chilled as his hands met not the soft, unmarked skin he had expected, but scarred flesh, crossed by untold ridges and welts. Merlin! He knew that pattern from
the scars across his own shoulders and back.

If Harry’s sorry excuse for an uncle had done this to him, had whipped a child until he bled and scarred, the best the bastard could hope for was that the Dark Lord found him before Severus did.

Harry tensed in his arms, and Severus murmured against his ear.

“Shh. You are safe here. I swear it.”

Potter sniffled and rested his cheek upon Severus’ shoulder. “It hurts, Professor. Not just my head, but inside. So much pain.”

Severus leaned back to take a better look at the boy. “Your head hurts?”

“Always does after a vision.” Potter sobbed anew at the memories of what horrors he had seen. “I, I’m so s-sorry. For everything. I should have stopped them carrying out this mad plan. I should have—”

Severus silenced him by holding the messy head against his chest. “It is not your fault, Potter. Shh.”

Harry leaned into Severus and worked to control his ragged breathing. “Y-yeah. Um, Professor?”

“Hmm?”

“Can you, would that healing chant work on my head?”

Severus frowned, surprised he hadn’t thought of trying it sooner. “Yes, it should. It is mostly for dark magic, so it might work rather well, actually, seeing as the pain originates from your curse scar. Lie still and I will heal you.”

Potter sighed. “Thank you.”

Severus held him a bit tighter and lowered his head over Potter’s. He had trouble with such a difficult charm wandless, but for Harry, he might be able to pull it off. It could not hurt him, at least. Calling forth his unique blend of healing powers, he murmured the melody of his soul into Harry’s messy hair. The young man slumped against him before he had even completed one round.

“Oh gods. Don’t stop. It helps so much.”

“Good,” he managed between rounds and begun his song again.

He wasn’t sure exactly when his melody shifted into a Gaelic lullaby his mother used to sing for him, but he noticed when Potter sagged against his chest and let slip a soft snore.

Merlin. Harry had fallen asleep in his arms. Tenderness spread throughout Severus’ chest and warmed him clear down to his toes. He had never imagined such trust, but knowing he had it melted another chunk of ice from his heart. He would sooner die than admit it, but he held Harry closer, just long enough to rest his head upon the messy hair and breathe him in.

He would soon be as sentimental as any Gryffindor at this rate.

With a sigh, he leaned back and patted the boy’s shoulder. “Potter? Wake up, Harry.”

Potter started and moved onto his bed again, wiping his eyes. “I fell asleep? Sorry, sir.”

“Never mind it. Are you able to sleep on your own now?”
Potter sniffled and hugged his knees. “Y-yeah, but, I, would you ….”

“Yes?”

“Stay? Just until I fall asleep again?”

Severus frowned. “You truly wish me to stay?”

“Yes. I don’t want to be alone.” His fearful, pleading expression compelled Severus. The man did not want to consider why.

“As you wish. I will just send a Patronus to Kingsley first.”

Potter nodded, and Severus launched his doe into the night, though it took time to conjure happy thoughts with Moody’s death weighing him down. As the slender figure vanished beyond the bedroom wall, her message on the way, Severus settled into the armchair by Potter’s bed.

“Your Patronus is a doe,” Potter whispered.

Severus just looked at him, waiting for an explanation of that statement.

“Like my stag. They match. Maybe we aren’t supposed to fight, Professor. I feel safe here like I never have before.”

Severus’ heart panged with the admission, and warmth spread through him clear to his toes. “You are safe. I assure you, you will find nothing meaner in these woods than myself.”

Potter snorted. “You’re not so mean lately, sir.”

Severus smoothed down a stubborn curl at the side of Potter’s head. “I have no reason to be any longer. Now, try to rest, Potter. I am here, though why that should comfort you is beyond me.”

The boy gave a halfhearted chuckle and climbed back under the covers. He was silent so long, Severus had begun to think him asleep when a soft murmur met his ears.

“Professor? Thanks.”

Severus turned and watched him for a beat. “You’re welcome.”
Harry woke sometime after dawn, still weary and with the numb ache of loss in the pit of his stomach, but well otherwise. The light of day and Snape’s comfort in the night had mitigated his grief. He hoped Snape had good news about the others. Harry wasn’t sure he could hold it together if anyone else had died for him.

After a fumbling exploration of the hallway, he found the loo and showered off what felt like months of dirt and sweat. He’d cast cleaning charms on himself the night before, but they never felt as thorough as a real shower. Once he’d washed his hair with what he supposed must be Snape’s shampoo and scrubbed the rest of his body with the minty soap provided, Harry felt like a new person.

After dressing in a clean tee and jeans, he somehow managed to transfigure a spare knut into a toothbrush and cleaned the gritty taste from his mouth. Another transfiguration turned the toothbrush into a razor, and after that, a comb. Harry wondered at his sudden skill when he hadn’t been able to make such items without a specific spell before, but didn’t question his luck.

The mirror gave a wry snort as Harry tried his best to flatten his hair with little result.

“Best to focus on battles you can win, dearie.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “What, you mean like offing Voldemort and saving the world?”

“That’s the spirit.”

Apparently magical mirrors lacked the capacity for sarcasm.

He shook his head and shoved the comb in his pocket. Might as well keep it since he’d no idea of where the day would take him.

With a yawn, he padded into the living room in stockinged feet and discovered Snape lounging like a cat in a cosy-looking armchair, a book open in his lap and his feet bare. Harry swallowed at the sight of him, his heart thumping. Gods, the man looked sexy like that. Harry drew in a sharp breath, shocked by his own thoughts, and fierce heat enveloped his face.
Snape raised an eyebrow over the cover of his book. “Something on your mind, Potter?”

Harry gulped. “No, no sir. Just a little hot. Er, it’s, never mind. What are you reading?”

“I am refreshing my knowledge of inheritance illnesses and their treatments.” Snape gave him a sad smile. “I thought it prudent to be prepared in case we are unable to leave until after your illness has passed.”

Harry rubbed his toe in the carpet and smiled from under his fringe. “Thanks, sir. For always taking care of me.”

“Until yesterday, I fear I have not been taking care of you at all, Harry. I have kept you alive. That is not the same as taking care of you.”

Harry went silent. He knew all too well about the difference between love and survival.

After a moment, Snape said, “Were you able to rest after I left?”

“Yeah. Slept well, considering. I didn’t hear you have nightmares. Were you okay?”

Snape shook his head. “I could not fall asleep long enough to begin them.”

“Oh.” Harry hugged his waist. “I’m sorry. Is it Moody or your injuries?”

“A bit of both, I suppose.”

Harry nodded and wrung his hands. “Did anyone else …?”

Snape shook his head. “Not that I have heard. Shacklebolt said George Weasley took a … cutting curse to the face, but he will recover. He said this morning that everyone else made it back in one piece with only some scrapes and bruises. That is all I know at this time.”

Harry winced. The news came as a physical blow. Moody gone and George injured, and all for Harry’s sake. Merlin, how he wished his friends would stop risking their lives for him. He held his chest and took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to hold back his grief.

“C-could be worse, I suppose.”

Snape nodded, though his eyes were kind. “We shall at least be able to tell them apart from now on, which will make their hijinks a bit more difficult. Still, trust them to come up with a way to circumvent their new difficulties within the week. I would wager they are already working on a solution.”

Harry gave a weak chuckle. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Thanks.”

“Are you well, Potter?”

“I’ll, I will be.” Harry scrubbed a hand across his eyes. “I’m sorry about last night.”

Snape shook his head. “No apologies. Grief is normal and natural. You had every right to weep, and I did not mind helping you.”

Harry chanced a shy smile. “Really? Even though I cried all over you?”

“I will be sending you the bill for a replacement nightshirt presently.”
Harry gaped when he realised Snape wasn’t serious. “You made a joke. Merlin.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “Is it so surprising that I have a sense of humour?”

“Not at all. You made me laugh yesterday, remember? Only I didn’t think you were trying to be funny last night; I just found your snark entertaining. But that joke was intentional. I just found it surprising that you trust me enough to want to be funny. I thought you’d restrain that part of you a lot longer, considering.”

Snape shrunk in on himself as if expecting attack. He was, Harry had no doubt.

Harry stepped closer, palms held out in supplication. “Professor, it’s okay. I was only surprised. Merlin knows, I’d rather you laugh with me than rant about my utter inability to use a cauldron.”

Humbling himself seemed to have done the trick. Snape relaxed and gave him a glare Harry saw right through.

“I am harder on those I do not hate than those I do. You may wish for my ranting back in a week’s time.”

Harry laughed. “Somehow I doubt that.” He moved closer and looked Snape over. “Did I hurt you last night? When I hugged you?”

“Not worth mentioning, Potter. Rookwood did, however.”

“I can try to heal you now, if you want.”

Snape frowned. “It may be too much of a drain with your inheritance around the corner.”

“Might I try anyway? I hate to think of you suffering, even if you do hide it incredibly well.”

Snape peered at Harry a moment, then stood with a sigh. “As you wish.”

He turned his back and tugged his black tee up his waist, and Harry’s eyes boggled.

“Professor?” The squeak in Harry’s voice made his cheeks hot.

“Calm yourself, Potter. I must take this off if you are to treat me.”

Harry gulped and watched pale skin as Snape revealed it, showing a trim waist and slender frame criss-crossed with a hatching of old scars. A slight frisson of heat in his belly turned to ice as he caught sight of the bloodstained gauze across Snape’s ribs. Red and brown painted every centimetre of the soft medical gauze, and black bruises marred the skin around its edges.

Then Snape banished the whole mess with a grunt, and Harry gasped and jerked back, horrified. Seven long, deep gashes hung open across Snape’s shoulders and ribs, each weeping blood. It indeed looked as if someone had lashed him with a whip—brutally.

“Bloody hell,” Harry breathed. “Professor, you should have had someone help you last night. This is bad.”

Snape frowned over his shoulder. “How, Potter? No one can apparate here, and our fire is not on the floo network.”

Harry winced. “So I guess that means no calling Madame Pomfrey then.”
“Bite your tongue, boy. That woman will hold me for a week for a curse that could be treated in moments.”

Harry hugged his chest and frowned. “I asked you not to call me that.”

Snape turned to face Harry and gave him a piercing look. “Why does it bother you so?”

Harry closed his eyes and his thoughts, hoping Snape couldn’t read the truth from his body language either. Snape already knew too much about how badly his uncle had hurt him. He did not need further evidence.

“It … it just does. Please, don’t.”

Snape studied him a moment. “Very well.” He turned his back once more. “Do you remember what I taught you last night?”

Relief washed through Harry at Snape’s acquiescence. He had expected more of a battle, but perhaps the man was too tired to fight. Harry dared not hope their nascent truce had fuelled the man’s gentle acceptance.

‘No.’ He couldn’t keep thinking like that, always trying to protect himself. Snape was clearly trying to put the past behind them. Harry should, too.

He sighed and let the old fear go. Even if Snape hadn’t proved himself a month before, the night previous would have convinced Harry of his trustworthiness. Snape had been so kind, so gentle when grief had threatened to drown Harry. His arms had held Harry together, and the young man could ill afford to forget it.

‘I trust him.’

Snape called over his shoulder, “Potter? Do you remember?”

Harry gave Snape a hesitant smile. “Sorry, sir. I think I remember. I look inside myself for my magic, ask it for healing, and let it choose the song?”

Snape nodded. “And the incantation?”

“Vulnera Sanentur?”

“So you can learn.” Snape turned and cast a glare over his shoulder. “I expect such attention in potions this year, Mister Potter.”

Fire flickered in Harry’s chest. “Would it make a difference?”

Snape shot him a cold glare. “And that is supposed to mean?”

“Will you banish every attempt I make whether it’s correct or not, or turn a blind eye every time a Slytherin chucks extra ingredients into my cauldron? Or are you going to belittle me at every opportunity and compare me to my father when I stand up for myself? Maybe you’ll take points for breathing too loudly this year, yeah?”

Fury flashed across Snape’s face, but it quickly vanished and changed to despair.

“Why should I? The Slytherins all know the truth about me now, and—”

Harry gasped. The Slytherins! Malfoy was no longer among them, but Parkinson, Goyle, Crabbe,
and many other baby Death Eaters still roamed Hogwarts’ halls. Any one of them could take Snape out, if they caught him off guard.

“And you can’t go back to teaching, can you?”

Snape looked away. “The Headmaster has asked it of me.”

Harry snorted. “Has he asked you to snap your wand, drop trou, and bend over, too?”

“Potter!”

“Oh, hush. I know you’re as worries—”

Snape turned and gripped Harry’s shoulders, his expression bordering on rage but his eyes full of fear. “Be quiet, you foolish child! You have no idea of what you are saying!”

Harry glared back. “Let go of me.”

Snape released him, but stayed close. “Potter, your Occlumency—how is it?”

Harry winced. “Not great. I can block the other students, but you still cut through my shields like butter.”

“As I thought. You may make free with the Headmaster’s character when you are half so skilled at mind magic as he is. Until then, hold your tongue.”

“When I’m …?”

The hair on the back of Harry’s neck stood on end. Something wasn’t right. Why would Snape say he could take the mickey out of Dumbledore at all? He had always insisted on absolute respect for his colleagues, bar Umbridge and Lockhart. And even Snape had hated Umbridge, with good reason.

Had Snape noticed Dumbledore’s less-than-honourable behaviour, too? Was he trying to warn Harry without making it too obvious?

Harry swallowed hard, ice building in his belly. If Snape had begun to see through the Headmaster’s manipulations, it would explain the man’s comments. Professor Snape wasn’t the only Legilimens at Hogwarts, so he couldn’t say anything to Harry yet—of course he couldn’t. Harry wasn’t a strong enough Occlumens. If he made one wrong move, the Headmaster could read their conversation in his mind, and Merlin help them both if he did. Snape would likely be sacked—or worse—and Harry would be confined to Order Headquarters, a kept weapon to be used and thrown away.

‘Not like that’s anything new,’ Harry grumbled to himself.

“I see I have confounded you,” Snape said with a smirk. “Pitiful. There is little hope of you ever learning to block if you do not even try to comprehend.”

Harry frowned and translated that from Snape-speak. ‘Pay attention. Try to understand what I need you to do.’

Right. So what should he do? Snape was trying to warn him, but about what? Harry thought back to their Legilimency sessions, and suddenly understood. Snape wanted to create a safe scene to show the Headmaster should his shields fail. Harry had to keep his head and act out the scene as they normally would. Any obvious comment or deviation from the behaviour Dumbledore would expect
Harry glared and prayed it looked convincing. He stood akimbo and shouted, but left his mind wide open so Snape could read the truth in Harry’s eyes.

“If someone I know had bothered to actually teach me, then I might be skilled enough to block him and Voldemort!”

He hoped Snape would understand his strong desire to learn Occlumency.

A brief smile of approval curved Snape’s lips before his familiar scowl twisted his face. “Skilled enough to block the Headmaster, Potter? You’ve a snowball’s chance in hell. Still, there may be hope to block out the Dark Lord, but I will not teach a whiny little brat who has no intention of learning and invades my privacy at every turn.”

Harry jerked back, stung in truth this time. “Oi! I already apologised about that—last year, if you remember. And if you hadn’t been so cruel to me, maybe actually explained how to clear my mind rather than just shouting and barging into my head, I might have done better.”

Snape scoffed. “You didn’t want to do better!”

“Of course I did. I had to—the door … damn!” Harry deflated and ran a hand through his hair. “No, you’re right. You had no chance to teach me then. I didn’t want to learn.” He flopped into a chair and buried his head in his hands. “That door—I wanted to know what was behind it. And because I was too foolish to listen to you and everyone else, Sirius is dead. It’s all my fault.”

A gentle hand fell on Harry’s shoulder, and he looked into eyes full of emotion, kindness warming their inky depths. The change it rendered to Snape’s face made his stomach jolt.

“Don’t be so arrogant, Potter. Not everything in this world revolves around you.”

Harry almost recoiled before remembering they were in character. Snape was trying to tell him without revealing too much that this situation wasn’t his fault.

“I never said it did.” He turned his face away and buried his head in his hand, struggling to hold his emotions in. Fuck. He really had killed Sirius.

Snape sighed and sat on the couch beside Harry, keeping his bleeding back well away from the fabric. “That is enough. You may speak a bit more freely.” He patted Harry’s shoulder. “Well done.”

“Thanks,” Harry muttered, not taking his head from his hand.

Snape hesitantly took Harry’s free hand and held it in his lap. “Potter, you did not kill Black. We all made mistakes that day. I provoked him, Black went without reason, you didn’t ask me if he was well before you left, Dumbledore delayed me in rescuing you. You could blame his death on any of us I suppose, but we are not his true killer. Black is dead for the same reason I have this appalling scar on my face: Bellatrix Lestrange is a twisted bitch of a psychopath.”

“Too right! Well, about Bellatrix anyway.” Harry freed his hand and tentatively reached for Snape’s face. With tender fingertips, he traced the side of the startled man’s cheek, where the glamour still concealed the worst of his scars. Though Harry saw only smooth skin, wrinkles and bumps marred the warmth under his fingertips. So the glamour only made it invisible. Harry wished he could take Snape’s scars away completely, if only to make the man feel better about himself.

Snape gasped at Harry’s touch and went rigid, his black eyes wide. He was shaking so hard, Harry’s
hand vibrated.

“It’s okay,” Harry soothed. “Ssh. I won’t hurt you.”

He traced in front of Snape’s ear and found what felt like divots from fingernails. Gods, had that mad bitch tried to tear off his face? Dear Merlin!

Harry would kill her for this, someday. Perhaps tossing her into the Veil would be poetic justice. Sirius would be there to make sure she paid for her sins in full even in the afterlife.

No. It wouldn’t be fair to force Sirius to deal with the mad bitch for eternity.

Snape gasped out, “P-Potter?”

The stammer in the man’s voice revealed the depth of his fear. His eyes couldn’t hide his intense vulnerability either. Snape was terrified.

Harry cupped both sides of the man’s fearful face, holding him steady with gentle hands. “Ssh. Professor, look at me.” Snape met Harry’s gaze with tearful, wide eyes. “See? I’m Harry, not the bastards who attacked you. It’s okay. You’re safe with me.”

“You, you will not hurt me?” Snape winced, as if afraid of his own vulnerability.

Harry left his mind open so Snape could see his intent in his eyes. “Never. I will never hurt you, Professor. I’ll protect you. I swear it.”

Slowly, the fear left the man’s eyes. Harry held him and stroked his thumbs over Snape’s cheekbones, smoothed his hair with gentle fingertips, and soothed him with a shy smile. After a time, Snape sighed and turned his face into Harry’s palm.

Harry smiled and let the other hand drop. “Okay now?”

“Yes,” he murmured. “But I do not understand. Why do you … touch me like this?”

“I just wanted to. And, I want you to know that I meant what I said. Your scars are not appalling—they only show how brave you are.”

Snape leaned ever so slightly into Harry’s palm, his eyes fluttering shut. A soft warmth filled Harry’s chest and belly.

“Poppycock,” he murmured, but his voice was soft.

“No, it’s the truth. I know you probably won’t believe me, but I’m proud of you. You’ve been so brave, so strong, fighting them like this and staring death in the face every day, just so the rest of us would have a chance. Merlin, I’m proud just to know you.”

There. Harry had kept his promise and told him. Snape needed to hear it anyway, even if he couldn’t believe it yet.

Snape’s eyes shot open, wide and brimming with tears. Tears? Merlin! Harry had made snarky, brave, tough-as-nails Professor Snape cry?

“You, you cannot be serious,” Snape said in a broken voice.

Harry gasped and grabbed Snape’s arms, keeping well away from his injuries. “Oh gods, sir! I would never hurt you like that, not even when I hated you, and I don’t any longer. I really am proud
of you. You’ve done us all proud. You’re a bloody hero, you are.”

Snape’s breath caught, and two fat tears slipped down his cheeks. Harry’s heart panged with grief and alarm at the sight. He rubbed Snape’s tears away, panic building within his chest.

“Professor! I’m so sorry. Please, please don’t cry. I didn’t mean to—”

Snape held Harry’s hands over his cheeks and shook his head slightly. “Hush, Potter. You have done nothing wrong. I only, I never thought I would hear those words.”

Harry swallowed hard and lowered their joined hands to Snape’s lap. “So, I didn’t h-hurt you?”

“No. Simply overwhelmed me. No one has confessed to feeling pride in me since my mother died.”

Harry still couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that he’d made Professor Snape cry.

“Oh. I, it’s true, though. You are a hero.” He calmed as he realised the tears had stopped. “I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

Snape sighed and squeezed Harry’s hands before releasing him. “I’m well enough. Are you ready to heal me now?”

Harry winced. “Oh! We should’ve done it already. I got distracted. I’m sorry. Turn around, and I’ll try the chant.”

“Not on the sofa in case something goes awry. Come.”

He moved to the centre of the room and turned his bleeding back. Harry came to his side and cringed at the sight of his wounds.

“If you are able to call your song,” said Snape, “then try to heal me. You cannot harm me with this chant, even if you fail to heal me the first time.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do my best.”

Closing his eyes, Harry tried to do as Snape had taught him last night, and relief washed over him as a soft melody filled his spirit. Rich and warm, the tone seemed made of light, and the tip of Harry’s wand glowed brilliant white. His voice sounded good, too.

Snape gasped. “Merlin, Potter.”

Harry tensed. “What? Did I do it wrong?”

“No, no. I was only surprised. Try again. With a voice like that, you should have innate skill.”

Harry’s cheeks flamed. “T-thank you.” He closed his eyes and sought his song again.

It came easily enough, though Harry wanted to practise before he put the charm to work, just in case. It seemed to work, though he wasn’t yet aiming at Snape.

Hmm. Maybe he could learn chanting. The idea intrigued him, and Harry could practise it even if they had to live rough. As far as he knew, it required no instrument besides his voice and his magic. Maybe Harry would ask Snape to teach him as soon as the man was better, though he didn’t imagine he’d have a lot of opportunity to learn much of anything while hunting horcruxes. Especially since Snape wouldn’t be there to teach him.
Wouldn’t be there to … Merlin! How had Harry failed to realise that Snape was *leaving*?

He reeled, stunned and shaking. The mere thought of Snape’s departure left a void in Harry’s chest and turned his gut to ice. The man had to return to work. Harry knew it, yet his stomach turned at the idea of letting Snape return to Hogwarts alone, where a slew of miniature Death Eaters eagerly awaited his arrival.

His hand trembled as he drew his wand and focused it on Snape’s open wounds. For a moment, he simply stared, terrified for his new … friend? *Were* they friends? It certainly felt that way to Harry. And Harry would sooner die himself than abandon his friends to face their fate.

No. He couldn’t let Snape return to that place. Not knowing one wrong move would kill the man. He’d lost far too many loved ones already.

Maybe he could convince Snape to come with him? Gods knew Harry would need the help. And whether Snape wanted to admit it or not, he needed Harry. He had no one else, and Harry wanted with every part of his being to make Snape happy.

“Potter? Are you well?”

At the sound of Snape’s concern, Harry shook himself out of his thoughts. He could worry about this *after* the gaping wounds on Snape’s back had healed. The man had to be in sheer agony.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I was just practising a bit. I’ll try it on you now.”

“Very well.”

With a deep breath to compose himself, Harry called his spirit’s song and poured all his strength into the charm. Snape deserved the best he could offer, all Harry had. He focused his power until his body vibrated and his wand tip glowed like a miniature sun. Satisfied, Harry drew his wand over the wounds. He had the lacerations cleaned and sealed in two passes and, with another burst of focus, made a third pass to clear the dark magic from Snape’s body.

As Harry’s wand completed the circuit and his chant ended the third round, his head spun and his breath left his lungs in a whoosh. Merlin, that spell must have taken a lot of magic. He felt as though a lorry had run him over. Harry shook himself and reached for a nearby shelf to gain some ballast.

When his vision cleared, Harry cried out and reached for Snape. Something had gone wrong. White light had covered the man’s entire body, focused on his chest, left arm, and face. The healing chant wasn’t supposed to make *Snape* glow, just Harry’s wand.

Harry dropped his wand and cried, “Professor!”

Panic crashed into him with the force of the Knight Bus when Snape didn’t answer. Bloody hell, had he killed the man?

“Sir! Are you okay? Oh, please be okay. *Please.*”

The light cleared, and Snape gasped and tilted forwards, clutching his chest.

“Merlin! Potter, what have you done to me?”

Relieved to at least hear the man’s voice, Harry sobbed and laid a hand on Snape’s healed back, searching for injuries he couldn’t see. “Oh gods, Snape! I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean, I was only trying to—did I hurt you?”
Snape turned—without a limp—and stared at the boy as if he had never seen him before.

“No. You healed me.”

Harry frowned and scrubbed a hand across his eyelids. “Um, well, that’s good, but I don’t understand. Isn’t that what I was supposed to do? What was that light if all I did was heal you?”

“I am unsure about the light, but you did heal me. Only …” Snape hopped on his injured leg and gave a huff of consternation. “I wasn’t expecting healing quite to this extent. It feels as if you have healed everything in my body. Even the …” Snape’s eyes widened and his breath came out in a rush. “Sweet Circe, even this!”

He turned his left arm out and rolled up his sleeve, revealing pale, unmarked flesh. Harry gasped and swayed, his knees suddenly weak.

“Holy Merlin! I healed your mark?” He touched the white, unblemished skin with shaky fingertips. “I can’t believe—I thought nothing could remove it! I mean, I know I cut the evil in it off so Voldemort couldn’t kill you through it, but—”

Snape jerked back, cradling his arm against his chest. “That was you? How?”

Harry’s face burned. He hoped Snape wouldn’t hate him for what he couldn’t help. “Um, through a vision. I saw you in the infirmary and realised Voldemort was trying to kill you, so I counteracted the dark magic with love. I, it blocked him when he tried to possess me, so I thought it might work with you, too. It did, thank the gods. I was so afraid you’d die before I could stop him.”

“A vision. You fought the Dark Lord in a vision for me. I … Merlin.” Snape sank to his knees and held his arm before his face, staring as if he had never seen anything so beautiful. “I thought it would taint me until my death. I never hoped to be free of it.”

Harry shuffled his feet and stuck his hands behind his back.

Snape met Harry’s gaze, his eyes shining through a sheen of tears. “Thank you, Harry.”

Harry’s jaw hit the floor. Snape was thanking him?

The man threw his head back and laughed. Actually laughed! The sound of it shocked Harry out of his daze.

“Well, don’t just stand there looking like I’ve shocked the life from you.” Snape grinned at Harry, making the older man look years younger. “Surely you’ve been thanked before.”

With a wry chuckle, Harry wiped his eyes and shook his head. “Not by you. Er, you’re welcome, Professor. I’m really glad it’s gone and he can’t hurt you any longer. But—” The blood drained from Harry’s face as he remembered his vision and Pomfrey’s chilling words. “Oh shite! Your magic, sir! Can you still use it?”

Snape paled and yanked his wand from his waistband. Harry helped him to his feet, and stood by, panicking, as Snape looked for something to charm. A flick of his wrist sent the soap dish floating from one side of the sink to the other. He tried various other spells in quick succession, then gave Harry a nod.

“It appears to be unaffected, and my core looks well enough.”

“You can see your own core?”
“If one is skilled enough in meditation and mind magic, or if one has mage sight, yes. I need not tell you that I qualify as the former.” He gave Harry a confused sort of smile. “Actually, my core looks clearer. Perhaps the mark was strangling my magic. It would make sense, considering Poppy reckoned me to be as strong as the Dark Lord but I have seen no evidence of such power before. It must be that the bastard was draining me.”

“Oh, thank the gods,” Harry whispered, shaking in the force of his relief. “Pomfrey said it was attached to your magic. I was terrified I’d made you a squib.”

Snape held Harry’s shoulder and gave him a tentative smile. “No, Harry. You made me a free man. And I’m still a wizard. Thank you. Truly.”

Harry grinned back. “Anytime.”

Snape’s laughter warmed Harry to the core.

Still overwhelmed with his unexpected freedom, Severus made his way to the shower. He barely registered his actions as he stripped and stepped under the water, too preoccupied with the unexpected direction his life had taken to notice the mundane.

He felt as though he had lost ten stone along with the Dark Mark. Perhaps he had, in a way. Without it, he could finally make a real life for himself.

Before, only Dumbledore had been willing to offer him legitimate employment and sanctuary. Despite the fact that Severus hated teaching, he had stayed year after year because he had no other choice and because his undercover work required it.

He had no reason to stay any longer. Hogwarts was no longer a sanctuary, Dumbledore was no longer trustworthy, and Severus had lost both his mark and his position as a spy. Gods, it felt good to know he could resign this year and say goodbye to the dunderheads forever. He would rather work alone, or at least with adults. He was certain his students would rather him work with a different age group, too. He was a horrible teacher.

As Severus lathered up his hair, he wondered what he would do now. He had always wanted to do potions research as a teen, but he thought the routine would likely bore him as an adult. He had become too used to intrigue and danger.

Danger, hmm? Perhaps the auror corps would take him. He certainly had the expertise, and Shacklebolt would surely snap him up in a heartbeat, should Severus apply. It wasn’t a bad idea, assuming he could convince the rest of the DMLE to accept him. With no mark and the head auror’s backing, it couldn’t be too difficult. Perhaps he would apply. He had no better ideas at the moment.

The thought made him chuckle. Severus Snape, an auror. Who would have thought it?

Black and Potter would roll in their graves, and that made the idea all the more enticing.

Severus rubbed a fingertip over his unmarked arm, his mirth fading. Potter Senior would indeed have been furious to share his profession with Severus, but not his Potter. How could he have ever imagined Harry to be a duplicate of his father? They were night and day.
James had approached his tussles with the Slytherins with a swagger, all ego and bluster. In fact, he reminded Severus strongly of one Draco Malfoy. Merlin, if it weren’t for the blonde hair, Draco could have been Potter’s son.

Severus shuddered at the thought.

But Harry, no. Harry was different. He avoided fights wherever possible, and where it wasn’t, he tried to defend the innocent, often risking his own life to save theirs. He hadn’t a blustering bone in his body, and Harry was kind. So kind and gentle. Severus had never felt a touch like Harry had offered him that morning.

Severus closed his eyes and lifted his face into the spray. The hot water massaged lines of stress and pain from his features and caressed him, a bit like Harry’s fingertips had.

When Harry had first touched him, Severus had fallen into the past, as if Bellatrix again had him petrified and was slowly stripping the skin from his cheek. For a moment, he had trouble keeping his terror under control.

Then, Harry’s voice had reached him, soft and soothing. Those emerald eyes had pulled Severus in, and Harry’s open mind had comforted him as much as the gentle hands on his cheeks, the soft caresses to his temples and hair. Harry meant only to heal him; Severus saw it in both his kindness and his thoughts. And, as his fears faded, Severus began to feel safe in Harry’s hands. Protected and cared for. He hadn’t been able to help turning into a calloused, but gentle palm.

And Harry hadn’t turned him away.

At the memory, a rush of warmth and tenderness spread through Severus’ chest. Merlin, Harry had been so gentle with him. Severus had never known a touch like that.

Halfway through rinsing his hair, he paused and considered their changed relationship. A week past, he hadn’t hated Potter, but he hadn’t liked him, either. After that morning, he had no one closer to his heart than Harry. Certainly no one he would allow to cradle his face and caress his scars. Harry appeared to feel the same way.

How had their relationship changed so quickly? Hardly twelve hours had passed since that ill-fated ride from Harry’s relatives. They should not have developed such a strong bond in that short a time.

Severus froze, gooseflesh rising all over his skin despite the warm shower. ‘Bond?’

“Oh, shite,” he whispered.

Ten years or so ago, Severus remembered coming across a description of a special type of soul bond in his research. At the time, he had been researching a cure for a student’s rare soul sickness for Poppy and he hadn’t paid the bond much attention, but he remembered a few details. Such as the bond fostering closeness between the participants.

It had mentioned something about intense need for deeper communion acting as the catalyst for the bond. Both participants needed to reach out to each other at the same time for the bond to take hold, but when it did … it bonded their souls together for eternity.

Severus slumped against the handrail, shaking and cold. ‘We didn’t … did we?’

He straightened and grabbed the conditioner, shoving the idea from his mind. No, there had to be some other reason. Simple closeness needed no magical explanation. After all, Minerva had always said when they met Friday nights for firewhiskey and chess, that if Severus could take his head out
of his arse long enough, he’d see he and Potter were actually quite similar. Well, if Potter had the same desperate need for touch and companionship that Severus did, it might make a bond between them develop faster.

No. Not a bond, just companionship.

He refused to consider the alternative. Harry was too pure, too beautiful to tie into a soul bond with the likes of Severus Snape.

Besides, Potter had a crush on Ginevra Weasley. Severus was sure of it.

Reassured, he continued his shower in peace. Potter and himself had both been alone for years. Was it so surprising they would reach out to each other? No. Not at all.

Gods, he still couldn’t believe how wrong he’d been about Harry since their first meeting. He never should have compared Harry to his arsehole of a father. Where James had been spiteful and cruel, Harry was compassionate and caring. He had held Severus in his arms and reassured him and called him brave. Brave! Those simple words and touches had eased a deep hurt within Severus’ spirit and made him feel worthy again.

James Potter would have died before he said anything kind to Severus Snape. Actually, he had done.

Yet, Harry showered him with praise and affection, and Severus soaked up every drop. Despite the six-metre thick steel walls Severus had erected around his heart, Harry had broken through, melted the ice within, and claimed the largest piece of the spy’s atrophied affections for himself.

Harry-bloody-Potter was now his best friend.

The thought brought a laugh from deep in Severus’ chest. Ah, it had been so long since he had felt any real desire to laugh. He must thank Potter for that, too.

No. Harry, not Potter. He couldn’t continue thinking of him by the same name as his hated father, not after what the boy had given him. It occurred to him he had been calling Harry by his given name often in the past few days, and the realisation that Harry didn’t seem to mind made him smile.

Severus looked in the mirror as he stepped out of the shower, curious what mirth looked like on his face. Gods knew he hadn’t had a reason to smile in years.

Merlin, what a change! His joy had lightened his features and made him look much younger. He should smile more often.

Wait. Severus paused, stunned. A mere smile couldn’t straighten his teeth. Nor his nose!

“What in Merlin’s name?”

Severus traced a fingertip down his nose, shocked at the change. It seemed Harry had healed his long-term injuries as well as acute. The sallow tone, premature wrinkles, and stains on his teeth and fingertips had gone. Instead, he had the same smile—only straighter—he had once had before falling prey to the Dark Lord’s evil. Hell, he looked better than he had at twenty. Even his scars … no, he was still wearing that glamour, wasn’t he? Shame. He supposed no magic could take away what Bellatrix had done to him.

But then, Harry didn’t seem to mind. Severus lifted a hand to his cheek where Harry’s touch had healed him so much.
Wait. Something was … Severus rubbed harder and gasped. He could no longer feel the pitting and wrinkling, nor the horrible dents in front of his ear where the bitch had tried to skin him.

No glamour could hide so much.

Trembling all over, he cast *Finite Incantatem* and received his third shock of the day.

The grotesque scarring Bellatrix had given him had vanished entirely. His face was as clean and clear as it had been in his youth.

Severus dragged shaking fingers over his cheek and ear—smooth once more—and a wave of emotion stung his eyelids with tears. *Tears*, for the third time in an hour, when prior to that he had only cried once since Lily’s death, and that only in the midst of torture.

*Merlin, he was* becoming a Gryffindor.

He jerked his hand across his eyes and tied a towel around his waist. “Potter! Harry! Come here a moment.”

The boy’s steps thundered through the hall—no doubt he feared an emergency.

“Professor? Are you okay?”

“Yes, but come. Open the door.”

Harry peeked inside and let out a little screech, jerking his hands over his eyes. “Oi! You’re not dressed!”

Severus gave a dark chuckle. “Obviously. I need you to look at my back. Do you see any scars there? Even from the cuts you healed earlier?” He turned and peered over his shoulder, watching Harry drop his hands slowly, a bright red flush creeping up his face and ears.

“Um, n-not that I can see. Why?”

Severus turned and pointed to his face. “My glamour is off, Harry. Look.”

Harry gasped and reached up, tucking Severus’ wet locks behind his ear. Severus closed his eyes at the feel of warm fingertips against his cheek and ear. So soft, so tender. He couldn’t help turning into Harry’s hand a bit. It felt so good to be touched with gentleness.

Harry grinned and stepped back, letting his hand fall and leaving Severus bereft.

“Brilliant! You look much younger without that scar.” Harry’s smile softened. “Mind, I thought you handsome even with it. It’s really gone, though? You’re sure you took the glamour off?”

Severus shot him a sharp look. As if she would forget.

Harry blushed deeper. “Right. Stupid question.” He hugged his chest and frowned. “I, I really healed you this much? Er, did you have a lot of scars before now?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I was one of the Dark Lord’s favourite toys, Potter. What do you think?”

Harry winced. “Oh. Merlin. I can’t believe I healed you so well. I’ve never really been that great at magic, so this … to have removed your mark and your scars—and, bloody hell, is your nose fixed, too?”
Severus nodded. “And my teeth. You healed everything amiss in my body, I think.”


“I am unsure. Perhaps you are a natural healer like Poppy. Or a natural chanter. Perhaps, with this degree of healing, you are both.” Severus met the young man’s eyes. “Whatever the cause, I am so very grateful to you, Harry.”

He tentatively touched Harry’s cheek, brushing shy fingertips against the young man’s face. Harry jumped and whipped his head up, eyes wide and mouth gaping.

Severus jerked his hand back as if stung. “Oh. Forgive me. I should have realised my touch would … would disgust you. I shall not take such liberties again.” He turned away, chest aching as if someone had lodged a knife between his ribs. To have Harry turn from him after such gentleness hurt him deeply. More so than Severus would have thought possible.

A hesitant hand took his and lifted it until his knuckles brushed soft skin. Confused, Severus turned to find his hand pressed against Harry’s cheekbone, and the young man holding it there. The ache in his chest eased.

“Ssh,” Harry said in a soft voice. “It’s okay, sir. I wasn’t disgusted—just shocked. I’ve never been touched here, not like that. You only surprised me. It’s okay if you want to … to touch me.”

Severus swallowed around a sudden tightness in his throat and tentatively cupped the young man’s cheek. Harry let his own hand fall and gave Severus a bright smile.

“That does feel nice,” he said. “I like it.”

The last of Severus’ pain vanished, and he rubbed his fingers across Harry’s cheekbone and through his messy hair. Harry’s eyes fluttered closed and he leaned up on his toes, as if trying to come closer. A strange ache filled Severus’ chest—not painful this time, sweet and tense and tingling. He had never felt anything like it.

Harry smiled and leaned against Severus’ hand. “Are you okay now, sir?”

Severus let his hand fall and gave Harry a shy smile. “Yes. I believe so. I am better than I ever have been. Thank you, Harry.”

“I’m just glad you’re healed.” Harry’s eyes flicked downwards, and a hot blush spread up his cheeks. “Oh, Merlin.” He coughed and turned his face away. “Um, s-sir, if there is nothing else, might I go in the other room until you’re, um, dressed?”

The young man motioned to Severus’ hips, barely covered by his towel, and heat crept up the spy’s face. Gods, how had he managed to forget he was standing practically naked in Harry’s presence?

“Yes, yes,” Severus choked out. “Forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive, sir. I was only a little embarrassed. I’m glad you trust me enough to show me, um, you.” Harry gave him a bashful smile and left the loo, shutting the door behind him. “Sir, I’ll have breakfast ready in a bit, and I’ve set out some of my clothing for you. I didn’t know if you have anything left here, and I thought you could transfigure it into what you want until we can get you something clean.”

The boy had made him breakfast and laid out clothing for him? Harry’s own clothing? Severus hid a soft smile behind the fall of his hair. He did have a few outfits in his closet in case he had need of
them, but he would wear Harry’s clothing that day simply because the young man had cared enough to offer. The thought touched Severus’ heart and filled him with warmth.

Severus smiled and called through the door, “I will dress and join you shortly, then.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry left, and Severus leaned against the door, his entire body warm despite his wet skin and lack of proper clothing. Harry was so good to him. Severus could hardly believe the treasure he had found in the young man’s friendship. Gods, he didn’t deserve it, and yet, he thought if Lily could only see them now, she might be proud of them both.

Harry was still blushing about the incident in the loo when Professor Snape returned, dressed in a dark blue button-down and black trousers—he blushed deeper when he realised Snape hadn’t altered his clothing at all other than to resize them to fit his lanky frame. He gave the man a sheepish smile and handed him a tray with porridge and wild strawberries, bangers, and toast.

“Here you are. Seems the preservation charms on this cold box are excellent. There wasn’t much left beyond a bit of butter, porridge mix, milk, and coffee, but everything is still good. I even found some bangers in the ice box and strawberries in the garden. How long has this place been empty?”

Snape took the bowl with a nod of thanks and carried it to the table. “Two years.”

Harry blanched. “Years? I supposed it was only a few months since there wasn’t much dust around. Er, that might not be safe after all, Professor.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “Preservation charms work wonders, Potter, and not just on food. What is the point of preserving the food and potions if one leaves the house susceptible to dust and vermin?” He sniffed at his bowl and smiled. “This is perfectly fine for consumption, unless you are a worse cook than what I can tell by the look and smell.”

Harry ruffled the back of his hair and gave him a wry grin. “Thanks, I think.” He poured a bowl of porridge for himself and brought the coffee pot to the table. “There’s only dry creamer and sugar, but knowing you, you probably take it black anyway.”

Snape poured coffee into the mug Harry had set by his plate. It was black and gold and read: ‘Wizards do it better.’ Harry had laughed when he saw it.

“Two creams and one sugar, actually,” said the man.

Harry pushed the sugar and creamer to Snape. “Huh. I figured you’d be a coffee purist. Shows how much I know.” He sipped from his plain blue mug, relishing in the warmth suffusing him all the way to his toes. “I grew up with it black, but I like a little sugar and cream these days.”

Snape fixed him with an odd look. “Your relatives gave a child black coffee? And you didn’t spit it on them?”

Harry forced down a shudder and set his mug aside. “Um, yeah.”

“Hmm.”
Harry shovelled porridge into his mouth in attempt to hide his discomfort. Severus’ raised eyebrow said he wasn’t fooled, but the man let the subject drop.

“Did anyone from the Order contact us while I was showering?”

Harry nodded. “Mrs. Weasley said everyone else is okay. George, he, he lost an ear.” He gripped his fork so hard, it was a wonder it didn’t snap in two. “The bloody idiot. Tried to save Mad-Eye, and Rowle hit him with ….” He looked away, grief, shame, and fury warring within him.

“Sectumsempra,” Snape said with a sigh. “I should never have shown them that spell. I should never have invented it.”

Harry choked on his porridge. “You? You’re the Half-Blood Prince?”

Snape waved his hand at the home. “I am a Prince on my mother’s side and a half-blood. The title seemed fitting.”

Harry sunk into his chair and stared, a thousand feelings pulling him in all directions. Snape was the Half-Blood Prince, the boy he had admired for the past year—at least until Harry had shot Sectumsempra at Malfoy and discovered his mystery friend had a dark side.

“Merlin,” he whispered. “I can’t believe it.”

Snape pulled back, drawing in on himself. “Disappointed?”

“No. Just shocked.”

Harry moved back into his seat and looked at Snape, searching his face for answers. Gods, Snape was the Prince. He was tortured and lonely, like Harry had thought the Prince had been. Scared. Brilliant beyond belief. Dark and damaged, but beautiful, too.

“It’s okay,” Harry said with a small smile. “I’m glad I found you. I always wanted to.”

Snape’s Adam’s apple bobbed and naked need filled his eyes. “You, wanted to find me?”

“Yeah. Hell, your book was almost like my only friend last year. I wished so much that the Prince was real, because I thought he’d understand me.” Harry gave a bitter snort.

Snape sighed and lowered his head. “Yet I did not understand you, did I?”

“Not at all, but you do now. So it’s okay. I really am happy.”

He was. He had wanted to find the Prince for so long. He smiled and sipped at his coffee.

Snape watched Harry, hands closed into fists on either side of his bowl and his eyes full of fear. “And you do not hate me for the dark side of that book? For George Weasley?”

Harry sighed and set his mug down. “No, but I do want to understand.” He gave Snape a piercing look. “Why did you invent that spell? It, it’s terrible.”

Snape swallowed hard and lowered his gaze. “I know.” He cupped his hands around his mug, as if he needed the warmth, and spoke in a low, haunted tone. “Potter, you have seen what I endured at home in our Occlumency lessons and a portion of what I endured from the Marauders in my pensieve. You have not yet seen what I endured as the only non-Death Eater in my dorm. Between all three, it was self-defence for emergencies. I did invent the countercurse, too, after all.”
Harry winced. “Damn. They must have been awful if you needed that kind of force just to protect yourself.”

Severus nodded. “That is how the Death Eaters came by the spell. While I was sleeping one night, the other boys in the dorm attacked me. They beat me bloody and ripped my night clothes to shreds. Dolohov was with them, and he, they would have ... all of them were going to rape me, Harry.”

“Fuck,” Harry whispered. “They, did they s-succeed?”

Severus gave a dark smirk. “No. I cursed Avery in the bollocks with Sectumsempra, and the others immediately decided their need for vengeance was not worth emasculation. From what I’ve heard, the man has never been able to ... perform since.”

Harry gulped and covered his bits with an unsteady hand. “Christ. I imagine I’d lose my stomach for fighting after that, too.”

Severus gave a bitter laugh. “You, Harry, would never have committed such an atrocity in the first place. But they did, and unfortunately, I had not yet learned to cast silently. They heard my spell, and the next day, every Death Eater in the ranks knew it.” He stirred his spoon in his porridge, watching it swirl. “I had to, to cast the counter on myself numerous times after that day.”

Harry shuddered. “Damn. So it’s not your fault at all, is it?” He pushed his plate back, feeling nauseated. “I, I don’t think I want to eat anymore.”

Snape shook his head. “Try, Harry. I am well enough, and you are in desperate need of nutrition.” Fury sparked in his eyes briefly, but the man did not explain his anger.

Harry had a good idea what he was thinking of, and the idea that Snape knew the extent of what Harry had endured from his relatives killed what little appetite the young man had left. He forced down a few bites because Snape had asked him to, but could manage no more.

After a few moments, Snape asked, “Did Molly say anything else?”

Harry nodded. “She said George is healing okay, though they can’t fix his ear. If I could heal your entire body and your mark, maybe I can heal his ear when we’re able to meet up again. It’s worth a try anyway.”

“Yes, I believe you might be able to. You certainly healed all of me.”

Harry gave him a shy smile. “I’ll try my best when next I can. She also said to stay here. It’s a madhouse out there, what with all the Muggles seeing us last night and Voldemort raging that we got away. Three Muggles were hurt in that auto explosion, too, but we don’t yet know how badly. It’s such a pain to get the Muggle news in a wizarding household. No tellies.”

“Yes.” Snape sighed and stared at his porridge. “I had hoped they would take my warning when I screamed.”

“Yeah.” Harry nibbled at a strawberry. “I hope they’re okay.”

“As do I.”

Harry put his strawberry down, half-eaten. “Anyway, from what she said, it sounds like we’re safer here than trying to floo or apparate anywhere, and I’m not about to put Freya through another hellish ride like last night. It’s much too dangerous besides.”
Snape nodded and resumed eating. “This fireplace isn’t connected to the Floo network regardless. It should be safe to apparate or portkey once your trace is gone tonight and you’re over your integration illness, but as I am not sure where to go, staying here seems like our best option at this time.”

“Yeah.”

They ate in silence for a few more moments, Harry mostly picking over his food.

Snape pushed back his bowl, only half empty. “You are finished?”

“Yeah. Sorry. I can’t eat much when I’m nervous. And I know better than to eat a lot aft—um, never mind.”

Snape gave Harry a piercing look. “After being starved all summer?”

Harry lowered his head, unwilling to answer or to let Snape see his shame. His face burned and his stomach went ice-cold, what little he had eaten congealing in his gut.

Snape spoke in a soft voice, “Harry, calm yourself. I will say nothing to the others, but I do need to know. With your integration illness around the corner, knowing your physical condition prior to its onset will help me tailor treatments to your needs.”

“Yeah.” Harry refused to meet his eyes.

Snape reached across the table and laid his hand on Harry’s. “You have no reason to be ashamed. You did nothing wrong, and their treatment of you does not make you less of a person. Come, don’t fret.”

Harry swallowed a lump and blinked down tears. “Can we talk about something else, sir? Please?”

Snape squeezed Harry’s hand and nodded. “As you wish.”

He stood and banished the dirty dishes to the sink with a wave of his wand. Another wave, and they started washing themselves.

Harry watched suds form under a magical dishrag and shook his head. “I should really learn some household charms.”

“I can teach them to you,” said Snape. “Later. Now, you asked me to change the subject, so I am changing it. We do need to talk.”

Harry gulped. “We do?”

“Yes. I am aware the headmaster has given you some kind of task, though he did not tell me what. Will you share with me?”

Harry nodded. “I will, but you can’t try to force me to back out of it.”

Snape tensed. “If you are going to get yourself killed—”

“Swear it, or I’ll say nothing. It’s too important to risk.”

Snape sighed and held Harry’s shoulder. “Potter, I have reason to believe that Albus— that your life is in danger. You are sure this task is necessary?”
Harry nodded.

“And that you alone must do it?”

“Maybe not alone. Truthfully, I’ll need help. But I can’t risk telling too many people, sir. It’s far too dangerous to our side. We’ll lose the war if I fail.”

“Well,” said Snape with an irritated huff, “that sounds highly appropriate for an eighteen year old undergraduate wizard to undertake.”

Harry scoffed. “And killing Voldemort, that’s safe and easy?”

“I suppose not.” Snape stood tall and gave Harry a stern look. “Very well. I will promise not to force you out of your task on one condition: you allow me to protect your life.”

Harry gaped. “You … want to protect me?”

Snape glared, but his eyes showed pain. “Have I not always tried to?”

Harry took the man’s hand with an apologetic smile. “Yeah, you have. I’m sorry.”

Snape smiled and released him. “Then, you will allow me to keep you safe?”

Harry’s face warmed, and he rubbed up the back of his hair. “Uh, yeah. Honestly, I could really use your help. But the thing is, you’re not going to be able to help me if you go back to Hogwarts.”

Snape frowned. “Whyever not?”

“Because I’m not returning to Hogwarts.”

Snape’s gaze took on a frosty chill, and he steered Harry towards the couch. “Sit and tell me why in the name of Merlin you have decided to abandon your education. Here I have … at least attempted to teach you for six years, and you are going to simply throw that effort away? What could possibly induce you to … drop out like a common fool?”

Harry flinched at Snape’s tone, feeling as if a knife had lodged between his ribs. He spoke in a quiet, sad tone.

“Because, overall, it’s not important. I have … things to do. War things. I can always come back later to finish my schooling or finish via private tutoring, and I do intend to, but the war can’t wait.”

He waited for the tirade, but Snape only sat beside Harry and gave him a searching look.

“Explain.” His voice was firm, but no longer cold. The pain in Harry’s chest eased.

“All right. That task you mentioned, I can’t be at Hogwarts to do it. It’s going to likely take me all over the country.”

Snape frowned. “Albus set you a task that takes you from your final year of schooling?”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a sigh. “He said to take Ron and Hermione too, but I don’t know if I should.”

Snape’s lip curled in disgust. “I should think not. What kind of headmaster interrupts his students’ schooling to send them gallivanting about the countryside?”
“Er, it’s not quite gallivanting. How much do you know about Voldemort’s immortality?”

Snape jerked to his feet and leapt away, his eyes wide with horror. “Immortality! That cannot be! No wizard is truly immortal ….”

But Harry saw the moment Snape remembered Lily’s death, the shade that had haunted Quirrel, the horrid scaled thing Voldemort had resurrected himself from in the graveyard. Snape blanched and fell onto the couch, shaking all over.

“Merlin help us. If he has truly found some way to immortality, we are all lost. There is no hope.”

After seeing Snape smile and hearing his laugh that morning, seeing the brave man curl into himself was like watching something beautiful die. Harry could not bear it. He grabbed the man’s hand and held it tight.

“No. Ssh. It’s all right. It’s not so dire as that.”

Snape seemed incapable of freeing his fingers. He stared at their joined hands as Harry caressed the despairing man’s knuckles. Harry laid his free hand atop Snape’s too, hoping the extra touch would ease the man’s terror.

“Professor, it’s going to be okay. Technically, he is immortal right now, but there is a way to break that and make it so he can die completely, and that’s what I’m doing for my task this year. Making the bastard mortal again. That’s much more important than graduating on time, or even at all.”

Snape lifted his gaze slowly. “How? How did he achieve this? How do we stop him?”

Harry frowned. “Professor, if I tell you, you have to guard this secret with everything you have. If Voldemort should get even an inkling that we know ….”

Snape glared at him.

“Right, of course you know that. Sorry.” With a deep breath, Harry released Snape’s hand and dragged his fingers through his hair. “Voldemort, he made horcruxes, Professor.”

Snape went ashen and gripped the arm of the couch. “Horcruxes? In the plural?”

“Yes. Six.”

Snape swallowed hard, as if trying to keep his breakfast in. “Merlin.” His eyes flickered to Harry’s forehead. “Oh, Merlin! So that is what Albus meant by—but no. No, it cannot be. You—no, it’s impossible.” He took a deep breath and shivered. “Gods.”

“That’s how I took it as well.” Harry shuddered. “They’re disgusting. The good news is, we’ve already destroyed two—Gaunt’s ring and the diary Lucius Malfoy pawned off onto Ginny. Professor Dumbledore destroyed the ring earlier this year, and I destroyed the diary in second year. We had hoped to find another that night when Malfoy let in the Death Eaters, but someone else had gotten to it first. We found Slytherin’s locket, but the one in the cave was a fake.”

“Slow down. Explain about this locket and cave.”

Harry related the story, twisting his hands around each other as he talked.

“—And then Dumbledore called Kreacher to drink that foul stuff in the bowl. It made him so sick, even I felt sorry for the little bugger.”
“Dumbledore forced a house elf to take the potion?”

“Yeah.”

A troubled expression filled Snape’s eyes. “Merlin, this is worse than I’d thought.”

“Professor?”

Snape met Harry’s gaze. “We’ll discuss it later.” The emphasis told Harry he would need to know Occlumency before Snape could reveal his fears.

“All right. Well, after Kreacher drank the poison—”

“Describe this poison to me.”

“Um, it was green and—” Harry frowned. “Sir, just look up here.” He tapped his temple. “You know how much of a dunderhead I am at potions. I’m bound to miss something.”

“I never thought I would live to see the day you would admit it.”

Harry laughed. “Git.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “I can still take house points, Mr. Potter.”

“Not in the summer, you can’t. Besides, I’m not a Hogwarts student any longer.”

Snape rubbed a fingertip over his lips. “Potter, I cannot believe I am saying this, but that is for the best.” He frowned and met Harry’s eyes. “You’re sure about this. You want me to use Legilimency on you?”

Harry gave a firm nod.

“You realise I could scour your mind for anything I wanted, do you not?”

Harry sat straight and held his chin high. “I trust you.”

The simple phrase gobsmacked Snape. He froze and gaped at Harry, eyes wide and cheeks pink. Had Snape never heard those words?

“It’s true,” Harry murmured. “Even when you hated me, you were always honest.”

Snape collected himself and lifted an eyebrow. “Indeed? And who said I do not still hate you?”

Harry chuckled. “Well, I’ve yet to meet your katana, for a start.”

“That could be remedied rather swiftly.”

Harry shook his head and chortled. “How could I have ever believed you had no sense of humour? You’re funny.” His mirth faded. “But, back to the poison, it really doesn’t matter whether you still hate me or not. This is serious, and my memories and personal embarrassment aren’t as important as the war effort. That you could search or break my mind is a risk I’m willing to take, as I don’t believe for a second that you’ll abuse my trust. You have too much honour, sir.”

Snape scowled. “I, a Death Eater, have honour?”

Harry laid a gentle hand on Snape’s forearm. “Former Death Eater, Professor. Your mark is gone
now, remember?"

A soft smile lit Snape’s face from within, and the change it rendered in the man’s face was stunning. Harry’s breath caught.

“Oh, so lovely.” Harry flushed and let slip a little squeak of embarrassment. “Gods! Um, never mind.” He coughed to cover his discomfort. “Er, I meant to say that besides your mark being gone, you’ve already paid for your sins tenfold.” He took the man’s hand again. “I trust you.”

Snape nodded and closed his eyes as if gathering his courage. “Thank you, Potter.”

“No thanks necessary.” Harry steeled himself and called up his memories. “This is for the war. We’re comrades and allies. It’s nothing. And I’m ready when you are.”

The man gave him a solemn nod and took Harry’s chin in hand, tipping the young man’s head back to look into his eyes. This close, Harry noticed traces of blue-gray around the older man’s pupils and flecks of navy throughout. Strange, he had always thought Snape’s eyes were dark brown. Snape smiled again, and Harry’s belly flip-flopped. He really did have a gorgeous smile, especially since Harry’s magic had apparently fixed the man’s once-crooked teeth.

Merlin, he really had healed everything in Snape’s body, hadn’t he?

“I promise, Potter,” Snape said, “I won’t hurt you.”

“Harry,” the young man murmured, spellbound. “Call me Harry. Only people who hate me call me Potter.”

Severus bowed slightly. “As you wish, Harry. Now, look at me.”

Harry gazed into Snape’s abyss-dark eyes and gave him a shy smile.

“Good. Don’t brace for the impact. Relax and let me in. It won’t hurt since you are not attempting to block me.”

“Yes, sir. Ready.”

Snape frowned. “Harry, as you have given me permission to use your given name and we are no longer student and teacher, please call me Severus.”


Severus—no, Severus—gave a shocked sort of cough.

“You cannot be serious,” said Severus.

“Er, what?”

Severus gave him a little smile, his dark eyes wide with hope. “You think I am regal?”

Harry found Severus’ sudden shyness adorable and grinned. “Yeah. I’ve always thought you elegant, even when we were still at war with one another. You have such natural grace.”

Pink flushed Severus’ cheeks. “T-thank you, Harry. It means much to me that you think so. I have rarely been the recipient of such kind words.”
“I reckon you haven’t let people close enough to say nice things to you before now. I thought the same of you years ago, but you might have hexed me inside-out if I’d told you then.”

Severus smirked. “I still might. The curse is *Corpus Inverto*.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “Why am I not surprised that you know it? But let’s get this Legilimency thing over with, Severus. This isn’t a pleasant memory at all.”

“Very well. Focus on the potion. *Legimens*.”

Harry fought the sting of tears as he relived having to force-feed Kreacher the potion. The diabolical little elf had some punishment coming, but not this. He struggled and wept and screamed, and Harry couldn’t stand watching him suffer, especially near the end.

*Kreacher curled in on himself and begged Harry to stop, all the while yanking his ears for disobedience. “Please, Master Potter. Kreacher will be good. Kreacher will stop insulting nasty mudblood friends. Just no more. Please, no more.”

Harry’s hand hesitated over the liquid’s surface. “Professor Dumbledore, I, do we really have to keep doing this? It’s hurting him.”

Dumbledore’s eyes were steel-hard. “You cannot stop. That is a horcrux in the bowl, and if the elf must endure a bit of suffering, well, it is better him than you. And I am too old to survive it.”

Tears blurred Harry’s vision, but he blinked them down and pushed the cup into the potion, scooping out another dose of acid green, viscous poison. The sheen on the potion’s surface reflected nebulous shadows, dark and forbidding and terrifying. Harry lifted the cup to Kreacher’s lips, and the elf sobbed, choking down the horrid potion.

“I’m s-sorry, Kreacher. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Master will not help me,” Kreacher shrieked. “Oh, where is Kreacher’s dear master? Master Regulus! Master Regulus, please. Kreacher will not fail you again. Kreacher is bad elf, but I’s be good if you save me. P-please. Oh Master, please, no more.”

Harry knelt and, filthy rags and all, brought the sobbing creature into a hug. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered, and wept over the elf’s bald head.

Snape pulled back and sat in silence, his face stony and eyes damp. “Merlin.”

Harry rubbed tears from his cheeks and cleared the lump from his throat. “Well?”

“I am … familiar with it.”

Harry winced at the flat tone. “You developed it, didn’t you?”

Severus stood and paced, arms wrapped tight around his chest, expression blank. “If I had known—but no. I was already a spy by that point, but, sweet Circe! To think he used Sceluserum to hide a horcrux! Even at my worst, I never would have approved it for such a devious use.”

“Sceluserum?”
Severus settled into his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “It is one of the darkest potions I have ever developed. I created an antidote, but the potion is so deadly—to humans at least—it is rare that the victim can acquire the cure in time to survive intact. Most victims die within two minutes of the final dose. And those two minutes are sheer hell.

“Sceluserum means ‘sin potion.’ It forces the drinker to relive every sin, both those others committed against them and those they committed themselves. At least, that is what it would do to a house elf, I believe. Their natural magic would render the aconite inert. In humans, however, it would also slowly turn the blood into acid until it melted the victim from the inside out. So it is good that Dumbledore had a house elf drink it and not a human, but ….”

“Christ,” Harry whispered. “That’s beyond terrible. Gods, poor Kreacher.” He shuddered hard. “You said it would melt a human after the final dose. So does that mean they didn’t drink the entire bowl, they’d survive?”

Severus lowered his head. “Not usually. It merely takes longer to kill them.”

Harry blinked tears back. “Why, Severus? Why would you invent something so horrid?”

He curled in on himself. “If I had refused ….”

‘Oh. He was forced to. Merlin, it must kill him inside.’

Harry sighed and took Severus’ hand in his own. “If you’d refused, Voldemort would’ve killed you and we’d have lost our only source of information in the first war. I get it. It was less about your life and more about Mum’s. And the war.”

Severus brushed Harry’s hair from his forehead and ran a thumb down the young man’s famous scar. “And you, Harry. Your mum was seven months pregnant with you. I could not allow either of you to perish.”

Harry shivered and tipped his head back, enjoying the feel of Severus’ hand in his hair, the older man’s long fingers holding him tight. Heat flooded Harry’s face and he stepped back, a shy smile on his lips.

Severus let his hand drop. “I tried to spare as many as I could,” he said, his expression pained.

“It’s okay, Severus. I understand. I forgive you.”

“I do not know how you can.”

Harry rubbed the man’s shoulder. “It’s okay. Well, not okay, but I do understand, and you are forgiven. You had no choice, Severus.”

Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Thank you, Harry.”

Harry took Severus’ hand and squeezed. “So what do we do with this? Do you have any ideas how to find the real horcrux?”

Severus rubbed his lips with a fingertip, a gesture Harry had come to realise meant the man was thinking hard.

“One thing strikes me as odd. I do not believe Dumbledore heard Kreacher say it, and you were too traumatised to fully realise the import of his words, but when Kreacher first landed in the cave, he said, ‘not again.’ Which makes me wonder if he knows where the real horcrux is.”
Harry gasped. “Blimey! The little shite just might, and he’d hide it out of pure spite.”

“You are still his master, correct?”

Harry nodded. “Your wards won’t hurt him—too badly—will they?”

“No. Call him.”

“Yes, sir.”
Severus doubled over so he could stare right in the foul little elf’s face. The creature had thus far resisted every attempt to drag the information out of him, but both wizards knew the elf had been in the cave before. And Severus still had an ace up his sleeve.

“Listen to me, elf,” he said in a low, dark voice that sent most students and Death Eaters running. “I know at least fifteen separate poisons specifically designed to kill your kind. Slowly. Unless you want your skin peeled off or your intestines boiled, I suggest you stop evading and tell us the truth.”

Kreacher stopped banging his head on the floor long enough to shoot Snape a toothy— and bloody— grin. “Then I’s would be free from nasty half-breed Master.” He resumed his self-flagellation as if he had never stopped.

‘One would think it would be less painful to simply answer the question.’

They had long ago given up on trying to stop the foul little beast from punishing himself. Perhaps the pain would motivate him to stop disobeying his master, though by this point, Severus had his doubts that anything could.

Harry snarled, “Answer us, you little shite!”

The elf merely hummed and kept on banging his head, making a macabre beat against the sound of Severus’ pacing.

Severus groaned and sat back in his chair. “This elf truly is a demon, Harry. No wonder Black hated him so.”

“Yeah, Sirius detested the little shite, with good reason, but ….” Harry’s eyes widened, and Severus could almost see the gears turning in his mind. They reached the conclusion at the same time.

“Regulus!”

Kreacher’s ears perked up, though the elf regarded them with no less suspicion even as he punched himself in the face over and over.

“Stop punishing yourself, Kreacher,” Harry snapped.

The elf stilled and smirked, though his bloodied lip ruined the effect.

“So you are capable of following orders,” Severus said with an exasperated sigh.

Harry glared at the demented creature. “When it suits him, the barmy little berk. Severus, you knew
Regulus Black, didn’t you?”

“He was a loyal Death Eater until his death twenty years ago. Of course I knew him, pompous arse that he was.”

Kreacher bared his crooked teeth. “Yous be knowing nothing of Master Regulus! Master Regulus was being a good man, and a good son of House Black. He was being kind to poor old Kreacher.”

The elf glowered as if to say, “Unlike you.”

Harry ignored the elf. “Severus, this is an odd question, but it’s important. Did you know Regulus’ middle name?”

Severus frowned. “Not that I see what this has to do with our current objective, but I believe it was Arcturus. I am unsure, howev—”

Harry leapt up and clapped his hands, grinning. “R.A.B.! I knew it!”

With no further explanation, Harry darted into his bedroom. Both elf and human looked bemusedly at Harry’s doorway as the boy rummaged in his trunk, muttering.

“No, that’s my sneakosco—oh, shut it. Stupid thing. Hmm. What’s this purplish light around it? Odd. Must be broken.” A stack of books banged on the floor. “Oh, a nice fat lot of chocolate frogs. Don’t mind if I do.” A wrapper rustled and a ribbit was promptly stifled, likely by Harry’s teeth. “Damn. Not here, either. Where is the stupid thing?” Harry’s words became unintelligible, as if he had climbed bodily into his trunk. After a moment, he cried, “A-ha! Found it!”

Harry came back into the room with a grin on his face, a smear of chocolate on his lower lip, and a golden locket hanging off one hand. A scrap of parchment poked out of the pendant.

Kreacher gasped at the sight of the locket and let out a shriek. “You has Master Regulus’ locket! Filthy half-blood thief! Yous be stealing from my dead masters! Oh, my poor mistress would—”

Harry snapped, “Kreacher, shut up!”

The elf’s mouth snapped shut on his rant, much to Severus’ relief. The little creature fumed and rolled about on the floor like a madman, but apparently had had enough self-punishment for the time being.

“Here, Severus.” Harry passed the locket over the elf, who scrambled to his feet and bounced on his toes trying to reach it. “Look at the note inside.”

Severus pried the clasp open and removed the tiny scrap of paper.

“To the Dark Lord,” Severus read out loud. “I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match you will be mortal once more. R.A.B.”

Severus paled and gripped the note in shaking hands. Shock and grief overwhelmed him with the knowledge that the one boy in his dorm who had never tried to hurt him was as much a spy as Severus had been. Only Regulus hadn’t survived. He had given his life in hopes that the Dark Lord could be defeated.

He was a hero, and the world had thought him a villain, just like Severus. He had died entirely alone and friendless, unmourned and unsung. Severus closed his hand around the cold metal, whispering a
silent eulogy for the brave young man in his heart.

A hand knocked a grabby elf away from Severus and the locket, then held the older man’s shoulder.

“Hey,” Harry murmured, “what’s the matter? Were you friends?”

Severus shook his head and gathered his wits. “Lily was the only friend I ever had until Minerva. But, but this means that Regulus was a spy, too. He was fighting against the Dark Lord all this time. He died without a shred of recognition for his bravery. And his brother—his only real family besides his pureblood-fascist parents, Harry—Sirius treated Regulus much like he treated me. The Marauders attacked him almost as much as myself.” Severus closed his eyes and drew the locket to his heart. “Gods, he had no one in the entire world, and now he’s gone.”

Harry’s eyes softened. “Like you, only you were able to save yourself. And you have me now.”

“Yes.” Severus stepped close to Harry and laid his head on the younger man’s shoulder. “How many, Harry? I had no idea Regulus was working for the light. He acted as loyal as any of the others. More so. And if the supposedly loyal Regulus was a spy, how many of my Slytherins might be spies as well? Or simply trapped and practically forced into the mark like Draco was? How many were outright kidnapped and marked under Imperius?”

Harry gasped. “Merlin! They really did that?”

Severus lifted his head long enough to shoot Harry an exasperated look. “Right. Death Eaters. Of course they did, the twisted bastards.”

“Yes, and I, I could do nothing to guide them away. They were as close to my children as I shall ever have, and I had no choice but to hurt them. To lead them to damnation and death.” He squeezed his eyes shut tight, struggling to hold back tears. “How many could I have saved, Harry?”

Harry wrapped Severus in his arms and rubbed the man’s back. “Severus, how many have you saved is a better question. It’s true, you couldn’t save them all. But maybe your torture will show the ones who don’t want to hurt people what it really means to be in Voldemort’s shadow. Maybe more of them will want to get out. And since you escaped, they’ll know it’s possible now.”

Severus sighed into Harry’s neck, enjoying the comfort his proximity offered. “But what will they do? If the Dark Lord realises they have defected, he will kill them through their marks as he tried to kill me.”

Harry rubbed Severus’ left wrist. “Not if I remove their marks first.”

Severus leapt back with a gasp, gripping Harry’s hands. “You would do that? Could you remove so many?”

“I don’t know, but I can try. And I can neutralize them even if I can’t take them off entirely. That’s enough, isn’t it?”

Severus swallowed hard and wiped his eyes. “Gods, yes. We will need a Legilimentic test and Veritaserum to make sure their loyalties are honestly with the light or at least not dark, but if you can remove the deadly aspects of the mark without killing its bearers, it would be worth it and more.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hands. “So it’s settled. We’ll work together to save those of your Slytherins we can, once we have a way to reach them.”
Severus caught Harry into a tight hug, clasping the locket between them to keep Kreacher from stealing it. “Thank you, Harry.”

Harry moved back and grinned devilishly. “You don’t know my price yet.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “A Gryffindor charging for his help? Interesting. What is it that you want?”

“When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

Severus burst into relieved, happy laughter. “As I thought.” He chuckled and wiped a tear from his cheek. “Ah, I did not realise how much their fates were weighing on me. I feel more at ease knowing we will do everything within our power to save their lives.”

Harry smiled and patted his shoulder. “Good. May I have the locket back?”

“Yes, of course. May I perhaps keep the note?”

Harry nodded. “Just make me a copy first?”

“One moment.” After a quick Gemino charm, Severus pocketed Regulus’ note and passed the locket back to Harry. Below them, the house elf rocked on his heels and keened as if the loss of his dead master’s jewellry caused him physical pain.

Severus fixed the elf with an assessing stare. “Kreacher, why do you want that locket so much? And do not pretend it is only because it is a Black family heirloom. I am not a fool.”

Kreacher made muffled growling noises, but Harry’s previous order would not let him speak.

“Oh for the love of Merlin,” Harry said with a scoff. “Answer him, Kreacher!”

The elf started banging his head on the floor again, and Harry sighed.

“Shite. Kreacher, what is your problem? Why are you so determined to spite us? Don’t you understand that Regulus was on the same side as we are?”

Kreacher shot Severus a cold look. “This human not being on the Light side. Master Regulus was always being saying Master Snape being in love with the Dark Lord.”

Both men cried at the same time, “What?”

Severus choked on bile and collapsed onto the sofa. “In love with that foul, demented dredge of humanity?” He shuddered and hugged his chest. “Mother of Merlin, no! How could any sane person love that demon? Even his loyal followers do not love him—they fear him and love what he promises them: power and punishment for Muggles and Muggleborns. And I? How could I do anything but hate him after, after what he did to Lily? To Harry? To me?”

Visions of torment flashed before his eyes. Lily lying cold and lifeless in his arms, her baby screaming in his crib. A distraught baby whimpering against Severus’ shoulder as the grieving man healed the strange cut on Harry’s forehead. Eleven-year-old Harry lying still and quiet in the hospital wing as Severus looked on from afar, terror for the boy’s life overriding his resentment. Harry crying in Minerva’s arms after Diggory’s murder, and Severus utterly sick with the knowledge of who had killed the boy. A snakelike face laughing as Severus lay dying, face half ripped off and body riddled with wounds, Harry’s broken pleas tethering him to life.
The past swallowed him into a sea of agonising memories. The sickening, coppery tang of blood covered the scents of dirty house elf and chamomile tea. A high, sing-song voice infiltrated his consciousness, suffocating all other sounds, and Severus cringed away. Pain ripped through his body and left him breathless and sobbing. Drowning in pain. He was back in the Dark Lord’s torture chamber, and he couldn’t escape this time. He had forgotten his ring.

“Help me, please. Someone. Anyone.”

Through the memory of blows and fingernails under the skin of his cheek, another voice slowly registered: a soft tenor calling his name. Calloused hands held his face, and gentle thumbs rubbed over his cheekbones, caressing tears away.

“Severus! It’s okay. You’re safe. I’m here, and I’ll guard you with my life. I won’t let anyone hurt you anymore. Come on, Severus. You’re safe with me.”

Severus gasped and reached for Harry, gripping the young man’s forearms and trying to slow his breathing. Harry leaned up and wrapped his arms around Severus, pulling the man close against him and whispering in his ear.

“I’m here, Severus. You’re safe. It’s all right now, I promise. I won’t let them hurt you.”

Dimly, Severus became aware of tears coursing down his cheeks and buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. He had never experienced this, having someone there to comfort him when he was afraid, strong arms to hold him, and a loving voice bringing him out of the night. Not since his mother died had he known love in any form, and she had necessarily kept her affection secret. He nuzzled closer, wanting to cherish the sensation of being held, shattered dignity and embarrassment be damned. Harry’s arms felt so good, so safe, and he had never felt safe before.

A gentle hand carded through his hair. “Severus, ss. I’m here. I’ll protect you.”

Severus nuzzled closer, and the scent of Harry, so close, so warm, gave him the strength he lacked. With a sigh, he lifted his head and shook off his despair.

“Harry?”

The young man eased back and searched Severus’ face. “Are you well now, Severus?”

Another wave of emotion tightened his throat and stung his eyelids. “Yes.” His voice was hoarse despite his best efforts to keep it steady. “Thank you.”

Harry smiled and moved back, until he was holding Severus’ hands rather than his whole body. Severus missed the feeling of Harry wrapped around him, but the warm, dry palms atop his own felt soft and sweet, too.

“You’re welcome.” Harry went to turn back to the elf, who was watching them with a bemused expression, but Severus gripped Harry’s hands tighter.

“Stay,” he whispered, hating himself for his weakness, but needing Harry close. No one had ever been so kind to him before, and he needed it now, when the darkness hovered just out of reach of Harry’s strong arms.

Harry’s cheeks reddened, but he stayed where he was. “I’m here, Severus. I’ll stay as long as you need me.”

Severus swallowed and closed his eyes. “Thank you,” he whispered.
“No need to thank me. You needed me. You would do the same if it was me suffering, I think. Maybe.”

Harry said it in a joking tone, but Severus heard his uncertainty. Severus hated that he had hurt Harry so much.

“Yes, I would.”

Harry gasped and leaned towards him. “Really, Severus?”

“I swear it.” He smirked to relieve the tension. “Haven’t I always been there to pull your arse out of the fire?”

Harry let out a burst of laughter. “True, that you have.” He squeezed Severus’ hands. “Are you all right now? We still need to question Kreacher.”

Severus gave a curt nod. “Forgive that pathetic display.”

Harry stood over Severus’ chair and rubbed the man’s cheek. “No. There is nothing to forgive. You’re human, too. I’m sorry it took me so long to realise that.”

Severus closed his eyes and savoured the sensation of a warm hand against his skin. “As am I, Harry.”

Harry brushed the back of his knuckles along Severus’ temple. “I’m glad. Will you be all right if I talk to Kreacher now?”

Severus swallowed his need and gave Harry a terse nod. Harry smiled and knelt beside him, but didn’t release Severus’ hand. The older man let out a shaky breath and caressed Harry’s fingertips with his own.

“Kreacher, come here. You see what your accusation did to Severus?”

The elf gave a hesitant nod. “Kreacher now thinks Master Regulus was being wrong about who Master Snape loves. But then, it was too many years ago for young Master.”

The tacit implication of the elf’s words hit Severus with the force of the Hogwarts express.

Merlin help him, how had he missed this? The way Harry’s touches soothed him even in his deepest grief, the way he felt safe and protected in the young man’s arms?

How, in the name of all things magical, had he managed to fall for Harry Potter? In one day, no less?

Severus knew the answer to his questions, as much as he wanted to deny it. They were soul bound. ‘Fuck.’ He had really mucked it up this time.

No. It had to be something else. He couldn’t tie Harry to him for life. Such a beautiful, kind young man deserved more out of life than him.

Severus’ deep-seated need for love was enough of an explanation, wasn’t it? And Harry’s unconditional kindness knew no ken. His soft touch had brought Severus out of the night and warmed him from within, and, bond or no bond, after being deprived of hope for most of his life, Severus had grabbed hold of the one light source he had ever known with unparalleled ferocity. Perhaps his heart had changed so fast because, deep under the snark and cold facade, he was starving for the kind of gentle love Harry gave so freely.
It made sense to Severus.

He ought to let go Harry’s hand. He ought to let Harry go. Bound or not, the young man deserved better than a used up former Death Eater. Severus resolved to, he truly did, but Harry’s hand tightened on his, and Severus craved the young man’s touch with all of his being, and though he tried, his fingers refused to obey the order to let go. Severus could do nothing but sit and take comfort from the feel of Harry’s hand upon his.

Merlin help him, he was dying for that touch, and despite the fierce conflict within him, he couldn’t pull away.

“Gods forgive me,” he whispered.

Harry turned and looked Severus over. “Are you sure you’re well, Severus?”

Severus gave a terse nod and tried to force his hand to move, but failed again. He sighed and lowered his head. Bond or no, it was too late for him. Harry’s kindness had captured him, and he was powerless to turn away.

A gentle hand tipped his chin up to look into Harry’s eyes. Gods, they were so beautiful. Green like leaves in the spring, like sunlight in the forest canopy. How had he failed to notice before?

“Hey. It’s okay,” Harry murmured, still holding Severus’ face. “Whatever hurts you, I’ll be here as long as you need me. All right?”

Severus ached to believe Harry meant what his heart leapt for, but he was no fool. The young man remained oblivious to the way his touch simultaneously shattered and healed his companion.

Yet, Harry needed him to be whole, needed to know his affection helped, so Severus forced a small smile onto his lips.

“Yes. As I will be for you.”

‘Always,’ he added to himself. ‘Even if he never feels the same. I dedicated my life to him long ago, and he still has it. All of it now.’

Merlin, he was getting soppy. Still, he meant every word, even if Harry hadn’t heard his silent declaration.

Harry’s smile could have lit the world. “Great. That’s good.” He rubbed the older man’s chin with the pad of his thumb, and Severus’ eyes fluttered closed.

“We should continue questioning Kreacher, Harry.” It took more effort than resisting the Cruciatu to say it, and Severus’ voice was rough with emotion when he spoke.

Harry nodded and turned back to the elf. He kept his hand in Severus’, and the potions master clung to that small contact like a lifeline.

“Yes,” the elf said before Harry could speak, “Regulus was definitely being wrong.”

Severus winced as if the demon of an elf had punched in in the gut.

Harry frowned, bemused. “Er, yes, Kreacher. Severus hates Voldemort. He hurt Severus Terribly. And even before then, Severus was working for the light for twenty years, bringing information about Voldemort’s plans to our side.”
The elf looked between them and wrung his hands. Harry tried pleading one more time.

“Don’t you want your dear master’s work to be finished? Don’t you want to help us defeat the cruel wizard Regulus was trying to fight?”

Kreacher’s ears drooped. “Kreacher wants to help Master Regulus, but Kreacher cannot! Kreacher be trying over and over to destroy the other locket, but Kreacher be making not a dent in it. And now Kreacher can do nothing. Kreacher is a bad elf!”

The elf rushed towards the wall as if to bang his head against it, but Harry caught his arm and whirled him around first.

“No punishing yourself, Kreacher. Please.”

“But, but t’is a house elf’s duty to punish when we cannot obey master’s orders.”

“You can obey. Regulus ordered you to destroy that locket before he died, right?”

Kreacher gave a despairing nod. “And Kreacher failed. Master’s last order, and Kreacher cannot fulfil it.” He struggled to break out of Harry’s grip and punish himself once more, but Harry held him firm, even with his other hand still wrapped with Severus’.

“Kreacher, stop. That is an order. No more punishment.”

“Y-yes, Master, but is what Kreacher deserves.”

“No, Kreacher. Don’t you see? Regulus’ last request, to destroy the locket? That’s what Severus and I want to do, too. We have to. It’s evil, and as long as it exists, so does Voldemort. So will you help us? Will you tell us what you know?”

Kreacher hesitated, his ears moving up and down in slow waggles. “If Kreacher tells you, yous be finishing Master Regulus’ work? Yous be destroying the locket?”

Harry gave him a solemn bow. “You have my word, Kreacher.”

The elf gave Harry a firm nod. “Then Kreacher be telling you.”

Severus let slip a sigh of relief. “Thank Merlin.”

Harry paced the length of Severus’ grandmother’s living room, fury pulsing through his veins. Damn Dumbledore! He had recommended Mundungus for the Order, and now, because of his “second chances” thing—or was it deliberate deceit?—the locket was lost. The foul thief had stolen it long ago along with several of Sirius’ possessions, and there was no telling who he had sold it to.

Severus’ eyes tracked Harry’s every move, sorrow buried deep within their dark depths. The man hadn’t taken his eyes off Harry in the past hour and that same sorrow had burned within them the entire time. Why? Harry hadn’t hurt the man, had he?

No. Something fundamental had changed within Severus himself—Harry was sure of it—but he was simply too angry to question the man about it at the moment.
“Shite, Severus!” Harry tugged at his hair and flopped down on the couch beside his new friend. “What are we going to do?”

Severus turned to him, a blank expression on his face. “We, Harry?”

After Severus’ recent affirmations, the suggestion that he didn’t want to be near Harry any longer sucked all the air from the young man’s lungs and left a void in his chest. Damn. How could it hurt so much?

He shouldn’t have expected better. It wasn’t as if Severus liked him, after all.

The pain that followed this thought left Harry shaking and cold. Still, he forced himself to speak, after a fashion.

“Oh. I, I just assumed. I shouldn’t have. Why would you want to stay? I mean, you don’t even like me. I, I suppose it was just me all al—”

A gentle fingertip on Harry’s lips stopped him. Harry swallowed and kept his mouth shut.

“Harry,” Severus said, “ssh. Four non-relatives in my life have had permission to use my given name. One was your mother, my best and only childhood friend. One … well, we will discuss him once our plans are set. One is Minerva, who is like a second mother to me. And you, you are the only other.”

Harry frowned and eased back from Severus’ finger, resisting the odd temptation to kiss the soft tip. “But lots of people call you by your given name. Remus, Mister Weasley, and Madame Pomfrey for a start.”

Severus gave him a wry smile. “Yes, but they do not have my permission to do so. I do not like Lupin, and while I don’t mind Arthur or Poppy calling me by my first name, I never gave them explicit permission to do so. Yet you have it, and with my pleasure. So what does that tell you?”

The terrible weight eased off of Harry’s chest, enough to allow him to breathe. “So, so you don’t hate me any longer?”

Severus seemed to argue with himself for a moment, then sighed and lifted a tender hand to Harry’s cheek. Gentle fingertips feathered through Harry’s hair, and a strange squirmy warmth filled his chest.

Severus murmured, “Does it look it?”

Harry blinked back a sudden rush of tears. “No. Not anymore.” He leaned into Severus’ palm. “I know I don’t have the right to ask you to stay with me, but, if you can stand me, if you want to, I could really use your help with the horcruxes.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s cheek and let his hand fall. “You do not want your friends’ help? I had assumed you would prefer them over myself. Or did you mean for all of us to accompany you?”

Harry sighed and slumped, feeling guilty for his decisions, however sensible they were. Was it a betrayal to ask Severus to come instead of his friends, or was he just trying to spare their lives and innocence? He didn’t know, but he knew he stood a much higher chance of success with Severus on his side than two students who understood less about the situation than himself.

Ignoring the squirming in his stomach, Harry shared his thoughts with his newest ally and friend.
“I had thought of Ron and Hermione, but while Hermione is brilliant, she doesn’t have much experience in a real fight and she’s too rigid and stuck on being absolutely ethical. You and I both know it’s not going to be that simple. And Ron is brave and willing to break the rules where we need to, but he punches first and thinks later, and again hasn’t much experience against Death Eaters. He’ll be expecting a schoolyard tussle when these monsters have curses that gouge out eyes and set fire to one’s entrails on the tips of their wands.”

“And worse,” Severus added with a shudder.

Harry grimaced. “Merlin. But see, that’s what I mean. You know what we’re dealing with and you’re not at all afraid to get your hands dirty if it means saving lives. And you’re utterly brilliant, cleverer than even Hermione I’d wager—you’d have to be to fool Voldemort, thirty of his minions, and pretty much everyone else too for twenty years, including Hermione. Besides that, you’re so brave, and strong enough to defend the both of us. Not to mention you know the Death Eaters inside and out. Old Mouldy too.”

Harry took Severus’ hand and met his eyes, pleading with gaze and words. “I, I need you, Severus. Desperately. Please come. I’m so scared. I’ve no hope of doing this on my own.”

Severus took Harry into his arms and whispered, “Hush. You won’t have to face this task alone, I swear it. I had always intended to help you, assuming I survived long enough.”

Harry stepped back, hope and joy blossoming like a rose in his heart. “You will? You’ll come with me and help me?”

Severus smiled, and the change in his expression took Harry’s breath.

“Well, as we established earlier, I do have a lifetime’s experience of keeping your arse out of the fire.”

Harry gave a quick burst of a laugh. “Yeah. So you’re coming?”

Severus’ expression turned serious. “I am, but we need to discuss our plans, Harry. When you say you are leaving school and not going back this year, does that mean you will keep contact with the Order, or are you striking out on your own?”

Harry hesitated. “I had thought at first to keep in touch with Dumbledore at least, but, well, that no longer seems like a good idea. And I don’t want to endanger Ron or Hermione. So it looks like I’ll be striking out alone, unless you come with me.”

“I am coming, as I have already said.”

Harry grinned. “Great! I never thought I’d be so happy to have you with me, but I am.”

Severus shook his head. “I never thought I could be happy at all. Strange how you have changed me in only a few short days.”

“Not strange. Beautiful.”

Severus’ answering smile warmed Harry deep within.
Out of the Cupboard

Chapter Summary

Warning: Severus describes a brutal scene here. Without spoiling it, I'll just warn pregnant mothers off, okay? Don't read that part. Just suffice it to say that Severus endures hell and move on.

*EDIT: 08/17/2018* I had to fix the part about Sev's grandfather. I had him described as a Muggleborn soldier in WWII, but that's not possible as his mother was a pureblood Prince. Edited it to make his grandfather a pureblood, but one who fought in Grindelwald's war.

Chapter Notes

I put a summary of this chapter at the end so those of you who don't want to read about the graphic brutality in this chapter can still get the gist of what's going on.

Harry followed Severus to the couch and sat beside him. “What are we going to do, Severus?”

Severus rubbed his lips with his fingertip. “That is the question, isn’t it? Hmm. Well, now that our plans are set—they are set, are they not?”

A twinge of uncertainty panged through Harry. “If set means we’re hunting horcruxes together.”

“Yes. And with no one else.”

“Then yes, they’re set. Anyone else would be in danger. And we’re already in it up to our necks, so what’s a little more trouble between us?”

Severus chuckled. “Indeed. But before we set out, we need to have a serious discussion.”

Harry nodded. “The horcruxes?”

“No. Your childhood. How bad was it?”

Harry cringed and reeled back. “What does that have to do with anything?” His voice had shot up an octave. The pitch embarrassed him, but the thought of talking about his relatives humiliated and terrified him far more.

No. He couldn’t tell Severus how much of a freak he was. Severus would leave, and Harry would be alone. He couldn’t lose another friend. Not so soon. Not when Moody hadn’t even been put in the ground yet.

“It was fine,” Harry said, defiant. “Nothing too bad about it really.”
“Hmm. Then why were there fifteen locks and a cat flap on your bedroom door?”

“I … because I ….”

Severus stood and took Harry’s hands. “Harry, even if I hadn’t seen your door, you told me yourself last night that they locked you in a cupboard.”

Harry’s stomach churned and he looked away to hide his tears. “It was fine, I said.”

Severus turned his face back to him and held Harry’s cheek. “Harry, please. I am not a fool. I can see it hurts you. Why are you so afraid?”

“W-why do you want to know so much?”

Severus hesitated. “Swear to me one thing before I tell you.”

“Yes?”

“That you will not place yourself anywhere near Hogwarts or Albus Dumbledore until you have enough skill to protect your mind from invasion.”

Harry nodded. “I swear. After what I gleaned from your earlier comments, I had no desire to anyway. But will you also swear to me that you will make an effort to teach me this time? To help me understand Occlumency when I don’t get it?”

“I so swear.”

“Good. Now, why do you want to know about my past so much?”

Severus gripped Harry’s hands tight. “Because I want to know if Albus is going mad or if he’s betrayed us, and if he has, how deep his betrayal runs. If he knew of your abuse yet sent you there year after year, I think we can safely rule out madness.”

“He knew,” Harry said with a shudder. “He knew exactly how bad it was, but only ever said the blood wards would keep me safe when I asked for help.”

Severus groaned and buried his face in his hands. “Merlin. Then it is as I feared: Albus is most likely working against us.”

Terror and shock pooled like ice-water in Harry’s gut. “W-why do you say that?”

“Besides the fact that he sent you to be abused repeatedly, it is only instinct and several comments he has made, plans he has fixed which do not seem quite right. He put two of the Dark Lord’s most hated targets on the same beast last night and told me not to wear glamours. It seems that, at the least, he wanted me to be killed. I fear it may have been both of us.”

“Fuck!” Harry paced and tugged at his hair. “Damn it, you, you have a point. I said as much the night before. Gods, what do we do, Severus?”

The man sighed. “That depends on just how far he is gone. If he only is out for me, then perhaps I shall disappear along with you when we hunt horcruxes and all will be well. If he is out for both of us, then I fear that will complicate matters.”

Harry scooted close and rubbed a hand through Severus’ hair. The straight, soft locks slipped through his fingertips like satin. “I won’t let him hurt you. Or me. And you already know the abuse was bad. So there’s no need to discuss it further.”
He gave Harry a firm, but not unkind look. “Not true. I still do not know how bad it is, Harry, and that knowledge will colour our plans. If he is truly as ruthless as I fear, we will need to take great care. I need to know the extent of your abuse before I can answer that question.” His gaze softened, and he took Harry’s hands in his own. “Besides this, I ask you to speak to me about it because you have been hiding it too long. It is poisoning you, and I don’t want you to change, to grow embittered and resentful as I did. Talk to me, please.”

Tears slipped down Harry’s cheeks. “But, but if I do ….”

Severus brushed Harry’s tears away with gentle hands. “If you do, what?”

Harry’s words left him in a broken whisper. “You’ll l-leave me.”

Severus’ eyes flashed. “What nonsense have they implanted in your mind that makes you believe yourself so unworthy?”

Harry sniffled. “D-didn’t you hear it in Occlumency?”

“No. I only saw flashes. Few imprints had vocal components, and even when they did, words were mostly unintelligible. You were trying to block me, remember?”

“I, I suppose.”

Severus laid his hand upon Harry’s. “Had I known you were being abused, I would have done something about it, Harry.”

Harry looked away. “You hated me.”

The man reeled as if struck, and Harry repented of his words immediately. He tugged Severus into a tight embrace and whispered against his ear, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m just scared.”

Severus’ voice was low and rough, showing how much Harry had truly hurt him. “Yes, I hated you then, but you were also a child in my care. Whatever my sins, I never would have left you in suffering if I had known. I would have taken you into my own charge sooner.”

“Ssh, I know. I know. You have too much honour. Forgive me?”

Severus sighed and pulled away. “Never say that to me again, and I’ll forgive you.”

Harry nodded. “I shouldn’t have said it in the first place. But there is one thing I don’t understand. If you only saw flashes of my life, why were your memories so clear to me that one time I accidentally broke through your shields? I heard every word until you threw me out.”

“I wasn’t expecting a counterattack, thus my shields weren’t up as high as they should have been.” Severus hesitated. “You do not think less of me for what you saw, do you?”

Outrage flickered in Harry’s chest. “Of course not!”

“Nor will I think less of you for what they did to hurt you. So, tell me. What did they do to you?”

“I, I, it’s so hard.”

“I know. But it’s for the best, Harry.”

With a wince, Harry pulled away and resumed his pacing and tugging at his hair. Severus watched him and said nothing, seemingly having decided letting Harry give his reply in his own time would
work better than forcing it. Yet Harry could not find the words. If he told Severus, would he pack up and leave? Would their tentative friendship, one that Harry could not believe had grown so fast out of so little, die before it had a chance to bloom?

The mere thought shattered something vital inside of him.

No. He had promised to have more faith in Severus. He had to try to trust him, at least try to speak. But before Harry could gather his courage, Severus’ voice called his attention from his own thoughts.

“I was five when my father first struck me,” Severus murmured, staring at the floor.

Harry’s breath left him in a rush. Severus was revealing his past to give Harry strength. The thought warmed him throughout, that such a proud man would show such a vulnerable, intimate part of himself to Harry humbled him. The cold knot of terror began to unwind, and Harry motioned for Severus to continue.

Severus spoke in a haunted voice, “He was arguing with my mother and had grabbed her arm to enforce his point, but, even then, I knew she was in pain. As my father had mostly ignored me for my entire existence and my mother was kind, I was consumed with the desire to protect her. I pulled my father’s hand away and screamed for him to stop hurting her, and he backhanded me into a wall. My mother cried and gave into whatever that man had asked of her. I do not remember what it was.”

“Severus,” Harry breathed. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

Severus glared. “Do not pity me.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You silly man. There is a difference between empathy and pity, you know. If I didn’t believe you capable of rising above your pain, that would be pity, but I know you are. You’re the strongest man I’ve ever known. So I empathise with your situation, because ….” He looked away and wrapped his arms around his waist. “Because I know what it feels like to, to know the people who should love you … don’t.”

Severus beckoned Harry, and the young man sat beside him.

“Do you think you can tell me, now that you know I have suffered, too?”

Harry lowered his eyes. “I knew before.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Severus sighed and leaned onto his knees. “Very well. Then I shall tell you my secrets. But at the end, will you speak with me about your own?”

Harry swallowed hard. “I, I’ll try.”

Severus patted Harry’s knee. “That is enough for now.” He stared at the piano for a long moment before speaking again. “It was my mother who taught me how to play. At least, for the first ten years I studied. After that, I had to have private tutoring.”

“Hmm? Why? Could she not teach you well enough?”

“No. Mother was a brilliant pianist. But when I was fifteen, she … died.”

Harry slipped his hand under Severus’. “I … sort of understand. I think it might hurt more to lose your mother after you’ve had time to get to know her, and I never had that chance. So I guess I can’t completely relate, but I know how much it hurts to miss her.”
Severus squeezed Harry’s fingers. “You do know. Do you want to know how she died? I warn you, it is … the worst story I have.”

Harry paled. “Worse than your stories from being a spy?”

“I would wager it is at least as bad.”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin. Severus, I, I don’t want to make you, if you really want me to talk, I guess I can try.”

“I do, but I did swear to you I would tell you my secrets. Do you want to know? I will understand if not. There are many nights that I wish I did not know.”

Harry searched Severus’ face. For once, the man had left his emotions open, letting Harry read the fear and shame in his eyes. Whatever had happened to his mother still weighed upon his soul.

“Have you … ever told anyone before?”

Severus crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. “Not even my grandparents knew the full story. Though I believe they suspected. My grandfather, the head of the Prince family, fought during Grindelwald’s war in France.”

“Not Britain?”

“He lived in France at the time. And after I moved in here, he often shared stories of the war with me. Survivors’ guilt. Times he had to kill or watch people being killed. I believe he knew the whole truth, and was merely waiting for me to tell him.” Severus closed his eyes and lowered his head. “I never did. I could never speak of it to anyone.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand. “Then tell me, if you can. Just like you said I need to talk to heal, so do you.”

Severus clutched Harry’s hand. “Will you stay?”

“Of course.” Harry rubbed the man’s trembling fingers. “You’re my friend. Friends stick together, okay?”

Severus bowed his head and released Harry’s hand. When he looked up, the lonely kind of sorrow Harry had seen in his eyes earlier had returned.

“Severus? You do believe me, don’t you?”

The man’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Of course, Harry. I am only a little afraid to speak, but you do have a point. I should talk about it.”

“Yeah.” Harry hesitated, unsure why the man looked so sad. But then, perhaps recalling his story was enough to make him hurt. “All right. I’m listening.”

Severus nodded. “Yes. Well, I told you he hit me when I tried to defend mother. After that, it became a regular occurrence. In fact, I drew his ire on purpose. I thought that the more he attacked me, the less my mother suffered. But I was wrong. He only limited his attacks to their bedroom.”

With a gentle look of empathy and sorrow, Harry freed his hand from Severus’ and laid it at the middle of the older man’s back instead. “Severus? I’m here.”

Severus snorted. “Yes, I’d noticed.” He laid his head in his hands and sighed. “I am not a good man,
Harry. Are you certain you wish to know the rest?"

“I’m staying. I know you were a Death Eater and all that implies. I forgave you for that long ago. You’re safe with me, I swear it.”

Severus closed his eyes as if steeling himself and dropped his hands to his lap. “Very well. Promise me you will not leave?”

The man’s rare display of need warmed something inside Harry.

“I promise, Severus. I’ll be right here with you.”

“Thank you.” He took a deep breath and continued his story. “I heard her screaming one night and burst into their bedroom. Father was … well, I’m sure you can imagine.” He shuddered hard, and Harry wrapped his arm around Severus’ waist instead, nudging the man close against his side.

“Unfortunately, I do think I get the gist,” said a stricken Harry.

Severus drew in a shaky breath. “Yes. Well, I attacked my father with all the strength I had, but I was only thirteen years of age and hadn’t my wand. He beat me bloody before my mother could gather strength enough to step in.” He touched his nose and scowled. “That was when he broke my nose. He slammed my head into the floor again and again until it broke. I suppose I am lucky that is all he shattered.”

Harry was having a hard time not wanting to find Tobias Snape and kick the man’s skull in for what he had done to his wife and son.

“Merlin, what a bastard.”

“You have no idea.” Severus reached across Harry’s legs and took the younger man’s free hand. “Is this … acceptable to you?”

“Yes, of course.” Harry couldn’t squeeze Severus’ hand from such an angle, but he held the man’s fingertips tighter. “Go on, Severus.”

He took a deep breath. “As you wish. Perhaps two and a half years after that incident, I noticed a change in Mother’s behaviour. She no longer stood up to that arsehole at all. She gave him whatever he wanted, no matter how ridiculous the request, and with Mother playing the willing servant, he turned his ire upon me. Not that I minded. Mother had finally regained a little happiness. As I was due back at Hogwarts anyway, I had only to endure for a week or so regardless.”

Severus leaned on his knees and laid his head in his hand. Harry hugged him closer.

“When I returned … to Spinner’s End for the winter hols of my OWL year, Mother told me of her pregnancy.” Harry gasped, but Severus continued as if he hadn’t heard. “She was five months along and so happy, but also afraid of what my father would do when he learned of her condition, especially since early scans had revealed that the baby was magical. So we hid in the utility room to discuss our plans. I was old enough to work a week from then, and we decided that we would stay with my grandparents until Mother and I could find jobs.

“Merlin, I wish we had left that moment rather than staying one last day to say goodbye and pack.”

Severus leaned hard into his hands and blinked tears down his face. Harry rubbed his back and hair, hoping to offer the man some comfort.
“My mother always collected the mail early to hide what she needed to from the bastard,” Severus said in a broken voice, “but while we were speaking, a letter came via special delivery, and we did not hear the postman. When Father came home that night, he was drunk off his arse and had the letter in hand. He forced Mother to read it out loud, and it was a letter from Mother’s mediwitch about the baby. It said the results of her scan had shown the baby to have an emerald green core, an incredibly rare colour, and she had all the makings of a strong witch.”

Harry winced. “A sister. You have a sister.”

The pain on Severus’ face made Harry’s insides twist.

“S-Severus? What happened?”

Severus gripped his knees and swallowed hard. “My father raged like we had never seen him. ‘No more spawn of yours will foul up my house, woman! One freak son is bad enough.’”

Harry gasped, stunned. Severus had been called a freak, too.

“Oh, Severus ….”

The man hesitated, but after what looked like another internal battle, he turned to Harry and laid his head on the younger man’s shoulder. Harry’s breath caught in surprise, but he didn’t mind the gesture. Severus’ closeness eased some of his nausea and made him feel stronger and safer.

With a sigh, he wrapped Severus in his arms and laid his cheek on the older man’s hair. So soft, and not a hint of grey. Harry ran his fingers through the silk-fine strands and enjoyed the way they slipped between his fingers like satin.

In his own way, Severus was beautiful. Or so Harry thought anyway.

“Father was disgusted with the baby girl Mother and I loved,” Severus said in quiet tones. “We had already chosen her name: Sariah Loraleen Prince. Mother didn’t want to name her Snape because of how much my father had hurt us, and despite a wish that I would share my name with one person worthy, I agreed. She did not need that horrible moniker or the sins attached to it dragging her down.

“But my bastard father—” Severus’ voice was rough and hoarse, and Harry hugged him tighter. “—He could not abide the thought of another magical child. So instead of welcoming the baby, he lunged at Mother.”

Severus shuddered and let slip a quiet sob, and Harry squeezed him tight, murmuring soft nothings to soothe him. “It’s all right. I’m here. Ssh. It’ll be okay.” Harry doubted they helped, but he would do anything to take the pain out of Severus’ voice.

Several minutes passed before Severus spoke again.

“I should have been stronger, but I failed them that night. As soon as he attacked, I stepped in and fought him harder than I ever had. I’m sure I hurt him, but, again, I hadn’t my wand—he had locked it away—and he was enraged. Mother tried to pull him off, but she was afraid and weak and pregnant. He knocked her across the room, and she was terrified.” He sucked in a shuddering breath. “Once the bastard broke my ankle, I couldn’t fight him any longer. So he … he took a kn-knife from the kitchen table and lunged at Mother. I struggled to protect her, but before I could move, he stabbed her, right in her belly.”

Harry gasped out a strangled no, and blinked tears into Severus’ hair.
“There was such a gush of water and blood, and Mother’s scream, Merlin, I will never forget it. Then he stabbed her again. And again. Mother cried and begged him to stop, but he just kept going. I was so horrified I couldn’t move. I just kept watching bits of my mother and baby sister spill out onto the kitchen floor, like staring could put them together again.”

Bile rose in Harry’s throat, and he barely choked it back down in time to hear Severus’ next words.

“Then he turned on me, but my magic pushed him back. It threw him into the wall and knocked him out. Somehow it healed the worst of my injuries, too. At least enough to let me hobble about. I rushed to Mother, and … I watched the light go out of her eyes. Her last words to me were to tell me to run before he killed me too. But I couldn’t. I held her as she died and wept over hers and Sariah’s bodies when, when she had gone.”

“Merlin, Severus!”

“I am still not finished.”

Harry winced. “This is already the most horrible story I’ve ever heard.”

“I know.”

Severus shuddered, his tears dripping under Harry’s collar. Harry caressed Severus’ face and shoulders, then shocked himself by pressing a light kiss to the man’s hair.

‘Why did I do that? He’ll kill me for it, surely.’

Harry’s face flamed as Severus lifted his head, but the murderous rage he had expected to see made no appearance. Instead, Severus’ tearful eyes were wide and his cheeks bright pink under silvery tear tracks.

“I, Harry?”

Harry winced. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. I just, just wanted to help you feel better.”

A still blushing Severus pulled Harry into his arms and buried his face into the younger man’s mop. “Foolish man. I did not reject your touch. It only surprised me.”

“So … it was okay?”

Severus laid his head on Harry’s shoulder once more. “As … strange as it might seem when we were enemies for so long, I find your touch reassuring. And … what affection you are willing to give is welcome.”

Harry frowned. Severus said the latter in a sad, wistful tone.

“Severus, I’m not going anywhere. It’s okay.”

Severus said nothing, so Harry slid an arm around his shoulders and held him tight. “Is it the story? You miss your Mother?”

“Only every day I breathe.”

Harry hugged him close so Severus’ head lay pillowed on his shoulder, the man’s silky raven locks spilling like satin over the young man’s chest. “I know it’s not the same, but I’m here. And I like holding you and helping you through your pain. It’s okay, I promise.”
Severus slipped an arm around Harry’s waist. “Thank you.”

His voice hadn’t lost any of its sad quality, but then, talking about his family’s murder was bound to hurt. Harry just held him as tightly as he could without hurting the man and hoped it was enough to pull him through.

“I’m here, Severus. Do you feel safe enough to finish your story?”

Severus shivered and buried his face in Harry’s throat. “Yes.” He took a deep breath, as if gathering his strength, and Harry stroked the man’s hair to soothe him. “I believe the last I told you was that my mother and baby sister had just died in my arms, with my father lying unconscious across the room. I was devastated and terrified. I had nowhere to go, and my father would kill me when he woke.”

Severus burrowed deeper, so Harry had to listen hard to make out his words.

“With my family slain by my own father’s hand, something inside me broke. I know now it was my soul. My father had ripped his child’s soul apart because of a simple hatred of magic.”

Harry stroked Severus’ back and struggled to keep back his tears.

Severus choked out, “I-I heard them screaming in my mind—even Sariah—and I did the first thing I could think of to quiet their anguish: I went to my poor mother’s body and took her wand, but I, when I rose, my father was coming to.”

He sat tall and looked straight ahead, tears still trailing down his cheeks but his eyes full of anger. “The bastard had just killed my entire family. He threatened to kill me, too, but I, I raised mother’s wand and, and I cursed him before he could. I cast Sectumsempra on his stomach and screamed, ‘How does it feel, bastard?’ Then, I, I killed him. I cast the Avada for the first time against my own father.”

“Merlin, Severus,” Harry whispered.

Severus rubbed his chest. “It hurt. Killing him ripped my soul. It still hurts, even now.” He tensed and lowered his head, hiding under falls of raven hair. “Will you turn from me? Now that you know the truth of what I am, will you run from the monster I have become?”

“No.”

Harry hugged Severus close and kissed his temple, pressing a gentle hand on Severus’ chest and wishing he had the means to heal his soul. To make Severus feel whole again.

“Never, Severus. I will never turn from you. And you’re not a monster.”

Severus gasped and shuddered. “H-how can you still believe that after all I have said?”

Harry held the man’s face so Severus had to look into his eyes. “I just do. You’re not evil, just broken-hearted, and I still want to stay with you. It’s going to be all right.”

Severus let slip a broken moan and buried himself in Harry’s shoulder. As Harry’s arms went down around the man, Severus clutched Harry close enough to meld with him. Harry’s breath caught at the feeling of their bodies pressed so close, Severus’ heartbeat drumming with his own, their breath mingling, their arms twined around one another. No one had ever held him like this, and if Severus’ soul-wrenching anguish had not ripped the heart right from Harry’s chest, he might have enjoyed the embrace. As it was, Harry could do little more than comfort Severus and hope his own pain did not
detract from the older man’s need for release. To that end, Harry kept his tears as quiet as possible and hid his face in Severus’ silky hair.

Severus did not cry long. His iron control reasserted itself before Harry could gather his wits, and as a result, when Severus sat up and wiped his eyes, Harry was still trying to stifle his tears.

“Harry?” He cupped the young man’s cheeks and thumbed away tears. “You were weeping?”

Harry sniffled. “Merlin, how could I not? I, it’s such a nightmarish story, Severus. I, gods. I wish I could have spared you somehow.” He closed his eyes to prevent another wave of tears, but they fell over Severus’ fingers anyway. “I’m s-sorry. I can’t seem to stop.”

Severus held him close and kissed his hair, as Harry had done for him. “Shh. You have no need to apologize. I was only surprised by your tears. Weep if you must. I am here.”

Harry shook his head and sat up, scrubbing his face. His tears didn’t stop, but they did at least slow. “I, I’ll be okay. Thanks, though.”

“It is I who must thank you.” He held Harry’s hands. “You do not hate me for killing my father?”

“Hate you? Merlin. If you hadn’t killed him, I’d find him and kill him myself for the things he did to your mum and baby sister alone. Then I’d bring him back and kill him again for the things he did to you. Well, if I could.”

Severus shook his head hard. “No, Harry. You must kill when we go to fight the Dark Lord for the final time, but until then, do not kill if you can avoid it. It hurts, as I have said. It tears your soul forever. That is where the creation of horcruxes originated: one truly sick wizard thought it possible to utilise that tearing for immortality. Of course, he never used his research; it was purely theoretical, but he enabled others to do so.”

Harry scowled. “Is it possible to hunt down all recorded evidence and theory of horcruxes once the war is over and destroy it, so no one can create the foul things again?”

“Perhaps, but eventually someone else will discover the spell and the process will begin anew. It is better to gather it and leave it with someone trusted, where readers of the information can be monitored and fighters will know what to do should someone make the accursed things again.”

“Good enough. Just so long as it isn’t available to any passing future dark lord looking for immortality.”

“Then we shall work towards that, once the more immediate threat is extinguished.”

Harry smiled. “Deal.” He rubbed the man’s chest in soft circles. “Severus, is there any way to heal this? Your soul?”

“I do not know, but you are easing the pain. When you touch me.”

Harry smiled sadly. “Good. At least I can offer you that.”

“Yes.” Severus laid his hand over Harry’s, still on his chest, and held it there. “Now that you know my childhood was horrific, are you able to tell me what happened in yours?”

Harry pulled away and drew his knees to his chest with a shudder. “I, I guess after that, I have no excuse. I feel a bit silly now, really. It wasn’t anything like what you suffered. Not even close.” He frowned and squeezed his knees tight. “Though I suppose it could have been—had Uncle Vernon
not been so afraid of magic as to avoid wizards entirely, he might have sold me out to the Death Eaters just to get rid of me.”

Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and drew him close. “I know not how to comfort others, but I will try to be there for you as you were for me.” He nuzzled Harry’s hair, and a shock of heat rushed down the younger man’s body. “I am here, Harry. I won’t leave you.”

Harry turned into Severus’ warmth and buried his face in the man’s chest. The sound of Severus’ heartbeat soothed him. Harry slipped a hand up Severus’ chest and gripped the older man’s shirt, remembering how close Severus had come to death just weeks before. Merlin, Harry had almost lost him before he even knew how beautiful and brave Severus was.

“I’m glad you’re with me, Severus.”

The man held him tighter and laid his head atop Harry’s. “As am I. Are you able to tell me now?”

“Yes. It’s just unpleasant to think of, but I’ll buck up.” Harry sighed into Severus’ chest. “Well, when you said your father called you a freak? They called me that, too. All the damn time. That’s why I was so afraid to tell you. I was afraid if you knew what a freak I am, you’d not want to be near me.”

Severus’ lips pressed into Harry’s hair, and tingling warmth spiralled down the younger man’s body from the soft kiss. His face flamed, and Harry turned his head to hide his blush.

“You are not a freak, Harry,” said Severus. “You are not unworthy, as they have made you feel for so long. You are beautiful and kind and brave.”

Harry’s ears heated, too. “Really?”

“Yes. Why did they call you such names? Because of your magic?”

“Yeah. They were scared of it. They said they had to stamp it out of me. So they denied me even the smallest scrap of love. My cousin Dudley, they spoiled him terribly. Piles of presents every holiday, anything he wanted to eat, ever—and that was a lot—toys and games whenever he demanded them, hugs and kisses galore, two bedrooms, and all I got was a slice of stale bread every third day, Dudley’s worn-out castoffs, and a cupboard under the stairs to live in.

“I had to nick Dudley’s broken toys from the rubbish bin and hide them in my cupboard if I wanted anything to play with, and my aunt and uncle made me cook their meals and ate them in front of me without saving me anything. I had to stand in the corner and watch them eat, or Vernon would lock me in my cupboard for days.” Harry hugged Severus tighter and sniffled. “Sometimes they forgot to let me out even to use the loo. I held it for as long as I could, but ….”

A vase shattered across the room, and Harry jumped.

“Forgive me,” Severus said, panting. “I lost control of my anger.”

Harry shrunk into himself. “You’re angry with me?”

Severus brought Harry into his arms once again. “Them, Harry. I am angry with them. Merlin, how could you think I would be angry with you for having human needs? Even at my worst, I never treated you so abominably.”

“No, the worst you did was throw a jar of cockroaches past me and shred me to bits with your tongue.”
“Even for that, I am sorry.”

“No. I only wanted you to stop hating me. You never hurt me like they did. Vernon beat me with his belt for every infraction. Dudley thought using me for boxing practise was great fun—though he stopped after I saved his life when a dementor attacked him and almost sucked out his soul—”

Severus interjected, “A dementor? I thought your relatives were Muggles!”

“They are. As Muggle as it gets. Why?”

Severus frowned and rubbed a fingertip over his lip. “How strange. I thought dementors could only truly feed off of those with magic.” He shook his head. “It is not so farfetched to believe that the authors of the authoritative texts have not yet had occasion to witness a dementor attack Muggles. It is also reasonable to suppose anyone who might have done would not have lived long enough to write about it. Perhaps my texts are only mistaken. At any rate, I have interrupted. Do continue.”

Harry nodded. “Well, like I said, Dudley hasn’t hit me or mocked me since that dementor attack, but he hasn’t stood up for me, either. Petunia’s no better. She scalded me in the bath when I was very young and scratches me or hits me with pans. You know, though, even though I have scars from Vernon’s belt and Aunt Petunia’s nails—” Harry turned his wrist up, revealing four white lines across the sensitive flesh. Severus rubbed a thumb over them. “—The other things hurt more. Never having a shred of love. Being left out of everything. Always being ‘Boy’ or ‘Freak.’ I didn’t even know my proper name until I started primary school.”

“So that is why you hate being called ‘boy.’”

Harry nodded. “It always went in hand with Vernon’s fists or belt before now.”

“I hope you know I do not mean that when I have used it.”

“I do, but it still makes me feel weak and vulnerable, and I hate it.”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead, sending a wave of warmth and sweetness through the younger man. No one had ever kissed him there, and the tenderness of the gesture took Harry by surprise.

“Understood,” said Severus. “I will strive not to use the word in your presence again.”

Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “Thank you. I’ll try to remember that you don’t mean it like Vernon did when you slip.”

“I shall try not to.” Severus expression darkened. “Did they ever abuse you sexually?”

Harry paled. “Merlin, no. Dudley’s friend Piers tried once, but my accidental magic threw him across the room for it. He never tried it again.”

“Thank Merlin for that. Was this the extent of it, Harry?”

Harry burrowed deeper into Severus’ comforting arms.

“Harry?”

Harry sniffled. “N-no. It’s not nearly as bad as what your bastard of a father did, but it’s bad enough. They used me like a house elf, always having to cook and clean and never reaping the benefits of the work. Worse than a house elf, really. I’m sure even the most downtrodden of house elves get fed, but not me.”
Now that Harry had finally begun to speak, the words poured out of him as if consumed by a will of their own. He had suppressed his story so long, the slightest release of pressure had caused an explosion of catharsis, and Harry could do nothing but listen as his tale spilled from every pore.

“They let me go to school in Dudley’s hand-me-downs, too, which might have made sense if he wasn’t as big as three of me. Then, when I left for Hogwarts, they told the neighbours I was going to St. Brutus’ Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys. That put paid to any friends I might have made in the neighbourhood and Dudley frightened off anyone who might have befriended me at primary school.”

Harry hugged his knees again, and Severus rubbed the young man’s back. “They told me Mum and Da were drunks who killed themselves in a car crash, and let me believe it until Hagrid forced them to accept my Hogwarts letter. They let me go without food for days upon end, they made fun of me at every opportunity, and Vernon belted me if I dared object—Merlin, Severus. I could go on for weeks about how badly they treated me.

“And Vernon’s sister was just as bad. She didn’t visit often, but when she did, using me for her amusement was her favourite pastime. She set her vile bulldog on me and let him chase me up a tree on my seventh birthday. They left me there for hours, and Dudley was ready with his bully friends when I finally made it down.”

Unbidden, tears streaked down his face. “Why did they hate me so much? I only ever tried to be good, but it was never enough. I was never enough.”

Severus gathered him close and sighed into Harry’s hair. “To think I once thought you spoiled. You have been neglected and abused in a criminal fashion, and I reinforced their cruelty to you all those years. I do not understand how you can be so kind to me, Harry.”

Harry laid his head upon Severus’ shoulder. “I need you, Severus. I’ve been alone too long, and I need this, this closeness with you. I don’t have it with anyone else, not even Ron.”

Severus frowned and pulled Harry so his back was against the older man’s chest. “Harry, I am glad that you feel close to me, but I do not understand. Until two days ago, I would have said you hated me as much as I hated you at the time. What changed your heart towards me so thoroughly?”

Harry flinched and curled up into a ball. “Promise you won’t hate me again?”

“Promise not to try?”

Severus’ lips twitched in amusement, but he didn’t laugh, to Harry’s relief, and only hugged Harry tighter. “I promise. So?”

Harry hid his face in Severus’ shoulder. “I did hate you … until second July this year.”

Severus gasped and clutchéd Harry tight. “Merlin. You saw it? You saw what they did to me?”

Harry winced and turned to face Severus. “I couldn’t help it, Severus. I tried to stop it, to Occlude, to turn my mind off so I could get help for you, but nothing worked. I have no control during the visions.”

“Harry, no, I am not angry. I am ashamed. I wish you had not seen me suffer, and worse, through that devil’s eyes. I cannot imagine he had a pleasant thought in his head concerning me.”
Heat traced up Harry’s cheeks and he looked away.

“Harry?”

“Um, Severus? That was what changed my feelings towards you. I didn’t see it through Voldemort’s eyes. I saw through yours. I, I don’t know why.”

Harry watched, petrified, as a barrage of emotions flickered across Severus’ features. First, shock. Then outrage at having his private thoughts invaded again, no matter that Harry couldn’t help it. Then, horror set in.

Harry prepared to be dressed down thoroughly, but Severus only looked more appalled by the second.

“Harry,” he said in an emotion-roughened voice, “when you have these visions, you feel all the pain of the victims, do you not?”

Harry closed his eyes and gave a slow nod. “The Dursleys weren’t happy about all the screaming.”

Severus tensed. “What did they do to you?”

Harry looked away. “I don’t think you want to know.”

Bone-white and shaking, Severus leapt up and bolted for the lavatory. The unmistakable sound of retching followed half a moment later, and Harry rushed after him.

“Oh, Severus.”

The young man knelt beside Severus on the floor and gathered up the man’s long hair, holding it aside. He rubbed Severus’ back with his free hand and tried to soothe him.

“I’m here, Severus. It’s okay now. They won’t hurt you again.”

Severus sat back and dragged a hand across his mouth. “That is not what made me ill.” His voice was raw and broken. “That you had to experience my torture, too, and you had no one to help you, you were all alone, and those creatures hurt you on top of it, I, I just—”

He dropped his head towards the loo again and expelled what remained of their breakfast. Harry stayed with him and tried to comfort him, but when Severus came up a second time, he was weeping.

“Forgive me,” Severus said in broken tones. “I never meant to hurt you by my sins. I was even worse to you than those monsters you call relatives.”

Harry climbed over him to grab a flannel from the linen closet, wet it at the sink, and knelt before Severus again. Harry flushed the vomit, then with tenderness and affection, he washed the mess from Severus’ face. Severus watched him with wide eyes and a bright blush. Harry doubted anyone had ever cared for Severus like this and reckoned the man was bound to feel embarrassed, so while he cleaned the mess away, Harry soothed him in a gentle voice.

“Ssh. Severus, you didn’t hurt me; Voldemort did. And I only experienced a portion of your torture anyway. I didn’t know what they had done to your face, remember? I only knew it hurt and bled, a lot. I must have come into your mind afterwards. But, yes, I did feel the rest. I’m thoroughly relieved you got us out of there before Dolohov could have his say.”
Severus shuddered. “Merlin. If it was real, you … you truly saw all of me.”

“Honestly, Severus, I mostly just saw a lot of blood. That wound on your face was really bad.”

Harry laid the flannel aside and cupped Severus’ cheek. “I meant what I said, though. What I couldn’t help seeing of you is beautiful.”

Severus leaned into Harry’s hand. “You don’t mean that. You can’t. I know what I look like.”

“Not through my eyes, Severus,” Harry whispered. “Not the way I see you.”

Severus’ eyes met his and fierce longing burned within their dark depths. Longing? The strength of desire in his eyes stunned and bemused Harry.

What was Severus longing for?

Severus sighed and looked away. “Forgive me. I am sorry you had to see that, to endure it. If I could change it, take it back, I would.”

Harry slipped his other hand into Severus’ hair and turned the man’s face back around. “I wouldn’t. Not one moment. Despite the fact that it hurt and I suffered for it afterward, I can’t regret it. Seeing through your eyes changed my opinion of you forever. I didn’t care if you were still snarky with me, after living through your pain and sacrifice, your desperate need to reach me, to help ….” Harry frowned. “Wait a tick. Severus, is it possible for someone as skilled at mind magic as you are to use Legilimency at long distances?”

Severus shook his head. “No. I know what you are thinking, but that is not possible.”

Harry sat back on his heels. “Then what was it? How did we connect like that?”

Severus paled, glanced to the door past Harry’s shoulder, and then eyed his hands. “I don’t know. There are … a few possible explanations, but I will need to research them further before I can answer truthfully.”

Harry frowned. Severus knew something, but for some reason, he didn’t want to talk about it. Harry shook his head. Perhaps Severus honestly did need to research first. Or perhaps he was simply afraid. Either way, Harry could give him the benefit of the doubt.

“All right.”

Severus blinked. “All right?”

“Yeah. You can talk about it when you’re ready.” Harry stood and offered his hand to Severus. “Come on. You’ve had a rough morning, and you didn’t sleep last night either. Let’s get you to bed, okay? Come to think of it, I’m knackered, too.”

Severus let Harry pull him to his feet and followed him out of the lavatory, keeping quiet and with his head drooping. Merlin, he must have been exhausted to let his tiredness show like this. Or perhaps he merely trusted Harry enough not to worry about his pride as much. Harry hoped he had earned the man’s trust. He had certainly tried his best.

He kept hold of Severus’ hand and led him into the older man’s bedroom. The pale green and white décor surprised Harry, but then, perhaps Severus needed something lighter when his whole life had been dark. Harry resolved then and there to be another light for Severus whenever he could.

“Come and lie down for a tick, Severus,” Harry said. “You’ve had too much upset for one morning.
You’re not used to dealing so with so much emotion.”

Severus just nodded and lay upon the bed. Harry helped him get his shoes off and laid them by the door, then dug a clean quilt from his closet and draped it over the man’s lean form.

“There you are,” he murmured and carded a hand through Severus’ hair. “Do you think you can rest?”

Severus whispered, “Stay with me?”

“Sure. Until you fall asleep or do you want me to watch over you?”

The older man closed his eyes as if in pain. “As long as you wish, though helping me fall asleep will be sufficient.”

Harry understood what the man was trying not to ask. He wanted Harry to stay, but feared to ask him. Whether he didn’t want to inconvenience Harry or because he had endured enough blows to his pride for one morning, Harry didn’t know, but he wouldn’t leave Severus alone and in pain regardless. Honestly, Harry felt he could use a bit of a nap anyway.

With a smile, Harry toed off his trainers and set them beside Severus’ shiny black shoes.

“I’m a little sleepy myself. It’s been a rough couple of days.”

“Hmm.”

While Severus still had his eyes shut, Harry took off his tee and shorts, leaving him in a simple white singlet and boxers, and climbed into bed behind the older man. Severus startled at the weight on his bed and turned to face Harry.

Severus’ Adam’s apple bobbed as his eyes travelled down Harry’s form, and the younger man blushed at the need and naked want within them.

Want? Wait a moment, Severus wanted him?

The realisation knocked into Harry with the force of one of Petunia’s cast-iron frying pans. Severus wanted him, cared about him. Perhaps even loved him.

Loved him …. Harry flopped down beside Severus, stunned and shaking, as Kreacher’s words replayed in his mind. “Kreacher now thinks Master Regulus was being wrong about who Snape loves ….”

Shite. If Severus loved Harry, if he believed Harry didn’t love him in return, that would explain all those sad, wistful looks. Come to think of it, Severus hadn’t started looking that way until after Kreacher’s revelation. And the moment the elf had spoken, gods. Severus had looked so lost, so broken. Harry had ached to heal him, but hadn’t known how.

Harry dropped his head onto the pillow with a little whoosh of breath. Merlin help them, it was true! Severus was in love with Harry. But how? When?

Harry frowned and gave himself a mental shake. None of that mattered. The fact was that Severus was beside him and hurting, thinking Harry could never love him in return. Fuck. Harry didn’t know if he could himself. Could he come to love Severus? Did he already?

Harry turned to the other man and gave a little smile. Well, it definitely wasn’t off the table. Severus
was gorgeous in his way, and the man’s gentle side underneath the snark melted Harry’s heart.

And, his lips called to Harry like a siren song. Harry ached to taste them, to see if the feeling burgeoning inside his chest every time Severus touched him truly was love. Harry was half-convinced and started to lean forwards, but his mind overrode him.

What if he was wrong? What if Harry felt nothing more than friendly compassion? He would shatter what was left of Severus’ heart if he went to kiss the man, gave him hope, and then found he could not follow through.

“Harry?” Severus’ voice quavered, which reminded Harry of just how much the man had riding on the line Harry had almost crossed. “What are you doing?”

Harry leaned back and gave a quiet sigh. He had to wait. He had to think and sort out his emotions before he made any kind of move on Severus. He would not lead the man on.

Severus deserved better. He deserved everything, and Harry wouldn’t move until he was at least reasonably sure he could give it.

Harry smiled and rubbed the man’s hair, testing the feel of it against his palm. ‘So soft.’ Out loud, he said, “Lying down with you. I didn’t think you wanted me to leave.”

Severus’ cheeks flushed. “No. Stay, if it does not inconvenience you.”

“No at all.” Harry lay as close as he dared and covered them both with the quilt. “Rest, Sev. I’m here for you.”

“Sev?” He gave Harry a soft smile. “Both of our mothers once called me Sev.”

Harry chuckled. “Maybe I should give you a different nickname then, one just for me. Hmm. How about Verus? You’re honourable. Seems to fit.”

“Verus? It is a good name. I am glad you gave it to me.”

Severus’ gaze burned with an intensity Harry had never seen before. A sudden burst of heat surged through Harry’s groin to his fingertips. His breath caught, and an involuntary shiver rushed down his spine. Harry leaned forwards, then caught himself. No. He couldn’t break his resolve.

At least he knew he desired Severus, but love needed more than lust backing it.

Harry swallowed and gave ‘Verus’ a shaky smile. “Have a good nap then. When you wake up, we’ll discuss our plans about the horcruxes, yeah?”

Severus nodded. “After lunch, perhaps. Then I believe I owe you a song.”

Harry grinned. “Lovely. Will you teach me a little?”

Harry did love that Severus could play, too. He had always wanted a musical partner.

“I shall try. I hope you are more apt than you were in potions and Occlumency.”

And his sense of humour kept Harry happy. Maybe, with a little time and understanding, they could work.

Harry gave a breathy burst of a laugh and curled up close to Severus.
“I may have been distracted by the teacher then.” Harry leaned up on his elbow, watching Severus’ face. His soft expression and hair spilling over the pillow was a surprisingly compelling sight. Again, Harry had to resist the temptation of Severus’ lips. He ached to trace a fingertip across the soft cupid’s bow and see if they were chapped or smooth.

Merlin, his feelings about the man had changed fast, but Harry had somewhat of a reason. What had prompted such a rapid alteration for Severus?

“Verus?”

The man turned to look into Harry’s eyes and gave him a tentative smile. “Yes?”

“What made you change? You hated me so much before. Why are you being so kind to me now? Not that I’m complaining; I’m just curious as to what brought this about.”

Severus hesitated. “Many things, I suppose. First and foremost, after being tortured so horribly, I no longer have the energy to hate you, nor do I need to maintain that façade as I am no longer spying.”

“Was it all an act then? If so, it was a damn good one.”

Severus let out a dark chuckle. “Would that I could say it was. I hated your father, Harry, and I had decided to hate you because of losing Lily to him. But try as I might to see your father in you, you are your own person. One that I find I have misjudged terribly until now.”

And that was why Harry needed to tread carefully. Their past could hurt them both otherwise. Harry had forgiven Severus, and he meant it, but, would that change when they argued? When Severus was angry with him, would he revert to the greasy dungeon bat?

Harry didn’t think so, knowing what he did, but what would happen if so? Would he be able to understand Severus’ actions as self-defence, or would he resent the man even now?

They needed to go slow. As slow as they could, anyway. Already, Harry’s resistance was weakening. He reminded himself again of how much he would hurt Severus if he misjudged and hardened his resolve. Severus needed him not to rush in, as his Gryffindor side was wont to do. He had to approach this like a Slytherin.

Well, the hat had said he would have done well in Severus’ house, hadn’t it?

Harry smiled and caressed Severus’ cheek. “I already forgave you, Verus, remember?”

Severus smiled at the name. “I do enjoy hearing that. And I know, Harry. You are a much better person than I ever gave you credit for.”

Harry couldn’t prevent a blush. “T-thanks. Is that why you changed?”

“Partially. Also, when you defended me against Mad-Eye and were so kind to me, it … healed something inside me. And I will admit I have not experienced such gentleness or affection as you are wont to show since my mother perished. I needed touch and hope desperately, and you give so freely of it. That made me wish to be as kind to you as you were to me. Because you trusted me first, I was able to trust you. Does that make sense?”

“Mm-hmm. I do understand, but I still feel like you’re holding back.”

Severus sighed and covered his face with a slender hand, but Harry pulled it away. The young man ached to kiss his cheek, but hesitated. Should he stop kissing Severus at all until he knew how he
felt? No. Severus had just said he needed Harry’s affection. Whether Harry was sure about his feelings or not, he could offer the man that much.

He pressed a soft kiss to Severus’ forehead and stroked his hair. “It’s okay. You can tell me.”

“Merlin, you will think me mad.” Severus shook his head and clasped Harry’s caressing hand in his own. “Very well. The whole truth is, ah, when you were … with me, Harry, in my torture, I heard you. Your voice. I thought I was hallucinating, but still, your voice gave me strength until now.”

Harry squeezed the man’s hand. “I was there, Severus. I did talk to you and try to pull you through it. Don’t you remember me saying I didn’t regret it?”

Severus swallowed hard and looked away. “I suppose I didn’t fully realize what you meant.”

Harry frowned and released his hand. “Severus? What’s the matter?”

“It is … one of the situations I need to research. Forgive me. I … I need time.”

Severus’ reluctance to speak piqued Harry’s curiosity, but he trusted Severus to tell him when he was ready, and the man needed to rest. Harry didn’t want to push when he was so vulnerable already.

“It’s okay. Just tell me when you know, yeah?”

Severus searched Harry’s expression and frowned. “I’m surprised you are not trying to bully it out of me. You have not taken well to secrets in the past.”

“The difference is that I trust you. I didn’t trust Dumbledore. Besides that, you’re not keeping it secret because you don’t think I can handle it or I’m too young. You said you’re not ready to discuss it yet.”

Severus winced. “No. I am not.”

“Then it would be unfair of me to push. And I don’t want to be a bully. Ever.”

Severus gave a relieved chuckle. “I think you could not be a bully if you tried. Merlin! You have been so kind to me, even in that night we both suffered, you were kind. Your presence held me together during one of the worst times of my life. I, I cannot believe it was real.” He gave Harry an incredulous look. “You truly thought so well of me even then?”

“Yes, Severus. I’m proud of you, and I was then. I was amazed by you, honestly. You’ve been alone so long, without a soul to help you, but you still faced death and destruction every day for people who didn’t even respect you.” Harry slipped a hand into his hair and held his cheek. “Gods, you’re so brave, Severus. So faithful.”

Severus’ dark eyes shone. “You mean this?”

“Every word.”

Severus stroked a gentle finger down the side of Harry’s face. The soft touch quivered deep inside the young man and filled him with warmth.

Harry had the feeling that, come this time next week, he would tell Severus yes.

“This, Harry,” said Severus, “your kindness is what truly changed my behaviour. Even with my other reasons, your gentleness with me was what brought me to alter my actions, though my heart towards you had already changed.”
“I’m glad.” Harry smiled, then let out a jaw-cracking yawn, every muscle suddenly drooping and heavy. “Oh, excuse me. Merlin. Where did that come from?” He flopped onto his pillow, unable to support his head. “Let’s just rest now, yeah? All of a sudden, I’m so—” He yawned again. “—so tired.”

‘Understatement.’ Harry felt as if exhaustion had smacked into him with the force of a speeding lorry. Was this kind of sudden exhaustion normal? Hell, he couldn’t think of it at the moment. His brain had just … gods, tired. ‘Can’t … think.’

“Yes, it happens on the day of your maturation,” said Severus. “One moment you are well, the next, you cannot stay awake. I would wager you will sleep until supper, in which case we will move our plans back a meal.”

“Mm-hmm.” Harry nuzzled closer to Severus’ warmth, already half-asleep.

“Rest, Harry. I will be here for you as you have been for me.”

“Mm, sounds … good. Yeah.”

He hardly noticed when strong arms pulled him close, but he buried his head in Severus’ chest and slept soundly all the same.

Chapter End Notes

Summary for those who couldn't read it: To get Harry to talk about his life with the Dursleys, Severus reveals his horrific past. He talks about how his father beat him and his mother and raped her, and then murdered his mother and her unborn daughter because the baby girl was a witch. Severus mentioned the girl having an emerald green core, which is an important detail later on. Then Harry talks about his own life, how badly the Dursleys neglected and abused him, and he and Severus become much closer because of it. Severus discovers that dementors could attack Harry's Muggle cousin, and that Harry was actually with him in his torture. He is horrified, but Harry helps him heal and puts Severus in bed. Severus asks Harry to stay with him, and through the man's actions and expressions, finally puts it together that Severus is in love with him.

Harry decides he likes Severus and the seeds of love are there, but he needs to sort out his feelings before he acts for Severus' sake. Then the beginning of Harry's inheritance illness hits him, and he gets super tired and falls asleep in Severus' arms.
Bright light and the sound of a throat clearing woke Severus from his nap. He jerked his wand from under his pillow and pointed it straight towards the glow. Only after he blinked the sleep from his eyes did he realise the light was a bear Patronus. Molly. Severus lowered his wand.

“What news do you have for me?”

Molly’s voice came from the bear’s mouth. “Nothing has changed since yesterday. We are all stuck where we escaped to, though a few of us have managed to slip home through Arthur and the Floo. As you and Harry are in the most danger, it’s best you stay where you are. Tell Harry not to worry about his birthday; we will celebrate with him as soon as we’re all able to meet again.

“We are all well at the Burrow. George is recovering. Already joking about his ear, the silly child.

“How are your injuries? And don’t forget to check Harry tonight—his integration illness is right around the corner. You know how it feels. Nothing a spot of tea and honey won’t cure—and don’t you dare deny him proper care out of spite, Severus Snape—take care of him in my stead, please. Don’t let Harry neglect his meals, either. He is far too thin by half and forgets to look after himself, the brave little dear.

“We will contact you when anything changes. Keep me posted on Harry’s condition.”

The bear faded, and Severus scowled at the image. Even in a Patronus message, Molly Weasley would find a way to scold and infantilise them. With a shake of his head, he turned to Harry, still sleeping soundly in his arms. Severus debated on getting out of bed, but holding Harry while the young man slept had an appeal he couldn’t deny. He snuggled Harry closer and kissed the top of that messy head.

Never had Severus imagined he would be able to hold Harry like this. Until that morning, he had never thought he would want to. The speed of their connection frightened Severus. He still refused to admit they were soul bound, but with the evidence piling up around him, he feared he could not hold onto the denial much longer.
Merlin, Harry had connected with him on the power of sheer, raw, wish magic. Their minds had linked them to a point where Harry could see through Severus’ eyes, feel everything the older man did, and even communicate with him mentally.

If that did not indicate a soul bond, Severus did not know what would.

Yet, there had to be something else. Anything else tying them together. Severus couldn’t endure eternity knowing his bond mate didn’t want him.

Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad. Even if he could not have Harry as a romantic partner, his touches and kisses might be enough to sustain Severus even with a broken soul. Every touch had been innocent, and still each one thrilled and excited Severus in a way he had never known. Harry had done nothing sexual, and still none of Severus’ former partners had made him feel as loved as Harry did.

Perhaps having a soul bond with Harry wouldn’t be so terrible for Severus, but Harry … would it destroy any chance for Harry’s happiness? Severus didn’t know, and until he did, he would say nothing about the soul bond on the slim chance that some other magical connection had brought them together. Severus would do anything, even endure the pain of a rejected soul bond, if it meant Harry could be happy.

He gazed down at Harry with a soft smile. Merlin, the young man was beautiful. Special.

The thought gave Severus pause. Harry was a special wizard, and that worried him. However annoying her delivery, Molly had a point about wizarding inheritances. The drain on a wizard’s magic often made them ill, and the degree of said illness directly correlated to the strength of the wizard or witch. As Harry was the only known wizard to escape Voldemort five or six times by now, his inheritance would undoubtedly be strong. And he had healed Severus’ entire body, Dark Mark included. Even Dumbledore hadn’t been able to remove it, though given what Severus had seen lately, he wondered if the old manipulator had truly tried.

Severus doubted his own raw power could match the young man’s, and he had been miserable for days after his inheritance.

It would be a rough week for both of them, that was certain.

He watched Harry sleep for a while, but eventually his bladder demanded a trip to the loo, and Severus decided to make them a meal after that. To his delight, the cellar cold box yielded much more in the way of foodstuffs than the kitchen refrigerator had, and Severus levitated the ingredients for several meals upstairs, including soups as Harry would likely be ill for some time.

As expected, Harry did not wake for lunch. Severus put the rest of their meal away under a preservation charm and decided to use the time to check on the thestral and see if his owl, Odin, had found them yet. He might search the potions’ garden, too. No doubt some of the ingredients had perished after two years without care, but most should still be in good condition. And he still had a working lab in the cellar. Perhaps he might set back a store of healing potions for Harry’s illness while he waited.

Odin had not yet arrived, and Freya seemed to be recovering well. Severus stunned a nearby rabbit and brought it to her for her meal, then went on a hunt for potions ingredients. By dinner time, he had a couple of strong healing potions in stasis and many more ingredients laid by in case his current cauldrons didn’t last throughout Harry’s integration.

With his preparations complete, Severus went ahead with making dinner, but even after calling him,
Harry still did not wake. The man pushed aside a tendril of worry and scanned through his books for information on healing particularly strong integration illnesses while he waited for Harry to wake.

When Harry had yet to awaken by nightfall, Severus had worried himself almost into a lather. He kept telling himself it was for nothing, that Harry had merely suffered all summer at the hands of his vile relatives and likely needed the rest, until he came upon a damning sentence in his book.

“*It is rare, but not unheard of, for particularly powerful wizards to begin their illness early—at the time of birth one day prior to the wizard’s eighteenth birthday instead of midnight on the day of. Experts disagree as to why this occurs, but the predominant theory is that repeated trauma encourages the magic to manifest early as a method of protecting its host.*”

Severus gasped and dropped his book. Repeated trauma? Well, Harry had that in spades. And come to think of it, hadn’t his own inheritance started early? It wasn’t much difference as he had been born barely an hour before midnight, but now that he thought of it, he remembered Poppy’s surprise to see him prior to his eighteenth birthday, however short the wait.

He jerked to his feet and dashed to the bedroom, hoping Harry hadn’t been suffering too long without aid. When Severus heard nothing from within, he rapped on the bedroom door, receiving a pained groan as his only invitation.

“Harry? I’m coming in to check how your inheritance has affected you.”

As soon as he stepped inside, a powerful odour of illness and sweat hit him hard enough to make him reel. Harry had gotten his inheritance without a doubt, and it was strong indeed.

“Sweet Circe!”

He raced to Harry’s side, heart pounding in his chest. A sickening chill raced down his spine as he took stock of the young man’s condition. Harry lay tangled in the sheets, one bare arm thrown over the edge of the bed and the other pinned to his side. His hair stuck up in wet points where it wasn’t plastered to his scalp, and his golden skin had taken on a ghostly pallor, with the flush of high fever mottling his face and chest. Disjointed murmurs spilled from his lips at odd intervals, names of his friends and Order colleagues among them. Mad-Eye’s moniker, muttered in an aggrieved gasp, made Severus flinch.

It appeared Harry had been suffering alone for hours.

Guilt gnawing bleeding holes in his chest, Severus untangled Harry from the blankets and threw them aside. A few brisk motions had Harry dressed in a clean tee and underwear and covered with a fresh quilt. Severus cast cleaning and drying charms on Harry’s pillows and arranged them to support him better, then dashed off to the loo for a stack of flannels and cool water.

With a tender touch, Severus washed Harry’s face and chest and dabbed sweat from his brow. Merlin, Harry was burning with fever. How long had he been suffering like this? Heartsick he had not checked Harry sooner, Severus chilled the wet cloth and laid it across the ill man’s forehead, praying with all he was worth that he had enough skill and potions to save his love.

What if he failed? Would he lose Harry? He had just found the man—surely fate wasn’t so cruel as to take his one, pure love away so soon? The thought comforted him briefly, then Severus remembered his lost family and Harry’s own suffering, and his heart sank. Fate was absolutely that
cruel. It had already taken his entire family, and Harry’s as well. And Severus would not survive if he lost Harry, too. He wouldn’t want to.

Tears blinding him, Severus worked to bring Harry’s fever down, to no avail. It would be the epitome of irony if Harry survived the killing curse only to die by his own magic. Perhaps the curse had left traces. Perhaps it had tainted Harry’s core and left him locked in a battle against his own body to survive.

Had Dumbledore told him the truth, then? The thought left Severus paralysed with fear.

No. He refused to believe it. He would not let Harry die. Not from illness, not by Death Eaters or their ringleader, and not to eradicate a horcrux, either. So help him, he would not lose one more soul that he loved.

Perhaps Harry’s potion just needed to be stronger. Severus had anticipated a harsh illness, but not one this powerful. Maybe some additional feverfew and wandering willow bark would bring Harry’s temperature down, and a healthy dose of wizard’s beard might take the edge off of the magical drain.

In usual situations, Severus would prefer phoenix tears to restore Harry’s magic, but without access to his stores and no knowledge of any living phoenix but Fawkes, he dared not risk it. The absence of his familiar would no doubt tip Dumbledore off to both the early start and strength of Harry’s illness. And Severus wasn’t sure, with his tainted soul, if he could call the phoenix or not. The bird would come for Harry—phoenixes were incapable of lying or false affection and Fawkes obviously loved Harry—but could Severus, a man who had killed before, call a creature as pure as a phoenix? He doubted it.

Severus shook his head. Perhaps the potion would be enough. He would try to call Fawkes if all his other methods failed, but not a moment sooner. For the time being, he had another ingredient to harvest and a remedy to brew.

The need for concentration overrode Severus’ debilitating terror, and he set a monitoring charm over Harry before making a mad dash to the garden.

“Please, hold on, Harry. I cannot lose you.”

Thankfully, the garden had plenty of the grey, stringy fungus called wizard’s beard tucked among the dried-up twigs of a dead begonia.

Severus tipped a vial of his second batch of potion into Harry’s mouth and helped the man swallow, praying his stronger potion would bring the young man’s fever down. He sat on the bed beside Harry once the sick man had taken the entire potion, fingers trailing through wet, messy hair and across a too-warm cheek.

There was no change, and Severus knew of no stronger remedy for integration illness. Harry continued to worsen as midnight approached, and Severus feared the toll of the clock like a funeral bell. Once Harry’s full magic released, he feared the man would not survive, if this was only the start.

Severus laid his forehead upon Harry’s wincing at the heat below him, almost burning his skin. “Oh love. Please hold on. You must survive. We have no hope—no. I have no hope without you.” Tears
splashed on Harry’s cheeks. “I love you,” Severus whispered, and gathered Harry up close. “Don’t leave me. Please.”

But Harry continued to worsen, and Severus knew he had no choice but to seek out Fawkes’ help. He thought of Harry, of the way the phoenix seemed drawn to him, as if he wished for a new master. Perhaps he did. No phoenix would truly ally himself with someone dishonest and cruel. The thought niggled the back of his mind, deep worry and alarm rising with it, yet with Harry moaning and suffering before him, Severus had no attention to spare.

Severus sat and wiped his eyes. Harry … had he not called Fawkes before? He thought the boy had mentioned it in Occlumency lessons, perhaps last year. If Harry could call him, was it possible, by his love for the young man, Severus could, too? The fire birds aligned with love, sought its purest forms like a bee to nectar. Severus doubted he qualified as anything close to pure, but if there was the slightest chance his love for Harry might summon the phoenix without the cruel headmaster’s knowledge, it was worth a try.

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He lowered his head and held Harry’s hands, whispering to the night and praying the gods might carry his voice across the realms once more. It had worked with Harry. Perhaps it would work with the phoenix.

“Fawkes, I, I don’t know if you can or will hear me, but if you might, I ask for your aid. Harry is dying. His inheritance is too strong, and even with all the skill I have, I fear I cannot save him when his full powers hit. His magic will burn away his life without your help. Please. I, I lo—”

A sudden flash of red light and a crackle like fire made Severus shoot to his feet, wand out and eyes wet but alert. A red and orange bird sat on his dresser, giving him a doleful look.

“Fawkes,” Severus breathed, and lowered his wand. He held an unsteady arm out to the bird. “Why? Why did you come? I did not think I could—there is nothing pure about me.”

Fawkes climbed to his shoulder and rubbed a feathery head into his cheek as if to say, “I see you, and I do not find you wanting.”

Severus choked back a wave of tears. “Oh, thank Merlin.” He sat beside Harry once more and set the bird upon the young man’s chest. “Fawkes, does Albus know you are gone?”

The bird gave him a sorrowful shake of its head.

Severus sighed. “Thank Merlin for that, too. Do you think you can help Harry?”

Fawkes gazed at the boy and moved to Harry’s shoulder. He turned his head to the side and a thick, pearly tear dropped into the young man’s mouth. Harry gave a sort of shuddering gasp. The phoenix let six more tears drop—seven? Was it not typically three for such a use?—and lifted his head.

Severus leaned forwards, heart racing and breath tight. “Did it work? Will he survive?”

The bird pulled on Severus’ shirt, tugging him away from Harry insistently.

“You want me to move?”

The phoenix gave a fierce nod.

“I, I suppose ….”

Severus let go of Harry’s hand reluctantly and moved to stand by the dresser. A shield of fire
surrounded phoenix and man, and Severus gave the bird a confused look. The phoenix merely stared at Harry, waiting.

The clock struck midnight, startling Severus. He jumped, then reeled back as a wave of powerful white light burst from Harry like a shockwave. Glass shattered all over the place and the cottage swayed before settling once more.

In the sudden silence, Severus panted and held onto the dresser for dear life. Sweet Circe, he had never even heard of such a powerful core. The young man had just broken every window and piece of crockery in the cottage, and possibly Severus’ potions bottles despite his anti-percussive charms. Thank the gods he’d not had time to decant Harry’s stronger brew, or that might have been destroyed, too.

“Dear Merlin,” said Severus in a breathless voice.

Fawkes gave a shaky trill and flew to Severus’ shoulder, where the bird sat trembling after such a breathtaking display of magical power. Severus couldn’t blame him.

With bated breath, the spy pressed two shaking fingers to Harry’s neck, praying with everything in him that Fawkes’ help had come in time. A thump met his fingertips, then another, and Severus gave a relieved sob and fell upon Harry’s chest.

“Oh, Harry. Oh, love. You’re still here.” He kissed Harry’s brow and whispered, “I swear I will pull you out of this, now that Fawkes has saved your life. You have my vow.”

Harry whispered Severus’ name, and the older man held him tight before releasing him with a sigh. Fawkes gave him a curious trill and a bemused look.

Severus chuckled wryly and scrubbed a hand across his wet eyes. “It is rather shocking, isn’t it? But it is also true. He has all of my heart now.”

Fawkes nuzzled Severus’ cheek, and at first, the man thought the bird was merely being affectionate, until a hot beak rubbed at the line of his jaw where his scar used to be and a surprised trill sounded near his ear.

Severus shrugged. “Harry healed it. All of my scars, even this.” He lifted his sleeve, revealing his pale, unmarked forearm.

Fawkes cocked his head, peering at the white skin with a beady black stare. Then the bird blinked, and fire flamed in his eyes. He met Severus’ gaze, and a trilling sort of whisper filled the man’s ears.

>You have been marked by evil and resurrected from its ashes, made whole again by love.”

Severus stumbled back, shock coursing through him. “You can speak?”

>“Only like this, and only with you or your mate. And even then, only if you accept me.”

“Accept you? What do you mean?”

>“As your familiar.”

Severus gaped, chills rushing through him until every hair stood on end. “Fawkes, if I do, Dumbledore will know. I, I do not know how deep his betrayal runs, but Harry, if what he did to Harry stands, then I fear for our very lives.”
The fire doubled in the phoenix’s eyes. “You should. The man is evil, black-hearted as the one who gave Harry his scar.”

Severus flopped back onto the bed, all the breath gone from him. “Merlin. Then, but wait. How can you ask me to be your human when you are Dumbledore’s familiar?”

The bird gave a fierce impression of a scowl. “I was never his. He kidnapped me and bound me with a spell to his side. Your love for Harry, and Harry’s trust in me set me free.”

Severus shuddered. “You are not his familiar. He captured and imprisoned a phoenix. A phoenix!”

“How is he still alive if his very soul burns?”

The phoenix gave a bitter sounding trill. “He has no soul left to burn.”

“Fuck,” Severus breathed, every hair on his body standing on end. “You’re sure of this?”

“Absolutely.”

Severus lowered his head. “Then I cannot leave you with such a cruel human. But if I accept you, he will see. If he is truly as evil as you say, and I am aware your kind cannot lie, then Harry’s and my life will be forfeit. He will poison the entire Order against us and have us killed. Worse, he would make it look like a murder-suicide, I would wager.”

Fawkes shook his head. “He will not know until I wish him to, which will be when you are ready to reveal the truth. I will still pretend to be his familiar until the time is right to reveal my true loyalties. It is not now. The prophecy has yet to be spoken, the time for open rebellion is not yet upon us.”

“Open rebellion? Bloody buggering—but wait a moment.” Severus stared at the bird, willing his shaking to still. “Which prophecy? The one I know of has nothing to do with this. Unless you are ‘the power he knows not?’”

“I am not. I speak of a prophecy that, as of yet, hides within the currents of time.”

Severus’ eyes flickered to the young man sleeping peacefully.

“Yes,” said Fawkes in sad tones. “It involves Harry.”

Severus sighed and dropped his head in a shaking hand. “Merlin. Is he never to find peace?”

“You will help him find it. But please, my time runs short. Will you accept me as your familiar, human, for all the time your soul exists?”

Severus swallowed. “Will it not damage you? My soul is broken, Fawkes. I have killed before.”

“Love heals such wounds. In time, you will be whole again. I will help you, too. This is the last time I am able to ask. Will you accept me, Severus Tobias Snape?”

Severus sighed and held out a hand. “I accept you, Fawkes of phoenix kin.” He paused. “That is your true name, isn’t it?”

The phoenix alighted on Severus’ wrist and gave a terse nod. “Dumbledore took it from my mind.”

“Would you like a new one?”
“A name? Not at this time. Perhaps after Dumbledore’s loyalties are known among the Order. Until then, I should remain bound to the name they recognize.”

“As you wish.” Severus stroked the bird’s head. “If I had known you were suffering, I would have helped you long ago.”

“You could not until Harry’s love erased the mark from your soul. I am content.”

“Good. Then come, and seal the bond, my companion.”

Fawkes nuzzled Severus’ hand. The man brought the phoenix close to his heart and unfastened the buttons of his shirt with a whispered spell.

“Severus Tobias Snape, with this brand, I accept you as my human and friend.”

The bird pressed his head to Severus’ chest, and the human flinched from a sudden sharp burn. Then the pain vanished, and a pleasant warmth eased the freezing ache of his torn soul. The phoenix pulled his head back, revealing a golden sun in the centre of Severus’ chest. Severus smiled and touched a fingertip to the mark.

“It’s beautiful, Fawkes. This mark I am happy to bear.”

The bird let slip a soft, pleased trill. “I am glad you like it. We are bonded as familiar and companion now.”

Severus bowed. “I am honoured to be chosen, angel of fire.”

The phoenix trilled at the customary acceptance. “Thank you, companion and shadow kin. I am honoured to be with you. I must go now, though I would rather stay. Your mate needs your attention, and if I am gone much longer, the dark-souled one is sure to notice.”

“Mate?” Severus shook his head. “That is beyond my wildest hopes, but no matter. Go, my friend, and be careful. Return to us only when it is safe.”

“Understood. Until we meet again, companion.”

After a last nuzzle of Severus’ cheek, Fawkes flew backwards and vanished in a burst of flames. The phoenix’s brand still felt warm against Severus’ chest, though the mark itself had gone. Severus rubbed it for several long moments, stunned at the strange turn the night had taken.

A Slytherin with a phoenix familiar. The world would never believe it.

Harry gave a pained-sounding cough, and Severus jolted back into action. He had more immediate concerns if he was to keep his vow to Harry.

“Hold tight, Harry. Let me just repair the windows, and then I am yours for as long as you need me.”

With a sad sigh for his suffering familiar, Severus stood and fastened his clothing, then rushed to fix the cottage and retrieve Harry’s next dose of potion.

Dawn had long since come and gone before Severus had a moment to send a Patronus to Molly. It
was just as well. She would believe Harry’s inheritance came on time, and Severus didn’t dare mention the young man’s atypical early inheritance or close brush with death for fear word would get back to Dumbledore or the Dark Lord.

‘Best to keep that quiet, just in case.’

He conjured memories of Lily’s smile and how it had felt to hold Harry in his arms, and with a flick of his wand, his doe appeared. She had orange eyes now, like his phoenix’s flames.

Severus gaped. “Oh, Merlin! Can you hide those new eyes of yours?”

The doe bowed and blinked, and had her normal silver eyes when she lifted her head.

“Thank the gods. Keep them hidden at all times unless I tell you otherwise. Now, I have a message for Molly Weasley. Make sure she is alone and safe before you approach her.”

The doe nodded.

“Good. My message is this: ‘Potter is seriously ill. I have fashioned him some medicine from the ingredients available around our safehouse, and he is resting peacefully now. Please do not try to find us. There is no way in. The house is not on the Floo network and the cottage has anti-apparition wards. As it is also located in the middle of a forest, there is no way to reliably find us, and I cannot leave his side to fetch you. I will keep you informed as to his condition as it changes.’”

The doe nodded her understanding.

“Good. Now hurry.”

Once she had disappeared, he made sure Harry was well enough to endure his absence for a few moments and went to check on the thestral. To his shock, not just Odin, but a pair of owls sat on the animal’s back—Harry’s snowy owl and Severus’ sooty. Hedwig had several tiny packages and cards in her talons—birthday gifts for Harry, no doubt. He checked both birds for tracking charms and hexes before offering an arm to them. Hedwig eyed him suspiciously and stayed on the thestral’s back.

“Hello, Odin. I am glad you’ve found your way to me safely, but I’m surprised to see you, Hedwig. I suppose you wanted to make sure Harry received his gifts?”

Hedwig gave him a wary look and bobbed her head.

“Thank you. He will be glad to have them, if h—”

 Odin clucked and rubbed Severus’ cheek, his excited greeting cutting off his human.

“Yes, yes. I am quite glad you’ve come, Odin. Let me speak, though.”

The little sooty hesitated and pecked at Severus’ chest. The bird flapped backwards and gave him a big-eyed look, one that spoke of hurt.

“Oh, my little friend, no. I have not replaced you. You know of Fawkes, the phoenix from which the Order takes its name?”

The owl gave him a wary nod.

“As it turns out, Dumbledore captured him against his will.”
Hedwig and Odin shot into the air with outraged squawks, both looking horrified. The thestral whinnied in shock and a shudder passed down her back from wings to tail.

“Yes. Such was my reaction, too. Fawkes told me Dumbledore has been keeping him as a prisoner. When he asked to be my familiar, I could not in good conscience turn him away, knowing what he faced if I refused. Will you forgive me that I could not ask you first?”

Odin gave an owlish snifflle and nipped Severus’ ear in affection. Severus patted his head. “Yes, you will always have a home with me. Now, are you all right?”

Odin nodded and settled down. Hedwig alighted beside him, though she still looked wary.

“Good. Hedwig, I must take you inside, if you can trust me so much.”

The owl gave him a suspicious glare

“I will not hurt you. In fact, I must apologise. Harry has shown himself to be a beautiful, loving young man, and I hurt him repeatedly. He forgave me, somehow. I do not deserve it.”

The snowy owl let out a nervous hoot and scooted closer to the man’s shoulder.

“Yes, I mean it.” Severus glanced towards Harry’s window and flicked it open with his wand. “Hedwig, Harry is just in there. He needs you, as his inheritance has left him seriously ill. Your presence might cheer him a bit.” He frowned when the bird stayed on his shoulder. “It’s not a trap. I would not hurt an innocent owl.”

She shook her head and flapped in irritation.

Severus sighed. “As you wish, though you can trust me. I have never harmed Odin.”

Hedwig gave the owl in question a curious nuzzle. Odin rubbed her head and nuzzled back. After a few moments of owlish chattering, Hedwig nipped Severus’ ear, too hard to be entirely forgiving but not hard enough to hurt, and soared through the open window. Severus left it open so she would not feel trapped.

“Thank you, Odin,” said Severus, “I must see to Freya now, so if you will wait over there, I’ll take you inside in a moment. Or you can go in with Hedwig.”

The sooty nodded towards the window, and Severus motioned him inside. He watched as the bird disappeared in the dim light of the bedroom, then turned to the thestral with a sigh.

“Well, that went better than I’d hoped.”

The thestral snorted.

“Hmm. You’ve quite the taste for humour, don’t you? You must be well aligned with Harry, then. Perhaps I am not the only one who will be acquiring a new familiar soon.”

Freya snorted again and spread her bat-like wings.

“You want me to get on with your check-up?” He laughed and patted her flank. “Very well.”

After a thorough examination, Severus determined she had healed from her long flight besides a bit of soreness in her wings and withers. He rubbed a tingling relaxant into the velvety skin and smoothed it with a soft touch. Once all her sore muscles had been treated, Severus finished with a pat to her rump.
“Looks as though you’re doing better. Have you found something you can eat, Freya? I fear I shall not be able to hunt for you with Harry so ill. I cannot leave his side for long.”

The thestral nickered and pawed at the remains of what appeared to be a hare, picked clean to the bones. Severus rubbed her withers in relief.

“Good girl. If we are here for any amount of time, I will get you some meat from the village in case hunting in the forest is scarce.” He pointed his wand at the hare’s remains. “Have you finished your meal?”

She nodded and whinnied.

“Good.” Severus banished the skeleton and *Scourgified* the area. “That’s done then. Go and rest your wings, girl.”

The thestral snorted as if to say, “I was here first.”

Severus rushed back to Harry’s side. Hedwig had set his shrunken presents atop the dresser and perched on the headboard. Odin sat beside her, doleful yellow eyes fixed on the ill young man. Harry’s condition hadn’t changed.

“Keep watch for me, Odin, Hedwig?”

The owls hooted in reply, and with them guarding his charge, Severus felt safe enough to get a quick breakfast and have a shower. He rejoined the birds after making a pot of tea and some light broth for Harry, hoping he could wake the young man long enough for him to eat it.

Hedwig peered down at Harry with wide golden eyes.

“Yes,” Severus whispered, “he is quite ill, but I think he will be glad to see you.”

The owl gave a plaintive hoot and settled herself closer to Odin. The sooty tugged gently at Hedwig’s head feathers, grooming her, and nuzzled her cheek. Severus hoped it gave the nervous bird some comfort.

After setting the broth and tea aside on the nightstand, Severus sat on the bed beside Harry and patted his shoulders.

“Harry, wake up. You’ve a friend to see you, and I have your breakfast.”

Harry groaned and peeled open his eyes. “S-Severus? I, I don’t think I can go to dinner.”

Severus frowned. “Dinner is long past, Harry. It is ten in the morning. Happy birthday, by the way, though I imagine it does not feel so.”

Harry gave a weak chuckle. “No, not so much. Still, not my worst birthday.”

Hedwig hooted and alighted on Harry’s pillow.

“Oh! Hello girl. How did you find us?”

She spread her wings and huffed as if to say, “*I’m an owl, you daft idiot.*”

Harry tried to pet her, but he couldn’t lift his hand.

“Be still,” Severus warned. “You are very ill. Had Fawkes not come last night, you would have
died.”

Harry went ashen, losing the flush of his fever. “What? But Dumbledore—”

Severus smoothed Harry’s hair and stroked his cheek. “Ssh. It’s all right. Fawkes made sure Dumbledore did not know.”

“He did?”

“Yes. He, he had quite a bit of news, but I think it is best to tell you when you have your strength back. I do not want to place further strain on your system.”

“Ughn. I think you’re right. I can’t, can’t take more. Ghn. Why am I so ill?”

Severus gave a wry laugh. “Because it is you, Harry, and your power is so incredible, it nearly finished you when the killing curse couldn’t.” He cupped Harry’s face. “Rest now. You are safe.”

“With you,” Harry whispered into Severus’ palm.

Severus swallowed and tried to contain a shiver. “Yes. I’ll be here every moment. There is no need to fear.”

Harry smiled and kissed Severus’ palm. A jolt of sensation surged up Severus’ arm and straight into his chest, reminiscent of Fawkes’ kiss of fire. Severus could not resist running his thumb over Harry’s soft, parted lips before he pulled his hand away.

“I am here, Harry,” he whispered, his voice unsteady.

“Thank you, Verus,” Harry mumbled into the man’s palm.

After a few steadying breaths, Severus fed Harry as much of the broth and healing tea as the young man could manage. He was asleep again almost before Severus had taken the teacup away. Severus banished the dishes to the kitchen and suppressed a yawn, his own exhaustion taking its toll. After a moment of running through his mental list of things to do, he thought he could spare time for a nap, so long as he stayed close and kept Harry under a monitoring spell.

With another yawn, Severus lay beside Harry and snuggled close, only to receive a sharp nip on the ear. Hedwig glared down at him.

“There is no need for that! I am not hurting him.”

The owl glowered and nudged his arm, the one draped over Harry.

“You are worried I am taking advantage of him? No, little one. You saw our changed behaviour, did you not? I am quite in love with him, and will never hurt him again.”

Hedwig let out an undignified squawk and shook out her feathers, obviously shocked.

“Yes. It surprised me, too.”

Her piercing gaze seemed to say: “Prove it.”

Severus sighed and rolled up his left sleeve. “Look. He set me free, Hedwig. Saved my life and stayed with me during my torture. How could I not love him? He has given me hope when, for so long, I have had nothing but pain.”
Hedwig cocked her head sideways and stared at Severus for a long time, her wide, unblinking gaze unnerving the man. She must have seen something she approved of, for after a moment, she hopped onto Severus’ side and nudged his arm back towards Harry.

Severus gave her a weary smile. “Thank you. Will you wake me if he needs me and I do not hear the alarm? I do not think it will be a problem, but I am more exhausted than usual.”

Hedwig nuzzled his cheek and perched on the headboard once more, like a guardian spirit over her chosen human. Somehow, having her there made Severus less afraid. With a yawn and one last check of Harry’s vitals, he bid her goodnight and drifted off to the sound of the young man’s breathing.

Two days went by, and Harry’s illness worsened. He went in and out of delirium, and it was all Severus could do to keep his fever from becoming dangerous with their limited resources. Even with Fawkes’ help from before, he had to keep making the potion every two hours. After a while, every stir sent fierce shocks down his arm and spine, but Severus persevered. He had to. He needed Harry like his next breath.

By the third day, Severus could hardly move for exhaustion. He caught naps in between potion making sessions, bathed when he could, and bolted down broth and raw veggies from the garden whenever he could squeeze in a bite. He found all three animals in his charge to be blessedly self-sufficient so long as he let them loose to hunt, so Severus made a point of letting them take care of themselves, though he checked on their wellbeing as frequently as he could.

Molly’s bear hounded him for updates, and Kingsley’s lynx had made a few appearances, too. By the fifth day, Molly wanted to come to them to help, and a half-dead Severus would have welcomed her, if he knew of any way to bring her there. He thought of sending Freya, but though the animal would know the way back, she did not know how to find the Order safehouse. Even Severus had no idea of its exact location—yet another indicator that Albus’ trust wasn’t as absolute as it appeared. Albus’ hawk had made an appearance, too, and Severus took extreme care in his reply to that one. He gave no details he could avoid and kept up his front of hatred, though he took care to say that Harry was being less combative towards him. Otherwise, the report of Harry’s behaviour with Moody at Privet Drive would contradict him.

By the seventh evening, Molly was frantic, and Severus had just begun debating the safety of letting the owls lead Freya to her, when Harry’s fever broke. The relief had Severus sagging in his chair, and he called on his happy memories to send Molly a much-awaited message with good news.

Before his Patronus had formed, Harry jerked up in bed and opened his eyes. A faint green glow filled his eyes, reminiscent of that night on the Astronomy tower, and Harry turned to fix his gaze on Severus.

“Harry, thank Merlin. It’s all right now. You’re s—”

A raspy voice much unlike Harry’s usual tenor croaked across Severus’ soothing tones.

“Two duelling lords, two sides of the same coin, plot, scheme, and bleed the world with their cruel machinations. Three knights lead the rebellion to cleanse the world of the lords’ evil. Lonely and overburdened, the White Lion languishes in his cave. The last of his kin, the Red Wolf dwells among
the forsaken. Misunderstood and broken, the Prince of Shadow walked the line between both sides until he was left in the night to die, but now he sits in wait, disillusioned and unaware of his true self. Despite their sorrow, they remain strong. No darkness shall survive as long as they still fight. They are the Court of the Dawn, and they are coming.

“They will soon converge. A union of light, blood, and forsaken brings the Dawn. A truce between lion and serpent builds safe quarters for victims and forsaken under abandoned roofs. The Red Wolf’s army arises under the full moon and darkness of night. The love of Light and Shadow heals the great mother’s pain and births a new age. Rejoice, for the Lion comes quickly, bringing Dawn on his heels.”

His message delivered, Harry’s eyes unfocused and he sank back into the pillows, fast asleep before he made contact with the bed.

Severus sat, frozen and staring, mouth agape. Since when was Harry a seer?

‘Wait. A prophecy on the seventh day of his integration illness? Could it be?’

Gooseflesh erupted along the entirety of Severus’ flesh. Even the hair on his head rose a little with the power of his realization.

Every wizarding child had heard the stories from birth. In this very house, Severus’ grandmother had spent hours telling him about the legend of the Seventh Day Seer, a special being born in great chaos and destined to save the world.

Harry wasn’t a mere seer—he was a mage, a class of wizard found only in legends. Until now.

“Mother of Merlin,” Severus breathed.

He forced down his shock long enough to cast a diagnostic charm over Harry. With gentle hands, he eased the young man into a comfortable position and pulled the covers over him.

Reassured, Severus flopped into his armchair and let out a whoosh of breath. Harry was a mage. Sweet Circe, the world hadn’t seen a true mage since Merlin walked the earth, and Harry had just manifested the final sign. What did it mean?

He ran a fingertip across his lips and considered the young man’s prophecy. The White Lion—no doubt that was Harry himself. And the Prince of Shadows could only be Severus. His Prince ancestry and former career as a spy proved that. But who was the Red Wolf? Hmm. Red? A Gryffindor most likely. And one who dwelled among the forsaken. One close enough to Harry to affect the outcome of the war. The phrase about being the last of his kin indicated all of his colleagues and family had either died or left. Hmm. A wolf? An animagus, perhaps? Or ….

Or a werewolf.

Severus groaned and rubbed his forehead. Lupin. It had to be Lupin.

According to Harry’s prophecy, the three of them would have to work together to end the war. Severus shook his head and resigned himself to working with his childhood enemy. As little as the idea of a truce with the last marauder appealed, he would do so gladly if it meant he never had to see the snake-faced bastard again. One had to choose their battles, and Lupin had nothing on the Dark Lord’s brand of evil.

Besides, if Severus planned on keeping Harry happy, he would have to heal the breach with the werewolf, or at least try. Harry considered Lupin the only family he had left, and Severus’ continued
grudge against the werewolf would hurt him.

Well, that made Severus’ path clear. Merlin, the things he was willing to do for his love.

With one part of the prophecy worked out, Severus considered the “lords.” One was the Dark Lord, no doubt. And the other …. Severus shuddered and brought his knees to his chest.

Merlin help them, Dumbledore wasn’t just mad or cruel, he was actively trying to take over Britain.

As much as the idea frightened him, they would have to take action against him, and as soon as possible. Dumbledore was already the de facto leader of the Light, and Harry his only viable challenger. The only bump in the road in Dumbledore’s plans.

No wonder Dumbledore had claimed Harry would have to die to defeat the Dark Lord.

Well, Severus had seen the light. He would not let Dumbledore kill Harry, not in combat and not to destroy an imaginary horcrux.

He scowled and restrained the urge to punch something. So this was why the old fool had kept Harry from combat training: with no skills, Harry was easier to kill. Even with power like Merlin, an untrained wizard would perish fast against a master duelist like the Dark Lord. To hell with all his lies about keeping Harry innocent; Dumbledore was keeping him naïve, purposefully withholding knowledge that would help Harry survive.

White hot rage filled Severus, and he struggled to control it before his magic broke something and woke Harry. The bastard wanted Harry dead. Severus would be damned first.

He hugged his knees to alleviate a sudden rush of heart-stopping terror. No, not just Dumbledore. The Dark Lord, too. They both wanted Harry dead, though Dumbledore’s reasons remained in shadow for the moment. Duelling Lords, as Harry had prophesied, each the top of their class, and both were out for Harry’s blood.

How could Harry hope to survive caught in the middle? Merlin help them, what would they do?

Wait. Merlin? Gods above, that was it!

Severus blurted, though quietly, “The power he knows not!”

Harry had power neither Dumbledore nor the Dark Lord knew about. They would train it and make sure Harry came out victorious. Upon his life, no one would harm his Harry, not while Severus breathed.

They could do this. They had to do this. Their very way of life depended on it.

At that moment, a bear Patronus burst into the room and lumbered to Severus.

“Yes, yes. I know. Harry’s fever has broken and he is recovering. He should be well within a day or two. Return and tell Molly that ….”

Severus frowned. Should he speak of Harry’s prophecy?

No. He would say nothing. The last time he had revealed a prophecy, his best friend had died. He had already lost Lily to this gods-forsaken war. He would not lose his love, too.

Severus continued, “Tell her his integration illness ended this morning. I would have told her sooner, but I was so exhausted I could not conjure my Patronus. Forgive me for the delay.”
The bear nodded and bounded away. Severus let slip a sigh. That should keep Albus off the trail, for the moment.

After a shower and brushing his teeth, Harry padded into the living room the next morning feeling much better. He found Severus on the couch with another book and opened his mouth to greet him, but got a faceful of black and white feathers instead.

“What the—?”

The feathers retracted to reveal a chuckling Severus and two owls on either of Harry’s shoulders, one dark as night and the other pale as the moon.

“Morning, Hedwig.” Harry scratched under her chin. “I take it you missed me?”

Hedwig hooted and nudged Harry’s cheek towards the other owl.

Harry chuckled. “Yes, yes. I was getting there. I just wanted to say hello to my own familiar first.”

Hedwig fluffed her feathers with pride.

“That’s my girl. Go and sit with Verus for a moment.”

Hedwig cocked her head and hooted.

Severus beckoned. “He means me, you daft owl.”

Hedwig sniffed and perched on Severus’ outstretched arm, and Harry turned his attention to the black owl on his shoulder. “Hello there. Are you Severus’ owl?”

The bird gave a happy hoot.

Harry rubbed its chin. “Hmm. You seem of a happier disposition than your human, eh?”

The owl nodded.

Harry smiled. “Between you and me, I’m going to see if I can’t make him smile more.”

“Good luck,” said Severus without looking over the cover of his book. “You’ll need it.”

Harry laughed and came to Severus, sitting beside him close enough to curl up under his owl-free arm. Severus obliged by wrapping said arm around Harry’s shoulders and hugging him to his side.

Severus gave him a wan smile. “I am glad to see you feeling better this morning, Harry.”

Harry kissed Severus’ cheek and thrilled in the man’s blush. “I am feeling better.” He took in the expression of Severus’ eyes and frowned. “You’re not, though. Is something on your mind?”

“You might say that, but it is best discussed after breakfast. I tried to feed you broth and nutrient mixes while you were so ill, but they can only do so much.”

“Fair enough. How long was I out of it?”
Severus shuddered. “Seven days.”

“A week? Merlin!”

Severus gave a bitter snort. “You’ve no idea how accurate that is.”

Harry gave him a piercing look. “Severus, why was I ill so long? I’ve never heard of an integration illness that lasted a week. Ron was only sick for two days, and Hermione was ill for four. The twins were out for five or six, I think, but they had the longest inheritance illness I’ve heard of. What do you know that I don’t?”

Severus looked away. “That would be what we need to discuss after breakfast.” He motioned to the window. “Out with you, Hedwig, Odin. Go sleep for the day, and when you wake, we’ll see about that fresh beef for you and Freya, hmm?”

The birds pecked his ears lightly and flew out together, both hooting to one another.

“Well, I never thought I’d see the day,” said Harry with a grin. “Hedwig likes you.”

“I believe I have earned her loyalty. She watched me fight day and night to keep you alive through the worst integration illness of which I have ever heard. It was so dangerous, I had to have Molly send food back with the owls. I couldn’t leave your side for a moment, save to brew your medicines, and Hedwig and Odin watched over you then. Hence promising them a reward for their help. After this, Hedwig knows I will not let you come to harm.”

Harry took Severus’ hands in his and kissed his temple. “Thank you.”

Pink flooded Severus’ cheeks, but the man spoke as if he hadn’t noticed. “No thanks are necessary. The Order would kill me if I let their bloody saviour die.”

As Harry realised Severus was joking, he didn’t mind the jibe this time. “Hmm, probably. Shall we eat? I’m famished. And we never did get to make our plans.”

“After you.” Severus waved to the kitchen table, set with a full English.

Harry’s mouth watered. “Sweet Merlin, that looks wonderful.”

“Well, go on then. Don’t stand here like an idiot.”

Harry grinned and set in like a man starving. Severus ate at a more sedate pace, but he, too, finished a full plate.

Replete from their meal, Harry eased back into his chair and groaned.

“Oh, I shouldn’t have eaten so much, but it felt like forever since I’ve had good food.”

Severus scowled and poked viciously at a bit of egg left on his plate. “I do not doubt it, thanks to your lovely relatives.”

Harry looked away. “Maybe we could not talk about them? Ever?”

“Only if we’re comforting you or debating the various methods of torture I might utilise as vengeance.”

Harry laughed. “Okay, that I can live with. Seriously though, don’t really torture them. They’re not worth bloodying your hands.”
Severus muttered something like, “Cruciatus doesn’t bleed,” and pushed his plate aside. “As you wish. We have more important things to discuss at any rate.”

Harry nodded. “Dumbledore, our plans, and the horcruxes.”

Severus sighed and rubbed his temple. “Harry, Dumbledore, his betrayal runs deeper than we ever imagined. He has been plotting against the true Light for decades.”

All the blood leached from Harry’s face. “Merlin! What has you so sure of this, Verus?”

Severus allowed a small smile at the nickname. “Besides the fact that Fawkes told me he was never Dumbledore’s familiar and the man captured him long ago? Many things.”

“Captured him! Merlin. Wait, Fawkes told you? He can talk?”

“Yes, to his companion and their mate.”

“That means …” Harry gasped. “Severus! Fawkes is yours now?”

The man gave Harry a solemn nod. “He bonded with me after saving your life and told me the truth of Dumbledore: that he is as black as the Dark Lord himself.”

“Fuck,” Harry breathed and sank into Severus’ side. “I, he’s really that bad?”

Severus hugged him tight. “Harry, do you know what the punishment for stealing a phoenix and forcing them into servitude as a false familiar is? For imprisoning a phoenix at all?”

“No. Defence teachers haven’t been good save you and Remus, and well, neither of you covered it. Nor did Hagrid.”

“I never imagined it would be necessary. The punishment, it is similar to what Muggles describe as hell: one’s soul burns like fire for eternity.”

All Harry’s hair stood on end. “Bloody buggering fuck! And, but how? How can he even function if he’s on fire all the time?”

“According to Fawkes, the man has destroyed his soul to the point he no longer feels it.”

Harry gripped the table, nails digging half-moons into the wood. “Holy Merlin. That is, that’s horrific.”

“Yes. And, while I do not quite understand how Dumbledore could cut off the pain from his soul, that he has done bodes ill for his character.”

“No kidding.” Harry shuddered and moved closer to Severus, needing the warmth of the man’s body to fight the chill in his bones. “Gods. I, I never realised he was that bad.”

Severus scowled and clenched his fist on his knee. “I should have known. I should have seen it, but he, his warmth blinded me. I thought he was a friend, but after seventh year, I should have known he was never my ally.”

Harry frowned at the pain in Severus’ eyes. “Verus? What happened in seventh year?”

Severus sighed and lowered his head onto Harry’s. “Much. I told you what happened to my family. I did not tell you what happened to me afterward. The man betrayed me at a time when I had nothing and no one left.”
Harry growled. “I’ll kill the bastard.”

Severus hugged him close. “Not yet. Powerful as you are, he is more so at the moment. He has kept you in the dark deliberately. You must train hard in combat and magic before you can hope to have a chance against either him or the Dark Lord.”

Harry frowned. “Verus, if you can’t call him Voldemort, call him Riddle. Don’t give him the honour of using his self-fashioned title.”

“Riddle?”

Harry gaped. “You don’t know?” He cursed and smacked his hand on the table. “No. Of course you wouldn’t know. Why would a pureblood fanatic tell his followers he’s a half-blood? And of course Dumbledore wouldn’t tell you information you might need to survive. The bloody manipulative bastard.”

Severus paled. “What? How do you know this?”

Harry took out his wand and wrote ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle’ in the air between them. At first, the letters shone so bright, both Harry and Severus had to cover their eyes. Harry frowned and muted the strength of the spell.

“There. Should be safe now. Sorry about that.”

“No trouble, but who is Tom Marvolo Riddle?”

With a swish of his wrist, Harry made the letters rearrange themselves to spell out: ‘I am Lord Voldemort.’

“It’s an anagram of his real name. He fashioned it for himself while still a student to escape using his Muggle father’s name. The young Tom Riddle who materialised from his diary in the Chamber of Secrets demonstrated his name like this in his usual ‘before-I-try-to-kill-you-again-Harry’ monologue.”

Severus covered a snort. “He does rather love the sound of his own voice.”

“Doesn’t he though? Idiot. By the way, I destroyed the diary horcrux there, though I didn’t know what it was at the time. Seems basilisk venom will kill anything but a phoenix. I stabbed his diary with a basilisk fang out of my own arm. It killed him and saved Ginny.”

Severus turned stark white. “A basilisk—Slytherin’s basilisk—bit you? How did you survive the bite of a thousand year old basilisk? Come to think of it, how are you not a statue?”

“I said it would kill anything but a phoenix. Fawkes stabbed out its eyes and saved me from the poison with his tears.” Harry rubbed Severus’ cold, shaking cheek and tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m safe now. And why are you so shocked, Verus? I thought everyone had heard this story.”

Severus shuddered. “Not in detail. We were told you fought a snake, not a basilisk, for Merlin’s sake. I assumed it was a python of some sort. Gods, I cannot believe you fought a basilisk at twelve years of age.” He kissed Harry’s hair and held him tight. “It seems we owe my new familiar more gratitude than I knew.”

“Yeah. He saved our arses that night for sure.”
“Dumbledore conveniently left that detail out as well. I wonder how many of your other heroic misadventures the Headmaster has ‘altered’ to fit his agenda.”

“I don’t know, but we can discuss that later. You were talking about what happened to you after … your family died.”

Severus raised an eyebrow at Harry’s wording, but let it pass. “I had nowhere else to go save Hogwarts. I wasn’t sure exactly where my grandparents lived—this cabin was under a *Fidelius* charm—so I had no way of contacting them, and a part of me feared their reaction. I had failed to save their daughter and youngest grandchild. I feared they would reject me.” Severus sighed. “They did not, but I could never tell them the entire story. Muggle authorities said that my father died of shock after killing Mother and Sariah, and that I ran away before he could hurt me. It was the same story I told Albus and he to my grandparents, but you know the truth.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you for trusting me with it.”

Severus acknowledged his comment with an incline of his head. “I lived here for two years in relative peace. Grandmother was broken with mother’s death, and Grandfather was never the same, either. Still, they were kind to me. I loved them as much as my scarred heart could, and tried to make them proud of me despite my own grief.

“Yet, my grandparents were old, and in my final year at Hogwarts, just before the winter hols, they both died in their sleep. Or, so goes the story.” Severus shook his head. “I have long suspected Death Eaters killed them as vengeance for my early refusal to join them, but I have no proof.”

Harry slipped his hands into Severus’ and rubbed his fingertips. “I’m sorry, Verus.”

Severus gave him a wan smile. “I had planned to go home for Christmas that year, but with my grandparents dead and my eighteenth birthday still a month out, I had no choice but to stay at Hogwarts instead. I had expected to be the only student there besides a couple of orphans, so you can imagine my surprise when I found the fabulous four at breakfast the first day of the hols.”

Harry cringed. “I definitely do not like the way this story is going. Severus, for whatever idiot thing my da and godfather did to you, I apologise.”

Severus gave a dark laugh. “Oh, you should hear the story first. As I was saying, I saw them there and grew suspicious. They all had loving families, save Lupin, who, as I understand it, had parents as caring as your relatives, but Lupin rarely left home regardless. Why should they then return?

“At first, I thought someone had sent them just to torment me, another foolish prank or something like, but they avoided me. Had they not seen me at meals, I would have thought them unaware of my presence.

“The night of the full moon, your dear godfather came to me. I believe you remember this story? How I met Lupin as a full-blown werewolf and only your father’s guilty conscience saved my life?”

Harry groaned. “And this after you had already lost so much. Severus, I’m so sorry.”

“Ssh. It is not your fault, Harry. It took me years to see it, but you were always innocent.”

Harry stood and motioned Severus into the living room. “Come. I want to be able to be near you for this. I think you’ll need me.”

Severus gave him a sad smile, then turned and levitated the dishes into the sink. With a muttered spell, he set them to washing themselves.
“I should really learn to do that,” Harry said with a wry smile.

“It’s a simple charm. I will teach you at dinner. But come and let us talk.”

“Lead the way.”

Severus chose an end of the couch, thinking Harry could choose the chair beside it or sit on the opposite end if he chose, but the young man gave him an impish grin and plopped down right beside him. Severus swallowed a flutter of nerves and smiled back, though his lacked Harry’s confidence. He had no experience of this … closeness, of another human’s desire to be near him. He spent every moment near Harry afraid he would say or do something wrong and push the young man away.

Harry seemed to have no such fears. He took Severus’ hand without delay and smiled a bit sadly.

“I’m listening. What happened after my prat of a godfather almost killed you?”

Severus could not reply, so entranced was he by the warmth of Harry’s palm against his. Harry must have thought his hesitation came from pain, because he wriggled closer and attached himself to Severus’ side like an imp-shaped barnacle. With a put-upon sigh, Severus lifted his arm and laid it across Harry’s shoulders.

“You are getting altogether too comfortable, brat.”

Harry chuckled. “Your grousing doesn’t work on me anymore.” A warm hand traced over Severus’ breastbone and left trails of lightning in its wake. “I know it makes you feel better in here when I hold you. If I can stop your soul from bleeding even for a moment, I’m glad to.” Harry laid his head against Severus’ shoulder and sighed in contentment. “It makes me feel safe, too. Please don’t push me away.”

Severus nuzzled Harry’s wild mop and sighed into the silky strands. “As you wish. I will admit, it comforts me, and you are correct. My soul doesn’t ache so when you touch me.”

“Good. Now, will you finish telling me about the attack? What happened when Da found you in the Shrieking Shack?”

Severus shivered. “I came closer to dying or lycanthropy than I would have liked. Your father almost didn’t make it in time. Lupin had jumped atop me and would have torn my throat out had your father’s Patronus not blown him off. To my relief, the wolf followed the stag like a lost puppy and let Potter haul me out of there, but in throwing off Lupin, I’d been knocked into an old kerosene lamp or something like it. The glass tore my arm open and the ignition fluid burned me, too. Potter hauled me to the hospital wing, where I told Poppy what had happened.

“Naturally, Poppy sent for Dumbledore and told him the story. He didn’t call me until after my wounds had healed, which I supposed originally was for my benefit, so I could recover. But when he called me to his office, rather than telling me Black had been expelled—and you know well for such a dangerous prank he should have been—”

“I’m not denying it. I said the same to Sirius once I found out.”

Severus paused, shocked. “You, you did?”
Harry glared. “Of course I did! He could have killed you, and had he succeeded, Remus would have been executed, too. And Remus, as much as you have some right to hate him for his inaction in the other instances, you have to admit he was innocent in this case. He can’t control his wolf without wolfsbane any more than the sun can keep from rising. He didn’t even know he’d hurt you until my da told him about it later, and Remus raked Sirius over the coals for it, too.

“We all knew Sirius was the guilty party, but I was harder on him than any of them. I told him he might have not deserved Azkaban for Pettigrew, but he deserved it, at least some of his sentence, for you.” Harry’s expression clouded over. “He, uh, didn’t take it well. Didn’t speak to me for weeks. Remus had to appeal for me.”

Harry said it in a light tone, but Severus heard the lingering hurt behind his jocular facade. He squeezed Harry’s shoulders and brought him closer.

“He didn’t deserve your unconditional love,” Severus whispered.

The thought occurred to him, that if Black didn’t, he himself had no claim to Harry’s heart, either.

“That’s a contradiction,” said Harry.

“Hmm? How?”

“Unconditional love means without condition. Which means there is no deserving that kind of love. It just is, and that’s all there is to it.”

A tentative spiral of hope blossomed in Severus’ chest, but he ignored it.

“I concede your point. But moving on, once I had healed, I went to Dumbledore’s office. I had expected some kind of human concern, but he only asked a couple of questions after my health and then demanded I keep silent on what had happened in the shack that day. I was the one who was almost killed, and, once again, Dumbledore had protected his precious lions and left me to rot.”

Harry growled under his breath, “Barmy rat bastard.”

Severus nodded. “The next day, I learned the abysmal truth of the situation. The Prophet had come that morning, bearing the Marauders’ pictures and mine under a headline of ‘Student Saves Rule-breaker from Werewolf.’”

An indignant Harry sat bolt upright and squawked, “What!”

“You heard me. The front page article discussed the ‘noble Gryffindor’s’ heroic deeds to save the poor, defenceless Slytherin who, of course being the evil little swot he was, had ‘disobeyed school rules to go ingredient hunting in the Forbidden Forest.’ Apparently I ran afoul of a wild werewolf, and if not for Potter’s quick thinking and selfless bravery, would surely have perished. Strange how it differed from my memory of the events, seeing as I was there.

“Potter seemed upset by the article, and I overheard Dumbledore saying he would take care of it, but it was never retracted, and eventually Potter forgot. He had other concerns what with wooing my former best friend and NEWTs.” Severus sighed. “Potter was bearable after that, but Black, he just loved to shove the fallacies of that story in my face. The Headmaster looked the other way. Of course, it was his article.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “His article?”

“It quoted Dumbledore. I doubted its veracity for a time, but now, knowing what I do, I believe he
sold the article to the Prophet himself. That was what drove me to the D—to Riddle. I thought since
the Light had no place for my talents, perhaps the Dark would give me a home.” Severus shuddered.
“Merlin forgive me. I was such a fool.”

Harry held Severus’ cheek. “Ssh. You had just lost your only remaining family and your home, and
when Lupin attacked and Dumbledore threw you under the bus, you lost your last sanctuary too.
You had nowhere to go, no one left to help you. If Dumbledore hadn’t driven you off, you’d never
have joined Voldemort, I’m sure of it. It’s because of that slimy, no-good, meddling, piece of shite
—”

The litany of names might have gone on for days had a stunned Severus not cut in.

“You are truly so angry?”

Harry turned his glare on Severus, and the man’s heart bled.

“Oh course I’m angry! He lied about it just to make you look bad and Gryffindors look good, so the
Light’s image wouldn’t be tarnished and Slytherin’s would be. He used your life in a power play and
drove you to the dark, effectively killing my parents and almost killing you. That does not sit well
with me. How could you think me so callous to not be angry about it?”

“It was not that I thought you callous, but that I ….”

“That you weren’t worthy of my anger?”

Severus could only look away, and Harry let out a long stream of curses.

“I will kill Dumbledore for this one day!”

Severus frowned. “For what?”

Harry held Severus’ face in tender hands. “For making you believe all that foul nonsense your
bastard da dumped into your head, about you being unlovable.”

“I, but ….”

Harry knelt up and kissed Severus’ forehead.

“You listen to me, Severus—” Harry paused. “Um, what’s your middle name?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Tobias. After my father.”

Harry shuddered. “Right. Won’t be calling you that. So, listen here, Severus Prince Snape. You are
just as worthy of love as any other person and more, for you’ve gone your whole life without it and
still risked everything to defend the very people who shunned you and hurt you at every
opportunity.” Harry kissed his cheeks and held him close. “If it takes a lifetime, I will teach you this,
Severus. I swear it.”

Severus pressed their foreheads together, drawing Harry closer. “And I shall do the same for you,”
he whispered. “Always.”

Severus pulled back, a strange thought ringing around in his head. “This, the foul way Dumbledore
treated us, it was intentional. Why? What purpose was there to making sure neither of us believed we
were loved?”

Harry snorted. “For me, that’s easy. Dumbfuck wanted his perfect little weapon.”
Severus levelled a look at Harry. “Under normal circumstances, I would correct your language, but you may have the measure of him. So, you see why I cannot allow you near him without you learning Occlumency?”

Harry sat again. “Yes. We’ll practise every day. Just go a little easier on me at first. When you went so hard last time, the lessons left me vulnerable to attack from Voldemort.”

Severus winced. “Agreed, and for those times I hurt you, I apologise. I could not teach you properly without blowing my cover, but I admit I pushed harder than I needed to. Forgive me?”

“Already done. No need to apologise any longer.”

A heavy weight lifted from Severus’ chest. “Thank you, Harry.”

Harry grinned and motioned him on.

“Right. So, we have discussed our enemies. Now we must discuss allies.”

Harry nodded. “Ron and Hermione?”

“As loyal as they are to you, Weasley may also be too loyal to Dumbledore to see him for what he truly is, especially with you united with the ‘Greasy Git of the Dungeons.’”

A bright blush bloomed across Harry’s cheeks and ears. “You heard that, huh?”

“Also that I am a vampire that hangs from the dungeon ceilings at night, that I suck the blood of students and use it to mark their essays—”

Harry burst into laughter. “Okay, that last one is a bit funny. It’s just so ridiculous.”

“And my hanging from the ceiling is not?”

“Of course it is. You’ve slept next to me. There was no hanging upside down involved. Besides, if you were a vampire, wouldn’t you hang during the day?”

Severus snorted. “I thought you were a passable defence student. Vampires don’t ‘hang’ to begin with. They sleep as everyone else with a mostly human body does.”

Harry chuckled. “I suppose you’re right. But—” His expression took on a steely gleam. “—you think Ron would betray me?”

Severus swallowed. “No, Harry. I do not think he would betray you, per se. I merely fear he is too entrenched in his black and white mentality to be fully convinced of our plight until it is too late.”

Harry frowned. “Black and white? What do you mean by that?”

“Good people are nice, bad people are mean. Or Gryffindor and Slytherin, if you will.”

Harry raised an eyebrow.

Severus swallowed and gathered his courage. “I am not saying that Mr. Weasley is a bad person or … unintelligent.” He added to himself, ‘Even if he has all the brilliance of the backside of a crup.’

Harry grinned. “That was painful for you, wasn’t it?”

Severus snorted. “You’ve no idea. What I am saying is that he is stubborn and has seen far less of the
world than you or I. He is not a bad friend, but it may be unwise to take him into our full confidence
until Voldemort and Dumbledore are defeated. At least until Dumbledore tips his hand. Before then,
I doubt Mr. Weasley would believe us. Perhaps not then, either.”

Harry paled. “Defeated? Merlin. Is it really going to come to that with both of them?”

Severus clenched his fist at his side to hide his trembling. “Yes. I will get to that in a moment. Do
you agree with my assessment of Mr. Weasley?”

Harry rubbed his forehead. “I don’t want to because he’s my best mate, but I’m afraid my better
judgment does. Ron is completely thick when he doesn’t want to believe something, and
‘Dumbledore is evil’ would fall into the highest tier of that category. He’d probably think I’d been
Imperiused and you would be the prime suspect.”

“An excellent analysis of what I predicted his reaction would be. As to Miss Granger, she is more
reasonable and more willing to listen before coming to snap judgments, but ….”

“But she’s a package deal with Ron. Right. So not Ron or Hermione. At least, we can’t tell them
everything. McGonagall?”

“As much as I care about Minerva, she has never listened when I said something less than kind about
Dumbledore. The Gryffindor loyalty is too strong in her. Still, she’s a resourceful old cat, and could
help us with the horcruxes at least.”

Harry frowned. “Who does that leave? The Weasleys are all one and the same—you get one, you get
them all—and I don’t trust the other Order members with something this serious. No offense, but a
lot of them would rather talk than take action, and most are set in their ways.”

“Another excellent assessment.” Severus gave Harry a piercing look. “Keep this up, Mr. Potter, and I
may have to reconsider my previous measure of your intelligence.”

Harry snorted. “Wouldn’t want that. Now, who does that leave? Is it only us?”

Severus closed his eyes and cursed fate for its choice of allies. Again.

“No. There is another who Dumbledore has treated badly, and who is reasonable enough to listen
before coming to a conclusion. As much as it galls me, Lupin is our other ally. Our only other ally in
full confidence.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Remus. You’re going to work with one of the Marauders?”

“I did not say I was happy about it.”

“Fair enough. Just try to be civil to him, will you? Remus has been trying to make up his mistakes
with you for years, and he’s the only family I have left.”

“I will … make an effort, if he does.”

“Another painful statement. Should I mix up some healing salve for you?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Only when I want to be poisoned.”

Harry laughed. “All right, all right. So, Remus. How do we contact him? Are we bringing him here
or does he stay with the Order? And ….” His eyes narrowed. “And what made you decide on him
for our other ally? It seems pretty out of character for you to just suddenly warm up to one of the
Marauders and invite him for tea and a chat.”

“I said nothing about tea,” said Severus with a smirk. “He may bring his own.”

Harry wasn’t amused. “Severus. What are you hiding?”

Severus lowered his head into his hands. “It is not that I am hiding it. I am simply loath to tell you because I know how it will frighten you.”

A warm hand slid into Severus’ and brought it into Harry’s lap. “Verus, what is it? What has you so scared?”

Severus freed his hand and wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulders instead, bringing him in close to his side. The young man’s warmth comforted him and melted his fear a little.

“Harry, have you heard the legend of the Seventh Day Seer?”

Harry frowned. “Er, a little. Ron started to tell me about it in a letter this summer before I left, but Hermione cut him off and took over the letter. What does that have to do with this?”

“Everything.”
Harry scooted closer as Severus’ voice took on a hushed tone with the quality of secrets hanging about the shadows. The hair prickled on Harry’s arms and legs, and he fought the urge to shiver. Something more profound had happened than mere legends, he was sure of it.

“Listen,” Severus said. “When I was young, my grandmother would tell me stories about the old days, when Arthur was still king. There was a prophecy made in the time of Merlin, on his deathbed actually, that has been passed down so long it has become nothing more than fodder for bedtime stories and fairytales. Few copies of the original prophecy exist, but I have seen it, and Dumbledore has as well. I do not doubt that the Da—no, Riddle has also. This prophecy is why I told Molly’s Patronus you were ill six days rather than the full week.”

Harry clenched his fingers in his trousers and swallowed a knot in his throat. “So it has to do with the integration illness then?”

“Yes. How much do you know of the illness and why it occurs?”

“Not much admittedly. Remus said something about the birth of new magic weakening the caster, and I remember you saying that it would wear me out on my birthday.”

“I never thought I would say this, but the wolf—”

Harry gave him a pointed glare.

“Oh, very well. *Lupin* is correct. We are all born with a set amount of power, but while our body is growing, most of it remains dormant so as not to interfere with our physical growth. When we are fully grown, or at least mostly so, our magic awakens, and the integration of new power weakens our bodies until it stabilises. Hence the integration illness. The stronger the power, the sicker the wizard.”

A tremble began between Harry’s shoulder blades and spread into his arms. “So the fact that my illness was seven days …?”

“Is unheard of. My illness was far worse than any other student in decades, and mine was but six days. By the sixth day, Poppy had started watching for a prophecy, but I recovered that evening instead.”

Harry recalled Ron’s letter and cold sweat trickled down the back of his neck.

“—You’ll probably turn into Trelawney on your seventh day or something ….”

Merlin, was it *true*?

He dug his fingernails into the coarse fabric of his jeans, needing the sensation to steady him, and forced his voice to work.

“A … prophecy?”

Severus gave him a worried look, setting Harry further on edge. “Yes. The prophecy of the Seventh Day Seer states, paraphrased, that in a time of war and chaos, when the world is in grave peril and light shadows darkness, a thrice-prophesied wizard would have a seven day illness of magic, and on the seventh day, would see the end of the Great War. The Seventh Day Seer would, for a time be vulnerable, caught in a war between wizards and lords, but his court of shadows and sun were
foretold to gather around and guard the Seer, who would then lead them to victory. As for why the Seer leads the battle and not his generals, it is because, according to the prophecy, he would be of greater strength than Merlin himself.”

Harry’s entire body froze, ice and darkness closing in. “We cannot be talking about me. Even if we include this prophecy from Merlin’s time, I’ve only been prophesied twice. Right?” Severus closed his eyes and lowered his head. “Right?”

"Not so, Harry. I, I admittedly did not link it to the Seventh Day Prophecy at the time. In your fourth year, you were not yet showing signs of greater than normal magic other than an incredible lucky streak.”

Harry locked eyes with him. “What happened my fourth year, Severus, and why wasn’t I told?”

Severus sighed and wrapped his chest in shaking arms. “That, I believe, is my fault. It was Lovegood, Harry, and I believed it to be more of her usual oddity. The Da—Riddle had not yet returned, and I thought she was speaking nonsense until it happened, and by then, I had more serious issues on my mind. I did not recall it until you … until last night. Can you forgive me?”

Harry sighed and gave him a terse nod. “Just tell me what she said.”

“Y-yes. Well, she came to me after a lesson one afternoon early in the year, asking why I didn’t cover flibbity-jibbles or some other nonsense—”

Harry couldn’t hold back a snort. “Can you pensieve that conversation for me? I’d love to see your face.”

Severus gave a wry chuckle. “I am sure you would. I should probably record them all so you can view the full prophecies regardless. At any rate, when I reminded her that her odd creatures were nonsense, she went still and her eyes went even odder than usual. She said—and I will have to pensieve it to remember every detail—but she predicted: ‘before summer was high, a great evil would rise again, an innocent would fall, and a shadow-walker would once again walk the line between light and dark.’ The first was obviously Riddle. The second was Diggory, and I, I myself was the third. She also said that ‘a great hero of legend would be born in that moment, learn his purpose, and again take up the mantle against evil.’ We both know who that referred to.”

Severus set his head in his hands. “I should have recognized it as true prophecy, but I thought she had conjured the story to prove that her creatures were real, as she went on talking about them afterwards as if she had said nothing out of the ordinary. She even referenced her own prophecy before she left. Trelawney never remembered hers, so I assumed it wasn’t real for that reason, and her strangeness did not help. I should have remembered that true Seers, the ones with real power behind their visions, can indeed recall what they See and interpret it for the world at large. Your Luna is a true Seer. I only wish I might have realised it sooner.”

If Harry gripped his jeans any tighter, his nails might have pierced them. He took in a shaky breath and struggled to gather his wits through a dizzying cloud of panic. “S-so this Seer, this one Merlin predicted, he would have to have been prophesied of three times.”

Severus nodded. “And so you have.”

Harry swallowed and spoke with a shaky voice. “If you include the original prophecy. Besides that, he would have to have a seven-day integration illness—”

“Which you did.”
Harry swallowed hard. “And an extremely powerful core—”

“Your magic awakening shattered every bit of glass and porcelain in the cottage, and if not for Fawkes’ phoenix shield, might have ki—” Horror crashed through Harry, and Severus quickly altered his phrasing. “Ah, it might have hurt us as well. Besides that, the usual potion preparation for unusually strong cores requires three phoenix tears. Fawkes used seven on you.”

Harry’s toes dug into the carpet as well, and he trembled all over. “B-bloody hell. Are you o-okay?”

“Yes. Fawkes protected us, and I repaired the cottage after your magic had released. I did not find any injured animals around the woods during your illness, either, so I assume they came out intact as well, though one old tree struck through with rot did split cleanly in two.”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin. So I’ve got the core then, too.”

“Yes. And what burst I saw of it was pure white, as the original prophecy claimed it would be.”

“O-okay. So the last part of this—the Seer would have to prophesy the end of the great war before he woke up.” Harry fixed Severus with a fierce stare. “Did I prophesy?”

The man winced at Harry’s stone-cold voice and looked away.

“Severus, did I prophesy?”

Severus lowered his head. “I am sorry, Harry, but yes. You did, and in great detail.”

Harry shook his head and let a breathy “no” slip. “No. No, I, if I were really the Seventh Day Seer, I would remember my prophecy. There is no way a prophesied Seer and Mage doesn’t have enough power behind his visions to remember them.”

Severus gave him a sad smile and eased Harry’s hands out of his trouser legs. “Harry, you do tend to recall your visions. The one about Mad-Eye’s death comes to mind. You likely forgot this one because you were so ill and exhausted from fighting your illness, you passed out immediately afterwards. It probably felt more like a dream than a true vision this time.”

Tears slipped down Harry’s cheeks and he begged Severus with his eyes to tell him it wasn’t true. But Severus only held Harry’s hands and watched him with a remorseful look in his dark eyes.

“I am sorry, Harry. I did not want to be the bearer of such frightening news, but you deserve to know the truth.”

Harry’s breath came short and turned his belly to ice. His hands turned to lead and his vision greyed. Freezing, paralysing terror ripped through his chest and shot through his veins, and he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t do anything but gape.

“Harry?”

Severus’ concern brought Harry back from the brink, but hysteria still loomed near.

“No. I didn’t. I couldn’t have. I’m just Harry. I—”

“Harry. I heard it. You did.”

“NO!” The windows of the cabin shattered, and Freya gave a startled yelp. “Bloody buggering hell!”

With a sigh, Severus cast Reparo at the windows. “And that is the second time I’ve had to repair all
the windows in the cabin this week. Perhaps we could keep the raging destruction to a minimum?”

Harry let out a hysterical laugh. “Rage? I’m not angry, I’m fucking terrified! Merlin? *Merlin*?” His voice increased in pitch with every subsequent word, his emotions running amok. “I’m no Merlin! The very thought, it’s insane, Severus. Totally mad. I *can’t*, I, no ….” He tore at his hair and slumped back onto the couch beside Severus. “I can’t be.”

“Ssh. Harry, I am here.” Severus took Harry into his arms and held him tight, pressing a soft kiss against his forehead. The gentle touch took the sharpest edge off of Harry’s hysteria.

“No. No, it’s not true.” Even with all the force Harry could put behind it, his assertion still came out as more plea than belief.

Severus caught Harry’s shoulders and turned him so Harry had to look into the older man’s worried, pained eyes.

“Harry, look at me. Hush.” He brushed away Harry’s tears and held his cheeks. “Come now, I know it’s frightening, but these are good tidings. You will need incredible power to fight either Dumbledore or Voldemort—both at once require a far out of the ordinary wizard. Fate merely gave us what we needed to accomplish our ends. It’s all right.”

Harry buried his head in Severus’ neck and trembled so hard, he thought he might vomit if he moved back a millimetre. “No,” he gasped out. “Not all right. *Nothing’s* all right.”

Severus held Harry tighter, rocking him slightly. “Harry, forgive me. I wish I had been able to spare you this.”

Harry could not answer vocally, but he slipped his hands behind Severus’ back and held on for dear life.

Three days passed in a daze for Harry. The Seventh Day Seer. Ron had jokingly warned Harry about it. “—Because everything barmy, weird, or impossible happens to you, mate. Cheers.” How ironic that he was right. And really, why *did* everything happen to Harry? Why couldn’t fate find some other poor sod to dump some of her extra baggage on? Hadn’t he lived through enough unbelievable events for a lifetime or three? Maybe for an entire nation’s worth of lifetimes?

It was juvenile to expect fairness from life, but even for Harry, who had experienced hardly a single fair moment in his entire life, *this* was too much.

He had never asked for anything more than love and to be normal. A home and a family. Well, fate had officially screwed that to hell and back. He had a hard enough time just finding someone willing to look past the persona of the Boy-Who-Lived. It would be impossible to start a family once the world knew he was not only gay, but Merlin reborn or some similar rubbish. He didn’t need the powers of a Seer to predict the headlines after *that* little titbit slipped out.

Harry paused halfway through pulling on his trainers. *Severus* looked past his powers, his fame. Severus accepted Harry’s strengths, his weaknesses, and even overlooked Harry’s three-day-long funk while he attempted to wrap his head around what his life had become. The man had been exceedingly patient and gentle with him, and shouldn’t that tell Harry what kind of man Severus really was under the mask he had worn for so long?
Perhaps he need not worry about finding a partner any longer. Harry tugged his laces into a firm knot and shook his head. No, he needn’t. No more waffling. Whether it had been one week or twenty years, Harry knew his heart. He felt at peace in Severus’ arms. They helped each other and, without the past and spying to cloud their judgment, they saw the complete truth of one another and accepted it all.

And besides that, when Severus touched him, Harry felt he would melt.

Well, Harry supposed he had his answer now. In spite of their past, in spite of everything, if he didn’t love Severus already, he soon would.

Harry nodded to himself as he tugged a jumper over his head. To hell with waiting. He had lost too many loved ones to let this one, miraculous chance at a real family slip him by. Harry wouldn’t hurt the man, and, after watching Severus for the past few days, he now knew the cruelty of the man’s days as a spy would never return.

The idea of them together, just him and Severus against the world, filled Harry with joy and purpose. Yeah. That sounded good.

Harry’s stomach dropped like a stone. The world—*shite*! It would *never* be just Harry and Severus. The press would hound them, especially if they really did defeat Dumbledore and Voldemort both. Would intensely private and shy Severus be willing to stay with Harry, knowing the amount of publicity likely to tail a mage for the rest of his life? Gods, even a thousand or so years later, people still invoked Merlin’s name every few moments.

Harry scowled. In another thousand years, would people say ‘dear Harry’ as a figure of speech the way they used Merlin’s name now? *Gods,* he hoped not.

Harry sighed and trudged into the forest, giving a concerned Severus a half-hearted wave on his way out. Perhaps Severus would rather have his solitude and leave Harry out of it, even if the man had to break his own heart. Merlin knew Severus was good at that.

Harry scowled again at his thoughts’ wording. Hadn’t he just complained about invoking Merlin’s name not a moment ago? He sighed and moved on, knowing he was fighting a losing battle.

Gods, he hated being famous. Worse, if he had to be a celebrity, why couldn’t it be for something he had actually had control over? He couldn’t help either instance contributing to his notoriety: surviving as a baby and being born with a Hagrid-sized magical core.

He kicked a stone into the stream behind the house and plopped onto its bank.

“*Whoop-dee-doo,*” he muttered, twirling his hands in self-mockery. “I was born and I didn’t die. That’s all I’ve ever done to deserve my fame. Hell, my mother deserves it more than I do. She died to save me, for Merlin’s sake. And Severus! The pain that man has endured for the sake of everyone else is staggering. He deserves this, not me. But instead, everyone keeps pushing his bravery aside like it’s nothing.”

Harry wrapped his arms around his knees and sighed. “*Gods,* it’s so stupid. Just because he’s Slytherin, Dumblefuck thinks he’s disposable and the rest of the world thinks he’s dark. Rubbish! The thought is enough to make me pity even Malfoy . . .” He groaned and banged his forehead against his knees. Repeatedly.

“And now I need to wash my mouth out with bleach. Ugh.”

Harry let his knees fall and dropped his head into his hands. “It’s not fair. Severus deserves fame and
accolades and love for everything he’s done, but he doesn’t even get the bare minimum of respect. People look at him like he’s scum on their shoes, when they should be bending over to kiss his arse rather than mine.”

The thought of lavishing attention on Severus’ rear end sounded far more tempting than Harry thought it ought to be, and heat crept into his face. He turned his thoughts back to Severus’ unfair infamy and away from said man’s hindquarters with a vengeance.

Was there anything Harry could do to get Severus the respect he deserved? Perhaps he could ask Luna to run an article in the Quibbler—but no. Severus would hex him into next week, and pushing Harry’s fame off onto Severus wasn’t fair either. It wasn’t as if Harry enjoyed it, and Severus was a far more private and introverted man. Fame would likely drive him barmy.

Harry amused himself for a moment with the mental image of a harried Severus hexing crowds of autograph seekers, but as humorous as the distraction was, it couldn’t take his mind off of his current situation. He wasn’t sure which was more laughable, Severus and the crowd, or himself and his supposed powers.

Powers like Merlin? Him? For heaven’s sake, he could barely shoot a levitation spell in the right direction, let alone command the type of power Merlin once had. He’d probably blow himself to bits if he tried.

And yet, as much as Harry wanted to deny it, the evidence kept piling up. Besides what Severus had told him outright, there was the fact that Harry hadn’t grown normally. He was barely 150 centimetres tall, shorter even than most girls. And hadn’t Severus told him that a wizard’s powers remained dormant in childhood so as not to interfere with their growth? He couldn’t deny that his relatives’ foul treatment had influenced the issue, but what if it wasn’t the only reason for Harry’s lack of height when both his parents had been tall? If he had been hiding power on the scale of a mage, it wasn’t farfetched to suggest that his body had needed too much of its already scant resources to keep Harry’s magic banked.

And then there was Severus. The man’s healed body and mark suggested power beyond a wizard’s ken. All his scars, all his wrinkles and grey hair, gone. Even the Dark Mark. Besides that, it appeared as though Harry had taken actual years off of the man’s age. Severus was probably closer to twenty-five in body now than forty, despite what his birthdate said.

He should suggest checking the man’s age, if such a spell existed. They were close enough now that Severus wouldn’t hex him for it. Probably.

He picked up another rock and tossed it between his hands, frowning at the implications of his thoughts. Bloody hell. If Harry had actually managed to make Severus younger, then he couldn’t deny his strength any longer. Wizards and Muggles alike had hunted for the secret of youth for ages, but no spell existed that could do such a thing. No average wizard—hell, not even the most powerful of them—could make someone younger just by wishing for healing.

What did this mean for them? For Severus?

Harry threw his pebble as hard as he could and started towards the house. He had moped long enough.
Severus had almost melted with relief when Harry had come inside wearing a determined look rather than a glazed, despairing expression, but this strange request had Severus baffled.

“You want me to cast a spell for what purpose again?”

Harry’s mouth thinned and his eyes took on a fierce expression. “I want to know the age of your body, regardless of your birthdate. I suspect we may be surprised.”

Severus stared, utterly bemused. “Harry, I am thirty-seven years old. Why do you need a spell to confirm this?”

“Because I don’t think you are thirty-seven anymore! Your face looks younger, not just clear of scars.”

“I’ve not taken any age-regression potions, which are only temporary to begin with and would not fool any worthy age-check, and no such spell exists. It’s impossible to lose one’s age with no catalyst, even on a temporary basis.”

“There was a catalyst, though. When I healed you.”

“Healing does not take off age, Harry.”

Harry snapped, “It might when Merlin himself heals you with all his power!”

Severus paled. Oh sweet Circe! At first, he had thought the shock and stress had injured Harry’s mind, but no, this made sense. Had Harry taken years off his age? With any other wizard, Severus would scoff and remind them it was impossible, but Harry had already done the impossible a hundred times over.

Heart racing, he dragged Harry by his hand to the loo and examined himself in the mirror. Merlin, he did look younger! Severus had attributed the changes to being happy and the removal of his scars, but he had lost all the lines around his eyes and mouth too. His forehead no longer had furrows, and some of the sharp edges of his face had smoothed.

He did need to check his physical age after all.

With a shaking hand, he pointed his wand at himself and whispered the spell.

“Statum Corporis Revelaro.”

The spell hesitated as if confused, then bright yellow letters appeared in the air before him, reflected on the mirror and the image of Harry’s face.


The spell went on to list his height and weight and many other minutiae Severus didn’t care about until he came to the bottom of the list. There the letters showed a paler yellow, as if the spell wasn’t sure of their accuracy. Severus read on and reeled back, stunned.

“T-twenty-two. Harry, you took fifteen years off my age?”

Harry winced. “So it’s true. I’m really the Seventh Day Seer.” His shoulders slumped. “Bloody hell, why is it always me?”

“Potter, did you hear me? I am twenty-bloody-two!”
“I heard you. I just don’t know what you want me to do about it. I’m afraid to try to make you older. I don’t know how to judge my power and you might end up at ninety-seven instead of thirty-seven.”

Severus gaped. “What to do about it? Merlin! I don’t want to do anything about it. You took off some of the most difficult, miserable years of my life.”

Harry paled. “Shite. You still remember them, right?”

“Yes, but the physical effects are gone. Don’t you understand what that means?”

“Er, you’ll look even hotter in jeans?”

Heat burst forth on Severus’ face. “Ah, oh. Of course not. I mean—Harry! It means the physical effects of three-hundred or so Cruciatius curses are gone. No more pain or twitches in my limbs. Merlin, that was murder to hide.”

A bright smile dawned over the young man’s face. “Really, Severus? I helped your pain?”

“Yes. I hadn’t time to notice it between caring for you while you were ill and the shock of your prophecy, but yes. The pain in my limbs is much better.”

“So this power is good for something at least.”

“Yes.” Severus gave Harry a shy smile and touched his chest. “Here, too. It hurts less. It must have healed the effects of at least four times I have killed, though I strive to avoid it wherever possible.”

Wiry arms crushed him into a tight hug and Harry’s face crashed into his chest. “Oh! Oh, Severus! That makes it worth this mess, despite the bloody bother this will be, to know I could heal your soul of pain, even a little.”

Severus enfolded the young man and ran his fingers through the soft black mop. “Harry, my pain truly affects you so much?”

“It’s been haunting me ever since I heard you’ve been carrying agony in your soul for twenty years or so. You deserve so much better. I wish I could heal it all.”

Severus could not quite blink back the tears such a tender confession wrought. “I, gods, Harry. No one has fought so hard for me, not since my mother died. Why? Why do you fight for me? Why do you care? I don’t understand.”

Harry clutched him hard. “That is the most heart-breaking thing—short of the story about your mum and little sister—I’ve ever heard anyone say. Severus, you are worth everything I can give you. You’re not going to believe me yet, but you’re beautiful. Inside and out, you’re so beautiful. And I want to give you back a little of all the affection and care you’ve been missing so long. Merlin, not a soul has cared about you since your grandparents died, have they?”

Severus, rocked to his core by Harry’s honest, heartfelt words, could only force himself to whisper, “Minerva,” before tears clogged his throat.

“Right, Professor McGonagall. Remind me to send her a giant plot of catnip and a store’s worth of cat toys for Christmas, will you?”

At the thought of Minerva’s office covered in greenery and cat toys, Severus couldn’t hold back a chuckle.
“Do get her a pot of catnip, and perhaps a fine bottle of Talisker. The old cat rather likes it, rubbish that it is.”

Harry snorted and stepped back from Severus’ arms, grinning. “You like it too, eh?”

Severus sighed, already missing his warmth. “I can hide nothing from you now, can I?”

“Not a thing. I’ve learned Snape-Speak. Is there anything else besides rare potions stuff that you like so I can add it to my Christmas shopping list?”

“It’s August, Harry. We’ve time.”

Harry laughed. “I suppose I’ll just have to pay attention then.”

“Indeed.” Severus gave him a wry smile. “Perhaps we should take this conversation out of the loo? We do have more to discuss, if you are well enough now. And I am a bit peckish.”

Harry sighed and followed Severus out. “Yes, I’ve wallowed in self-pity enough for one year or twelve. It’s time to put the moping away and accept these odd powers as one more thing that makes me different, unfortunately.”

Severus stopped and turned to Harry, hearing the disgust in his tone. It was obvious that Harry hated the fame, the fickle friends only after his popularity, the fear of reporters tailing his every move. Severus couldn’t blame him, but he couldn’t leave Harry feeling inadequate either.

“Harry.”

The young man looked up, startled. “Hmm? Something wrong?”

“Yes, there is. It is not just something that makes you different. Your magic is a part of you, just a part, and one of the many that makes you so beautiful.”

Harry’s eyes went wide and his lips parted. “Merlin, Verus. I never imagined I’d hear you say something like that to me.”

Severus lifted a tentative hand to Harry’s cheek. “It’s true. But I do find admitting such things rather uncomfortable, so perhaps you could refrain from discussing yourself like you are flobberworm mucus in the future?”

Harry’s lips twitched upwards. “I’ll try to keep the flobberworm mucus to a minimum.”

Severus let his hand fall and moved past Harry. “Good. I should think you would have had enough of it in detentions to sustain you through several years.”

Harry’s laugh followed him all the way to the kitchen.
After breakfast, Severus settled into an armchair near the living room fireplace, expecting Harry to take the chair opposite. Instead, the young man lowered himself to the floor near Severus’ feet and lounged between his knees. With his face burning and heart pounding, Severus trembled at Harry’s touch so low on his body and hoped he could keep his composure. One touch on the softest part of Severus’ socked foot or the inside bottom of his thigh, and he would be putty in Harry’s hands. He made sure his feet stayed firmly planted on the carpet and lifted a hand to stroke through Harry’s soft hair.

With a sigh, Harry laid his head back on Severus’ thigh and smiled. “Oh, Severus. That feels wonderful.”

Severus swallowed hard and nodded, incapable of speech with Harry’s lips brushing his inner thigh. Gods, any lower, and he would catch fire.

“Are you okay, Verus? You’re quiet.”

Severus dragged his wits together with a herculean effort. In a rough voice, he said, “I am not particularly loquacious on the best of days.”

Harry leaned back to frown at Severus, then a sly smile spread across his face. “You feel this, huh? You like it when I touch you?”

Severus flinched. “Please, Harry. Don’t toy with me.”

“Verus! What is it going to take to convince you that I’m not like that?” A sigh heavy with sorrow warmed Severus’ knee. “Do you want me to move away?”

Severus closed his eyes to hide his pain and desire. “That might be to the best.”

Harry let slip a little gasp and jerked away. “Oh. O-okay. I’m sorry.”

Keeping his face low so Severus could not read his expression, Harry scrambled to the other chair and nearly upended the coffee table along the way. He sat bolt upright, knuckles white on the armrests, and gave Severus a forced smile. Harry’s wild fringe shadowed his eyes.

“What do we need to do next?” His voice was strained, as if he was struggling to keep it from breaking. Judging by his death grip on the armrests and his tense posture, he was.

A cold rush of shock surged through Severus when he realised he had just rejected Harry, and hurt
him by it, badly. The young man tried hard to keep his pain hidden for Severus’ sake, to respect his wishes, but Severus had not spent twenty years spying for nothing. Harry was holding back tears by the merest thread.

“Harry, you are in pain, aren’t you?”

The young man’s tension ratcheted up. “I’m okay.”

“You’re not. I hurt you.” Severus curled in on himself, anguish ripping through his chest. “I, I understand if you wish to leave.”

Harry leapt up, terror and grief apparent in his wide, tearful eyes. “You, you’re sending me away? Why? I don’t understand, Severus. I thought you wanted me to touch you. You told me it heals your pain. So what have I done wrong? Why don’t you want me near you anymore?”

Every word cut Severus sharper than Bellatrix’s knives. When Harry’s voice broke on the last sentence, Severus rushed to him and caught him in his arms.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, voice as broken as Harry’s. “I did not intend to hurt you or cause you to leave. I simply don’t know what I am doing, Harry. I have never been so close to someone before, and I don’t know how to be … accommodating.”

Harry hesitantly slipped his arms around Severus’ neck and hands into his hair. “Why did you push me away then?”

Severus sighed against Harry’s forehead. “I am afraid. When you touch me like that ….”

“Severus.”

His heart gave a jolt at Harry’s forceful tone. Panic and anguish tore through him, setting every nerve aflame with terror. Harry would leave him now. He had ruined everything.

“I, please, don’t go, Harry.”

“I’m not going to. I just want you to know something.”

Severus’ knees wobbled with relief. Harry wasn’t leaving him.

“Y-yes?” His stammer embarrassed him, but it couldn’t be helped. Emotions like he had never known warred for control, and Severus was lost among them. He could only hold on and hope he survived the storm with his relationship with Harry—and his sanity—intact.

Harry leaned up on his toes, so close, his breath rushed against Severus’ lips. The older man’s heart skidded to a halt and tingling anticipation prickled his stomach and chest. Standing frozen and wide-eyed, breath coming in tight gasps, he could do nothing but watch the beautiful young man just a heartbeat away from kissing him.

“I feel it, too,” Harry whispered, and closed the distance between their lips.

Electricity pulsed through Severus. He became a live wire of heat and emotion, and his joints turned fluid to better conduct the surge. The kiss was short and light, but it rocked Severus to his soul. He melted against Harry with a soft moan.

So this was what he’d been missing all those years. Gods, no wonder the students were always snogging in the Astronomy Tower. He suddenly felt a bit guilty for always hiding in the wings and
docking them points the moment they looked thoroughly absorbed.

“Harry,” he panted into the young man’s shoulder. “Stay with me. Merlin, I need you.”

“I always planned to, love.”

Another soft kiss found Severus’ earlobe, and his heart leapt for joy. Love. Harry—his brave, sweet Harry—had called him ‘love.’ His eyelids stung and tears flooded his vision, but he couldn’t be arsed to care. Somehow, despite all his sins and failures, Harry cared for him.

Severus held Harry tight, head buried in soft black hair and tears flowing unchecked. Dignity be damned. He had room for nothing but love. It filled every crevice and washed every fear away.

Harry’s tender hands cupped Severus’ cheeks, and concern filled those lovely eyes.

“Verus? Love, why are you crying? Did I go too far? Did you not want—”

Severus smashed his mouth to Harry’s in answer. As he kissed Harry hard, one long hand slid into a mop of black hair and the other crushed the younger man flush against Severus’s body. Harry’s shocked gasp filled Severus’ mouth, and the older man chased it with his tongue. Gods help him, he couldn’t breathe for the desire and need laying claim to his very soul. Harry moaned and arched up as Severus slipped his tongue past the younger man’s lips and toyed with his teeth.

Harry tasted like honey. So hot, so sweet, and the answering caress of Harry’s soft tongue left Severus aching for more. As Harry shyly explored Severus’ kiss, caressing, tasting, and all the while mewling with passion, Severus burned, surge after surge of fiery, melting sensation sucking the breath from his lungs and leaving him dizzy with need.

Merlin, he would die if this continued much longer.

Harry pulled back with a soft gasp, panting against Severus’ cheek. Severus breathed as if he had just fought for his life. Indeed, he felt as if he had, though Severus wouldn’t mind doing so in that manner again.

Gods, it was wonderful. Perfect. Severus had never imagined a kiss could feel so bloody good. And the look of Harry, Merlin! Severus could hardly tear his eyes away. His passion had set Harry’s already messy hair in absolute rebellion, those sweet lips bore the tell-tale redness of a hard kiss, and his cheeks flamed with heat and desire. Black swallowed those haunting green eyes, wide with the wonder of first kisses and looking at Severus as if he held the answer to everything Harry had ever wanted.

‘Beautiful.’

Merlin, Harry was so handsome, so tender and intelligent and brave. Severus couldn’t believe his good fortune in finding him, especially given their volatile history. He said prayers of thanks to every deity and spirit he could think of as he rested his forehead against Harry’s and tried to catch his breath. Occlumency helped, and after a bit, he lifted his head and gave Harry an assessing look.

“Are you all right, Harry? I did not push too far?”

Harry groaned and laid his head on Severus’ shoulder. “All right? Merlin, Severus. I think you melted me. Bloody hell. My knees are shaking.”

Severus gave a little huff of breathless laughter. “I’ll support you.”
Harry nuzzled his head into Severus’ neck. “Don’t push me away again. Please.”

Severus threaded his hand through the young man’s hair, smoothing the messy locks. “I, I’m unfamiliar with intimacy, Harry. I shall endeavour not to hurt you, but I fear I shan’t be able to help it entirely.” He kissed Harry’s temple. “Yet, know this: as unsure as I am of myself, I am certain of you. I will not push you away again.”

Harry gave him a bright smile. “Good. I want to stay with you. Could we sit though? I really am a bit shaky.”

Severus kissed Harry lightly, just to know he could. Harry’s smile eclipsed the sun.

“Yes, let us sit,” Severus said. “I ….” He considered telling Harry of the soul bond, but what if Harry wasn’t ready? What if he told his love the truth about the depth of their connection and Harry decided it was too much too soon? What if, Merlin forbid, he blamed everything on Severus for being attached to such a terrible man, and left him alone with a broken soul and a voided soul bond to endure, day in and day out for eternity?

Severus didn’t think he could bear it. With a sad sigh for his weakness, he led Harry to the chairs and sat in his own, waiting for the young man to join him. Harry hesitated before Severus’ chair, a fearful expression in his eyes. With an encouraging smile, or at least an attempt at one, Severus pulled Harry down so he sat in the older man’s lap, wrapped in his arms.

“Now, is this what you wanted? Your puppy eyes were killing me.”

Harry grinned. “I was going to sit at your feet like before, but this is better.”

“Sit where you like, Harry. I meant it. I won’t push you away again. I was only afraid you would turn me away.”

“No, love. Never. Are you still afraid?”

Severus hesitated. “I fear I will never feel fully safe, but you soothe me. Don’t let go.”

“I won’t. We’re together now.”

“Yes. I apologise for hurting you, Harry.”

“It’s all right. I understand why. Just hold me. I feel better in your arms.”

Severus thrilled in Harry’s words and pulled him close. Harry laid his head on Severus’ shoulder and curled one hand into his hair. Calloused fingertips left trails of electricity wherever they brushed the former spy’s neck.

“So?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you happy like this?”

Severus kissed Harry’s hair and hugged him tight. “I fear I would not know the emotion if it danced naked before me. I am now closer to that than I have ever been. I only wish ….”

Harry pressed a soft kiss to Severus’ jawline. “Wish what?”

Severus sighed and laid his head atop Harry’s. “I wish I were still whole. More worthy of your
affections. I wish I were a better man.”

Harry jerked back and gaped at the former spy. “A better man? Merlin, Severus, you’re a hero! You’re so brave and brilliant—and yes, snarky and antisocial, too—but underneath that hardened mask of yours, you have a heart of light.”

Severus snorted. Light? He was shadow incarnate.

Harry cupped the man’s cheeks. “It’s true, so don’t scoff at me. My Severus, you have held me when I cried, comforted me when I had nightmares, and spent every moment at my bedside when I was ill. I couldn’t ask for a better man. Gods, Severus. I wish I were worthy of you.”

Severus shivered as Harry pressed a soft kiss to his mouth, the tender touch melting him down to his toes.

Harry whispered against his lips. “You are beautiful and brave and everything I’ve ever wanted. It’s okay. I’m with you, I want you, and you’re more than good enough for me.”

Harry’s words filled a hole in Severus’ heart that had been bleeding longer than he knew. He must have done something wonderful in another life to deserve Harry’s love, for he had done nothing worthy in this one. Hell, he didn’t even have the courage to tell Harry they were probably bound in spirit. What would Harry say if he knew what Severus was hiding? Would Harry call him brave then?

Severus closed his eyes and drew in on himself. Brave, hah! He was a coward.

“Severus. Look at me.”

Warm hands cupped Severus’ cheeks and tipped his head back. When Severus wouldn’t open his eyes, a hot mouth met his lips and kissed him with tender hesitation.

“Please look at me.”

Severus forced his eyes open, unsurprised when tears tracked into his hair and around the top of his ears.

“Oh, love.” Harry kissed his temples and cheeks, and Severus only realised Harry had been kissing his tears away when another touch of their lips tasted of salt.

“Severus, please. Don’t hate yourself like this. I … care for you. You’re everything I’ve ever hoped for in a partner.”

Severus swallowed another wave of tears. “Harry, how can you say that? I treated you appallingly for so long. How can you … care for me now?”

Harry smiled and ran his hand through Severus’ hair. “It’s not greasy, you know.”

Severus frowned. “My hair? I am flattered that you imagined it would be.”

“Oh, hush. I was trying to show you that my impressions of you as a child were, well, wrong. Ron and I used to go on about you, but everything I ever said about you then was so far off the mark, it wasn’t even in the same building.”

“I believe you have mixed your metaphors, so to speak.”

Harry laughed. “I have no idea. I was just trying to tell you that, since those days where you yelled at
me all the time and cursed my name, my impressions and feelings for you have changed greatly. Now I look at your face and see refined beauty. Elegance. Yes, even your dear nose. Even before I straightened it, I had come to see it as regal.”

Severus’ breath caught as a fingertip lovingly traced the profile of his accursed ‘beak.’

“Aquiline noses aren’t bad, you know,” Harry murmured, his lips close. Severus couldn’t hold back a pant as Harry kissed the tip. “Yours is handsome. It suits the rest of your face.”

Harry traced Severus’ cheekbones, too. “And these are lovely. So strong and high and refined. Perhaps your second best feature behind those gorgeous eyes of yours.” He kissed the ridge of each cheek, and Severus shivered.

“S-second best?”

“Hmm. You have a point. Perhaps the third best.”

He flashed a wicked grin and wriggled against the older man’s hips, and the feel of him—oh gods, that glorious firm body—had Severus struggling for composure. A moan tore from his throat and he dug his fingers in the chair’s arms to prevent them from grabbing Harry’s arse and rubbing, squeezing—Merlin, he had to get control of himself. The young man was a virgin, despite his brashness, and such a bold move would frighten Harry without a doubt.

“Your body is dead sexy,” Harry said, the fire in his eyes burning through Severus’ resolve.

“Gryffindor minx,” Severus gasped out. “It is too soon for this.”

Harry winced and drew into himself. “I’m s-sorry. I only wanted to make you feel better about yourself.”

“Oh, I feel better. So much so, I can barely keep still.” Severus unclenched one hand from the chair and cupped Harry’s face. “But Harry, I know you are … ah, inexperienced. I do not wish to frighten you, and it is difficult to control myself when you … touch me like that. Move slowly, love, for both of our sakes.”

Harry swallowed and hesitantly uncurled from his ball. “So, so I haven’t ruined it?”

“Oh, Harry. No, not in the least. I only wish to treat you well. I have much to make up for.”

Harry shook his head and kissed Severus lightly. “You needn’t make up for anything. You’re forgiven. Completely, Severus. Please don’t keep hurting over the past. It’s over now. Let’s move forward from here on and not let our past mistakes darken our future.” He grinned and kissed Severus lightly. “I do want you though. Maybe not yet. I don’t think I’m ready yet. I just, I wanted to let you know I do find you attractive. Hot. And after a while, when I’m not scared, I want you to make love to me.”

“H-Harry ….” Severus gasped, just the thought of Harry panting and writhing under him sending heat through his entire body. “Please, may we change the subject before I do something we would both regret?”

“I would never regret you,” Harry whispered in his ear. “Never. But yes, I do agree that we should take it slow, so I’ll stop talking about it for now.”

Severus took a deep, steadying breath. “Thank you, Harry, for understanding. And, for … caring for me.”
Harry struggled to cover a laugh. “You don’t have to thank me for that, silly.”

Severus curled away from Harry’s laughter, fear freezing the warmth from his heart and effectively killing his desire. The Marauders’ taunts stung even twenty years later. He knew Harry wouldn’t hurt him, but that old fear hadn’t released him yet.

Harry kissed him with tender affection. “Severus, ssh. It’s okay. I didn’t mean to hurt you, love.”

Severus gave him a tentative nod. “Why … why did you laugh?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t mocking you. I just found it funny that you wanted to thank me for something I feel utterly selfish for.”

“Selfish?” That brought Severus’ thoughts out of the past with a vengeance. “Why in the name of Merlin would you feel selfish for caring for me?”

Harry snuggled close and lay his head on Severus’ shoulder. “Because of how good it makes me feel, love. Because I’ve never really had anything for myself, except you, and it feels so bloody good, it must be illegal.”

Severus let slip a dark laugh. “To the Muggles, it is illegal. We are both men. But we are not Muggles, are we?”

“I wouldn’t care if I was. You’re mine, and I am yours, and nothing else matters to me.”

Severus gave him a bright smile.

“Merlin, Verus! Smile like that more often. Gods, you’re so beautiful.”

Overwhelmed and thrilled that Harry saw beauty in him, Severus held his soul-bond close and kissed him with all the tenderness and love he could show. He held his Harry like a precious treasure, caressed soft, parted lips with reverence, a pure gift of deep, abiding love, new and tender and beautiful.

Severus had waited so long for his first love that he had come to believe they did not exist. His heart had grown cold over the years it lay empty, abandoned and unable to show the all-consuming, powerful emotion buried and locked within.

Finally, his Harry was here, he was now, and Severus’ heart had stored so much love during the long lonely years, it poured from every crevice of his being, all the more powerful for the wait. If only he could find the courage to tell Harry the truth, and without losing the love he had waited for his entire life, the moment might have been perfect.

Severus pulled back at a soft sob from Harry. Terrified, he hugged Harry close and held his cheek.

“Love, what is it? Have I hurt you?”

Harry shook his head, tried to speak and failed. Severus stroked Harry’s hair and brushed his tears away while he waited for Harry to gather his wits.

“So much,” Harry choked out. “It was so much.”

Severus stilled. “Too much?”

“Oh, no, love. You just washed away years of pain, and I’m just a bit overwhelmed.”
“I, forgive me?”

“You did nothing wrong, love.” Harry scrubbed a hand across his face and gave Severus a sheepish smile. “Sorry, Verus. I just never thought I’d be kissed like that, like I was the most important thing in the entire world.”

“Was it not to your liking, then? I do not understand why you are crying.”

“Those were happy tears, Severus. I love every second of your kisses. I’m sorry I scared you. I just couldn’t hold it in.”

Relieved, Severus caught Harry into a tight embrace and cradled the young man’s head against his shoulder. “Oh, Harry. I have no doubt that we will fight in the future, things will be hard at times, and perhaps your friends will not much like the idea of us, but please, stay with me. No matter what happens …” He closed his eyes and swallowed against his fear. “No matter what … may happen between us, promise me you’ll stay? At least, stay long enough for us to speak of the matter calmly before you leave me?”

“Severus!” Harry cupped the man’s face. “No more talk of me leaving you. I’ve been looking for forever, not a fling. I’ll never leave unless you ask me to. Or if you’re deliberately hurtful or dishonest, but I don’t think you could be. You’re too honourable. So I’ll promise you I won’t leave as long as you’re honest and don’t do anything to deliberately hurt me. Will you promise me the same?”

Guilt and fear for his secrets driving the joy from his heart, Severus murmured, “I so swear,” and hoped it would be enough.

‘Forgive me, Harry. I only want to give you time to adjust before … before I tell you that your life is irrevocably tied to mine. I’m so sorry.’

Severus sighed and hugged Harry close. “I am glad you wish to stay with me. I do not think I could bear to lose you. But as much as I would love to sit here and hold you forever, we must speak of the war now. I do not know how much time there is, and we need to bring Lupin into the fold soon.”

Harry nodded and slipped a hand into Severus’. “All right. Business before pleasure, but how should we contact him? Where is he anyway?”

“From one of Molly Weasley’s myriad Patronus messages while you were ill, I gleaned that as soon as the furore died down Lupin was to return to the werewolf tribune and attempt to sway them to our cause. I am unsure if he has left yet. He will be with Miss Tonks if not. It should be safe to contact him by owl either way.”

“Right. I think we’ll have to share at least some of the story with Tonks anyway. Tonks is an Auror, so having someone with eyes in the Ministry would be good. More to the point, she’s Remus’ fiancée and is carrying his child. They have a hard time keeping secrets from each other, and I don’t think we should encourage it.”

Severus frowned. “I am unsure she can be trusted.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand. “She can be. I know she looks silly, always tripping over things and forever changing her nose and hair, but she’s smart and serious where she needs to be, and much more capable than she looks from all I’ve seen of her. And I believe she’ll keep it quiet for Remus and their baby’s sake.”

Severus nodded. “That is true. My own mother … well, it is a good argument in Tonks’ favour.”
Then we shall bring her into our fold. It will be good to have a Ministry spy.”

Harry nodded. “We’ll have to send two letters, I think. Tonks is back at the ministry. Kingsley and Mister Weasley too. Remus probably stayed long enough to know if I’m safe before he left. Missus Weasley would have sent him a Patronus as soon as she heard, if I know anything about her.”

“Then we shall owl them as soon as possible, but there is one problem: we should not use our owls. Hedwig and Odin are both too distinct. We need a third owl, one that will blend with the indigent fauna of Britain, so any observing eyes will not know immediately who is contacting Lupin. If word returns to either Dumbledore or Riddle, it will be the worse for us.”

Harry nodded. “Maybe a barn owl or a tawny, I suppose, but how are we to get one? We can’t just prance into Eyelops. Both of us are prime targets for the Death Eaters now.”

Severus grinned, startling Harry. “No, not as ourselves, we cannot. But you are … with a potions master, are you not?”

“Dating, Severus. You can say it. And you’re terrifying me about the potions bit.”

Severus laughed. “As it well should. Now, it is too late to go to Diagon Alley today, so perhaps we should spend the day working on your powers and studying for the war. Most of my books are at Spinner’s End, but there should be some here as well.”

Harry nodded. “Sounds good. I’m sure I’ll find something.”

“Then let us go search.”

“Okay. Do you have any books on soul magic?”

Severus froze, the blood draining from his face. Had Harry discovered his secrets?

“I, I believe so, but for what purpose?”

Harry frowned at him. “Love, I don’t plan on making horcruxes anytime soon. There’s no need to be so frightened.”

Severus forced himself to breathe again. “R-right. You are right, of course. Forgive me. Ah, there may be some soul magic books in the attic. I kept the most dangerous there, out of sight of anyone who might dare explore. You are welcome to them, if there are any, but do take care. Some of those books are quite dark and disturbing.”

“Can’t be any worse than ‘Secrets of the Darkest Art.’”

Severus shuddered. “Indeed. Where did you find that monstrosity?”

“Dumbledore. For the horcrux hunt.”

Severus sneered. “Of course. I do not believe any in the attic are quite that unpleasant. May I ask what you are looking for?”

Harry gave him a sheepish grin. “Well, I am looking for more information on horcruxes. Not because I want to make them, mind, but if I understand them better, with the power I have, maybe I can track them.”

Severus gasped. “Merlin! That’s brilliant, Harry!” He stroked Harry’s cheek with a long finger. “How did I ever believe you to be unintelligent? You are quite the hidden genius.”
“Oi! Don’t insult me like that,” Harry said with a laugh. “I’m not at all a genius. But I’m not stupid, either.”

“No, you are not.” Severus kissed him lightly. “Go on and see what you can find in the attic. I am going to see if I have any books on magic tracing that may aid you.”

“All right. Um, where’s the attic?”

Severus flicked his wand and a pull-down ladder dropped in the foyer.

“Er, in front of the main door?”

Severus grinned wickedly. “No one ever thinks to check entryways for secrets. And even if they had, they would have found quite the nasty surprise had they tried to open that with no Prince blood.”

Harry gulped. “Um, so should I … be careful about what I touch here, then?”

Severus rubbed his hair. “I have already added you to my wards. Nothing here will harm you now. I ask only that you take care not to damage my things, which you would do anyway.”

“Thanks, love. I’ll be careful.” Harry kissed Severus’ cheek and disappeared up the ladder. Severus stared after him a moment, still stunned at his good fortune.

‘I cannot believe he cares for me, too.’ The warmth of Harry’s last kiss followed Severus all the way to his bookshelves and stayed with him for a long, long time.

The next day, Harry knocked on the cellar door—carefully. Severus might just kill him if he caused a potions accident, whether they were dating or not. Severus opened the door with a wave of his hand.

“Hello, Harry. Are you in need of assistance?”

“No, I only ….” A cloud of cinnamon-scented steam greeted Harry as he stepped inside and fogged his glasses. He frowned and cast Impervius. When the fog cleared, he saw Severus by an unlit cauldron, smirking as he decanted a gloopy red potion into shot glasses.

“It’s gone nine, so I wanted to check your progress. I take it you were able to find a way to polyjuice us?”

Severus gave him a disgusted look. “This is not polyjuice.”

Harry chuckled. “I am aware, you know. I’ve brewed it since second year.”

“You brewed polyjuice potion in second year?”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Er, okay. So I ‘helped’ Hermione brew it. At any rate, I know it looks somewhat like sewer sludge and is certainly not red.”

Severus snorted. “Red. No wonder you have trouble in potions. This is crimson.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I think we’ve already established my lack of skill here. So what have you
made for us, oh great potions master?” He mimed bowing, and Severus barked a laugh.

“This is … I actually never named it. But it came in handy when I needed to escape from my arsehole of a father and only had household ingredients and an hour or two to spare.”

Harry’s jaw dropped mid-bow. “You invented a potion like that as a fifth year?”

Severus smirked. “Third.”

“Blimey! No wonder you’re a master at this.” Harry gave him a real bow and a tender kiss. “You’re bloody brilliant, Severus. I’m so relieved you’re on my side now.”

Severus set the second glass down and kissed Harry’s forehead. “Thank you, love. You are as well, though it is unfortunate your skills do not stretch to potions.”

“Well, I have you for that, don’t I?” Harry slid his hand into Severus’ and turned back to the potion. “So what does this do?”

“Actually, it does work a bit like polyjuice, but rather than impersonating a particular human based on a hair or other superfluous piece of their body—”

Harry shuddered. “It always makes me feel like a cannibal.”

“For once, we are in agreement. I detest imbibing polyjuice as well.”

“Stop the presses! Severus Snape doesn’t like a potion!”

Severus chuckled. “Brat. I never said I didn’t appreciate its use. It is merely complicated to make and foul to drink. Especially if you are impersonating a Death Eater. It makes you feel like a Death Eater, quite literally. The more people one has murdered, the more one’s polyjuice tastes like decaying flesh, or at least what I imagine it would taste like. It is quite as horrid as it sounds.”

Harry shuddered. “Remind me never to try that.”

“Hopefully, we shall have no need. At any rate, this potion works more like a glamour than polyjuice. There is no need to keep dosing oneself on the hour, and it cannot be spelled off, but its disadvantage is that you cannot impersonate anyone in particular. It transforms the natural attributes of the drinker enough to make them resemble a new person, and it requires an antidote to remove.”

“Brilliant, Verus,” said Harry with a grin. “How on earth did you come up with that as a third year?”

Severus turned away. “Necessity is the mother of invention, so they say.”

Harry rubbed the man’s lower back. “Sorry, love. Didn’t mean to make you think of him. I’m just impressed, is all.”

Severus had gone still, and his muscles trembled under Harry’s hand. Harry pulled back, unsure of himself.

“Love? Did I hurt you?”

“Not at all.” The man’s voice was rough and husky, and went straight to Harry’s groin.

“Oh.” Harry rested a tentative hand on Severus’ lower back once more. “It feels good?”

“Merlin,” Severus said, halfway between a pant and a groan. “If you continue doing that, we may
not make it to Diagon Alley this week.”

Harry chuckled and removed his hand. “Noted. Any other places that send you wild?”

Severus’ cheeks reddened. “Ah, nothing worth mentioning. My experience is unpleasant, Harry. I know relatively little about enjoying sexual congress.”

Harry paled. “Severus! You were raped?”

He lowered his head. “It was common enough in the Death Eaters, but no. I never had that particular indignity foisted upon me, thank the gods, though I have been attacked.”

“Attacked? How?”

Severus turned his face away. “It is not important.”

“Oh, love. It’s immensely important. You are immensely important. Can you tell me?”

He shivered. “Not, not yet.”

Harry slipped a hand into Severus’ and rubbed the coldness from his fingertips. “Okay. But will you talk to me about it when you’re ready?”

“Yes, I promise.” Severus gave Harry a wan smile. “My only point was that I have never made love. Not with anyone who cared to find what places arouse me.”

Harry kissed his shoulder. “Oh. Then since no one’s ever taken the time to make your gorgeous body feel good, I’ll just have to make sure I find every single spot. Well, once we’re ready for it.”

Severus gripped the edge of the table and let his head drop. “Gods, Harry. Keep talking like this, and I will have trouble respecting your wishes to wait.”

“Then I’ll stop for now, love. We need to get ready for Diagon anyway. So how do we do this potion?”

Severus gave a relieved sigh. “We must cast a spell on it before we drink, but I will cover that in a moment.” His expression clouded. “Harry, I know this will be odd, but I think one of us should take a gender swapping potion as well.”

Harry gaped. “What? Severus, I like our bits just the way they are, thanks.”

Severus glared. “You have not even seen mine yet.”

“No, but I have a general idea, and I like that idea. Not sure I would if you were a girl.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “It isn’t permanent, Harry. It has an antidote like most other potions and every potion I would consider taking myself or giving to you.”

“Oh. Thank Merlin. But, um, who’s taking it?”

Severus sighed and stared at the purple potion. “I, I suppose—”

Harry looked into Severus’ eyes, read the fear and resignation there, and made up his mind. Severus had been subject to enough humiliation for ten lifetimes.

“Er, right. I’ll be taking it, then.”
Severus gasped and jerked back. “You will? I assumed I would need to take it.”

“Verus, I can’t even begin to imagine you as a female, and I don’t want to. My features are a little more androgynous.”

“I’m surprised you know that word.”

Harry mock-slapped his arm. “Git. I do know some big words, I’ll have you know. Just because I’ve yet to swallow a dictionary ….”

Severus chuckled. “Yes, yes.” His laughter faded, and a sombre expression crossed his face. “You are certain of this, Harry?”

“Yes, love. I think it would work better. I’m far shorter to begin with, and you’re just too masculine to make a convincing female.”

Severus frowned. “I am unsure whether that is a compliment or an insult.”

“Neither. Just observation.” Harry smirked. “Besides, I like looking at you like this.”

A faint blush spread across Severus’ face. “Oh. You do have some convincing points.”

“Just, I don’t have to wear a skirt, do I? Or pumps?” Harry scowled at the mere thought.

“No, you do not need a skirt. And as we will be walking over cobblestones for a fair bit, I would recommend against wearing anything with a significant heel. Unless you want broken ankles?”

“No thank you,” Harry said with a wry laugh.

“Flats and trousers it is, then. Stylish ones, though. It would be best if we appeared to be people of means. Fewer will question us then.” Severus pulled a small vial with a purple potion inside. “Now, this is the gender potion. You should take it before the glamour potion so it does not interfere with the glamour once set.”

Harry nodded and took the vial. “Bottoms up, I guess. And don’t laugh.”

“I promise, but before you—”

Harry knocked back the potion. It tasted like stale yeast, but thankfully there wasn’t much of it. Severus wrapped Harry in a tight embrace, pinning his arms, and before the younger man could question why, sharp, tearing pain shot across his entire body. Harry wanted to claw at his burning chest, to rip out the pain, but Severus held him steady. He cried out as the pain dropped into his pelvic region and intensified tenfold. His eyes watered and his muscles strained in effort to escape the agony, but before he could do more than let slip one anguished shriek, the pain faded.

Harry leaned against Severus, panting and blinking down tears, while long fingers ran through his hair and soothed away the remnants of pain.

“I apologise, Harry. I meant to warn you, but you took it before I could speak.”

“It’s all right. Nothing to a Cruciatus.”

Severus shook his head. “I wish you had no knowledge of that. But never mind. Let’s see you then.”

Harry covered his now-rounded chest with his arms and looked down. “I don’t like this.”
Severus stepped back and tipped up his chin. “I know. But if it is any consolation, your face is just as beautiful with feminine features.”

Harry gave him a small smile, warmth chasing away some of the squirmy sensation in his belly. “Thanks. It does help. Of course, I’m more concerned about these.” He looked at his chest to make his point. The potion hadn’t given him large breasts, but they were definitely female.


Heat diffused his cheeks at the same time a sinking coldness filled his belly. “Do you … prefer me like this?”

Severus frowned and touched Harry’s cheek. “Of course not, but I am able to see the beauty in both sexes, and you have it as male and female.”

Harry blinked. “You’re bi!”

Severus smiled. “Indeed. But regardless, no, I do not prefer you as a female. It isn’t you. I will admit I find it intriguing, but I want you as you are naturally, Harry.”

Harry rubbed his chest. “I suppose it isn’t so bad. Maybe we could try sex like this one day? Just for curiosity’s sake?”

Severus’ lips parted, and a gleam filled his eyes. “Diagon, Harry. Diagon. We must get there this week. Merlin, what was I thinking, falling for a teenager?”

Harry laughed. “You know, you’re not so far off from a teenager yourself these days.”

“Bullshite! I may be twenty-two in body, but I have lived twice that in my thirty-seven years.”

“Twice that, even.” Harry’s sad smile turned devilish. “I take it you liked the idea of having me as a woman?”

Severus groaned and covered his face with a shaking hand. “Harry, please. My self-control is already suffering.”

Harry chuckled and hugged Severus from behind, resting his head against the taller man’s back. “Okay. I just wanted you to know I’d be willing to try it one day if you are. But I don’t want to push you into stuff you’re not ready for. Is this okay, love? Me holding you like this?”

Severus held Harry’s hands in his own. “More than okay, though it is a bit disconcerting to feel your breasts against me. I have to keep reminding myself it is only you.”

Harry chuckled into Severus’ back. “Mm. It’s me, Severus. Even if everything about me is different.”

“Oh, not everything.”

“Hmm?”

Severus turned to ruffle what he could reach of Harry’s hair. “That mop of yours hasn’t changed a bit.”

Harry snorted. “You’d need the powers of a mage to make it change.”

Severus laughed. “Then change it to a length suiting a woman and let me turn around so I can give
“All right.” Harry released Severus and watched as the older man tapped his wand against a phial full of his red potion and whispered a spell. The liquid inside turned pink. “There we are. This one only tickles a bit.”

Harry took the proffered phial. “I don’t suppose it tastes like it smells?”

“Unfortunately not, but it isn’t as unpleasant as most potions.”

“I’ll take what I can get, I suppose.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s cheek. “I am with you, love.”

Harry gave him a blinding smile. “Yes. You always have been.”

With a little shake to ready himself, he held his nose and downed the potion. It tickled, as Severus had said, and Harry couldn’t help but laugh. Severus chuckled along. A moment later, Harry straightened and gave Severus a lopsided smile.

“Well, how do I look?”

“Not like my Harry, but beautiful nonetheless.”

Severus conjured a mirror, and Harry gasped at the sight of himself.

“Merlin! I’m completely different.”

“Yes. That would be the point of the glamour potion.”

His signature emerald eyes had gone—well, he supposed they were too recognizable. Instead, he had dark blue-grey eyes a bit like Sirius’ had been. The thought gave his heart a little pang. Besides that, his nose had become a bit upturned and pointed, he had fuller lips, softer skin though the tone hadn’t changed, a smattering of freckles across his nose, and short chestnut-coloured hair. He looked a bit like his mum, only with a greatly muted hair colour and blue eyes.

“Are you going to be able to look at me like this, Severus?”

The man frowned. “Of course. Why do you ask?”

“You don’t think I look like … like Mum?”

He caressed Harry’s cheek. “Perhaps there is a passing resemblance, but not enough to make me think of her. Do not trouble yourself.”

“Okay. As long as you’re all right.”

“I am.”

“Good.” Harry ran his hands through his short, spiky reddish-brown hair and frowned. “Doesn’t look very feminine, that.”

He concentrated on the lengthening the locks, wondering if he really could make them grow just on his powers alone. To his shock, yellow light formed at the ends of his hair, growing along with the strands, though it only lengthened a few centimetres and Harry had been aiming for perhaps thirty.
“Hmm,” Severus said with a frown. “Harry, I think you will be immensely powerful once we have you trained a bit. For now, a lengthening potion will have to do.”

Harry nodded. “Do you have one?”

“No, but I have the ingredients and it will only take a moment.” He conjured a stool and set it in the far corner of the room. “Sit and occupy yourself while I mix it for you.”

Harry grinned. “Sure you don’t want me to help?”

Severus shot him a glare. “When I want to be blown to bits, I’ll call you.”

Harry laughed and let the man go to work.
A Trip to Diagon Alley

Diagon Alley was overflowing when Severus arrived with the glamoured, female Harry in tow. He couldn’t understand what had drawn such a crowd until they passed near the corner of Knockturn Alley, where a stout witch in Ministry robes stood on the corner, handing out what looked like pamphlets. Severus had started to walk past, uninterested in Ministry dealings, when Harry’s grip tightened on the older man’s hand enough to hurt. His free hand automatically going to his wand, Severus turned to Harry’s line of sight in search of what had disturbed his partner.

“Come and get your information booklets, courtesy of the new Ministry of Magic.”

The high, girlish voice ran down Severus’ back like ice water, and he instantly suffered flashbacks to ridiculous lime-green bows, fuzzy pink cardigans, and tacky kitten plates on every available surface. He controlled his scowl and shudder with a great deal of effort and turned to the source of the voice.

Umbridge. Whatever the horrid pink toad was doing in Diagon Alley, it wasn’t good.

Harry leaned into Severus’ shoulder, his disgust written all over his face. He muttered, “What is she doing here? And what does she mean, the new Ministry?”

“Control your anger, love,” Severus replied. “Your accidental magic will give us away otherwise. As to your questions, if we pose as curious passers-by, we should be able to find out.”

“Ugh. I hate that woman.”

“As do I, but we must not draw attention to ourselves. Remember what we came to do.”

Harry sighed and let his hatred fade, from his expression at any rate. Severus still felt it in Harry’s grip, but it was nothing he couldn’t endure for a season.

“Come, love,” said Severus in a louder voice. “Let’s see what she has for us.”

Harry muttered, “Okay,” and followed Severus as he approached the vile woman.

Umbridge began speaking in her vile honeyed tones as they fell into line with the others waiting for pamphlets.

“Minister Thicknesse has great plans for England and the entire United Kingdom, make no mistake,” she said.

Harry gasped and whispered. “Thicknesse? Isn’t Scrimgeour still Minister of Magic?”

“Ssh. Obviously we have missed much while in seclusion. Listen.”

Harry nodded and returned his attention to the toad-woman, who was still speaking.

“—And we will have reason again to feel safe in our beds. Minister Thicknesse and his team are working around the clock to restore order to Britain. Soon there will be an end to this division, an end to the strife. Soon our aurors will clean out the vile beasts who bring war and chaos to our great land, and the good, worthy wizarding people of Britain will prevail, working in harmony to establish a better, safer world.”

Severus cringed internally. He had a fair idea what would appear in the pamphlet. By the fire in Harry’s eyes, he knew, too. So he had learned to read between the lines. Good. It was past time the
young man embraced his Slytherin side.

Umbridge gave Harry a simpering smile as he reached the top of the line. “And what might your name be, dear? I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Severus’ heart dropped into his stomach.

‘She doesn’t remember him from Hogwarts and suspects he’s been in hiding. Merlin, I hope he has the sense to answer well.’

He held Harry’s hand—it wasn’t as if he could have extricated himself anyway—and hoped for the best.

Harry returned her simpering smile with one of his own. “Holly Black. I’ve been out of the country, attending Beauxbatons. I just arrived back in Britain last week. Should I let my uncle know I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you, Miss …?”

Umbridge coughed. “Oh, ahem. No, dear, that won’t be necessary. I’m quite sure you and your suitor here will do well in England, what with all the improvements coming. Your family has always worked towards the greater good.”

Harry’s hand clenched Severus’ still tighter.

“Indeed we have.”

Umbridge gave a false smile and held out her pamphlets. “Won’t you take a booklet with you for you and your intended? It gives information about all the new programs coming to the Ministry.”

“Thank you, madam.” Harry took the pamphlet and started to turn, when Umbridge gave a sort of curtsy. With the movement, a flash of gold appeared at her neck. Severus couldn’t tell what it was from his position, but Harry froze and went stark white. The young man forced a smile on his face, gave a jerky incline of his head, and tugged on Severus’ hand, steering him away from the crowd.

“Love, are you all right?” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “If you are afraid, don’t be. You did well. Using Black’s surname was the best possi—”

Harry cut across him in a strangled croak, “Horcrux.”

The blood drained from Severus’ face. He swayed a little and motioned to a small cafe off the main thoroughfare.

“In here. We cannot discuss this on the street.”

“But Umbridge—”

“We cannot do anything about it in Diagon Alley with a hundred witnesses and aurors likely hiding in every corner.”

Harry gave a tense, worried nod and followed Severus into the cafe. Severus chose a secluded booth in the back, squeezed into the seat next to Harry, and ordered butterbeers for them both, not that he preferred such a noxiously sweet concoction. Harry did, though, and the distraught young man needed comfort.

Once the waiter had returned with their drinks, Severus cast a discreet *Muffliato* under the table and turned to his shaking, ashen love.
“Harry, what is it? What about a horcrux?”

The young man pointed to his throat. “Umbridge—the locket!”

Cold dread settled in Severus’ bones. “She has Slytherin’s locket?”

Harry shuddered. “She was wearing it like a necklace. A horcrux!” He gave a bitter laugh. “She’s so evil already I doubt it even affects her.”

Severus nodded, though he had hardly heard. Mother of Merlin! If Umbridge had the locket, how in the name of all things magical were they to get it? They couldn’t likely break into her house without being caught, even if they knew where she lived. And there was bound to be someone with her at all times in the Ministry … except in her office. She might have an aide, but they could handle two people. Severus’ blood began to flow once more, and he drew Harry into his arms.

“Love, it’s not hopeless. I believe I have thought of a way to get the locket. We will need to refine our plans, of course, but it is possible.”

Harry met his eyes, the fear in his own palpable. “How, Severus?”

“Her office at the Ministry. It is the only time she is likely to be alone and relatively safe for us to attack. If Miss Black made an appointment, with a little finesse, we should be able to just take what we want.”

Harry paled. “Severus, as much as I hate the evil toad, if we murder her, the entire Ministry will know. We’ll be killed before we leave the building.”

“Of course we would, but we will only be stunning and Obliviating her.”

He relaxed marginally. “Well, that’s better than murder, I guess. Though I wish someone would top her already.”

“With the number of people and magical creatures that woman has angered, it can only be a matter of time. But let us not worry ourselves about this now. We still need to purchase an owl and determine what in the name of Merlin has happened at the Ministry and what cretin gave that foul woman any sort of power. Contacting Lupin is essential now. Miss Tonks, too, may have some information about what has happened.”

The colour came back to Harry’s cheeks. “You’re right. We need an owl first, then news, then Remus, then we deal with the pink toad.”

“I imagine something about what happened will be in The Prophet, swill that it is. We should pick one up before we leave.”

“Yeah, The Quibbler, too.”

Severus frowned. “The Quibbler? Isn’t that the nonsense magazine which blathers on about dimple-cheeked woodchucks or some other such tripe?”

Harry chuckled. “Crumple-horned Snorkacks, and yes, but they also publish articles my group wants out there. Luna’s da runs it, and—”

“Ah. That explains it.”

Harry glared. “Luna’s brilliant.” He rubbed his neck and gave Severus a sheepish smile. “But she is
a bit barmy, yes. Still, you shouldn’t underestimate her. She sees things most people don’t, and she’s almost always right. Unless it has to do with some weird magical creature.”

Severus inclined his head. “Understood. Now, you were saying?”

“Well, ever since the Ministry refused to acknowledge Voldemort’s return in fifth year, we’ve been using The Quibbler to get the truth out there that The Prophet flubs up. It’s got a good following now, though Luna’s fairly confused as to why no one but her family believes in her creatures yet.”

Severus nodded. “Then, should we need something published, we know where to turn. We will pick up your friend’s magazine as well. Perhaps their truthful articles will allow us to fine-tune our plans for the locket.”

“Yeah.” Harry squeezed Severus’ hand. “I’m glad you’re with me. You balance me. Had it been Ron and Hermione and me, we probably would have nicked some polyjuice and ran into the Ministry blind. Probably gotten caught, too.”

“And no doubt escaped by the skin of your teeth on the heels of a catastrophe. We shall not be going in blind. We will ask Tonks or Shacklebolt for information on the Ministry and devise our plans accordingly. One that shall involve no catastrophes, if I can help it.”

“Right.” Harry knocked back some of his drink and let slip a sigh. “Merlin, I needed that. It soothes me.”

“I thought it might.” Severus sipped at his own drink and found it pleasant despite its cloying taste. “Now, shall we discuss your little deception back there with Umbridge?”

Harry winced. “Am I going to get us killed?”

“No, it was quite good. I admit, when I realised you were impersonating a Slytherin, I expected you to choose Malfoy’s name.”

“Ew,” Harry said with a grimace.

Severus chuckled. “For once, your hatred of Draco Malfoy has served you well. Had you chosen his name, we would likely be in danger even in this guise. The Malfoys are targets from both sides these days and, with Lucius in disgrace, have far less influence with both Riddle and the general public. While the British branch of Blacks is all but extinct, there are still several French families, all closemouthed and wary of the British Ministry, or we would find ourselves in trouble. Granted, your little deception will still require some quick work to protect, but it is nothing a floo call from the Leaky to Madame Maxime cannot fix.”

Severus fixed Harry with a stern look. “That said, our story will most likely fall through without the Malfoys’ support.”

Harry winced. “We’d better think of a cover fast then. Malfoy would eat blast-ended skrewt shite before he helped me with anything.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I do know several mouth-washing spells.”

“Ugh. You’re channelling Missus Weasley right now, and it’s a horrifying thought.”

A snort escaped Severus’ control. “You shall give me even more nightmares that way. But back to the subject at hand, Lucius Malfoy would indeed sooner cut off his arm than help a Potter. His heir, however, is another story. The same is true for Narcissa, and she will help with less reluctance. And
Draco is likely feeling quite desperate by now. I imagine he is not nearly so cocky after being exiled and disgraced.”

Harry scowled. “What’s your point, Severus? I’d rather do just about anything than talk about Malfoy. Especially Lucius. Draco’s a whiny little snot, but Lucius is pure evil and deserves an Avada or twelve. Only Umbridge and Old Mouldy are worse. Oh, and Bellatrix.”

Severus shuddered. “Indeed. And she is the crux of the issue. Bellatrix is a Black, love, and the instant she finds some supposed French girl she’s never heard of was claiming the Black name, she will deny it until her dying breath. Bellatrix is also, to our benefit, undeniably mad. Even the other Death Eaters know it and take everything she says with a pinch of salt, as does the Ministry. I cannot say this of Narcissa. She still holds some sway of her own right, even with Lucius’ disgrace.

“Therefore, if we can convince the Malfoys, Madame Maxime, and the Order to back your story, then Umbridge will not be able to disprove it. We shall be at least relatively safe in this guise, and have a decent cover story to explain our long absences—we are French, after all.”

Harry raised an eyebrow in fair imitation of Severus. “And when someone talks to me in a language I don’t speak?”

“Well, in a dire situation, there are translation spells that would cover you long enough to make an escape, but let us try to avoid that situation, hmm? Or let your Delacour friend handle the French. Come to think of it, we should ask the Delacour family for aid in your cover as well.”

Harry frowned and sipped his butterbeer. “It will look suspicious when I don’t speak even if Fleur is there to help.”

“Yes, which is why I suggested we avoid the situation. Now, if we might stop stalling, this has reminded me of our problem with my students.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’. “What is it, love? I’ll help if I can.”

“You may not wish to after you hear my ideas, Holly, as they involve the Malfoy heir.” In an aside to Harry, Severus whispered, “The waiter is walking close. It may be best if we go by our agreed aliases at all times when in this guise, though I must ask your forgiveness for having to refer to you by a woman’s name.”

Harry shrugged and whispered back, “I am a woman like this. Not just dressed like one. I have the parts.” He frowned. “And that will be awkward when I need to use the loo.”

Severus chuckled. “Just remember to sit and you should be fine.” He kissed Harry’s cheek and moved back. “Now, love. We have spoken of my students. It hurts that I cannot guide them away from the dark.”

Harry nodded. “And I’ve agreed to help them, but I don’t know how to lead them away either. Won’t the new Slytherin head try?”

“I suspect Dumbledore will pass it to Sinistra when he realises his potions professor has no intention of putting himself in harm’s way to suit his whims. While she is a kind woman, she does not have the force and cunning needed to pull my snakes out of the proverbial pit. They will run all over her, which, I fear, is exactly what Dumbledore wants. We need a separate influence to keep them from all becoming casualties of the Headmaster’s crusade against Slytherins. We need Malfoy.”

Harry sighed. “I really hate Malfoy. And Parkinson isn’t much better.”
Severus gave a wry chuckle. “Truth be told, I do not like them much either. Too spoiled, ignorant, and bigoted. But they are still children, Harry, or rather, adults just out of childhood. Still young enough to correct their mistakes.”

“Will they, though?”

“That I do not know. What I do know, however, is this: the Headmaster is evil enough to imprison a phoenix without dying in agony and he has a vendetta against Slytherins. What if he is not content to isolate us, Harry? He has already proven he is capable of killing us, or did you truly believe he put me with you, wearing my face, out of a desire to protect us?”

Harry winced. “No. We already gathered that he wanted you dead, and perhaps me as well.”

“I think he counted on your wand saving you. He wanted me dead, Harry, the ultimate Slytherin in his eyes. I suppose he believed it would demoralise the rest, never mind that the dark ones are actively seeking to kill me and the light ones do not trust me.”

Harry’s eyes glowed vivid green. “Bastard.”

“Yes, he is a bastard, which terrifies me for my students. Yes, even Malfoy. Even he, troublesome brat that he is, has never done anything deserving of death, and for all we know, Albus may have it in his mind to execute Slytherins.” Severus lowered his eyes. “History has seen it before. Riddle’s rants about pure blood, Albus’ machinations for the greater good—I fear they are all pretty words for Hitler’s ‘final solution’ with the sect of their choice. For Albus, it is Slytherins, Harry. I could not live with myself and let him, for example, line up my little first years before a curse squad.”

Harry set his butterbeer aside, his eyes wide and his skin bone-white. “First years? He wouldn’t—would he?”

“You heard what I said, love.” Severus hugged Harry close, in part to comfort him and in part to drive the ashy-sick coldness from his gut. “If he is capable of shredding his soul to the point that even Phoenix Fury would not burn him, he is capable of killing first years to suit his purposes.”

“The other professors would never allow that!”

“No. But as with Hitler, Dumbledore has been slowly wearing them down for years. Making them mistrust us, see us as second-class citizens. Slytherins were not always so downtrodden, love. Albus has ensured students like Malfoy follow the self-destructive views of their parents by making them the pariahs, the scapegoats.

“Do you know how much it hurt that everyone thought I was dark long before I ever considered joining the Death Eaters? If I had had even one good friend left to turn to, I might not have gone to the dark, but there was no one! No one would trust me. Everyone looked at me like scum, and it wasn’t only me. It was the same for us all.”

Severus sighed and laid his head against Harry’s. “I do not ask for preferential treatment for them. If they have hurt others, then they should pay fair consequences. All that I ask is that they receive the same treatment students of any other house would. This, this farce of a system we have at the moment is a breeding ground for dark lords. I … I need to save them—flawed or not, they have been like my children—but I have no power to. Not alone. I need your help, Harry.”

Harry squeezed him and kissed his cheek. “You have it. I can’t guarantee that we can save all of them, or even any of them, but we can bloody well try.” He hesitated. “But, er, how are we supposed to do that? Neither one of us will be in Hogwarts next year, and even if Malfoy goes, he
won’t have the influence he did before. Even on the off chance that we manage to convince him to help, he won’t be able to save many of his housemates. So what do we do?”

Severus’ eyes took on a devious gleam. “We are not after Malfoy alone. The Slytherins, the ones we can save from the Death Eaters, could be a silent army at Hogwarts. They could be our ears and eyes on Dumbledore, and many of them have good motivation not to trust him. I am not the only member of my house that man has betrayed.”

Harry gave a dark chuckle. “An army of Slytherins spying on and working against Dumbledore? I admit, it’s poetic justice, but you still haven’t explained how we’re to accomplish this or how making an army of your House will keep them out of Dumbledore’s rubbish bin.”

Severus sighed. “I admit that, even with our best efforts, it may not be possible, but I must try. So my thoughts are this. To convince them, we start with Draco and Zabini. Draco will be easier to convince than you think. He was all but forced to take the mark. Once he knows you can remove it, I think he will be willing to help, if not eager. And Zabini only wants protection. He is not associated with the Death Eaters in any way, but the pressure is heavy and he has nowhere to escape to if it comes down to his family forcing him to accept the Mark. He’s afraid.”

Harry rubbed his chin in thought. “Hmm. I’m not positive I can remove the Mark again, but I’ll certainly try. Do you think there may be other students with it that were forced?”

“I believe most of them who have it were, either by the pressures of their family or by physical restraint. Few children of that age are truly evil enough to believe that genocide, even of a race they dislike, is acceptable. Besides that, well, I was never asked to abduct students as it would have jeopardised my position, but I know others have. Crabbe Senior comes to mind.”

Harry cringed. “Merlin. That’s bloody awful. Who … who are they? Who’s been forced that you know of for certain?”

“It is hard to say as they must be careful about revealing their abhorrence for the mark, but I believe Millicent Bulstrode, Miles Bletchley, Tracey Davis, and Theodore Nott are some. Nott I know for certain. I, I was there. His screams will haunt me until I die.”

Tears pooled on Harry’s lashes. “Gods.” He slipped his hands into Severus’. “Ssh. It’s going to be okay. I’ll give everything I have to help them, love. I can’t guarantee I can remove the mark without the same powerful feelings I had for you at the time, but I’ll do my best. Maybe if I just think of you and how much I feel for you, it may work. I hope so.” He squeezed Severus’ hands. “But I’m confused. This still doesn’t tell me how it’s going to protect them at Hogwarts.”

Severus shook his head. “Dumbledore will most likely put Sinistra in charge, who, as I’ve already said is a complete pushover. When that happens, what do you think a hundred and twenty plus students sorted into my house for ambition and cunning will do? Keep in mind that they have spent six years being the targets of every house and teacher save Sinistra and myself?”

Harry winced. “It’ll be bedlam.”

“Exactly, which is what I believe the Headmaster wants. That way he can convince the other teachers that Slytherin House should be eliminated. Of course, the other teachers will think he means simply to re-sort the students. I fear he has much more nefarious plans. And even if he does not, taking away their House pride and sorting them into the other houses will end them just as efficiently. They will be as scorned as I was, and we will have more fodder for future Death Eaters and Dark Lords, many too late to save.”
Harry shuddered. “Let’s not do that.”

“Agreed. To that end, I believe that if we pull the Slytherins into our side, then we can convince them it is to their benefit that they show their best behaviour this year. Not only will it undermine the Headmaster’s plans, but it will keep them safe from his plotting. At least, he won’t have public support for it. They will behave, if only to outmanoeuvre Dumbledore.”

Harry looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. “Do you always convince your Slytherins to behave by giving them devious reasons to do so?”

Severus laughed. “I think we both know they were not so well-behaved under my tenure. It was an unfortunate side effect of the role I had to play, but I am unwilling to sacrifice innocent children because of it.”

“So am I. So we’ll go forwards with this plan, then. And if it all goes to hell, we’ll find a hideout for Zabini and any other Slytherins who might be caught in the middle. Which means we’ll need a safehouse for them. Your grandparents’ house is nice, but it doesn’t have that much room.”

“Yes. We will potentially need to shelter students from other Houses, too, but I am afraid I am only familiar with the plights of my snakes. Not many outside of Slytherin dared come to its abrasive head for advice.”

Harry crossed his legs and tapped his fingers on the table, his expression troubled. “I don’t know, Xavier. We’d need a castle to house so many. Or a manor at least. I’m not that rich.”

Severus snorted. “Not that rich? Were you not the sole heir to Sirius’ portion of the Black Estate?”

“Er, yeah? He blood adopted me, so it goes to me. But some should go back to Tonks’ family and her baby, now that I’ve the power to reinstate them into the family.”

“Love, there will be more than enough. As far as I know, Black had a fortune in excess of sixty-four million galleons, as well as several large estate houses. It is potentially more since then, as no Black has been alive or free to touch it until the mutt’s escape from Azkaban.”

Harry choked on his drink. “Sixty-four million? Holy Merlin! If that’s still anywhere near accurate, we’ll have enough to buy a township for them. Shite.”

“That is not counting the Potter inheritance, either. They were not as rich as the Blacks, but they were a wealthy pureblood line, so there are likely estates and galleons on that side, too.”

Harry sighed and flicked his eyes to the clock. “Looks like we’ll need a trip to Gringotts, but how am I to convince them of my identity without revealing myself?”

“They have ways to do that for clients who must remain in disguise. Goblins care little what we do, so long as we keep giving them our gold, and no potion changes the composition of one’s blood. Not potions that leave the drinker alive, at any rate. They will most likely check that, if they do not recognize you by scent alone.”

“Scent? That’s a bit … unnerving.”

“They are non-humans, love. They have senses we don’t.”

“Of course. It’s only odd to think of someone … sniffing me.” Harry shrugged and tossed back the rest of his drink. “Well, it doesn’t matter as long as we can get into my vaults. We’d better get moving. We still need to go to the Leaky and the Owl Emporium as well as get a copy of the
newspapers. We should probably get your robes and such from Hogwarts too, before Dumbledore thinks you aren’t coming back. Best he not get too suspicious until your things are good and gone.”

Severus nodded and dropped some galleons on the table for their drinks. “Agreed. I will go tonight and sneak everything out.” He stood and offered Harry his hand, then cancelled the privacy spell. “Come, love. Gringotts first?”

“We’d better. We’ll need the money.”

“True. Then follow me and let us choose your owl. Nothing but the best for my beloved’s birthday, you hear? No little scops owls, even if you do find them … cute.”

Harry grinned at the way Severus was passing on information without giving anything away. They would need a larger owl in case they had to deliver things of any size, of course. Hedwig could handle moderately sized packages, but Severus’ sooty couldn’t deliver much beyond the size of a book, and neither familiar could go on covert delivery operations.

“Well, then I will just get the biggest, best bird they have, hmm? Spend all your money the moment it touches your pockets.”

Severus sighed and gave a fair imitation of exasperation. “Nothing too flashy, yes? You wouldn’t want to be seen with a tacky creature like a fwooper, would you?”

Harry gave a false look of disgust. “Of course not. An owl will do well enough.”

Severus squeezed his hand to let him know he’d done well. “Thank Merlin for small mercies.”

They left Gringotts with their pockets considerably heavier. Harry’s wealth had utterly shocked them both. With the Potter, Gryffindor, and Peverell vaults that he was somehow the sole heir of, Harry had over three-hundred million in galleons, thirty-seven manor houses, a library’s worth of books—Severus had nearly fainted at the sight of them—and any number of ancient heirlooms and artifacts. Even after reinstating the Tonks family and doling out their portion of the Black estate, Harry still had over two-hundred million galleons to his name.

He even owned a Wizarding village on the Isle of Whithorn. Apparently someone in Gryffindor’s line had made judicious use of wizarding space and wards to turn the empty isle head into a quiet little township called Bàn Leon, but the town had been abandoned for centuries, its occupants having long since left Bàn Leon for less isolated shores. As few modern wizards knew of its existence and fewer still knew how to access it, the isle sounded as if it would make a perfect safehouse.

Harry had clapped his hands with excitement upon hearing about it, but it was nothing to the reaction its name caused Severus.

Griphook laid his papers down, giving the ecstatic Harry a piercing look. “I assume it meets with your approval, Mister Potter?”

Harry grinned. “It sounds perfect. What did you say it’s called again?”
“Bàn Leon,” he said with a quick glance at the paperwork. “At least, that is the name for the city proper. It also has an old wizarding fort by the name of Dùn Bàn Leon. It means Fort of the White Lion in Gaelic.”

Beside him, Severus dropped into a nearby chair with a soft cry of dismay.

Harry whirled around and grabbed Severus’ hands, heart thumping with concern. “Xavier, love, are you ill? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, per se. I am only shocked half from my wits.”

“Shocked? I should think you’d be excited. It sounds like the perfect place for your charges, should we need it.”

“Yes indeed, and the name proves it. That was what knocked the wind from me. Sweet Circe, I can hardly process it.”

“Xavier? What do you mean?”

“The prophecy of which I told you? It called the three of us by strange titles. I am the Prince of Shadow, and Lupin is the Red Wolf. You are … the White Lion.”

Harry sank to his knees, overcome with sudden lightheadedness. That was much too specific to be coincidence.

“Merlin! Are you serious?”

“I believe we have found our … new home.”

Harry could only nod, dazed and breathless. As much as he feared it, the prophecy had begun.

Harry’s daze lasted all the way to Eeylops and beyond. “Two-hundred million galleons” and “Dùn Bàn Leon” kept pinging around in his skull, and he could focus on nothing else. Severus had to call his alias twice at the entrance of the shop before Harry realised who he meant, and he recalled almost nothing from the trip when they left with a gentle giant of an eagle owl named Demeter.

As Severus already had two familiars and Harry feared he might find a magical familiar of his own soon, they bound her to the Prince household. Since Harry had been blood bonded to the Princes through Severus’ wards, she would answer to both of them, but for the moment, she appeared to prefer Severus. Perhaps because he was actually of Prince blood, or perhaps because he was bigger and could carry her weight with ease. Either way, she had settled in on the taller man’s shoulder and was half asleep by the time they arrived at the Leaky Cauldron.

“Holly,” Severus called, cutting across the remnants of Harry’s daze. “Love, you need to pay attention now. We will have to take great care here.”

Harry gave himself a mental shake and nodded. “Right. Sorry, Xavier. I’m still stunned, but I’ll put it aside for now.” He frowned. “But how are we going to floo your little ferret friend without everyone and their brother overhearing?”

“Watch and see. It’s not something I can safely say here. And do try and remember we are trying to establish a truce of sorts. Calling him a ferret is not conducive to reconciliation.”
“Understood. You lead the way, and I’ll watch my mouth.”

“First, the papers.” Severus went to a magical dispensary containing the day’s issues for any wizarding magazine or newspaper still in print. He tapped the top of the bright green wooden box and said, “Daily Prophet, present issue and The Quibbler, also present issue.”

A mouth opened at the top of the box. “Five sickles,” it said in a squeaky voice.

Severus dropped a galleon in the mouth; it burped and the box presented his change in a cupped palm on the side. Once Harry took the change, the mouth and hand disappeared into the wood. With a loud click, the dispensary front swung open to reveal the publications they had requested in the box.

“Nice,” Harry remarked. “I kind of want one.”

“Perhaps we can have one installed in the township.” Severus picked the Quibbler off the top and scoffed. “‘In Search of Hibbly Hijinkies: One Brave Witch’s Tale.’ Utter rubbish.”

He handed the magazine to Harry, who promptly opened it and searched through the table of contents for anything interesting. He had scanned halfway through the list when a shocked gasp from Severus redirected his attention to his partner. Severus’ white-lipped, stone-faced glare said all Harry needed to know. Someone they loved had been maligned—himself, most likely.

Then Harry saw the tears in Severus’ eyes and the red on the man’s cheeks, and his heart sank into his stomach.

“Xavier? Let me see it, love.”

Severus gave a bitter, near-hysterical laugh and slapped the paper into Harry’s hands. “Why not. All of Britain knows now, why not you too? Here. Come and read about the callous, resentful Death Eater who only got what he deserved, after all.”

Harry swallowed a lump of terror and unfolded the Prophet once more, casting a hasty Muffliato on their immediate area. The first headline reiterated some of Umbridge’s words and mentioned that she would be in Diagon Alley today. So that explained the crowds. ‘Magic is Might,’ the headline proclaimed. Harry scowled. More thinly veiled pureblood propaganda.

Underneath, a second headline made his blood run icy and fiery by turns. ‘Death Eater Severus Snape Caught Spying at Hogwarts.’ Fury raging hot through him, Harry skimmed the text to see how bad it was.

Bad indeed. The text conveniently left out all Severus had sacrificed for the light and mentioned him as head of Slytherin several times. It painted him as a nasty, evil git who hated children and whom ‘several light-oriented students’ had questioned at every turn, but also a man whom Dumbledore had been determined to save despite his ‘better judgment.’ The nasty, evil git didn’t want to be saved, however; and when he had attacked the Headmaster, decisions had to be made. Of course, Voldemort knew that the light had all but disowned him, and Severus was subsequently tortured, which explained his limp and scars.

“What a load of tripe!”

“Dumbledore did it,” Severus said in a low voice echoing with hurt.

Harry took his hand. “Oh, love. You’re sure?”
“He’s the only one besides you, Minerva, and Poppy who I let see the scar on my face. Minerva would never do this, and Poppy is bound by a healer’s oath.” He let slip a bitter laugh. “I suppose he thought you would see the scar when we helped you escape and our forced contact would increase our enmity to the point that I believed you capable of this depth of betrayal.”

“What! That barmy, no-good, shite-for-brains—”

Severus’ half-hysterical laugh interrupted again. “The truly terrible thing is, before now, I might have. Before I saw how kind and loving you are.” He dragged a hand across his eyes. “I truly am an evil git.”

“Xavier! You know this is so much rubbish. Come, love. Come here and let me show you how wonderful you truly are.”

Severus dragged himself to Harry’s side, hugging his waist and keeping his face hidden. He couldn’t hide the tear tracks on his cheeks, though.

“You should leave me. Find someone who won’t drag you down by association.”

Harry’s heart screeched to a halt. “No, Sev—Xavier. Please don’t send me away. Please.”

“I will only make you miserable in the end, and—”

“And you swore to me! You swore no matter what, we would stay together.”

Severus flinched and two tears dripped from under his hair.

“Love, I will not leave your side when you’re in trouble. Come. Come into my arms and let me ease your hurt a little.”

Severus choked back a sob and embraced Harry, shaking with grief and fear. “I was so afraid you would want to go. You already have so much bad press, and this is more trouble you do not need. I tried to be brave, but I don’t want you to leave. Merlin, I need you right now. I need your help.”

Harry held him close and rubbed circles on his back. “I am not leaving you, love. Ssh. We both know this article is as much tripe as they usually print, but this time, we’re armed and ready.”

“Hmm?” Severus stepped back and wiped his face. “What do you mean?”

“You have the antidote to your glamour potion in your pocket? Good. We have a few trips to make before we go to the Leaky. Come to think of it, we might want to stop and get a bite first. We’re going to be busy most of the day, I think.”

Severus stepped back and wiped his eyes. “We are? Where are we going?”

“The Daily Prophet Headquarters, of course.”

Severus paled. “Holly, you can’t ask them to retract this. They got it from Dumbledore and they don’t know you. They’ll laugh at you. Or worse.”

“First, I’m not going as Holly, and second, I’m not going to ask for a retraction.”

“Then what are we doing exactly?”

Harry gave him a devious grin. “Wait and see.”
Severus groaned. “Why does that make me worry so?”

Harry gave a lighthearted laugh. “Because it usually means trouble for you, but not this time, love. I promise. This time, I’m prepared.”

Severus just sighed and followed Harry into the Leaky Cauldron for lunch.
When they arrived at the Daily Prophet Headquarters, Severus directed Demeter to take refuge in a nearby grove of pines and promised to whistle for her when they had finished. She nipped his ear in a friendly manner and took off from his shoulder, her huge wings blowing his hair about. As he smoothed his locks down, he watched the owl fly, half wishing he could follow.

Merlin, he hoped Harry knew what he was doing.

The inside of the building reminded Severus of Malfoy Manor: it had all the pompous furnishings with half the taste. White marble floors showed not a speck of dust despite hundreds of feet walking about. Pale yellow stucco walls gave way to huge floor-to-ceiling windows in every available space and gilt mahogany supports between. The high domed ceilings had even more gilding, and a giant skylight overlooked the lobby.

Harry nudged Severus’ arm. “Bit frou-frou, isn’t it?”

“Understatement,” Severus agreed.

Harry nodded towards the restrooms. “Once it’s clear, we’ll go do the antidotes there.”

“As you wish, but I still think this is a terrible idea.”

“You don’t know what my idea is, love.”

“Exactly why I think it’s so terrible.”

Harry snorted. “Relax. You don’t have the monopoly on cunning. I promise I’m not going in blind. It’ll be okay. Just watch my back, okay? It looks like everyone but the receptionist has gone back to work after the lunch break, but I’m sure you know someone could be late. Anyway, do you think it’s safe to go now?”

Severus sighed. “No, but let’s go regardless. Whatever half-baked Gryffindor plot you’ve concocted, I only hope it works as well as most of your instincts.”

“It will.”

“It had better.”

Severus motioned to an empty stall and checked the loo. Once he was sure it was clear, he warded the door and took the antidotes from his breast pocket.

“All clear. Take the blue one first—the glamour antidote. Once your glamour is entirely removed, then take the gender reversal potion—the green one. It should not hurt as much as the first time, but it will still be quite painful. Be careful not to damage yourself.”
“Thanks, love. I’ll be right back.” Harry pocketed the vials and locked himself away.

A moment later, Harry emerged from the stall back to his usual appearance. Severus tapped his glasses to shift them back to the round frames he used and transfigured his feminine clothing into his usual muggle tee and jeans with trainers. Harry grinned down at himself.

“Thanks, love, but I think I’ll need something a bit more fashionable. I need to look like a wizard of means, and since I have no fashion sense, that means I’m dependent wholly on you. Help me, please?”

Severus rolled his eyes and transfigured him into stylish, expensive robes instead. The dark purple he had chosen brought out Harry’s eyes, too. He frowned and added a gold trim to the cuffs, collar, and hem, then changed Harry’s trainers to dress shoes and his jeans to pleated black trousers.

“Wow,” Harry said with a chuckle. “I clean up pretty good, huh?”

“I would be able to enjoy it more if I were not so nervous about this plan of yours.”

“Nice try, love. You’ll find out in a moment.”

Harry walked to the door, but Severus took his hand and pulled him close before he left the loo. Severus cupped Harry’s face and met his eyes.

“Harry, you are thinking this through, aren’t you? It’s not blind Gryffindor recklessness? I don’t possess your incredible luck to survive perilous situations unscathed.” He ran a hand down the side of his face for emphasis. The scar had faded, but the memory hadn’t.

Harry kissed him by his ear. “Ssh. Don’t think of that, love. You know how it scares you.”

“Yes, and this scares me, too. I just found you, Harry. I waited almost forty years for you. I don’t want to lose you, especially not so soon.”

A soft kiss to Severus’ lips melted the sharpest edge of his fear. Harry tucked a loose strand of hair behind Severus’ ear and held him until his trembling eased.

“There you are, love. It’s going to be okay. The Daily Prophet employees are just idiots and gossipmongers; they aren’t Death Eaters. Besides, I have scars too, love. Look.”

Harry rolled up his sleeve to reveal his inner forearm. Two sprawling, wrinkled scars marked what must have been terrible injuries once.

He pointed to them in turn. “This is from a basilisk fang, and that one is where Pettigrew cut me when he resurrected Voldemort. These aren’t the extent of it, either. My back is a mess.”

“That is not exactly comforting, Harry.”

“Yes, I know, but what I’m trying to say is that it’ll be okay. You do have my uncanny luck to survive against all odds, because you’ve endured sheer hell and here you are! Besides—” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “—You have a mage at your side. I’ll keep you safe, I swear it.” At Severus’ glare, he added, “And myself too! Just don’t panic, love. I promise you, I have more than one trump card up my sleeve today. Cards I’ve been saving up for a long time.”

Severus sighed and motioned him on. “Then, by all means, let us see what Gryffindor planning amounts to. I am not sure whether to expect an absolute disaster or the type of fly by the seat of your trousers miracle only you could manage to pull off.”
Harry grinned. “You forget, I was almost sorted into your house, oh great master spy.”

“Perish the thought. You are so blatantly Gryffindor you have your own personal town named for a lion.”

Harry laughed and took the door handle. “All right. Game faces on. You’re Xavier from here on out, and acting as my advisor.”

“How am I to advise you when I don’t know what we’re doing?”

“That’s easy. I’m about to buy out the entire newspaper.”

Severus’ jaw dropped. It was more cunning than he had expected, but still had worrying potential to cause catastrophe. He opened his mouth to protest, but Harry had already left the loo and started for the receptionist’s desk. Severus suppressed a sigh and stalked after him.

“As your advisor,” he muttered in Harry’s ear, “may I say that this plan might very well come to bite us firmly in our arses?”

Harry snorted. “Oh, that’s nothing. Not compared to a basilisk bite in the arm.”

“Potter, I hope you have more than a metric tonne of galleons to back this plan.”

“Of course. It wouldn’t be very Slytherin of me if I didn’t. I’ve been planning this for years, but until now, hadn’t the means to do so. Now that I do, I fully intend to take advantage.”

Severus shook his head as they reached the desk and kept his reply to himself.

Harry put on a bright smile and fluttered his eyelashes at the receptionist, a young woman with fashion sense eerily reminiscent of Rita Bloody Skeeter. “Hello, dear. I need a little help, if you’re not too busy.”

The receptionist goggled and pushed her glasses higher on her button-nose. “Merlin! Oh! What can I do for you, Mister Potter? My, you’re dashing. I hadn’t heard that before.”

Harry gave her a bashful smile. “Heh, thanks. I’d like to see the owner of the paper, right away. Also, my advisor, Xavier Prince, will be with me.”

‘Xavier’ nodded in acknowledgement.

The girl stammered and shuffled some papers. “Oh! Well, the owner is quite busy—”

“Yeah. Sorry about that. I know it’s rather short notice, but I was hoping you might be able to pencil me in—” His eyes flickered to the nametag on her lapel. “—Amanda? As a favour to an acquaintance, you know? If it’s not possible, I can return later in the week, but I’d really prefer to get this done today. If you could help me out, I’d be ever so grateful.” He flashed her another dazzling smile.

The girl’s eyes widened behind her bug-eyed spectacles and she blushed to her hairline.

Severus had to suppress a snort. Harry had her—hook, line, and sinker. A cunning little bugger under the bravado.

‘Hmm. This might be interesting after all.’

The Rita Skeeter lookalike stood and gave him a shy smile. “Oh, well, I’m not really supposed to,
but since you’re asking so nicely, um, let me see what I can do.”

“Thank you, sweetheart. I’ll remember it.”

Her blush deepened at the pet name, and Severus watched as the girl almost tripped up the stairs in her rush to obey.

“Well done, Harry,” Severus murmured in the young man’s ear. “She was eating out of your hand.”

“I’m not totally inept, you know. It was more than luck that kept me out of detention all those times.”

“Hmm. Just so I’m the only person you charm like that in earnest.”

“You’re my only person, period. You’re my peace.”

Severus fought to keep a bored expression on his face with warmth and passion filling his chest. “Keep the tender sentiments to a minimum, love. I have to remain neutral.”

Harry gave him a soft smile. “I’m glad to know they affect you, but I’ll rein it in for the moment. Just know I feel it.”

“I do, and thank you.”

They waited in silence, side by side but no closer than acquaintances might stand. For his part, Severus ached to hold Harry, at least his hand, to touch him in some small way, but that would have to wait. He would not blow their cover, and hoped Harry had the sense to quell his need for contact, too.

How surprising that Severus, who had shunned touch for so long, longed for Harry’s with all of his being. Harry needed his, too. Perhaps their years spent deprived of loving contact left them starved for it. Whatever the reason, Harry’s love and affection kept the pain in Severus’ soul at bay.

Severus’ musing halted as the receptionist arrived with a harried sort of smile on her face. She motioned them to her and grinned at Harry.

Harry smiled back. “You got us in?”

She nodded. “Got a thorough chewing out for it, too, but because you’re, well, you, she’ll see you now.”

“Great. Thanks, Amanda.”

“You’re very welcome. Follow me, and I’ll show you to her office.”

“Ladies first,” said Harry with a short bow.

The girl giggled and led them up the stairs and down a hallway furnished with abstract paintings and modern-style furniture. She stopped in front of a grandiose door with gilt edging and potted ferns on either side. A gold nameplate read: Myrna Gabblebrook, President. Severus failed to restrain a snort at the pretentious door and covered it with a cough.

“Pardon me,” he said, his expression perfectly neutral.

Amanda smiled and knocked at the door. “Quite all right. President Gabblebrook, Mister Potter and his advisor, Mister Xavier Prince, are here to see you.”
A squat, middle-aged woman with far too much makeup and dyed red hair answered the door. Her suit jacket’s neckline plunged to reveal ample cleavage, and a slit on the side of her skirt showed a flash of thigh. She fashioned hastily-rouged lips into a smile and bowed them in. Severus almost choked on the perfume-scented cloud that followed the woman.

Even the Skeeter lookalike had more class. Better personality too. Severus liked her, despite the look. She was sweet-natured and competent, if a little shy and gullible.

Something about this woman, whether it was the look or something more sinister in her bearing, put Severus on edge before she even opened her mouth.

He suppressed a scowl and sat in the overstuffed armchair she indicated, one behind the corner of a monstrous gilt desk. A gold-plated mantle sat atop a stone fireplace in the corner—a floo, no doubt—and portraits of all sorts of famous people and celebrities hung about every available bit of wall. Harry’s own face even looked on from over the mantle in the place of honour, wearing an expression of undisguised loathing.

The sight of Severus’ love in this foul woman’s office, his portrait taken obviously without his permission and before he reached adulthood, turned Severus’ stomach. Rage and horror raced through him as he watched the young Harry plead with his eyes and mouth. ‘Help me!’

Severus gave him a firm nod, his heart breaking as the portrait Harry sobbed silently and slumped against the back of his frame. Gods, he couldn’t believe the woman would steal the image of a child. And not just Harry. How many others had she stolen and used to bolster her ego? As several of the portraits wore similar expressions to the young Harry’s, he judged the number around twenty at least.

If the adult Harry didn’t kill the tramp for this, Severus would.

Just inside the door, Harry stopped short at the sight of his own face. The portrait gave him a pleading sort of look, and the real Harry responded with a short nod. He looked to Severus, and the older man used their Legilimentic bond to communicate.

‘We shan’t leave him here with this … bint of a woman.’

Harry’s tense expression eased. He plopped in the remaining chair with his usual lack of grace and a strained smile.

“Good afternoon, Missus Gabblebrook.”

The woman tittered as Amanda closed the door behind herself and left. “Oh, no. Miss, if you please. Better yet, call me Myrna.”

She offered a pudgy hand with blood-red nail polish on garish nails, and Harry kissed it with aplomb, though Severus felt the disgust radiating from him. How could the tramp miss it?

The tramp sat behind her desk and flashed Harry a smile. She ignored Severus, not that he minded. “Now, what can I do for you today, Mister Potter?”

She fluttered her eyes at Harry and leaned forwards, revealing a long line of cleavage, as if what she put on display would tempt him. Harry had more taste, and he belonged to Severus. Nevertheless, the former spy had to stamp on an immediate, powerful urge to stake his claim then and there. Harry might not object, but it would blow their cover.

He contented himself with the promise that as soon as it was safe, he would kiss Harry so hard and so well, the man would never desire to stray. Not that Severus thought he would. Harry was far too
Harry’s smile took on a predatory quality, but the idiot behind the desk hadn’t noticed the change. Yet.

“Well, Miss Gabblebrook, I have a proposition for you.”

The woman grinned. “Oh? Would this be better discussed without your advisor present, Harrrrry?”

Severus clenched his hands on the armchair to stop himself from cursing the leer off her clownish face.

Harry’s eyes flashed with affront. “A business proposition, Madam, and don’t use my given name without permission.”

She scowled a little and flopped back in her chair, her disappointment palpable. Severus permitted himself a small smirk, but resisted the urge to crow. Barely.

“I see,” she said in a sour voice. “Well, what is it then? I am a busy woman.”

Harry’s smile turned so devious, even the tramp noticed this time. She leaned away and frowned at his expression. For his part, Severus just watched and waited.

“Well, it seems the … integrity of this paper has declined. Sharply. In fact, it appears that your employees not only take any story they can get, whether true or not, but they actively publish blatant libel and character defamation.”

“No, see here,” the woman started, but Harry cut across her as if he hadn’t heard.

“Furthermore, at least one of your reporters, the most prominent one at that, is an illegal unregistered animagus and has—with the blessing of the leadership here, no less—been using her abilities to spy and pick up private information for the sole purpose of instigating this foul trade in libel. As I have proof of this, I suggest you listen to my proposition and take what you can get before I go straight to my friends at the Ministry—I’m quite familiar with Head Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt, did you know?—and turn you in for aiding and abetting.”

The woman’s colour faded with every word. At Harry’s last sentence, she let out a squeak.

Severus contained his surprise. Where on earth had Harry learned all that? He sat back in his chair and steepled his hands in his lap. So his sneaky little Harry did have some Slytherin qualities after all.

As if he had heard the former spy’s thoughts, Harry turned to Severus with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “Xavier, dear, how much of a sentence is a charge of aiding an illegal animagus in pursuit of criminal activities worth?”

Severus let his glee show without restraint. “Oh, considering the charges and the status of the people victimised, I would say at least ten years in Azkaban.”

Gabblebrook squeaked again.

Harry smirked. “Ten years. Hmm. That’s a rather long time, isn’t it?”

“Well.” Severus was enjoying this far too much. He would have to thank Harry later.

By this point, the tramp had turned an unpleasant shade of blotchy white. She gulped and straightened her blouse, an obvious attempt to gather her wits. And fashion her story, no doubt.
“And just what proof do you have of this, Mister Potter?”

Harry’s smile was positively feral. “Do you really want to know, Madam? I could squash you like a bug.”

Her colour paled further, if that were possible.

“I, but—but you have no evidence!”

“Hmm. Pensieved memories work as evidence, don’t they, Xavier?”

Severus grinned. “They do indeed, Mister Potter.”

“As I thought.” Harry stood and walked to the double of himself, giving the portrait a reassuring smile. “I’m pretty sure—correct me if I’m wrong, Xavier—”

Severus grinned. “With pleasure.”

Harry chuckled. “As I was saying then, I’m sure that there shouldn’t be a copy of myself here, seeing as how I never gave permission for my image to be used in any form, let alone to prop up the already enormous ego of a gossip-mongering thief like yourself.”

“Well, I never! Watch your tongue, boy, or I’ll—”

Harry cut across her with a bored look. “How many years is that worth, Xavier?”

Severus laughed at the tramp’s spluttering. “Oh, given that it is the stolen image of the Boy-Who-Lived, Ministry champion and Gryffindor galore, I would wager twenty years or so. With the other stolen likenesses here, it might go as far as a lifetime sentence, and no evidence other than the portraits’ testimonies would be needed to convict. They can speak for themselves, after all.”

“Not these portraits,” the woman snapped. “They have had their voices stripped.”

“Oh?” Harry waved his hand and nodded to the portrait of himself. “So sorry about your time here, my friend. It’ll be over shortly. You’re coming home with us.”

Portrait Harry slumped in relief. “Thank Merlin!” The tramp gave a startled squeak and started spluttering again.

Portrait Harry spoke over her, too. “Get me out of here, mate. That pretentious bitch has had me under lock and key since we won the first task of the Triwizard Tournament.”

Harry’s lip curled. “Since the Tournament? Merlin. How old are you?”

“Still fourteen. Portraits don’t age, and she had this made from a third year picture.”

The look Harry turned on the tramp could have frozen fire. “Third year. You took advantage of the image of a fourteen year-old boy?”

She fiddled with her fingernails and refused to meet his eyes. “I … I ….”

Harry scowled and turned his back on her. “You disgust me.” He turned back to Severus. “Using the image of a minor should cement that lifetime sentence, Xavier, don’t you think?”

“Definitely,” said Severus.
“But, but I—” The tramp slumped back in her chair, defeated. “Very well. You’ve made your point. What do you want?”

Harry gave her a grim smile. “Knew you’d see things my way. I want your job, Madam. I intend to buy the paper out right now. You will never work in the publishing industry again, and you will walk out of here without a word about who took your place. In return, Xavier and I will say nothing about the crimes you have committed against us, and keep mum about your personal involvement in Skeeter’s illegal actions.”

The spluttering returned in full force. “B-b-buy it out! Preposterous!”

Severus cut across the tramp. “How much is the paper worth, Madam, and I remind you that any fabrication will void our agreement. We will simply turn you over to the Ministry and buy you out afterward.”

Harry nodded and grinned at Severus. “Too right. If you even attempt to lie to me, we’ll know. And I’ll give you to Kingsley with a request to make sure you’re shown no mercy. So what will it be, Miss Gabblebrook? Are we doing this the easy way or the hard way?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and pouted, turning an already cartoonish face into a veritable caricature. “Well, you won’t be able to afford us regardless.”

Severus repeated, his tone icy, “How much are you worth, Madam? One more attempt to delay and we go straight to Auror Shacklebolt.”

She glared harder. “Fine. It’s worth fifteen million. Still think you’re going to buy us out? You’re a schoolboy!”

Harry’s eyes turned to steel. “Didn’t stop you from hitting on me, did it?”

The woman frowned. “You’re of age. It’s not a crime, and I didn’t continue when you rejected me.”

“No, you do have that in your favour at least. I would hate to add harassment or assault to your already long list of crimes.” He narrowed his eyes and glanced to his portrait. “Did you take advantage of him, Miss Gabblebrook?”

She turned crimson and squawked, “He’s a bloody portrait!”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t abuse him.”

The portrait gasped out, “Harry, please. No.”

The boy on the wall had curled into himself, his eyes wide with terror and tears and his posture positively reeking of shame. Severus’ heart lurched. Gods above, she had abused the boy. The fury in his veins tripled and his fingers closed around his wand. He stood, wand pointed directly between the tramp’s eyes and held back an Avada by the barest thread. The woman went ash white and backed into the wall behind her.

“You disgusting, foul, wretch of a woman,” he snarled. “How could you?”

The young Harry cried, “Please! Don’t!”

A gentle hand on Severus’ shoulder calmed his rage somewhat. “Xavier, no. Not like this. We’ll make sure she pays for her crimes legally. Besides, look at him.”
Severus lowered his wand a bit and looked to the portrait. The young Harry was clawing at his arms, weeping and shaking his head ‘no’ over and over. With a deep breath, Severus gathered the strength to apply his Occlumentic barriers, pocketed his wand, and returned to his seat. His expression remained icy cold and fixed on the twisted bint.

Harry turned to the woman, who was straightening her clothing and scowling hard. “Be glad I was here to stop him. He might have punished you a hell of a lot harder than the aurors would. But back to our former discussion, Miss Gabblebrook, as you have just established that I am of age and thereby able to purchase businesses in my own name, there’s nothing stopping me from buying this shameful excuse for a wizarding paper. And fifteen million? Tell me, Xavier, can the lord of estates Gryffindor, Peverell, Potter, and London House Black afford such a trifle?”

Severus’ laugh was vicious. “At least ten times over with millions to spare.”

Gabblebrook screeched. “No! You can’t do this!”

Harry picked up the floo powder box from her mantle. “I could do a lot worse. Now, I’m going to throw this into the fireplace. Whether I call my accounts manager at Gringotts or Auror Shacklebolt is up to you. So?”

She rubbed a hand across her face and waved him on, bitter tears smearing her mascara. “Fine. It’s yours. Just don’t send me to Azkaban.”

“Glad we could come to an agreement.”

After Harry had finished fire-calling Gringotts and while the accounts manager was on his way over, Severus nudged Harry to him and whispered, “You’re not really going to let her go, knowing what she did to the portrait Harry, are you?”

Harry whispered back, “Trust me,” and pressed a tiny kiss to Severus’ ear before he stood tall again.

Thirty boring, but satisfying moments later, Harry was the proud new owner of The Daily Prophet, the premiere paper of Wizarding Britain. As soon as the goblin accounts manager left, Harry rubbed his hands together as if washing them of an unpleasant substance.

“Well, that was vile to watch,” said Severus with a shudder. “Can’t imagine that’s good for the wood.”

“Nop, but she won’t have need of it shortly.”

So Harry did mean to have her arrested. Severus gave him a relieved smile. “Good.”

Portrait Harry said in a small voice, “You’re not going to … about me, are you?”

Harry shook his head sadly. “No, though I wish you were able to face it. Don’t worry. I won’t hurt you further.”

“T-thank you.”
“It’s okay, mate. I’ve got you.”

Harry removed his portrait from the wall and addressed the other paintings. “I apologise for the foul way you have all been treated. You should be able to speak now.” He turned to a portrait of a young witch with a long sheet of white-blonde hair. “You there, the lady who looks like a Veela. Will you try to talk for me?”

“Allô, Monsieur Potter. I am a Veela, so it is good that I resemble one. I am Madame Genevieve Gusteau. Merci beaucoup for the use of my voice once more.”

Harry’s eyebrow shot up. “A Veela and a Frenchwoman? Are you by any chance Fleur’s Delacour’s grandmother?”

She smiled brightly. “Oui! Such a beautiful bébé.” Her smile faded. “I ‘ave not seen ‘er since I was stolen from ze maison of ma fille.”

Harry grinned. “You’ll be happy to know that I competed with her in the Triwizard Tournament, and she’s my sister-in-law through my unofficial adoptive mother, or she will be here in another month. She’s engaged to Bill Weasley, a curse breaker at Gringotts and my oldest adoptive brother.”

Genevieve clasped her hands in joy. “You are my petit-neveu? Magnifique! Will I be free to see ‘er wedding?”

“I’ll make sure of it,” Harry said with a bow. “Fleur will be ecstatic to have you there.”

“Oh, oh merci. So much, merci!”

Harry waited for the Veela to calm herself before he addressed the rest of the portraits. “Like Madame Gusteau, as soon as we sort out this mess, all of you will go to your rightful homes. For those of you she stole, you’ll be returned to your families who will then have the choice to pursue legal action or not. Should you choose to, I’ll gladly testify in your favour.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Did we not just swear to keep mum?”

“Oh yes, for our own charges. I said nothing about theirs.”

Severus laughed in devilish delight. “Ah! So that is how you intend to make her ‘pay for her crimes.’ Mister Potter, I must concede to you. You would have made an excellent Slytherin. That was a move worthy of the best of them.”

Both portrait Harry and the real one grinned.

Harry was high on adrenaline. Damn, it felt good to be able to stick it to the Prophet at last! They had messed with his life and the lives of others long enough.

Now, with the fate of the company in his hands, it was time to take out the rubbish.

Harry fire-called Kingsley and, in a few minutes’ time, had the head auror and two of his subordinates in Gabblebrook’s office. Severus motioned Harry and Kingsley away from the two unknown aurors and cast a subtle muffling spell.
“Shacklebolt, what in the name of Merlin is going on at the Ministry? What daft idiot put Umbridge in charge of anything?”

Kingsley raised a dark eyebrow. “Snape? Is that you under there?”

Severus scoffed. “Who else would be with Potter? Now, the Ministry?”

Kingsley winced. “You’ve not heard? I thought Arthur would have told you.”

“We don’t know a thing,” said Harry. “I imagine they were trying to keep ‘poor little Harry’ protected and didn’t trust Snape enough to tell us what happened. We came to Diagon Alley today expecting everything to be normal, then suddenly Thicknesse is Minister for Magic and there’s the pink toad handing out pamphlets about this ‘might of magic’ rubbish, easy as you please.”

Kingsley’s lips thinned. “You understand what’s fuelling it, don’t you? The little game they’re hiding with pretty words?”

“Of course we do,” Severus snapped. “It’s the same pureblood rot the Dark Lord so loves to instil in his followers. Now, what is going on, Kingsley? I never cared for Scrimgeour, but even he had the sense not to let Umbridge anywhere near anything resembling power.”

Kingsley shook his head. “Ssh. Don’t speak so of the dead, Severus.”


Kingsley let his head droop. “We, misjudged him, Harry. Even I thought him a total fool for political power, but Scrimgeour, he died protecting us. The Order. The Death Eaters tried to torture your and Harry’s whereabouts out of him, and he told them where to shove their wands. He died a hero.”

Harry swayed into Severus, the bottom gone from his stomach. He felt he might throw up then and there. Another person tortured and killed, simply because Harry dared to exist.

Harry wrapped his arms around his chest and tried to sink into the floor. Another person, dead on his behalf. Maybe he should just Avada himself and save Voldemort the trouble. If he didn’t know it would shatter Severus … but no. He couldn’t. Should Harry sacrifice himself, Severus would break like fragile glass, shatter into dust, and no one would ever be able to repair him. Besides, Harry didn’t want to die—he just wanted the killing to stop. He stepped closer to his love and wished he could hold the man, or maybe bury his head in Severus’ chest and never come out again.

“With Scrimgeour gone,” Kingsley continued, “the Ministry’s in utter chaos. They’ve put Pius Thicknesse in charge, but I’ll bet my arse he’s under Imperius. He’s been acting downright suspicious, and all this rot with the Muggleborn Registration Committee—that’s what they’ve put Umbridge in charge of—it’s a load of bollocks. They’re only tagging everyone Muggleborn so Umbridge’s friends know who to kill first.”

“Merlin,” Severus breathed. “Are you able to head her off?”

“Are you able to head her off?”

“The Order’s doing all we can, Severus. And I’m not so sure how long I’ll be in this job, to be honest. They’ll want one of their own in my position, but they’ll have to kill me first.”

Harry groaned and buried his face in his hands, shaking with grief and shame. “Damn it! It’s all my fault. If I, if I’d only—”

A gentle hand under his chin forced his face to meet grey eyes that should have been dark as midnight. “Harry. Ssh. What have I told you before? This is not your fault. You did not even know.”
“I should have,” said a tearful Harry. “I saw Voldemort going to torture you. I should have seen this too. I should have warned him, I—”

“Harry, no. Didn’t you hear Kingsley? He said the Death Eaters tortured Scrimgeour, not the Dark Lord. You cannot See their actions.”

Kingsley gave Severus a bemused frown, but shook it off and held Harry’s shoulder in a soothing grip. “He’s right, Harry. It’s not your fault, and don’t even think of doing something stupid like sacrificing yourself for the cause or some other noble Gryffindor bullshite. Too many people love you and miss you. Hell, I’d miss you. And Molly Weasley would string Severus and me up by our toenails if we let you run off half-cocked again.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck to hide a blush. “Erm, how’d you kn—wait a minute. Noble Gryffindor bullshite? Aren’t you Gryffindor?”

Kingsley scowled. “Perish the thought. I wore green on my robes, thank you very much.”

Harry wiped his eyes and chuckled. “I should’ve known you for a snake. You’re too cunning to be a hot-blooded Gryffindor like me.”

“True enough.” Kingsley patted his shoulder. “Now, are you all right to tell me exactly why you had me drag two of my aurors here right in the middle of our shift? Seems an odd place if all you wanted to discuss was the situation at the Ministry.”

Harry gave a weak smile and cancelled Severus’ muffling spell. “Right. I’ll buck up.” He took a deep breath to collect himself and shook off his grief. “All right. No, we called you for a reason. We’re here for a spot of good old Auror fun, Slytherin style.”

Kingsley grinned and rubbed his hands together. “Oh? Then, lead the way, gentlemen. We’ll be right behind you.”

Harry nodded and marched into the lobby, the aurors and Severus at his side, his portrait and Madame Gusteau’s tucked under his arm. Harry waved the Aurors onto the balcony before him, snickering at the sound of Gabblebrook’s outraged squawk.

“Mister Potter! What do you think you are doing?”

The shout had the effect Harry wanted. Every eye turned to the balcony and Rita Skeeter insinuated herself at the front of the crowd faster than he could say quidditch.

“Shite,” Severus muttered. “We should’ve cast a Fidelius before anyone saw you, Harry! I was so disturbed about the Ministry … I forgot.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand. “I’ll take care of it.”

“But it’s too late! They’ve already seen you.”

“I know. It’ll be okay. I think I can still force them to be quiet with a different kind of spell.”

“What kind of—”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ briefly and squeezed. “Later, Professor. Let’s handle this first.” He stepped in front of Kingsley and called, “Hello, everyone. Meet your new president.”

Kingsley gave him an amused smirk. “What have you been up to today, Harry?”
Harry grinned and raised his voice once more. “Well, first off, I bought the Prophet.”

Over whispers and babbling, Skeeter called out, vile quill in hand, “Do tell, Harry.”

Before Harry said anything else, he waved his wand discreetly, directing pure magic through the conduit as he didn’t know the spell to bind a Fidelius and Severus had said it was too late regardless. When he had finished, no one present besides himself, Severus, and Kingsley would be able to say a word about their new owner or his ‘advisor,’ and anyone who tried would be marked with a tattoo on their forehead, à la Marietta Edgecombe after betraying the DA.

Come to think of it, he would need to rename that group. Later, when it wouldn’t matter if it raised Dumbledore’s suspicions. For the moment, he watched the magic—yellow-orange with dots of dark red—settle on the crowd below.

Once the magic had vanished into their skin, he leaned into Severus and whispered, “It’s all right now, Verus. I’ve bound them from speaking about me.”

Severus gaped. “How?”

“Pure magic, I suppose. I’ll explain later.” Harry raised his voice again and gave Skeeter a vicious grin. “You can put that quill away now, Rita. My first order of business today is to sack you.”

Rita screeched, “You can’t do that!”

“I’m afraid I can. I bought the Prophet fair and square from Miss Gabblebrook, so I am in control of what direction this company goes in. We will no longer be a gossip rag. Oh, and you broke the terms of our agreement in fourth year—yes, I saw that article you wrote about Snape. Did you think I wouldn’t care? Lies are lies, and libel is libel, no matter who you’re writing about.”

“Dumbledore himself gave me that story!”

Beside him, Severus winced. Harry squeezed the man’s shoulder.

“Now that’s a lie,” Kingsley muttered.

“Actually,” said Harry, “she’s probably telling the truth. Dumbledore isn’t the saint he’d like you to think, King, but keep that to yourself for the time being.”

Kingsley gave Harry a calculating look. “What do you know, Harry?”

Harry’s eyes went hard. “A lot. But this isn’t the time or place to discuss it.”

“Understood.” Kingsley waved to the crowd. “Carry on.”

Harry nodded and raised his voice again. “Regardless of your source, Miss Skeeter, our terms clearly said that you were not to write another scathing article about anyone, and you have now done so. That article about Snape was both vicious and false.” He hesitated. “But since you did have a believable source and likely thought your article true, I won’t take any other action against you. In fact ….” He tapped his chin. “I may have other work for you. Later. For now, you are going to have to find someone else to employ your services. And may I remind you that the terms of our agreement still stand. No more scathing articles.”

Rita grumbled and put away her pen. “Fine. I’m sure I can find work at another paper.”

“Try The Quibbler.”
She stared as if Harry had grown a second head. “The Quibbler. You’re not serious.”

“I am, actually. The Lovegoods could use your reputation to boost their services and they do run important articles. Er, occasionally. Articles sourced straight from yours truly. With your … skills, it could be a mutually beneficial relationship.”

She hesitated. “You’d give me interviews?”

“Assuming you wrote them truthfully. And I may have a big assignment for you later.”

She nodded and tucked her notepad in her bag. “Fair enough. Then I’ll ask around at The Quibbler. Might I say that you sent me?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll send Xeno a letter when we’re done here. But don’t say that I’ve taken over the Prophet. It’ll only hurt us both.”

“Fine. Thanks for the recommendation. Oh, and go to hell.” She held up two fingers with pointed lime-green nails to emphasise her point.

Harry laughed and waved her off. She left the office with her expression somewhere between a scowl and a smile.

Severus said, “Ah, Harry? Why did you refer her to the Lovegoods?”

Harry shrugged. “She’s useful, as much as I hate her guts. Couldn’t do us any good in Azkaban. And I thought she might help us dig up information on … our other Lord.”

Severus nodded. “I see. Not a bad plan. We’ll keep it in mind.”

“Right.”

Kingsley grinned and nudged Harry’s elbow. “More than she deserves. Still, sending her to The Quibbler? That’s a bit of a sour pill to swallow.”

“She’s right,” said Harry, both portrait and real.

Kingsley started at the portrait’s voice. “Well. I’ll expect an explanation for that.”

“And as I said nothing about what my portrait might or might not say in the terms of my agreement with Miss Gabblebrook,” said a grinning Harry, “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to tell you. Later. At the moment, I have more journalists and an editor to sack.” Harry reeled them off one by one and motioned them all to the door. “Get out and never darken these doors again. And say nothing about me or you’ll regret it.”

“Harry?” The fearful call caught his ears over the din of the journalists’ irritated exodus.

Harry sighed and called out, “Amanda, come here.”

The woman nudged her way through the crowd and moved to the front row. She looked between the doors and Harry with confused tears shining in her eyes.

“I’m so sorry we had to lie to you, sweetheart. You did nothing wrong, and I won’t hurt you further, as you were kind to me. You did your job well and have no control over what this paper publishes anyway, so you have nothing to worry about.”

He shook his head sadly. “You might want to find someone else to emulate, though, or better yet,
just be yourself. Skeeter is the worst kind of liar. Everything she printed about me during the Triwizard Tournament was pure rubbish save for the bald facts everyone knew, like that I won the first task and my parents are dead. I think those are the only two things she got right.”

Amanda sniffled and wiped her eyes. “But you won the tournament, didn’t you?”

“Not alone. Cedric Diggory and myself tied for the win, and the only reason I was given the title and not the both of us was that Pettigrew murdered Cedric the second the cup—which Crouch Jr. had made into a portkey—deposited us in front of him. Yes, Peter Pettigrew. Yes, he’s alive. Yes, Sirius Black was innocent, not that you would know it from the lies this paper spread about. You’d think Voldemort was a fuzzy puppy with the way it’s been up till now.”

The remaining crowd gasped as one.

“Oh, come off it,” said Harry with an exasperated sigh. “It’s just a name. And not his real one, either. Actually … how many reporters do we have left?”

Several nervous people raised their hands.

“Good. Anyone in charge of articles like Skeeter covered, except legitimate?”

All but two lowered their hands again.

A mousy scrap of a woman with her hand in the air called out, “We’ve never written for the front page story, though. That was always given to Skeeter.”

Harry nodded. “Consider yourselves promoted on a probationary basis. Assuming the articles you write are truthful and well-written, you’ll stay there after I have a period of time to judge such things. Three weeks should be enough.”

The woman blushed and gave him a shy smile. “T-thank you, Mr. Potter.”

“You’re welcome.” He addressed the crowd then. “I’m not here to dismantle the paper. It’s too important to our world. I’m only changing the way we report. Libellous journalism will not be given a free pass any longer. I expect all of you to source your articles and give accurate reports, even if it’s less interesting than your imagination. The person who disobeys this and knowingly prints a lie will be immediately sacked and given to Auror Shacklebolt’s team for questioning.

“Oh, and no one is to report about me without my approval. My life is in danger until Voldemort and all his supporters are either dead or in Azkaban. I will not have you endangering me or those I care about in pursuit of fame. Do I make myself clear?”

A chorus of “Yes, Mr. Potter” met his statement.

“Good. Then, you, the lady I just promoted a moment ago. What’s your name?”

“S-Sandra Longbottom, sir,” she said.

“Longbottom? You’re Neville’s relative?”

“His second cousin.”

Harry grinned. “Great. Neville’s a good friend. If you’re anything like him, you’ll be a good fit here.” He ignored Severus’ quiet snort. “Now, you’ll be taking a report from me once we’re done here about the origins of one Tom Marvolo Riddle, otherwise known as Voldemort.” He also
ignored the flinches and gasps. “An anonymous report, of course. I have this information straight from the horse’s mouth, or the snake’s, as it were. You will also be retracting the paper’s former claims about Voldemort’s resurrection and reporting the truth. And the other feature journalist, what’s your name, sir?”

“Peter Harvey, sir,” the blond, chubby man said in a jovial voice.

“Great. I’ve read some of your work before, and it’s pretty good.”

Peter grinned. “Thanks, sir.”

“Anytime. You’ll be speaking with Auror Shacklebolt and the portraits in the owner’s office about the takeover of the paper. I’m afraid Xavier and I cannot reveal the details of the meeting personally due to a promise to your former president, but the portraits are bound to no such oath.”

Gabblebrook screeched and bolted towards the doors, but Kingsley caught her in a binding spell before she made it three steps.

“Not so fast,” he said. “You’ve been dealing in this blood trade, too. You’re going to sit right here until we’re done with Mr. Harvey’s report and an interview of all the portraits.” He motioned to his two subordinates. “Lock her up.”

The aurors replied with a chorus of “Yes, sir;” and darted down the stairs. Gabblebrook whined about being betrayed.

Harry laughed. “I’ve kept the terms of our agreement, Madam. It’s not my fault that you failed to consider all the angles.”

Severus laughed. “Gods, I love y—this!”

Harry caught the slip and Severus’ resultant blush, but let it go. “We’ll talk later, Xavier. King, Mr. Harvey, I believe you have somewhere to be. Take … the other me with you, but I want him back when you’re done. Also, get names from all the portraits so we can send them back to where they ought to be.”

“Right away, oh great chosen one,” said Kingsley with a mock salute.

Harry snorted. “Go on, then. Just don’t mention my name in the takeover article. It’ll make me more of a target, as well as the headquarters.” He gave Sandra an assessing look. “And with that in mind, it might be safest to publish the report about Voldemort as a single article apart from the Prophet. That way he can’t target our reporters for vengeance.”

“Good plan,” said Severus.

Kingsley nodded and tucked Portrait Harry into his arms. “It’ll help, anyway. Mister Harvey, follow me.”

He levitated Gabblebrook up the stairs and led the way to the President’s office, Harvey and Gabblebrook’s frozen form following.

“Now,” said Harry with a smile. “I believe the articles the rest of you have written for tomorrow’s paper need to be sourced and vetted for accuracy, so I suggest you get back to work. And nothing is to be said of my name. Not to your friends, your family, your husbands or wives, not even to Dumbledore himself, understood? If Voldemort learns I took over here, we’re likely to be attacked. So it’s in your best interest to keep quiet.”
He said nothing about his spell. It would be interesting to see who broke his terms and who didn’t.

Sandra spoke up, looking unsure of herself. “Um, Mister Potter?”

Harry met her eyes. “Yes?”

“Of course I won’t say anything if you think it best, but I don’t think my fiancé would betray us. Why may we not tell our spouses?”

Many others in the crowd wore similar expressions, a couple with gleaming eyes Harry didn’t like the look of. He had to nip this in the bud before it grew into a huge problem.

Harry eyed all the workers in turn as he spoke. “Do any of you know who Peter Pettigrew is?”

“You just told us he was the one who killed Cedric Diggory,” said Harvey. “And if Black is really innocent, then I suppose it must have been Pettigrew who killed all those Muggles years ago.”

Harry gave him a grim smile. “Yes to both. He blew up the street and cut off his own finger to make it look like Sirius had killed him. And do you know why Sirius confronted him?” The crowd replied in the negative. “Because Pettigrew was also the one to betray my parents’ location to Voldemort, who in turn killed them the same night. Do any of you know who he was before then? How he even knew where my parents were when Dumbledore had them hidden under a *Fidelius* charm?”

Harry paled as he realised that Dumbledore might have suggested to use Pettigrew as the secret keeper on purpose, knowing he was the weakest of the group and the most likely to crack. He met Severus’ eyes, seeing the same stricken understanding in them, and choked back a sudden rush of fury. If the bastard had intentionally had Harry’s parents killed, the best he could hope for was a plot in the ground beside Voldemort.

Meanwhile, the workers below were giving him bemused looks.

“Er, sorry about that,” said Harry with a wan smile. “It’s still pretty hard to talk about them.” The pity filling the workers’ expressions annoyed him, but it would at least keep them off the real trail.

Severus stepped close, using the opportunity to appear to be comforting Harry, but in reality, he rubbed Harry’s shoulder and whispered in his ear, “Brilliant cover. You are incredible.”

Harry flashed him a bright grin. “Thanks, Xavier.”

Severus dared a small smile and squeezed Harry’s hand. “Anytime.”

Harry caressed Severus’ fingertips before he withdrew his hand. “Right. Where were we? Oh yes. Who Pettigrew was before he framed Sirius Black.” He glared and clenched his fists. “The filthy rat was my parents’ best friend. He grew up with my parents, and he still sold their location out to Voldemort just because he thought the bastard could offer him some protection. Their best friend got them killed.”

Gasps and exclamations of surprise filled the atrium.

Harry nodded. “Shocking, isn’t it? They might be honourable people, but fear, pain, or greed can make all but the strongest break. We don’t *know* that, faced with death, torture, or a giant pile of galleons, they would be able to keep quiet. And, at least for the former two, I wouldn’t want them to. I don’t want them to have to face that choice. And that’s why I say don’t tell your friends or family about me, but it’s not the only reason.
“We all know how determined Voldemort is to kill me. He is also a master Legilimens. He can read people’s thoughts, and so can some of his Death Eaters. So even if your loved ones are honourable people, even if they would die before selling me out, their very thoughts are a weakness. I’ll protect your minds as best as I can with wards, but I can’t protect theirs. What’s more, unmarked supporters of Voldemort aren’t all publicly known and some are also skilled at Legilimency. They’re walking around at this very moment, working in shops, delivering your post, washing your windows—” He grinned devilishly. “—or even handing out pamphlets in Diagon Alley at this very moment.”

Murmuring broke out in the lobby, most of which centered around Umbridge’s name.

Kingsley chuckled darkly. “Way to out the toad,” he muttered.

“It might weaken her platform a bit,” said Severus in a low voice, “but it is unlikely to stop her.”

Harry shook his head. “Well, we can kick all the platform legs out from under her until it collapses.” He raised his voice once more. “My point is that his supporters are everywhere. They might even be your neighbours. And if your relatives happen to go near one and think of me, one of those supporters might just pick up their thoughts and reckon that they know something important. So just by telling them anything about me, you might make them a target.”

Real tears filled Harry’s eyes. “Voldemort has killed my parents, my godfather, my friends, my dorm-mates, and has brutally tortured others I care about, all just to get to me. I don’t want anyone else to die or be hurt on my account. So, don’t speak of my whereabouts or my ownership of the paper to anyone. Please. We’ve already lost far too many to that madman’s obsession with me.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder and neck. Despite Harry’s sudden grief, the former spy’s gentle touch kept him placid, at least on the surface.

The workers all agreed, the unnerving gleam gone and replaced by concern and determination. It convinced Harry that they would at least attempt to keep mum. “Good. Then I think we’re done here.” He motioned to Sandra. “Come with us now, Miss Longbottom, and we’ll get started on setting the record straight.”

He stopped and turned to the girl, remembering the reason he’d come in the first place.

“Oh, one more thing. I realise it’s probably too late to finish before tonight’s printing, but you’ll take a retraction of that article about Severus Snape. I’ve worked closely with the man for years. He was a spy, yes, but for the Order of the Phoenix, and Voldemort tortured him because he was discovered aiding us, not because he failed to kill Dumbledore. That scene was arranged beforehand as a cover, and Dumbledore had the antidote to the curse in his pocket the whole time. I’ll give you the entire story before we leave today.”

“Great,” she said with a grin. “I’ll get it in the day after tomorrow’s printing, if you can find a new editor in time.”

“We’ll post a job advert in the paper today. For the moment, Xavier and I will edit. It’ll be damn near perfect with Xavier’s infamous red pen at work. I warn you though, he’s got a sharp tongue on paper.”

Sandra giggled and waved him off. “Oh, tosh. They all do.”

Severus gave them a wry look. “I am standing right here, you know.”

Harry smiled. “I hadn’t forgotten. Anyway, just be prepared for it, Sandra. Expect him to excoriate you for errors, but remember he’s just a big softy with a sharp quill, and you’ll be fine.”
“I am not a softy,” Severus muttered.

“The softest,” said Harry with a grin.

Severus mumbled something about incorrigible teenagers being too smart-arsed for their own good, making Harry laugh.

“Well,” said a chuckling Sandra, “now that I’m assured of your razor-sharp quill, Mister Prince, if not your cuddliness, if you’ll follow me, sirs, we’ll get down to business.”

Harry laughed and waved her on. “Lead the way.”
Night had fallen on the Daily Prophet Headquarters, and everyone save Severus and his fellow Order members had finally gone home. Besides Harry, only Kingsley remained, still holed up in Gabblebrook’s office and finishing his DMLE report on the tramp. Harry leaned against the wall near the door, looking weary and handsome at once. Severus stood as close to Harry as he could safely manage and soaked up his presence.

A sudden whiff of tangy-sweetness drifted to Severus’ sensitive nose and nearly melted him. Harry’s scent. His heart panged with need. He ached to hold the younger man, even just to touch his face. The absence of Harry’s touch burned in Severus’ chest like a knife, a physical pain he couldn’t bear much longer.

Dignity be damned, Severus needed his Harry.

Gods, he had changed. Who would have thought cold, abrasive Severus Snape capable of the kind of soul-searing, desperate love that burned in him now? Not even Severus himself had believed it, until Harry tore open the floodgates of his tender heart.

Severus could never return to his former cold existence. Where he had once been a placid lake of reason, he had become a churning sea of fathoms-deep emotion. Fire and water and everything between. Despite the fear of being hurt, he embraced the change.

He was a better man with Harry in his life. Pity he hadn’t seen it sooner. He had wasted so much time on foolish schoolboy grudges, and who knew how much time they had left with a madman like Riddle on the loose? He wanted to cherish every moment, every touch, celebrate every dawn he woke with Harry still near.

Any day, any moment might be their last.

Merlin, how Severus needed to touch his Harry, if only to reassure himself they were still safe.

With skills borrowed from his spying days, Severus surreptitiously scanned both sides of the hall. Seeing no one, he cast a silent Notice-Me-Not and Muffliato and moved to Harry’s side. He reached for his love, but before he could take Harry into his arms, the door opened and forced him to move back a pace or two.

“Damn,” Severus whispered, but no one heard.

Harry smiled at Kingsley and waved him over. “All finished?”

The auror nodded and handed Harry two sleeping portraits. “Poor little guy hadn’t been sleeping. He passed out almost as soon as he finished his testimony. Good thing he could stay awake long enough to get through it—his story alone is enough to put her away for thirty years, or it should be. And with Madame Delacour’s and all the others, well, it doesn’t look good for her. My boys took her to a Ministry holding cell to await trial.” He frowned and rubbed his ear. “Are we already under muffling spells?”

“Yes,” Severus said. “I just cast them as you walked out. As far as we know, everyone is gone, but it is better to be safe in such dangerous times and an unfamiliar location.”

“Right. Well then, I’ll be straight with you. I’m a bit worried Umbridge might interfere with Gabblebrook’s trial—the bint is pureblood, you know—but we have too much evidence for her to
Harry patted his shoulder. “It’s enough. Thank you.”

“No problem. Good work flushing her out.”

Harry chuckled. “Thanks. But listen, Professor Snape still has to get to Hogwarts tonight, so we really need to go soon. I’m dead on my feet, and we have a new owl waiting in the little grove outside.”

“You got a new owl?”

“Yeah, one that won’t stick out as much as Hedwig and Odin. She’s a sweet eagle owl named Demeter.”

“Whew. That’s a big bird. Local though, so she won’t draw as much attention as one might think. It’s a good choice.”

Harry nodded and moved towards the stairs. Severus followed.

Kingsley stepped into the lead and frowned over his shoulder. “You wrote a reveal on Voldemort?”

Harry gave him a grim smile. “Yeah. Reckon he’s going to be right hacked off come morning.”

“How are you publishing and sending it?”

“Susan made up a pamphlet and she’s distributing it to the Prophet’s mailing list. I’d have liked to get the Quibbler’s list, too, but I figured the Prophet’s would be both more extensive and probably easier for a ‘concerned citizen’ to obtain. It’s not like they haven’t sold information to the highest bidder in the past.”

Kingsley shook his head. “Even with your precautions, You-Know-Who will probably still assume the Prophet’s responsible for it. We’d better call out an auror detail on this place and set wards. I’ll have to put aurors on your reporters, too. Snape, you’d be best for the ward caster. You be the power nexus and we’ll do the ward work.”

Severus looked to Harry. “I think you had best set Potter as the nexus. His raw power and innate protection against the Dark Lord will serve us well.”

Kingsley nodded. “Can’t hurt. Come on, then. We’ll go to the lobby. The nexus needs to be there, where they’re most likely to enter.”

“Right.” Harry followed Severus downstairs, Kingsley leading.

With everyone’s attention elsewhere, Severus felt safe enough to hold Harry’s hand, if only for a moment. Harry flashed him a soft smile and squeezed his fingers, caressing him before letting go at the base of the staircase.

That one small touch gave Severus strength.

“Right,” said Kingsley as he took his place just left of the lobby centre. “This feels like the core magic source for the place. Snape?”

“Yes, I believe so. Harry, stand right here.” Severus marked Harry’s spot with his toe and waited until the young man had set the portraits aside and stood at the centre.
“Um, Kingsley?” Harry gave the man a sheepish smile. “I don’t know how to ward.”

“That’s okay.” He clapped Harry on the shoulder. “As the nexus, you don’t need to do the fancy wandwork. You’re just supplying the power. All you need to do is stand here and try to remove the natural barriers on your magic. You need to lift your arms out to the side, palms up and fingertips pointing towards Snape and myself.”

Harry moved into position. “Like this?”

“Perfect. Now, just let your barriers down.”


Kingsley shot him a bemused look, but the auror had no idea how much power Harry truly had. Unless Harry unleashed his magic in increments, it might well do Riddle’s job for him and level the place. Judging by Harry’s shudder, the young man understood.

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. “All right. I’ll start opening the floodgates whenever you’re ready.”

Severus snorted mentally. ‘Floodgates? How apropos.’

He raised his wand arm so that his fingers almost touched Harry’s. On the other side, Kingsley did the same. The two older men nodded, and Severus prepared himself for ward casting. As protective magic, it worked through the caster’s love and desire to keep those he or she cared about safe. All Severus had to do was look before him to see the one he most needed to protect, the one human whose life gave him meaning.

Between Harry’s power and Severus’ all-consuming love for the man, Severus had no doubt they would soon witness the birth of the most powerful single ward cast since the time of Merlin. The thought made him giddy with anticipation.

Severus locked his eyes upon Harry and remembered every soft touch, every gentle word, the way the man’s tender care had obliterated his emotional blocks and filled him with a love so pure, so strong, it had transformed the bitter ex-spy into a romantic all but overnight. Kingsley began his chants, and Severus joined in, eyes never leaving Harry’s.

His soul sang with love for the young man; his heart cried out his joy with each beat. He wanted so much to close the distance on their fingertips but held back, waiting, watching for the first signs of Harry’s incredible power.

It came like a whisper, like a footstep in the night, a soft kiss against Severus’ ear. I love you. Harry’s power called like a siren song, demanding Severus take his hand, but he resisted for fear of altering the ward casting. I love you. Light the same emerald as Harry’s eyes built on the young man’s fingertips and glowed brighter with each moment. I love you. The light shifted to pure white and spilled from under Harry’s lashes and between his lips, too. Lips Severus ached to kiss.

‘I love you, Harry.’

Kingsley’s chant stuttered as the man met Severus’ eyes, only then did the ex-spy realise his own eyes and lips and fingertips spilled light, too, violet to Harry’s white, dark to light, shadow for sunlight.

So, magic had chosen the two of them to cast the wards. Severus had participated in enough rituals to know when it was time to resist magic’s call and time to let it run its course. This time, magic herself
had revealed the way, and he would not deny her power.

Severus kept chanting and moved into the chant, letting magic draw his feet forwards. He stepped into the nexus, standing toe to toe with his lover, fingertips reaching for Harry’s but not touching, not yet. Harry whispered without sound, a quiet call pulling Severus in, and the ex-spy pressed their palms together at last.

At the first touch, a shockwave of sheer magical force burst from their joined hands. Harry threw his head back and opened his eyes, revealing twin cores of blinding white. Across him, Severus’ body echoed the young man and his vision shaded purple in the strength of his magic.

Kingsley backed away, whether in fear or good sense, Severus wasn’t certain. Either way, the magic had warned him off. The auror gave up all pretence of chanting and watched from a corner, thunderstruck, as ripples of magic built around the lovers and reflected off the walls in a kaleidoscope of colours. Severus’ chant took on a musical quality, and when Harry joined him in a higher register, every hair on his body stood on end.

Gods, the quality of Harry’s voice, the sheer strength within his song rocked Severus to his core and brought a wellspring to his eyes. He gave his tears not a thought as the magic grew and swelled to a fever pitch inside his chest and set the lobby ablaze with light. He hadn’t the strength to stop them regardless.

He had never felt such power before. Their magic was alive. A deep, resonant laugh built in Severus’ chest and spilled from his lips, bathing the lobby in unabashed joy.

“Holy mother of Merlin,” Kingsley muttered from his hiding spot, his black eyes wide and shining with indescribable colours.

“Begone,” Harry cried suddenly, eyes on doors, white light shining from every crevice and even from the tips of his hair. “All who would harm us and those we protect, begone from this place and never return lest the power of dawn burn the flesh from your bones.”

White light, opalescent with the force of power they had called, burst from Harry in a sphere. Its sheer power rocked the foundations of the building and sent all three wizards toppling to the ground. The brilliance faded from the spell before it left the building, but Severus felt the new wards echo throughout the city and wondered just how much of London Harry had covered in the white lion’s aura.

The men staggered to their feet, dazed and shaking.

“Well,” said a wobbly Kingsley, “that was … a bit more than I was expecting.”

Harry dissolved into helpless laughter. “A bit? You must have had a lot more faith in my power than I—” His mirth morphed into sudden horror. “Shite! Severus, did I kill them? The city, I, was it too much?”

Severus tugged Harry into his arms and gave Kingsley a look that dared him to deny him the right. Kingsley stepped back and waved him on.

“Harry, oh, no,” said Severus. “No, they’re safe. Safer than Shacklebolt and I could have done on our own. You did well.”

Kingsley looked between them with a wry smile. “So that’s why your magic kicked me out, hmm?” He frowned and scratched his head. “That’s … unexpected.”
Severus hugged Harry tighter. “Please. Say nothing to those who haven’t seen. You saw the force of his power, Shacklebolt. There are few who would not be tempted by it, and we both know there is a spy within the Order. This cannot leave this room, not our relationship, not the slightest inkling of Harry’s power. Do you understand? It is not just my life at stake.”

Kingsley held up his hands. “It’s not my place. Just, Harry, this is what you want, yeah?”

The glare the young man sent the auror might have burned him to a husk.

“All right, all right,” said Kingsley. “Don’t give me the death glare.”

Harry harrumphed. “Don’t insult me like that, then. Or him.”

Kingsley rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, Harry. It’s just a bit of a shock, you understand? Forgive me?”

“So long as you swear to say nothing of what you’ve seen here, to anyone in the Order or without, regardless of whether you believe them safe or not. Especially not Dumbledore.”

“Not Dumbledore? Surely you don’t think he’s the spy?”

Harry snorted. “The spy? He’s not reporting to Voldemort if that’s what you mean, but he’s dangerous, King. You, as a Slytherin, ought to know that much.”

“Shite.”

Severus held Harry close, heart racing and wand held tight, just in case they needed to make a fast getaway.

Kingsley looked to Severus and frowned. “Dumbledore really sold that crap about you to the paper, didn’t he?”

“He was the only one who could have done it,” said Severus with a nod. “No one else save Minerva, Harry, and Poppy had seen the scar on my face. Perhaps Moody did, but he had perished long before then. They would not have done this.”

Kingsley shrank into himself. “But why? Why would he do this?”

“I don’t know his motivations for sure yet,” said Harry, “but he’s done much worse. And we think he’s out to get Slytherins. King, you need to watch your back. Between Umbridge and Dumbledore, you’re in for it. Just be careful, yeah?”

The auror sighed and drew himself to his full height once more. “Understood. I’ll watch my step and keep quiet about what I’ve seen today. It’s not my place anyway, and for Merlin’s sake, who would even believe me?”

Severus flicked his wand out. “Your oath, Shacklebolt.”

The auror laid his wand against his heart and swore not to mention their involvement or the power he had seen. “But how are you going to keep this from getting out regardless? The people here already know Harry owns the paper. No doubt that information would bring in more than a few galleons and the reporters here aren’t exactly the open and honest type.”

Harry gave Kingsley a smirk. “Oh, no worries about that. Wards aren’t the only skill I have up my sleeve. I bound them to a Fidelius with pure magic and threw a hex in should they try to break it.
Anyone who tries to speak of me will be immediately marked as the traitor they are."

The auror looked at him as if seeing Harry for the first time. Perhaps he was, in a way.

“You don’t say.” He frowned and shook his head. “Shite. I’d better go. No doubt that ward-casting registered on a massive scale at the Ministry. If you hope to keep this quiet, I think I’d best get back and do some fast talking. Now.”

Harry squeezed Kingsley’s arm. “Thanks. Do you think it’ll work? Will they be safe?”

Kingsley snorted. “Harry, I have a feeling you just kicked every Death Eater in London out. I’ll get some aurors down here tonight just in case, but yeah, I think it’s enough.”

“Good,” Harry breathed in obvious relief.

Harry led Severus away from Headquarters with barely enough time to make it to the Leaky Cauldron before Tom went to bed. The night manager, Belinda, knew of the Order’s special permissions with their private floo, but Severus had told Harry that he didn’t trust her as much as Tom. She was an unknown entity. And Harry trusted nothing Severus didn’t.

Harry led ‘Xavier’ and Demeter to the Leaky Cauldron, ignoring his fans as much as he could without appearing cruel. Merlin, did they stalk him everywhere? Couldn’t he so much as go to the loo without someone asking for his autograph? He sighed when he thought of how much worse it would get once the story of his prophecy and true powers leaked. Just what had happened at the Prophet HQ earlier was enough to make an unscrupulous reporter’s career. Thank gods he’d bound them all from speaking.

He smirked when he thought of the reporters he had sacked earlier and waited in devious anticipation to see how many developed unsightly tattoos on their forehead over the coming eight weeks. After that, he would warn the remaining employees about the Fidelius and remove the curse attached to it, but for now, it provided a handy way to learn who he could trust.

Harry stood tall as they entered the tavern. Between his celebrity, the two portraits in his arms, and the giant owl on Severus’ shoulder, they garnered a lot of attention. Harry ignored the whispers and looks and went straight to the tavern’s owner.

Tom was behind the bar polishing glasses and smiling at everyone. “Harry! How nice to see you out and about. Doing well, I hope?”

“Hi, Tom. I’m good, thanks.” Harry beckoned Tom close enough to whisper. “My friend and I need to use the Order’s floo. He’s going by Xavier, but that’s really Professor Snape.”

Tom nodded. “Questions first, you know the drill. Who was the first person you came to my tavern with, Harry?”

“Hagrid. He was showing me around Diagon. Dedalus Diggle was here, too, I believe.”

“Good job. And you, er, Xavier.” Tom motioned to him. “What’s your usual?”

Severus frowned. “That’s your question?”
Tom’s eyes turned steely. “Can you answer it?”

Severus groaned and muttered, “Of course, you nitwit. It is only such an odd—”

“He means ‘embarrassing,’” Harry chimed in with a grin. “He doesn’t like that you know his preferences so well.”

Severus sighed and covered his red cheeks with a hand. “It’s only a bit personal, but no matter. Most days I have the house soup and a chicken salad sandwich with tomato, or a scotch or two if I’m not feeling peckish. Firewhiskey if I’m unwell or the weather is particularly foul.”

Harry committed all that to memory for future reference.

“Great,” said Tom, his eyes friendly again. “I’ll take you up then. Got your token? Floo’s locked, you know.”

Severus revealed a coin with an image of a phoenix in the palm of his hand, cupped so only Tom and Harry could see.

“Right. Then, after me, gentlemen.”

He led them behind the counter and up the stairs to a private room with a couple of sofas, a dozing portrait of Tom’s grandfather, and a big stone fireplace. A coffee table and biscuit tray sat between the couches. Harry set the snoozing portrait of himself against a wall beside Madame Delacour—the poor kid hadn’t slept since that tramp had him stolen—and helped himself to a chocolate biscuit.

Between bites, he said, “How’s it work?”

Severus raised an eyebrow and guided Demeter to perch on the arm of one of the sofas. “Swallow first.”

Harry grinned. “S’no fun that way.”

Severus rolled his eyes and returned to the hearth. “This is the key.” He pressed the phoenix coin into an indentation Harry hadn’t noticed before and a pot of floo powder appeared on the mantle.

“Brilliant,” Harry said, and shoved the last of his biscuit in his mouth.

Severus handed Harry the floo tin. “Contact Miss Delacour first.”

Harry nodded and gobbled down his biscuit before he tossed a bit of powder into the flames. One didn’t take chances with floo powder, as he had learned the hard way on Knocturn Alley all those years before.

“Shell Cottage,” he called once the flames turned green and stuck his head in the fire. “Fleur? Are you here?”

A woman’s voice called from around the corner. “‘Arry? Is zat you?”

“Yeah, Fleur. Come to the fire. Professor Snape and I’ve found something I’m sure you’ll be thrilled to have for your wedding.”

A smiling Fleur dashed into the living room, apron tied over her dress and hair braided down her back. “Allo, little bruzer, Professeur. Oh. You do not look like the Professeur.”

“He’s under a glamour, Fleur,” said Harry. “It’s not safe for him since his cover’s been blown.”
She winced. “Oh, mon dieu, it had slipped my mind. Forgive me, Professeur.”

“It is none of your concern,” Severus said with a frown.

Fleur chuckled. “Now *zat* is the Professeur I remember. What ‘ave you found, zen?”

Severus took the Veela’s portrait. “Your grandmother,” he said, and called to the woman in the frame. “Madame Gusteau, wake up. Fleur is here through the floo.”

The Veela gave a little snort and shook herself. “Oh! You ‘ave my petit-fille? Where is she?”

“Here you are, Madame Gusteau,” said Harry, and passed the portrait through the floo.

With a gasp, Fleur grabbed the painting and pulled her through. “Oh! Oh, *Grand-mère*! I ‘ave missed you so!”

The two women fell into rapid French, and Harry watched, unable to follow but happy for them nonetheless. Warmth enfolded his back as Severus knelt beside him and slipped a hand between Harry’s shoulder blades. Harry leaned into him as much as he dared, a smile stretching his cheeks for his own happiness, too.

Fleur looked up after a long moment, tears streaking her beautiful face, and reached for Harry through the flames. Portrait held close against her chest, she pulled Harry into a one-armed hug and kissed both of his cheeks.

“Oh, ‘Arry. I can never repay you zis kindness. I ‘ave missed my dear grandmuzzer since as long as I can remember. Zank you. It means so much to ‘ave ‘er back. Gabrielle can meet her at last, and she can meet my dear Bill.”

“You’re welcome, Fleur. I’m just glad she’s home again.”

Severus tried to escape, but Fleur caught him and pulled him close before he could get away. “And zank you, dear Professeur. I did not expect zis kindness, but I, oh, just zank you.” She kissed Severus’ cheeks and left him red-faced and sputtering.

Fleur moved back and wiped her eyes, still clutching her grandmother’s portrait close. “‘Ow did you find her, ‘Arry? We ‘ave looked everywhere.”

Harry scowled. “She was in an office at the Daily Prophet. I went there to get more of their lies corrected and saw her hanging there. Needless to say, we had the culprit arrested and brought her to you as soon as we could. She deserves to be home.”

Fleur’s eyes misted over again. “Merci.” She sniffled and gave Harry a bright grin. “I must go. I was making dinner when you called, but now I must call Bill. ‘E will wish to know.”

“You’re very welcome.” Harry waved to the portrait. “Goodbye, Madame Gusteau. I will see you at the wedding?”

“Oui, my young friend. Merci, from the bottom of my ‘eart.”

“Mine too, ‘Arry.” Fleur gave his cheek one last kiss and vanished from the floo.

“Thank Merlin,” Severus muttered. “If that woman had kissed you again, I might have hexed her.”

Harry grinned. “She kissed you too, you know.”
“All the more reason to hex her.”

With a laugh, Harry pulled Severus into his arms. He kissed the ex-spy’s soft lips and whispered, “You are my only.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair. “As you are mine, but you must hide now. Malfoy will not speak if he sees you right away.”

“Understood.”

Harry scurried away into the shadows near his portrait and watched Severus toss a pinch of floo powder in the flames.

“Maison du Rien,” he said, watching as the fire glowed green.

An image of a cozy living room flickered into life on the other side. It looked pleasant to Harry, warm and inviting, a bit like the Burrow with its homey atmosphere and oft-mended sofa.

Malfoy probably hated it, which suited Harry just fine.

Severus stuck his head in the flames. “Draco? Come to the fire. I must speak with you.”

Harry said, “Uh, Severus? Wand out, okay? You still look like Xavier.”

“I know. I cannot take the glamour off here. Draco will wait, I hope, to let me answer questions as to my identity.”

Footsteps sounded coming nearer, and a slightly bedraggled Draco Malfoy appeared on the other side of the fire. He took one look at Severus and drew his wand.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Severus tensed. “Draco, I will not harm you. I am Severus Snape, but I cannot go safely through Diagon Alley without a glamour. Ask me something only I would know.”

Malfoy frowned. “What was the first potion I learned from you?”

“Officially, a boil cure potion. Unofficially I believe it was a mild acid bomb, Flesh Burner. I had brewed it while speaking with your father and caught you watching in the closet when I went to put the finished product away. Your father was quite angry with you and withheld your dessert for the evening, but soon gave in after your colossal tantrum. I am afraid he taught you nothing but to listen in closets that day.”

Malfoy lowered his wand. “So it is you. But, how? I thought the Dark Lord killed you.”

“He certainly tried. I escaped.”

Malfoy sighed. “Thank Merlin. What is it? Has the Dark Lord discovered us here?”

“Not to my knowledge, but I am no longer in his confidence. I simply need to speak with you. Draco, do you intend on returning to Hogwarts?”

He hugged his waist and shivered, and Harry almost pitied him. Almost.

“I would rather not, but Mother is insistent that I cannot abandon my education. And Father believes I am the last hope for the Malfoy line.” He scoffed bitterly. “What hope do I have now, Professor?
I’m marked. If the Slytherins who aren’t with the Dark Lord don’t kill me for being a fool and aligning myself with him, the Death Eater Slytherins will for not being horrid enough to stick with it.”

Harry frowned and stepped closer. Malfoy looked depressed and downtrodden, hair in disarray, robes dirty and tattered, his eyes sporting circles as dark as Harry’s had ever been. He jumped at every sound and looked over his shoulder every few seconds, as if waiting to be attacked.

Perhaps he was.

Severus leaned forwards, lowering his voice to a murmur. Harry had to strain to hear him.

“Malfoy, I have a way to keep you alive, but I need your help.”

“Me? What can I do? I’m trapped in a hovel and have no place anywhere any longer.”

“The mark. Potter can remove it.”

Malfoy stiffened and his eyes went wide. “No. It’s impossible.”

“See for yourself.” Severus pulled up his sleeve, revealing his bare forearm. “He’s the only one both capable and willing to do this, Draco, even for you.”

Malfoy lifted a shaking hand towards Severus’ arm. “Merlin. It’s gone. It’s really gone. I can’t feel the dark magic any longer.”

“Yes. Potter removed it completely when he healed me recently. He is willing to help you, too, so long as you keep his secrets and help us keep ours.”

Malfoy gave him a piercing look. “Why would he help me? Potter hates me. He hates you too, for that matter.”

Harry stepped out of the shadows. “One out of two, Malfoy. Not up to snuff, I’m afraid. Still, it might get you by with a D for effort.”

“Potter!” Malfoy snarled and jerked out his wand, but Harry recognized it as a fearful response and did not retaliate. “What the bloody hell are you doing here?”

“Well, there’s the arrogant berk we all know and love. I was beginning to wonder where he’d gotten off to.” Harry knelt beside Severus. “I’m trying to save your life, you daft sod. Whether I like you or not has nothing to do with it. The fact is, you’ve done nothing to deserve being tortured to death by Voldemort and his minions, nor executed by the light, nor used as cannon fodder in Dumbledore’s crusade against all things Slytherin.”

“Why should you care?”

“Does it matter why when I’m offering you a way to save your life?” Harry held the frightened gaze until Malfoy dropped his eyes.

“I, I just, don’t understand. What’s in it for you?”

“I don’t operate that way and you know it, but it just so happens that this time, I do need your help. I need you to convince your parents to cover for me and give me an alibi, and your help establishing it as well.”

“Good luck with that, Potter! They hate you even more than I do.”
“True, but this is war. Personal grudges don’t matter. I’m willing to put mine aside in exchange for help providing me with an alias and some civility from you. I’m willing to remove your Dark Mark, assuming I still can, in exchange for your help to Professor Snape. Your parents might reconsider their stance on me when they realise I am the only thing standing between their heir and a particularly nasty fall from grace, and that’s only if the Light Slytherins get a hold of you first. We both know what will happen if the Death Eaters catch you.”

Malfoy shuddered.

“Exactly,” said Harry. “So, can we put childhood rivalries aside and work together or not?”

Malfoy’s guard dropped a bit. “You, you would really take this monstrous thing from me? And all you want me to do is build you an alibi and help Professor Snape?”

“And keep our secrets. That’s the most important part. People will die if you don’t.”

“And keep your secrets.” Malfoy lowered his wand. “That’s, really all you want?”

“I want a magical oath from you swearing those things I mentioned once you understand what’s going on, but that’s about the gist of it, yes.”

“I, I don’t have to kill or hurt people, and you won’t torture me if I try and fail?”

Harry scowled. “Of course not! I’m not Voldemort. Merlin.”

“No, you’re not, but you are in league with Dumbledore, and he would force me to fight a war if he could take this away from me.”

“In league with him?” Harry scoffed. “There is a lot you don’t know about me, Malfoy. I fight for the light because it’s the right thing to do and I’m sick of the snake-faced bastard killing off everyone I love. Dumbledore has nothing to do with it.”

Malfoy hugged his waist. “I, I’ve seen enough of war. I don’t want to fight anymore. I don’t want to kill or hurt people. Are you going to put me on the front lines if I accept your help? I’d be in your debt, and, and I, I’ve no reason to trust you.”

Harry’s expression eased. “No. I suppose I haven’t given you a reason. But I should hope that you have seen for yourself I won’t make people fight who don’t want to. The war needs healers and potion makers and ward specialists as much as soldiers. I’d be happy for your honest help however you want to give it, but all I’m asking in return for removing your mark and giving you a safe place to live is what I’ve already asked from you.”

Malfoy shrank into himself. “It just, it sounds too good to be true.”

“No. He speaks the truth, Draco,” Severus said in a soothing tone. “He asked me for nothing when he healed me.”

Harry nodded. “Trust Snape if you can’t trust me. I’m not after revenge, not against you at any rate. I’ve much bigger fish to fry.”

Malfoy looked between them with a bemused expression. “Just, tell me one thing before I agree to this?”

“Yeah?”
“How are you two working together without trying to kill each other?”

Harry chuckled. “Let’s just say I saw Professor Snape for the brave man that he is, and he realised I’m not the arrogant tosser my father used to be. We’ve a common enemy, and it’s stupid not to fight them together just because we once hated each other.”

Malfoy’s tense stance eased. “You’ll extend the same courtesy to me, then?”

“Of course, so long as you can be civil, too. And I won’t let you die or force you into battle either way.”

The Slytherin relaxed and knelt before the fireplace. “All right. Then I’ll swear your oath and do the best I can to help you. Just get this godsforsaken thing off my arm.”

Harry nodded. “I can’t do it here—you’re in hiding and I’ll light up your floo like a Christmas tree. The Ministry will find you, and we all know how that will end. Instead, we’ll get a house elf to apparate you to a private location where I’ll remove your mark, then we’ll have you take the oath.”

Malfoy frowned. “You Gryffindors don’t do dishonest, so I know you’ll do what you’ve said, but how do you know I would keep my word? I could just do a runner after you took my mark away.”

“First of all, it would serve you to remember that this Gryffindor missed being sorted into your house by the skin of his teeth.”

Malfoy choked. “You, the Gryffindor golden boy, almost became a Slytherin?”

“Yep. The hat only put me in Gryffindor because I begged off of Slytherin.”

“And what’s wrong with my house, Potter?”

“Well, I hadn’t a very good impression of it what with Voldemort being Slytherin and you being a prat to Ron on the train, now had I?” Harry gave Severus a shy smile. “Knowing what I do now, I wouldn’t have minded being a Slytherin, but it’s probably a good thing I wasn’t sorted there.”

“No,” said Severus with a sombre shake of his head. “You would have been murdered in your bed the first night.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Potter, if you were Slytherin, you’d have the sense not to offer titbits of information to known enemies for nothing.”

Harry grinned devilishly. “Even if I know said information will drive my enemies mad?”


“What? How do I know you won’t run? Well, I don’t. You could run out as soon as I remove your mark, but being a sod isn’t punishable by death. Regardless of your decision about the oath, I’ll help you with the mark. I’ve already seen you don’t want it.”

“And if I run?”

“Then you run. But you won’t have my protection or help afterwards, either.”

Malfoy drew his arms around his chest. “It still sounds too good to be true. How do I know you’re not apparating me into a prison cell in Azkaban? You could just be doing this to get me alone and hurt me.”
Harry snorted. “If I could just trick people into Azkaban, I’d start with your lovely aunt, not you. And no offence, but you look like I could knock you over with a puff of air. If I wanted to hurt you, I’d just come through the floo and do it.”

Malfoy tensed. “I, I can fight. I’ve just had a rough go of it lately.”

Harry held up conciliatory hands. “Easy. I know you’re miserable, and I’m not out to hurt you. There’s no point. Even if you were in top fighting form, there are far bigger threats in this war.” He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “Look, Malfoy. I’m offering you a way out. If you don’t want it, then you don’t have to take it, but if you want rid of that thing and some kind of safety, I’m about your only choice. So what’s it going to be?”

Malfoy hesitated. “Professor Snape, you trust Potter?”

Severus’ arm wrapped around Harry’s waist and pulled him a little closer. “He saved my life, Malfoy. The Dark Lord would have killed me if not for Harry’s help. Yes, I trust him with everything I am.”

Malfoy’s shoulders slumped, and he gave Harry a tense nod. “Then I’ll do it. Just, just keep your word, okay? I’m trusting you.”

Harry extended a hand through the fire. “You have my promise, Malfoy. I will do just as I have said.”

Malfoy stared at Harry’s hand for a bit, then gave Harry a hesitant smile. “Hmm. About time you reciprocated, Potter. It only took you six years.”

Harry laughed and shook his hand.

Severus promised to have a house elf transport Malfoy and Zabini to Bàn Leon as soon as it was convenient, the latter agreeing to come without a fuss. With Madame Maxine updated and the Malfoys’ oath to support Harry’s alter ego, they had finally finished in Diagon Alley. Severus had only to go to Hogwarts before they could return home. And as Harry couldn’t walk safely alone outside Hogwarts’ wards, Severus made him accompany him to the castle gates and just inside.

Harry’s intelligence and cunning had surprised him. The young man had done everything he had hoped for and rescued several innocents in the process. Severus had been humming with anticipation and need for Harry since his creative performance at the Prophet Headquarters, and the forced distance had begun to cloud his mind. He needed to touch Harry, and he needed it now.

As soon as they had closed the gates, Severus muttered a Notice-Me-Not and pinned Harry against the perimeter wall. Harry started in surprise, but recovered quickly and took hold of Severus’ waist.

“Gods, you were wonderful today,” Severus whispered against Harry’s lips. “First the Prophet, then the wards, and you were brilliant with Malfoy. Merlin, I’ve been waiting to get you alone all day.”

Harry moaned and tugged him into a passionate, frenzied kiss. Severus shivered at the taste of Harry’s tongue, and pressed his full length against the shorter man. Harry stifled a cry in Severus’ mouth and rocked into him, panting into the older man’s kiss. Severus gentled his kisses and held Harry’s face.
“Softly, love. We are in public and you have asked me to wait.”

Harry whispered against his lips, “All right, but I wi—”

Portrait Harry cried, “Bloody buggering hell, mate!”

The real Harry jumped. “Shite! Oh, Little Harry, are you okay? Gods. I didn’t mean to … I’m sorry.”

Severus spoke in a soft voice so as not to frighten the boy, “You have my apologies as well, Potter. Are you all right?”

Portrait Harry nodded, but his eyes were wide with shock. “Don’t baby me. It was just a snog, and … and a loving one at that.” He sounded wistful and full of pain. “It didn’t scare me, but it did shock me half out of my skin. Harry … I’ve not gone blind, right? You just snogged Snape?”

“Yes,” Harry said with a smile, and stroked down Severus’ cheek. “Go on and get your things, love, and I’ll explain to our new resident.”

Severus nodded. “Please disillusion yourself and Potter—I’m referring to your portrait, of course—and cast Muffliato as soon as I leave. Your brand is more powerful than my own.”

“I will. Be careful. If Dumbledore realises you’re not coming back to teach this year, he might try to hurt you.”

Severus grinned. “I almost hope he does. He’s a master duellist, Harry, but so am I. I’m quite good enough to escape him unscathed, though his power would possibly overcome me in a long battle. And, if he is stupid enough to attack me in the middle of Hogwarts for no other reason than my resignation, he will have exposed himself in a spectacularly foolish manner.”

“You think he’ll play it safe?”

“Yes. Unfortunately for us, he is an intelligent foe. He will only reveal himself when he has no other choice. Also, attacking me now would go against his goals. You know I suspect he published that article to ensure I have no further place here. He wants me to resign. It just so happens that to do so falls in line with our own plans or I might stay another year just to spite the old bastard.”

Harry chuckled and kissed him lightly. “Just come back in one piece, yeah? I don’t want to have to patch you up again.” He pulled a face. “We might have you in nappies if I try.”

Severus laughed. “No, no. Just make a conscious effort not to de-age me the next time, and all will be well. We were not aware of your capabilities the first time you healed me.”

“Speaking of, Verus, you’d better cast glamours. He doesn’t know my powers and I’d like to keep it that way. If he suspects you’re twenty-three now and have lost all your scars, he’ll know.”

Severus hesitated, icy steel sinking his gut. “Harry, he can see through glamours.”

Harry flinched. “Well. That will make this more difficult. Unless … how much do you trust me?”

Severus frowned. “I have already said I trust you with everything I am, love. What are you thinking?”

“Maybe if I set the glamours and try to make it so he can’t see through them ….”

“We don’t know the spell for that. How will you do it?”
Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Wish magic, I suppose. I did it with the other Harry so he could talk, and there was the spell I did over the Prophet’s staff.”

“Yes, while we’re on the subject, how did you do that at the Prophet? You said you used pure magic, but how did you know it worked?”

Harry ruffled his hair and frowned. “Er, well, I can see it, sort of. Magic. It shimmers. I saw the spell take effect earlier. I can’t tell you how I know it did what I wanted it to, though. I just do.”

Severus grinned. “Mage sight and intuition. Of course you would have it. Gods, that explains so much.”

“We can worry about it later,” said Harry. “You need to hurry.”

“Right.” Severus sighed and stood tall. “Try to set my glamour if you are able. Intent is ninety percent of magic anyway, so focus on what I looked like before and see what you can do about locking it against those with mage sight. If you can’t see through it, then suffice it to say Dumbledore will not be able to either. It’s a pity. This appearance is much more attractive, not that I was ever much.”

Harry cupped Severus’ cheek. “Severus. Look at me, love.”

He raised his eyes to meet Harry’s.

“You were always attractive. Even before, I thought you had a kind of dark mystery, and that’s sexy. You are gorgeous.” Harry kissed him with such love, Severus’ fears melted and his soul soared.

“I can’t decide if that’s disturbing or hot,” said Portrait Harry. “Just because it’s Snape, mind. Not because you were bothering me.”

Harry and Severus broke into laughter midway through a kiss.

“Luckily, you’re too young for him anyway,” said Harry. “He’s mine, mate. Now, hold still, Severus, and I’ll try to fix your glamours.”

Severus closed his eyes tight. “Proceed.”

A moment later, a cool, liquid sensation washed over Severus. He gasped and leapt back.

Harry met his gaze with a sad smile and tears shimmering in his eyes. Severus paled and patted down his body. Everything seemed to be attached, at least.

“Harry, what is it? Did it fail?”

Harry shook his head. “No, love. It worked. I had just forgotten how bad that scar on your cheek is.” He brushed Severus’ hair back and tiptoed to kiss below the man’s ear, along the worst of the scar. “I will never let anyone hurt you like this again.”

“Merlin, you frightened me,” Severus said in a breathless voice, leaning forwards to give Harry better access.

“I’m sorry. I just wish I’d been able to spare you this pain. That’s all.” A soft kiss pressed into the space below his jaw and Severus shivered.

“You healed me, love, and not just physically. That means everything to me. But we can discuss this further at a later date. I must be going.”
Harry kissed him lightly. “Be swift and safe, Verus. Should anything happen, try to send a Patronus, if you can.”

“I’ll be careful, Harry. Hide yourselves well.”

Severus kissed Harry’s cheek and turned back to the path. He jogged to the first turning and looked back one last time, but Harry and his portrait had vanished. A stream of silver and green sparks from Harry’s wand eased his mind, and Severus rushed down the path to the castle.

On the way, he worked himself into a desolate kind of fury as a show if someone should run into him, remembering the impotent rage when he had realised Dumbledore had gone behind his back to betray him yet again. Harry had fixed the article as much as it could be and healed Severus’ pain, but Dumbledore didn’t know that, and Severus wanted to keep it that way.

He almost wished he could stay a couple nights, just to see Dumbledore’s expression when the retraction printed day after tomorrow. Then again, that meant leaving Harry for a time, and Severus couldn’t abide being apart from him long.

Strange how much everything had changed in such a short time. Yet Severus was happy, and for the first time in his life, he valued love over his pride. Over dignity. Harry had torn away the veil over his ascetic and miserable former existence, and he would not go back.

For now, though, he had to remember and act as if nothing had changed. He had fooled Riddle for twenty years. Surely he could fool Dumbledore for a few moments.

As he passed through the doors, he gathered all his emotion and thoughts of Harry and forged their strength into his Occlumency walls. To his surprise, his mind felt even more the impenetrable fortress and he wondered if Harry had helped him from afar. He thanked the man in his mind, though he doubted Harry would hear him this time, then shut his thoughts off other than remembering his misery from that morning.

As Severus made his way, unimpeded, to the dungeons and began packing his former life away, the anguish and rage pinned him in and suffocated him. Without the ballast Harry offered, his emotions churned in a malefic storm that, even with his tight mental shields, seethed just within his control. One slip, and his fury would reach out and break something. Or someone.

Merlin, how had he lived like this for twenty years?

He knew the answer to that—he hadn’t wanted to, but he had a duty, and honour meant more to him than the joy he had believed a farce. Severus had never known happiness then. He hadn’t known Harry.

With a frown, Severus killed that thought and allowed a tendril of worry to coil in his belly instead. He had never had trouble shutting out dangerous thoughts before, yet his mind kept drifting back to Harry. Perhaps he had underestimated the changitive power of love. Severus poured his worry into his shields, too, and forced his mind to empty of everything but the way he had felt at Dumbledore’s betrayal.

Oh, he had best kill those thoughts, too. He couldn’t know Dumbledore had authored it. He was meant to suspect Harry. The thought made him want to laugh, but he squashed it without mercy.

Merlin. This was more dangerous than he had realised. He forced his mind to focus solely on his task and stopped thinking at all. If that was the only way to protect himself, so be it.
“All right, mate,” Portrait Harry said once Severus had disappeared around a bend, “explain to me how the bloody hell you ended up with the dungeon bat?”

Harry shot his portrait a quelling look. “If you call him that again in my presence, I’ll—” He struggled to think of a way to punish a portrait, especially one who’d been hurt enough. “I’ll ground you.”

The portrait laughed. “Ground me? I’m a portrait! I’m grounded by default. And who made you my da anyway?”

Harry shrugged. “No idea, but I’ll figure something out. And as for being your da, nope. We both know who that was. But you’re under my guardianship now, so I have to learn to nip those bad behaviours in the bud somehow.” He rubbed his chin in thought. “Maybe I can invent a spell for that too.”

Portrait Harry gulped. “Um, no need for that. I’ll watch my mouth, honest. But how did you end up with him? I’d have thought, darkly hot or not, he’s the absolute last person you’d want. And wait, did you say twenty-three? Isn’t he more like forty?”

“Slow down! I can only answer one question at a time. Yes, he was closer to forty before I tried to heal his back and accidentally erased all his scarring and fifteen years off his life.”

“Merlin!” Portrait Harry looked gobsmacked. “That’s, but it’s—Merlin!”

“More accurate than you know, mate.” Harry sighed. “So, Severus first, right? Then me. Us. Me? Er, I’ve confused myself, but moving on. So, Severus. He grew up like we did, Harry.”

“You know, maybe you should call me a different name so we’re not getting confused all the time.”

Harry nodded. “Think of one you like and we will. In the meantime, Severus had an awful life. His da beat on his mum and Severus, and, and well, it’s a horrible story, so I’ll tell you after I answer your questions. The truth is, Severus was as broken and lonely inside as I was. He needed healing, and I saw that. When I touched him with kindness, when I defended him, he was utterly helpless. Just stood there, frozen and with every emotion showing on his face.”

Portrait Harry gazed towards the castle. “He, he was lonely?”

“Terribly. He’s been alone since his grandparents died, which I think, based on things he’s said, was over twenty years ago. He’s not felt a single caring touch in all that time. So when I touched him, when he suddenly found himself being held and touched and hugged, he … well, I think he fell in love with me. He hasn’t quite admitted it yet, but I can see it in his eyes sometimes. Or, at least I think I do.”

“That was what he meant to say at the Prophet today, wasn’t it?”

Harry smiled to himself. “Yeah. I think it was.” The warmth swirling in his chest faded at the younger Harry’s apparent confusion. “Will you listen now? To Severus’ story and the truth about us and why we have to be so careful?”

“Yeah, mate. Anything that can get Snape to act like that should be worth hearing.”

Harry sighed and hugged his waist. “Somehow, I don’t think you’ll be saying that by the time I’m
done.” With a deep breath for courage, Harry started in on their tales.

Severus shrunk everything he could and stuffed a trunk full of the few rare ingredients, texts, and potions that could not survive shrinking. He left the robes, standard books he could pick up at Flourish and Blotts if he needed a copy, and the furniture. What use did he have for teaching robes now?

It saddened him that twenty years of his life fit into one trunk. He had no trinkets save for a photo of his mum and a muggle microscope Minerva had given him for Christmas six years before. He had nothing else worth keeping.

With a sigh, Severus looked around the rooms that had been his home for so long. He had spent countless hours grading essays at that rickety desk with a loose leg. The sturdy four-poster in the corner had provided him a refuge every night, a place to heal after Riddle had abused him for some trivial sin. He had shared pint after pint of whisky and scotch with Minerva on the worn leather sofa, talking about everything from quidditch to politics and Harry-bloody-Potter.

In these rooms, Dumbledore had met with him every week to talk and heal the breach his betrayal in Severus’ seventh year caused.

Severus had always prided himself on his foresight, but it had failed him then. The Headmaster had utilised every weakness Severus had to break down the younger man’s mistrust and worm his way back into Severus’ confidence. Severus had, eventually, come to forgive Dumbledore over a working relationship of several years and began to see him as a mentor. A friend.

Then, just when Severus needed him, Dumbledore had ripped off the bandage and left Severus to bleed. To die slowly, had Harry not picked up the pieces of his shattered heart and put them back together. Had Harry not held him and healed him, no doubt he would have gone off to perish by inches somewhere. Thank Merlin they had found each other beforehand.

Severus had so many memories here, good and bad. Yet, ultimately, sorrow and wretched loneliness had marred his life at Hogwarts. Painful memories from his past with the Marauders and watching his students be picked off, one by one, either by Riddle or the hatred of the other Houses and some of their professors. Minerva and Filius had always been fair, but the others had followed Dumbledore’s example.

Severus sighed. Draco would have his work cut out for him. Merlin, he hoped the boy would be well here.

Well, if he wasn’t, they would hide him in Bàn Leon. He would finish Draco’s education himself, and that of all the Slytherins, if he must. Though Harry might resent the draw on his time, he had a duty to these children, and he wouldn’t fail them.

Somehow, he thought Harry would understand.

With a quick swipe of his palm across wet eyes, Severus levitated his trunk and left his quarters for the last time. The snick of the door closing felt anticlimactic to the finality of the moment. A huge chapter of his life story had ended, twenty years gone. He should have slammed the door.

Still, knowing he left Hogwarts behind for life with Harry muted the melancholy of saying goodbye.
For the first time, his future looked bright.

As he stepped into the dungeon halls, he remembered the danger in allowing his thoughts free rein and shoved everything but his sorrow and anger into the strength of his mental shields. Severus fixed his features in a stormy expression and floated his trunk behind him as he stalked towards the castle entrance. He hoped to avoid a confrontation with the Headmaster, but did not trust his luck.

He was right not to. Just outside the Great Hall, Dumbledore waited with a sad sort of smile on his face. Severus deigned to nod and started to walk off without saying anything. It was the sort of thing Professor Snape would have done when faced with unwanted emotionality.

Dumbledore followed. “Severus, my boy, you don’t have to leave.”

The obligatory pretended reluctance. Severus saw through it now.

“Oh? Should I wait here then for the crowds of mutinous parents? Or perhaps I should let the students in Death Eater ranks finish me instead. It seems a preferable end to spending one more day grading the tripe these dunderheads pass for essays, but given the choice, I think a nice vial of aconite will do the job well enough without inciting the masses to riot on your doorstep.”

Satisfied with his reply, Severus stalked away once more, but the old man’s presence lingered just behind him. They walked in silence to the entrance.

“For what it’s worth, I am sorry about this, my boy.”

Severus buried his revulsion deeper than the core of the earth. ‘I am not his boy, nor will I ever be again.’

He feigned irritation. “Why should you be? You can fill my post with a more amiable instructor now, surely.” He sighed and let weariness slip through his mask—Dumbledore knew his front failed when it came to the safety and wellbeing of his students. “Who will take care of them in my stead, Albus? Slughorn does not wish to stay on for another year of Potions. And what of Defence? The Slytherin Headship?”

Dumbledore tugged at his beard as if in thought. “Well, Horace has agreed to take another year of potions, at least until I can find a suitable professor to work in his stead. As for Defence, well, we run this race every year, do we not? I am quite used to composing adverts for Defence teachers. And for Slytherin there is no one else but Aurora. I have no other Slytherins on staff save Horace, and I’ve no doubt he will refuse. He means to return to retirement soon regardless.”

Severus closed his eyes to hide his sudden grief. “Sinistra. Are you mad? That woman was placed in Slytherin for her intelligence and ambition alone. She hasn’t an ounce of the force and cunning it takes to wrangle a Hufflepuff into behaving, let alone a Slytherin. They will run over her like the Hogwarts Express.”

“Now, now, Severus. I’m sure they will be fine.”

Severus’ gut ached with the sudden realisation that he had hoped, prayed to be wrong in his suspicions about Dumbledore. Some small part of him had wanted desperately for his mentor to still be the man he had once believed in and sacrificed so much for, but his hope shrivelled at the ice in Dumbledore’s eyes. His words held kindness, but his eyes showed the truth of the old man.

Severus forced a wave of unexpected hurt behind his walls and blinked hard. Dumbledore might expect tears at a moment like this, so he could use that as cover at least.
“Severus,” Dumbledore began, but the younger man cut him off and whirled to face him.

“No. Spare me the ‘talk.’ I do not want to hear your empty condolences. Do not tell me everything will be well. We both know that is not the case.” Severus turned away and stalked a few steps before speaking again. “I would prefer to lick my wounds in private than having them dragged into the light. It is enough to know that I gave them a few years of peace. Leave me be, Albus.”

The old man sighed. “I merely wanted to wish you well, my friend. Wherever you go, I hope you find happiness.”

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Severus wanted to believe Albus meant that, but he knew better. If Albus had truly wished him well, he would not have outed him as a Death Eater.

Severus’ last shred of stubborn hope for the old man withered and left him empty and aching in its wake. He let the emotion show. Dumbledore would interpret it as sorrow for things left behind.

“Goodbye, Albus,” Severus murmured at the gates. “Thank you for everything.”

He meant it. Despite the old man’s intentions, he had offered Severus sanctuary for all the long years he had been a spy. Severus honoured his debts, even if Dumbledore did not.

“Thank you, dear boy. May you be happy.”

“Heh. Such things are not for men like me.”

He opened the gates and felt Harry’s hand at his waist. The touch grounded him.

“Albus, tell Minerva and Poppy … tell them I will miss them. I cannot say it well.”

He thoroughly expected Dumbledore to say something terrible to them, and would owl them to say what he truly wanted. The discrepancy might clue them in that Dumbledore was not all he seemed. Or it might make them trust Severus’ response less, but he had to believe someone had faith in him. Minerva should, at least. She knew Severus loved her despite his reticence.

“I will gladly pass on your message,” said Dumbledore, “though I wish you might stay long enough to deliver it yourself.” He squeezed Severus’ shoulder, and the younger man fought his urge to tense and throw off his hand. “Good journey, my friend.”

“Goodbye, Albus.”

Severus allowed him a brief moment of contact before he stepped through the gates and called his trunk close. Dumbledore stood by the gates and watched him walk towards Hogsmeade in silence.

Harry said nothing until they were out of earshot, and even then he spoke in a whisper.

“I’m proud of you, Severus. You’ve done everything you could for them. More than you should have. Because I know he didn’t say it and he should have, you did well, love.”

Severus wished he could hold Harry close, but Dumbledore could still see them.

“Oh, Harry. I didn’t expect it to hurt this much. I knew he had betrayed me, but some small part of me still hoped …”

Harry wrapped an arm about Severus’ waist and kissed his shoulder. “I know, love. I felt the same way after Sirius died and I realised Dumbledore had known the prophecy and what Voldemort was trying to do to me the entire time. If I’d known how important it was, I’d have paid more attention in
your lessons and to hell with that door. He let Sirius die.”

Severus turned his head slightly. “Why, then, do you blame yourself?”

“Because I should have paid attention anyway. You told me how important it was, but I didn’t listen. I should have trusted you.”

“Love, you weren’t meant to. I wasn’t a good teacher to you then. I couldn’t afford to be, but you couldn’t know that.”

“I know. Dumbledore should have taught me himself.”

“Yes. So I said to him on many occasions. It seems he has betrayed even his lions.”

“He’s only out for himself.”

Severus nodded and walked towards a bend in the road. Trees alongside would block the Headmaster’s view from there to the city, and he would feel safer beyond them. As they turned the corner, he sensed Harry hesitating.

“Harry?”

The mage sighed. “I wish I could reveal myself and give him a two-fingered salute, but it’s too soon. He’d set the entire order against me, and I haven’t had a chance to tell them anything at all, let alone the truth about him.”

Severus froze. “Harry, we can’t. No one would believe us yet.”

“I know, love. I know. We’ll start laying the seeds now, but it’s far too soon to reveal our hand. We have to let Dumbledore hang himself first.”

Severus’ heart began to beat again. “Yes. Now, come, love. We have hardly stopped since breakfast, and I need rest.”

“Yeah. We need to find Other Harry a place, too, and introduce Demeter to our flock.”

“Speaking of, Potter—I am using your last name in reference to your Portrait and not my Harry—are you able to deal with the situation now? Between Harry and myself, I mean.”

As they had passed the trees, Harry dissolved the disillusion and glamour spells with a wave of his hand. Portrait Harry—carried against the real Harry’s chest—peered to his side as if he could look around the edge of his frame. Severus moved forwards a bit to oblige him.

“Well, can’t say I’m exactly comfortable yet, but he did explain, and, and sir ….”

“There is no need to apologise. Harry has done so at every opportunity.”

“Yes, for him, but not for me. I’m not quite the same person. I’m sorry, sir. I had no idea you were facing so much danger and pain for us.”

“It’s in the past, Potter. No need to trouble yourself over it now. I am content.”

Harry flicked his wand to levitate the portrait beside him and wrapped an arm around Severus’ waist. “Are you, love? You had to say farewell to twenty years of your life tonight, and even with Dumbleberk’s betrayal, I know you weren’t friendless.”
Severus kissed Harry’s cheek. “Yes, I am. It hurts, but I know the future is better.”

“I promise, Severus. If nothing else, I will make the future a happy place for you. After everything, you deserve at least that.”

He laid his head on Harry’s. “Stay with me, love. Just stay, and I will be content.”

Harry leaned up to kiss him, and Severus’ grief washed away. As long as he had Harry, he could face whatever fate had in store.

Behind him, Harry’s portrait muttered, “Ron will never believe this.”

Harry laughed and broke from his kiss. “Not in a million years.”
That evening, Severus’ feet hurt like mad from all the walking and work, but he said nothing. He had endured far worse pain in his life, and as he sat in his armchair by the hearth, Potter sleeping in his portrait above the mantle and Harry curled up between his knees, he felt contentment like he had never known. He sipped at a glass of port and stroked through Harry’s hair, enjoying the feel of silky strands through his fingers and the young man’s warm breath against his thigh.

If this was love, he could get used to it.

Harry suddenly moved around his body so he was facing Severus’ knees and pulled one of the older man’s stockinged feet into his lap. A shiver of anticipation and fear alike jolted up his leg, and Severus gave Harry a nervous smile.

“Love? What are you doing?”

His breath caught as Harry pulled off his sock and brushed his fingertips along the arch of Severus’ foot, holding him by his heel.

“I thought your feet might hurt,” he said with a loving smile. “Hermione took care of me like this once, and I thought, maybe you would like it too.”

“Like wha-ah-ohh.” Harry’s thumbs and fingers rubbed firm circles in his arch and toes, and Severus’ voice broke off into a moan.

Harry smiled and massaged down to the tips of his toes and back up. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Good hardly described it. Beyond the easing of pain and tension, Harry’s fingertips sent quivering shocks up his leg and straight to his groin. Severus trembled and strained to keep his desire from his expression. His first lover had mocked him for his sensitivity in such an odd place; why should Harry not? And if his strokes went much higher ….

Severus attempted to pull his foot away. “I am quite all right.”

Harry tugged his foot right back. “You’re not. I saw you flinching in front of the floo. I know your legs and feet hurt, love. Let me take care of you, please.”

“But, I, I am well enough to heal it on my own.”
Harry’s eyes filled with a masked sort of sorrow. “I see. Well, if you don’t want me to, I won’t force it.”

He started to rise, and Severus’ conscience betrayed him. Gods, he couldn’t bear to put that look of pain in Harry’s beautiful eyes.

“Sit down, Harry,” he said in a weary voice. “I am, ah, only a bit nervous about my feet.”

Harry frowned and held Severus’ foot in gentle hands, rubbing softly down his ankle. “Why, love? You have beautiful feet. So long and slender and elegant. No need to be ashamed of them.”

Severus couldn’t hide his blush. “I never thought of my feet as remotely attractive before. They’re feet.”

“They’re part of you, love. And when they hurt, I want to make you feel better. It’s okay.”

Severus swallowed and gave Harry a tentative nod. Any moment Harry would find his weak spot, but if it garnered the disgust he dreaded, then at least Harry would be spared pain.

Gods, he had become a sop. Bloody Gryffindors, turning him into an emotional mess.

Then Harry’s fingers hit the middle of his sole, and all higher reason left Severus in a shock of melting heat. Surge after surge pulsed through him, and he gripped the arms of his chair, struggling for some semblance of control. He half-hoped, half-feared Harry would stop, yet the young man kept going, oblivious to Severus’ dilemma, and control fled as desire took over. Severus moaned, couldn’t possibly help it, and threw his head back as those brutal fingers continued taking him apart stroke by stroke.

“Ha-Harry, please,” he panted.

Harry looked up, surprised. Then his eyes darted back down, and understanding flickered across his features.

Shite. Harry had seen.

Cold leached through Severus’ veins, cooling his ardour, and the man braced himself for rejection.

“So that’s why you were nervous,” Harry murmured, and to Severus’ surprise, his voice was breathless. He hadn’t taken his eyes off Severus’ groin.

“Harry ….” Severus’ body responded forcefully, and he bit back a groan.

Harry’s fingers worked his sole once more, but rather than watching his foot, the man’s green eyes focused on Severus’ hips, their depths glowing with magic and the firelight. Severus fell back into the chair, gripping the armrests and panting with every stroke. His head thrashed from side to side, and his hips rocked of their own accord. Gods, he couldn’t bear much more.

“Harry, I c-can’t. Can’t hold back if you keep touching me like that.”

Harry nodded and kissed the arch of his foot before releasing it. “Maybe I should just do a healing charm tonight, then. But I’m coming back to that in the future, when we’re ready.”

A pang of tender-sharp emotion zinged through Severus’ chest. “You’re not disgusted with me?”

“Disgusted? Merlin, no! That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen, watching you slowly come undone, and me just touching your feet. If I didn’t want to wait a bit, I’d have used my tongue there
instead just to see if I could make you scream.”

Severus grabbed the armrests and threw back his head, a tense, shaky moan in his throat. It was a long moment before he could control himself once more.

“Gods, Harry. Keep talking like that, and you’ll hear it without a doubt.”

The young man’s Adam’s apple bobbed, and the fire in his eyes doubled. “We’d better do something else quick, or I’m going to just take you here.”

“Sweet Circe, love, that is *not* helping!”

Harry laughed and brought Severus’ other foot into his lap. Instead of rubbing it, he just took off his other sock and murmured his healing chant for Severus. The man sighed at the relief of his pain and caressed Harry’s thigh with the ball of his foot.

“Thank you, love. Much better. And no nappies required.”

Harry laughed again and turned so he sat with his head between Severus’ knees and the man’s feet on his legs. Harry held them there, but kept his fingers well away from Severus’ soles. Instead, he brushed his fingertips over Severus’ instep and laid his head against the older man’s knee.

Though Harry kept his touches soft and non-sexual, his caresses helped Severus to understand he hadn’t been rejected, that Harry hadn’t seen him as inferior or disgusting for his unusual erogenous zones. Hot, Harry had said. The thought had him flushing all over again.

It made him want to give something to Harry, to repay one kindness for another.

“Love, I believe I owe you something.”

“Hmm?” Harry closed his book and gave Severus a curious smile.

Severus cocked his head to the piano. “There is still time for a song or two before bed, and we can put a silencing charm on the room so as not to wake Potter.”

Harry leapt to his feet and grinned. “Brilliant! Go on! I’ve been aching to watch those gorgeous hands play ever since you told me you could.”

Severus paused halfway out of his chair. “You have? But you did not care for me then, did you?”

Harry turned and rubbed his toe in the carpet, a blush visible on the backs of his ears. “I, I think I did, Severus. Ever since the day you were tortured, love, I think my heart has belonged to you. You were so brave, so strong, so, so … *beautiful* in spite of everything they did to hurt you, I don’t think I could help falling for you. I just didn’t realise it until I learned that you cared for me, too.”

Severus wrapped his arms around Harry from behind and held him close. “I think I fell then, too. Your voice kept me sane. You held me together during my pain, and since then, I… as you said, you have had my heart since then.” He kissed Harry’s hair and whispered, “If I had to suffer, I am glad that this came of it. You have brought joy into my life, my Harry.”

Harry tipped his head back and kissed Severus lightly. “I like that, you calling me yours.”

“Mm, I like that you enjoy it. You are mine, and, though I never thought I would say this, I am yours.”

Harry reached up and threaded his hands through Severus’ hair. “You are, and I will keep you safe,
always.” He turned and kissed him, then gave Severus a bright grin. “Now, I think it’s time you show off for me. Get thee to the piano.”

Severus’ cheeks burned. “I do not show off, but I will play because you asked.”

“Whatever makes you play, love!” Harry laughed and smacked his rear end. “Go on.”

Severus flinched at the light contact. “Potter! Do not hit me!”

Harry cringed and backed away. “I … Potter again? I didn’t mean to hurt you. Did I?”

Severus took several deep breaths to calm himself and turned to face Harry. “Forgive me. I did not mean to snap. It is only … I cannot bear being hit.”

“Damn. You’ve been hurt before like that, haven’t you?” Harry edged closer and held out his hand. “I didn’t know, Severus. I won’t hit you again, not even in play. I swear it.”

Severus passed up Harry’s hand and brought the mage into his arms instead. “Please, don’t fear me.”

“I don’t. I only didn’t want to make you afraid.”

“I will survive.” Severus kissed Harry with a repentant touch. “It’s all right, Harry. I know you meant nothing by it. Forgive me?”

“Nothing to forgive, love.”

Severus kissed Harry and led him to the piano bench. “Then let us move on from this.”

“All right.”

Harry stood behind Severus and held his shoulders, watching in childlike delight as the older man positioned himself to play. Severus considered his repertoire for a moment, and decided Moonlight Sonata would give the proper tone he wanted.

As soon as his fingers struck the notes, Harry let slip a sigh of contentment.

“Oh, Severus. Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.”

He leaned his head against Harry’s belly and played out all the depth of his emotions, thrilling in his love’s acceptance of his private skills. Not mere acceptance, either. Harry loved it. He arched up on his toes with every sweeping crescendo, and down with every fall. The long rising passages made his fingers tense around Severus’ shoulders and hair, and when his song ended with a dark, resonant chord, Harry slumped against him, tears sliding down his face.

“Merlin, Severus. You’re wonderful. Brilliant. I—gods, look at me.” Harry scrubbed his face with the back of his hand and gave a soft little laugh. “I’m a right mess.”

Severus brought him into a tender kiss. “You are beautiful. You truly liked it, love?”

“Liked it? I thought I would fly. Play for me often, please?”

Severus gave him a shy smile. “As you wish.”

Harry plopped down beside him with a grin. “Now, teach me a little?”

“Very well.” He pressed down middle C and opened his mouth to tell Harry about it when a lynx
Patronus leapt through the piano and landed with his head sticking out of the keys.

“Kingsley?” Harry touched the Patronus’ head. “Severus and I are listening. What’s your message?”

The lynx spoke in Kingsley’s low drawl. “Death Eater attack in Godric’s Hollow. Do not come out of hiding. We all know he is trying to draw you out, both of you. Stay hidden and quiet. The Aurors are already dealing with it, but, well, if I don’t come out of this, know I’m proud of you, Harry. And Snape? You’re a changed man. I’m happy for you—really.

“That said, stay there, boys. Please. This time, it’s not your fight. Don’t make me worry about you when I need to be worrying about who’s shooting curses at my head.” The lynx vanished in a puff of silver mist.

Harry paced and slammed his fist into his hand. “He’s going after what’s left of my parents’ house, isn’t he?”

Severus took Harry’s hands and led him to the sofa. “As much as I wish that I could reassure you, I believe you are correct.”

Harry was shaking with rage. “Why? Why does he have to ruin everything?”

“Don’t despair, Harry. We will try piano again soon, and do not forget I have promised to teach you chanting when we find the time.”

“Yeah. I want to go after him.”

Terror raced like a stampede to Severus’ heart. “Harry, no. You heard Shacklebolt. He is right. If you enter the battle, all the focus will shift to you and make his job infinitely harder.”

“He’s taken everything from me.” Harry’s voice broke. “So many people I love, my family, my home, friends, every single beautiful moment I’ve ever tried to have ….”

“Harry, I, I know it means little, but I am here.”

Tears slipped down Harry’s face. “It means everything. I need you, Verus.”

Severus pulled him close and kissed his forehead. “Then I am here. Perhaps we can build new moments together, Harry, as he has stolen everything from me, too.”

“S-Severus ….” Harry pressed his face into Severus’ shoulder. “I’m afraid I won’t have anything left to live for by the time he’s done.”

“Me, Harry. You will always have me, as long as you wish.”

Harry clutched at the man and kissed Severus’ neck. “Don’t leave me. Don’t let him take you away from me, too.” Tears dripped under Severus’ collar and ran down his chest.

“I won’t, Harry. Come here. You need to feel me closer, I think.”

Harry gave a mute nod and scooted into the man’s lap. Severus wrapped him up and held him tight.

“There now,” Severus murmured, “safe and warm in my arms. I won’t let you go, love. I swear it. As long as I have life, I am yours.”

“Don’t lose your life, either. I can’t lose you like I’ve lost everything else.”
“I cannot promise that, but I will do everything I can to survive. Now that you are here, I have a reason to.”

“Yeah. Don’t forget it. I’ll kick your arse if you do.”

Severus gave a wan chuckle and brought Harry closer, taking comfort in his warmth.

“Verus? I’m scared.”

“I know. I’m sorry, love.”

Harry buried his head in Severus’ shoulder and wept.

The young man’s sorrow cut through Severus’ heart like a sword. Gods, how much he wished he could take the burdens from his lover and bear them himself. Tears brimmed Severus’ eyes, but he blinked them down and held Harry tight, praying it would ease the mage’s pain.

Severus murmured, “Ssh. It won’t be forever. We shall end him, one day. That I swear to you. Until then, I will hold you. You are safe here, with me.”

Harry whispered, “Don’t let me go. Please. I need you close.”

“I won’t leave your side.”

“T-thank you, love.”

Severus cradled Harry’s head against his shoulder. “Nothing to thank me for. Just rest, Harry. I am here, and here I will stay.”

Harry nodded and buried his face into Severus’ neck, weeping silently. Severus held him and stroked his hair and cheek until he fell asleep, protected in the older man’s embrace.

“My love,” Severus whispered as he carried Harry to bed, “whatever he steals from us, he will never ruin this. Never us. I swear it.”

With a gentle kiss to Harry’s temple, Severus pulled the covers over the young man and went into the makeshift lab to work and wait out the night. Since he had nothing to do and would not likely sleep, he could at least make some use of his time.

Harry opened his eyes to a lavish parlour, complete with a blood red throne-like chair on a dais. He made his way to the throne, looking on his surroundings with disdain. He deserved more, but soon all of Britain would be under his sway. He had only to be patient.

For now, though, he was furious. His raid of Godric’s Hollow had failed to bring either the Potter brat or the traitor out of hiding, and the aurors had run them off before they could raze the city like he had intended. He hadn’t even managed to level the Potter home before they arrived to ruin his fun.

Worse, the traitor and brat had somehow divined his plans. This proved they would not be so easily drawn, which meant he had to find them. If he wanted to find Potter and Snape, he would have to depend on his spies. And after Severus’ betrayal, he no longer had confidence in their loyalty.
A sneer curled his lip with fury and disgust. It seemed another spy had gone rogue as well. He had only one left, if Rookwood had deserted. The fool had better have a good reason for missing the summons. Travers, too, though he was expendable by comparison. Rookwood’s desertion would leave him blind in the Ministry, save for what garbled messages he could force out of Thicknesse.

It wasn’t a fate he wanted to contemplate.

A knock sounded at the door, and a hesitant voice called out to him. Ah. So Rookwood had deigned to come at last. Well. Perhaps the night would not be a complete loss.

“My dear Augustus,” said Harry as he perched on his throne, “I do hope you are well. I had hoped to find you at my side tonight, but alas, you were nowhere to be found. Would you care to tell me why you were gallivanting off in the night while we fought aurors, our fighters outnumbered two to one?”

Rookwood winced and stumbled to the dais. He knelt and took the hem of Harry’s robes in shaky hands, his head low and eyes reddish, from inhaling some illicit substance no doubt. His breath reeked of firewhiskey, too.

“M’lor,” the man slurred and pressed a sloppy kiss to Harry’s robe. “Was doin’ my job. Watchin’ for the traitor, I was. Din’t feel any summons.”

Harry pulled his hem out of reach with a hiss of disgust.

“Do you need a sobriety potion, Augustus? Perhaps you might know where I can find a certain potions master so I could retrieve one for you. Or,” Harry let a menacing tone enter his sibilant speech, “have you been shirking your duties? Having a pint and a smoke on the job, hmm?”

Rookwood scrambled back and swayed in place. “No shirkin’, m’lord. M’drink was spiked.”

“Indeed? And where is Snape?”

“Saw’m, m’lord. Hogsmeade, walkin’ to ‘partition po’nt.”

“In Hogsmeade, hmm? Where there are several pubs right on the main thoroughfare?”

“Err…..”

“Crucio!”

Rookwood fell, writhing and wheezing to the floor. Harry watched, taking perverse delight in his victim’s suffering despite his rage. Cruciatatus always took the edge off his bad days.

He ended the curse and watched Rookwood slowly regain his feet.

“Now, what have we learned?”

“No drinkin’ on duty?”

“Good boy. And what else?”

“Err ….”

“Another round, then. Crucio!”

Harry laughed at Rookwood’s agony, and laughed again when he fell upon trying to stand, landing
flat on his arse.

“We also learned that lying to the Dark Lord is especially painful, didn’t we?”

“Y-yes, m’lord.”

“Good. You were fortunate this time. The next I shall not stop.”

Rookwood shuddered and shrunk in on himself. “Yes, m’lord.”

“Enough. Get on with your report.”

“Erm, where was I? Right, Snape was walkin’ in Hogsmeade to the—”

“You already said that, fool! Where did he appa rato?”

Rookwood cringed, but when there was no curse forthcoming, spoke in a tremulous slur. “Well, see, he went ‘round Maidstone, near the southeast coast o’ Engl’nd. Or was it west? Er, he went there, see? And we tracked ‘im to Detling and off in the forest ….”

Harry tapped his foot and considered what curse to use next. “Yes, and? Why is he not here?”

Rookwood winced. “Well, see, we followed ‘im into the woods, but, um, Travers, he tripped over a root, and they heard us. Couldn’t follow ‘im after that, put some kind o’ anti-trackin’ field up, and it knocked us out flat. Came here for backup as soon’s we woke up. They’d gone by then, but they’re in the area! We’ll find them, soon enough.”

Harry’s gaze pinned Rookwood to the floor. “Them, Augustus? Who was with him?”

Rookwood gulped. “Er, he, well, you see …."

“I am losing patience, my dear Augustus.”

Rookwood flinched again. “Er, it was … Potter.”

Well. At least he knew what curse to use now.

Harry stood and paced the dais. “Let me see if I understand this correctly. You and Travers were in Hogsmeade, drinking.”

“Er, yes, m’lord.”

“And while there, you saw Snape and Potter heading to the Apparition point. You abandoned your drinks, followed them to Detling and from there into the forest, where you proceeded to broadcast yourself to a spy of all people, and let not only our traitor escape, but also Potter? Is that correct, Augustus?”

“I, I—”

Harry whirled around and let his curse fly. “Incendio sanguis!”

Rookwood let out an inhuman scream and scrabbled at his body and face, leaving trails of blood in his wake. Harry smiled and lounged in his throne with a summoned glass of port, watching as the blood trails caught fire and Rookwood’s skin bubbled and blackened. The alcohol in his blood would only exacerbate the Blood Burning curse, a perfect way to end a drunken fool. The smell of burning flesh soon overpowered, but Harry delighted in it. He would solve the problem of his dead
Harry woke with someone holding his arms against his side and muttering against his ear. Tears tracked down his oddly sore face, but he couldn’t wipe them away with his arms pinned.

“Harry, love, it’s all right. Please, don’t hurt yourself again. Ssh. I’m here. You’re safe.”

Harry gagged and jerked out of Severus’ arms. He barely got his head clear of the bed and Severus’ long legs before he retched. Severus gave a startled cry and leapt all the way onto the bed, then settled beside Harry and rubbed his back.

“Whatever you saw, Harry, it’s over now.”

Tears streamed and his nose and throat burned like the fire, that ungodly fire from before. At the memory, another wave of nausea overwhelmed him. Having cleared his stomach of everything he’d eaten that day, Harry gave a few last dry heaves and fell onto the bed.

Gods, he didn’t want to do this anymore. He hoped better Occlumency blocked these terrible visions. Or at least the pain of them. Save for Severus’ torture, that had been the worst yet.

Severus banished the vomit and conjured a wet flannel. He lay beside Harry and washed the younger man’s face, tenderly wiping away all traces of bile and sweat, but the tears kept coming. He banished the flannel and tugged Harry close, rubbing soft circles in the weeping mage’s back. The cool flesh of his palms felt soothing against Harry’s hot skin.


“Love, what is it? Can you tell me what you saw?”

Harry sobbed and clutched Severus tight. “It was awful.”

He could say no more. The adrenaline left his system and, without the numbing rush of blind terror, the pain of the vision came to the fore. It felt as though a monstrous beast had lodged itself in Harry’s chest, trying to claw his way out, and the only way to release it was through tears. With a low, keening cry, Harry surrendered to his anguish. He wept in Severus’ arms until his sobs ran dry, and lay there for many long moments afterward.

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and cheeks, soft lips brushing his tears away. “I’m here, love,” he said, his voice rough.

Severus’ pain jerked Harry out of his own anguish. “Severus? What’s wrong?”

Severus gave him a wan smile and kissed him lightly. “Only that I wish you need not suffer like this.”

Harry shivered and buried his head under Severus’ chin. He felt safe there, cherished, held against his love’s strong chest.

“That, besides your torture, was the worst I’ve endured. Rookwood is dead. Voldemort, he, he used … the man was drunk, and Voldemort set his blood on fire.”

Harry wept all over again. “He died before I woke up. Voldemort sat there, drinking wine and watching him burn to death like he was a cosy fireplace.”

“Gods. He is beyond comprehension.”

“Yeah.”

Severus stroked through Harry’s hair and rubbed his back until the young man quieted.

“Harry, why did Riddle kill him? Drunk or not, Rookwood was a Ministry spy. I can’t think he would do so for anything trivial.”

“No. He saw, he—oh shite!” Harry leapt from the bed and jerked Severus with him. “We have to go, now!”

“What?” Severus grabbed Harry’s hands. “We cannot. Shacklebolt ordered us to stay.”

“I know, Severus! This isn’t an adventure or rushing into danger—it’s rushing out of it. The curse made me forget until you mentioned it, but Rookwood saw us. He tracked us to the forest. That was the sound we heard when I cast that shield over us. Apparently Travers was there too, drunk, and he tripped—Voldemort will probably kill him next. My shield knocked them out somehow, or we’d likely have been overrun already. We have to leave. Now! They’ll be here come morning, at least in the area, and we won’t be able to escape then.”

Severus gave Harry a rushed nod and moved to the door. “Hurry and pack your things away in your trunk. Make your bed like no one was ever here.”

Harry wasted not a moment and immediately began throwing his belongings willy-nilly into his trunk. Severus left, presumably to pack. Harry hoped he would hurry and not worry about a little disorder just this once. They had no time for fussiness.

A few moments later, they had the few things they had collected over two weeks stuffed in boxes, shrunk, or otherwise stored, including a disgruntled portrait locked in the top of Harry’s trunk. Harry might have carried him had they not a thestral and three owls to transport, too.

“Thanks.” Harry stood and frowned at Severus’ dark robes. “Damn. I forgot to change before I packed everything.”

Severus transfigured Harry’s pyjama bottoms into a hooded, dark grey robe and his slippers into black trainers. “There you are, love. Come and let’s get our zoo together.”

“Hmm. We are building a bit of one, aren’t we? All we’re missing is a blast-ended skrewt, yeah?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

Harry gave a wan chuckle and led them outside to Freya’s clearing. The owls came at Severus’ call, pitched like a nightingale for safety. Harry leapt onto the thestral’s back after a rushed hello and bid Hedwig to perch on his shoulder. Severus looked odd with a huge eagle owl on one shoulder and a little sooty on the other, but at least when Severus mounted behind Harry, their entire family was connected. With Harry’s hand on all their lashed belongings and Severus’ on an unregistered portkey, they would all land in Bàn Leon in one piece, he hoped.

“Portus,” Severus whispered.
A sharp jerk behind Harry’s navel began their journey, and after a lot of whirling and the nauseating sensation of falling, they landed in the stronghold’s main courtyard. Harry let go of their trunks and leapt off Freya, falling to his knees in the brush and sending a disgruntled Hedwig into the air. His stomach had nothing but a thin stream of bile to expel, but it carried on trying nonetheless.

Severus rushed to Harry’s aid and ran fingers through his hair. “Not a good night for you, is it, love?”

“How at all. I hate portkeys.”

“So I see. I was unaware you had motion sickness. How do you fly so well?”

“It’s not motion sickness. It’s just, every time one grabs me, I go back to the graveyard. I have to see Cedric killed all over again, smell Pettigrew’s foul breath, feel that horrid knif—” He doubled over and dry-heaved again.

“Ah.” Severus rubbed his back and murmured, “Love, we’re home now. No dark lords or light lords for miles. Just you, me, and our animals. And Potter, of course.”

Harry groaned. “Let him out. He’s in my trunk on the very top. It was the only way to get him here, but he’s bound to be scared. He hates portkeys as much as I do, and the graveyard fiasco was still recent when his portrait was taken.”

“Merlin.” Severus bolted to the trunks, extricated Harry’s from the pile, and pulled a sobbing portrait from the mess. “Gods, Potter. Forgive me. Harry is ill, and I was unaware of your condition with portkeys.”

The real Harry ran a quick mouth cleaning spell to clear the bile and spat into the grass. Feeling a little better, he struggled to his feet and shuffled to Severus and the painting.

Portrait Harry was sobbing and leaning into the canvas—it looked as if he had pressed himself against glass. “I, I wish someone could hug me like this. Touch me. Something. I’m so scared.”

Severus closed his eyes for a moment, obviously stricken. “I am with you, as close as I can be.” He pressed his palm to the painting near Potter’s shoulder.

Harry leaned against Severus’ side, taking comfort from his warmth, and added his hand. “I’m with you too, not that I’m worth much after a bloody nightmare of a vision and a portkey within fifteen minutes of the other.” He shivered. “Did you see the vision, too?”

“No, thank Merlin. That’s one thing I don’t miss about being fully human.” Potter gave them a watery smile and laid his hands against theirs. “Thank you both. I can’t feel it, but it helps to know you’re trying.”

Harry dragged his wand free with a shaking hand. “M-maybe I can change that. At least a little.”

Holding his intent firmly in mind, Harry tapped his wand against the portrait frame, and a soft emerald light enveloped the painting. As it faded, Potter gave a stunned gasp.

“Merlin! I can feel you now, Professor, Harry! Your hands. So warm. It’s been so long.”

The boy in the painting broke down once more, and Harry cursed what fool had taken his portrait against his will so young. The child he used to be needed love desperately, and couldn’t find it within a painting. Not alone.
He gasped as an idea occurred to him. “Severus, do you have any pictures of yourself as a boy about his age?”

Severus rubbed his lip in thought. “Hmm. I did not like being photographed after my father broke my nose. There might be one left at Spinner’s End, but it is not safe for me there. Perhaps I could send Minerva after it if we need one, but why?”

“The other Harry needs a friend. A painting who can keep him company and hold him when he’s scared. Your fifteen year-old self did, too. Would you consent to having a portrait made of your younger self to keep him happy? We’d just keep it here so it wouldn’t be anywhere it could embarrass you.”

Severus nodded. “Who will paint it? The portrait-making spells go a long way towards aiding realism, but a high degree of natural skill with a brush is still required.”

“Dean Thomas could. He’s an excellent artist. Would you trust him with it?”

“Ah, then you would have to tell him about us. Do you think he would believe it?”

“To the tune of five-hundred Galleons? You bet he would.” Harry laughed. “Seriously, I could tell him if you want to—Dean is far more reasonable than Ron. I don’t necessarily have to, though. I could just say I’m making it to place in a position we could spy on for the Order and we’re using your younger form as a method of disguise. Top secret, of course.”

Severus grinned. “Brilliant, love. Do that, but tomorrow. We are all exhausted, and Potter needs us tonight. Let’s go inside and find a place to sleep. Since you two have been traumatised, perhaps you would like to stay with me tonight? Both of you?”

Portrait Harry sniffled. “Um, you’re not going to be shagging with me around, are you?”

The real Harry’s face burned red as the dawn. “Dear Merlin, no! You’ve been abused, mate. Besides that, we wouldn’t shag in front of a kid, and we haven’t gone anywhere near that far yet anyway. Shite!”

“S-sorry,” Portrait Harry said with a sniffle. “I didn’t mean to be rude. I’m just, really upset.”

“No trouble,” said Severus. “My Harry, are you well enough to find a bedroom and take Potter with you? I need to settle Freya and our owls for the evening.”

“I think so. The owls will probably just go hunt, but show them where to rest when they return. Freya might hunt too, come to think of it.”

“Yes, I know. I’ll be along in a moment. And, Potter, you’re safe here.”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a smile. “We’ll protect you, mate. You won’t be harmed here.”

Potter sniffled and wiped his eyes. “T-thanks. Let’s go find a place to sleep, okay? I’m still really tired.”

“I bet. King told me you hadn’t slept in weeks.”

Potter scowled. “Bit hard to, when every moment you’re waiting for ….”

Severus touched his hand gently. “For?”

Potter shuddered so hard, he shook the frame of his painting. “No. Not tonight. Not after
everything."

“As you wish. It is certainly true that you have had enough trauma for one evening.” Severus lifted a hand towards Potter’s face. “May I?”

“Yeah. I trust you. Don’t baby me, remember? I’m not going to break.”

“It is not meant to infantilise you, Potter, but to protect you. Survivors of sexual assault often have difficulty accepting touch, especially in intimate ways. I was only trying to reassure you that I would never touch you without consent.”

Potter blushed and lowered his head. “Oh. I, all right. S-sorry.”

Severus brushed the boy’s hair back from his face. “It is quite all right.” He stroked Potter’s forehead and hair. “Is this acceptable to you?”

Potter leaned into the touch and sighed. “Yeah. Feels safe.”

“And that is a novelty to you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Harry laid his hand on Potter’s shoulder. “Mate, we’ll protect you. I swear it. You won’t be hurt with us, never again.”

Tears dropped down the painting’s cheeks. “T-thank you.”

Severus wiped the boy’s cheek. “Nothing to th—” He cut himself off and stared at his hand. “Oh gods. Harry!” He turned his hand over and held it out to the mage. His fingers were shaking … and wet. With a gasp, Harry touched Severus’ hand and rubbed water away between his fingertips.

“No—you’re serious? They’re real?”

“Test it yourself and tell me I am not going mad.”

“If you are, we both are.” Harry held a hesitant hand out to Potter’s cheek. “Can I touch your face for a second? Promise I won’t hurt you.”

Potter rolled his eyes. “Like you’d hurt yourself. Go ahead, but what are you two on about?” He went to wipe his face, but Harry pressed his hand against the canvas to stop him.

“Don’t!” Harry rubbed Potter’s cheek where a tear was still visible and gasped at the feel of water on his hand. “Merlin! Severus, it … they’re real. How? How can a portrait …?”

“Perhaps your spell enabled him to cry, Harry. It may have given him more life than you intended.”

Potter snorted. “Oh, that? I’ve always been able to cry.” He looked away, his green eyes full of deep, intense pain.

Severus lightly brushed the boy’s temple and hesitated when he flinched. “Potter? It is only me. Are you well?”


Harry clenched his fists in sudden fury. “She’ll never make you cry again, you hear me? I’ll kill her first.”
“I know.” Potter gave him a wan smile. “Thanks, Harry. Let’s go see about finding a room. I’m still really tired, and you look sleepy too.”

Harry would have rather hunted Gabblebrook down and made her pay, but at a pleading look from the painting, he sighed and let his anger fade. There was no point. The woman was already in Ministry custody and looking at thirty years at the least. More charges would just be overkill at the moment. Still, perhaps they could keep that card in their deck in case Umbridge got the bint off on some made-up pureblood law or something.

With that thought in mind, he nodded and levitated Potter to the most isolated of the houses within immediate reach, a timber-framed hall house set a quarter-kilometre back from the road.

It looked good to Harry, despite being abandoned for over five centuries. What he could see of the grounds wasn’t overly expansive, but it was clean and empty besides a small grove of pine trees in a corner. The dead twigs of a privet hedge blocked entry and sight from the street, save for a broken wooden gate and old shell path, and a high stone wall—still in good condition thanks to preservation charms—protected the rest.

It was perfect. No nosy reporters would be able to photograph him. Severus could grow his herbs in peace and Harry could relax without worrying about who was peeking in the blinds. They could work out the rest later.

“This’ll do.” He floated Potter in, expecting Severus to follow, but the man remained behind with a sorrowful expression on his face. “Love? What is it? Is something wrong with the house?”

Severus shook his head. “No. At least, nothing I am able to detect. It looks quite suitable for you.”

Harry’s heart cracked. “F-for me? You don’t want to stay?”

Severus sighed and looked away. “I had thought … I should establish my own place. You will want your space before long and I—”

“Wait.” Harry took Severus’ hands and searched his face, what he could see of it in the dark. “Wait. Can we talk about this first?”

Severus’ throat bobbed. “Yes. I will just take care of the animals and join you in a few moments, then?”

“Yeah. But come back. I mean it. If you don’t, I’ll come look for you. And you promised Potter, remember?”

Potter shrugged and said in a shaky voice, “Everybody breaks their promises to me. I should have known better than to believe him.”

Severus paled and rushed to his side. “Potter! Please. I had always intended to stay tonight. I only thought … well, perhaps it doesn’t matter what I thought. It’s all right, Potter. I will return. I promised Harry we would talk before I made any decisions, remember?”

Potter tilted back his chin and glared, though his lashes shone with unshed tears. “You had better keep it.”

Severus smoothed the boy’s hair and rubbed his shoulder. “I will. Go ahead and find a room for us to sleep in, Harry.” He turned, and soft lips met Harry’s own. “I will settle the animals in that grove then. Actually, I see Hedwig in the trees already, so I assume the other owls are already there.” He patted his empty shoulders. “Since there is only Freya to settle, I will be in momentarily.”
All right,” said a shaken Harry. “I, I trust you.” He flicked his wand at Potter’s portrait and floated him down the path.

Severus watched the mage and his portrait go until they vanished into the empty house. After they had disappeared, he turned to look at the road, dread and hope warring for dominance of his heart. He had only offered to search for another home because he had thought it was what Harry would want. His own space, freedom from Severus’ cantankerous temperament, and as of late, his wild emotions.

Did Severus want to stay? To be near the one man he had ever loved in his entire life? He wanted that more than anything in the entire world. He needed Harry like his next breath, but did Harry truly want him? No. How could he, with Severus such a wreck?

The man would be tired of Severus in a week, without a doubt.

He sighed and turned back to the house. Both Potters needed him that evening. When Harry tired of him, Severus supposed he could always look for a house then.

Gods, he dreaded that day with every piece of his being. Harry’s light had already begun to heal the cracks in his soul. Without him near every day, it would break and burn again.

Without his soul-bond near, he would perish.

Severus rubbed his chest and stared at the house, his mind a million kilometres away. He might have stared longer, too, had Freya not nickered and head-butted him in the rear.

“Oh!” He turned and gave the thestral a glare. “Wicked beast. Come, then, and we shall see about lodgings for you.”

Freya snorted—the equine equivalent of eye-rolling in Severus’ book—and nudged him along.

“All right, all right.” Severus hesitated again inside the door. “I am only afraid of losing him. I know I am being foolish, but I cannot shake the fear that he will tell me to go.”

She whickered softly and laid her head on Severus’ shoulder for a moment. He petted her fetlock.

“Thank you.”

She nudged him again, clearly saying “You can’t just stand here all night,” and whinnied in impatience.

Severus sighed. “Yes, you are right. I did promise them. Come, then.”

With a deep, bracing breath, he walked inside the gate and towards the little grove. To his surprise, he found a worn, but serviceable lean-to hidden behind the house and led Freya to it. With a few Reparos and warming charms, the place made for a cosy little stable. Severus Summoned a bed of dried pine needles from the owls’ roost and conjured some hay to scatter atop it, then went to check on the birds.

He was stalling and he knew it, but he couldn’t gather the courage to face Harry yet. A part of him let him know he was being silly, that Harry cared about him and had been afraid when Severus
hadn’t wanted to follow him inside immediately, but the much larger part of him, the abused little boy who had no one in the whole world he could turn to, remembered how often he had been betrayed, how no one but his mother and grandparents had ever truly loved him.

He leaned on a thick pine branch and watched Odin and Hedwig play in the branches above him. Even Dumbledore had—no. Severus shook himself hard. He would not let himself compare Harry to that farce of a man. Harry had been kinder to him than anyone, and he deserved better than this waffling. With a sigh, Severus shook off his fears and beckoned Demeter. He had one last chore to take care of before he could join his love.

“Demeter, here are fifty galleons for a year’s subscription to the Prophet.” He conjured a piece of parchment and quill and wrote a quick note, tying both note and money to her leg once he had finished. “Here you are. A request for a new subscription, given to you and you alone, in the name of Xavier Prince. Take it to the Prophet headquarters and leave it for Amanda at the front desk?”

The owl nipped his ear to indicate her understanding and flew away. Severus watched her go, then gathered his courage and headed for the house’s back door.

Inside, the house had a large central room with a stone hearth in the middle and four smaller rooms off to the sides. From his knowledge of early wizarding architecture, he wagered one side would be outfitted with a pantry and washroom, both with greatly outdated equipment, and the other would be a storage room and private study meant more for letter writing and keeping post than actual studying. The bedrooms would be upstairs, as well as a possible library.

A staircase leading beneath the central room made Severus smile. So a potions master had owned this house once. His hopes and fears ratcheted up a notch. With ample extension charms and several badly needed plumbing and appliance updates, this would be a good home for him and for Harry, if only the young man would allow him to stay.

He swallowed his fear and listened for the Potters, but the house was utterly silent. His heart thumped in his throat as he climbed the stairs in search of his love. He found them in a small room likely used as a child’s bedroom once. Harry had dressed in his pyjamas and lay on a conjured bed, reading. Potter hung on a wall beside him.


“Harry?”

Harry sat and clutched his book, speaking in a soft, sad voice. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

Severus pinned an arm around his waist and swallowed a wave of terror. Was Harry going to leave him forever now? Let him bleed with a broken soul for all of eternity?

“I, I do not understand. Tell you what?”

Harry laid the book aside and looked out the window. “Since you took so long with the animals and Potter was exhausted and wanted to kip a bit, I thought I’d read to keep from going mad.”

Severus winced. “Forgive me. I found a lean-to behind the house. I thought it would make a decent place to keep Freya, so I repaired it for her. I came here directly after ensuring the owls were safe.”

He lowered his head. “And, and I needed a moment to gather my strength. Harry, I did not intend to hurt you. Please, forgive me.”

“Maybe not tonight, you didn’t, but I’m not so sure about before.” Harry wiped his eyes and opened
his book again. “So, like I said, I decided to read a bit in my book. You know, the soul magic book I picked up from Squire House? Seems that there’s a type of bond between powerful wizards in distress, an eternal bond, and it sounds an awful lot like what’s happening to us.” He met Severus’ eyes, and the betrayal within their emerald depths cut Severus to his core. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

Severus’ heart stilled. “Oh, oh gods. Harry, I—”

Harry’s face contorted with pain. “I knew it. You knew about the bond and hid it from me.”

Horrified and sick, Severus struggled not to weep and reached out for his love. “Harry, please! I wa —”

“How could you hide that, Severus? That we’re soul-bound for eternity? But then, you did want to find another house tonight.” Tears slipped down Harry’s cheeks. “I guess being bound to the Gryffindor Golden Boy was too much for your pride, huh? Or maybe the thought of being subjected to the kind of press I have to deal with all the time was just too horrible.” He turned his back and shuddered. “Maybe I’m just not enough for you.”

Struck through with shock and fear, Severus stood mute and frozen in the door, eyes wide and mouth half-open.

“I should have known,” Harry murmured in a breaking voice. “I should have known it was too good to be true.”

His heart-rending sob, followed by Potter’s quiet sniffling, jarred Severus into action. He darted across the room and caught Harry into his arms.

“No,” he murmured. “No, no, no to all of that! You are enough, Harry! You are my heart and the one part of my life that gives me hope.”

“Leave me alone.” Harry pressed half-heartedly against Severus’ chest, but the older man would not let him go.

“Please. Listen to my explanation, Harry. If you still wish me to go after I have told you my side of the tale, then I, I will …” His vision blurred, and terrible, crushing pain spread from his heart to his ribs. “I w-will leave. It is … the very last thing I wish to do, but if that is what you ask of me, I will g-go.” His voice cracked into a sob on the last word.

“Severus?” Harry wiped his eyes and looked at the spy with a wince. “Gods. You look … devastated.”

“I am.” He hesitantly touched Harry’s cheek and wiped wetness away. “Will you … at least let me explain before you … m-make me go?”

“You don’t want to be rid of me?”

Severus closed his eyes and let his tears fall, Harry’s words slicing through him like a knife to his heart.

“Merlin. I have truly made a mess of this if you could possibly believe I would ever wish to leave your side.” He cupped Harry’s cheek and held his gaze. “Do you not know that you are the best, most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me? How could you possibly believe yourself unworthy?”
A little of the pain left Harry’s eyes. “But then, why? Why would you hide this? Why would you want a different house, if you knew we were bound and didn’t want to be rid of me?”

Severus cringed away. “Because I believed you would wish to be rid of me! I am older, broken, miserable, and have the worst personality of anyone I have ever met. Who would want a soul-bond to the greasy dungeon bat?” Tears flowed down his cheeks, and even his Occlumency had no power to stop them. “Especially one so beautiful and perfect as you are?”

“I am not perfect,” Harry said with a frown. “Not even close.”

Severus touched Harry’s cheek. “You are to me. Harry, not since you stayed with me in my torture have I once found you wanting. You are beautiful and brave and intelligent and so unbelievably loving, but I? What can I say of myself other than I have intelligence and strength? It means little to a lover. Gods, even in trying to protect you, I have hurt you.” He turned away and buried his head in his hands. “You deserve better, Harry, and I thought you would wish for your freedom.”

Harry’s expression eased. “You really think so little of yourself?”

Severus gave him a terse nod.

With a sigh, Harry slid a hand into Severus’ hair. “Not greasy. Soft and silky and damned sexy.” A gentle hand lifted his face and turned him, and soft lips touched the tip of Severus’ nose. “Not a bat, but a gorgeous, intelligent, brave-as-a-dragon, caring man.” Warm arms surrounded Severus and brought him close. “And you’re not in the dungeons any longer, either. You’re in our house—our house, you understand?—and with me. And I’m happy like that.”

Severus gripped his trouser legs and dug his fingernails into the rough khaki. “How can you be? I am no one’s first choice of a partner. How can you not be disappointed?”

Harry pried one of Severus’ hands loose and held it close to his heart. “I’m not. I’m just happy you think I’m good enough for you. I, no one wants me. At least, not the real me. Everyone wants a piece of my fame or the hero I’ve never been, but they don’t care about the scared boy underneath wondering if anyone will ever love him. You’ve seen me at my best and at my worst, so I know you have no false expectations I could never hope to live up to.”

Severus sighed and brought Harry into a loving embrace. “I never intended to make you doubt your own worth.” He kissed Harry’s forehead and held him close. “Harry, you may have trouble believing this, but you are a hero to me. You saved my life, and you made it worth living again. I have not forgotten that.”

He buried his face in Harry’s mop. “I am only terrified that you will tire of me, that one day you will decide you have had enough of my moods and my temper and my odd habits and banish me from your home and your arms.” He kissed Harry’s hair and cupped the man’s face, rubbing a thumb over his scratchy stubble and smooth cheek, both wet with tears. “My Harry, I never wanted to leave you or hurt you. I, I ….” Fear and sorrow clogged his throat, but Severus forced himself to speak regardless. Harry deserved to know the entire truth. “I l-love you.”

The young man gasped and sat back, staring into Severus’ eyes, tears brimming his own. “S-Severus? Really?”

Severus couldn’t stop shaking. His tears wouldn’t cease. And his skin had gone paper-white, if the colour of his hands meant anything. He tried to raise his mental barriers, but a touch of Harry’s lips against his own stopped him.
“Don’t. Don’t shut me out.”

Severus winced. “I am … so afraid.”

“I know.” Harry straddled the man’s lap and wrapped his arms around Severus’ neck. “Is it true? Do you really … love me?”

The warmth of Harry so close, the scent of him, the feel of his breath on Severus’ cheek gave the older man the courage he lacked.

“Yes,” he whispered against Harry’s lips. “I am completely in love with you, Harry Potter. My soul and my heart are yours, irrevocably.”

“Oh, Verus!”

Harry claimed him in a tender, emotional kiss, and Severus dared hope he mightn’t be alone forever after all. After a long, breathless moment, Harry pulled back and rubbed the tears from Severus’ face.

“Love, that’s why you didn’t tell me about the bond and why you wanted a different house tonight? You were scared I’d make you leave?”

Severus trembled harder. “I am still afraid. Terrified.”

Harry cupped Severus’ cheeks and held his face in firm hands. “Ssh. Verus, look at me. Come on.” A sweet kiss soothed Severus’ fears, and he met Harry’s gaze. “Severus,” Harry said in a soft voice cracking with emotion, “I’m with you forever now, and nothing will change it. Nothing, you hear me? Not a spat, not a blazing row, not even if you blow up the entire house with one of your potions experiments—though let’s try to avoid that, okay?”

“Let’s definitely avoid that,” said a pale Potter.

Severus gave a wan chuckle. “I will do as you say. I would not want to hurt either of you.”

“Good.” Harry nuzzled his nose. “You’re not going anywhere, Severus Tobias Snape. You’re my soul-bond and my heart. And you should know that ….” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “That I love you, too.”

The man’s breath caught, and his eyes widened. “Merlin! Harry, you do? Truly?”

“With all of me. Love isn’t something I give lightly, either. I’m not going to get tired of you. You are mine, you hear me? I won’t give you up.”

Severus threw his arms around Harry and tugged him close, kissing the mage’s face all over. “Oh, Harry,” he said, his voice breathless and broken. “I didn’t dare believe it. I, I never thought I would hear those words again when Mother died. And I never hoped to hear them from you.” He squeezed Harry tight and buried his head in his hair. “I, I cannot, it’s so much.”

Harry kissed Severus’ forehead. “Believe, Verus. I’m yours as long as you want me.”

Overwhelmed and dizzy with the force of his emotions, Severus sobbed and caught the younger man against him, rocking their bodies together. “Harry, oh, my Harry. I love you so much.”

Harry held him, whispering soft words of love and promises for forever while Severus trembled and wept in his arms.

“I’m here, Verus,” he murmured and kissed Severus’ tears away. “I always will be.”
“Harry … I, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I thought, if you had some time ….”

“It’s okay. You were only afraid. Besides, this bond might just help us win the war.”

“P-perhaps. You are not angry?”

“No. Not anymore.”

Gentle kisses calmed Severus, and only then did he realise that Harry had somehow removed his shoes—magic, he supposed—and switched out his robes for the black pyjamas he liked. Severus frowned and tugged at the shirt.

“How did you know?”

Harry gave him a wry laugh. “I didn’t. I just swapped out your clothing with some of the nightclothes you brought from Hogwarts tonight.” He laid Severus back on the sheets and ran his fingers along the waistband of Severus’ trousers. “They’re … nice. Very nice.”

Struggling with the feel of Harry’s fingers touching him so intimately, Severus gasped out, “H-Harry, I can’t—Potter is … I can’t.”

Harry whipped his hand away and his ears went bright red. “Merlin. I was just—er, right. I’ll just keep my hands to myself tonight, yeah?”

Severus shook his head and brought the young mage into his arms. “Don’t. Not entirely, my love. I need to feel you, to know you are real.”

Harry smiled and lay beside him, sandwiching Severus between Harry and the portrait. “I’m real, love. And I want you close tonight, too.”

“I am here.” Severus wrapped an arm around Harry and carded through his mop. “Thank you. For loving me.”

Harry kissed him softly. “No thanks needed. But now that we’re okay—we are okay, yeah?”

Severus nodded. “If you are content.”

“I am, so ….” He turned to the boy in the portrait. “Are you still angry with him?”

Severus winced. “Potter, I am sorry.”

The boy shook his head and held up a hand. “I’m fine. But also … scared.” He curled in on himself. “Harry, if you’re soul-bound to the Professor, does that mean … I am, too?”

Severus’ heart stilled. “Merlin, I hope not! You are only a boy.”

Potter nodded. “Yeah. I mean, you’re a good man, Professor, but I-I don’t want to be bound to you. I mean, maybe if it was your fourteen-year-old portrait, I wouldn’t mind, but ….”

Severus shuddered. “I agree.”

Harry sat and gave Potter an assessing look. “Did you see his torture? When he called out across the … well, I suppose it was the soul realm or something, did you hear it? Second July this year?”

Potter let out a sigh. “No. That day was ….” He swallowed hard and looked away. “No, I never heard Professor Snape.”
Harry frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just … trying to get over the past.”

“All right, I guess. We’re here if you need to talk about it.”

Potter shuddered. “Not tonight. Please.”

“Okay. It’s okay. And I don’t think you’re bound to Severus. That night, he wasn’t calling to you, Little Harry. He didn’t know you existed. So you’re not bound, because his soul didn’t recognise yours. At least, that’s what I think happened.”

Severus sighed and hugged Harry tight. “You are probably correct. Besides that, while I do think portrait animation—and Potter’s in particular—is likely based on some sort of soul magic, I do not think it takes from the soul of the subject. Or, if it does, it is unbound. If it were tied to the subject’s soul, I believe the painting might well work like a horcrux and prevent the person from passing on.”

Harry paled. “What if that’s why most portraits don’t activate until after their subject is dead? Is he … do I …?”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “Ssh. Harry, once a person dies, their soul is gone from this plane—unless they remain as a ghost. And either way, it cannot be drawn from any longer.”

“So Little Harry isn’t a horcrux?”

“No. It is simply impossible. I do not know what he is, unless it is simply that your magic is so powerful, his painting activated before your death. That is the only possibility I can think of.”

“We should probably find whoever painted Little Harry and make sure.”

“That is wise. Perhaps Kingsley can wrangle it out of the bint during the investigation.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “The bint? That’s unusually informal for you.”

Severus scowled. “The foul bitch sexually abused a child. She does not deserve a formal title.”

“True enough. We’ll send King a Patronus in the morning, okay? Or, actually, Little Harry, do you know who painted you?”

Potter scowled. “No idea, and I really need to think of a new name so you’ll stop calling me ‘little.’”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, you do. It’s weird hearing Verus call you Potter and thinking he’s reverted back to Professor Snape for a moment.”

“If I truly do revert, Harry,” said Severus, his heart full of worry, “will you tell me?”


Severus shivered. “I, I am serious. I am afraid of becoming that man again and hurting you. Will you tell me gently, a-and ….” He closed his eyes and trembled. “Will you stay?”

“Severus …. ” Harry turned so his weight covered half of Severus’ chest, a firm pressure that the older man found comforting. “Listen to me, Severus. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted, regardless of our rough past. You’re my heart, and I need you like my next breath. You’re beautiful and strong and intelligent, and you love me with the power of all the sun and stars. You would willingly give your life for mine, and almost have more than once.”
Harry kissed the tip of his nose. “Do you really think I would ever throw all that away? I love you, Severus, and I will never let you go.”

With a cry, Severus tugged Harry down into a fiery kiss. He hoped Potter would not be traumatised, but gods, he needed this after such an emotional night, and Harry’s mouth tasted so good. Severus gasped at the feel of Harry returning his explorations, a tentative tongue dipping into his own mouth, tasting, claiming, branding Severus as Harry’s own. Fierce heat rubbed his belly, and Severus pulled back with a low moan.

“Gods, Harry,” he panted. “N-need you, want you, but we h-have to stop. I don’t, don’t want to hurt Potter.”

Harry buried his head into Severus’ neck. “S-sorry. I just … needed you so much.”

“It’s okay,” Potter said. “It was … actually kind of nice to watch.”

Harry’s ears flamed. “You watched?”

“Well, I am hanging right here, you know.”

Harry groaned. “Kind of thought you’d close your eyes or something.”

Potter chuckled. “I did at first, but then … I, I wanted to know what it was like. When it was good and both people were willing and … and …. He turned away. “S-sorry.”

“Oh, Potter,” Severus breathed, his chest icy for the boy’s pain.

Potter wiped his eyes and took a deep breath. “T-thanks. For letting me see what it’s like when two people love each other. That, when you both want it, it feels good. That it doesn’t have to h-hurt.”

Tears tracked down the boy’s cheeks, and Severus turned so he could wipe them away and comfort the child.

“Oh, gods. Potter, I, I wish I knew what to do to help you.”

“This helps.” The boy rubbed his cheek in Severus’ palm. “Touching me without hurting me. Talking to me, making me feel safe, that all helps.”

“Then I swear to you now, I will try with all of my power to help you feel safe and cared for—in a platonic manner—so you might heal and be whole once more.”

Potter’s cheeks reddened. “You care about me?”

Severus chuckled. “Well, I have not known this form of you long, but I do care for your safety and well-being. Just so you understand that it is a very different feeling than how I care for your older counterpart.”

Potter hesitated. “You, you’re sure? We are the same person.”

Severus looked between the grown Harry and back to the frightened little boy before him. “You are not, actually. Perhaps you started out as the same person, but in the past three years, your lives have been very different. Three years of war and growth has shaped Harry into a warrior, but you, you are still a boy. You have had different hurts, different experiences to my Harry, and now …. He rubbed his lips in thought. “Now you are more like brothers than the same person. Brothers who look very much alike. Nevertheless, you are in no danger from me. Even if you were the same person, he is my
Harry kissed Severus’ neck and made him shiver. “As you’re mine, love.” He sat and grinned at Potter. “I’ve no intention of sharing him regardless, but Little Harry! Brothers! Haven’t you always wanted a sibling? I know I did.”

Potter gave him a tentative nod. “Especially there. I was so alone.”

“You’re not alone any longer.” Harry pressed his hand against the painting’s shoulder. “You’ve got a big brother, your brother’s soul-bond, and pretty soon you’ll have a friend in Little Severus, I hope.”

Severus held Potter’s other shoulder. “And you will always be safe here. I promise.”

Potter gave them a teary grin. “Thanks. I, I’m glad you found me, Harry, Professor.”

“So are we,” Harry said with a smile. “Go to sleep if you can, little brother.”

“I think … I might be able to. I feel safe here.”

“Good,” said Severus.

Harry and Potter both settled in for the night, Harry wrapped within the comfort of Severus’ arms. The mage nuzzled Severus’ chest and hugged him tight.

“Goodnight, Severus. I love you.”

Severus stroked his hair. “As I do you. Goodnight, my love.”

“Goodnight, both of you,” said Potter with a yawn. He closed his eyes and slumped against his frame a moment later.

“Poor kid,” Harry whispered. “He’s utterly exhausted.”

“Well, we shall make sure he sleeps well here.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “Rest, my love. I am with you.”

Harry smiled and curled into his chest. “Yeah. S’good.”

They were quiet for a long moment until Harry murmured, “Verus?”

“Yes, love?”

“I hope they don’t find your grandparents’ house. I really liked it there.”

Severus sighed and held Harry closer. “So do I. It is only a cabin, but it has been my sanctuary for twenty years.”

“Yeah. Verus?”

“Hmm?”

“You’ll play for me again sometime, right?”

“Of course, love. Go to sleep now. We can talk more in the morning.”

“All right.” Harry leaned up and kissed him lightly. “Stay with me?”
Severus rested his chin upon Harry’s hair. “Always.”

Harry snuggled under his chin and sighed in relief. Severus watched over the young man until his breathing deepened and turned into light snores. Only once Harry was secure, did he dare close his eyes and rest as well.
Grains of Truth

Chapter Summary

Warning for a discussion of sexual assault upon a minor. This one is in more detail though still not explicit. I'll add tags around the sections where it's discussed for those of you who'd rather not have the details.

Severus woke the next morning eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Daily Prophet. To his delight, Demeter arrived bearing it and a red, shiny pamphlet as soon as he came downstairs.

“Perfect timing, girl. Thank you.”

He took the paper and pamphlet from her and Summoned an owl treat from his trunk. Demeter gobbled it down, and he went to find a suitable room to use as a study. Demeter followed him throughout the house, nosing through corners and under what little furniture remained. Severus assumed she was hunting, and had that verified when she emerged from under an ancient side table with a mouse in her beak.

“Good hunting, Demeter, but take your breakfast outside, please.” He flicked his wand to open a window.

She gave a muffled hoot and flew through. Severus closed it after her and gave the room before him a wry look. This looked like the study, as verified by the wooden slab desk in a sunny corner and built-in bookshelves, but after seeing Demeter nab a mouse two meters away, he couldn’t read there with any comfort. Instead, he returned to what he assumed to be the pantry and cast several cleaning charms and anti-vermin spells before transfiguring an old wooden bowl into a chair and conjuring a table.

Their first task today—after going into a nearby Muggle town for some breakfast—would be to outfit this place for habitation. Well, assuming the pamphlet had been handled properly.

With a devious grin, Severus sat and began to read.

_The Truth About You-Know-Who: Pureblood Fakery at Work!_

This booklet is a private publication sent to the subscribers of the Daily Prophet, and is not associated with the paper itself. Despite the risk to our beloved paper and its employees, we at the Daily Prophet believe this article to be of utmost importance and have, therefore, allowed its authors to send their work with our morning edition. The information within is shocking to say the least, and may well turn the tide of the war. May Merlin watch over those who dare to publish the truth in these dark times.

Without further ado, onto the story.

_Pureblood Hypocrisy_
For over twenty years, the snake-like man known only as “You-Know-Who” by most of Britain has haunted our nightmares and bloodied our streets, for nothing more than a belief that purebloods should rule the rest of the magical population. We have all lost loved ones to his twisted regime, to this godforsaken war, whether through the man himself or his Death Eater minions. Some have even joined his cause, showing themselves to be utterly cruel and ruthless—or if they are not ruthless enough, soon falling prey to those who are.

This evil, demented dredge of a man has struck so much fear into our hearts, we dare not even speak his name. Voldemort is a word breathed only in stuttered whispers, dark warnings, or by the bravest of men, but as it turns out, we ought not fear the name at all. Thanks to one of these brave men, this reporter—left anonymous for safety—has discovered the true origins of the one who holds magical Britain in his thrall, and they are not half so glorious as You-Know-Who would have everyone believe.

Harry Potter, who was kind enough to grant this humble reporter an interview, believes knowing the man behind the monstrous mask will make him seem more conquerable, less legendary, and I am surely disillusioned after learning that You-Know-Who, pureblood fanatic extraordinaire, is not a pureblood at all, but the son of an almost-squib mother and a Muggle father! That’s right, folks. The monster behind the ‘Purebloods First’ regime is a Half-Blood!

Severus allowed himself a short chuckle, imagining the look on Riddle’s face when he read his own pamphlet that morning. Cruciatus would run like water in the Death Eater hideout today, Severus was certain of that.

The Origins of You-Know-Who

Voldemort was born Tom Marvolo Riddle, the son of a witch of Slytherin’s line with barely any magic in her body, Merope Gaunt, and a Muggle father by the name of Tom Riddle, who wanted nothing to do with his son. ‘Voldemort’ is nothing more than a rearrangement of his Muggle name, chosen to spell: “I am Lord Voldemort.” A clever trick, to be sure, but a trick just the same.

Prior to Riddle Junior’s birth, Gaunt had escaped her cruel brother and father, respectively Morfin and Marvolo Gaunt, and planned to start a new life. As she had fallen in love with Riddle Senior but had little hope of securing his affection in return, she obtained or brewed herself a dose of Amortentia and dosed Riddle. Soon after, Gaunt and Riddle married and relocated to London ....

Severus read the rest of the article in fascination, learning more not just about the self-fashioned Dark Lord, but about the so-called lord of light, too. Severus knew Dumbledore had shown Harry pensieve memories of Merope and Morfin Gaunt. So leaving Voldemort alive wasn’t a part of the old man’s schemes, but Harry? No, Dumbledore had made it clear to Severus that he expected Harry to die ‘for the greater good.’

How much of what Dumbledore had told Severus was true? Was Harry a horcrux, or had the manipulative bastard only said so to take out his competition?

Severus didn’t know, but he would soon find out. He certainly wouldn’t trust the old man blindly and tell Harry he had to die when he loved Harry and would do anything to spare him such a terrible fate, or even the fear of it. He would investigate on his own and find out the truth before he said a
word.

And if it was true, Severus would find a way to remove it without damaging his family. He would not lose either Harry or Potter, would not give them up when he had already lost so much to this bloody war.

Severus froze, chills running through his entire body. If Potter was a portrait of Harry and Harry turned out to have a horcrux of Riddle in his scar, did that mean Potter’s scar was a horcrux too? He was just a painting. Was it even possible to replicate a horcrux by painting and animating it?

Come to think of it, how was Potter alive at all? Paintings generally didn’t animate until after their subject’s death. As Harry was very much alive, what force animated Potter?

Perhaps it was Harry’s powerful magic. It was the only explanation Severus could think of, but this presented another problem: how would they animate little Severus since the older version of himself was still living and definitely not a mage? Could Harry bring the boy to life with his magic?

He had better talk to the Potters about this. He didn’t want Potter to get his hopes up too high only to have them come crashing down when their plans didn’t work.

Severus gripped the table and shook his head. No. They would find a way. They had to, for the boy’s sake. Perhaps he could invent a spell or sacrifice a bit of his own life to use for the photo’s spirit. Severus would gladly do so, if it gave Potter a way to heal.

And once they had this figured out, then they would find a way to destroy the horcruxes in the Potters, if they existed, without breaking Severus’ family apart. He wasn’t willing to give up either of them.

With a greeting that jolted Severus out of his musing, Harry came into the room and stuck Potter’s portrait to the wall overlooking the table. After a wave to his portrait, he kissed Severus’ cheek in greeting. “Good morning, love. How did they do?”

Severus tugged Harry into his lap and held him close. “Quite well, actually. This article about Riddle’s origins is both fascinating and damning. He’ll go absolutely mad with fury.”

Harry settled back against Severus’ chest and nodded. “He’ll be even madder when he meets all the wards we set around the Prophet and finds we’ve vanished again.”

“Indeed.”

Severus read on, Harry’s body heat soothing his aches from the day before. Potter’s eyes fixated on him, and Severus wondered if he had said something offensive.

“Potter, are you well this morning?”

The portrait blushed. “Oh. Yes, sir. Just a little lonely.”

Severus gently moved Harry off his lap and went to the portrait. He touched the boy’s hair and ran his fingers down the side of his face, wondering at Harry’s spell that made it feel as if he were touching an actual person rather than paint.

“We will try to contact Thomas today, little one. I promise.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll write him a letter as soon as I’m done with this, mate.”
Potter gave them both a bright smile. “Thanks, you two. You know, between having you as a brother, Harry, and Professor Snape being so gentle with me, I … I feel like I have a real family now.” Tears shone on his lashes. “I always wanted one.”

The boy’s soft words touched Severus’ heart in a way he hadn’t expected. Potter was merely a painting, and yet, Severus could not help but feel a sort of paternal affection for him. And perhaps that was exactly what Potter needed—a father figure to help him through his pain. Severus was willing to stand in those shoes, if Potter wished. Either way, he would be his friend.

Severus patted Potter’s shoulder. “We are your family now. No matter what happens, you will always have a home with us.”

Potter gave him a shy smile. “Really? I, I’d like that. T-thanks, Professor.”

“You do not need to call me by a title that no longer fits. Severus will do, if you like.”

“But then what will I call your portrait? May I call you Snape for now?”

“If it helps you keep us separate, yes. But know you have permission to call me by my given name if you so choose. And … my portrait. Damn! I had almost forgotten. Potter, we have a problem.”

Harry laid the pamphlet aside and fixed his eyes on Severus. “What’s the matter, love?”

Severus sighed and sat beside Potter. “Little one, I’m so sorry. But my photo—how will we animate it, Harry? I’m still living. Perhaps your own portrait is alive because of the immense size and nature of your core, but I am not a mage. My portrait will not have such a benefit.”

Potter shrank into himself. “So … so I’ll have to stay alone forever?”

Severus laid a hand on the boy’s cheek. “No, Potter. Never alone. I am always with you as is your brother, and we will not give up on animating my portrait for you, either.”

“Then … there might be a way?” Potter looked up at him with hope and fear shining in his huge emerald eyes.

Severus could not tell a face like that ‘no.’

“Perhaps.”

“But … how?”

“That, I do not yet know.” Severus paced the length of the room. “Harry may be able to bring him to life using his magic. In fact, I do believe he will be able to—after all, he gave you speech and touch, and no portrait has ever been able to feel before to the best of my knowledge.” He clenched his fists at his side, determination straightening his spine. “However, if he cannot, I will find a way myself. I will sacrifice a bit of myself to bring him to life if necessary, or invent a potion, or perhaps a spell. I will find a way, for your sake, Potter.”

Potter gasped. “You … you would give up a part of your life … for me?”

“Yes. I would do so gladly to heal you.”

Potter blinked tears down his cheeks and pressed himself against the canvas, spreading his arms as if attempting to hug Severus. The man could only press near as well, but as he moved back, he kissed Potter’s cheek and rubbed his hair with affection.
“You will not be alone forever, Potter. I swear it. We will find a way.”

“Yeah, we will.” Harry conjured a chair and sat with Severus. “Severus, this might sound a bit mad, but was there any picture of you that your mum was particularly fond of?”

“Fond of?” Severus gave Harry a bemused frown. “I suppose so, but what does that have to do with the situation at hand?”

Harry shrugged. “It might not have anything to do with it, but I have this hunch ….”

Severus eyebrows shot up. “Instinct again. Explain it, love, if you’re able.”

Harry rubbed his chin with a fingertip. “Well, it’s just that love magic has protected my soul from possession and death and all kinds of other things. It’s so strong. I guess I was thinking that maybe if there was a photo she really loved, it might retain a little of that for me to work with and make animating him by my magic easier.”

Severus sat back in his chair, thinking. “Well, I believe I know one that may work. I had forgotten it until you mentioned this, but at the beginning of my fifth year, Mother took a Polaroid photo of me in the park where I played as a child. She said she wanted something to keep near her, so she wouldn’t miss me so much. As far as I am aware, she kept the photo in her breast pocket at all times. She only moved him to a photo frame on the kitchen cupboard when she was cooking or washing dishes, out of fear of ruining it with the water. It may be enough for your purposes.”

Harry grinned. “Yeah, that one will be perfect, Verus.” His grin faded to a fearful look. “Did he survive the … m-murders?”

Severus closed his eyes and fought back a wave of anguish. A warm hand in his own brought him back to the present.

“Severus?”

Severus shook off his pain and focused on Harry’s question. “Yes, I believe he survived. Mother and I were cooking dinner when the bastard … killed her. She had put him in the frame, if memory serves. It is most likely that he is still sitting in the exact same place.”

Harry paled. “Staring at the scene of his mother’s and baby sister’s death for twenty years?”

Severus bent over as if punched in the gut. “Merlin! He is … do you suppose he understands?”

Harry’s eyes went grim. “I don’t know, but either way, we should get him out of there as soon as possible.”

Severus nodded, shaken at the thought of his photo’s potential suffering. “Fuck. I, I did not know.”

Harry kissed him lightly. “Ssh. You were only a child yourself, Severus. Of course you didn’t know. We’ll get him out as soon as we’re able, okay?”

Severus swallowed and gave Harry a shaky nod. “R-right. You are right.” He shook his head and tried to collect his wits. “Forgive me. I … I did not intend to make him suffer so.”

“He may not be able to remember it. Like you said, he’s just a photo.” Harry shuddered and wrapped his arms around his waist. “But I don’t like leaving him there regardless.”

Severus nodded. “Yes. I feel the same.”
Harry stood and returned to the pamphlet, conjuring a new chair as Severus hadn’t been able to maintain two in his sudden grief.

“Well, first thing’s first,” said Harry with a resolute expression, “we’ve got to get some furniture for this place. We’ll do that today, and we’ll get some reliable house elves while we’re in town. We can make arrangements to rescue your photo as soon as we get McGonagall updated on the situation and she has a moment to go after him. I’m going to get stuff to write Dean right now.”

Severus released a sigh. “Yes, yes. Thank you, Harry.”

Harry kissed him lightly. “Anytime.” He touched Severus’ cheek briefly, then, with no other warning than a mischievous smirk, apparated upstairs.

Severus started at the sudden crack. “He might have walked ….”

Potter chuckled. “I think he wanted to make me laugh.”

Severus smiled. “I am glad to see it worked.” He patted Potter’s shoulder. “We will take you to the Burrow today while we’re shopping so you needn’t spend the day alone. But say nothing of Dumbledore’s betrayal. Weasley cannot yet be trusted with that information, not because he is dark or untrustworthy, but simply because he is far too loyal to Dumbledore and far too antagonistic towards me.”

“Should be the other way around,” grumbled Potter, “but I understand. I’m glad I’ll get to see him. I miss him and Hermione so much.”

“You shall see them soon.” Severus smirked. “Did Harry tell you they are dating now? Granger and Weasley?”

Potter gasped and shook his head. “Really?”

“As far as I know.”

“ Weird.”

Severus laughed. “I have often thought she could have chosen a man with better wits, but then, love is blind, or so they say.” He looked to the door, where Harry had gone. “He might certainly do better than myself, after all.”

Potter pouted. “Hush. About Ron and about yourself. He’s smart enough, and you’re all right.”

“Thank you. And, for your sake and Harry’s, I shall strive to abstain from teasing Mister Weasley, so long as he comports himself like an adult. If he acts immaturely, I may be forced to point it out.”

Potter chuckled. “Yeah, go for it. Just don’t poke at him for no reason, yeah? He is my best mate.”

“As you wish.” Severus smirked. “Well, at least you will be forewarned should we find them to be … occupied when we take you to the Burrow.” He shook his head. “I would rather just take you along with us to Diagon Alley, but it would be impractical. We would draw too much attention regardless. I am sorry, Potter.”

Potter gave him a wan smile. “You can’t float a portrait through town all the time, Snape. It’s okay. I know I’m just a painting. I’m just glad I can feel touch again and I’m not in that bint’s office any longer.”
Harry returned to the kitchen on foot, Muggle notebook and biro in hand, and sat at the table. “We’re glad, too. I’m only sorry we didn’t know sooner.”

Potter leaned against Severus’ hand. “I’ll be okay. You two are helping so much. Snape especially is healing me, just by these gentle touches. It’s nice to know they don’t have to hurt.”

Severus blanched. “Gods, Potter. If I had known, I’d have come long ago.”

“I know.” Potter pressed his forehead into Severus’ palm and sighed. “Just keep treating me like this, and I’ll recover. It’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

“I swear it,” Severus murmured. “I will help you to the best of my ability, Potter.”

“Thank you.” Potter kissed Severus’ palm, all he could reach, and gave the man a smile.

Severus rubbed the boy’s hair. “Potter, about what that bitch did to you—”

Potter went ashen and pulled away. “Please. Not yet. Don’t make me.”

Severus laid a hand over the boy’s shoulder, all he dared touch after reminding Potter of his horrible past. “All right. If you are not ready, I shall not force you to speak. Only, know I am here for you when you are. But do explain one thing to me—”

~~~Description of child sexual abuse~~~

“How could she touch you? You are a painting, and until Harry gave you that spell, you couldn’t feel touch, could you?”

Potter closed his eyes. “N-no. But she could still f-freeze me in place and, and … c-cast spells, and … and ….”

~~~End Descriptions~~~

Potter turned away and covered his face. “I’m sorry. I just can’t.”

Severus held a hand above the boy’s back but did not touch him. “Potter, I am going to touch your shoulder. Just your shoulders. It is only I. You are safe here.”

The boy shuddered and sighed as Severus’ hand came down and gently rubbed across his shoulders. “I-I’m sorry, Snape.”

“It is quite all right. If I ask you some questions, would you be able to answer them?”

Potter turned and wiped his eyes. “N-not yet.”

“All right. There is no rush. I only wish you to speak of it so you do are able to heal. I will not force you to do so before you are ready.”

Potter gave a relieved sigh and leaned against the canvas, as if he was laying his head on Severus’ shoulder. The man leaned against the canvas to oblige the boy.

“Thank you,” Potter murmured. “I know I need to talk about it soon, I, I’m just, I can’t yet. I need time to just be okay first.”

“As you wish, love. And I do not mean that in the same manner I do for Harry, so please do not be afraid.”
Potter stood and stepped back, his eyes wide. “Then how do--do you mean it?”

“I would call any child I cared for by the same name. I would say this to a son, if I had one.”

Potter gasped. “You, you care for me like a son?”

Severus frowned. “I have never had one, so I cannot be certain, but I believe so. I care for you more than any child I have ever known at any rate.”

Potter gave a strangled sort of cry and threw himself into the canvas, arms stretched wide for Severus. The older man gave him a soft smile and hugged the painting, as close as he could come to embracing the boy.

It wasn’t enough. It hurt to feel nothing but canvas backing and wood where he wanted to feel flesh and blood.

Tears stung Severus’ eyes and collected on his lashes. “Oh, love. How much I wish you were fully human, that I might hold you in reality.”

A soft sound from behind him was his only warning of Harry’s approach. The young man wrapped strong arms around him from behind and whispered into his shoulder.

“If I could give you one wish, Severus ….”

Severus sighed and rubbed his eyes. Harry wanted to help, but he couldn’t. Mage or not, he could not give a painting true life. It was a pipe dream, but no matter. Severus’ love would heal the boy whether paint or flesh comprised him. Severus held Harry’s hand against his stomach and stepped back from the painting, checking him for tears or signs of alarm.

“Are you well, Potter?”

The boy gave a little laugh and wiped streams of tears from his cheeks. “Yeah, just a bit overwhelmed. I’ve found a brother and a father of a sort overnight when I’ve never had anyone.”

“Yes. We are your family now, love.” Severus touched his shoulder where Potter had wept and frowned to find his shoulder wet. He rubbed his damp thumb and forefinger together. A sniff and a dab with his tongue verified the substance as actual tears.

Gods, how did a portrait have the ability to weep?

Severus looked up to find both Harry and Potter staring at him with identical bemused expressions. Heat traced his cheeks.

“Ah, I, forgive me. I am still surprised that you are able to cry, Potter. I do not understand how a portrait is capable of it.”

The boy hugged his chest and shrunk into himself. “I don’t know either, but I—”

~~~Description of child sexual abuse~~~

“I always did when, when she … touched me. It made her think I was real. Made her do it more, but I couldn’t stop crying.”

Severus blanched. “Oh, love.”

Potter sobbed and pressed his head against the canvas. “It hurt! I wanted, I wanted my first time, the
first time someone touched me to be special, but she, she ...."

~~~End Descriptions~~~

He broke into bitter tears, and Severus ached to hold him.

“Potter, is it all right if I touch your hair and hands? I do not wish to frighten you.”

“Yeah,” he sobbed. “Yeah, hug me. Make it stop.”

Severus hugged the painting as tight as he could, praying his touch and voice soothed the boy. “Ssh. Love, you’re safe. I am here, Harry is here. We are with you, and, so help me, no one will ever touch you without your permission again. I will kill the one who tries it.”

“Me too,” Harry said in a broken voice.

Severus pulled him into their embrace, too. “My little family. I swear I will protect you both.”

The real Harry stood on tiptoe and pressed a tender kiss to his cheek. “As will I.”

Severus smiled sadly and held the portrait tight against his chest until his tears stopped.

“There, love. Are you feeling any better now?”

Potter rubbed red eyes and nodded. “Much better. Lighter, now that I’ve told you a little. I don’t think I’m ready to talk more, though.”

“I understand. I am glad you were able to trust us this much.”

Potter frowned. “Severus, put your cheek against the canvas?”

Severus gave the boy a bemused look but did as he was asked. A light peck on his skin shocked and warmed him to his core. He cupped a hand over his cheek and gave Potter a soft smile.

“Thank you, Potter,” he murmured. “That is the first time a child has kissed me since Lily.”

Both Potters gasped. “Mum?”

Severus nodded. “She was my only friend, until that incident you saw in the pensieve, Harry. That was the first time I hurt her too much, and she never forgave me.” He forced back a wave of tears. “Gods, how I miss her.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. “No wonder you were so angry that day I broke into your pensieve! It must have torn you apart to relive it beside her son.”

Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Yes, at the time, it hurt, but now I am glad that you’ve seen it, if only because it birthed a little empathy in your heart for me.”

Potter looked between them with confusion. “Um, what are you talking about?”

Harry growled and clenched his fists. “Da and Sirius practically sexually assaulted him in front of all their peers, and no one did anything to stop it. Not Remus, not even Mum.”

Potter went ashen and covered his mouth with his hand. “D-Da, he did that?”

“Yeah. It sucked for me too, when I realised what an arse Da really was.” Harry gave Severus a
penitent look. “I’m sorry, love. I really shouldn’t have said anything without your permission, but is it okay if I tell him?”

Severus closed his eyes and gave a terse nod, willing back the waves of humiliation and fear that memory caused. A sudden warmth at his back and an arm around his waist soothed him, reminding him that someone found him worthy now, and he was loved. Severus turned into Harry’s embrace and knelt so that he might bury his head in the young man’s shoulder. A gentle hand in his hair and one wrapped about his shoulders made him feel protected, even as Harry shared one of the worst memories of his past.

Harry gave a sad sigh. “Little brother, much as I’d like to think of Da and Sirius as heroes, truth is, until they grew up a bit, they were awful. Worse than Malfoy. They tortured Severus his entire time at Hogwarts for no other reason than he was poor and in Slytherin, but the day they cornered him after the OWLs was beyond the pale.”

Potter trembled and sank into a chair at the back of his painting. “What happened?”

Harry tipped Severus’ chin to look into his eyes. “Verus? Is it okay if I tell him what I saw?”

Severus gave him a terse nod and buried his face in Harry’s shirt once more, breathing in the scent of citrus that seemed to follow him everywhere.

“Well,” said Harry in a low voice, “Verus had gone to sit under that big tree by the lake, you remember it? He was alone and just minding his own business, reading and not bothering a soul. Then Da and Sirius came, with Remus and Pettigrew and probably twenty of their other mates in tow. They cornered Verus and hung him in the air by his toes—that was Severus’ own jinx, too. He made it, and they used it against him.

“Anyway, they left him hanging up there, despite the fact that he had nothing but y-fronts on under his robes and they were exposing him to the entire school. Severus was brilliant and tried to fight back, but there were too many, and he was humiliated. They insulted him, and when Mum came and told them off, Severus was even more hurt and humiliated. He lashed out and called her Mudblood, and she left him. Just left him hanging there for those idiots to torture. I, I don’t know if they actually did it, but when the present Severus pulled me out of the memory, Da was going on about taking off his pants, too.”

~~~Description of child sexual abuse, going a bit past what was in canon~~~

Severus let out an anguished groan, and Harry clutched him tight.

“Oh gods. He did it, didn’t he, love?”

Severus gave a terse nod and buried his head into Harry’s neck. “They had started in on a whipping curse on my bare arse before Lupin finally snapped and disarmed and hexed them all. He did take as many points as he could from them and forced them all to take detention with Filch, but he could do nothing worse to them as a prefect, and he hadn’t the courage to report them. It was too little, too late for me. I was left half-naked and bleeding until Regulus found me an hour or so later and carried me to the infirmary.”

~~~End Descriptions~~~
Severus started to answer, but a sudden crack at his side startled him. He whipped his head around to see Harry standing near the wall, panting, with his fist buried into the plaster and streaks of pink on the edges.

“Harry!” Severus gently removed the man’s hand and sighed at the damage to his knuckles and fingers. “Merlin, such a mess.”

“I’m not sorry,” said a furious Harry. “I wish it was his fucking face. How could he? How could any decent human being hurt someone like that? And you … the one his own son loves? I’d kill him if he wasn’t ….” Harry’s anger cracked down the middle and tears streaked his face. He swiped them away with his uninjured hand. “It’s not right. He shouldn’t be dead. I should be able to kick his arse for this.”

Severus lifted a shaky hand towards Harry’s cheek. “Harry … I … I apolo—”

Harry cried, “No! You don’t apologise for this. It’s not your fault.” He shuddered and wrapped his uninjured hand across his waist. “Gods. How could he? Even if it were Malfoy, I couldn’t do such a thing. I’d hex the little snot, but to strip him off in front of his classmates and whip him?” He sank into the conjured chair in front of Severus. “Fuck. I can’t understand it.”

Severus sighed. “No, you cannot, because you are a good man with a heart of pure light who would never do such a terrible thing.” He shook his head and held his wand over Harry’s hand. “Be still while I heal this.”

“All right.” Harry slumped into his chair with a sigh. “I’m sorry, Verus. I just … it made me so bloody furious.”

Severus gave the wall a wry look. “I suppose we are lucky you did not break all the windows in the house this time.”

Harry gave a wan chuckle as Severus went into a healing chant, one for more general healing than his countercurse to *Sectumsempra*.

Harry looked up and frowned. “What chant is that, Severus?”

Severus paused in his healing. “It is *Sana Plagara*. Literally, *heal wounds*. It is made for simple wounds, unlike the dark magic-centred *Vulnera Sanentur*.”

“Could I try it?”

‘Hmm. Try to heal himself? This should be interesting.’

Severus moved back and waved him on. “By all means.”

Harry began the chant, and Severus boggled as it healed the young mage’s hand.

Merlin. He hadn’t expected it to work.

After a couple of repetitions, Harry’s hand was good as new. Not so much the wall. Severus cast a *Scourgify* and *Reparo* to fix the damage to their home.

“Well, that worked a charm,” said Potter.

Severus chuckled. “It is a charm. They were all charms.”

“Guess it’s good it worked like one, then,” said Harry. “Thank you, Verus.”
Severus held Harry’s hand up, examining the results, and shook his head. “Merlin, Harry. You are amazing. I had intended that to be a lesson—chanters cannot usually heal themselves—but it appears you have taught me.” He let Harry’s hand drop with a sigh. “You are brilliant, Harry. Brave and strong and handsome. What are you doing with a used-up, ugly old man like me?”

“Paugh! You’re gorgeous, Verus. And you’re mine.”

Harry grabbed Severus’ face and kissed him with such love, Severus felt he would melt into the young mage. As it was, he couldn’t help tangling his fingers in Harry’s wild hair and leaning in closer.

“Enough self-hatred, Severus Snape,” Harry murmured against Severus’ mouth. “You’re sexy and strong and brilliant and brave as a dragon. Your eyes are gorgeous, and your lips, your hands, your legs, your arms, your feet, this raven-silk hair of yours. I haven’t seen the rest of you—well, at least not when you’re whole and not covered in blood—but even then, I thought you were beautiful. I’ll probably melt when I see you, all of you, for the first time.”


Harry gave a wry chuckle. “I wasn’t going to take your clothes off now, Severus! Merlin. All I was saying is that I love your face and body and that I do find you attractive. And, more importantly, your heart is just as lovely, even if you think it’s not.” He kissed Severus with love and smoothed back his hair. “You know what, though? It’s okay that you don’t know how wonderful you are yet, because it’s my job to heal you anyway.” He laid a hand over Severus’ chest and kissed him again. “I love you, Severus. I’m not going anywhere.”

Harry’s words gently removed icicles and knives from Severus’ broken heart, and he laid his head on the young man’s chest. “I love you so much, my Harry.”

A gentle hand stroked through Severus’ hair. “I love you, too, my gorgeous, brilliant, brave man.”

Another wave of tears blurred Severus’ vision. “Y-you truly think me so wonderful?”

“And more, love.” Harry kissed him softly, and Severus’ chest ached with the depth of his love for the young man.

Yet, his fears would not let him stay silent. “But, Harry, what will you do if I should lash out and hurt you? Like I hurt Lily. I shall strive never to do so, but what if I fail?”

Harry stroked tears from Severus’ cheeks and gave him a sad smile. “Love, that terrifies you, doesn’t it? You’re afraid you’ll drive me away with your sharp tongue?”
Overwhelmed and shaking with the depth of his fear, Severus could only nod.

Harry kissed his forehead tenderly, then tipped Severus’ chin up once more. “No. That will never happen. Severus, for one, I will never let you fall into a similar situation. I will protect you with my life.”

Harry cupped Severus’ cheeks and looked into his eyes. “But if I should somehow fail you and come across you while you are being hurt and abused, even if you do call me Mudblood, arsehole, whatever—I don’t care. I won’t abandon you. I’ll admittedly remind you to mind your tongue and that I’m on your side, but then I’ll get you to safety, beat your attackers bloody, bring you home, and cradle you close until you’re okay again. I swear it.”

He kissed Severus with soft lips and just the tip of his tongue, enough to melt the icy fear in Severus’ heart.

“Severus, it’s okay. I love you. I will never abandon you.”

Severus let slip a soft cry and threw his arms around Harry. “I … I did not realise how much I needed to hear that.” He kissed the mage’s temple and struggled to control his tears. “I was so afraid.”


Severus breathed, “H-Harry ….”

“Ssh. I’m here.”

Severus buried his head in Harry’s shoulder for a long moment, tears flowing hard despite his best efforts to control them. Harry didn’t seem to mind. He simply held Severus and smoothed the older man’s hair while he wept. Beside him, Potter was sniffling, too, and Severus looked up to see Harry’s palm pressed against the younger Potter’s and tears running down the canvas.

Seeing the boy’s distress weakened Severus’ own enough for him to rally. “Potter? What is it, love?”

“I … don’t really know,” the boy said. “Just … I’ve been through a lot the last couple of days, and I don’t like seeing you cry.” He scrubbed a hand across his face. “Merlin. I never thought I’d live to see Professor Snape cry.”

Severus flinched and turned away. “You think I had no right to cry? Forgive me for being human.”

And there was that coldness he had feared. Surely they would be angry with him, turn away from him.

“Snape—Severus,” said Potter, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make it sound bad. I was just a bit shocked and … well, as overwhelmed as you were. It’s just that you were always so tough in class. I mean, you still are—gods. I just … don’t like to see you in pain, Severus.”

“It’s okay, Verus,” said Harry in soothing tones. “Neither of us is angry or ashamed of you. We’re just concerned.”

Severus dared to breathe again and turned, his eyes fixed on Harry. “You are not angry?”

“Not a bit.” Potter gave Harry a curious look. “Nice save, Harry, but when did you get so good with emotional stuff?”
Harry laughed. “Blame Hermione. She’s given me so much to study over the summers lately—even wizarding stuff and classwork disguised as Muggle books so the Dursleys couldn’t complain—I can’t even keep it all straight. It’s a miracle I’m not buttoning my trainers and tying my trousers by this point.”

Potter snickered.

“Besides, I already knew I have to be gentle with Severus.” Harry came to Severus and wrapped him in a hug. “You’ve been hurt and alone too long. You deserve someone to be gentle with you.”

Severus swallowed hard. “Harry … why aren’t you angry with me?”


Severus sighed and laid his head against Harry’s. “I love you.”

“And I love you as well.” Harry kissed him lightly. “I need to get back to my letter, love. Are you going to be okay?”

Severus sighed and straightened. “Yes. I will sit here with Potter and talk with him.”

Harry smiled. “You do that.” With another gentle kiss, he returned to his letter.

Severus looked to the painting. “Little love, are you well?”

Potter pouted. “Please don’t call me little.”

Severus frowned. “Does it hurt you?”

“No,” said Potter with a wry smile, “but it’s really annoying. I’m … well, I know I’m short. I just don’t like being reminded of it all the time.”

“I will try to remember.”

Severus chatted with the boy for a bit, then recalled he had two letters to write as well. He hadn’t time to do both, but perhaps he could write Minerva this morning and Poppy later. He needed to get Minerva’s out first anyway, for the photo’s sake. Gods, he hoped the poor thing wasn’t cognizant.

“Harry, love, is there enough paper there for me to write a letter as well?”

Harry nodded and carefully removed a few sheets of paper. “Are you writing McGonagall?”

“Yes. I did not have time to say goodbye to either her or Poppy properly, and I must ask her about the photo. I shall write Poppy this evening as well.”

Harry chuckled. “Madam Pomfrey won’t take a letter, you know. She’ll drag you to the hospital wing and shove potions down your throat until you tell her goodbye in person. Come to think of it, so might McGonagall. Only it’d be catnip she’s shoving down your throat.”

Severus laughed. “Perhaps they might. Even so, I cannot neglect them. And Minerva would be far more likely to choke me on talisker.”

As Potter and Harry’s laughter quieted, Severus settled in and began to write, once in a while looking up to check on Potter and Harry. They both seemed content, Potter watching Harry’s letter over his shoulder and Harry focusing on his work.
“Done, I think,” said Harry with a nod.

“I have finished mine as well. Should we send them with Demeter, do you think?”

Harry shrugged. “We might give them to our own owls since they’re going to places we know, and they need jobs, too.”

“That is acceptable.” Severus whistled and began tying the letters to their owls’ legs.

After a moment, Potter said, “Are you two going to tell Ron about your relationship today? We should bring popcorn if you do.”

Severus chuckled. “Yes, I cannot imagine he will be thrilled.”

“Understatement,” said a pale Harry.

Severus nodded. “Despite the furore it will no doubt cause, I believe we should tell the Weasleys and Miss Granger. It is unfair to ask you to keep such important news from those you consider family, Harry, and unfair not to tell them.”

Harry turned from Hedwig, a pinched expression on his face. “Love, I, I’m afraid. I’m not even sure Ron knows I’m gay, let alone involved with his least favourite professor. Well, besides Umbridge. Even at your worst, you never held a candle to that bitch.”

Severus scowled. “Thank you, I think.”

Harry chuckled. “Verus, I was saying that even when I hated you, I knew you weren’t really evil. And now that I’ve seen the good in you, I know you’re the best man in the world.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Balderdash. I was a menace and you know it.” He smiled and gave a little laugh. “But I do thank you for your kind words.”

He went to Harry’s side and kissed the young mage’s hair. “Love, I do understand your worries about Weasley, but I fear that the longer you hide our news, the more damage it will do to your relationship with him and with the others as well—Granger especially. As well, I have been considering the strategic risk, and we cannot be more of a target for Riddle’s wrath than we already are. Dumbledore, perhaps, but that is a risk I am willing to take if it means your happiness is preserved. Especially now that you are a mage and he has no idea where we are.”

Harry shivered. “He’ll hate me. Ron will. He abandoned me during the Triwizard for much less.”

“If he is your friend, he will learn to accept it. Either way, you cannot hide it long. They will find out eventually, and it will hurt them far less if it comes from you rather than deduction.”

Harry sighed and kissed Severus lightly. “No, you’re right. And you deserve better than that anyway. I won’t have you as a dirty little secret. You’re my world, and if they can’t accept you, then they aren’t who I thought they were.” He closed his eyes and leaned against Severus’ chest. “But I’m afraid. Stay by my side and apparate us out if it gets too mad?”

Severus stroked Harry’s cheek. “I promise.”

“Thanks.” Harry moved to tie up his letter, but before his hand met the paper, a pained cry escaped him and he sank to the floor. Severus rushed to catch him, his heart pounding in his throat.

“Harry! Love, are you all right? What is it?”
Harry came up laughing, though he rubbed his scar at the same time. “Yeah, might need a headache potion, but I’m okay.”

“What was that, then?”

Harry snorted. “Voldemort saw the pamphlet. He’s bloody furious.”

Severus couldn’t help but grin. “I will send Shacklebolt a Patronus.”

“Probably for the best, yeah.”

Harry’s heart pattered like mad as they approached the Burrow, his portrait against his chest and his ‘Holly’ potions and antidotes in his pocket. Severus walked at his side, forbidding as ever, but Harry knew his aura came more from fear than true loathing.

Harry couldn’t imagine this meeting going well. Severus deserved Harry’s confidence and the Weasleys and Hermione deserved the truth, but Ron would protest without a doubt. Loudly. He only hoped Portrait Harry would have a place to stay when all was said and done. None of it was the young Harry’s fault.

They really needed to come up with a new name for Portrait Harry. Having two was too confusing, and Harry hated hearing his surname all the time.

“Mate,” Harry said to the portrait, “any luck on thinking of a name for yourself?”

“Not yet,” the portrait replied. “I had thought of ‘James,’ but Severus would hate it. And after what you’ve told me about Da, I don’t think we’re much alike after all.”

“Yeah.” Harry kicked a stone in the path, his heart aching. “I know what you mean.”

Severus rubbed his lip in thought. “Hmm. What do you think of ‘Evan?’”

Portrait Harry frowned. “Why Evan?”

“For your mother. Lily Evans Potter.”

“Her maiden name was Evans?” Potter frowned. “I dunno. If Mum left you there on her own and never forgave you when she was at fault, I reckon I’m not much like her, either.”

“Hmm.” Harry rubbed his chin, thinking hard. “Remember that flick we watched a few years back? We snuck into the living room and thought the main character was dead sexy.”

Potter blushed. “Yeah. Figured out we were gay then, but didn’t want to admit it.”

“Being gay and a wizard at the Dursleys’ was pretty much a death sentence, but we neither one have to worry about it now. Well, the main character, I think his name was Seth. Do you like that?”

“Yeah, I do, actually. Seth. Do you think your younger self will be okay with it, Snape?”

Severus shrugged. “I think that it does not matter. What is important is if you like it.”
Portrait Harry—Seth, rather—lowered his eyes and hugged his waist. “But, if you don’t like me, I’ve no one else. I’m alone in here, except for what little you two can interact with me.”

“Severus will like you, mate,” said Harry with a smile. “Seth is a nice name. Besides, he’ll have to come up with one of his own, too, once we figure out how to animate him. Can’t have two Severuses running around.”

“I do not run,” Severus said with a scowl.

Harry laughed and squeezed his hand. “Unless you’re saving my arse again, right?”

“In those times, I am afraid my dignity must be sacrificed. Merlin only knows what mess you will find yourself in from week to week.”

“Oi, I’m a lot better about that now.”

“That is still not saying much.”

‘Seth’ jumped in, “He’s got a point, mate.”

Harry chuckled, but his laughter died in his throat at the sight of a red head poking out around the edge of the door—Ron.

“Oi! Harry!” The tall redhead ran out to meet him, but skidded to a halt at the realisation that Harry wasn’t alone. “Oh, Professor. Um, hi?”

“Eloquent,” Severus muttered.

Through his teeth, Harry whispered, “Be nice. At least try.”

He took Severus’ lack of response as the best answer he could hope for.

“Um, mate?” Ron looked between him and Severus and the portrait, utterly gobsmacked. “Not that I’m not glad to see you, but what the bloody hell are you doing here? And why is he with you? And why are there two Harrys?”

Harry frowned. “Didn’t your mum tell you we were stopping by this morning?”

Ron’s ears pinked and he rubbed the back of his neck. “So that’s what she was going on about at breakfast. Mate, you know if it’s before nine, I tune her out. Too early for all that.”

Harry gave his friend an exasperated smile. “You really should start drinking coffee.”

“Blech. Foul stuff.”

“Not with a little cream and sugar, but since you missed the news, I’ll tell you the gist. One, I’m here for a short visit before I go back to our safehouse to both update you on what’s happened since I saw you last, and two, because I, I have news. Also, I need to make a trip to London—yes, I’ll be in disguise and with the Professor—and my portrait here has no one to stay with. He’s been through hell, and he’s still pretty young, so I’d appreciate it if you could keep him company today. Since he’s staying with me, he’s going by ‘Seth’ instead of Harry.”

Ron grinned at the portrait. “Nice painting, Harry, but where on earth did you find it?”

“Him. His name is Seth. He’s a person, not a thing.”
Ron’s ears turned red. “Er, right. Sorry about that, mate. Seth, is it?”

The boy in the portrait nodded. “Yeah. Professor Snape and Harry helped me think of it.”

Ron wrinkled his nose. “That’s … nice. Where’d you come fr—?”

Harry cut across him, “Look, I’d rather go over this once, if you don’t mind. It’s a long story and we don’t have time to repeat it twenty times.”

“All right, but you still haven’t told me why you had to bring him along.”

Beside him, Harry felt Severus’ flinch more than saw it, but knew the redhead’s callous behaviour had hurt him. Harry gave the man an apologetic look and glared at Ron.

“Watch it, mate. I love you, but you’re crossing a line. Besides the fact that he’s here to keep me safe, he’s been incredibly kind to me since we left the Dursleys’. He’s here because I want him to be, and because he’s part of my news, so keep your rude comments to yourself.”

Ron turned a shade somewhere between puce and purple and bunched up his fists, but whatever tirade he had prepared fell flat as Severus laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Be gentle, Harry,” he murmured. “I’m quite used to this kind of attitude. You should not alienate your friends for what is only the way they have been taught to treat me.”

Harry slumped, his heart already aching with the storm he saw building on the horizon. “It’s not right, Severus. You’ve had enough pain for ten lifetimes. It’s not right.”

Ron’s mouth dropped open, but no words came out.

Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “Remember how I had to treat him, Harry. He sees me as the enemy because, for six years, I was. Try to see the situation from his point of view.”

Ron opened and shut his mouth a bit like a fish, but could only croak, “What the hell?”

Seth looked him dead in the eye. “Mate, you’re absolutely wrong about Snape. He’s been so good to me, better than I could have ever imagined. He’s good to Harry, too. Pick your jaw up off the floor and shove your prejudices long enough to hear out your best mate. He’s been scared of this meeting all morning because he was afraid of how you would react to something that’s been making us both happy.”

Ron searched for words a moment longer, but none came, and eventually he turned and stomped back into the house. With a sigh, Harry followed.

He knocked at the door and stepped inside. “Missus Weasley? We’re here.”

The stout woman poked her head out of the kitchen, bringing a smell of scones and tea with her. “How many times do I need to tell you to call me Molly or mum, dear.”

“Er, sorry, Mum. It’s still a bit strange, you know? I’m not used to it yet.”

“That’s quite all right. And hello to you as well, Severus.”

Severus returned her greeting with a nod.

She gave Harry an appraising look and sighed. “You’re as thin as ever. Were those awful Muggles mistreating you again? I thought the Order had set them right.”
Harry looked away and rubbed his toe in the carpet. “I’d really rather not discuss them, if you don’t mind. I’m shot of them at last and I’d like it to stay that way.”

Molly sniffed. “I’m sure you would. Well, go and sit in the parlour, dearies. I’ll just be a moment with the tea and biscuits.”

“Thanks, Miss—”

She shot Harry a look.

“—Er … Mum. We’ll just go get settled, yeah?”

“Go on. Arthur, dear, can you get the others together? Harry and Severus are here.”

“Yes, love,” said the man from the kitchen. He greeted Harry and Severus on his way upstairs with a friendly smile, then went up after his scattered family.

Harry let his shoulders droop and trudged down the hall as one facing his own funeral, clutching Seth to his chest. “Well, let’s just get this done, yeah?”

Severus squeezed Harry’s hand and whispered in his ear. “Whatever happens, I am here, love. That will never change.”

Harry gave him a sad smile and led him into the parlour to wait.

Bedlam had descended onto the Weasleys’ home, not that Severus believed it much different from its usual state. While the redheads and Granger argued, Severus stood stone-still by Harry’s side, his face set in a steel-hard scowl. Harry sat curled on the couch and pressed his face into Severus’ hip, his shoulders trembling with grief. Severus wished he could take his love’s pain away, but all he could do was stay near and hope Harry took comfort from his presence.

Seth, whom Molly had stuck on the wall above the sofa, glared at Ronald with cold fury that put even Severus’ wrath to shame. If it wouldn’t have hurt his suffering love further, Severus might have expressed his pride in Seth’s burgeoning skills in intimidation.

Harry’s predictions about Ronald’s anger had been spot on, unfortunately. The moment Harry dared announced his relationship, the volatile redhead had flown into a temper deserving of a year’s worth of detentions. Pity Severus would not be at Hogwarts to administer them. The brat working himself into a lather surely had several tall stacks of grimy cauldrons and unsorted flobberworms coming.

Ronald, it seemed, had finally noticed Severus’ attempts to soothe his weeping lover. With a howl worthy of Lupin on a full moon, the enraged idiot lunged at Severus.

“Get off him, you prick!”

Severus flicked his wand, erecting a shield between himself and the daft idiot. Ronald bounced off of it and looked around, as if he expected to see a brandished fist or foot.

“Ronald Bilius Weasley!”

Molly jerked the idiot to his feet by his ear and several befreckled arms grabbed him from behind, but
the fool continued his rant as if nothing had happened.

“You cursed him, didn’t you? Imperius or something. I’ll kill you!” He struggled against at least five pairs of restraining arms. “Oi! You lot, get off me so I can kill the git!”

“Ron!” Hermione called out to him, face streaked with tears, and Severus’ heart panged for the girl. “What is the matter with you? Look at what you’re doing to Harry!”

Ronald stamped his foot. “Doing him a favour, aren’t I? He doesn’t … doesn’t ….” The mouthy redhead’s tirade faded midstream as he watched Harry weep into his lover’s side.

Severus continued stroking Harry’s hair and eyeing the mouthy brat, ready if he made one wrong move. For a moment, Harry’s soft sobs were the only sound in the room.

“I, I didn’t—” Ronald slumped and rubbed his head as if waking from a trance. “I, you don’t have him Imperiused, do you, Snape?”

Severus heard the hope in the question and shot the brat an icy glare. Seth cut across him, however, before Severus could utter a word in his own defence.

“Of course he doesn’t, you bloody berk,” the portrait snarled. “Look at them! Snape didn’t do a thing to him but take care of him. Harry loves him, and he loves Harry.”

Ronald winced. “You don’t know that. You can’t know that.”

“Can’t I? I guess I was dreaming when I watched them say that last night, then? Both of them. Yes, the great greasy bat—easy there, Harry. You know I’m speaking for his opinions, not mine—the vampire of the dungeons with no heart and no feelings declared his love for Harry last night right in front of me. Sounds pretty hateful, right?”

The sarcasm dripping from Seth’s voice was beautiful. Severus might just have to accept him as his protégé if this kept up. As it was, he had a hard time keeping his expression neutral.

Seth continued in a quieter tone, “You know what else, Ron? I was scared half out of my wits last night, and he helped me through it.”

Bill said, “What happened, little bro?”

Seth grinned. “That’s about the only time I don’t mind being called ‘little.’”


Seth shuddered. “Well, I guess you all know by now that ever since the graveyard, I hate portkeys. But Death Eaters had found our location last night, and Harry had no choice but to put me in a trunk and take a portkey to escape to a new safehouse. I was a mess when we arrived, but Severus touched my hands and comforted me and stayed with me all night. He helped me through the nightmares and talked to me about his own. Harry, too. He helped us both. Harry is his partner, but me—I’m just a painting, Ron, and he took care of me like I was his son.”

In a way, Severus felt Seth was his son now, but this was not the place to say such things.

Ronald hugged his waist, looking lost, though no longer aggressive. “But … why? I don’t understand.”

The arms holding the boy let go, though the strongest of his family still hovered close.
“Contrary to popular belief,” Severus said in a cold tone, “I am human. I have emotions as much as the next man. I am merely better at hiding them than most.”

“I got it, okay?” Ronald paced and glared at Severus by turns. “You’ve all drilled it into my head enough that you’re not a total heartless bastard.”

Molly warned, “Ron, language.”

“What I don’t get,” continued the brat as if he hadn’t heard, “is why, if you had all these emotions and supposedly care for Harry, why the bloody hell—”

“Ronald! One more word—”

“—Did you treat us like utter shite for six years?”

Molly flicked her wand and bubbles burst from a near apoplectic Ronald’s mouth.

“I did warn you.” She glared and ended the spell.

Ronald spit bubbles and rubbed his mouth. “Mum! Can you lay off just this once? I’m an adult, and I’m trying to figure this out. That’s what you’ve been yelling at me to do, isn’t it?”

Molly harrumphed, but put her wand away. “Fine, but keep the cursing to a minimum. We taught you better.”

He gave her a jerky nod and turned his attention back to Severus. “Well?”

“Let me ask you to use the thing between your ears for a moment,” Severus said.

“Oi!”

Harry moved back from Severus’ hip and scrubbed a hand across his eyes. “No. Love, that’s only going to get Ron going again. You can make your point without insulting him. For my sake if you can’t do it for his own.”

Severus gave a put upon sigh. “Very well. For you.” He drew himself to his full height and used his glare to its full potential, as his tongue had been tamed. “Think, Mister Weasley.”

“Ron,” the young man said. “There are too many Weasleys to call me by my surname. Especially if you’re ….” He shuddered. “In love with my best mate.”

Severus nodded. “Ron, then. You have asked me why I treated Harry so harshly in potions class and around Hogwarts. Think, boy! Who else was in our immediate vicinity, hmm? Malfoy, Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle—all children of Death Eaters and junior recruits themselves. What do you think would have happened had I been overtly kind to Harry? They would have reported to their parents, and my cover would have been blown much sooner than two months prior. I would not have been able to help the Order keep Harry alive, and I might not have escaped the Death Eaters then, either. I hadn’t the motivation I did this time.”

Ron gave him a bemused frown. “What motivation?”

Harry nudged his side. “Go on. It’s okay.”

Severus sighed. “I, I did not intend to, but wish magic worked upon my great need to reach Harry and give him information vital to the war before I died, as well as upon Harry’s need to warn me, and it somehow forged a … link between our minds. I heard Harry encouraging me the entire
duration of my torture, and Harry, much to my chagrin, experienced everything I did, through my own eyes.”

Everyone in the room blanched, save those who already knew the story.

Hermione laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Oh, oh, Harry! You felt it? His pain?”

Harry nodded. “And his need. His fear. Merlin, he was absolutely terrified that he would die without reaching me. Not just afraid he would die, but afraid he wouldn’t be able to help me. He wanted to help me fight, and his desire was so strong, and mine so strong to rescue him, that our shared need linked us. We didn’t know at the time if it made some kind of emotional link between us or if we just came together because we’re so much alike under the surface, but we’re bo—”

“Alike!” Ronald looked between them, appalled. “Not a chance.”

In retrospect, perhaps it was a good thing that Ron cut Harry off before he could tell them of the bond. Severus tried to communicate this to Harry with his eyes, and the young man gave him the barest nod and did not try to pick up where he had left off.

“We are alike,” Severus said, his eyes still on his Harry. “Both of us grew up in … cruel homes. Neither of us had a scrap of love, though Harry did at least have friends at Hogwarts and I did have my mother until my fa—until my mother passed away.” A shudder spread from his shoulders, and Harry rubbed his back in a soothing motion.

“It’s all right, love,” Harry whispered. “I’m here.”

Severus gave Harry a wan smile and turned back to the Weasleys. “Our parents are dead. Our families were cruel. We’re both exceptionally powerful. We’re both intensely emotional, despite how we present in public. We were both alone in ways that, somehow, the other person heals. And we give each other strength and courage to fight. Tell me, Weasley, how is this such a terrible development? Harry is happy with me.”

Ronald scoffed and kicked at the carpet. “Don’t see how. Not like you’re anyone’s first choice. He could do so much better than a greasy g—”

Harry leapt to his feet, eyes blazing killing-curse green. Severus hastily erected a magic-dampening field around the young man, just in case.

“No one more word, Ron, before you cross a line you can’t come back from.” Harry’s voice was low and lethal—it chilled Severus with its icy tone. “You don’t have to understand. You don’t have to agree with my choice of partner. You don’t even have to like him, but I will not stand here and let you tear down what little confidence I’ve been able to build in him so far. You know nothing about him besides his mask, and that’s nothing real at all. So don’t you dare talk about his worth like that. He’s worth far more than you could ever understand.”

Ronald’s mouth dropped open, and his eyes boggled. “Harry? You, but I …. Merlin! You really do love him.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’. “More than you know.” He gave Severus a sad smile. “More than even he knows.”

Severus laced their fingers together and squeezed Harry’s hand. As much as he loved Harry, he could not expose himself by admitting it before these people, especially when one of them was actively deriding him.
He wished he had Harry’s strength sometimes. Still, Severus tried to show with his eyes what his tongue would not let him say. Harry’s answering smile lit the room.

Ronald sighed and held up his hands in supplication. “All right. Call it pax then, Harry. I’ll try to understand. Just, promise you’ll explain this better to me someday? I really don’t get how you went from enemies to friends and now suddenly you’re in love. It’s been two weeks!”

Hermione gave Harry an apologetic smile. “In that, he does have a point. It is rather fast. And what about school, Harry? How will you continue to see Professor Snape as a student? It’s against the rules.”

“That is quite easy to remedy,” said Severus with a bitter edge to his voice. “I am no longer a professor, so there is nothing the governors can do.”

Ronald gaped. “Merlin! You quit for Harry?”

Severus gave a mirthless laugh. “No. I quit because that article in the Prophet, however false, did sufficient damage that I will never be able to teach again. As well, neither Harry nor myself are remotely safe at Hogwarts now. There are too many Death Eaters in the ranks and a spy in the Order.” He scowled. “I have yet to discover them, nor am I so foolish to believe there will not be another even should I remove this one. Therefore, Harry and I will be going into hiding on a more permanent basis, at least until we can finish Riddle for good.”

“What?” Several voices squawked at once.

“What do you mean, going into hiding?” Hermione looked hurt and scared. “You, you’re not going to Hogwarts this year, Harry? What about your NEWTs?”

“I can always finish them later, ‘Mione,” said Harry with a sad smile. “I’d have liked to finish with you, but it’s too dangerous. There are spies everywhere, and I have a mission to end the war, remember? Severus has the skills and knowledge to help me do it with a minimum of blood loss.”

Hermione’s expression fell. “I, I thought we would help you.”

“You can, but do it from Hogwarts, where you’ll be relatively safe. Severus and I might well run afoul of Death Eaters on this mission. You’re brilliant, ‘Mione, but fighting isn’t your strong suit. Ron, it’s the same for you. I don’t want to lose either of you, and I know Severus is more than strong enough to defend himself.”

“Oi!” Ronald glared at Harry, miffed. “I’m right good in a fight, mate.”

“Against thirty Death Eaters at once, Ron? Or Voldemort himself?”

Ron blanched. “Um, I, well I’d try my best!”

“And you’d die for it. I can’t lose you, too.”

Hermione sniffled. “Harry, you can’t fight thirty at once either. Even Professor Snape would find those odds all but impossible.”

Harry nodded. “Which is why I have a spy to help me avoid precisely that situation. We have other … events in our favour, but it’s just too dangerous to speak of them now.”

Molly cried, “But you’re too young!”
Harry raised an eyebrow. “I’m not too young to be dating a man fully twenty years my senior but too young to be fighting a war I’ve no choice but to fight anyway?”

She hesitated. “I, but, that’s not the same, love. Severus won’t kill you. You-Know-Who will if he gets the chance.”

“Riddle, Mum,” Harry insisted. “If you can’t call him Voldemort, call him Riddle.”

She shivered. “I, I’ll try. But Harry, you can’t just run off into the night like this. Let the Order handle it.”

Harry shook his head. “Has to be me, Mum. You heard Severus. There’s a spy in the Order. If this gets out, all our hopes of defeating Voldemort are lost.”

Every Weasley flinched, and Granger sighed.

“She’s right,” she said with a sad smile. “Harry has to do this. We know what he’s talking about, and it’s too dangerous to trust anyone else with. Anyone. It has to be Harry, and Professor Snape will keep him alive better than anyone else could.”

Harry nodded. “It’s not up for debate, Mum. Dumbledore wanted me to do this anyway, so I have to go.”

Dumbledore. The one reason the Weasleys would accept, at least until the manipulative old codger slipped up and revealed himself. Severus inwardly praised his partner’s cunning.

As predicted, Molly slumped in defeat and wiped her eyes. “Well, if Dumbledore said you should go, then it must be for the best.”

Severus barely resisted the urge to snort. Harry and Seth’s identical pursed lips and fierce eyes suggested they were not far from revealing their disgust either.

“Thank you for your understanding,” Severus said, directing attention to himself and away from the Potters’ scowls. “We must go soon, though. Harry and I have found a suitable safehouse, but it’s quite empty. We must purchase furniture and the like if we are to remain there for any length of time.”

“You know you’re welcome here,” Molly began, but Arthur spoke over her.

“No, love. They need their own space. Good luck, Severus, Harry. You’ll come to us if you need help, right?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll be seeing you again soon, I promise. We still have things to discuss, but now isn’t the time. Keep watch over Seth, yeah?”

“I’ll be fine,” said the portrait, eyes on Ron. “We’ll just have a bit of a talk while you’re gone. Maybe try to help him understand things. Want me to tell him about the, er, the spell?”

Harry looked to Severus.

After some thought, Severus nodded. “Yes, Seth, but all of you must keep the knowledge absolutely secret. Not even the Order, not even Dumbledore should know. It would be a danger to our lives and our very souls should it reach the spy’s ears.”

Each Weasley nodded in turn, even Ron, and Severus sighed. “Thank you.”
“I’d tell you myself,” said Harry, “but that’s definitely a conversation we don’t have time for if we’re to go shopping today. Thanks, little brother. I’ll see you later, yeah?”

He pressed a hand to Seth’s.

Seth smiled. “Yeah. See you, Harry.”

Severus bid him goodbye as well, and, after a round of farewells from the Weasleys, they escaped the Burrow more or less intact.

“Well, that could have been worse,” Harry muttered on the way out of the Burrow.

“Hmm. We have only begun to break the ice, love. Wait until they know about the bond.” Severus shuddered. “I fear for us should one of them break their word and Dumbledore should discover the truth.”

“Let him. He can’t stop us. And I’d love just to mess up his day.”

Severus gave a dark chuckle. “Indeed? In that case, how would you feel about making a trip to Hogwarts to see the Headmaster for breakfast tomorrow? We should arrive just in time for the Daily Prophet, don’t you think?”

Harry burst out laughing. “My love, you truly are devious. That’s probably not wise, but maybe you can get McGonagall or Pomfrey to pensieve a memory of his expression.”

Severus rubbed his chin in thought. “You know, I may just do that. Come. We have a letter to give Demeter before we go to Diagon.”

“Er, we do?”

“Yes. It’s time to start laying our seeds, my love, and we will start with Minerva. I did write her earlier, but it was only a note to express my regrets that I could not say goodbye in person, as well as to ask her about Spinner’s End. I believe I should question her on what Albus told her and begin taking his mask apart with this letter. Not to mention, I should also like to know what his face looks like come morning.”

Harry laughed and laced his fingers with Severus’. “Right. Then let’s go.”
Minerva McGonagall had never been one for mawkish displays of sentimentality, but she had hoped for at least a proper goodbye from Severus. That he had left the school without so much as a wave cut her deeply in and of itself, but the fact that he would say such cruel things on his way out had left a void within her heart. She loved Severus like a son, however cantankerous the man could be, and until two days hence, she had thought Severus loved her, too.

Was it all a lie? Part of his façade?

But why? Severus would not befriend a Gryffindor to fool You-Know-Who—quite the opposite, in fact. Why then, should he hurt Minerva so? She could not believe he had faked everything in their talks, not the rare moments where his true heart showed through and he had leaned on her wisdom, not the times when he had come to her angry and scared because Potter had done something stupid and almost gotten himself killed again.

As much as Severus insisted he hated the boy, Minerva knew better. Severus hated the boy’s father, and not without reason. Severus pretended to hate Harry because he refused to admit the truth. And perhaps it was easier to pretend for You-Know-Who if he believed it himself.

Or perhaps he truly did hate Harry and only pretended to care about keeping him alive. Could one ever fully trust a spy?

Minerva settled onto her desk and rested her head in her hands.

She no longer knew what to believe. Severus had always had a tongue like a razor blade, but until two nights hence, he had never sharpened it on her, not like this. They had sniped at each other a bit, but never cut too deep. She had thought of it rather like a game, until Severus left with a two-fingered salute as his only goodbye.

*That* had hurt.

Minerva leaned back and frowned at the memory phial on her desk, watching the silvery plumes fold in on themselves and form anew. A memory. The niggling worry in her gut grew sharper. Something
about this entire situation seemed off. With a shake of her head, she sat back and pondered her fears.

Severus was more than capable of excoriating someone with their tongue, that was true. Perhaps even herself, if given enough provocation. Yet Albus—that man had always been so infuriatingly vague. He hadn’t even told Harry about the Prophecy after Severus had warned him about the door in Harry’s visions and the fact that Harry was not taking well to Occlumency. At the time, the boy hadn’t wanted to Occlude, and Severus had even warned Albus of that. Yet Albus had insisted that to tell Harry would strip away his innocence, and he couldn’t bear to frighten the boy, at least, not so soon. Minerva had been on the fence—right up until the moment Sirius Black had fallen through the veil.

Albus should have told Harry sooner, yet he had insisted on keeping his secrets to ‘protect’ the child. Such was always his way, always keeping his cards close to his chest lest someone get hurt.

Why then would he not only tell Minerva of Severus’ parting shot, but provide her with a memory of it? Such an action was grossly out of character with Albus’ former behaviour. The Albus she knew would have pretended he hadn’t seen Severus at all.

She couldn’t pin it down, but something about the entire situation smelled fishy. Even the memory Albus gave her had seemed a little hazy around the edges, as if it hadn’t been quite … right, somehow.

And Severus’ behaviour wasn’t in line with his past, either. Minerva could believe he might snap under pressure if pushed hard enough, and Merlin knew Albus could push, but this vicious attack without reason was out of character, even on Severus’ bad days, when Minerva knew well Voldemort and his followers had hurt the spy and he was struggling to hide his pain. Even then, he wouldn’t simply attack without reason.

The fact that he had resigned after one scathing article bothered her as well. Severus had faced harder opposition in the past, and the teachers all knew the article was false. Come to think of it, who had authored that article in the first place? Who would have had all the information it gave, yet none of the mitigating truth? Death Eaters would just kill Severus and be done with it, so who would choose such a route to discredit the man?

Minerva sighed and went to go about her work. She couldn’t muse on Severus’ odd behaviour all day. There were end-of-term reports to sort, lesson plans to create, and … and letters to answer, apparently. She picked up the Muggle-style envelope lying on her desk, trying to think of who might send her correspondence in such a manner even as she turned it over to read the address.

Her heart thumped against her ribs.

“Severus?”

She frowned and looked around her office. Athena hadn’t yet returned, so he must have sent this letter before receiving her tirade.

With a frown, she slit the envelope and flipped the letter open.

Dear Minerva,

I hope I did not interrupt your morning nap among the sunbeams. However, I am writing to say goodbye, so needs must. Do forgive me that I hadn’t time to say so in person the night before. Harry was waiting on me at the gates and I did not feel it wise
to leave him there too long despite the strength of his disillusionment charms, nor did I feel it wise to linger myself, not with my loyalties revealed.

As to the reason for my departure, I am resigning. I am sure you saw the lovely write-up the Prophet published on me yesterday. As the letters of gushing adulation will no doubt soon clutter my desk, and crowds of admirers will begin storming me at the gates, I have taken my leave to ensure my newfound fame does not interfere with the students’ education.

In all seriousness, regardless of the damage that foul article has done, I feel the school is unsafe for Harry and myself this year. He is withdrawing to go on some mad artefact hunt in hopes of destroying the Dark Lord, and I am coming along to watch the show. Perhaps he will throw them at Riddle. It may, perhaps, prove more effective than his abysmal wandwork up to this point. Regardless, I am going with him for the sheer entertainment value, as well as to keep his much-lauded neck in one piece.

Well, now that I have had my fun, I suppose I should come clean. It is not safe to reveal the extent of my newfound relationship with the ‘saviour’ to anyone else—there is still a spy in the Order, after all, and I have yet to smoke out their identity—but I know I can trust you. You, of all people, have earned my honesty.

That said, I can only pray for Merlin to strike me deaf once you have read this, for you will undoubtedly crow about it until the end of time. Fridays will never be the same.

Minerva, I must admit that you were right about him. He is nothing like his father. He is kinder, braver, and in truth, he does not look much like the man after all. Harry has only inherited his father’s appalling glasses—which, given the conditions he was raised in, may actually be his father’s—and his messy hair. Harry’s eyes, his face, even his structure is nothing like James. Nor is he like James in nature. He is far kinder, much more compassionate.

Though I am shocked at the direction my own thoughts have taken, he is even kinder and more compassionate than Lily.

The more I look at him, the more I find … that I cannot look away. He is stunning, Minerva. How, in all my years teaching him, did I fail to see it?

Minerva jerked away from the letter with a screech. “Sweet Circe! Have I gone mad?”

She picked up her jaw and resumed reading the rest of the letter. Among a strikingly kind and emotional goodbye—did Severus truly think of her as a second mother?—he had asked her to look out for his Slytherins and professed worry that Aurora was not up to the job of wrangling them.

She snorted. Anyone with half a brain could see that.

He had also asked her to retrieve a photo from Spinner’s End, but Minerva could not see a way she could safely do so. For gods’ sakes, the Death Eaters had attacked the Minister of Magic—a skilled fighter—and killed him. They would not fear to attack an aging witch while she walked alone in a Muggle neighbourhood, especially one they already had a watch on. She would simply have to decline and hope Severus could find another way to retrieve his photo.

But Merlin! Was this truly Severus? The sarcasm and information seemed accurate, but he seemed
… tamer. Gentler than she had ever known him to be. And dear Merlin, had he called Mister Potter …

“Harry?” She stared at the letter as if it would explode. “He called Potter his given name! And … stunning? Sweet merciful Merlin, can this be real? I … it sounds as if he … if he has ….”

‘Fallen in love with Potter!’

She could not finish her thought out loud. It was simply too ridiculous.

She recalled her last Friday with Severus, where the man had called Harry a ‘troll-brained ignoramus who routinely risked the lives of his friends, family, and teachers all for a mad quest to gather more admirers.’

‘Severus Snape, in love with a Potter?’

A bitter laugh escaped her. “Not a chance in hell.”

With a shake of her head, she placed the letter upon her desk and cast several revealing and testing charms. None of them gave an alarm, but Merlin! How could it be genuine?

No. The man must have placed some kind of anti-testing charm on it. Perhaps he thought of it as a game to toy with her emotions and, just when she believed in him again, he would turn on her and … and ….

And nothing. Gods, what was she thinking? Severus had more honour than that.

With a sigh, she tossed the letter in a desk drawer and pulled out her lesson plans for the first years. Honour or no, it couldn’t be genuine. Not from Severus. It was written on Muggle school paper for crying out loud, not to mention bursting with honest emotion, and, strangest of all, the man had called Harry stunning. Stunning! And this from a man who had—until now—liked Harry less than flobberworm snot.

After all, the latter had a use in potions.

Minerva scowled. Was this supposed to be his idea of a joke? Was he winding her up?

“Ach, the fractious little twit. This is not funny, Severus! Not at all!”

With a huff, she stacked her half-finished reports on her desk and set to work.

In spite of her dismissal, a niggling shard of hope remained. Some part of her could not help but wonder if perhaps two weeks in shared quarters had forced Severus to see what he would rather not. What if he truly had fallen for Harry?

Could they really be in love?

Though the other professors might damn her for it, she hoped they were.

In spite of the rules, in spite of their ages, they both needed someone to care about them. Severus had been alone for so long, and, besides the Weasleys and Miss Granger, Harry had never had a soul. If those two stubborn boys could love each other, perhaps their similar backgrounds might be a bond to draw them together, to help heal the breach of past hurts.

But no, she knew better. It couldn’t be true. Especially not after two bloody weeks. It simply wasn’t enough time for a man like Severus to learn to trust anyone again, let alone Harry.
It had taken him ten years to trust Minerva at all, let alone an enemy. And love! No. It simply couldn’t be.

She shook her head and frowned at the envelope. Regardless of whether Severus’ love for Harry was real or not, that wasn’t the most troubling part of the letter. The troubling part was that he had sent it at all. Albus had told her Severus had bid her good riddance and would not want to continue their relationship. Assured her of it—hell, he had even provided her with a memory.

Yet, Severus couldn’t have known about all that. So, even if he was winding her up about Harry—and especially if he wasn’t—how did she fit his kind, respectful, and trusting letter in with Albus’ revelations?

That was the trouble: it didn’t fit. Someone—either Severus or Albus—was lying to her, and at the moment, she had no idea who it could be.

She sighed and pushed her worries to the back of her mind. When Athena returned, she would have her answers, or so she hoped.

A lynx Patronus was waiting at their stoop when Severus arrived with Harry. Despite the fact that Severus knew no one was outside to hear them, he led the argent beast inside the house before he would speak a word.

“Yes? Harry and I are listening.”

Kingsley’s deep voice echoed in the unfurnished hall. “You-Know-Who tried to attack the Prophet. Your wards kept him out, Severus, Harry, but he’s gone after Surrey now. Aurors and the Order are already on the scene. Stay out of it, boys. We all know he wants you.”

The lynx shook out his fur and vanished. Harry stared at the spot where the beast had stood without blinking, his eyes wide and full of horror.

“Harry?” Severus touched Harry’s shoulder, and the mage jumped.

“They’re innocent.”

“Are they, beloved? They let you be abused for how many ye—”

“No!” Harry rubbed his eyes fiercely. “The Dursleys told them all stories and kept me hidden. I don’t think any of them realised—and even if they did know, even if they let it happen, do they deserve to die for it? Even kids, Verus? That neighbourhood is full of children. Little kids who didn’t even know I exist, let alone—” He cut himself off and buried his head in his hands. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Severus brought the mage into his arms and stroked the young man’s hair. Harry buried his face in Severus’ chest and clutched his waist.

Eyes big and shining with tears, Harry looked up to Severus and murmured, “Where does it end?”

“It ends when we end V-Voldemort, Harry.”

The young man smiled through his tears. “You said it. You said his name.”
Severus gave him a small smile back. “It was … time.”

“That’s my brave man.”

He reached up and placed a gentle kiss on Severus’ lips. Severus sighed into Harry’s kiss and slid his hand into the mage’s messy hair. Oh, so good. Then soft heat prodded at the seam of Severus’ lips, and he melted into his lover.

_Gods._

He opened to Harry, his breath hitching as the man explored him, no longer tentative and shy, but fierce and ardent. Severus clutched at Harry’s back and returned his passion, almost bending his smaller lover double with the force of his kiss.

_Good gods, he was on fire. Every touch of Harry’s hands, his lips and tongue set Severus ablaze._

_Merlin. He needed more. He needed to lay Harry back and … and …._

_Something was sitting on his shoulder. And pecking him._

_Severus came up for air, breathless and dazed, and turned into a face-full of brown feathers. An owl._

“What the …?”

He leaned back to see whose owl had dared interrupt him, and his ardour cooled into sub-zero temperatures.

_Athena—Minerva’s tawny, and without Odin. It was too soon for Severus’ letter to have arrived._

_Harry flicked out his wand, no doubt upset by Severus’ reaction, and levelled it at the beast._

“What, no,” Severus forced out. “She … she’s Minerva’s. This is A-Athena.”

_Harry lowered his wand a tad. “Oh, I see. Um, should I still scan her for tracking charms and the like?”_  

_Severus nodded. “Minerva would not put charms on her, but Dumbledore might, and we do not know what he may have done to Hogwarts’ wards.”_  

_Harry frowned. “Good point.” He conjured a perch for the bird and patted its handle. “Come here, girl. Sit still for just a moment, and I’ll make sure you’re safe, okay? I promise I won’t hurt you.”_  

_Athena hooted and hesitantly seated herself on the perch._  

_Once the owl had settled, Harry waved his wand over her and sent a shower of harmless sparks and colours her way. She squinted and trembled at first, but when nothing hurt her, she relaxed and let Harry finish his examination._  

_Severus stood frozen, staring at the owl as if she would curse him. As with Molly and Harry, Minerva was the closest thing to a mother Severus had left, and he couldn’t bear to hurt her. Yet, if Albus had been cruel to her, then Severus had hurt her already, by proxy. The mere thought turned his gut to ice._  

_He dreaded that letter more than he had the call to Voldemort a month prior._  

_A whistling sound brought Severus out of his thoughts with a jolt._
“Damn. There’s some kind of tracking charm on her, Verus.”

Severus flicked his wand at the owl, dissolving the tracker with a handy spell that also had an Obliviate mixed in. If anyone had been watching the owl’s whereabouts, they wouldn’t remember it.

The whistling stopped.

“Thanks, Verus,” said Harry with a hesitant smile. “She’s clean now.”

“So I see.” Severus went to the bird and stroked her head. “Is she terribly angry with me, little one?”

She gave him a doleful hoot and a solemn nod, and Severus’ knees buckled. He stumbled, but strong arms wrapped around his waist and supported him.

“Ssh. Come and sit.” Harry led him to a conjured sofa near the owl perch. “Verus, it’s okay.” He sat beside Severus and held the man in a gentle embrace. “If Dumbledore’s told her foul stories, we’ll set her to rights.”

Severus trembled in Harry’s arms. “And if she doesn’t believe us? Dumbledore is well-known for being honest despite his habitual lies, and my irascible temper is just as well known. What if she takes his word over mine? It would not be the first time someone I trusted did.”

“Remember that I’m here to speak in your defence, love. She won’t be able to discount your story with both of us backing it, though I think she wouldn’t to start with. From everything you’ve told me and what I’ve seen of your relationship, she loves you. She’s probably confused and hurt and just wants an explanation. We can do that.”

Severus rubbed a hand over his eyes. “You, you would speak for me? But she is your Head of House. You do not want to endanger that relationship, do you?”

Harry kissed Severus with love and affection. “Yes, she is. She’s also a good woman and a good professor and I like her very much, but I love you. Even if I believed taking your side would cost me that relationship, and I don’t, you come first.” He cupped Severus’ face and kissed him with gentle love. “What will it take to make you believe I am yours?”

Severus winced. “I do believe you. I merely ….”

“I know, love. I know. Sometimes I have trouble too, wondering why you’re with a scrawny, myopic brat when you could do so much better.”

“I could do—Harry, don’t you understand, love? No one has ever wanted me like you do. I cannot do better. There is no better. You are my only.”

Harry gave him a bright smile. “As you are mine, Severus. Now, can you face your letter knowing I’ll be by your side however it goes?”

Severus laid his forehead against Harry’s. “Thank you, my Harry. I believe I can face it, so long as you stay near.”

“I’ll be right there with you. Let me just get Athena settled with some water and owl treats, and we’ll tackle this letter together, okay?”

“Yes. Thank you, Harry.”

“Anytime, love.”
Ten minutes later, Severus had settled into a freshly conjured armchair, Minerva’s letter in hand and Harry in his lap. Severus shivered as Harry opened the parchment and smoothed out the curls.

Gods, he was so afraid. He clutched Harry close against him, taking comfort in his weight and warmth, and peered over the mage’s shoulder to read.

He hadn’t so much as made it through the salutation before Harry interrupted.

“Well, that’s never a good sign. She used all three of your names. When Missus Weasley does that, you can bet someone’s in it up to their neck.”

Severus suppressed a fierce wave of pain. “Not helping, beloved. Just let me read it.”

“Oh, um … well, I’m here, Verus. No matter what. It’s going to be okay.”

Severus kissed Harry’s cheek and kept reading.

Severus Tobias Snape,

What in the name of Merlin has gotten into you, packing up and leaving the castle without so much as a ‘how-do-you-do?’ Twenty years together, and you leave at the first sign of opposition? Where is that Gryffindor courage I have always said you have in spades underneath that Slytherin cunning?

What’s more, I thought we were friends. I thought—well, I suppose any diversions into Gryffindor sentimentalism will be unwelcome with you, however brief. But I thought you cared about me, at least a bit. Enough not to leave such a callous message with Albus. “Good riddance to the harpy,” indeed!

You had better explain yourself, child, or I will find you shortly and give you a solid dose of those spankings you’ve sorely missed all these years you’ve let your tongue run free. I have given you twenty years of Friday nights, twenty years of trust and affection.

Whether you are able to emulate love or not, I deserve better than this.

Love always (whether you want it or not),

Minerva McGonagall

By the time Severus made it to the closing, tears had soaked his cheeks and collar. Albus had called her a harpy. Mother of Merlin, even on his bad days, he had never said such cruel things.

“Well,” said Harry in a wobbly voice, “we’d better do some damage control, yeah?”

Severus laid his head against Harry’s neck, broken and heartsick. Minerva was furious at him, and it was all Dumbledore’s doing. Every time he thought he had let go of hope that Albus could be saved, the man did something else horrid and Severus found he had faith yet left to be destroyed.

He wished his stubborn heart would believe what his mind already knew: Albus was a liar and a monster, and there was no saving him.

Yet, some small part of him could not let go of the childish hope that everything could go back to the way it was, even when the rest of Severus knew the past had come and gone. Even when the bastard
did something like this and made his heart bleed.

“Oh, Verus.” Harry turned his face into Severus and gently kissed away the older man’s tears. “Ssh. It’s not hopeless, love.”

“I … why would he do this? Why hurt her so much? I cannot fathom a motive.”

Harry hesitated. “Love, I, I think he wanted you to be friendless and alone, maybe to drive you to suicide. You’re not alone though, okay? It’s going to be all right.”

Severus gave a bitter, broken laugh. Suicide. It made a twisted sort of sense. Albus did want to get rid of all Slytherins—why not start with their head?

Gods, it hurt. Severus buried his head in his hands and wept.

“Oh, Severus.” Harry kissed his cheek and reached a hand up behind his head to stroke through Severus’ hair. “Baby, it’ll be okay.”

Severus choked and jerked up. “Dear Merlin, did you just call me ‘baby’?”

Harry chuckled. “I might have been hoping to shock you out of your pain.”

“It worked. Merlin.”

Harry kissed Severus lightly. “Good. It’s going to be okay, love. There’s hope in the closing. She isn’t refusing reparations—she just wants an explanation. We can do that, right?”

Severus sighed. “Yes, but I would rather he had not hurt her to start with. A part of me had hoped he would not, that somehow, he would not be the monster I now know him to be. It was a foolish hope, and yet, I find I keep falling into the same trap. When will I learn?”

Harry sighed and nuzzled his cheek. “Believe me, love, I do understand. I was the same way, until, well, until this year, when he forced me back to the Dursleys again and I realised I would never be anything more than a weapon to him. That hope is hard to let go of, Severus. You’re not a fool. You’re human.”

Severus kissed Harry’s mop and held him tight, drawing comfort from both the young man’s word and presence. With a little murmur of pleasure, Harry reached behind Severus’ head and ran his hand through the older man’s hair. The odd angle let the collar of Harry’s Muggle tee drop, and Severus caught a glimpse of a long white line across Harry’s nape. Another redder line crossed over it and dipped across Harry’s shoulder. Severus sat back and traced the white line with a gentle fingertip.

Scars, from a whip or a belt, most likely. He remembered the night he’d held Harry after his vision of Moody’s death, recalled the feel of ridges all across Harry’s back, and fury burned away his anguish.

Had he not just wished for something to break the last bit of trust he had in Dumbledore, so he would not fall prey to hope any longer? Here it was. Besides the lies that man had told Minerva, the monster had left Harry with people who had marked him all over, beaten him like a piece of meat. And Dumbledore had done so knowingly. Such crimes against a child were unforgivable.

Severus scrubbed a hand across his eyes and sat tall. He would not let Dumbledore fool him again. No, instead he would make sure the old manipulator paid for his cruelty.

Severus’ righteous wrath wiped away all desire for tears. Sitting up straight, he whipped out his wand and aimed for their bedroom.
“Accio quill, ink, parchment, letter ribbons, and a number three phial.”

After a bit of rustling and banging, the requested items plopped onto the table in front of Severus. Harry moved off Severus’ lap to let him write and picked up the phial, turning it this way and that.

“What’s this for, love?”

“Proof.”

Severus dipped his quill and ignored Harry’s curious expression. He had a letter to write and a memory to send. So help him, Minerva would not be fooled any longer, either. He would not let her be taken in one more day.

He only hoped she could find it in her heart to believe him. He shook off his fears and begun to write.

A screech interrupted his letter halfway through the closing, echoed by a hoot.

“Oh, hello, girl. Hello, Odin.” Harry brought Hedwig to Severus’ side and frowned at his finished letter. “Love, I know you just got back from Dean’s place—actually, he was at Seamus’ aunt’s in Glasgow, wasn’t he? You’re back too fast for London.”

The owl bobbed her head.

“Well, that works out nicely for us. Do you mind delivering this to Professor McGonagall as well? Odin can go with you, if you want, and Athena will come along as well—that’s her on the perch over there. McGonagall’s owl.”

Athena let slip a chiding sort of hoot and glared at Harry.

Harry gave Severus an amused look. “Did I just get reprimanded by an owl?”

Severus chuckled darkly as he finished his letter. “If you cannot recall your superiors’ proper titles, what do you expect?”

Harry laughed. “Oh, all right. Professor McGonagall.”

The owl ruffled her feathers and settled down, looking proud of herself.

Harry snorted. “You’re a character, aren’t you?” Hedwig nipped his finger. “Oh, don’t go getting jealous. You know you’re my girl.” He rubbed her head. “So, how about it? Do you think you can handle a trip to Hogwarts?”

She hooted and ruffled her feathers.

“That was ‘after I’ve had a bite,’ I think,” said Harry with a chuckle. “Well, could you eat on the way? I’d fix you something, but Severus and I are already behind. You can take all day to get there if you want—we won’t be back before late tonight and don’t have any other letters today anyway—so you’ve plenty of time to rest and make friends with Athena.”

She gave an owlish sigh and bobbed her head.

“Thanks, love. Will some owl treats hold you over for now?”

Hedwig nodded again and moved to perch beside Athena. Odin hooted and left his perch on Severus’ shoulder to join the other two birds. With a laugh, Harry enlarged the perch so they could
snuggle together and, after spreading some owl treats and pellets into a tray for the birds, returned to Severus’ side.

“Are you ready with that, love?”

“Almost. I only need to gather my proof.”

“What proof? You never did say.”

Severus focused on his memory of saying goodbye to Albus and touched his wand to his temple. A silvery strand came away, and he duplicated it and sealed the copy within the glass phial. He returned the original memory to his head.

“Oh,” said Harry. “Well, that should clear this up, hmm?”

“We can only hope.”

As Severus laid the strand of memory in its phial, Tonks’ new wolf Patronus came bounding into the room and licked Harry’s face. He patted the beast and tapped its head.

“Hi, Tonks. Severus and Harry are here and it’s safe. Is the baby okay? Remus?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You do realise a Patronus cannot answer questions?”

Harry blushed. “Oh. Right. Well, go on then, Tonks. We’re listening.”

The wolf sat on her haunches and spoke in Tonks’ voice. “Harry, the Death Eaters have gone after Godric’s Hollow, too. King is cleaning up in Surrey—that attack was over almost before it begun—but You-Know-Who is going after a school now. Don’t worry—this one looks as though it’s going to be over fast, too. These were unplanned, poorly executed attacks of retaliation. It’s going to be okay. Just promise me you’ll stay the hell away from Surrey and Godric’s Hollow today, okay?”

The wolf butted her head against Harry’s belly, then vanished.

Harry gave Severus a fierce look. “He’s attacking children on purpose to draw me out. He’s using children’s lives as a ploy.” His eyes took on a fierce emerald shine. “I’ll kill him for it. I swear I’ll kill him.”

Severus took Harry’s hands. “I know, but not yet. You are not ready to meet him yet. We must first outfit our home for living, and we shall begin your training immediately afterwards. Will that be enough for now?”

Harry sighed. “It’ll have to be, but gods, I wish someone would off the bastard already.”

Severus snorted. “That, I believe, will be our unfortunate duty. But do not fret, beloved. We are working towards it as fast as we are able.”

“Right.” Harry shook himself and beckoned Hedwig back onto his arm. “All right, girl. Let’s get this letter on the way, shall we?”

She nuzzled his cheek and held out her leg.
After a trip to Gringotts and Harry’s services manager, Harry had bonded several new house elves to himself, Severus, and to the Court of the Dawn. While there, they divvied out positions and set down rules—no corporal punishment, pay and days off for those who would take it, and a hefty spending account so the elves might always have access to whatever supplies they needed without having to apply to their masters.

Despite their best efforts, the elves wouldn’t accept any other benefits. Not even Dobby.

Harry had been worried about placing Kreacher, but it turned out there was no need. After the elf had finally told him all he knew about the horcrux locket, Harry hadn’t been able to bear the pain in the creature’s eyes when he put the false locket away, and so he had given it to Kreacher. They hadn’t needed it any longer once they knew what the true locket was, and the elf had obviously wanted it.

That small kindness had completely transformed Kreacher. After years of defiance, failing hygiene, and slip-shod work, he had suddenly become as devoted as Dobby. He obeyed Harry’s and Severus’ few requests without question and took care in his work, even going so far as to learn his humans’ preferences. He dressed himself well and bathed regularly, and he wore his new locket like a badge of honour, though he had to shrink the chain.

Harry couldn’t believe the change such a small act of love had accomplished, until he looked at Severus and realised the barmy old elf had probably been just as lonely and miserable. He had vowed, from that moment on, to always try kindness first to those people who were mean and cold to him—well, as long as they weren’t trying to kill him. Love had rebirthed Severus and Kreacher, after all. Who knew how it might affect others in the same situation.

While Harry deliberated over what to do with the old elf, Kreacher had bowed low and offered to be a spy among the Hogwarts house elves. Harry looked to Severus and grinned. It was perfect.

“All right,” said Harry with a nod. “It’s a good plan. Only you need to disillusion that locket and pretend to be just as surly and grumpy as you were before.”

The locket disappeared at once.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” said Harry, “but you only need disillusion it at Hogwarts. You’re okay to show it around us and the other elves.”

Kreacher gave Harry a beaming smile—less several teeth—and let his gift show once more. With a low bow, he thanked Harry and Severus for their kindness, and a relieved Harry moved on to the next elf.

Besides the attitude-adjusted Kreacher, Harry had taken in Dobby, Winky, and fifteen other elves into his service. He took Dobby as his personal elf, bound Winky to Severus for the same purpose, and delegated the other elves to various tasks, chief among them restoring their empty house and village.

One elf had a slinky kind of grace that put Harry in mind of Severus. After testing his stealth skills against the ex-spy, Harry assigned the elf, Rilen, to keep tabs on Dumbledore, but at a safe distance. Severus gave him all sorts of warnings and instructions and bought a warm, black blanket for him to sew into a spy uniform. He then put all manner of concealing and camouflaging charms on the fabric before presenting it to the worried elf.

“It’s not giving you clothes, Rilen,” said a kneeling Harry. “It’s providing you with the tools you need to do your job. We thought that giving you a blanket and letting you make the outfit yourself
would bypass the clothes rule. Will you be safe if you do it this way? If not, we can come up with something else.”

Rilen looked to their household leader, a capable older elf named Tinny, and received a nod from the ancient creature.

“Is safe, as long as is not master’s clothing,” said Tinny. “Masters must be giving it to us purposefully before it breaks our bonds. We’s could not do the laundry or sewing otherwise.”

Rilen clutched the blanket and gave them a teary nod. “Thank you, kind masters. I will do as you say.”

Harry patted his shoulder and returned to their delegations. After another few moments, he had given their new tailor, a young female named Gemmy, bolts upon bolts of new fabrics, as well as several each of thick midnight, gold, and white fabrics for elven uniforms. Severus also bought her a basket of sewing supplies, which had the young elf in hysterics of gratitude.

Dobby was allowed to keep his hats and socks, much to the elf’s joy.

Once Harry and Severus had sorted their elves, they went to an isolated café to have lunch. While there, Kingsley’s Patronus had approached Severus and whispered in his ear.

After the beast had gone, Severus patted a terrified Harry’s hand and gave him a reassuring smile. “It is all right, beloved. Our auror friend only wanted to let us know that the skirmishes in Godric’s Hollow and Surrey are over and that there were no casualties, only a few injuries to the aurors and one civilian, but nothing so serious the medics could not heal it.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Harry breathed. “I was so afraid.”

“I know, love. It seems he has exhausted his revenge for the time being, and now we need only worry about his next move.”

Harry shuddered. “It’s going to be bad, isn’t it?”

“Yes, most likely, but we shall warn the Order as soon as it is safe and have Kingsley begin placing guards on the places he is most likely to attack. If I know the man, he has already done so.”

Harry stared at his soup and tried to guess what Riddle might do in retaliation for his bold move at the Prophet, but he could think of nothing.

“Holly, be calm, love. There is no point in worrying over it. I shall try to puzzle out what he is most likely to do while we are shopping, but even then, I believe it shall be fruitless. We cannot know his plans any longer, beloved.” Severus’ voice turned bitter. “Not without a spy.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ own. “Well, I still need a spy in the Order, don’t I?”

Severus chuckled. “Hmm. I suppose you do. We are both spies now, I think.” He rubbed Harry’s fingers. “Beloved, I do not think we will be able to predict his next move. All we can do is try to prepare for it and hope we are ready when it comes.”

“Right.” Harry sighed and eyed his soup. “I think I’ve lost my appetite.”

“I do understand, but we will not have much time to eat today, love. At least try to finish part of it. You do not eat enough.”
Harry gave him a lopsided grin. “Oh, that’s cute.”

Severus choked on his tea. “Cute? Merlin forbid. What have I done to deserve that hell-spawned descriptor?”

Harry laughed. “‘Cute’ is hell-spawn? That’s brilliant. But you earned it by worrying about me, love. By wanting to make sure I eat well enough.”

Severus rubbed his cheek. “Believe it or not, I worried about your eating habits even before we were ….” He blushed and gave Harry a look that said he was terrified of overstepping his bounds. “Before we f-fell in love. I worried you would starve yourself long before you ever had a chance to fulfil that blasted prophecy.”

Harry smiled and laced his fingers with Severus’. “I love you, too.”

Severus’ eyes filled with unabashed joy. “Then eat your soup so you live long enough to enjoy our love.”

Harry chuckled and tucked in, Severus’ shy, sweet affection having taken the edge off of his worries. It would be all right. Harry was a mage, after all. Once he learned to fight, neither Voldemort nor Dumbledore would know what hit them.

He went back to his meal with the fire of determination burning in his chest. Soon.

After lunch, Harry and Severus went on a whirlwind trip to purchase furniture for their home and city, using false identities other than Holly and Xavier for an extra layer of anonymity. They even bought a few beds for a safehouse and had the elves shrink and transport them to Harry’s living room, as they did with the rest of the furniture meant for places other than Harry’s and Severus’ home.

Once they had the furniture sorted, Severus took Harry shopping for a new wardrobe—saying that if Harry was going to wear tees and jeans, he could at least choose ones that fit.

“Well, it wasn’t my choice, Severus,” Harry murmured, looking at his feet. “All I ever had were Dudley’s hand-me-downs.”

Severus’ lip curled in an expression Harry recognised as disgust. “They gave you—my waif of a lover—that absolute glutton’s clothing?” He frowned and glanced down Harry’s body. “These are shrunken, then? Considering the difference in your sizes, I should think it would quite literally fall off otherwise, especially the trousers.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Hermione shrunk them for me as best as she could. Even with the best she could do, they did fall off in first year. If it weren’t for the Hogwarts uniforms, I imagine I’d have had a lot more trouble with classes. I did in primary school.”

Severus was staring at Harry, wide-eyed with shock. “You’ve been wearing the same clothing since first year?”

Harry rubbed his toe in the dirt. “N-no. Since I was ten. They, um … they had plenty of room to grow into, you know. Even after Hermione shrunk them.”
Severus snarled. “Those utter beasts! It would perhaps not be so terrible if they had been poor and those hand-me-downs were all they could give you, but their son has the best of everything while you struggle.” He huffed and took Harry’s hand, leading him into a clothing store. “It is perhaps a good thing I do not know where those foul Muggles went to. I should be forced to kill them otherwise.”

Harry gave him a nervous chuckle. “Y-yeah.”

Severus tugged Harry into a shadowed corner and kissed him, though Harry wished he had been able to do so in his true appearance. The blond Viking-type Severus had become had a scratchy beard and his lips were too full for Harry’s beloved Verus. He missed the feel of Severus’ angular jaw and the way the man’s aquiline nose bumped Harry’s cheek when their kisses heated up.

“Gods,” Severus breathed against Harry’s lips. “I cannot get enough of kissing you.”

Harry, who was in the form of a black-haired British-Italian female, shrunk into himself and trembled. “You don’t miss my real shape?”

“Oh no, love. I most definitely do. Kissing a woman is not the same. Men are … sharper, firmer, where women are soft.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead, where his scar would have been if it was still visible. “But even though you do not look or feel like my beloved, I know it is you inside this guise, and I cannot get enough of you.”

Harry smiled and slipped his hand into Severus’. “Yeah. I feel the same.”

Severus held him for a moment, then nodded toward the clothing shelves. “Come. Let us find some new clothing for you, hmm? And jeans and tees are all well and good, but I would like you to also choose some finer clothing, do you hear? I would like to be able to take you to a formal restaurant now and again, and you will need formal robes, too, if you are to be a wizarding leader in the near future.”

Harry scowled. “I don’t want to be a leader of anything.”

“Beloved, the best leaders never do.” Severus took a button-down from a nearby rack, frowned, and switched it for a smaller size. “Hmm.” He held it over Harry’s frame and nodded. “This size will do, I think. I will be sure to tell the clerk to put auto-sizing charms on our choices, but even with those, one still needs to come close. What do you think of this?”

Harry frowned. “It’s purple.”

“And?”

“And I don’t usually get anything purple.”

“With your eyes, my love, you are stunning in purple. Would you try it for me? If you still do not like it when you try it on in your … usual appearance, we will send it back.”

Harry gave him a shy smile and took the shirt. “You like purple on me?”

Severus blushed that soft pink Harry loved to see. “It was certainly a beautiful colour on you yesterday.”

Harry grinned and laid the shirt in the trolley. “Well, then I guess I’ll have to try it, if you like it.”

Severus beamed, and that look convinced Harry to try all kinds of new clothes, if only to see Verus
smile so brightly again.

By the time they had finished with the men’s store and moved on to the women’s—for Harry’s female alter egos—his enthusiasm had faded. He watched in quiet horror as Severus took several dresses from various racks and placed them in the trolley.

“Um, Sev? I, I’m not really—I’m not wearing a dress, okay?”

“Hmm. Perhaps this is a bit excessive.” Severus sent most of them flying back to their proper places, though he retained a couple of simple day dresses, a business suit with a skirt, and a long, slinky black number Harry that appalled Harry to no end. Even if he could be convinced to put the monstrous thing on, it had no back. Wouldn’t it show his scars?

Harry shook his head. If it did, Severus would never force him to wear it.

“There,” said Severus. “I believe those will cover most contingencies. Trousers and shirts will do for the rest.”

“I … I guess ….”

Severus took Harry’s hand. “Beloved, I know you are uncomfortable with them, but there will be events that require you to wear a skirt. Anything involving the Ministry, for example. The Wizengamot especially are old-fashioned and will not heed you if you appear as a female in trousers. Many of the elder Ministry workers are the same. I believe, for the most part, we shall appear … in our natural shapes to handle Ministry business, but I cannot be sure. That is what these are for: the more unpleasant side of politics.”

Harry sighed. “All right, though I’m supremely unhappy about this.” He took over the trolley while Severus left the dresses behind and scanned a rack of trousers, picking some out and bypassing others. “How do you know so much about … all this, Verus? I didn’t think you paid much attention to clothing.”

Severus gave a dark laugh and set a pile of trousers in with the dresses. “You would be surprised what manner of skills a spy needs to learn, my love.”

“Hmm, I guess I would at that.”

They moved through the rest of their shopping without issue, though Harry balked at a blouse with a pink floral print.

“Oh, no. Not that. That’s much too girly!”

Severus’ lips twitched. “Hmm. But it might be quite pretty on you.”

Harry shuddered. “Gods. Please don’t make me wear flowers. Or pink.” He gagged for emphasis.

Severus chuckled and chose a white and blue pinstriped blouse instead.

Harry sighed. “Yes, that’s much better.”

“Good. Well, with this, I believe we are finished now ….”

Harry slumped into Severus out of sheer relief. “Thank Merlin.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “—Except for your undergarments.”
Harry’s face flamed. “Merlin, Verus. You’re going to buy women’s knickers for me?”

“Yes, love. You are small enough to avoid the brassieres for the most part, but knickers, on the other hand, you will need. Some of these trousers will hug your rear end, and it will show if you wear men’s pants underneath. Men, unfortunately, often behave little better than dogs in heat, and some of them may notice. It will be safer for us all if we do not give them anything to question.”

If it were possible, Harry blushed hotter. “Good gods. I, I … really?”

Severus snorted. “Yes, really. Come and put your eyes back in. You will draw attention like that.”

Harry snapped his jaw shut with an audible click and followed Severus into the lingerie section. At first, Harry could only stand there and try not to flush, but as he realised Severus had only gathered serviceable underwear into the trolley—nothing flashy—he relaxed. He supposed they wouldn’t be too much different than y-fronts, and he could bear those.

As Severus shopped, Harry dragged his hand across the stacks of knickers, feeling a little bored. He winced when a jagged edge of his fingernail caught something purple. As Severus’ back was turned, Harry deemed it safe to check out what he’d caught.

Harry’s face caught fire. Oh Merlin.

Well, those would be different from y-fronts, that was certain. There was hardly any fabric at the sides, and the rest was nothing but lace. He went to put it back and realised it came with a matching bra and some kind of sheer nightie. So it was a set.

Harry wondered what he’d look like in it and promptly blushed. As a man, he’d simply look ridiculous—though some men could certainly pull the look off, it wasn’t his style.

But as a woman?

Severus would melt, Harry was sure of it. And hadn’t he said he liked Harry in purple?

Harry gulped and scooped up the set and a white one sitting nearby, hoping that Severus wouldn’t notice them. He buried them between clothing folds and tried to look innocent. Severus only gave him a raised eyebrow, so Harry gathered he hadn’t quite pulled off the innocent look, but at least the man didn’t know what he’d put in the trolley. Yet. Maybe he’d get lucky and they would be able to check out without Severus finding them.

Of course, Harry’s luck only stretched to life-or-death situations, and Severus noticed them the moment they landed on the counter.

“Elaina?”

Harry flinched at the sound of his throwaway alias. “Um, yes?”

Severus held up the purple little number and smirked. “Care to explain?”

‘Elaina’ leaned in close and whispered, “Thought you might like it. You know. On me. When we switch things up later.”

Severus’ throat bobbed and his breath came out in a rush. “Merlin. I shan’t argue that.” He laid the garment on the checkout counter and tucked Harry close into his side.
The sun had long since set before they had finished shopping, and by that time, Harry’s guts had twisted themselves in knots with worry about meeting the Weasleys again. Seth would have told them by now—at least Ron and Hermione, and perhaps the family as a whole—that he was irrevocably soul-bound to Severus. Ron would know that he would have to either deal with Professor Snape on a permanent basis or give up contact with Harry.

Harry was terrified his friend would choose the latter. After all, Ron had abandoned him in the past, and for much less.

He dug his hands into his pockets to keep from biting his nails as they trudged to the Weasleys’ door, feet and back aching from their long shopping day, heart pounding into his ribs. As they reached the stoop, Harry stopped and stared at the door, fear freezing his arms to his sides. Shite. He couldn’t knock. He couldn’t do this.

Severus’ warm hand rubbed his shoulders and held him close at the older man’s side.

“It will be all right, Harry,” Severus murmured. “We shall face them together.”

“Y-yeah. I just don’t want to lose them.”

“You shan’t. If they are angry, we shall discuss it until they are satisfied. I promise you.”

“Yeah. Thank you, love.”

Severus just held him tight. Harry hugged Severus back for strength, then gathered his courage and knocked on the door.

Molly answered a moment later, as smiling and friendly as usual. “Welcome back, Harry, Severus. Did you finish your shopping?”

Harry peered into her eyes, trying to see if there was anything different, anything lacking about her expression, but the woman merely raised an eyebrow at his scrutiny. Harry blushed.

“Um, yeah. For the moment. Where are …?”

“Ron and Hermione? They’re in Ron’s room with Seth. Severus, why don’t you sit with Arthur and myself and have a spot of tea while Harry goes to check on them.” The look in her eyes made it clear that it wasn’t a request.

Severus clutched Harry close. “I would … prefer to accompany Harry, at least for a moment. He has been afraid his friends will reject him all day. I would feel as though I were abandoning him if I left him to face them alone.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ waist. “No, no. It’s okay, love. I should probably go up on my own at first anyway.”

Severus turned and cupped Harry’s face, careless of Molly’s piercing gaze. “Are you sure, my Harry? I will come with you, if you wish it.”

“Yeah. I’m sure. They remember you as Professor Snape, Verus, not the gentle, loving man I’ve come to know these past couple weeks. They’ll be afraid to say what they really think of all this if you’re with me.” He sighed and hunched in on himself. “It’s probably best to find out the truth now, before it goes on too long.”
Severus’ eyes filled with pain. “Harry, I … I did not intend to bring such sorrow upon you.”

Harry kissed Severus lightly. “Ssh. It’s not your fault at all. This kind of surprised all of us, love, and now we just have to deal with the backlash.”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “I will be with you no matter what happens.”

“Yeah.” Harry pressed their foreheads together and held Severus close for a moment. “Yeah. I know.”

Severus straightened and smoothed Harry’s hair—not that it did much good. “Then go on, love, and meet with your friends. I shall be all right with Molly and Arthur.”

Harry buried his face in Severus’ chest and squeezed him tight, trying to burn the man’s scent and feel and warmth into his senses for the confrontation ahead. Severus’ strong arms came down around him, and for a moment, he felt as if he was home. Harry could have stayed there, safe in Severus’ embrace forever, but he had to face the music sometime. With a sigh, he pulled back and gave Severus a warm smile.

“Try not to terrify them too much, okay?”

Severus chuckled and brushed a stray piece of hair from Harry’s forehead. “I shall strive to be the perfect gentleman.”

Harry snorted. “No one’s asking you to go that far.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Hmm.”

“I’m teasing, Verus. You know I love you. Go and have your tea. I’ll be back with Seth as soon as I can.” He started for the stairs, but turned back a few steps away. “Um, Severus? If they ask me about you … about … your past, is it all right if I give them at least the gist? Um, with … with your family and all that?”

Severus closed his eyes, obviously uncomfortable, but gave Harry a slow nod.

“I’ll avoid it if I can, but they’ll keep your secrets, Verus. They’re our family, after all.”

A bright blush painted Severus’ cheeks and a look of wonder filled his eyes, transforming his scar-glamoured face into a thing of unparalleled beauty, at least in Harry’s eyes.


Harry smiled back and made his way upstairs. He chewed his lip all the way to Ron’s room, fearful of the fiery young man’s reaction, and gathered his courage at the orange-painted door. After a deep, calming breath, he knocked.

“Ron? It’s me. Can I come in?”

“Yeah, mate,” said Ron. “We’ve been waiting.”

Harry gulped. ‘We?’ He opened the door and blanched. Besides Ron, Hermione, and Seth, the twins and Ginny had also taken up residence in Ron’s room, and all but Seth were staring at him with eyes that demanded explanation.

“Oh, shite.”
The Red-Headed League

Chapter Summary

***It ran long again, so the steamy section got booted to the next chapter. It's important to Seth's development, so it kind of deserves its own place. Also, the title of this chapter is a shout-out to the Sherlock Holmes story by the same name. And, just a heads up, the rating is going up in the next chapter. It's still a pretty mild explicit, but the next scene definitely went past the bounds of 'mature.'***

Warnings: A metric ton of redheads, lots of emotional fluff, discussion of the sexual assault Severus went through as a teen, and mischievous twins. The Weasleys start to realize what kind of monster Dumbledore really is.

CHAPTER 18

THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE

Harry stood frozen in the doorway, unable to move, unable to even breathe as he stared at the worried faces of his friends. Would they abandon him? Would they all hate him now?

He wasn’t sure he could bear it if they all left, just because he’d dared to fall in love.

Ron stood and came to the doorway, standing in front of his friend. Harry’s heart leapt into his throat and cut off his air.

Ron held up conciliatory hands. “Easy, Harry. It’s all right. We’re your friends, okay?”

Harry gulped. “You … you’re not angry?”

Ron shook his head. “No. Listen Harry, I want an explanation—we all do—but we’re still your family. I’m still your best mate. I’m not going to toss you—never again, you understand?”

Harry swallowed hard and blinked down a sudden rush of tears. “Yeah, yeah, I’m sorry.” He rubbed his eyes. “I … are you all right with this then?”

Ron crossed his arms over his chest. “Don’t know if I’d go that far. Whatever possessed you, Harry? He was an arse as our professor, and you’ve only seen the kinder side of him for two weeks! How did all this happen? How could you fall in love so quickly with a man you hated?”

Harry rubbed the back of his hair and gave Ron a sheepish smile. “Well, it’s kind of a long story. Reckon I should sit, yeah?”

Ron shook his head. “No. Listen Harry, I want an explanation—we all do—but we’re still your family. I’m still your best mate. I’m not going to toss you—never again, you understand?”

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Ron crossed his arms over his chest. “Don’t know if I’d go that far. Whatever possessed you, Harry? He was an arse as our professor, and you’ve only seen the kinder side of him for two weeks! How did all this happen? How could you fall in love so quickly with a man you hated?”

Harry rubbed the back of his hair and gave Ron a sheepish smile. “Well, it’s kind of a long story. Reckon I should sit, yeah?”

Ron’s cheeks reddened. “Oh, yeah, come in, mate. Sorry about that.”

Fred patted the bed beside him and Harry took a seat. With Seth hanging on the wall behind him, he felt like he was protecting his little brother.

“Harry,” said Ginny, “I’ve got a question for you. Before you and Severus bound to each other—
were you even gay? Are you going to be able to be happy with him, considering that he’s a man?”

He blushed and rubbed up his hair again. “Um, yeah. I knew before Severus I wasn’t into girls.”

“Even I know I’m not into girls,” said Seth with a shudder. “I imagine we never have been.”

Heart aching for what Seth had endured, Harry gave the boy a sympathetic look. “Yeah, mate. Remember Cho? Oh, no. You hadn’t experienced that disaster yet.”

“Cho Chang? What about her? I mean, I thought she was cute and all for a while, but she never seemed all that interested in me.”

“She was interested in me in fifth year,” said Harry with a scowl. “As a replacement for Cedric Diggory. She kissed me just before the winter hols. It was … well, gross, frankly. After that, I reckoned I wasn’t all that into girls.”

Ginny gave Harry a wan smile. “Well, Dean will be glad to hear that. He was convinced you’d steal me away from him one day.”

“Um, no, can’t do that. Couldn’t even if I wasn’t bound and in love.”

“Did you love Professor Snape before this bonding thing came into effect?” Hermione fixed him with a searching stare. “Do you love him because you’re bound or are you bound because you love him?”

Harry frowned. “I … I don’t think it works like that, ‘Mione. One isn’t dependent on the other, as far as I know.”

Fred said, “Well, when did you fall for him?”

George took over. “Because, while we admit he has a voice like silk—”

“And he’s even a bit sexy in a dark, mysterious kind of way—”

“Well, if you’re into guys, that is.”

Ron gagged. Fred ignored him. “Even so, until we saw him today—”

“He was a complete arsehole to you, Harry.”

“Worse to you than he was to anyone.”

George shrugged. “And we do know part of that was spying—”

“But not all of it was. That shite about your father—”

“—Wasn’t because he was a spy.”

Harry cut in, “No, but—”

“What we want to know is,” said Fred, “can you forget—”

“—What he did all the years before now?”

Harry frowned. “I—”

“This is forever, Harry,” said Hermione. “Are you sure it’s what you want?”
Harry huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, if you lot would let me answer one question before you ask the next!”

They went silent and gave him sheepish grins.

“Right,” said Harry with a sigh. “Let’s start with the first point. Yes, he was an arsehole to me in the past. Yes, part of it was because he was a spy, and part of it was because he thought I was a pampered, spoiled, prince and needed discipline.”

“A prince?” Hermione snorted. “Your home life was anything but princely, as far as I can tell.”

Harry frowned. “I’m not keen on talking about it, if you don’t mind. I’m done with those bastards now—no point in hashing it out now. But yes, he’s aware of my past. While all of you were changing into your ‘me’ disguises, he was in my former bedroom, looking around and realising everything he thought he knew about me was wrong. He apologised the night he was tortured, he apologised again in person the night of the breakout, and he has done every time it’s been brought up since.”

Harry tucked his knees close to his chest. “It makes him feel unworthy of me. Everything makes him feel unworthy of me, so I’d appreciate it if you lot don’t tear down what little bit of confidence I’ve been able to give him. He feels terrible about everything in the past, honest, and he’s been wonderful since the breakout. Well, since that night he was being tortured with me really.”

“Okay,” said Ginny. “If he’s really sorry and trying to make it up, we can accept that—”

Ron started a protest, and Hermione quelled him with a look.

Ginny shook her head at Ron and continued her question. “But if he was mean to you because he thought you were spoiled, then I don’t understand what the bit about your da was about. Your da was dead. He couldn’t have spoiled you.”

Harry cringed. “I … well, my da was pretty awful to him.”

Hermione’s eyebrow shot up. “You’re avoiding something.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea right now, Harry,” said Ginny with a fierce expression. “We need to know what you’re getting into. We’re your family—I’m not going to let my big brother be abused just because his da was a bit of a prat.”

“And it’s completely unfair that he treated you so badly because of it anyway,” said Ron with a growl. “Just because your da pulled some pranks—”

Harry jerked to his feet and snapped, “It wasn’t just pranks, okay?”

Fred tugged him back down by his hand. “Okay. Then tell us what it was.”

“Because Ron’s right,” said George. “If all he did was pull some pranks—”

“—Then Snape’s anger is way out of proportion.”

“No one hates us like that, after all.”

Harry sighed and put his head in his hands. “It’s just—it’s not my secret to tell. But then, I suppose he did say it was okay to talk if I needed to.”

Ginny reached behind Fred and patted his shoulder. “What happened, Harry?”
Harry gave in and mentally kicked himself for his weakness. “All right. But you guys can’t spread this around, okay? It’s really hurtful to Severus.”

“We promise.” Hermione shot Ron a look. “All of us.”

Ron grumbled his agreement. The others nodded.

Harry gripped his knees and tried to calm his racing heart. “I mean it, okay? This goes way beyond a prank.”

Hermione frowned. “Are you talking about the time Sirius sent him into the shack while Remus was transformed? Because, while I can forgive him his anger at Sirius, I should think he’d be grateful to your da for saving his life.”

Harry shook his head. “That was really bad too, but this was almost worse.”

“Worse than sending him in with a werewolf?”

“Yeah. You see, um, well, that attack, as bad as it was, it failed. Da was there to save his life. But the first time—he was the one holding the wh—” He choked on the word and looked away. “He hates my da because Da and Sirius assaulted him in their fifth year. Brutally. And no one was there to save him this time. Instead, they all watched and laughed while he suffered.” Tears stung Harry’s eyes. “It was … h-horrible, what they did to him. And honestly, after knowing the whole story, they deserved all Severus’ hatred.” He struggled to control a surge of fury. “They deserved Azkaban.”

A low, vibrating hum filled Harry’s ears.

“Harry,” Hermione said in a worried tone, “you’re rattling the windows.”

Harry took a deep breath and forced his anger aside. It did no good now—Sirius and his da were dead. They had already been punished more harshly than Harry would have ever done.

A silver doe appeared in front of him and spoke in Severus’ low voice, concern tinging every word. “Harry, I do apologise for the interruption, but are you well, my love? The windows were shaking.”

Harry gave them all a significant look, then turned his attention to the doe. “Yeah, sorry about that, Verus. I just, we were talking about how much Da hurt you—I didn’t give any details—and just the thought of it made me furious like earlier again. I’m okay now.”

The doe nodded and bounded off.

Hermione said, “Earlier?”

“Oh. Yeah, I just learned the whole story this morning.”

Seth added, “He put his fist through a wall when he heard.”

Harry nodded and rubbed his knuckles. That had hurt.

Hermione winced. “How bad is it, Harry? I mean, are we talking Death Eater level?”

Harry paused. “Yeah, kinda. I mean, Da wasn’t a Death Eater, but what he and Sirius did to Verus was as bad as the Death Eaters have done to some of their victims before. It was terrible. And Severus had to deal with the shame and horror of it alone for twenty-three years.”

“Mate,” said Ron in a hesitant voice, “I don’t want to make you angry again, but are you sure what
he said was true?”

Harry gave him a terse nod. “Absolutely. I saw part of it in fifth year.”

Fred started, “But your da was dead then—”

And George finished, “So how could you have seen it?”

Hermione frowned. “You’re talking about Snape’s pensieve. This was what you saw in his memories that upset you so much? Your da assaulting him?”

Harry winced. “Yeah, that and Mum abandoning him to be tortured, and Remus just standing by and letting it happen. Look, I don’t want to go into detail about this. I didn’t ask Severus if I could talk about that specifically because it’s so … humiliating for him.”

Hermione paled. “Shame, humiliation, assault … Harry, are you saying what I think you are?”

He looked away. “Don’t ask me, Hermione. Please don’t ask me.”

She gasped. “Merlin. A-all right, Harry. I won’t ask.”

“Thanks.”

Ginny said in a shaky voice, “Let’s just m-move on to the next question, yeah? Um, what was it again?”

“If you can forget all the shite he put you through for the past six years,” said Ron. “And I need to add—can you forget all the shite he put us through just because we were your friends?”

Harry closed his eyes. “Forget it? No. But I’ve forgiven him.” He tried to smile at Ron, but the young man didn’t return it.

Ron gave him a heartsick look. “For us, Harry? For me?”

Harry held his stomach, trying to stem the bleeding from his tearing heart. “Ron, please don’t act like the fact that I’ve forgiven him for his sharpness means that I don’t care about how he treated you. Didn’t you hear me tell him to mind his tongue twice for your sake today, even when you were acting like an prat?”

The pain in Ron’s eyes faded. “Yeah. I guess you did at that. But, well, maybe I’m just a stubborn arse, but I still don’t understand how you can forgive him, Harry. I mean, he was awful to you.”

“And like I said, he feels horrid for it now. Ron, the man apologised to me while he was dying. Voldemort was trying to kill him through his mark while I was still trapped in his mind. So while I was working to neutralise the mark, I was talking to Severus, trying to get him to keep fighting. And he begged my forgiveness for everything.”

Harry closed his eyes to hold back tears. “Are you honestly going to tell me that after enduring a night of terrible torture beside a man you hated—Malfoy, for example—if, while he was bleeding and dying and shaking in sheer terror, he cried out to you and begged forgiveness, you would tell him to naff off?”

Ron gulped. “Um … I …. ” He sighed and dropped his head into his hands. “No. I don’t think I could, even if it was Malfoy.”

Harry debated telling Ron that Malfoy had come to a truce with Harry out of sheer deviousness, but
decided against it. Ron could only handle so many Slytherins in one night. While he meant it as a playful prod, it could easily blow up in his face and ruin everything.

He sighed and wished he hadn’t been so black and white in the past. It would make getting the Weasleys to accept the decent Slytherins easier now. Still, perhaps he could at least start the process with Severus.

Harry leaned on his knees and met his friend’s eyes. “Ron, if you must know, I forgave him even before he asked for it. I saw through his eyes, mate. I felt his pain, his fear, and the stark, utter loneliness that choked him like a noose until I came, and that changed everything.” He ruffled his hair, searching for a way to explain. “Look, remember how before the troll in the loo incident, we didn’t really like Hermione?”

Ron nodded.

“It was a bit like that. After I was with him during his torture, after I heard his thoughts and saw the world through his eyes, I could never go back to the way it was. Do you know that even though he thought I was a hallucination, he tried to comfort me? They had him hung up by his hands, bleeding, naked, and with his face and the flesh of his legs torn half off, and he was trying to keep *me* sane.”

“Merlin,” Fred gasped out. “Merlin. I didn’t realise it was that bad.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “They’re Death Eaters, guys. What did you think they did, whip him a little, maybe call him a name or two?”

“No,” said a tearful Hermione, “but we were hoping you didn’t have to endure … that it wasn’t as bad ….”

Harry gaped at her. “He was tortured as a traitor, Hermione. If anything, it was worse than usual.”

“Oh.” She crumpled into herself and covered her face. “Oh.”

Ron wrapped her in his arms and whispered something to her. Over her head, he mouthed to Harry, “Move on, mate.”

Harry nodded. “Um, well, let’s not go into this anymore, okay? Seth’s only fourteen and he’s still recovering.”

Seth shot him a dirty look. Harry blushed and mouthed, “Sorry.”

Seth shook his head and gave him a wry smile. “Anyway, guys, what was your last question again?”

Hermione sat up with a sniffle and said, “If this—a lifetime with Professor Snape as your soul-bound—was what you wanted, Harry.”

Harry blinked. “Well, it’s done now, so it doesn’t so much matter if I do or not, does it?”

She winced. “I just ….”

“But don’t worry,” he said with a grin. “It’s exactly what I wanted. Though it *does* sound a bit mad when you’ve not been there to see it develop, yeah.”

“A bit?” Fred’s expression made it clear that he was teasing. “You’re shagging Severus Snape and you think it’s only a *bit* mad?”

“Completely barmy,” said George.
“Utterly off the rocker.”

“Deliriously demented.”

“Fantastically fu—”

“Enough, you idiots,” said Harry with a grin. “I do get the idea.”

“Idiots!” Fred clucked sadly. “How insulting.”

“Indeed,” agreed his twin with a melodramatic sigh. “I’d say we’re at least duffer level, wouldn’t you?”

Harry burst into laughter. “Gods, I love you guys.”

Fred ruffled his hair. “We love you too, mate. Hence the inquisition.”

“Right.” Harry ducked away from Fred and gave them all a hesitant smile. “So … you’re okay now? I mean, you’re not angry with me any longer?”

Ron rubbed his neck. “Mate, we were never angry with you. We were just in a lather—”

“Pretty sure that was just you, Ronniekins,” said Ginny.

“Oh, stow it.” He gave Harry a wry grin. “Er, yeah. I reckon I owe you an apology about my tantrum earlier. Sorry about that, mate. It was just … a bit of a shock, yeah?”

Harry rubbed up the back of his hair and looked at the floor. “Yeah, I suppose it was.”

“Well, just so you know, it was never you I was upset about, mate. I jus—”

“Just lost your head a bit,” Hermione spoke over Ron before he could stick his foot in his mouth, much to Harry’s relief. “I think what we all want to know is this, really: does Professor Snape treat you well? Does he love you back? I mean, really love you? Because if he does, then all our questions are moot.”

Harry gave her a bright smile. “Yeah. Yeah, Hermione. He really does.”

She smiled. “Well, that’s okay then. So …?”

“So … what?”

“Spill! What’s he really like under the mask?”

The Weasleys all bunched in closer to Hermione and gave Harry expectant looks. Even Ron looked curious. Harry looked over his shoulder and exchanged amused grins with Seth.

Apparently they were going to be here longer than he’d thought.

Severus followed Molly to the kitchen with Harry’s words ringing in his ears. Family—*their* family. Gods, Severus hadn’t had a family since his grandparents’ deaths. Well, except perhaps Minerva, if she still wanted to be his friend after they sorted the mess with Dumbledore’s lies.
And if she didn’t disown him for falling in love with a man half his age and his former student.

Severus forced away the pain of those thoughts and focused on the joy Harry had just brought him. Even if the Weasleys never accepted him, the fact that Harry considered Severus a part of his family sent rays of light spilling into the darkness that had been his life for so long. He cherished the feeling of Harry’s love, how it had begun to seal the cracks in his spirit one by one.

Then he stepped into the kitchen, and all his warmth faded. It wasn’t just Arthur waiting for him—Bill, his Veela wife, and Charles sat at the table as well, each with half-drunk cups of tea and nibbling at a plate of biscuits and pasties.

As soon as Severus set foot in the kitchen, all nibbling and polite conversation stopped. It was if the air had vanished from the room. Every eye fixated on him, and Severus did not need to be a spy to see the coldness within their stares.

Occluding the fear from his expression, he brought his cloak around himself and stood tall. He had faced Death Eaters as a traitor. A house full of Weasleys could do no worse.

Still, he gripped his wand and braced himself, just in case.

“Severus,” said Arthur in a gently reproachful tone, “there’s no need to be so on guard. None of us are going to attack you.”

“Yet,” Charlie muttered.

“Charlie,” Molly chided. “Be quiet. At least let the man speak before you judge him.”

Charlie gave her a terse nod and went silent, but Severus did not relax.

“For Merlin’s sake, man,” said Bill, “come and sit. None of us are Death Eaters. We just want an explanation.”

Severus sighed and chided himself mentally. Bill was right. These were Weasleys. The epitome of fair and friendly. He could bear a dressing down from them.

Even so, his heart panged at the thought. Merlin, he didn’t want them to hate him—more than they already did, at least. He ached for these people—for Harry’s family—to accept him, or to at least make the attempt, and he feared what it would do to his relationship with the young mage if they did not.

“Sit down, Snape,” said Charlie in sharp tones, “and tell us how in Merlin’s name you ended up bound to our little brother and a man half your age! He was your student, for gods’ sakes.”

Severus suppressed a shudder and swallowed hard. No, they would not accept him. Yet … he looked to the stairs and sighed. At least, for Harry’s sake, he had to try.

He inched closer to the table. “I … I ….”

“Severus ….” Molly patted the seat beside her. “Come now. I realise you’re afraid, but we’re all adults here, aren’t we? We can discuss this without attacking each other.” She shot Charlie a quelling look.

“All right, all right.” Charlie sighed. “Just sit and explain it, yeah? Because I’m at a loss.”

Severus allowed his relief to show in his eyes and took the seat Molly had offered. “T-thank you. I
confess I find myself … more afraid than I had thought I would be. I … I do not wish to cause Harry pain—Merlin knows I have hurt him enough in the past.” He looked to the staircase and frowned. He hoped Harry hadn’t been met with an inquisition as well.

“He’ll be fine,” said Arthur with a hesitant smile. “Though it relieves me to see that you do care for him, remember that we’re his family. They just want an explanation, the same one we’ve asked of you.”

Severus met him with a level gaze. “What, precisely, do you wish me to explain? I am unaware of how much Seth has divulged, and so, do not know where to start.”

“Start by telling us what this means for Harry. Seth couldn’t explain it, and none of us know what soul-binding is. Is it like a marriage bond?”

Severus hesitated. “Yes, and no. Understand that I do not know much about it myself, but from what I do understand, it is like a marriage bond in that our souls are drawn to each other, and now that the binding is settled between us, any significant time spent apart will begin to hurt us. Physically as well as emotionally. However, it is also unlike a marriage bond in that we are not legally bonded and shan’t be unless we have the same bonding ceremony every other bonded wizard does. As well, there is no emotional link yet—though there is a telepathic element, apparently—and this bond does not end with death.”

Molly paled. “So you two will still be bound even in the afterlife?”

“If there is such a thing, yes. Please do not ask me how it works. I do not know.”

“But … what does that mean for your souls? For Harry?”

He closed his eyes. “Again, I am uncertain. To the best of my knowledge, it means our souls will be drawn to each other in whatever life exists after this one. For all I know, they could be literally bound together, or merged, and that is where the term half-souled comes from.”

Charlie paled and said, “H-half-souled?”

“It refers to the pain one experiences when separated from their soul-bond. Whether it is a literal interpretation or not is beyond my knowledge at this time.”

“This spell, it sounds terribly dangerous,” said Arthur, quiet fire burning in his eyes.

Severus tensed and moved back a bit. “I … perhaps. I do not know enough about it to properly judge.”

“And yet, you thought it wise to bind Harry to yourself, not knowing what consequences might await him for your actions?”

Severus swallowed and blinked hard. “Do you truly believe I would have done such a terrible thing to Harry on purpose? Do you believe I would have thrown away my own soul, and for what? For revenge?”

“You’ve not been shy about risking your life in the past,” said Arthur.

Severus scowled at him. “No, I have thrown myself at death’s feet over and over again, haven’t I? For you. For Harry. For all of you.”

Arthur blushed. “That’s not what I meant, Severus! I know you’ve done this all for the war and to
save us all. Merlin.” He rubbed his forehead. “All I meant to say is that you don’t seem to be too attached to your own life.”

Severus held his gaze. “Perhaps I did not mind sacrificing my life, Arthur, but we are speaking of souls. I would have gladly embraced the peace of death then. I was forced to be a monster I am not day in and day out. Any moment, I knew I might say the wrong word or make the wrong expression or even think the wrong words and die for it. I had to be friendly with death to do my job, Arthur, but what peace is there after death if I die with only half my soul?”

Arthur sighed. “All right, you have a point. So why did you do it, then?”

“How have you not heard a word I am saying? I did not intend to do it at all! At the time that this bond occurred, I … well, no. I had not hated Harry for the entirety of his sixth year. Once he apologised about the pensieve incident, and when I … received greater knowledge about what, at the time, I believed he would have to face in the war, my hatred had dimmed to a sort of grudging respect. However, I still did not like him. How can you believe that I would willingly bind my soul to a man I could barely tolerate, let alone cherish with the kind of love that soul-bonds need to survive?”

Severus sighed and hugged his waist. “Besides that, although my feelings for Harry have changed greatly, and now my heart is his as well as my soul, even if I had loved him then, even if my world had revolved around his happiness, I would not have bound him to me. I would have left him the choice, if I had had one myself. This bond was never my intent. It was … an accident of fate, if you will.”

“But that’s what we don’t understand,” said Bill. “If you didn’t mean to bind your soul to Harry’s, how could it have happened when we all know that magic works on intent?”

Severus rubbed his lip in thought. “I am not entirely sure. I did mean to link to Harry, but it was supposed to be temporary.”

Their eyes grew sharper, and Severus rushed to defend himself before they attacked.

“It happened during my torture, and I was not in my right mind. I was desperate to reach him before I died, but I never meant to bind him to me irrevocably! I never meant to bind him at all!”

Molly laid a calming hand on Severus’ wrist. “Easy. Just explain what happened.”

“Y-yes. I shall try.” Severus rested his forehead in his hand and spoke to the table, fearful of seeing the censure in their eyes. “Well, at the time, the Dark Lord had sent Bellatrix in to torture me first. Within five minutes, she had already separated the entire side of my face from … from the fascia underneath, and was ….” He gripped his hair and squinted hard to hold in tears. “She was tearing my skin away. My face. She had set the bar for the following torturers so high, I did not think I would survive long.”

The scraping of dishes along the table let Severus know the Weasleys had all lost their taste for their tea. He couldn’t blame them.

“Tearing your face away?” Bill’s voice was shaky. “Merlin. I … Merlin.”

“They are Death Eaters.” Severus sat up and shuddered hard. “They have done much more inhumane things than that. They did many of them to me.”

“I am sure we can eemagine,” said Fleur with a shiver. “Sacre bleu, what ‘orror!”

Severus swallowed hard. “Yes. It was horrifying, and under such terrible torture, I believed I would
perish within moments. That is the only reason I reached out to Harry mentally. I was attempting to establish a Legilimentic link despite the distance. It was the only way I knew of to speak to him before it was too late.”

He hugged his chest and pressed against the back of his chair, needing the comfort of something solid behind him.

“I never meant to bind myself to such a beautiful, gentle young man. Even at my best, Harry deserves so much better than I can give. I only wanted to link our minds for a moment, just long enough to pass on information that, at the time, I believed crucial to Riddle’s defeat. I have since come to doubt my source, but at that moment, I believed that unless I reached Harry, he would not know how to defeat Riddle and we would all die. As I was dying myself at the time, I did not know what else to do but to reach out to him in spirit and hope he heard me somehow.”

Molly patted his shoulder. “Understandable. Perhaps I would have do—”

A vibrating, rattling sound filled the kitchen, and, after a second of confusion, Severus realised it was coming from the windows.

*Harry.*

Severus focused on his memories of that morning, of kissing Harry and feeling the young man respond in his arms.

“What in Merlin’s name?” Bill stood, wand drawn and looking for the source of the trouble. “They can’t get through the wards. I know they ca—” The windows stopped rattling, but Bill only tensed further. “Shite. Where are they?”

Arthur joined him, wand held aloft and eyes hard.

Severus held up a quelling hand. “It is only Harry. *Expecto Patronum.*” His doe looked at him with wide silver eyes. He sent the animal up with an inquiry after his love and turned back to the Weasleys.

“Sit down, gentlemen,” said Severus. “It was only Harry losing control of his temper. He has broken all the windows in our former safehouse twice in the past week.”

The doe reappeared just as the Weasleys had taken their seats once more.

She said in Harry’s voice, “Yeah, sorry about that, Verus. I just, we were talking about how much Da hurt you—I didn’t give any details, love—and just the thought of it made me furious like earlier again. I’m okay now.”

The doe vanished, and Severus looked up to find a round of Weasley eyes boring into him. He swallowed and inched his hand towards his wand, just in case.

Charlie leaned forwards and peered hard at Severus. “What did Harry’s da do to you?”

Severus shuddered. “Besides tormenting me with cruel pranks and such for seven years for no other reason than I was poor and Slytherin—”

“Which you gave back just as much, from what I heard,” said Arthur with a frown.

Severus kept a flinch from his face, though the sting of that comment had cut him.
“I was one person, Arthur, and they were four,” he said in a low voice ringing with pain. “Yes, I fought back, but it was almost always in self-defence. And, though I will admit to instigating trouble on several occasions after they had made an enemy of me, do try and recall that they were Gryffindors and had the backing of their peers and the school. I was Slytherin and alone. No matter what I did or did not do, I was always the villain. I had no one to defend me but Lily, and no one at all after fifth year.”

“Even so, that’s just typical teenage antics. Nothing to be so upset about twenty years later.”

“Teenage antics?” Severus held his aching middle, trying to stem the bleeding inside. “I believe I recognise that phrase. Albus told you this?”

Arthur hesitated. “Well, yes. Albus did tell us about the strife between you, but that has nothing to do with anything. The fact is that they played pranks on you, and you fought back, hard. There is no reason for you to still hold a grudge even now.”

Severus gave a bitter laugh. “Oh yes, the evil, sneaky Slytherins could certainly hold their own against honourable, good Gryffindors. Oh, it was four on one and the Gryffindors were about as honourable as miniature Death Eaters, you say? Well, that is only teenage antics, then. Boys will be boys, after all.” He closed his eyes tight to pin back tears. Gods. He could only imagine what stories Dumbledore had told these people to make them fight so hard against something that should be obvious.

“But, Severus! That isn’t fair. They were school boys, not Death Eaters. And you did hold your own against them, didn’t you?”

Severus sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Arthur, imagine for a moment that Ron was a loner, that he did not have the friends he does in Harry and Miss Granger and the support of his other housemates. Now imagine that Ron came home to you one day and said that three Slytherins had attacked him brutally while he was doing nothing but reading a book, alone, while twenty of the attackers’ friends looked on and jeered at him. If said attackers then left him lying on the ground while bleeding and severely injured, if he lay there weeping and shivering for hours before one of his own house mates found him and carried him to the hospital wing, would you not consider it bullying, at the very least?”

Arthur shuddered. “Well, that sounds more like a crime than bullying, to be honest.”

Severus raised an eyebrow and waited for it to click.

Arthur’s eyes widened. “My gods, Severus. Are you saying that they did that to you?”

Severus inclined his head. “They did indeed. Will you still tell me they were simply being teenagers and having antics?”

Arthur shivered and hugged his shoulders. “I can’t believe they would do such a thing. They were good men.”

Severus nodded. “Perhaps. Potter did die to save his wife and son. And Black died trying to protect Harry. I cannot overlook their sacrifice however badly they treated me, because they saved the life of my soul-bond. For that, I am grateful to them. However, while I will agree that Potter at least grew into an acceptable man—I do not believe that Black ever quite grew up at all—they were both terrible boys.”

Arthur opened his mouth, then closed it again. His eyes filled with shame and grief. “Forgive me,
Severus. I was wrong to have said what I did.”

“All is well. It is a common misconception, apparently.” Severus folded his hands upon his lap and sighed. “The event I mentioned before is what angered Harry so much.”

Molly patted his hand. “Can you tell us what happened, dear?”

Severus hesitated. “I … it was in fifth year, after the Owls. They cornered me by the lake and set into a brutal assault that left scars on my bare ….”

The Weasleys gasped as one.

Heat traced Severus’ cheeks and he ducked to hide his shame. “On my person. They were abominably cruel to me, and Harry, naturally, is struggling with it.” He leaned on the table and kept his head down, wishing he had enough privacy to curl into a ball and lick his wounds in secret.

Molly touched his hand. “Severus, I’m just … judging by my experiences in the Order and your reactions—which are quite difficult to read, so do forgive me if I’m misinterpreting here—but was this assault … sexual in nature?”

He shuddered and turned his face away, unable to look at them, unable to speak. Any moment, they would judge him as the scum he was, they would hate him, push him away, and—

“Mother of Merlin,” Bill choked out. “It really was?”

Severus cringed. “I … I ….”

Molly rubbed his shoulder. “There now. You don’t need to speak of it further if it hurts you so. It’s all right.”

He whipped his head up and gaped at her, wide-eyed and shaking. “You … you believe me?”

Molly’s eyes went sad and soft. She brushed a lock of hair behind Severus’ ear. “Well, I can’t speak for the rest of them, but I do. I’m afraid it’s quite obvious in your reactions, dear. And besides that, Remus told me once he had stood by while something terrible happened to you. He would never say what it was, but his shame was obvious. He regrets it terribly. The kind of remorse he showed … I would expect it after an event like that.”

Severus scowled. “He has never expressed regret to me.”

“Perhaps he’s only too ashamed to face it.” She took his hand in her own. “Did they … was it as bad as I fear?”

Severus closed his eyes. “Most likely not. They did not actually touch me, not with their bodies at any rate.”

Charlie gave him a bemused look. “I’m confused. If they didn’t touch you, how can it be assault?”

“There are spells, Charlie,” Molly whispered. “Horrible, nightmarish spells.”

Charlie’s wide-open mouth snapped shut. “Oh gods.”

“It was nothing so dark as that,” Severus rushed to say. “Merlin. As Arthur said, they were schoolboys, not Death Eaters. They only stripped me before our peers and used a whipping curse on my rear end, but ….”
“That’s enough,” Molly said with a shake of her head. “It’s bad enough.”

“Y-yes. So Harry seems to think as well. He punched a hole through our wall when I told him the full story, so perhaps we are lucky this time that nothing was damaged.”

“Yes, there is that.” Molly patted his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“I am … well enough.”

She poured him a cup of piping-hot tea and slid a tray with cream and sugar to him. “There now. That should help you gather your wits.”

He thanked her and used the movement of preparing his tea to calm him.

“That’s better,” said Molly. “Now, what do you say we move on from the past and get back to the reason we’re here, hmm?” A round of nods and murmurs of assent met her request, though Arthur’s eyes still held pain and unresolved questions. “Good. Now, if I recall correctly, the last thing you said was that you were afraid you would die without passing on crucial information to Harry, and that was what made you reach out to him?”

Severus nodded sipped his tea. Hmm. Chamomile—a good choice for such a volatile discussion. The warmth and calming nature of the drink seeped into his veins, and he felt his tension slowly drain away.

Molly gave him a knowing smile. “What happened after that?”

He frowned and stirred his tea again, just to have something to do with his hands.

“I am … not entirely sure. As I have said, I reached out to Harry’s mind and begged him to let me in. I believe I fell unconscious afterwards. I do not remember anything else until after Gibbon had taken over for Bellatrix. It was some moments later before I realised I could hear Harry in my mind. Feel his presence inside me, somehow.”

He shook his head. “I thought he was a hallucination brought about by pain. Harry and I do have a telepathic bond thanks to our Occlumency lessons, but it does not work over long distances. I did not believe I could honestly reach him, but because Harry was trying to reach me concurrently, our magic connected and bound our souls together.”

Severus breathed in the steam from his teacup and sighed. “I did not recall the binding spell until long after that day, when I realised Harry’s feelings towards me had changed. When I learned what we shared that night—what I had believed to be a hallucination—was real. And when I did recall the spell, I was horribly ashamed. Harry deserves better.”

Severus bowed his head and sipped at his tea, needing the warmth to drive away his cold terror and shame. Molly laid a hand at his shoulder, and her touch soothed him in a way the tea could not.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Not at all,” she said with a sad smile. “Anyone would need comfort after reliving such painful memories as you have done tonight.”

“Y-yes.” He set his tea aside and hugged his chest tight, imagining it was Harry’s arms around him instead of his own. “Do you know that even if we hadn’t enacted that spell, I believe I would have still fallen in love with him? That night … I would have died without his presence. He held me together. Encouraged me and called me brave. It was the first time I had heard it.”
Severus swallowed and stared at the milky swirls in his tea. “That night, he saw me like no one has since … well, that event we discussed earlier. Dolohov had … he had torn all of my clothing away, bared my scrawny, scarred body for the horror that it was. I was covered in blood, bile, and who knows what else, but Harry … he looked at me then, saw me in the worst state I have ever been in, and somehow still called me beautiful.” Tears pooled on Severus’ lashes. **Beautiful!** I was like something out of nightmares, and he said I was gorgeous.” He wiped his eyes and gave a little huff of a laugh. “Perhaps he needed his glasses checked.”

Molly laid her arm across his shoulders and held him. The touch brought him to the verge of tears again, and he closed his eyes to keep them back.

“I cannot think Harry truly thought I was beautiful then, not when I looked like death, but the fact that he would even say it—that he would even attempt to comfort me in such a manner—it stripped the walls from my heart like no one has ever done before. I had never even been called passable, let alone gorgeous. Beautiful. Yet he did. He said it, and despite the condition I was in, he meant it.”

His tears slipped out of his control and down his cheeks. “I had never heard any of the kind words he bestowed upon me. No one but Harry had ever said I was worthy, that I was brave and strong—and that he could say such things, even after my years of antagonism, ripped the veil from my eyes and forced me to see him for the beautiful human being he truly is.” He wiped his cheeks and gripped his teacup. “Harry has had my heart since then, though I did not know it until after the trip to save him from his horrid relatives.”

He scowled at the memory of what those beasts of human beings had done to his love, but his expression quickly faded to reveal his shame and sorrow.

“Once I realised I had bound us, I was appalled. He deserves so much better than I can give, so I tried to let him go before the bond took hold. To allow him space to find someone better, but he wouldn’t have it. He refused to let me back away, even for his own sake.” Severus gave another breathless laugh. “I still cannot believe he wants me. After all I have done to him, I deserve nothing but his antipathy, but he … he loves me. And, after everything we have endured together, I love him.”

Severus looked up to find Charlie wide-eyed shock, Bill watching him with a soft smile, Fleur and Arthur discreetly wiping their eyes, and Molly with tracks of tears running down her face.

“Severus,” Molly said in a shaky voice, “if this is truly how you feel about our Harry ….”

He laid his hand upon hers. “I will swear an oath if you wish it.”

“No. I believe you—no one with a soul could doubt you after witnessing that kind of honesty. I feel privileged to have seen it.” She moved back with a chuckle. “Merlin, look at me! Blubering and carrying on.”

“It is quite all right, though I did not intend to cause you pain.”

“Oh no, no, dear, you didn’t hurt me. I was upset for your pain. And, well, that was such a heartfelt, beautiful moment, I was overcome.” She Summoned a handkerchief, and after a pause to wipe her face, patted Severus’ shoulder. “I can’t speak for the others, but as far as I’m concerned—welcome to the family, Severus.”

He gasped and gripped her hand, almost knocking over his tea in his shock. “Truly? I … you would offer me a place with … but why?”
Arthur answered for her. “Harry has been waiting for someone to heal his heart his entire life. We tried to show him as much love as we could, but he never let us quite close enough to really heal his wounds. If you can do that for him, Severus, if you can bring that light of joy to his eyes again, then I’m happy to welcome you as well.”

His expression turned stern. “But I will not have you degrading him like you did in class. I won’t hear of you treating him as anything less than the wonderful, brave young man he is.”

Severus bowed his head. “No. I shall never hurt him again, if I can help it.”

Arthur nodded. “Good. Well, that’s one worry off my mind, but I confess, I’m still a bit concerned about the difference in your ages.”

Charlie nodded. “Same here.”

“Oh, tosh,” said Molly. “Bill is ten years older than Fleur. What does it matter as long as they love each other and treat one another well?”

Severus gave her a shy smile. “Thank you.”

“It matters,” said Bill with a worried frown, “because when Severus dies, what happens to Harry?”

Severus shuddered. “I do not know. I think, knowing what I do, that one soul-bond cannot live long without the other.”

Molly’s eyes filled. “So … Harry will die young?”

“I …” Severus looked to them and decided that of all the people in the world, these were people he could trust. “If you … you are truly willing to consider me a part of your family, then I would ease your fears.” He glanced to the stairs and shivered. “I must beg you to keep what I am about to reveal absolutely secret—even from the younger Weasleys and Albus. Not for my sake, but for Harry’s. If even a word of this should reach the wrong ears ….”

The Weasleys’ eyes all fixed upon Severus, and he suppressed a flinch at the intensity of their stares.

Bill said, “What is it, Severus? What do you know?”

“I am—wait.” He stood and withdrew his wand. “Before I tell you, will you allow me to check for listening spells? I fear for Harry’s sake if someone not on our side should overhear this.”

“The wards here are sound, Severus,” said Bill. “I set them myself.”

“I am certain they are, but recall that there is an unidentified spy in the Order. The enemy may well have been invited in, with no one the wiser.”

Bill gulped. “I, it’s only been Albus and Minerva here. I don’t think ….”

Severus nodded. “Perhaps you are right, but will you allow me to check anyway? I would feel safer knowing for certain there is nothing to fear.”

Arthur waved him on. “If it will ease your mind, go ahead. I’d much rather deal with a bit of embarrassment than have Harry be hurt or killed because we weren’t diligent enough to run a simple check for listening spells.”

Severus nodded his thanks and set to work searching for charms and spells. He turned up an Extendable Ear below the sink and disposed of it, but while he was there, the aura of another spell pressed on his magic, one that would not show up on simple scans and should most definitely not be within the Weasleys’ kitchen.

“Bill.” Severus said nothing else, but simply motioned the man over. It was enough.

“Merlin’s beard, how in the world did that get there?” Bill scanned it and cast the counterspell, then gave his father a concerned look. “A dark scrying spell, Da. And it had a listening factor attached, with its destination scrambled. How … who could have even put it here? It wouldn’t have been possible to place it from outside the wards, not with the protections I added.”

Arthur had gone white. “Merlin. I, I have no idea. But I, Bill, this could be bad news. We all talk in here, even about Order business. I hope to the gods that a Death Eater wasn’t on the other end of that.”

“I think,” said Severus, “if it were a Death Eater listening, many of our plans would have been much less successful. The Dark Lord was unaware of most of our hidden information until he destroyed Emmeline, so I do not think it was a Death Eater who placed that.”

No, Severus knew exactly who had done it—an interfering, twisted bastard of an old coot currently enjoying the shine of his pristine reputation. If only Fawkes were here now, perhaps Severus could convince the Weasleys of the truth of his false companion, but no matter. Severus would bring them into the fold when they were ready. For the moment, he had at least removed the immediate threat.

“I suggest you run scans for dark spells over the rest of the house, Bill, but after we are done here. For the moment—” Severus cast a revealing spell for dark observing spells and came up empty. “—This room is clean at any rate.” He returned to his seat along with Bill.

“All right.” Arthur cast heavy silencing and warding charms. “Now, what did you want to tell us, Severus?”

Severus sighed and rubbed his once again crooked nose. “Only that I am not so much older than Harry as you believe. Not any longer.” He pointed his wand at his own face and said clearly so the others could hear, “Finite Incantatem.” His glamours faded, revealing the fresh young man Harry had resurrected from the ashes of the past.


“Precisely what I said. I am younger.”

“But … but that’s impossible,” said a bemused Arthur. “Isn’t it?”

“For most wizards,” said Severus with a wry smile, “but Harry is not most wizards.”

“Too right,” said Charlie with a wry smile.

Molly shushed him and patted Severus’ shoulder. “Do go on, dear. What happened?”

Severus’ shoulders tensed with the ghost of Rookwood’s curse. “During our flight from the Dursleys, I received a whipping curse across my shoulders. Harry had expressed a wish to heal me. I taught him the Vulnera Sanentur—and Merlin, he will be a brilliant chanter one day. His voice is absolutely breathtaking.”

“He has a natural talent, and I have promised to help him develop it, but I digress. He was unable to heal me that evening, but the next morning—the day before his inheritance, if you will remember—his chants worked. And they worked like nothing else has done before.”

Severus laid a hand over his left wrist, thrilling in the lack of dark magic there. “Perhaps because of a combination of factors—Harry’s love for me, our bond, the strength of his core, and the fact that his magic was erratic that day, among many other factors—not only did he heal me of every scar and injury upon my person, including the Dark Mark, he—”

“What!” Molly reached for Severus’ hand and peeled his fingers away from his arm. “It’s really gone?”

Severus revealed his unmarked wrist to a chorus of gasps. “Yes. It is gone, and without killing me or destroying my core, which is what Poppy believed removing it would do.”

“Oh, Merlin,” she breathed. “I thought … nothing could remove it.”

“So did I.” He traced a finger over his bare wrist. “Besides the gift of his love, this is the most wondrous thing anyone has ever done for me. I am still amazed every time I see my arm like this, like it should be, and realise I am free.”

Molly took her hand in hers. “How wonderful, Severus. I am glad for you, but … what does this have to do with your age again?”

“At the same time that he removed my scars and my mark, Harry also erased fifteen years from my biological age. I am no longer thirty-eight. I am now twenty-three, despite the fact that my birthdate has not changed.”

Bill flicked his wand at Severus, causing the former spy to flinch, but he only cast the same status spell Severus had while checking his age the week prior. Yellow numbers appeared and Bill scanned through them until ….

“Oh my gods. He really is twenty-three.”

Molly gasped and covered her mouth. “My heavens. I, I didn’t think that was possible either!”

“No, and neither does the rest of the wizarding world. If they knew the truth, despite my theory that this is a one-time event he is most likely unable to repeat, Harry would be overrun. Or worse.”

“But, Severus,” Arthur said with a frown, “I do understand the need for secrecy and will keep mum, but there’s something I don’t quite understand. All wizards’ and witches’ magic is erratic on the day prior to their inheritance, and this isn’t the only war our world has ever seen. Surely there have been instances in the past where a loved one has had to heal their partner on their inheritance day, but as far as I know, there’s never been a report of … permanent de-aging from it.” He paused. “It is permanent?”

Severus nodded. “I do not believe it would fool the *Corporis Statum* spell otherwise. Temporary aging and de-aging potions most certainly do not, or your twins would have competed in the Tri-Wizard Tournament alongside Harry.”

Arthur chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. “They are rather a handful, aren’t they?”

Severus’ raised eyebrow revealed everything he thought about that comment.
Arthur laughed. “Yes, yes. Understatement, I know.” His laughter faded. “But, Severus, if his erratic magic, strong love for you, and powerful core were the primary reasons why you were de-aged from a healing chant, why has this never happened in the past?

Severus sighed and hugged his waist. “Besides the fact that we are soul-bound? There is another reason, but it is a dangerous one. I must ask you to swear you will not reveal what I am about to tell you to anyone—including Albus.”

The Weasleys all exchanged bemused looks, but agreed to Severus’ terms.

“Thank you. Now, Molly, you recall our Patronus messages during Harry’s integration illness? Do you also remember how many days it was between the first and the last?”

She hesitated. “Six, I believe. He had quite the inheritance.”

Severus gave a wry laugh. “More than you know. His came early—the same afternoon he healed me—and it ended far later than I said on the last Patronus message, only moments before I sent it. Please forgive me for the deception, but I was only trying to protect him. You see, his illness was not just six days—it was seven, and he prophesied about the war at the end of it.”

Arthur gasped and met Severus’ gaze. “You, you’re not saying that …?”

“I am indeed. He is a mage. The prophecy of the Seventh Day Seer—and yes, it is a real prophecy—has come to pass in Harry.”

The kitchen went deathly silent. For a moment, no one breathed.

“He … he’s a mage?” Molly’s voice was weak. “Severus, you’re telling the truth?”

Severus turned to meet her eyes. “Look at me, Molly. Look at my face. Do you believe a mere wizard could do this?”

“No.” She sniffled and wiped her eyes. “Sweet mother of Circe! A mage. No wonder he’s always been so ….” She sighed and shook herself. “Well, no matter. Whether he is a mage or the weakest squib ever to walk the earth, he’s my son now. And I suppose that means you are too.”

Severus gasped. “I … I am?”

She laughed and caught him up in a hug. “Someday. And I expect a ceremony, do you hear me? No bonding in the night somewhere where no one can share in your joy.”

“You … you want me to … Merlin.” He couldn’t stop a wash of tears and buried his face in her shoulder to hide them. “Gods, Molly. I … I’ve never … not since my grandparents died so long ago … I, no one but Harry has ever held me like you have done this evening.”

“Well, that’s a shame.”

She sat back and dabbed at his cheeks with her handkerchief. Severus allowed it, though it was utterly absurd to do to a man who should have been nearing forty. Still, her care comforted him, and he was able to give her a hesitant smile.

“Wow,” said Charlie, his eyes wide. “Three things I’d never thought I’d live to see just happened: Snape getting a hug and not cursing the giver, Snape crying, and Snape smiling. Have I gone ‘round the twist?”
“Oh, shut it,” said Bill with a shove to his shoulder. “The man was just overwhelmed. And I, for one, happen to think he has a nice smile.”

Severus groaned and buried his face in his hands, bringing about a round of low chuckles.

“Come out, dear,” said Molly. “They were only teasing a bit. It means you’ve been taken in under our wings, believe it or not.”

Severus let his hands fall and tried to smile again.

“There you are. My, it is a nice smile.”

His cheeks flamed. “T-thank you. No one but Harry has ever said that, either.”

“Well then,” said Arthur with a sad smile, “I reckon we’ve some catching up to do.”

“Oh. I … gods.” Severus covered his eyes to hide a wave of tears, though he smiled. “Thank you. I, I did not expect this.”

“No, neither did I!” Charlie laughed. “Merlin. Our Harry, bound to Severus Snape, and a mage to boot!”

“I told you he was powerful, no?” Fleur nudged her husband. “I said zat he would do great zings. And so he has.”

“You’ve been a bit biased since the second task,” said Bill with a wink, “but yes, you did. And you were right! Gods, Severus. Look at you! You look better than you did when you were teaching me.”

“He straightened my nose,” Severus said with a wry laugh. “I had begun to think it would take an act of god. Apparently, just an act of Merlin.”

Charlie gaped amongst his family’s laughter. “Did Snape just make a joke? He did, didn’t he? Merlin indeed!” He laughed and gave Severus a grin. “Of all the things I expected to happen, joking around with you wasn’t one of them.”

Severus gave him a hesitant smile. “I, will you accept me as well?”

Charlie’s mirth vanished. “Do you love him?”

“With everything I am.”

“And are you planning to bond with him one day?”

Severus paled. “B-bond? Merlin. It has only been a week! I hadn’t yet begun to think so far ahead.”

“But you’re soul-bound, Severus,” said Arthur. “That rather changes the game. Either you bond with him one day, or he’ll be forever tied to you, but without the reassurance of a formal bond.”

“I … gods. You are right.” He shrank in on himself and held his waist. “I … is it fair to bond him to someone as … tainted as myself?”

Molly tipped up his chin. “There is nothing tainted in you, Severus. Even when you were harsh before, you were never tainted.” She held his shoulders. “Harry would be fortunate to have a bondmate who loves him as much as you do—someday. Do give him time to adjust.”

Severus sighed and closed his eyes. “May I assume that I have your blessing when we are ready to
Arthur nodded. “So long as you don’t revert back to your past behaviour, then yes.”

“Upon my honour, I shall strive to always love him as he deserves.”

Charlie smiled. “Then that’s all we need, Snape.” He frowned. “Hmm. That’s no good. I guess if you’re going to be my brother one day, I should be calling you Severus, yeah?”

Severus gave him a tentative smile. “Yes. I, I would like that.”

“All right, then Severus it is.”

Severus nodded and shook Charlie’s outstretched hand. “Thank you. All of you, for your welcome. It was far more than I expected.” He lowered his voice. “And I beg of you, say nothing of Harry’s powers, not even to Dumbledore. Please. It is so very important.”

Molly gave him a firm nod. “Yes, we swear, but are you sure we can’t tell Dumbledore? Surely he wouldn’t tell the spy?”

Severus’ breath caught. “Absolutely sure. Please, for the sake of us all, do not breathe a word of this to Dumbledore. Do not even mention it at Hogwarts. The walls have ears there.”

“Merlin, Severus,” said Arthur. “Is it truly that serious?”

“You have no idea. Our very lives depend on keeping this absolutely secret, and that means keeping it from Dumbledore as well. Especially from Dumbledore. Consider Harry’s past—of the abuse he endured without a shred of help from that man—and I think you will realise that Albus is not as kind or trustworthy as he would like you to believe.”

“But you didn’t help Harry either,” said Charlie with a frown. “Why should that make us doubt him? None of us knew.”

Severus held his gaze in a pincer grip. “No, I did not know, but I was not Harry’s mentor. He did not trust me enough to confide in me, not like he trusted Albus. Knowing this, do you truly believe that, after spending ten months in a place where he was warm, fed, accepted, and relatively safe, that Harry would let Dumbledore pack him back to the Dursleys without at least attempting to seek summer quarters at Hogwarts? Do you truly believe Harry would not have told him, begged him for shelter?”

Charlie paled, as did every other person at the table.

“N-no,” said the dragon keeper. “I guess not.”

Severus nodded and left it at that. The Weasleys would—he hoped—begin to reconsider their opinions of Dumbledore and pay more heed to the man’s actions, and for now, that would have to be enough. He doubted they would believe the truth of Albus’ evil without proof.

He would just have to trust them to find it themselves, at least until Harry was ready to open up about his past, or until they trusted Severus enough to believe him about his own.
Harry jumped back from a sharp cry of feedback. Someone had just destroyed their Extendable Ear in the kitchen. Severus. Harry was secretly happy about it. He hadn’t wanted to eavesdrop on the others, but the twins and Ginny had been dead set on listening to at least a bit of their conversation, just to make sure they weren’t being left out of Order business again.

Harry would have liked to have told them that the Order was a farce led by a madman, but it was too soon, and his lame statement of ‘maybe we shouldn’t, guys,’ hadn’t been enough to convince them to keep their ears to themselves.

Fred rubbed his ears. “Merlin. We’ve got to work that out.” He tossed the useless receiver and its amplifier onto a desk. “Guess Severus found it.”

George Summoned the amplifier—it wasn’t ruined, after all. “Maybe hiding it under the sink—”

“—Was too obvious.”

“We’ll hide it somewhere better—”

“—Next time.”

“Yeah.” Ron lounged in his pumpkin-coloured chair like a cat and tapped at his chin. “I wonder ….”

Harry watched Ron with a frown. He shuddered to think how Ron would react if he knew that Severus did almost the same thing when he was thinking.

“I’m wondering too,” said Hermione. “What was Severus going to tell them, Harry? Do you know?”

Harry gulped. “Well, yeah, it’s about me, after all—but it’s also bloody dangerous. If you let one word slip, we’re all done for.”

The Weasleys and Hermione went wide-eyed and swore not to say anything.

“I … no. Guys, I don’t think I can tell you. Not because I don’t trust you, but because none of you know Occlumency and Dumbledore could read it from your minds.”

Ron frowned. “But Mum and Da don’t know Occlumency, either. Neither does Charlie. I think Bill does, though.”

“Yeah, but Charlie lives in Romania and Severus can maybe protect your Mum and Da during Order meetings.” Harry neglected to say that it would most likely be himself doing the protecting. “You guys live with Dumbledore during school term.”

“We don’t,” said the twins.

“No, and maybe I could tell you two soon, but as for the rest of you, it’s just too risky.”

Hermione frowned and met Harry’s eyes. “Why are you so worried about Dumbledore picking our brains anyway? Isn’t he on our side?”

Harry closed his eyes and refused to answer. “Harry …?” Ginny’s voice was afraid. “He is on our side, isn’t he?”

He sighed and gave it up as a bad job. Harry couldn’t lie like Severus could, and they’d weasel the answers out of him eventually. Maybe more than he wanted to reveal if he didn’t at least give them some of the truth now.
But first ….

Harry flicked out his wand and tried to find traces of foreign magic. There. Under the bed Harry slept in? Fuck!

He cursed and shot a Banishing and Obliviation spell at the scryer, aiming between George’s legs.

“Oi!” George leapt to his feet and gave Harry a reproachful look. “What the bloody hell was that for, Harry? I haven’t done anything!”

Harry rubbed his toe in the floor. “S-sorry, George. I wasn’t aiming for you. I was aiming for the scrying spell the bastard had under my bed.”

“What?”

Every Weasley—and Hermione—leapt to their feet.

Ron cried, “How did You-Know-Who get in here?”

Fred said, “What did he even want to put a scryer in here for?”

“All he’d hear is an obscene lot of wanking,” said George.

“Oi!” Ron growled and turned on his brothers. “Shut it! This is serious. This place is supposed to be warded. If You-Know-Who can get in here to place scryers, then we’re all in tro—”

Harry cried over him, “Guys! Calm down. You’ve got the wrong bastard. Riddle didn’t place that spell.”

Every eye turned a bemused look on Harry.

“If it wasn’t You-Know-Who,” said Ginny, “then who?”

“Dumbledore. He’s the only one who’s been up here and had a motive.”

“He … had a motive?” Hermione frowned and sat down. “What motive?”

“Keeping an eye on his dear little weapon, isn’t he?” Harry motioned them back. “Sit down, and I’ll tell you what I can, okay? It’s just … you’re not going to like it.”

Ron frowned, but sat in his cannon chair again. “Okay, Harry, I’m listening, but I don’t understand. You think Dumbledore did that to keep an eye on you? But … I just … why would he do that? He’s always been so nice.”

“Has he? Has he really?” Harry returned to his perch on the bed and shook his head. “No. Think about it, Ron. How many times did you ask Dumbledore not to take me back to the Dursleys?”

“Probably about eighty times a year, but it was always ‘the blood wards protect him,’ blah-blah-blah.” Ron’s eyes narrowed. “What are you on about?”

“Did they protect me, Ron? You’ve seen my scars. Did they keep me safe?”

Ron sighed. “No, but you’re alive, aren’t you?”

“Only because Bellatrix or Malfoy Senior never found out my address.” Harry scowled. “If those blood wards protected me from the Death Eaters, if my blood was protection against them all—the
same blood powering those wards—why could Pettigrew take it from me in the first place? Why didn’t he blister and die like Quirrell the moment he touched me?”

The room went dead silent.

Ron took in a shaky breath. “I … I don’t know.”

Fire built in Harry’s eyes. “Well, I do. It’s because the blood wards only protected me from Voldemort himself. If Malfoy or Pettigrew had ever found out my address—thank the gods we never said it in front of Scabbers, Ron—I’d be dead. He’d have killed us all in our sleep. Hell, the Dursleys might have handed me over just to be rid of ‘the freak.’”

Hermione put a hand to her mouth. “Harry … were they really so bad?”

He gripped the hem of his Pink Floyd tee, trying to get the courage to show them his scars, but he couldn’t face it. He couldn’t bear their eyes if they knew. With a sad sigh, he let his hands fall to his sides again.

“Yeah, Hermione. They were—and Dumbledore knew it. He’s not the bearded white knight he’d like everyone to believe he is.” He squeezed his eyes shut tight and dug his nails into his knees.

“You want to know the truth about him? He’s a bloody sociopath, and a dangerous one.”

Ginny cried, “What? No!”

“Yeah.” Harry forced his eyes open and met her gaze. “Look, I can’t force you to believe me, but at least promise me you’ll be careful—all of you. And even if you do believe me, don’t act like it around him. You’ll give him reason to want to check your minds, and I’d rather him not know that we know about his games before … before it’s safe to.”

Harry hugged his knees tight. “I can’t say anything else, guys. It’s too dangerous. But just … think about it, okay? He’s not trustworthy. Not in the least.”

The Weasleys and their plus one nodded, all with wide eyes and shocked expressions, but none stony with disbelief.

Harry sighed to himself and let his knees down again. “Are you lot okay?”

Hermione looked at him as if her entire world had just fallen in. “Just … w-why didn’t we see it before? He never should have l-left you with those monsters, and I knew it! Why … why didn’t I put the two t-together?” Tears slid down her face, and Harry’s heart broke for her.

“She sniffled and wiped her face. “I just … I’m so sorry, Harry. We all should have done more to get you out of there.”

Ron pulled her into his lap and held her tight. “What could you have done, love? You were a little girl, and none of the adults were listening anyway.”

“Ron’s right, ‘Mione.” Harry tucked his knees tight against his chest again. “Dumblefuck is great at manipulation. He has the entire Order eating out of his hand and no one even questions him. Well, no one except Verus, but his personality—until now, he was just so sharp that no one wanted to listen to him either.”

Harry hugged his knees and rocked to stifle intense grief. “Do you know that Severus told
Dumbledore about the door? About my visions and why I was failing Occlumency? He told that bastard that I needed to know about the Prophecy long before Sirius died, and even told him that he thought Voldemort was using those visions to smoke me out. He told Dumbledore that, unless he manned up and told me about the Prophecy, something awful would happen. Of course, at the time, Severus thought I would be killed and not Sirius, but that isn’t really the point.”

Harry looked up and met their eyes. “The point is that a man who hated me at the time did more to save my life than Dumbledore did. Severus went out of his way to make sure I was safe, but again and again, Dumbledore kept pushing him away, kept putting it off. He might have even done it on purpose. I don’t know. But the fact is: he knew something bad was going to happen to me. He knew I was failing Occlumency and Voldemort was using that failure to get to me. He had information that would have kept me from going after that bloody door, that would have kept Sirius alive. And he did nothing.”

Hermione said, “But why? Why not tell you? What could he possibly gain?”

“My guess is that he didn’t know about the other horcruxes yet and he wanted me to kill Voldemort before he got too powerful.” A bitter scowl crossed his face. “Or maybe he just thought my having a godfather would be a distraction for his dear little weapon.”

“Merlin,” whispered Ginny. “You really think … he let Sirius die on purpose?”

Harry winced. “Shite. I just pulled a Hagrid. I really shouldn’t have said that.”

The others gave nervous chuckles.

Harry shook his head. “Look, I don’t know that he meant for Sirius to die. Come to think of it, he couldn’t have known what would happen in the battle, so I guess that wasn’t it. But the thing is, even if he didn’t let Sirius die on purpose, Verus had warned him about the door. So, at the very least, he knew something bad would happen if he didn’t intervene. And he still didn’t do a damned thing.”

Everyone turned to Harry with lost, fearful expressions.

“But Harry,” said Fred, “if we can’t trust Dumbledore—”

“—Then who can we trust?”

Ron added, “Who’s leading the war effort, if not him?”

Harry closed his eyes. “Right now, it’s still Dumbledore. But one day, much as I loathe the idea, it’ll be me.” He looked up and swallowed hard, trying to keep from shaking. “C-can I count on you guys to back me when that day comes? When I have to step away from the Order and start fighting this war on my own?”

Ron blinked. “You really need to ask that question, mate? We’re your family, Harry. Family sticks together, okay?”

“Right,” said George. “We’ll handle the special operations, hmm?”

“We’ll have you up to your ear in war gear, little brother.”

George grinned. “Oi, that’s a pretty good slogan, mate. Up to your ear in war gear!”

Fred bowed. “At your service, General Potter.”
“Good gods.” Harry smacked his forehead and groaned. “Never call me that again, yeah? I’m just Harry to you lot.”

“Fair enough,” said Hermione with a hesitant smile. “Anyway, we’ll be with you to the end, Harry. No worries about that.”

Harry grinned. “Thank you. All of you.”

“Cor, don’t get all mushy on us,” said Ron.

“You got it,” Harry said with a smirk. “I’ll save that for Severus.”

Ron gagged. “Mate, I love you and I’ll accept your relationship and all, but please, spare me the details.”

Harry burst into laughter.

The meeting with the Weasleys went on until well after midnight, but Severus thought it had gone well. He felt he had established a place with them, and more importantly, they had not ostracised or alienated Harry for his choice. In fact, Harry had been laughing and joking with the others when Severus had finally come to collect his Potters.

Severus did not need to search long for Ron’s door—gods, had a blind person invented that shade of orange? It should have been illegal.

He squinted to block out the colour and hesitantly knocked. “Harry? Seth? Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah, Verus.” Harry opened the door, and Severus’ eye sockets burned.

Dear Merlin, and he had thought the door was bad. It looked as if a radioactive pumpkin had vomited all over the boy’s room.

Severus steeled his expression and took the hand Harry had offered him.

It was a miracle he’d been able to see it.

Harry met his eyes and smirked. “How do you like Ron’s room?”

Severus hesitated. “It is very … orange.”

Seth burst into giggles. “Yep! It looks like a pumpkin puked in here.”

“Those were my sentiments exactly,” said Severus with a chuckle.

“Oi!” Ron snorted. “I like the Cannons, okay?”

“We know,” said Fred.

“Everyone knows,” said George.

“And your room is a bit of an eyesore.” Ginny smirked. “Besides, everyone knows the Harpies are the best.”
“The Harpies? Oh, come on. Don’t get me started on their chasers, Gin! They couldn’t catch a quaffle if you tied it to their wrists!”

“At least they can hit a bludger at the opposite team!”

“Cor, don’t start that again you two,” said Fred with a laugh. George said, “We’ll be up all night if you get into—”

“—a quidditch pissing contest now.”

“The Harrys and the Professor have to—”

“—go home sometime tonight.”

“Hmm,” said Severus. “Perhaps I can put the argument to rest. I shall have to concede to the Cannons’ strategy.”

Ron blinked. “Er … you do?”

“Yes. Those uniforms would blind any opponent who dared challenge them. Indeed, they deserve awards just for managing to mount their brooms in such glaring garb.”

The group burst into laughter—even Ron had trouble suppressing a snort.

“You’re all right, Professor,” said Ginny with a chuckle. “Well, when you’re not taking points for breathing.”

Severus saw the flash of pain in her eyes and realised the girl was putting a brave face on a painful situation—one he had caused. He looked to his love, the man he had decided to ask to be his bondmate someday not an hour before, and remembered that these brave people, these Gryffindors he had hurt so badly, were Harry’s family. By extension, they were also his own.

He owed them all an apology.

Severus gathered his courage, took a deep breath to calm himself, and bowed to the Weasleys and Miss Granger.

The group gasped.

Ginny called, “P-Professor Snape? Please … don’t, I didn’t mean ….”

“No.” He stood and gave her a sad smile. “No, I do understand that you were only trying to be friendly. However, I have wronged you. All of you. I have hurt you and snarled at you when you were only children and you had done nothing to deserve my wrath.”

He lowered his head and swallowed hard. “If you are able, please forgive me for all the cruel things I have done to you and those you love. I am truly sorry.”

“Verus,” Harry whispered. “Oh ….” He stepped into Severus’ embrace and wrapped his arms around the taller man’s waist. “Gods, how I love you.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair and slowly lifted his gaze. Harry’s friends and family were watching them. The twins and Ginny were grinning like mad. Miss Granger was weeping and smiling at once. And Ronald looked both surprised and relieved.
“Well,” said Ginny, “I’ll forgive you.”

“So will I,” said Fred.

“We’re of the same mind,” said George.

“—Literally,” Fred added with a smirk. “It’s how we finish each other’s—”

“—Sentences. Didn’t you know?”

Hermione laughed. “You two idiots.” She smacked George on the back of the head lightly, then gave Severus a kind smile. “Ah, sir, I forgave you when I saw you hold Harry earlier like he was the most important thing in the world. But I’ll admit, that apology was a relief. I was afraid for Harry if you couldn’t get on with his family, but gods! You’re a completely different man.”

“Yes,” Severus said softly. “He has … freed me, both figuratively and literally. This is who I truly am, when I am loved.”

“Then I’ll make sure you’re always loved and happy, Severus,” Harry murmured into his chest.

“So will I,” said a shy Seth. “I mean … well, you know.”

Severus ran a hand down Seth’s hair and held Harry tighter with his other arm. “You already do. Both of you.”

Severus looked back to the pumpkin-sick room to meet the last Weasley’s eyes. “Is it possible to heal the breach between us, Ron? I do not wish to come between you and either Seth or Harry, and I would like … I … I haven’t the words, but I am sorry about the past, and I would like to try to repair our relationship, if you are willing.”

“We’ve never had a relationship to start with,” said Ron with a frown, “but if you’re really sorry, then I’ll … try, okay? For Harry and Seth’s sake, I’ll try. Just give me a little time to get over stuff, yeah?”

Severus closed his eyes and bowed his head, overcome with relief and emotion. “You may have all the time you need.”

“Then yeah, I think we’ll be all right.”

Harry beamed at his friend and held Severus tight.

A short time later, they left the Weasleys’ home with a box of Molly’s butter biscuits tucked under Harry’s arm and Seth held tightly against Severus’ chest. Severus’ apparition put them in the Bàn Leon town square once they landed, and—after righting Harry—they began the short trek home hand in hand.

Harry rested his head against Severus’ shoulder, and the loving gesture warmed the older man despite the start of an autumn chill. “How did your Weasley inquisition go, Verus?”

“Quite well, actually. Though I did end up telling them that you are a mage. They were concerned about my age, and after they had been so kind to me—Molly especially—I found I could not leave
“them in distress.” He sighed and wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “It worries me. How am I to be a spy if I can no longer keep secrets?”

“You kept a lot of secrets.” Harry kissed his shoulder. “It’ll be okay.”

“We ended up telling our lot about Dumbledore anyway,” said Seth with a frown. “At least some of it. They still don’t know that he’s really evil, but they know he’s a sociopathic bastard now—and even Ron believed us. If both groups talk to each other, they’ll find out most of the story between them.”

“I bid the elders not to speak to the youths.” Severus frowned and wrapped an arm about his waist. “At the time, I was concerned for your group’s safety, but I wonder now if I have made the right decision. Was it wrong to ask family members to keep secrets from one another?”

Seth shook his head. “It’s too dangerous for them to know about Harry’s powers while they’re in school with Dumbledore. I think, considering that we’re trying to save their lives, they’ll understand.”

“I do hope so.”

Harry slipped his arm around Severus’ waist. “It’ll be okay, Verus.” He kissed the man’s shoulder. “So Mum accepted you?”

“They all did. I confess, they have won my allegiance as well.”

Harry smiled and snuggled closer. “The Weasleys are all really great. They’re … mm, so understanding.”

“Don’t fall asleep on my shoulder. We still have a ways to go.”

“Mm, carry me?”

Severus snorted. “Carry yourself.”

“Meanie.” Harry shook himself and lifted his head from Severus’ arm, but the older man missed Harry’s warmth and gently tugged him close again. “Thought you said you didn’t want me going to sleep against you?”

“I like feeling you so close. Should you actually fall asleep standing up, I would carry you. I may actually enjoy it, having your entire body within my arms, knowing you are safe and entirely dependent on me for that moment—hmm.” Severus kissed Harry’s hair. “The pleasure of it might win out over my own exhaustion.”

“Oh, you’re making that sound good.” Harry sighed and snuggled close. “I’m glad they accepted you, Severus. I was really scared.”

“Mm-hmm. So was I. Seth, love, did you have a good time?”

Seth rubbed up the back of his hair. “Well, when they weren’t hounding me.”

“Sorry about that,” Harry murmured. “Next time you can just visit and have fun.”

Seth nodded and said nothing, but his eyes held deep sorrow. Severus let them inside their gate and, once they were inside, turned the painting so he might touch Seth’s hair while he walked.

“Love, what is it? Did you have trouble?”
He sighed and turned into Severus’ hand. “Merlin, it’s so nice to have someone who cares about what happens to me.”

“We both do, Seth,” said Harry. “Was Ron an idiot or something? I told him not to treat you like an object when it’s clear that you’re a person.”

“No, no, it wasn’t that. Everyone was kind and it was great to see them again, but …” Seth looked away and sighed again. “But as nice as they are, they’re not the Ron and Hermione I remember. They’ve grown up, while I’m still young. And yet, though I’m small and they’re not, I feel like they’re still kids in ways. They’re still so … innocent. Still looking to play while I … I just feel so lost.”

Severus stretched out his free arm and hugged Seth’s painting to his chest. “There, now. Are you still feeling lost?”

“Not as much, no.”

Severus felt pressure on his shoulder and looked down to realise Seth was resting his head against him. How strange that he should feel it. He would have to ask Harry about it—later, after he cared for Seth’s needs.

“Love, they are still children in many ways. Perhaps they are legal adults and showed unexpected maturity tonight in the way they handled their questions about us—”

“Hermione and Ginny wrangled Ron into behaving. He was planning on charging in like a bull on a rampage until they made him realise if he stomped all over Harry’s feelings, he’d lose us both.”

Severus chuckled. “Hmm. I thought such an intervention must have taken place. I am glad they were able to make him see sense.”

“Yeah, me too,” Harry said into Severus’ sleeve. “I … I couldn’t have borne it if ….”

Severus held him tighter. “Ssh. All is well.”

Harry sighed and pressed into Severus’ shoulder. “Yeah.”

Seth sighed. “I’m glad, too. I just … where’s my place in this world? Do I even have a place?”

Severus leaned the portrait back so he could see Seth’s face. “Right now, love, your place is here, with us. We still plan to make a portrait of my younger self for you, remember? Perhaps you will be able to make a new, lifelong friendship with him.”

Seth’s face turned bright red. “Um … S-Sev?”

“Snape?”

Seth’s eyes flickered to Harry. “Well, I know you think of us like brothers, but really, we started out as the same person. So, um, does that mean, if Harry loves you, that I’ll … um … that little Sev and me …?” He ducked his face into a shaking hand, but what Severus could see of the boy was positively crimson.

Severus blinked, caught by surprise. “Merlin. I honestly have no idea.”

“What if I do? I mean, you’re practically my da, so what if I fall for him and then he can’t because we’re family and it’s weird and I ruin everything?”
Harry gaped at the portrait. “Is that what I sound like when I’m scared?”

“Oh, exactly like, but this isn’t the time.” Severus kissed Seth’s forehead. “Love, calm yourself. “Just as you are different from Harry, my younger self is different from myself. Much more different, as there are twenty years and a war between the young Severus and myself.” He shuddered and pressed the painting tighter against him. “And if, gods forbid, he is cognizant, then the trauma of our family’s death and his long isolation will have changed him deeply. Seth, if you love him, all is well. We shall simply have to make arrangements so that the two of you can be together.”

Seth smiled hesitantly. “Really?”

“Yes, love.”

“And, it won’t make things weird between us? You too, Harry?”

Severus set the portrait back into the levitation spell and rubbed Seth’s shoulder. “I will only be happy you are no longer alone.”

“So will I,” said Harry with a chuckle. “Though I guess that means I won’t be able to claim him as a brother, too.”

“Hmm, perhaps not.” Severus shivered and nudged Harry closer. “Gods, I hope that photo is not cognizant. I hope he has not been waiting there, alone, staring at the place where they died for twenty years.”

“Merlin, so do I.” Harry kissed Severus’ shoulder. “But even if he has, love, we’ll heal him, just like we are for Seth. It’ll be okay. We just need to get him out of there as fast as possible.”

“Yes.” Severus scanned the skies. “Do you suppose the owls might have Minerva’s reply yet?”

Harry shrugged. “My guess is they’ll camp for the night with McGonagall and come back first thing, but we can always try calling them.”

Severus shook his head. “I do not want to disturb them if they are resting.”

“All right. We’re here anyway. We can just ask the elves if they’ve been about.”

“True.” Severus laid a hand on the knocker and smiled at his Potters. “Well, let us see what the elves have been able to accomplish in our absence, hmm?” He opened the door, and froze in place, stunned.

“Wow,” Harry breathed.

Severus echoed his sentiments within the safety of his own mind.

Merlin, the house elves had transformed the place. No longer bare and dusty, the floors gleamed with fresh polish. Tasteful furnishings filled the wide open living space and the little extras—rugs, curtains, paintings, and an assortment of knick-knacks Harry had picked up at random intervals—made the house feel like a home.

And gods, Severus did love the sight of stuffed bookshelves lining an entire wall. He couldn’t wait to settle down in front of the fire and dive in.

“Blimey,” Seth said with a whistle. “Looks like the elves have been busy all right.”

“Understatement,” agreed an awed Harry.
Severus nodded. “It is lovely. And I am relieved that I needn’t waste energy conjuring everything from a chair to a spoon any longer.”

“Yeah, we’re all set, I think. Blimey, they must have worked on without a break all day.” Harry frowned. “They’re supposed to rest. I hope they did. Where are they anyway?”

Dobby poked his hat-laden head out from the former buttery door. “We is sleeping in the cupboards, Master Harry.”

“The cupboards!” Harry shuddered and hugged his waist. “No. No, that won’t do.”

Severus slipped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and tucked the young man into his side once more. Harry gave him a grateful smile, then turned back to the odd little elf. “We’ll set up a house for you lot tomorrow, all of you. I know you tend to be happiest when you stick together.”

Dobby gasped and reeled back. “A … a house for us elves? But master, we is supposed to be living with our family. You do not wants us any longer?”

Harry clapped his hands over his ears at a chorus of wails. “What? Merlin! Of course I do, Dobby. But I can’t abide anyone or anything sleeping in a bloody cupboard.”

The wailing stopped.

Dobby tugged on his ears hesitantly. “We’s … did wrong?”

Harry cried, “No punishment, Dobby!” At Dobby’s flinch, he softened his tone. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t want you to hurt yourself. Remember the rules, okay?”

Dobby gave him a tentative nod and let his hands drop. “But did we’s do wrong?”

“No. You didn’t do anything wrong—it was what you’ve been taught to do, isn’t it? To sleep in the cupboards?”

He stuck his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. “Yes. Malfoys made Dobby sleep on the stoop outside, but is typical for house elves to sleep in their household’s cupboards.”

Harry gave a bitter laugh. “Gods. They really did make a house elf of me, didn’t they, Severus? On every bloody point.”

Seth gave a little snuffle as well.

Dobby gasped, and the few elves visible behind him looked terrified and confused. “He was not speaking of you lot,” Severus said. “Seth and Harry’s relatives were abysmal creatures who deserve to burn in the deepest pits of hell for their crimes.” He tucked Harry into his arms and rubbed the young man’s shaking shoulders. “Seth, are you well?”

The boy gave a bitter chuckle. “I’ve seen worse things than cupboards now.”

“So’ve I,” Harry muttered from Severus’ chest. “Though … not like that.”

“Ssh. He knows, love.” Severus stroked Harry’s hair. “Hmm. I suppose since you are grieving, I shall handle this, hmm?”

Harry nodded and burrowed deeper.
Over Harry’s head, Severus addressed the elves.

“All of our Prince and Dawn elves, come out of the cupboards at once.”

They obeyed with shaking ears, all looking at their feet and obviously afraid they had erred.

“Be at peace, little ones. I did not speak so harshly to punish you, but because Harry is upset and I am trying to aid him as quickly as possible.”

They nodded as one.

“We’s not meaning to upset Master Harry,” said a wide-eyed Dobby. “We’s just trying to be proper house elves.”

“Except for your hats,” said Gemmy, her brown eyes sparkling with laughter. “And your shorts.” Dobby glared at her. “Dobby likes his clothes. Master Harry gives them to Dobby.”

“But they is not proper for house elves.”

“They is if Master Harry says they is!”

“But I’s told you, masters is saying we’re to have uniforms. I’s not making flower shorts for uniforms!”

“Enough,” barked Severus, and both elves cowered.

“Easy, Severus,” said Harry from his chest. “Remember, they don’t yet understand that you’re gentle and won’t hurt them like their past masters have.”

“Right.” Severus took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Forgive my sharp tone. I only wanted the two of you to stop arguing.”

Dobby winced and shuddered, obviously torn between punishing himself and obeying his Master’s order not to. Gemmy looked to be in a similar state.

“There is no need for punishment,” Severus soothed them. “It was a misunderstanding, that is all. Gemmy, yes, you are to make uniforms for our elves and, later, to help make them for the soldiers as well. However, Dobby is a personal elf, and his uniform is a bit different. He enjoys wearing his hats and socks as testaments to when Harry set him free from his former cruel masters, so Harry has told him he can keep them.”

Dobby grinned.

Gemmy frowned and tugged on her skirt. “But how is I to be sewing his uniform if he’s wearing all his clothes already?”

Severus tapped his chin. “Hmm. In that case, I do believe a compromise is in order. Dobby, would you be willing to wear the trousers, shoes, and shirt that Gemmy provides for you, if we also allow you to keep your own hats and socks?”

Dobby gave him a shy smile. “Dobby will wear all of the uniform if Masters wish it, but I do likes my hats and socks.”

“Is that acceptable, Gemmy?”
She gave him a wide-eyed smile. “I, I’s never having masters who asked me what I wanted before. Yes, that is grand!”

“Then it’s settled. Now, back to your sleeping arrangements. You are not to sleep in the cupboards again.”

“If not in cupboards,” said Bindy, a yellow-eyed female and their new cook, “where is we to be sleeping?”

Severus frowned. “Hmm. Harry? I do not think I can maintain eighteen conjured sleeping places overnight.”

Harry sighed and emerged from Severus’ chest. “I was so cosy, but yes, I’ll help.” He flicked his wand and nine elf-sized double bunk beds appeared against the back wall. “That’ll do for tonight. For tomorrow, I want some of you to work on expanding the empty bedroom upstairs and making it into a suitable place for all of you to sleep. In beds, you understand. Use some of the spending account to purchase them, along with bedding and pillows and everything else one needs for a proper bed—eighteen of them, okay? One bed apiece, unless some of you would prefer to share—and Severus and I will top up the account again tomorrow.”

The elves crowded around the new additions and looked at the beds in awe.

Bindy said, “They is … really for us?”

“Yes,” said Severus with a chuckle. “I don’t believe I will fit in any of them, do you?”

The elves tittered.

“Maybe if we’s stacked them all together,” said Gemmy with a laugh.

“Maybe,” said Harry, a soft smile on his face. “Do go on, though. We’re all beat.”

The elves all climbed into bed carefully, as if they expected a punishment or reprimand for daring to use such comfortable sleeping places, but Harry only gave them an encouraging nod.

“Are they good enough to sleep on?”

“Good enough!” Dobby sobbed and wailed into his hands. “Master Harry and Master Severus, they is too good for us. We is never having such a nice place to sleep before.”

Harry exchanged a sad smile with Seth and turned back to the elves. “We do understand. We really do. Are you quite all right?”

Dobby pulled out an elf-sized handkerchief and blew his nose. “Yes, Master Harry. I is being happy.”

“Good. And the rest of you?”

“I … I is shocked,” said Tinny, her ancient amber eyes wide. “We’s all being shocked. But ‘tis a good shock, Master Harry.”

He gave her a bright smile. “Good. Then tuck in and get some sleep. We’re going up for the night.” He paused halfway through turning towards the stairs and pivoted back around. “Uh, actually, before we go up, have the owls been by yet? Hedwig and Odin?”

Tinny sat up and frowned. “We is not knowing your owls yet. I’s not been seeing a male owl, but a
big female is in the woods behind the house.”

Harry nodded. “That’s Demeter. Hedwig is my snowy owl and Odin is Severus’ sooty. They should be back in the morning, since they didn’t come tonight. Anyway, we’re all going up to bed now, but don’t be afraid if you see a bright light. Severus and I are going to ward the place. Goodnight you lot.

The other elves echoed Harry, making Severus’ ears ring a bit, but then they quieted and turned into their beds for the evening. With a sigh of relief, Severus carted Seth upstairs and brought him to the room next to his and Harry’s.

“Will you be well here for the night, Seth?”

The portrait gave him a bright smile. “I think so. I feel loads better. Honest.”

“Good.” Severus kissed the boy’s cheek. “Goodnight, love. If you need anything, Harry and I are right next door. You need only call.”

“Thank you,” Seth said with a shy smile. “Goodnight, S-Severus.”

“Goodnight, love.” Severus smiled as he closed the door behind him.

Minerva had returned to her office to settle in for the night when a shrill screech from outside her window let her know her beloved owl had returned. She rushed to open the sash and smiled as her feathered friend flew inside, but to her shock, Athena hadn’t come alone. No, Harry Potter’s owl had come with her—along with Severus’ sooty—and the snowy beast bore a letter in her talons. A letter with Severus’ black ties.

“What is the meaning of this?” She shook her head and took the letter from Harry’s owl. “Thank you. If you will join Athena there on her perch—it should stretch to accommodate you—I will bring you food and water shortly.” She gave the owl a searching gaze. “I don’t suppose you can explain why you have Severus’ reply and not Athena?” She paused. “Unless … Merlin, was that letter from earlier legitimate? But surely it couldn’t be. Severus would not—”

Hedwig nudged Minerva’s hand as if to say: “Read it and see.”

Minerva straightened her shoulders and gave the owl a determined nod. “Right. No use beating around the bush, then. Do you mind waiting while I read it? Or, if you are tired, you may spend the night here with my owl. I do not mind making room.”

Hedwig nudged the letter once more and flew to perch beside Athena and Odin. The owls groomed each other like old friends, and the sight brought a smile to Minerva’s face. At least the animals didn’t bother with such petty things as feuds, not like her boys.

But if Severus had told the truth earlier, they weren’t feuding any longer, were they?

She watched the owls, frowning as Odin curled up under Hedwig’s slightly larger wing. Their behaviour—and the fact that Hedwig and Odin had come together at all—certainly lent credence to Severus’ earlier letter, but … Merlin! Could it really be true?
She gave herself a little shake and sank into her tartan armchair. She wouldn’t find out by staring at the owls. Gryffindors did not balk like this. Where was her courage?

With a deep, calming breath, she perched her spectacles on her nose and opened her letter. To her surprise, a small phial had been shrunk and attached with spellotape to the inside edge. Silvery gas swirled inside. Another memory?

Well. That was unexpected.

Minerva detached the phial with care and laid it aside, then turned her attention to the spidery scrawl of her long-time friend.

Minerva,

While I have made many mistakes in my life, I had hoped you would know by now that I would never treat you with the kind of disdain your letter suggests. Sharp as my tongue may be, I would never truly hurt you. You are the closest person to a mother I have left, and I value our friendship above any other, save one, and that one will shock you, no doubt. I hope it will also please you, but I digress.

Since I’ve every reason to assume Albus intimated my false vitriol to you, I know you will not be keen to accept my explanation over his. I have included my memory of my last words to Albus that evening, in which I told him to bid you farewell in a kind manner, as I lacked the time and skill to do it.

I confess, I did this for a purpose. I wanted to show you there is more to Albus than you have been willing to accept.

I hope you will listen now.

I must beg your forgiveness about my little experiment. Though I had your safety in mind, it has obviously hurt you, and for that, I apologize. I had hoped Albus would not live up to my expectations, but judging by the content of your letter, he surpassed them.

Forgive me, Minnie. I never meant to hurt you.

At this juncture, a more uneven, rounder hand came in after a space or two.

Professor McGonagall,

This is Harry, obviously. You probably figured that out by the owl. And by my chicken scratch, Severus says. Humph. It’s no worse than his own handw—ow! He bit me! He actually bit my hand! And now he’s laughing.

Even at my expense, I can’t help but love that sound.

Bet you never thought you’d see this, huh? Severus and I had a mutual hatred thing going on so well, it was the stuff of legend. And I—Severus! I am not a dunderhead.

Anyway, he’s none-too-gently reminding me I’m likely sending you ’round the twist like
this, calling him ‘Severus’ and saying I like his laugh and such. Hah! Turned the tides there, if that little blush means anything.

—I am not blushing, Potter!

—Not fair, Severus! I didn’t interrupt you. Anyway, Professor, the reason I’m sending this letter with Hedwig and writing with Severus is this: he’s telling you the absolute truth. When Severus left Hogwarts that night, all he said to that lying, manipulative, two-faced, self-centred, twis—

—Today, Harry.

—Right. All he said to that man was, “Please say goodbye to Poppy and Minerva for me. You are better at such things than I.” Well, I’m paraphrasing, but the memory is in the phial anyway. And I’ll give you mine in person if need be. I was there, too, but invisible. So was my portrait, though I don’t know if you can take a memory from a portrait. I’m sure he’ll be happy to tell you what he saw, though, if you could come see him. He’s going by Seth so we don’t get so confused about who’s who all the time.

In fact, having you over is a pretty good idea. Professor, would you be okay to meet Severus and me at our safehouse in, say, five days or so? We still need a bit of time to get things together. We had to make a rushed exit from our former hideout because Death Eaters were in the area and our new place was empty, no furniture or anything. We still have to fix it up.

Anyway, just send your reply back with Hedwig. We’ll be here, not killing each other, if you can believe it. We’ve become, um, quite close. Closer than you’d ever have imagined we could. Just don’t tell Dumbledore about our relationship, please. I’d rather not give him anything else to use against me.

And try and forgive Severus, yeah? He left in a hurry because it was too dangerous to be seen in the open, and he honestly has done nothing to deserve your wrath. I think you know I’d tell you—bluntly—if he had. Merlin knows I’ve never been shy about discussing his shortcomings up to now, but I was a big idiot then. I was totally wrong about him. He’s all right.

—Harry, you weren’t an idiot about me. I truly was terrible to you. You were only reacting to my temper and cruelty.

—Well, there’s nothing to react to now. You’re a wonderful man, Severus. I only wish you’d showed your true self to me sooner.

Bet that shocked your tabby stripes off, eh, Professor? And now Severus is laughing again. Merlin, I love that sound.

Er, anyway, I’d best finish up and let you digest all this, yeah? If you’ve questions for us, just send them back with Hedwig. We’ll see you in five days, I hope.

Yours,

Harry and Severus

—PS. Minerva, please watch Albus when he reads the paper tomorrow. Harry and I want to know how he reacts.
Minerva stared, open-mouthed and wide-eyed at the letter. For several moments, she tried to speak, but nothing except strangled squeaks escaped her lips. Severus and Potter—in love! She could hardly believe it. After six years of constant sniping, snarling, and outright fighting, they had finally overcome their differences? More than overcome them, apparently.

Merlin! What had brought about such a change? The gods knew Minerva had tried to make Severus see the error of his ways every Friday since Potter had started at the school—and most days in between. She had begun to think it a lost cause.

She scanned through the letter again, frowning at Potter’s request to keep their news from Albus. Why would he not want Albus to know? But wait … what had he said? Harry didn’t want to give Albus more to use against him? What did the boy mean by that? What had Albus used against him before?

The entire situation made Minerva uneasy, though Severus’ apparent innocence mitigated her pain. She dropped the memory in a pensieve and watched, bemused, as Severus, looking pale and distraught, said precisely to Albus what Harry had reported, give or take a word or two. The memory was clear, not a bit of haze.

Her eyes flickered to the other phial on her desk. There was still Albus’ memory to consider, so one of them had to be lying. And as both Severus and Albus were highly skilled at mind magic, either could produce a faked memory and make it look real.

Knowing this, whom on earth was she to believe? The haze had to be the difference between a real memory and a faked one, but was it in favour or against? Perhaps memories had a natural haze because of their state in the mind? Or was the lack of mist in Severus’ indicative of the truth?

She straightened and marched to her writing desk, phial in hand. A few moments later, she had attached Albus’ memory, Severus’ memory, and her own of the meeting between herself and Albus yesterday evening to a letter for the man, that she would send home with the owls in the morning.

Out of curiosity, she viewed her own memory in her pensieve. It hadn’t any haze, but perhaps that was only because she was no mind magic expert. Still, its clarity instilled her with a sense of doubt and worry that perhaps her employer wasn’t as honest as he seemed.

Well, if so, she would soon know. On her honour as a Gryffindor, the truth would out.
The Birth of Potterwatch

Chapter Summary

Lots of warnings for this chapter. 1st section, after Harry contacts Kingsley, is full of slash sex, so skip if you don't want to read it. Also a discussion of past prostitution of a sort takes place. Next section is from Seth's POV and it deals with his past, so needless to say, sexual abuse of a minor is covered. If you want the important parts without reading the gory details, read the end notes. I don't want to spoil it. Then, a scene or two later, there is a ritual scene with a possible graphic violence trigger.

Whew. I think that's it for the warnings. The only other thing I have to say is that writing this sex scene while watching my 13 month old son who was determined to *help* was awkward in the extreme. LOL

Oh, and Happy Holidays, if I don't get a chance to update before then.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER 19
THE BIRTH OF POTTERWATCH

The light of their wards had long since faded, and Harry was still chewing on his nails and pacing along their newly-installed bedroom hearth—and locked floo. He’d been waiting for Voldemort to retaliate further all day, but there was nothing. Britain had been quiet all afternoon, as far as he could tell. Too quiet.

Hesitant fingertips touched his shoulder, and Harry jumped. He turned to Severus and gave the nervous man a smile to ease his worries.

“Have I … done something to upset you, Harry?”

Harry shook his head and buried his face in Severus’ robes. Gods, he smelled so good. Severus’ scent had the natural warmth of masculinity, but also held notes of vanilla and some kind of herbal zing Harry couldn’t identify. It was quickly becoming his favourite fragrance.

Strong arms settled around Harry’s shoulders and held him close. “Why then, have you been wearing a path in our floors?”

Harry smiled against Severus’ chest. Our floors. Merlin, those words sounded so wonderful from Severus’ lips. The knowledge that Severus had begun to feel more settled with Harry thrilled him, but as soon as he lifted his face from that soft, enticing scent to speak to his lover, Harry’s worries crowded away the peace Severus’ touch had brought.

Wide-eyed and fearful, he lifted his gaze to Severus’ and held him tighter. “I’m scared. Why haven’t we heard anything? What is he up to?”

“We may not know until he actually attacks, my love. We cannot go about in constant fear of it, or
he has won already.”

Harry sighed and took refuge in Severus’ chest. “I know. But I’m so worried. I wish King would get back to us about what he knows already.”

“Perhaps he simply hasn’t had time, Harry. It should be safe to attempt messaging him through our floo with the wards we just set. Would you like to try?”

Harry sighed and slumped into Severus’ chest. “Yeah. Merlin, yeah I would.”

“All right.” Severus levitated a few pieces of firewood into the grate. With a wave of his hand, they blazed bright and sent a shock of heat through Harry’s legs.

“That was impressive.”

Severus smirked. “I may not be a mage, but I am not weak. My own illness ended just prior to the seven day mark, after all. Now, go and floo Shacklebolt already before you wear a hole in the floors.”

“I haven’t been pacing while you held me, but all right.” He grabbed a pinch of floo powder from the hearth and tossed it into the flames, watching as they turned green.

“Kingsley Shacklebolt’s office, Ministry of Magic.”

Harry stuck his head inside the flames and winced at the sharp tingle of the wards, like tiny knives poking into his neck—and he was one of the exceptions. He didn’t want to think about what the wards might do to someone unauthorised who tried to break through them.

“King? Are you about?”

A muffled curse and a thud sounded on the other side of the room, and Harry swivelled about. On the other side of the room, Kingsley stood, doubled over and half-buried in a file cabinet. He emerged still cursing and rubbing a red mark on his shining scalp.

“Harry!” Kingsley yanked out his wand and cast several powerful wards and silencing charms. When he spoke again, his tone was sharp. “Shite, Harry! What in Merlin’s name are you doing contacting me by floo? You know it’s not safe.”

Harry shook his head. “Severus and I warded this one so tightly, I doubt Merlin himself could find it. Besides, it’s locked. I’ll pass you a key when I can do so safely.”

Kingsley relaxed—slightly. “All right. Then I suppose you want an update on the raids and what happens now?”

Harry nodded. “Why haven’t I heard of any other attacks? I expected something … well, bigger for this degree of insult.”

“Yes, so did I. To the best of our knowledge, he only focused his early forces on places that would hurt you if he destroyed them: Surrey and Godric’s Hollow, which we anticipated, of course. He lost a couple of Death Eaters—Rowle and Travers—and after that, he retreated.”

“Yeah. Don’t you think it’s too obvious, King? Too weak?”

Kingsley’s eyes narrowed. “You think it was a distraction.”

“That’s my fear. What do you think he’s really up to?”
Kingsley shrugged. “We won’t know until he gives us a clue. Without Severus in the field, we have no source of inside information.”

“Oi! He feels badly enough about that. Don’t go making him feel worse.”

Kingsley showed his palms in a calming gesture and knelt before the hearth. “Easy, Harry. I’m not trying to make him feel bad. I’m with you—he’s done enough.”

“Too much,” said Harry in a dark voice.

“Yeah. I believe it.” Kingsley sighed and rubbed his head as if smoothing back the hair he didn’t have. “Look, Harry. No one wants answers more than I do, but we simply don’t have them. I’ve already told you everything I know.” He frowned and rubbed his chin. “Though, I’m afraid you might be onto something about this being a distraction for something bigger. I’ll look into smaller incidents that occurred at the same time—things that would have gone unnoticed with a Death Eater attack happening concurrently. Maybe that will give us an idea of what he’s planning.”

Harry nodded, relief washing over him. “T-thanks. That should help. I know he’s up to something. And it’s bad news for us. I feel it in my bones.”

“I know, Harry. I feel it too. And I’m doing everything I can.” He sat on his heels and sighed. “I have the feeling he’s going for more strategic vengeance this time. Which might be worse for us than if he had just planned an outright attack.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too.”

Kingsley grinned. “You’re going to be a hell of a general one day, kid.”

Harry almost choked on soot. “A w-what? Merlin. I’m just trying to get out of this alive, same as any of us.”

“Mm-hmm. I know a leader when I see one.”

“Shut it,” Harry grumbled. “Just … do you have any idea what he might try? Anything?”

Kingsley shook his head. “Not until I look at those reports, assuming there are any. It could be anything, Harry. He could be planning a wide-scale physical attack and these little fights were just test runs. Or he might go through the Ministry to cause chaos through legislation. Or he might try to break down your wards and take over the Prophet—and I really hope he does, because it’ll take him the better part of fifty years. Or, he might do something else entirely.”

“So … what do we do?”

“Well, I’ve already got people placed around here and ready in case he tries something at the Ministry. Besides that, aurors are guarding the locations we think he’s most likely to attack. And I’ll even ask Tonks to look at those reports tonight while she’s on duty, but other than that, there’s not much we can do other than keep our eyes and ears open.”

“Damn. So we just sit back and wait?”

Kingsley shook his head and gave Harry a wry smile. “Sit back and wait? No. We work towards killing the bastard while we do our waiting.”

“Oh. Well, we’re already doing that.”
“Right, and that’s my point. Just be patient, Harry, and don’t worry yourself to death. We’re as prepared as it’s possible to be.”

Harry sighed. “I guess.”

“It’ll be all right.” Kingsley reached through the floo and patted Harry’s head—it was all the man could reach, after all. “Oh, by the way, I was going to send you a Patronus tomorrow morning, but since you’re already here, I’ll just tell you now. After the attacks today, I slipped into the Department of Measurements and did some research into those wards you and Snape cast over the Prophet.”

Harry frowned. “Yeah?”

Kingsley grinned. “I had to read it five times before I believed my own eyes. They stretched over fifteen kilometres, Harry. That area of London is completely off-limits to Riddle and his crew now.”

“Merlin! Fifteen kilometres? Really?” Harry frowned. “Maybe we should just cast them all over Britain.”

Kingsley laughed. “That could take a while. Faster just to kill the bastard.”

“Well, yes, but we’ve work yet to do before that can happen.”

“True. I’d tell you to ward strategic places like Diagon Alley if you can, but the risk of being seen there is just too high.”

Harry nodded and frowned. “Maybe, but we could probably get the goblins to agree to let us ward Gringotts if we sweet-talked them enough. No one could see us if we worked from one of the vaults. And we could ward Diagon Alley through the twins’ shop, maybe.”

Kingsley grinned. “Merlin! That’s fantastic, Harry. That would cripple them. Get on that as soon as you can.”

Harry nodded. “Will do.”

“Good.” Kingsley sat on his heels, still smiling. “Oh, and bang up job with the report on Voldemort, by the way. I didn’t even know half of what you revealed in it, and I’ve been studying the bastard’s history for years now.”

Harry scowled. “Yeah, Dumbledore’s been sitting on those little gems for a while, the manipulative berk.”

Kingsley raised an eyebrow, but chose not to comment. “Hmm. Well, it’s been a good chat, but unless there’s anything else, I do need to finish up for the evening so I can go home at some point. Especially since I’ll need to debrief Tonks now.”

Harry smiled. “Thanks, King. I’ll let you go—oh, wait. Before you leave, can you make sure someone files some Ministry paperwork—backdated—for one Holly Maureen Black and Xavier Sabastian Prince? We’re ‘French,’ but I imagine we’ll need a visa or something.”

Kingsley smirked. “You’re going about as a woman?”

Harry’s face burned with embarrassment. “Shut it.”

Kingsley laughed and Summoned a Muggle notepad and biro. “Just teasing, Harry. I’ve done it more often than I care to think of myself. It’s all part of being an auror, but gods, whoever thought up high
heels deserves an *Avada* to the head.”

Harry snorted. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Kingsley shook his head. “You might find out the hard way if you keep going about in a woman’s body, but I digress. Give me some information on your alter egos. I saw ‘Prince’ so I won’t need a physical description for him, but I need ‘Holly’s’ description as well as birthdates and such.”

“Right.” Harry reeled off as much information as he could think of. “That all you need?”

“Yeah, yeah. I think we’re good. I’ll get Arthur to file this in the morning. Anything else?”

Harry shook his head. “No, I’ve kept you from your bed long enough. Goodnight.”

The man waved. “Tell Snape I said goodnight, too.”

“He’s right behind me.”

“Thank you for your help, Shacklebolt,” said Severus.

Kingsley jumped. “Merlin. I could have sworn I just heard Snape say ‘thank you.’”

Severus scowled. “Hilarious.”

Kingsley laughed. “Well, I thought it was funny.”

Harry couldn’t quite hold back a snort. “Oh, stow it, King. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, boys.”

Harry withdrew from the flames with a chuckle.

“He called me a *boy,*” said Severus with a sneer. “I only allow Minerva to call me that. Well, and I used to allow …. .”

Harry pressed a gentle fingertip to Severus’ lips. “Ssh. Let’s not think of this anymore tonight. It’s been a rough couple of days.”

“Hmm. Perhaps we should go to sleep. We must begin your training soon.”

“Tomorrow, love. Assuming it’s quiet enough.”

“When is it ever quiet with you?”

“True enough.” Harry laughed and flopped onto their brand new bed. “Oh, Merlin. This is *amazing,* Verus. Come here and lie down with me.”

Severus raised an eyebrow and, instead of lying down, stood at Harry’s feet and untied his trainers. Harry blushed as the man gently removed his shoes and socks, revealing his aching feet.

“Shoes off, then we lie down.” Severus sat beside Harry’s feet and bent down to remove his own boots.

“Hmm. All right.”

Severus stood and took off his robe as well, leaving him in just his customary white dress shirt and black trousers. Intrigued, Harry watched the lines of Severus’ body as he moved, tracing the shape of
his bum as he laid their shoes by the door.

Damn. The man had a nice arse. And long, gorgeous legs.

Harry gulped as he realised his hesitation had gone. He wanted to see Severus’ legs, wanted to touch his body, explore every curve and angle of him—or at least make a start of it. He sat upon the bed, and as Severus came close, Harry reached up and curled his fingers in the man’s collar, pulling him down for a fierce kiss.

Severus jerked back with a gasp and batted Harry’s hands away from his neck. “N—not like that. Please, not like that.”

Harry winced. “Another way you’ve been hurt?”

Severus gave him a fearful nod.

“I’m sorry, love.” Harry opened his arms. “Come here. I won’t hurt you.”

Severus sighed and lay beside Harry, burying his face in the mage’s shoulder. “I do not know why such things should frighten me. I know you will not hurt me, but nevertheless, when you are rough, I cannot help but be afraid.”

“That was rough?” Harry winced. “I’ll have to be careful with you until we’re past these bumps, huh?”

Severus cringed away. “I am sorry. I … I know I am ….”

“Oh, Verus. Ssh. I didn’t mean there was anything defective about you, only that, well, I wanted to kind of … I mean, I was ….” Harry sighed. “Maybe we should just go to sleep, yeah? It’s been a long day, and I don’t want to muck things up between us.”

Severus lifted his head and frowned. “Was that garbled attempt at English your way of saying that you wished to … explore my body?”

Harry’s breath hitched. “My gods. Say it like that again. In that low voice of yours.”

Severus’ lips parted and his black eyes went impossibly darker. “You wish to explore me? To touch places no one has seen in fifteen years?”

Harry groaned and buried his face in Severus’ neck. “Merlin, yeah. Can I?” He toyed with the buttons at Severus’ throat and watched his lover’s eyes.

Severus was afraid.

Harry pulled back and gave him a sad smile. “Love, it’s okay. We don’t have to.”

Severus sighed and moved Harry’s hand away. “I would like you to touch me, Harry, but I believe that the … incident with Dolohov has scarred me. Perhaps, if you let me remove my own clothing, we can bypass my fears.”

Harry smiled hesitantly. “You need to be in control?”

“Yes. At least for now.”

Harry laid back and gave Severus a warm smile. “All right. Then maybe you could touch me instead and show me what you like?”
Severus’ breath caught. “Merlin. Keep talking like that, and we shall not make it far.”

Harry chuckled and blushed. “I, I might not anyway. It’s … only my first time. I mean, I don’t think I’m ready to—not all the way, but I’ve never even had a good snog before except with you. I, I don’t … I mean …. .”

Severus straddled Harry’s hips and kissed him. “Ssh. I am aware you are a virgin. We shall move slowly.”

Harry was having a hard time concentrating with the feel of Severus’ warmth boxing him in and those gorgeous legs wrapped around his thighs.

“Mm-hmm.”

“I shall not push you into anything you are not ready for. So you must watch me. You must tell me if anything frightens you. Promise me you will tell me. I shall not be angry with you or unsatisfied. We shall simply find something that does not frighten you, as we are doing for me by giving me control.”

When Harry couldn’t answer, Severus moved up to kneel on his hands and knees above Harry. “Will you tell me if you’re afraid?”

Harry lifted a hand to Severus’ face, but hesitated. “I … yeah, I’ll try, but … can I touch you at all?”

Severus closed his eyes and turned his head into Harry’s hand. “Please. Please touch me. Let me feel your love. Only, be gentle with me. Touch softly, until I am well again.”

Harry slipped his hands into Severus’ hair and cradled his head close. “Like this?”

“Oh, yes.” Severus kissed him softly. “Yes, just so.”

Harry kissed around Severus’ jawline and up to his earlobe. Severus gasped and settled against Harry’s hips again, setting off sparks through the younger man’s entire body. It took all his control not to bite down on Severus’ ear out of pure surprise, but no doubt that would terrify Harry’s skittish lover. He took a deep breath to regain his control, then let slip a breathless moan and slowly moved against his lover’s hips, on purpose this time. Severus shuddered and changed his angle so Harry could feel his desire, so they touched with every breath.

Severus panted between slow thrusts, “This is … more comfortable … without trousers.”

Harry blushed. “A-all right. Just, maybe just the trousers for now? I’m still a bit scared.”

Severus froze. “Should I stop?”

“No, gods no. Not that kind of scared. Just … ‘it’s my first time’ kind of scared.”

Severus relaxed and gave Harry another slow thrust. “I see. May I remove my shirt as well? I have more freedom of movement without it.”

Harry nodded and gasped out, “Yeah, please. You can … all of it, if you feel safe. I just need … my body—I’m so scarred, Verus.”

Severus leaned up on his knees and unbuttoned his shirt and trousers. “Harry, beloved, I have already seen some of your scars, and I do not find you wanting.” He shouldered out of his shirt and tossed it aside. “On the contrary, I find you more beautiful, knowing that you survived such pain and grew strong.” Severus stood long enough to push down his trousers and kick them off, then returned
to the bed beside Harry. “One day, I hope you are comfortable enough to show me the rest of your beautiful body, but until then … this is enough.”

Harry leaned up so he could see Severus, and a moan escaped him at the sight. “Gods. Gods.”

Who knew the man was hiding such an athletic body beneath those robes? Harry hadn’t really been able to see Severus’ chiselled abs the first time because of all the gore, and the second time, he’d been trying not to look, but this time, oh, yes. He drank in every inch of his strong, lanky lover and burned it all into his memory.

Severus, still standing beside the bed, trembled and murmured an unsure, “Harry?”

“Ssh. You’re gorgeous, Severus. Perfect. I’m a bit jealous that others have seen your body before I have.”

Severus blushed and lowered his head. “I am sorry. I had to. It was … for the war. Well, most of them.”

Harry winced. “That … oh, Severus! You mean … they raped you?”

Severus cringed. “No. I … I had to … pretend to want it. To sell myself for information. It … it was more like ….” He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “More like p-prostitution than rape, but it was not what I wanted, either. And that is perhaps why I am so frightened when you are rough. They were rough, and they left scars.” Tears shone on his lashes. “No one has seen my body like this, Harry. Until you, I bore the marks they left behind.”

“Oh, Verus. Here. Love, come here.”

Harry beckoned him close and ran a gentle hand down Severus’ chest and stomach. He was almost hairless, save for a little trail at the centre of his belly and leading into the hem of his pants. Next to him, Harry felt like a gorilla, with his wild hair that didn’t just stay on his head.

“So … it’s almost like I gave you a new body, hmm? Like a fresh start?”

Severus’ smile lit the room. “Yes. Oh, I do like that. Starting over with you.”

“Yeah.” He kissed Severus’ stomach. “This beautiful body is all mine now, okay? And I promise I’ll only love it, and love you.”

Severus took him into an ardent kiss. “My love, I am yours.”

“And I’m yours, my Verus.”

Severus nuzzled Harry’s nose. “On that note, where were we? Ah.”

His hands moved to Harry’s trousers, and those beautiful, long fingers brushed Harry’s erection. Harry sucked in a sharp gasp, sudden pleasure zinging through every nerve ending and setting him ablaze with anticipation.

Gods, they’d barely even started, and already Harry was wondering why on earth he had waited so long.

Above him, Severus paused. “No?”

Harry kissed him with passion, though he restrained himself from pushing too hard for Severus’ sake. “That was … good surprise. Please.”
“Ah.”

Severus hesitantly unbuttoned Harry’s trousers. “Are you well?”

“Yes, yes. Don’t stop.”

“As you wish.”

Severus slid down his zip, and gods, Harry wanted more. He needed those long fingers, that gorgeous body on him. He was half-mad with desire already, and they had hardly touched.

No, he would not last long. Not tonight.

Then Severus was sliding his trousers off, and Harry froze in alarm. His legs weren’t as badly scarred as his back and bum, but they bore marks, too. Would Severus be repul—

Severus’ lips and the tip of his tongue traced the inside of Harry’s leg from his ankle to the hem of his pants, and all conscious thought left in a rush of melting heat.

“G-gods.” He could barely get out that much. Merlin, he hoped he didn’t really get scared while Severus was making love to him, because Harry wasn’t sure he could find the breath to cry out if this kept up.

Severus crawled to straddle Harry’s legs and slipped a hand under the young man’s tee, tracing his fingertips just under Harry’s navel and at the hem of his pants. Sharp pleasure shot through him, tinged with cold, tingling fear.

“Not the … the pants yet, okay?”

Well, apparently he needn’t worry about finding breath.

Severus kissed the skin he had just touched, and Harry’s resolve almost flew out the window as he wondered what those glorious soft lips would feel like lower on his body.

“I promise,” Severus murmured against Harry’s belly. “May I touch you like this with my hands? Or my mouth?”

“Ghbminah.” Harry had no idea what words those were supposed to be, but he arched his hips towards Severus to make his desires clear.

“Mm, I see.”

Severus traced the length of Harry’s desire with a long fingertip, and the mage’s eyes widened at the intensity of the sensation the touch brought. Harry gripped the sheets and writhed, anxious, desperate to have more of that fiery touch brand him. Then Severus palmed him and squeezed, just a bit, and Harry thought he would lose it right there.

Severus smirked and rubbed with more confidence, his eyes on Harry’s face, and then his lips on Harry’s lips, and all Harry could think of was a buzzing blur of more-more-more. He was ready to rip his clothing off and make love to Severus himself, so long as it brought more of that lightning-sharp but wonderful sensation.

His thoughts left him vocally in a garbled plea, and Severus moved down Harry’s body again. One of those blessed hands surrounded Harry as best as it could through his pants, and the other cupped and massaged beneath, and fuck. Hot, damp, pressure surrounded the tip of him, sucking a bit, and
oh-my-gods, was that Severus’ mouth? He looked down and groaned at the sight of all that glorious black hair spilling over his hips.

He had never seen a hotter sight in his life.

Merlin save him, his entire body was on fire. Pressure and wetness rubbed against him—Severus’ tongue, no doubt—through his pants, and Harry cried out with need. Gods, he needed more. Words were leaving his lips—he had no idea what any longer—and his body was melting into a puddle of electrified goo, and oh Merlin! The feeling of it. Nothing compared.

Shite, he couldn’t, wouldn’t last. He briefly thought of warning Severus, but nothing but gasps and garbled pleas could make it past his lips. His brain was short-circuiting. Dimly, he was aware that he had begun to thrash and shout and rub against Severus’ hands and mouth, but in spite of a trickle of fear that he was being too rough, he had no control. The best he could do was lay a hand on Severus’ hair and stroke those soft, lovely locks.

Severus tensed, but Harry didn’t know what he’d done to frighten him and petted on. After a moment, Severus relaxed and rewarded Harry’s gentleness with firmer pressure and faster strokes, and oh-my-gods, he couldn’t bear the heat of Severus’ mouth any longer. Harry’s fingers clutched without his consent around Severus’ hair—he forced them away so he wouldn’t hurt or frighten the man—and his hips rocked like mad. He desperately tried to control them, tried not to push too hard or too fast, but his body was beyond his control.

“Sev’rus!”

Heat and light and fire exploded within him, and he cried out something … an apology with half of Severus’ name and a plea for more all in one. The hands and lips upon him gentled, a soft kiss touched his bare stomach, and soothing whispers reached his ears.

“Ssh. It is all right. You did not hurt me.”

Harry’s breath left him in a strangled sort of sob and he reached for Severus, needing, desperate to feel the man he loved within his arms. Severus smiled and climbed up Harry’s body, nestling himself in the young man’s embrace.

“S’good,” Harry panted. “Was so good. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I enjoyed it as well.” He pressed close, and warmth and firm pressure poked into Harry’s thigh. What was …?

Oh. Oh.

“You’re still …”

“It’s quite all right. I did say I enjoyed it.”

“I … but I want you to feel like I did.”

“Ssh.” Severus kissed Harry’s lips, and the faintest taste of himself sent a thrill through the younger man. “I love you. I was happy to bring you pleasure.”

Harry gently pushed back on Severus’ shoulders. “And I love you, so now it’s my turn.” He straddled Severus’ legs and hesitated. “Unless you … um … don’t want me to?”

Severus swallowed hard. “Be gentle. Slow. I am a little afraid.”
“Okay. I will, I promise.”

Harry leaned down to kiss his love softly, gasping into the man’s mouth as Severus’ erection brushed between his legs. He was still sensitive, apparently.

“Oh.” Harry hesitantly rocked against Severus. “That … you’re right. It does feel good like this.”

Severus shivered, and Harry took it as a sign to slow down. He moved back to the man’s face and kissed his forehead, his closed eyelids, his nose, his cheeks, and finally moved back to Severus’ parted lips. Severus panted into Harry’s mouth and slid his hands into the man’s hair, his tongue claiming dominance as he turned Harry onto his back once more.

“Mine,” Severus whispered against Harry’s mouth and began to slowly move his hips.


Severus moaned and fell to on Harry’s neck, sucking and nibbling with teeth and lips alike, and Harry’s hips bucked beyond his control. Merlin. He hadn’t expected to feel anything again so soon, and perhaps he wasn’t fully there, not like Severus was, but he still felt enough to turn him to putty in Severus’ hands.

“Please,” Harry whispered. “Please let me touch you.”

Severus guided Harry’s hands down his back, just under the hem of the man’s smalls.

“You want me to …?”

“Mhn, yes.” Severus’ voice was rough and breathless, and Harry had never been so turned on by a simple sound in his life.

With shaking hands, he dipped into Severus’ pants, cupping firm, bare skin, and rubbed. Severus groaned into Harry’s hair, revealing his throat—the shorter man couldn’t be expected to reach Severus’ mouth like this, after all—and Harry turned into him with a sigh of pleasure.

Gods. Severus’ salty-sweet skin was heaven. Harry suckled him as his hands explored and occasionally pushed Severus harder against his hips, slowly making his way closer to the cleft at the centre. Harry was curious. How would Severus feel there? How would he react if Harry touched him, gently?

But Severus turned them over once more, trapping Harry’s hands, and gasped into his lover’s hair.

“Please,” he panted. “Not yet.”

“Okay.” Harry withdrew his hands and leaned back. “Can I touch you here instead?” He rocked his hips downwards for emphasis.

Severus moaned. “Yes, please. Need, need more.”

Harry’s breath hitched. “Merlin. Seeing you like this has got to be the sexiest thing ever.

“Harry! Stop talking and touch me.”

Harry chuckled and moved down Severus’ body, kissing and suckling along the way. “Verus, can I … take these off?”

“My underwear? Oh, yes, but make sure I can see your eyes.”
“Um, okay. Maybe a spell?”

Severus shook his head hard. “Gods, n-no. Please, just use your hands this time.”

Harry winced as he suddenly recalled the last time Severus’ underwear had been removed by a spell. And then he realised why Severus needed Harry to keep his eyes up—so the nervous man could see which Potter was taking off his underwear this time and remember why.

“Oh, okay,” Harry said in a soft voice. “Just my hands, and I’ll try to watch you.” He knelt beside the man and, while gazing into his love’s half-frightened, half-desirous eyes, he carefully slid the man’s smalls downwards a bit. “It’s okay, Verus. It’s just you and me here, and I will never hurt you. Never. Can you hear me, love?”

The tension in Severus’ body eased. “Yes.” He lifted his pelvis, giving Harry the ability to push Severus’ underwear past his hips.

“It’s okay, Verus,” Harry soothed. “I love you.”

He slowly slid Severus’ underpants down to the man’s knees, keeping his eyes on his lover’s face all the while, and let Severus himself kick them off.

“Can I look at you, Severus? Can I see how gorgeous you really are?”

The man’s eyes filled with nervous anticipation and love. “Y-yes.”

Harry took Severus’ hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the man’s fingertips while his eyes drank their fill. Merlin. Oh Merlin, Severus was … damn. Harry had never seen anything so enticing. He traced his fingertips up from Severus’ knee and stopped just short of his prize.

“Can I?”

Severus moaned and arched into Harry’s hand. “Yessss.”

The hiss put Harry in mind of Parseltongue, and gods, he hadn’t thought Severus could get any sexier. With a huffed sort of moan, he stroked gentle fingertips over the man’s rounded wrinkled flesh and up to the smoother skin jutting proudly from his hips. Harry’s fingers wrapped around him, and Merlin. He felt like velvet over steel.


Harry paused. “Is it scaring you?”

“Mhn, please.”

No, that was a plea for more. Harry smiled and caressed his lover, watching as Severus slowly came undone beneath him. His breath came in hitching gasps, his hair fell in disarray, and his face and chest flushed.

Gods. Harry wanted to feel him closer. He wanted to rock with Severus, to have their bodies touch as the man finally let go.

Severus gasped as Harry straddled his legs and moved to his hips, sitting back as he rubbed his love. A gentle hand caressed Harry’s tip, sending shockwaves through him.

“You are hard.”
Harry moaned. Gods, he’d just come out and said it. Shite, the man got sexier with every word he spoke.

“Y-yeah,” he panted. “Want more. C-can I, could we …?”

Harry swallowed and pushed down his underwear, revealing his desire to his love. He wasn’t ready to take them off entirely, but this much, he could do.

He rocked his hips against Severus’, rubbing their erections together, and Severus’ breath exploded from him in a shaky gasp.

“Merlin,” he panted. “Y-yes.”

Harry moaned and thrust forward again, gently, trying not to terrify Severus as he made love to the man. Severus met him, and electricity crackled through Harry’s smaller frame. Gods, it felt so good.

“Harry …. .”

Oh Merlin, hearing his name like that—he was going to melt.

“Sev’rus. Need you.”

“Mhn.” Severus flicked his hand and whispered something, and his palm and fingers shone with some strange substance. Harry didn’t understand until he wrapped that hand around them both and it was slick and hot and oh-my-gods, Severus stroked them, pushing them down and into each other, squeezing Harry with just the right amount of pressure.


Harry placed his smaller hand under Severus’ and followed his strokes.

“Oh, Merlin,” Severus cried. “Yes, yes, like this.”

Harry sobbed with intense pleasure and rocked into their hands, into his love, his palm growing slick from the lubrication. Gods. Oh, gods. His brain gave out to sensation, his hips thrust beyond his control, and his head tipped back in a surge of desperate pleasure.

“More!” It was all he could say.

Severus moaned and ran his free hand over Harry’s bare thigh. “You are bloody sexy, you know?”

“Mhn … I am?”

“These strong, seeker’s thighs with all this masculine fur and you—oh, Harry—h-how can you even ask me that?” His head thrashed, and a desperate keen escaped him. “Can’t … so beautiful. So good. Gods, Harry. Can’t … hold on.”

Harry watched, amazed and burning with desire, as Severus came completely undone beneath him. He thrashed and clutched at the sheets, his hips arched wildly, and his mouth opened and shut with silent cries.

“Let me hear you,” Harry said, his own voice strained from need. “Please. Let me hear you cry out for me.”
“Harry!” Severus keened his name and rocked into their hands, his pleasure escaping in growls and mewls that melted Harry’s insides. “Don’t stop. Need more.”

Harry took that as permission to move faster and leaned on his free hand to give him more control. Severus moaned, and the sound of his voice in that low, breathy register nearly pushed Harry over the edge.

Then he cried out Harry’s name, and the young man could bear no more. Harry tipped back his head and sobbed, “Sev’rus,” and lights went off inside him. He groaned and arched like a bow pulled taut, riding out shockwave after shockwave of pleasure.

Then an answering cry sounded beneath him, and Harry’s hand grew hot and slick, and he thrilled in knowing he had made Severus feel good. The man rocked into them, whispering Harry’s name as his thrusts slowed down.

“G’night, Sev’rus.”

Severus held Harry tight and covered them with their quilts. “Goodnight, my beloved.”

Harry smiled into Severus’ chest and slipped into dreams.

Some sharp sound woke Seth out of a sound slumber. He jerked to his feet, already on high alert in case Death Eaters had found him, or gods forbid, that horrible woman had come to try and steal his other half again. It was a moment before he remembered he was no longer in the harpy’s custody and his other half himself had stopped her before she could bring her horrid plans to fruition.

At least, he hoped her plans had failed. They would know for certain in a few weeks.
He panted and tried to get his bearings. The house was quiet and dark, so it couldn’t have been Death Eaters. And Gabblebitch was in prison, so it wasn’t her, either.

Had something happened to his family?

Severus strained his ears, ready to cry out for Dobby in an instant—but would house elves respond to a portrait? Would they even hear him? If they didn’t regard him as a part of the family, they mightn’t regard him at all unless commanded to by the masters of the house.

House elves were weird like that.

Gods, he hoped Harry and Severus were all right.

Then, he heard it. A breathy cry. “Harry!”

Shite! Had his brother been hurt? Would he die if Harry did? What would happen to him if——”

His panicked mental ramblings came to a sudden halt as another voice answered the first.

“S-Sev’rus, more.”

Oh.

Oh gods. Seth did not want to hear this. He covered his ears and tried not to weep.

But Severus had sounded like he was in pain. Would Harry really … no. Harry couldn’t. Could he?

Shaking all over, sick and wishing desperately he could disappear to another portion of the house, Seth peeled his hands from his ears.

The moment he did, a strangled cry of “Harry, please,” assaulted his ears.

Tears streaked his face. Severus was in pain. The quality of his voice assured it. How could Harry do such a terrible thing?

And if Harry was so cruel, did that mean Seth was a monster, too? One day, would he want to …?

He would have retched if portraits had the capability. As it was, tears soaked his canvas—it felt a bit like raindrops. What would happen to him? If Harry was cold enough to hurt his bond mate, would he come after Seth one day, too? How much more could a mage do to him than the Gabblebitch could? And a male mage at that.

No. Gods, no. He couldn’t bear it.

He sobbed and clawed at the canvas containing him. He didn’t want this. Didn’t want to be in this life if he was only going to end up passed from one monster to another.

Then, another muffled cry arrested him.

“Oh, beloved. Yes. Please, there.”

That … was Severus. And he definitely didn’t sound like he was suffering now.

But did that mean … were they just making love then? Was it … going to be okay?

“Sev’rus!” Harry’s sharp cry rang out almost in time with Severus’, and their voices went soft once
more. Seth swallowed hard and listened for sounds of anger or tears.

Nothing but soft, muffled words met his ears. Oh, Merlin, they were okay. They’d only forgotten the silencing charm.

Thank the gods.

Seth slumped against his painting and wept. Merlin, he was an idiot. He should have known Harry would never hurt Severus like that. Even if Harry still hated the man, he simply did not have that coldness in him.

They might be brothers now, but they had started life as the same person. And Seth, after all, would rather gnaw off a limb than hurt someone like that.

He should have known better.

But Merlin, he had been so afraid. Not just of Harry, but of himself. For a moment, he had feared he had the potential to become a monster like the one who had used him in an elaborate scheme to get to Harry.

Well, at first, he had just been a substitute, but when the bitch had realised he could cry, she had hatched a terrible plan. If it had worked, they all would have suffered.

But it hadn’t worked, and he was safe. She had no claim over either of them now.

And that meant he didn’t have to fear her any longer, didn’t it? He had Harry and Severus now, and they would protect and help him even if the bitch’s plan had worked at the last.

Her smirks every time she looked at him had turned his blood to ice. Thank Merlin that Harry had come when he did.

Seth wondered if he should tell Harry and Severus. Give them time to work out a defence, just in case the worst had happened, but no. If it hadn’t … well, he didn’t want to think of the horror he had endured any longer.

So why couldn’t he get the images out of his head? The horrible things she had done to him, and the utter nightmare she had threatened him with?

Gods, he just wanted the pain to stop.

A light flickered on under his door and footsteps came closer. A murmured call followed a soft knock upon the door.

“Seth? Love, are you well?”

Severus. The man must have heard him crying. He straightened up and called in his strongest voice—which wasn’t saying much, “I’m f-fine.”

Damn.

Severus sighed. “You are not. I am coming in.”

“No! I mean, if you ….”

Severus pushed the door open, and Seth closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands, just in case.
“Love, whatever is the matter?”

A gentle hand stroked his hair, but Seth jerked back with a cry. “N-no. I can’t.”

Severus’ voice shook. “What have I done to hurt you, Seth? I do not understand.”

At the sound of the man’s obvious pain and confusion, Seth dared open one eye and peek through his fingers.

Severus stood with his hand pulled to his chest, a black bathrobe wrapped around his body and warm slippers on his feet.

Seth cursed himself for a fool. Of course Severus wouldn’t just come in here naked and touch him like that. He wasn’t a demon, not like the bitch from before. Gods, why did he keep thinking such terrible things? Especially of the two men who had saved his life and who loved him?

“M’sorry.” Seth let his hands drop and opened his other eye. “G-got scared.”

Severus frowned and let his hand drop. “Whatever for, love? Did you have a nightmare?”

Seth winced. “Um, no. Not … not really. I just heard … and I thought … it was stupid, Severus. I-I’m sorry.”

“You … heard?” Severus’ eyes flickered to the wall between their bedrooms. “Oh. Oh, Merlin. We forgot the silencing charm?”

“Um ….”

Severus’ eyes filled. “And you thought I had come in here … to hurt you?”

Seth flinched. “N-no. Not quite that. I was just … I couldn’t help but remember, and ….”

“Flashbacks. You were having flashbacks. I understand now.” Severus sighed and came a step closer, palms outstretched and empty. “I am not going to hurt you, Seth. Ever. I will never touch you in a way that is not appropriate between blood relatives. Whether you are truly my son or not, I feel that you are, and I cannot hurt you. Will you allow me to touch your hand?”

“Y-yeah.” Seth sighed at the feel of a gentle hand upon his, just smoothing his knuckles and fingertips and pressing against his palm when he opened his hand. “That’s better. It helps.”

Severus nodded. “A soothing touch—a small one, not too intimate—usually does. With victims of sexual assault such as yourself, I have found that it is best only to touch their hands and only if they allow it. Hence, my request for permission.”

“But you’ve touched more than my hands before.”

“You were not in flashbacks then, love. This is a different situation.”

“Oh. Severus, what’s a flashback?”

Severus smiled wanly and rubbed Seth’s palm. “Well, trauma like we have endured—you, Harry, and myself—it leaves wounds. Wounds that, if the right pressure is applied, reopen and bleed. When you overheard us, it likely made you remember her, did it not? Perhaps you were afraid it was not mutual?”

Seth gaped and nodded hard. “Y-yeah. You sounded like you were in pain, so I ….”
“You were afraid that I was unwilling.”

“Yeah.”

Severus shook his head. “Nothing could be further from the truth. I do not wish to go into too much detail, both for your sake and for ours, but Harry was exceptionally gentle with me. I have never been handled with such love before, and … well, I … I was not expecting to lose control, but such tender care disarmed me.”

Seth sighed and laid his head against Severus’ hand. “T-thanks. I … I was more scared than I realised.”

“Ssh. All is well, child.”

Seth pressed his palm against Severus’ warm hand and wished that he could wrap his fingers around it. This distance, while it was better than feeling nothing at all, wasn’t enough. Still, feeling Severus’ warm skin and gentle hand against his own calmed him. Besides, if Seth kept getting so terrified all the time, maybe it was better that he had to stay firmly within his own space.

Only, it would be nice to feel a real hug every now and again. He missed that more than anything.

Severus hesitantly touched Seth’s hair. “Is this acceptable to you?”

“Yeah, it feels nice.” And it helped. It healed him of so much to be touched like this, gently, and as if he were precious to the man before him.

A son. Severus thought of him as his own, despite the fact that Seth was only a painting. Gods, just the thought made Seth feel so loved. So safe.

At times like this, wished he could really be Severus’ son. He needed a father desperately. A real family, at last.

And so did Severus.

Severus rubbed down Seth’s hair and the side of his cheek. “I am sorry for frightening you, love. I shan’t forget the charms next time, or perhaps I shall just put a one-way silencer on the room permanently.”

But if he silenced that room permanently, Seth couldn’t hear them if something bad did happen. No. He needed to be able to make sure his new family was safe, even if he really didn’t want to hear their bedroom activities.

“T-thank you, but could you let Harry do the permanent charm instead?”

Severus frowned. “You do not want me to?”

“It’s not that,” Seth said, “but before you came in here, I thought one of you had been hurt. Maybe Harry could fix it so that I could still hear you if something was wrong.” Seth sighed. “Though I don’t know what good it would do. Even if I cried out, would the house elves obey a portrait?”

Severus frowned. “That is a good idea and a good point. I will ask Harry to attempt the charm in the morning—he is fast asleep now—and I shall assign one of the elves to you this moment so you are able to sleep well tonight. Would you like Zephie, perhaps? She is the little female elf with big blue eyes—a gardener elf—and not much older than yourself. Quite young in elven years, perhaps about the same age.”
Seth grinned. “That would be perfect.”

Severus nodded and clapped his hands. “Zephie!”

A tiny blue-eyed elf popped in, rubbing her face and pulling a sheet around her shoulders. “M-Master Severus called me?”

Severus knelt to her height. “Hello little one. I am sorry to wake you. You may return to bed as soon as we are finished here, but I would like to change your assignment, and for Seth’s sake, I needed to do so immediately. Are you able to become a personal elf for a portrait?”

She blinked and looked to Seth with wide eyes. “To Master Seth?”

“Yes, just in case he needs help and Harry and I are indisposed. I do not believe it will be much of a draw on your duties. He mainly needs company and the assurance that we will all be safe.”

“Oh. Yes, Master Severus, I will listen to Master Seth, but we’s all do already.”

“You recognise him as a master of the house?”

“Yes, Master Severus. He is having the same life core as Master Harry.”

Seth frowned. ‘Life core?’ Did that mean he was a mage as well?

Maybe she could tell him more about it in the morning. They were all still tired at the moment.

Severus’ eyes held the same questions, but he only looked at the droopy-eyed elf and patted her shoulder. “Very well then. I would still like you to help Seth, if you are amenable.”

She grinned. “I’s be happy to. We’ll be friends—yes, young master?”

He smiled back. “Yeah, friends sounds good. Um, you can sleep up here for tonight if you want, in the main bed. I’d feel safer having you here with me just in case.”

She gasped. “Sleep in the masters’ bed? That is … I … I would be honoured.”

Severus lifted her up onto the bed, making the little elf squeal and giggle.

“I’s never been picked up by a human! Not even when I’s being a little baby!”

“Well, that’s no good,” said Seth with a smile. “If you have little elf babies here one day, we’ll play with them too. Um, if that’s okay? I don’t know if there’s some kind of rule …?”

Zephie gasped. “You’s be wanting to see elf babies? There’s no rule, young master, but they is being very fragile. Very small.”

“Oh, I see. So it might be best just to hold them, then?”

“Yes, that would be good!” Zephie gave him a toothy grin. “Goodnight, young master. I’s still sleepy. Unless you needs me?”

“No, no,” said Seth with a smile. “Go to sleep. I already feel a lot safer.” He motioned Severus close and air-kissed the man’s cheek. “Thank you. I think I’ll be okay now.”

Severus smoothed his hair. “If there is anything you need, simply call me or send Zephie, all right?”
“Yeah. I will. Goodnight.”

Severus bid the painting goodnight and padded back to his room, his steps as silent as a cat’s.

“I think … I’m going to be okay here, Zephie.”

“Mm-hmm, you’s safe, young master. Zephie will protect you.”

“Yeah.” Seth blinked down tears of relief and joy. “Yeah. You will. You all will.”

With a sigh, he wiped his eyes, propped his head against the side of his canvas, and let sleep take him.

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Harry was dreaming. He stood in the centre of a magical circle with his most trusted allies beside him, light blue flames licking harmlessly at his feet. Bare, bloodless, skeletal feet.

Death Eaters and supporters surrounded him and watched in eager anticipation, the flames lending their leering faces an eerie blue cast. The sheer number of them filled Harry with pride. Even the snatchers had come to taste of his new power.

A cold laugh warmed his insides. His army would be powerful indeed.

Let this teach the Potter brat to air his dirty laundry as if the Prophet was a bloody tabloid and strip the mystery from his hard-earned name. He would pay for his arrogance, soon.

Harry nodded and motioned for the others to begin.

To the left of him, Greyback raised his arm and, with a cry of pain, tossed a sprig of aconite and a phial of something crimson into the circle. “To trace the usurpers, we give the blood of the hunter and the leaves of the hunter’s doom.”

Harry watched the phial burst into flame and vanish. Greyback’s bloody sacrifice would not go unrewarded. He would make certain of it.

Pettigrew tossed in a lock of his own scraggly hair. “To seek them in whatever form they hide, we add the … fur of a half-man.”

Bellatrix tossed in a pair of sightless, gory eyeballs from beside Lucius. “To locate them through wards and hidden night, we add the seer’s orbs.” Her mad laugh encouraged a dark chuckle from Harry as well.

From beside Pettigrew, Goyle tossed in a blood-covered wand. “To transport them, we add the wand of an apparition master.”

Harry smiled. Twycross would not survive through the night, but such was not a great loss to the wizarding world. The old man had already far outlived his welcome.

Gibbon threw in a chunk of white hair attached to a bloody hunk of flesh. “To hide us upon arrival, we add the hair of a demiguise.”

The beast would not miss it, not after his vampires finished with it.
At last, Runcorn tossed in a pair of handcuffs stolen from the deepest pits of the Department of Mysteries. “To bind them upon our arrival, we add the cuffs of a nightwalker.”

One more vampire walking free and on his side, and one more loss for the Ministry. Perhaps the day had not been good, but the night was looking up for Harry and his men.

With the final piece added, Harry stepped into the flames and laughed as they engulfed him with barely a tickle.

“For the crime of using the name of a god without respect, I come to demand a reckoning. The slip of the tongue will bring doom upon those who dare speak of me without proper devotion.”

He slit his neck over his artery and let a spray of his lifeblood decorate the chanters and the circle before sealing his wound. Dizziness enveloped him, and he stumbled but for a moment, but with a deep breath, he gathered his strength and stood tall once more. His voice rang out over the circle as he called to the skies.

“Be it known to the elements and all who walk the earth, the name Voldemort is sacred and to speak it will bring the furies upon you. So mote it be!”

The flames and circle vanished into Harry and his followers with a great whooshing sound, lighting their eyes with an eerie blue glow before it vanished. The flames burned as they settled in his chest, but Harry laughed as it took of his endless life and power and marked all those present. Now they would be able to track down any hapless brat who dared use his name without the proper ceremony and apparate straight to them, wards or no. The power did not pass to himself, but such were the sacrifices one needed to make if one wanted absolute dominion. His followers would not dare disobey him, not after he had shown Rookwood’s flaming corpse for the insult that it was.

He wagered half the Order would be in his cells come morning—including the obnoxious Potter brat. With this ritual, the war was as good as won.

His laugh branded the night with blood.

Harry woke to the feel of bare skin and gentle arms holding him tight. He struggled a moment, until that familiar scent of vanilla, herbs, and masculinity cut through his panic and soothed him.

Severus cried, “Harry! Wake up, love! Please.”

Gods. How long had Harry been under that vision? The man was half-sobbing.

“Verus,” Harry muttered. “M’awake.”

Severus let slip a soft cry and caught him up. “Oh, oh thank Merlin. I had begun to think you would never open your eyes again.” He brought Harry into a desperate kiss. “You cannot leave me like that, Harry. I cannot watch him destroy you from within.”

Harry returned his kiss briefly and wiped away the man’s tears. “Ssh. It’s all right, Verus. It’s just that I can’t usually wake from those visions until they let me.”

“I do not understand why you continue to have them at all! As far as I know, he is aware of your
abilities and Occluding against you.”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe I’m too strong for him to hide it now.”

“Yes, perhaps.” His eyes flickered to Harry’s scar. “Or ….”

“Or?”

Severus shook himself. “It is nothing. What did you see?”

Harry gasped and leapt from the bed, blushing when he realised he was only dressed in his tee and a pair of smalls that had fallen under his hips. “Whoops.” He waved his hand, and a bathrobe materialized on his shoulders. “There. And with that done ….” He turned and grabbed Severus’ hands. “Get up, get up now! We have a huge problem, Severus.”

“Harry, it is three in the morning. What is so urgent that we cannot simply handle it at first light?”

“Vol—” Harry clapped his hands over his mouth. Shite. He had almost fallen prey to the trap not ten minutes after the bastard had set it.

Gods, he was an idiot.

“R-Riddle. He just finished a gory-as-hell ritual like some shite out of a nightmare, Severus, but the thing is, this ritual, it’s made it so the Snatchers and Death Eaters can apparate immediately to anyone who uses his self-fashioned name. The V one. The one I just sent out an article to most of Britain telling them not to fear using!”

“Mother of Merlin,” Severus breathed. “You … you are certain that is the purpose of this ritual?”

“Pretty sure, yeah. He was boasting about it in his head.”

“Gods.”

Severus leapt from the bed and pulled his own bathrobe around his naked body. Harry barely resisted an urge to pout.

“We must call the Order together immediately,” Severus said.

Harry frowned. “I don’t … do you really think we should risk that?”

Severus’ eyes bored into him. “Do you wish for the innocents to be killed simply because their leader is a demon who deserves to be caught up in the trap?”

Harry’s knees wobbled. “N-no. Merlin, no. But might we try the twins first?”

“The … Weasley twins? Whatever for?”

Harry shrugged. “Just a hunch. That, and they’re damn good at coming up with wartime mischief on the spot. They might at least have an idea, and it’s less risky than going into an Order meeting at three in the morning.”

Severus nodded. “Floo their shop, then. I will send a Patronus to Kingsley while you are doing that.”

“Tell him that Twycross is probably dead or will be soon, and that Runcorn let a vampire out of the DoM.”
Severus shuddered. “That one will be loyal to the Dark Lord now, without question.”

“Unfortunately.”

Severus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Merlin, what I wouldn’t give for one straight night of sleep, but no matter. Hurry and floo the twins. We have little time.”

“Right.” Harry kissed him lightly. “Thanks for trusting me. I know you think I’m mad, but I have this weird feeling like it’s the right thing to do.”

Severus stroked Harry’s cheek. “I believe in you. Now go, while we still have time.”

Harry nodded and rushed to get the fire going again. Once the flames had turned green, he called out the twins’ home address and stuck his head into the flames.

“Gred! Forge! Wake up, it’s an emergency!”

A thunder of steps sounded in the halls and Fred, George, Lee Jordan, and Angelina Johnson, all tumbled into the upstairs sitting room in Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes.

“What the hell, Harry?” George rubbed his eyes. “It’s three in the mo—”

“I know, and if it wasn’t bloody life-or-death urgent, I’d have let you sleep.”

Fred knelt by the fire with Lee. “What is it? Is everyone okay? Did something happen to Severus?”

Harry grinned. “He’s fine, and I’m chuffed that you thought to ask. But no, this is a much bigger problem, and I need to know if you guys have a way to contact every wizarding house in Britain—including Muggleborns—in like, ten minutes.”

Fred’s jaw dropped. “A-all of them? Merlin. I don’t know how to … I mean, we don’t have bellyvision like you Muggleborns do.”

“Or fellytones,” said George.

Harry snorted. “That’s television and telephones, but … actually, that gives me an idea. Mum listens to a radio, doesn’t she? Do all wizarding houses have them?”

Fred gaped. “Mother of Merlin, so they do. Most of them anyway.”

“Maybe not so much the Muggleborns,” said Lee with a frown, “but we could definitely force a broadcast through to the wizarding families.”

George knelt at Lee’s side. “Maybe if we tweak the spell to go to all houses with a magical aura, then it’ll work with Muggle radios, too. It’s worth a try at least.”

Angelina knelt beside Fred and shook her head. “That might also include old wizarding houses Muggles have taken over. You’ll have to fine-tune it further to only include active auras. Then you should be able to do your broadcast without shooting the secrecy act to hell and back.”

Fred grinned and kissed her square on the mouth. “And that’s why I love you, babe. Brains, beauty, and you’re a hell of a chaser to boot.”

Angelina laughed and smacked his shoulder. “Such flattery will get you nowhere.”

Fred waggled his brows. “Maybe later then?”
She glared. “Fred! There are people’s lives at stake! Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“R-right you are. As always.” He turned to his twin. “Can you and Lee get the spell started? Ange and I will whip up the potion with our altered criteria. What should we add for the aura tracing, do you think?”

Harry remembered the ritual and said, “Um, would aconite blow it up?”

Fred gasped. “Bloody hell, that might just do it.” He gave Harry a wry look. “I thought you were no good at potions. Is Severus giving you private lessons, then?”

“Fred,” Angelina growled. “Not the time.”

He huffed. “I was serious, Ange! How did you know to add the aconite, Harry?”

Harry shuddered. “That’s what V—Riddle did to make the ritual he performed tonight trace magical auras. Well, that and werewolf blood, but with Remus in Germany, we don’t have a werewolf available at the moment.”

Fred gulped. “Oh Merlin. A r-ritual?”

“Yeah, and it’s bad news, so get moving, guys.”

The twins and their companions went ashen.

George said, “R-right. We’ll get on the spell. But, uh, what’s our broadcast?”

“That Riddle’s put a geis on his name. The one everyone is afraid to speak.”

“And the one you just challenged everyone to use,” said a grim Fred.

“Yeah. He had to use up a ton of power to do it, but now Death Eaters and snatchers can apparate straight to anyone who says it, so we’ve got to get the word out that people can’t use it anymore.”

Harry pounded his fist into the hearth. “But gods, this hacks me off. I had just broken the chains of fear on that name, and now he’s gone and made it into something horrible and terrifying again.”

The twins met each other’s eyes.

“You know, old chap,” said a wickedly grinning Fred, “I reckon we—”

“—Can make it so Riddle—”

“—Regrets ever putting a geis on his name.”

Lee grinned as well. “I think I know just what you mean, and it’s bloody brilliant.”

Harry frowned. “Just … be careful, okay? These are people’s lives at stake.”

“Oh, we’re aware,” said George.

“She won’t let me forget it,” added a dismal looking Fred.

Angelina stood and cuffed him on the back of the head. “You berk. Get going and stop teasing me, or you’ll be sleeping cold for the next week!”

Fred sighed dramatically. “Yes, dear.” He rose to his feet and motioned to a snickering George.
George brushed off his trousers and joined his brother. “She has you whipped, you know?”

“Yes, yes. Tell me about it when you find a girlfriend already.”

George winced and followed his twin. “Touché.”

“Good luck, boys,” said Harry. “Send me a Patronus when you’re done.”

“Go over to Mum’s,” said George.

“—So you and Severus can—”

“—Hear the broadcast when it’s done.”

“Right, we’ll do that.” He stood and doused the flames with a wandless snuffing spell. “Severus? Are you finished?”

He turned to find Severus watching him with love and wonder in his eyes.

“The aconite was a brilliant suggestion, love. I was going to mention flutterby wings, but they are both reactive and difficult to come by. Aconite may well work better.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “I believe you have saved thousands of lives tonight.”

Harry blushed and gave him a shy smile. “Y-yeah?”

“Yes.” Severus held him close. “I am proud of you.”

“T-thanks.” Harry tucked his head under Severus’ chin. “What did you say to Kingsley?”

“I warned him of the danger and relayed your messages about Twycross and the vampire. As soon as I heard the twins’ plan, I also told him we have started taking countermeasures.”

Harry nodded and slipped his hand under Severus’ robe, tracing gentle fingers across the man’s bare hip. “Shame we have to get dressed. Your body is amazing, do you know?”

Severus’ breath hitched. “H-Harry. We do not have time.”

“I know. I just wanted to let you know that I love you and think it’s a pity that you have to cover up that sexy body with all those robes.” He withdrew his hand and gave Severus a smile. “But I do understand why.”

Severus kissed him lightly. “Come. We can play later. For now, we must make sure our family is safe.”

Harry beamed, a warm-fuzzy sensation enveloping him at Severus’ words. “Yeah. Our family.” He shook his head and reminded himself that this was war and innocent lives hung in the balance. “Right. Let’s get dressed, grab Seth, and be on our way.”

“Lead on, beloved.”

Severus held Harry in his lap in the Weasleys’ living room. A crowd of redheads sat close to the fire,
all watching the radio with eyes full of worry. Thirty minutes had passed since Harry had flooed the twins, and no one knew what was taking them so long.

Ron was the only Weasley on his feet, pacing the floor with the family telephone in hand as he desperately tried to reach his girlfriend. He had already rung the Grangers ten times, and Severus was about to suggest trying a Patronus when a tense expression of relief crossed the young redhead’s face.

“Hermione! Oh, thank Merlin.”

Severus did not need to have his spy’s ears to hear Hermione’s indignant screech.

“It’s four in the morning, you berk, and mum and da have to work early today! What in Merlin’s name is so blasted important that it couldn’t wait until I see you in four bloody hours?”

“Hermione, please! I had to warn you, okay? Harry’s had a vision and … and I need you to get that old Muggle radio of yours out. Now. And for the love of Merlin, whatever you do, don’t say You-Know-Who’s name, okay? The one we’re all afraid of.”

“Stop being such a fraidy-cat, Ron! Vold—”

Ron screamed, “Stop! Oh gods, no, don’t!”

Severus jerked to his feet, lifting Harry with him, and set his shocked lover down. He jerked out his wand and took Harry’s hand.

Hermione’s shout echoed through the room. “When you find your bollocks, Ron, let me know!”

Severus’ heartbeat slowed a bit, but the danger hadn’t passed. Had Ron stopped her in time?

He looked to Seth and winced. The boy was pressed against his canvas, eyes wide and full of tears.

Severus gave Seth’s shoulder a pat and returned his attention to Ron. The boy was struggling to keep control of his emotions and half-shouting into the phone.

“It’s not me, Hermione! The bastard’s put a geis on his name. Gods! I was trying to save your bloody l-life.” His voice broke, and Severus’ heart panged for him.

Harry was still tense with fear and alert. “Ron, is she okay?”

Ron winced. “Hermione, listen. Did you finish saying the name?”

Severus couldn’t make out her reply, but Ron sighed in relief and gave them a thumbs up. Relieved, Severus sat once more and guided Harry back into his lap and his arms.

Gods, what kind of idiot said a name their terrified lover had just begged them not to?

Still, perhaps she had some excuse. The Weasleys were the last people in the Order still avoiding the bastard’s name. They would probably pass the fear of it onto their children and grandchildren and their great-grandchildren.

Severus hoped, by then, it was only a name.

Ron rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Look, Hermione, this isn’t about being afraid of him, okay? He’s fixed it so his minions can swoop in on anyone who says that awful name. They’ll have your location the minute you speak and … if I understood Harry right, they can break through wards to
get to you and everything.”

Hermione’s squeak echoed through the room too, but Severus had to strain to make out her reply afterwards, even with his trained hearing.

“Oh gods. Ron, I … I’m so s-sorry. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Ron flopped into a chair beside his younger sister. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just, just don’t say it again and get your old radio out, okay? Please? The twins are trying to break the news to the masses—Muggleborns included—and we need to know if it works on Muggle stuff.”

“Right. Well, hold on just one moment and I’ll get the radio and bring it here. This is an older phone and it doesn’t come away from the wall.”

“Okay. I’ll be here.”

Severus watched as Ronald leaned the telephone against his shoulder and trembled. He buried his face in his hand and struggled to hold back tears, but didn’t quite succeed.

Severus leaned over to murmur to the Weasley matriarch. “Molly, might you happen to have a mild Calming Draught in your stores?”

She stood and patted his shoulder. “Thank you for reminding me. I’ll make it into some tea for all of us. Merlin knows we’ll all need it tonight.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Thanks, love,” he whispered in Severus’ ear.

Severus held him tighter and hoped his arms made Harry calm, at least until Molly could finish the tea.

As soon as she left the living room, the wizarding radio crackled to life, and a blaring siren made everyone jump.

Perhaps it was a good thing Molly hadn’t finished that tea.

The siren went on for a full minute, while the Weasleys, Harry, and Severus all covered their ears and grimaced.

Then finally—blessedly—it stopped, and Severus removed his hands and listened again.

Lee Jordan spoke into a tense silence. “Citizens of the Wizarding World, do forgive us for interrupting your rest, but we’re here with urgent news that can’t wait a moment.”

“You may recall that yesterday,” Fred said, “our very own Harry Potter released a story revealing the background and origins of You-Know-Who’s title, urging people to let go of their fear and call him by his proper name. Sort of. Only it’s not a proper name, but I digress.”

“Well, we’re here to tell you to stop,” said George. “Don’t say it now. Harry has the right idea, but old Mouldy-Pants put a geis on his ‘other’ name tonight, and if you say it, you’ll find yourself in a right mess.”

Molly gasped and put a hand to her mouth. The other Weasleys looked just as horrified. Severus shook his head and listened.

“He’s enchanted it so that if you do call Snakeface by his self-fashioned title,” said Fred, “the Death Eaters and Snatchers can find you. Even through wards, they can apparate straight to your location,
capture you, and—well, I don’t need to tell you what Death Eaters do to their victims. It isn’t pretty.”

“That’s right,” said George. “so don’t test it out, okay? It’s taboo now, so if you do need to talk about him, just do what we’re doing—make up your own name for the slimy bastard. He can’t put a geis on th—”

Harry cried out and smacked his hands over his forehead, drawing sympathetic looks from the Weasleys. “Oh. Oh gods.”

Severus murmured, “He is angry?”

“Yeah. Hurts.”

“I am here.” Severus placed his hand over Harry’s forehead and jumped at the tingle of dark magic.

Fuck. Something was hurting him all right. With a frown, he began the Vulnera Sanentur, and after a moment, Harry slumped into him with a sigh.

Severus stroked Harry’s hair and murmured, “Better?”

“Better?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you need a potion?”

“No, I’m okay.” Harry snuggled close, and Severus held him while the broadcast went on.

Lee said, “So you can’t call him by his imaginary title anymore, but don’t despair. You can still show President Ponce all the respect he deserves. And now you can even be creative with your adulation, too. It’s a win-win situation. For us, anyway.”

George chuckled. “President Ponce. Oh, that’s a good one. I personally like Mouldy-Wart and Blast-Headed Fruitcake, but there are endless possibilities.”

Fred said, “The Great Prat.”

“Dung-Eater Supreme.”

“Minister of Madness.”

“The list goes on and on, so I’m sure you can think of something to give old Funk-face the respect he so craves.”

“Good luck in your naming pursuits,” said Lee. “I’m sure Captain Cue Ball will love all the attention.”

“Right,” said Fred. “Just be sure not to say the name he doesn’t want you to. Wouldn’t want to disrespect the Bloodshot Baron, after all.”

“No indeed,” said George. “And with that, we end our public service message. If, in the future, we should need to broadcast again, be on the lookout. For now, this is your local Potterwatch station—”

Harry choked out, “Potterwatch?”

“—Bidding you goodnight and good luck.”
The house went deadly silent.

Molly spoke in a shaky voice, “M-Mouldy-pants? Dung-Eater Supreme? Oh, they’ll be murdered in their beds!”

Harry laughed. “No, no. It’s brilliant! Don’t you see? He can’t put a geis on everything. The first spell cost a ton of his power, so now—he can’t do anything but endure the insults. And that’s going to degrade fear and respect for him. He’ll be the laughingstock of the country by Sunday.”

“Sunday?” Severus chuckled. “I give it until Saturday.”

“It’s Saturday now!”

“Which is exactly my point. He is already a laughingstock, and he knows he can do nothing about it. He will take off the geis within the week.”

“Or kill us all for daring to say such terrible things,” said Molly in a broken voice.

Severus shook his head. “In this situation, he is impotent. He drained much of his power to perform the geis, so any attacks he initiates now will be weak and poorly orchestrated. The aurors are already on high alert, so in that as well, he will be foiled. When this is all said and done, he will have little choice but to crawl back to his cave with his tail between his legs.”

Harry grinned. “Like I said, it’s brilliant.”

Molly curled into herself and hugged her chest. “But … what if he …?”

“Mollywobbles.” Arthur wrapped his wife up from behind and kissed her cheek. “I know. I know you’re afraid. But I can see the genius in this plan, too. I think we should do it.”

“You mean … you want to insult him? But that will only draw fire!”

“To what?” Severus shook his head. “He cannot attack every home in wizarding Britain at once, and that was the twins’ plan. However, they will need support to carry it out. This kind of psychological warfare is only effective in numbers.”

Molly paled further. “So you’re saying that if the twins stand alone on this …?”

“They’ll be targets,” said a grim Harry. “But they won’t be alone. The Prophet will no doubt get in a report about this in a special edition. I’ll just have to slip in a story asking the people to back them up and explain why it’s important. Just like I made them retract that horrid story on Severus—that gem will be out in the morning edition.”

Arthur frowned. “Harry, how on earth are you getting all this done with the Prophet?”

Harry grinned. “I made friends with the president.”

Severus stifled a laugh in Harry’s shoulder.

Perhaps because of the late hour and the fact that the twins had already dealt with the danger, Harry received no summons to an Order meeting, to his immense relief. Before returning to bed, he and
Severus drafted a story for the prophet and sent it off with Demeter, along with a note urging them to publish the piece as soon as it could be edited and printed. Once she had left, Harry trudged upstairs and dropped into bed. He lay there, curled up on his face with only one thought in mind: sleep, and forget everything for a few moments.

Gentle hands removed his shoes and socks and laid them aside. Severus removed his own with a spell and stacked them beside Harry’s, then stripped down to his pants and climbed back into bed.

“Severus?”

“Hmm?”

Harry nuzzled close and kissed the man’s neck. “Thank you for taking such good care of me.”

“I try, beloved. Do you want your jeans off?”

“Mm … I can do it. Maybe.” He concentrated on the fabric, and they dematerialised from his legs, appearing in a heap again on the other side of the room.

Severus snorted. “Love, I think you put both legs on one side.”

“I’ll fix it in the morning.” He slid his hand into Severus’, curled in close, and fell into dreams.

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Harry paced the throne room of Malfoy manor, reclaimed as the Lord’s Manor, and fumed. How had Potter seen their ritual? He had taken every precaution—intense Occluding, the Seer’s orbs Madame Guiverre had assured him would keep anyone out of his head.

It was a shame he had already killed her to complete the ritual.

For the moment, however, he had a new problem to solve. His geis had proved useless now that all of wizarding Britain knew about it. He might gather one or two defiants by slips of the tongue, but not the droves he had been hoping for.

Damn it all to hell. Every time he came up with a plan, that Potter brat ruined it. And this time, he had gone too far. Mouldy-Wart indeed. When Harry found the imbeciles responsible for this renaming nonsense, they would wish for death.

He sat upon his throne and rubbed his temples. What to do, what to do? Gods, even now, the Potter brat might be seeing his plans, and there was little he could do to prevent it. Perhaps another ritual?

No. He would not have the energy to spare for another ritual for many weeks. But, in the meantime, he did have a prisoner, did he not? Perhaps the night would not be a total loss after all.

“Runcorn! Fetch me Twycross, if he is still living. I have some anger I must work out.”

A balding man stuck his head in the door. “Yes’ sir. Be back in a mo’.”

Runcorn vanished, and Harry began preparing his finest instruments while he waited for the man to return. He mustn’t forget his manners, after all. Only the best for his … guests.
Severus woke to find Harry thrashing beside him for the second time that evening. Damn it, another vision? He had just come out of one. Gods. Would they ever be allowed a night of rest?

Severus sat and took Harry’s hands so he couldn’t scratch himself again. This time, Harry wasn’t going to suffer, not if Severus could help it. He laid the young mage flat on his back and froze him in place. With another spell, he pried Harry’s eyelids apart, and a third spell kept them wet while he was unable to blink.

“Not this time, love,” Severus whispered. “I won’t let you suffer.”

He fixed his eyes upon Harry’s, opened the telepathic channel between them as wide as he could, and dove straight into his lover’s mind.

Severus landed in a room with gilded chandeliers, white walls, and a blood red carpet. Ah. The throne room at Malfoy Manor. Well, at least he knew his way around the place, then. Now, he only had to find Harry and pull him out of his nightmares.

Without moving lest he draw attention to himself, Severus looked around and tried to get his bearings. Something red was vibrating on the dais—a pulsing red light, most likely Riddle’s mental presence. As the red light didn’t appeared to have noticed him, Severus sidestepped it and searched for his love, knowing he would be somewhere nearby.

He moved a little closer and shuddered. Harry—well, a bright white glow he thought was Harry—was on the opposite side of the red light. Severus would have to move all the way around the room and risk being observed before he could pull the mage out.

For a moment, he wondered if it was too dangerous, then he noticed what Riddle was laying out on the table. Thumbscrews, knives, iron pokers … shite. Someone—probably what was left of Twycross—was about to be tortured to death.

Gods, no. He couldn’t abandon Harry to that.

Severus crouched and moved around the red glow, frowning when his arms looked nothing like arms but rather like shadows of them. How strange. Well, perhaps it was only the way he looked in Harry’s mind.

With a shake of his head, he worked his way around the edges of the area, trying to get behind Harry’s light. His heart pounded with every step, a timpani chorus in his ears as he tiptoed closer. He had no idea what would happen if Riddle noticed him there, but suspected it would not be good, neither for him nor his Harry.

When he was a few steps away, the red glow focused into a pair of eyes, searching, scanning, and Severus’ stomach turned to stone. Shite. Riddle had sensed him, somehow. Worse, he had nowhere to hide. Shaking and praying he hadn’t killed himself and his lover, he pressed back into the wall and tried to make himself as small as possible.

The wall shifted. Or perhaps he shifted through it. Either way, he felt cold for an instant, as if passing through ice, and when he opened his eyes again, he was in a flower-filled meadow. Harry’s broomstick lay abandoned in the middle of it.

Perhaps this was what Harry had been dreaming of before Riddle took over his mind.
Fuck. What had even happened? Severus had never heard of shifting through dreams like this, not in telepathy. Could it be one of Harry’s million-and-one undiscovered gifts?

Or was it one of his own?

Severus shook himself. There was no time for this. He had to get Harry out before Riddle hurt him.

With a deep breath, he turned to the wall he had just passed through. He couldn’t see it, but he could sense it. It shimmered like a heat mirage, and Severus again felt that coldness when he passed his shadowy hand through it.

Well, he had at least been able to shift his hand through. Now for the rest of him.

With a deep breath, he stepped forwards, half-expecting the wall to solidify and block him out, but he slipped through with ease.

On the other side, the eyes had gone and only the red and white glows remained. Thank Merlin.

Severus gathered his courage and crept up behind the white light. As he came close, he needed to squint to protect his eyes, and when he did, the outline revealed Harry’s trembling form.

Harry was terrified.

The door opened, and with a silent gasp, Severus stepped into the white light and grabbed Harry’s hand.

Harry screamed, and the next moment, Severus opened his eyes on the other side of the mage’s body. Shite! Harry had tossed him out.

And he was still screaming.

“Why can’t I move? What the hell is wrong with my eyes? Why won’t they close?”

Severus let slip a sigh and released the spells. “Ssh, it should be safe now.”

Harry blinked and rubbed his face. “Merlin, that was terrifying. Did you do that?”

“Yes. Please forgive me. I was trying to pull you out of your vision using telepathy. Did it work?”

Harry frowned. “Not sure. Riddle was about to torture Twycross to death, though, so I’m glad you pulled me out when you did.” He shuddered. “I reckon we should tell Kingsley.”

Severus sat against the headboard and beckoned Harry into his arms. “Come. Sit in my lap and let me hold you. I will tell Kingsley of our new troubles, though I imagine he will not thank me for waking him again.”

Harry sniffled and crawled into Severus’ lap. “I’m sorry. I … I don’t want to … no one else should have to die for me. There isn’t … we can’t save him, can we?”

“I am afraid not. He is in the middle of Malfoy Manor, protected by wards and an unknown number of Death Eaters. Even with your powers, as an untrained fighter, you would not be able to fend them off for long. We would only be throwing away our lives—and the entire war—into the bargain.”

Harry whimpered and buried his face in Severus’ neck. “S-sorry. So sorry.”

Severus cradled Harry close. “Ssh. Just rest, beloved. The night has been too hard for you. I am
going to give you a bit of Dreamless Sleep before we return to bed in hopes it will hold the visions away for a few hours, at least.”

“Yeah.” Harry sniffled and kissed Severus’ neck. “Thank you. I was really afraid I was going to be tortured with him.”

“Never again, not if I can help it.” Severus kissed Harry’s hair and Summoned his wand.

“Verus? Before you tell King about this, I did learn a couple of things from my vision. Riddle is definitely Occluding and he did some kind of ritual to keep me out. Why did I still see it?”

Severus swallowed hard and refused to think of the scar on Harry’s forehead, of the link that might exist.

*No.* It could not be a horcrux.

He could not bear to lose his Harry.

“You are the Seventh Day Seer, love. Perhaps he cannot block you out any longer now that your powers have come to the fore.”

“Maybe.”

Severus’ hand trembled, and, as he struggled to cast his Patronus, he found his happiness had faltered. What did any of it matter if Harry would only be taken from him anyway? Harry was the only real joy he had.

“Severus? Are you okay, love?”

“I … I am afraid.”

Harry turned his head up and kissed the man’s ear. “Ssh. It’s all right. I’m here. I’m with you. And I love you.”

Severus clutched him close. “I do not want to lose you. I cannot lose you.”

“Severus? What is it?”

Severus sighed into Harry’s hair. “I cannot. It is unfair to you.”

“Please, please tell me, Severus.”

Severus winced. He could deny Harry nothing.

“I am … afraid of what this link might mean, Harry. Why you see visions of him still. Dumbledore said … he said something terrible, and a part of me is afraid it is true, despite knowing what a lying bastard he is.” He curled Harry closer. “I cannot bear to lose you.”

Harry sat and cupped Severus’ face. “I’ll tell Kingsley about Twycross, okay? Then you and I are going to lie here and talk about what has you so terrified.”

“But … but you are already so tired. And I … I am not sure if it is true. I do not have enough evidence to be sure. I … I do not want to frighten you, Harry.”

“Verus, if it’s bad enough that you can’t conjure your Patronus, then I need to know.”
“I … I suppose.”

“Ssh. It’s going to be okay. Just let me talk to Kingsley, all right?”

Severus nodded and watched as Harry called his stag and sent it galloping away with their message.

Gods, he hated himself. He had sworn not two days before to keep it secret until he knew for certain, but at the first sign of trouble, his weakness had shown through, and Harry had realised he was hiding the truth.

“I am sorry, love,” he whispered, too quiet for Harry to hear. “I have failed you.”

Harry lay back and tugged Severus down to lay beside him, tucked into the crook of the mage’s arm.

“Now,” Harry said in a soft voice, “lie down with your head on my chest, so you can hear my heartbeat, and tell me what you’re afraid of, love.”

Severus obeyed, and some of the zinging-sharp pain of terror left him with the steady thump of Harry’s pulse in his ear. He hooked his longer legs over Harry’s and slipped a hand under the mage’s tee across his belly, needing to feel Harry’s skin then. To know his love was still whole, still alive.

“I’m here, Severus.” Harry’s hand slipped through the older man’s hair. “Now, tell me what you’re so afraid of.”

Severus petted the hair on his Harry’s belly and sighed. “I … I have tried to keep it quiet. Not because I do not trust you, but because I did not want you to be afraid. It was … the reason all of this happened, actually. What I meant to tell you during my torture, but could not.”

Harry stroked his hair and held the man’s shoulders. “Well, you can tell me now.”

“I … will try. You see, at the beginning of your sixth year, Dumbledore took me aside and told me that … that he believed you would have to die in the final battle with Riddle.”

“You mean he wants me to die in the final battle so he can have a clear shot at running Britain.”

Severus nodded and held Harry closer. “But the issue is, Harry, he told me that … that you would have to die because … he believed your scar is a h-horcrux. And I do not know any longer he is lying about this or not.”

Harry gasped and would have jerked up if Severus’ weight hadn’t been holding him down.

“You’re not bloody serious. No. It can’t be … can it?”

Severus closed his eyes and buried his face into Harry’s chest. “I … I do not know. But the fact that Riddle cannot block you out of his mind is troubling.”

Harry trembled all over and tears leaked from the corners of his eyes. “Oh gods. Severus, I, does that mean I really have to die? And shite! You’re soul-bound to me, so if I die …”

“Then I will die as well.” Severus swallowed a sob and wrapped his arm around Harry’s waist, holding him tight. “If you die, I would not want to live without you. You have been the sole light in my life for … for twenty-five years. And a brighter light than Lily ever was.”

Harry turned into Severus and brought the man up into his arms. “I’m not sure Mum was ever much of a light to you either if she could just abandon you like that.” His foot slid between Severus’ calves and caressed him, the tender gesture easing some of the older man’s blinding grief and terror.
“All the more reason to fear losing you. I do not want this life if you are not in it.”

Harry sniffled. “D-don’t. Don’t talk about dying like that, please. I love you.”

“And I cannot endure without that love—not now that I know how beautiful it is.”

Harry kissed Severus softly, tears running down his face. “No. I can’t … it would be one thing if it was just me, but I can’t die knowing I’ll take you with me.” He jerked a hand across his eyes and choked back a sob. “No. I won’t accept it. There must be another way, Verus. Even if it is a horcrux, I’m a mage, aren’t I? What good are the powers of Merlin if I can’t destroy a horcrux inside me without killing myself?”

Severus gasped and leaned back, careless of his own tears. “Dear Merlin, I did not even consider that. Your power—perhaps there is another way!” He remembered his resolve from the day before and gathered Harry into his arms. “And even if there is not, I will make a way. I will begin researching potions, love. Perhaps with a primer to separate his soul shard from the whole of yours, we can at least make it a safer process for you to remove it.”

“Y-yeah. That might work. Or maybe when I get a better handle on my mage sight and stuff, I’ll be able to see what I’m doing and then I could remove it without killing myself.”

The tight pain in Severus’ chest began to unwind. “Oh, Harry! I think … I believe that may be our answer. With the amount of sheer power in you in addition to your mage sight—oh, beloved! I think you have found the way. At least, I have hope it will work. Perhaps while you are training your mage sight, I can begin a course of potions to help separate the foreign soul fibres.”

He buried his face in Harry’s hair and pressed his lover close, reveling in the feel of his warmth, his breath on Severus’ ear. “I love you, Harry. I love you with every part of my being, and I refuse to let you go. If this does not work, we will abandon the process and keep trying. You are mine, and that bastard cannot have you.”

Harry sniffled and hugged Severus tight. “I’m scared, Verus.”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “I know. So am I. But we shall find a way, love. I promise.”

“Y-yeah.” Harry turned his face into Severus’ throat. “Maybe … could you help me forget for a little while?”

Severus coughed. “Now? It is nearly dawn and we have hardly slept.”

Harry blushed and rubbed up the back of his hair. “Well, yeah. We need to relax before we can sleep again, don’t you think?”

Severus sighed, then traced his tongue along Harry’s throat and made the younger man shiver.

“If that is what you want, I will try.”

Harry jerked back with a little cry. “No! Don’t … not if you don’t … it’s not right. I don’t want you to force yourself to ….” He jerked a hand across his eyes and turned to his other side. “L-let’s just go to sleep, okay?”

“Harry?” Severus scooted close and wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist. “Beloved, I am not forcing myself. You are lovely. It is only that I am exhausted and I do not know if I can muster the energy.”
Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ and sighed. “M’sorry. I keep thinking that you could do so much better and I’m scared.”

“Better? There is no one better, not for me. Even if scores of men—or women—prostrated themselves at my feet, I would only ever see you.” Severus kissed Harry’s earlobe and murmured against him. “Do you not understand what you have done for me?”

Harry sniffled and turned on his back. “I … I don’t know what you mean. All I’ve ever done—well, at least since you were tortured—is love you.”

Severus smiled and kissed Harry with warmth and passion. “Yes. You loved me, when no one else did. No one besides my Prince relatives had ever cared about me, but you loved me. And your love is the greatest, most wondrous thing that has ever happened to me.”

He snuggled Harry close and kissed his cheek. “You are the only one for me. You always will be, my beloved.”

“Same here.” Harry smiled and turned into his arms. “I reckon if you’re tired, we could just rest for now. D’you have any potion here?”

Severus kissed him tenderly. “I do not mind taking care of you, Harry.”

“Um, no. Not with your past. I’d be too afraid you’d feel like … before if you weren’t well enough for me to reciprocate.”

Severus’ breath caught. “Truly? I … I have never been treated with such consideration before.”

Pain and anger filled Harry’s eyes. “Gods. Those shiteheads.” He sighed and kissed Severus on the mouth. “I love you, Verus. I’ll always treat you with consideration if I can help it. But do you have that potion, love? I really don’t want another vision, especially if it’s ….”

Severus understood. Harry didn’t want to see an old man being tortured to death for no reason, didn’t want to feel it.

Severus didn’t want him to endure it, either.

He raised his hand and summoned a potion from their medicine cupboard into his open palm. Harry sighed at the sight of the no doubt familiar dark purple phial and took it from Severus.

“How much?”

Severus turned to the clock. It was nearing six. “Two sips. We can afford to rise a little later this morning. Only do not be worried if I wake before you. If I am not here, I will be either helping Bindy with breakfast or watching over Seth.”

“All right, though I’ll wager Bindy will tie you up before she lets you anywhere near her cooking pots.”

Severus chuckled. “Perhaps. At any rate, take that potion and try to rest.”

Harry obeyed and slumped into Severus the moment he swallowed the second sip. Severus pried the potion from his lax hand before he fell completely asleep and dropped it.

“G’night, Sev’rus.”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and helped him into a more comfortable position, then took one sip
of the potion himself, closing it with the last of his strength.

“Goodnight, my love.”

He fell asleep wrapped in Harry’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

Summary of the scene with Seth: Gabblebrook wanted Seth to get to Harry. Seth overheard Severus and Harry getting busy, and he got scared. Severus helps him through it. They assign him a new elf to help him feel safer.
Harry woke alone and figured Severus had gone to help with breakfast. He dragged himself out of bed and into the shower, and felt much better for it.

As he dressed, he wondered what retaliation Riddle might be working on this time. The slimy bastard couldn’t attack—not with his power levels so low—but he could scheme. He could interfere at the Ministry. Or with the people directly.

Well, at least Harry had no worries about him interfering at the Prophet. The bastards couldn’t even get through the door.

He allowed himself a smug smile and considered floo-calling his accounts manager at Gringotts to ask about warding the place, but no. That would require more finesse than Harry possessed. He’d have to ask Severus or Remus to handle it, once Remus was back in the country.

Remus. Shite. They still hadn’t owled him. With all the drama, it had slipped Harry’s mind.

“Damn it.”

Harry Summoned a piece of parchment and a biro and made his way down to the dining room—really just a screened off portion of the big main room. They would have to find builders if they wanted to put in new walls, but for the moment, Harry found he liked the deep blue and gold screens with images of birds on them.

When he came into the dining room, Severus and Seth were smirking over the morning paper and—Merlin, were those Belgian waffles? With strawberries and chocolate chips and whipped cream and all the other treats Harry so loved?

He tucked the parchment and biro in his pocket. Remus could wait until after breakfast.

“Wow,” he said with a grin. “This looks great, Bindy!”

The house elf poked her head out from behind a hovering stack of pots and pans. “You is sleeping in late, Master Harry. Best to eat it soon before it gets cold.”

“Right.” Harry sat beside Severus and started piling waffles and toppings on his plate. “Morning, love, Seth. Did you get any sleep after the broadcast?”
Severus looked over the edge of his paper. “I slept well enough considering I took the same potion you did.”

Seth blushed and gave him a forced smile. “Erm, I slept fine.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “You do know I invented that trick? It’s not going to work. You didn’t have my visions, did you?”

Seth shook his head. “Not since I was painted, thank Merlin. I don’t think I could have borne that and ….” He looked at Harry’s breakfast and gave him a wan smile. “And everything.”

Harry would have to thank the boy for waiting to go into detail until after he had eaten. He took a bite of his waffles and nearly melted through the chair at the sweet, melting goodness. “Oh my gods, that’s wonderful.”

Severus nodded and gave him a wry smile. “I am afraid my skills in the kitchen do not measure up to Bindy’s. Not at all.”

“No, nor mine.” He popped another bite in and groaned.

Seth’s face went even redder and he turned away.

Harry frowned and swallowed. “Okay, what’s the matter, Seth? What happened?”

Severus sighed and laid his paper aside. “Harry, we forgot to apply a silencing charm last night.”

Harry choked on his tea. “You mean … he heard us? Wait, did everyone hear us?”

Bindy called, “We elves be sleeping at night. We’s not usually be hearing Masters then unless they need us. We heard you’s get up and run about, though.”

“Well, there’s that at least.” He hid his face into his hands. “Gods, I’m so embarrassed. And ….” He pulled away from his hands, horror washing his embarrassment away. “Oh shite, Seth, I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

Severus ran his fingers through Harry’s hair. “All is well, Harry. I helped him to cope with it. Though we should apply a one-way silencer on that room permanently. Do you think you could alter the traditional spell so that it would allow us to be heard if we were in danger or needed help?”

Harry rubbed his lip. “Maybe. I can certainly try, though I’m not entirely sure how we’ll test it.”

“I may be able to fool the magic through manipulating my emotions. I will try, at any rate.”

Harry nodded. “We’ll do it as soon as we can.” He tapped the paper. “In the meantime, how’d they do?”

Severus chuckled and motioned to his breakfast. “Eat, then you can see for yourself.”

“I can do both.”

“I have not finished with it, Harry, and I do not want sticky spots all over it.”

Harry pouted. “Humph. Read it to me then? We don’t have a lot of time.”

“True enough.” Severus unfolded the paper and turned to the first page. Harry tilted his head to see the front and read the headline.
A picture of Severus greeted him from the front page, a younger Severus, about the age he was now, with a stern but not cruel expression. Harry smiled at the picture, and the Severus in the photo blushed and gave him a discreet wave.

“Oh, that’s adorable,” Harry said with a grin.

“Say that again and you will lose a limb,” Severus said without a hint of irony.

Harry decided he didn’t want to test his luck. Instead he made sure his hand was free of all sticky substances, coated his finger with a bit of pure magic shielding to protect the ink, and brushed a fingertip down the photo Severus’ cheek. The man’s eyes widened and he gave the real Severus an incredulous look.

Harry burst into laughter. “I take it he didn’t know?”

“Of course not. He is a photo. He doesn’t have the mental capacity of a portrait.”

Photo Severus gave himself a two-fingered salute and glided out of the frame. Severus rolled his eyes and turned the paper to read it.

Harry snorted. “I don’t think he appreciated that. But turn that again so I can read the headline? I might have been a bit distracted.”

“If I am to read it to you, Harry, it should be facing me.”

Harry pouted again, and Severus turned the paper with a sigh. Harry grinned and checked the top.

The True Story of Severus Snape: A Spy Forsaken

“Oh, that’s beautiful,” Harry said with a snort. “I’ll bet my Firebolt that Dumbledore is having kittens right about now.”

“I’ll take that bet, as Dumbledore is human and quite incapable of birthing anything.”

Seth chortled behind his hand. “Nice, Severus.”

Severus smirked.

Harry snorted and thought to mock-smack Severus, but remembered his fear of being hit just in time and laid his hand gently on the man’s arm instead. “You silly git! You know what I meant. What would you do with my broom anyway? I’ve never seen you fly except for that one match you refereed all those years back. Well, and the time you flew from the tower, but you didn’t exactly need a broom then.”

Severus raised an eyebrow and sipped his coffee. “I rarely had opportunity before. As for your broom, I would simply sell it. I am in need of a bit of capital, now that I am out of work.”

“You’re not out of work. You’re working for me. Can’t have an army without stealth and potions masters, can you?”

Severus’ cheeks pinked and he lowered the paper. “I don’t want favouritism.”

With the paper down, Harry noticed photo-Severus peeking around a tree, but pretended not to have seen anything.

He smiled and poured himself a new cup of tea. “Favouritism? Bah. It’s just good sense. You’re a
brilliant potions master, and you lied right to the Bald Menace’s face for twenty years without getting caught. There aren’t many capable of either feat.”

The photo Severus’ jaw dropped. Apparently he hadn’t gotten his Occlumency down yet at that age. That, or the skill didn’t apply to newspaper photos.

Severus’ ears coloured, and he gave Harry a shy smile. “In that case, I’ll have you know I’m quite expensive.”

Harry laughed. “That I don’t doubt. You’ll bleed me, but it’ll be worth it.” He glanced at the photo. “I love you, Severus. Everything I have is yours.”

The photo’s eyes filled, and the man inside it jerked away. Harry’s heart ached for him, whether he was only a photo or not.

“I … I wish you’d known love, Severus. I feel bad that you went so long without it.”

Severus frowned and followed Harry’s gaze. “Oh, tosh. Harry, he’ll forget all of this in half a moment.”

“But for that moment, he’s in pain. I can’t stand to see you in pain.”

Severus sighed. “Finish your breakfast, love. We do not have time to dawdle.”

“Well, no, but …” Before Harry took his fork again, he touched a gentle fingertip to the photo Severus’ hair, watching the photo’s eyes widen and fill again. “He still remembers it.”

Severus frowned and watched his photo self. “So I see.”

Harry brushed down the photo’s hair and cheek. “It’s okay, Severus. One day, you’ll be loved. Cherished above anyone else.” He pressed his fingertip to his mouth and then to the photo’s parted lips. “He’s—you’re my entire world. So, you won’t always be alone.”

The real Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders, and the photo Severus closed his eyes and kissed Harry’s fingertip.

Severus scowled. “I never imagined I would be jealous of myself.”

Harry laughed, but his mirth faded as photo-Severus’ eyes went glassy and vacant. “Oh. He’s forgetting.”

“So it appears.” Severus’ voice echoed with sorrow.

Photo-Severus shook himself and looked around like he didn’t know where he was or why his own face was staring at him with such pain.

Harry hugged his waist and whispered, “So that’s what it’s like for them, huh?”

Severus blinked hard and sat back in his chair. “Yes. I … it seems a harsh existence.”

“Yeah.” Harry rubbed his eyes and gave Severus a sad smile. “Well, at least he doesn’t remember it.” He returned to his breakfast, though with less enthusiasm than earlier. “Now, do settle in and read me that fine piece of work.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “You read it already—you edited it.”
“I haven’t heard it in that sexy Snape voice, now have I?”

Severus blushed and gave him a shy smile, and Harry didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the shocked expression on photo-Severus’ face. He settled for a sigh and motioned to Severus to read on.

“Right. ‘Dear beloved readers of ‘The Daily Prophet,’ it has come to our attention that the story we published on Friday last about Professor Severus Tobias Snape is false. Professor Snape was a spy, but for the Order of the Phoenix, not You-Know-Who. He was discovered last June and ....’”

Minerva sipped her morning tea as she read her paper. The article about Severus had relieved her. It seemed the snarky spy still had friends somewhere, thank Merlin, and one had seen fit to make the truth about him known. Someone was still looking out for her wayward friend.

Considering the letter she had yesterday evening, she had a fair idea who.

Recalling what Severus had said about Albus in his postscript, she observed the man as he strolled in, late as usual, and claimed his seat at the head of the table.

The man chatted with Filius and Aurora Sinistra a bit—the poor woman looked haggard, with dark circles under her eyes and her normally sleek black hair frazzled. Minerva wouldn’t wish the Slytherin headship on her worst enemy, let alone the sweet, shy astronomy teacher. Severus had the presence to handle a bunch of ambitious, cunning teens, but Aurora would come out of the year flattened like a pancake under the force of the Slytherins’ rebellion.

Judging by her appearance, Aurora knew it, too.

Albus stopped talking—finally—and went about making his breakfast. With her heart thumping into her ribs, Minerva pretended to read her paper but truly watched Albus out of the corner of her eye. He took his time getting to the Prophet, choosing instead to nibble on scones heaped with butter and jam.

How he had survived nearly to his bicentennial eating like that, Minerva would never understand.

After a plate or three of the tooth-rooting confections, he finally put down his sweets and opened the paper, sipping tea as he settled in.

Three seconds later, he spat his tea all over Filius’ head.

“I say, Albus,” the charms teacher said. “I’ve already had my shower today.” He dabbed at his scalp with a napkin and polished it until it gleamed. “Was that really necessary? There was nothing so shocking in the Prophet today. Only someone cleared Severus, but that’s good news. Nothing to spray me over.”

Albus cleared his throat and sputtered as if he had choked on his tea, but Minerva had seen the gleam of fury in his eyes, however brief.

“Forgive me,” Albus said and banished the mess. “Had a bit of scone stuck in my throat, you know. Needed a bit more jam, I suppose.”
Filius chuckled and accepted this explanation without question, but the tabby in Minerva smelled a lie.

“So. He is quite displeased that someone cleared Severus’ name. How … interesting.’

She folded her paper and returned to her breakfast, though she couldn’t have said what she ate afterward. Her mind was too busy sorting through all she had learned recently to pay any attention to what went into her mouth.

What would Potter and Severus have to say about this?

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After breakfast, Severus reluctantly trudged upstairs after Harry, his photo and a spare picture frame in tow. Harry had refused to do anything else until he had cut out the picture, framed it, and set it on their bedroom table.

“You do realise,” said Severus with a teasing smile, “that every time we make love, he will look at us like we have lost the plot?”

As if on cue, the photo stared at Severus with bug eyes and his mouth wide open.

Severus scowled. “I do not make that expression.”

Photo Severus closed his mouth and rolled his eyes.

“Well, he’s got that one down,” said Harry with a grin.

“Oh, do shut up.”

Harry laughed and slipped his arm through Severus’. “Come on. He’s all settled, so let’s get to work on training.” He frowned. “Um, what first?”

“Let us try Occlumency. It may help with the visions, at least in part.”

Harry nodded and motioned to the bed. “Can we do it here?”

“No. You will only fall asleep.” Severus conjured a wide gym cushion on the floor and motioned to the mat. “Kneel for me. I do not want to hurt you this time.”

Harry obeyed, and once he was seated, Severus led Harry through his first Occlumency lesson with a willing, gentle teacher. To Severus’ surprise and relief, Harry did well once the older man had explained the practise of clearing his mind. After some practice and discussion, they discovered that Harry’s problems came down to his impulsive nature. Emotions ruled Harry, rather than the other way around, but once Severus explained the process of meditation and directing his energy flow to dampening emotional channels, Harry’s wild thoughts soon quieted.

He hadn’t learned to block yet, but it was an auspicious start. At least Dumbledore or Voldemort wouldn’t be able to read his surface thoughts like the morning Prophet, though if they really probed Harry, they would break through.

Still, it was enough for the time being.
Severus ended the lesson at Harry’s first sign of a headache, gave the young man a potion to clear it, and then set in to training him in physical combat.

By the time they came down to rest while Bindy prepared lunch, both men were winded and in great need of a snack. Seth looked at them with a bit of envy, and Severus wished the boy could go for a fly.

He tapped his chin in thought. Maybe he could.

“Harry, do you think you could add the ability to feel the environment to Seth’s enchantment?”

Harry blinked. “You mean like the air and the heat from the fire and such?”

“Yes, exactly. From whatever room he is in, or if he is outside.”

“That might be problematic in winter.”

Severus frowned. “Well, perhaps we could conjure a coat for him. Or Thomas could add it in to his painting.”

Seth, who was hovering in a chair across the table, gave Severus a bemused look with eyes full of tentative hope. “S-Severus? Why are you asking this?”

“I thought you might miss flying.”

Seth’s eyes filled. “Gods, yes.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “Oh. Well, I can’t really give you a broom or a place to fly inside your painting, mate, but I think I can fix it so you can feel the wind in your face at least. Maybe we could go for a fly together soon. Though I’ll have to figure out how to carry you.”

“I can set his levitation charm to follow you, Harry,” said Severus with a smile. “So he could fly on his own, in a way.”

“Oh, Severus!” Seth motioned him close, and by now, Severus recognised the gesture as a wish for him to press his cheek against the canvas so Seth could kiss it.

“Thank you, gods, thank you,” Seth half-shouted, excitement colouring his features. “That’s amazing! Harry, can you do it?”

He shrugged. “I can certainly try. It might help if you tried to help me from within.”

Seth’s face fell. “But I … I don’t have a wand in here.”

“I know. But even your intent would help.”

Seth nodded and squared his shoulders. “Okay. I’ll give it my best shot. Ready?”

“Yeah. Try it now.” Harry put his hand to the canvas, and a rush of warm air swirled around both painting and mage.

Seth’s hair moved.

“Oh,” the boy breathed. “Oh, Merlin. Harry, make a flame or something. A real flame, not those funny ones Hermione does.”
Harry nodded and conjured a lit candle, holding it as close to the canvas as he dared. “Can you feel it?”

Seth gave him a bright grin. “It’s warm! Merlin, the whole dining room is warm. And I can even smell her sandwiches.” He rubbed his belly with a wry smile. “Shame I’m never hungry like this. But oh, it’s wonderful. I feel like … I’m not entirely trapped in this world any longer.”

“Good,” said Harry with a smile. “That was the point.” He flopped down into his chair with a groan. “Well, now I need a nap.”

Severus chuckled and stroked Harry’s hair. “We will rest a little after lunch.”

“Sounds good.”

“Yes. And now that our plans are settled and Seth is taken care of ….” Severus tapped the young man’s chest. “What is that parchment in your pocket, Harry? I have been wondering about it all morning.”

Harry frowned and pulled it out. “Parchment? Oh! Shite, I forgot again.” He sighed and laid the parchment on the table, smoothing out its curls. “We still haven’t owled Remus.”

“Ah. Well, then get to it.”

With a nod, Harry took a biro out of his pocket and set to writing. Severus watched over Harry’s shoulder and levitated Seth close so he could see as well.

Remus,

Don’t freak out about the new owl—she’s mine. Well, ours—yours, mine, and Severus’. Um, it’s a long story that I can’t go into in too much detail in a letter, but I’ll tell you what I can.

First off, um, Severus and I are … we’re … damn it. I wish I could tell you everything, but it’s just too dangerous. There are eyes everywhere. All I can say is that after seeing through his eyes, I can’t find it in me to hate him any longer. At all. And he feels the same way.

And yes, he’s been treating me well. He’s been wonderful, actually.

Remus, we’ve run into a massive problem, though, and we need you to come home as soon as possible. Don’t tell Dumbledore about it either. And before you protest, think about my childhood, Remus. Ask yourself what that man has actually done to earn your trust.

Anyway, just come as soon as you can, okay? And for gods’ sake, please don’t tell Dumbledore. It’s really, really important.

Oh, and before I forget, we found a portrait of my younger self in the former president’s office at the Prophet. I had her arrested—and not just for stealing my image—so I’m in control of the Prophet now, and my painting is staying with me.

He’s alive, Remus. We don’t understand why, but he’s alive. He’s chosen the name ‘Seth’ so we don’t get confused with two Harrys all the time. I’ve taken him in as a
younger brother. And, though I know you’re going to make that frowning face you do when you don’t believe me, Severus thinks of him as a son.

Anyway, I know Seth misses you—so do I—so come home soon.

Love (and most likely a kiss-my-arse from the latter),

Harry, Seth, and Severus

“Inaccurate,” said Severus with a shudder. “I do not want the wolf anywhere near my arse.”

Harry sighed and rolled up his letter. “At least call him by his surname, please. For me.”

Severus grumbled, but he knew the battle was already lost. He would never forget that Lupin had stood aside and let him be assaulted, would never be able to accept him fully, but he could call the wolf by his name if it made Harry happy.

“Well, come then,” he said with a sigh. “Let us send that off. We still have much to do today.”

“Yeah.” Harry stood and moved to the door, letter in hand, but as he opened it, an owl Severus did not recognise flew in.

“Oh, hello, Totoro.” Harry motioned the owl into the kitchen and returned the biro and letter to his pocket.

The owl landed on the kitchen table and held out his leg for Harry, showing a Muggle-style envelope tied to his ankle.

Harry grinned. “I see you’ve Dean’s reply. Brilliant.”

Seth pressed himself against the canvas edge trying to see. “What does it say? Will he do it?”

“Keep your smalls on,” Harry said with a wry laugh. “I just need to make sure there are no spells on the letter or owl first. Is that okay, Totoro?”

The owl gave him a bemused sort of stare, then bobbed his head.

Harry quickly cleared the owl and nodded. “Thanks. If you were human, I’d just ask you a question, but as you can’t talk back to me, I’ve no choice but to check you with my wand. Now, let me see this letter of mine. Is he waiting for a reply?”

Totoro nodded.

“All right. Severus, come and sit with me, yeah?”

“Hmm.” Severus transformed one of their kitchen chairs into an armchair and pulled Harry into his lap. “Is that what you wanted?”

“Mm-hmm. Sure is.” He kissed Severus’ cheek and sighed. “I feel safest like this now. It’s silly, but this is my favourite place in the world.”

“It is mine as well.”

“Harry,” Seth whinged, bouncing from foot to foot. “The letter?”
“All right, all right.”

Harry levitated Seth’s portrait close and tore open the envelope. Severus watched the man’s expressions as he read, noting joy, a wistful kind of loneliness, laughter, and surprise. Curiosity made him lean closer. What had surprised Harry?

Harry laid the letter aside with a thoughtful frown. “Well, Dean’s glad to help, but he needs a safe place to work.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” said Seth with a sigh. “I know you two are doing your best, but I need someone I can really touch and hug.”

Harry shook his head. “We still have to figure out how to animate him, but even when we do manage it, give Little Sev a bit of time to warm up to you before you start hugging him, Seth. He might panic and close himself off otherwise.”

Seth nodded, acknowledging the warning, but his smile didn’t fade.

Harry frowned at Seth for a moment, no doubt worried about everything that could go wrong and crush Seth’s sensitive, still-healing heart. Severus worried over the obstacles, too.

“Well, that’s one problem solved,” said Harry with a sigh, “but where do we put Dean while he’s working, Verus? Portraits take a long time to make—he’ll probably be working on it until school starts again. I’d offer him the Burrow, but it’s not really my house and no one can get any work done there anyway. Much too chaotic, especially during the summer hols. Can we put him up here?”

“Not in our house,” said Severus. “I wouldn’t be able to help touching you, and Thomas isn’t a complete dunderhead. He would know the truth of us before the day was out.”

Harry sat back, eyes scanning the letter. “Severus, I wonder if we could bring Dean into the fold. This last paragraph makes me think he’s lost trust in Dumbledore, and he’s not grown up with the legends about mages and the like. He’d think my power was just me being me, as my luck goes. What’s more, Dean’s loyal, brave, and intelligent. He doesn’t just rush into battle without a thought like most of us Gryffindors. I think he’d give you a chance, too, once you show him how much you’ve changed.”

Severus’ cheeks flamed. “I am glad you think I’ve changed. I have tried.”

Harry kissed him lightly. “You’ve done well, love. I hardly recognise the irascible man you used to be in the kind person you are today.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You know the word ‘irascible?’”

“I know the word ‘git,’ too.”

Severus laughed, but his mirth faded as he considered Harry’s views on Thomas. “Love, do you think it’s time to start bringing in our army?”

Harry met his eyes. “Armies are big. If we’re building one, then I reckon we’d best get started sooner rather than later, yeah?”

Severus nodded, rubbing his lip in thought. “What exactly did Thomas say that makes you think he has lost faith in Dumbledore?”

Harry scanned the letter until he found the paragraph. “He says: ‘I’m glad you’re shot of your mad
relatives, mate. I never understood why Dumbledore kept sending you there again and again. We all told him it wasn’t safe for you. Wards or no, your horrid uncle might still have done you in, if those scars on your back are anything to judge by. Whatever Dumbledore thought, Hogwarts was much safer than home for you, Harry. I just don’t understand how he could do it, knowing you’d be hurt.’"

Harry laid the letter down and scrubbed a hand across his eyes, lost in painful memories.

“He’s right,” said Seth with a sniffle. “I begged Dumbledore both years not to send me back. Ron did too, and Dean, and Neville, and every bloody Gryffindor who knew me, but he never cared, and I don’t think that stuff about the blood wards was real, either.”

Harry shook his head sadly. “It wasn’t, Seth. He just wanted us to grow up in hell so we’d be his good little weapon, then top ourselves when the war was over and we had no real purpose anymore. Well, if Snakeface or his minions didn’t kill us first.”

Terror surged through Severus. *Top himself?* He gripped Harry’s shoulders and turned him around so the young man had to look into Severus’ eyes.

“Don’t you dare, Harry. Don’t you *dare* leave me.”

Harry nuzzled Severus’ cheek and held him tight. “I won’t, love. You gave me hope. I’m not going to kill myself—that way Dumbledore gets what he wants, and I’ll bloody chop off my legs before I give that bastard anything he wants.”

Severus stroked through Harry’s hair. “No chopping off your legs, either.”

Harry chuckled and wiped his face. “Of course not. I’d have a bit of trouble getting on my broom then, don’t you think? Hard to play quidditch with no legs.”

Seth laughed and winked at Harry. “We’d probably still catch the snitch.”

“Perhaps,” said a smirking Severus. “However, since with no legs, your arms would be steering the broom and holding you aloft, you would be forced to catch it like you did the first time.”

Harry snorted. “What, you mean almost choke to death on it? No *thank* you. How about we leave our legs attached and figure out how to foil Dumblefuck’s plans instead.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You know, you are an adult with a minor in the household. You really should try to watch your language around Seth.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “Severus, I know you’ve been in the boys’ dorms at Hogwarts. Harry has the mouth of a saint compared to that.”

“Nevertheless, we should at least try to set an example for you, love.” Severus’ chest panged with grief. “Merlin knows both of you have lacked positive role models.”

Harry smiled and kissed Severus softly. “You sound more like a father every day. It’s unbelievably sexy.”

Severus blinked. “That is … strange.”

Harry laughed and curled into Severus’ shoulder. “Yeah, maybe a bit.” His smile faded. “Verus, you know, I don’t understand why Dumbledore is doing all of this to start with. I mean, I get it that he wants Riddle and myself—and you—out of the picture, but why? I mean, well, we all know why he
wants Riddle gone. But the rest of us? And what’s his deal with Slytherins anyway?"

Severus sighed and rubbed his forehead. “That is a difficult question. The man is a master Occlumens, Harry. Even I cannot read his mind. All I can do is tell you what I surmise.”

“Well, you’ve been right in the thick of this for a long time, love. If anyone would know, it’s you.”

“Perhaps.” Severus drew Harry closer. “I think you are right about Riddle—mostly. Dumbledore most likely believes the man is too obvious about his death and destruction and finds him to be an annoyance. A hack, in his eyes. After all, not only does Riddle kill in broad daylight, but he boasts about what he plans to do for twenty minutes beforehand.”

Harry snorted. “You have no idea how many times that whole, ‘I’m going to kill you, Harry, and here’s exactly how I plan to do it’ speech has saved my life. He certainly makes it easier to get away.”

Seth chuckled. “It is a bit stupid of him, isn’t it?”

Severus gave them a wry smile. “It has saved my own life as well, but to answer your question, Dumbledore most likely thinks of Riddle as both a threat and a nuisance, and there is also the fact that he kills too many people to leave the wizarding population intact. After all, what good is ruling Britain if there are no citizens left to lord it over?”

“Ruling Britain?” Harry frowned and rubbed his chin. “You think that’s his goal?”

“Ultimately, yes. What is any self-fashioned lord’s goal but to rule?”

Harry picked at his jeans. “Well, I mean, that makes sense, but if he wants to rule, why did he turn down the Minister’s job? Wouldn’t he have been able to do more from that office than sequestered away in Hogwarts?”

Severus shrugged. “How much do you respect the Minister, Harry?”

“Er, not much. Well, Scrimgeour was better than Fudge, and now, knowing what he did for us, I respect him, but not while he was in office. And Fudge is a complete moron.”

“And most of Britain feels the same. With that kind of power comes intense scrutiny, and all but the best of men flounder. And he is not the best of men. His secrets would out in a week.”

“Okay,” said Harry and Seth together.

Severus smiled before he continued. “Now, consider the Order. Not only does Dumbledore have the luxury of keeping his secrets, but how much do they respect him? For that matter, how much does your average wizarding citizen?”

Harry winced. “They’d lay down their lives for him in a heartbeat. I see where you’re going with this. Damn. He can rule better from Hogwarts than he could in the Minister’s seat.”

“Exactly. Especially considering his role in the Wizengamot, he gets all the respect while leaving the Minister to deal with the irritating day-to-day jobs. It is a lord’s idea of paradise.”

“So basically, what you’re saying is that he wants me dead—and Riddle—because he doesn’t want competition?”

Severus gave him a sad smile. “Precisely.”
“Gods, the twisted, manipulative, manky fuc—”

Severus glared Harry’s tongue into submission.

“Er … manky muppet.”

“Indeed,” said Severus with a chuckle. “That is the best you can do without cursing?”

Harry stuck his tongue out at him. Severus kissed it, to the mage’s surprise.

“Well,” Harry said with a laugh. “I should do that more often.”

“Hmm. Not in front of Seth.”

“I’m all right,” said Seth, “but I’m also still confused. Okay, so Dumbledore wants to get rid of his competition. Well, that makes sense for us and for Riddle, but what about you, Severus? I don’t think your past would let you become a world leader, even if you are worthy of it, but he’s still trying to drive you to … the same place he wants me and Harry.”

Harry nodded and added, “And, while we’re at that, what’s his issue with Slytherins in general?”

Severus closed his eyes and sighed, sorrow weighing him down. “Seth, do you recall what your classmates and wizarding adults said about Slytherin before you were sorted?”

Seth frowned. “Yeah, but they’re obviously wrong. I mean, look at you.”

Severus gave him a wan smile and rubbed the boy’s hand. “Thank you.” He tipped his head back against the chair and stared at the ceiling. “You were told that every dark wizard who has ever been came from Slytherin, were you not?”

Harry and Seth looked at each other.

“Yeah,” said Harry with a shake of his head. “Hagrid said so on the trip to buy my school things. Obviously, it’s the same for Seth.”

“I heard it in her office, too,” said Seth. “Someone she interviewed said it.”

Severus nodded. “Such is the popular opinion. And it is not entirely untrue. Many of our dark wizards and witches were indeed Slytherin, but that is only because usually only Slytherins have drive enough to go so far. There have been dark wizards from all houses. In fact, as far as I know, Dumbledore was Ravenclaw.

“However, especially since the rise of Tom Riddle, that rumour has changed. From ‘most dark wizards come from Slytherin,’ it has become ‘all Slytherins are dark wizards.’ If the foul beast ruling Hogwarts actually believes that rumour, then he will also believe that ridding the world of Slytherin house will destroy a nest of dark lords and all his competition in one fell swoop.”

Harry’s eyes had gone killing-curse green. “So all of this, all the lies and manipulation—especially of you—it’s all because he believes you’re a supposed dark wizard waiting to take over his throne?”

Severus gave a low chuckle. “In the most technical terminology, I am a dark wizard. Most of the magic I use when I fight falls under that classification.” His chest ached with the grief of Dumbledore’s betrayal anew. “But that does not mean I want people to die. It does not mean I have any intent of hurting anyone who does not deserve it.”

“Well of course not,” said Seth with a frown. “You were ready to risk your own life to save
Hermione in an instant last night. You’re not evil, Severus. Not at all.”

Severus lowered his head and spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. “I could have been. If not for you, for both of you, this betrayal might well have driven me over the edge.”

Harry cupped Severus’ face and brought in into a soft, loving kiss. “I’ll never let you go down that path, my Verus. You’ll never have a reason to now.”

Severus traced a fingertip down Harry’s scar. “I hope I do not.”

Harry’s eyes filled with fear, and Severus took him into his arms.

“I swear to you, my love, even if … if the worst happens, I will remain firmly on your side … as long as I breathe.”

“Stop,” Harry said in a broken whisper. “Please. I can’t bear to think of … of d-dying.”

Seth cried, “Neither of you are going to die! No. I just found you. I’ll climb out of this painting and kill the bastard myself first.”

Severus pulled himself together and gave the portrait a wan chuckle. “Indeed.”

Though outwardly, he comforted Harry and Seth, inwardly, he watched the boy with the germ of an idea forming in his mind. Climb out of his painting. Was it possible? Seth certainly had life neither Harry nor himself understood. Was it possible that he could step out of that painting one day?

Perhaps, with Harry’s help, he just might.

Severus resolved to research it in secret. It would be unfair to get Seth’s hopes up when it mightn’t be possible, but oh Merlin, the idea of rescuing that boy from his prison was beautiful. The hope of it latched onto Severus and wouldn’t let go.

He would speak to Harry of it later. Not now, not where Seth could hear.

“Thank you, Seth,” Severus said with a smile. “I rather enjoy having such fierce protectors.”

Seth grinned. “Always will be.”

“Good. And now that we have discussed Dumbledore’s motives and position, I think we should wait a bit longer before we bring in your friends, Harry. Soon, but not today. Dumbledore needs to tarnish his image a bit more first. This article will have begun the process, at least with Minerva, or so I hope, and we have at least made the Weasleys think. Let us start with Minerva, get her support if possible, and go from there.”

Harry nodded and stood. “All right. I’ll reply to Dean. Do you think the owls will be home soon?”

Severus frowned. “They should have been already. I hope they are well.”


Seth was reading a novel from his bookshelf and wondering if Dean could also change out his books
for new ones when a sudden screech called his attention away from his story. White and black feather-balls came in through the owl-post window—sealed magically from the elements but not owls—and landed, shaking and wet on their perches.

“Hedwig! Odin!” He ran to the confines of his canvas and wished he could help his bedraggled owl. “I … Severus and Harry are still asleep, I think.”

“Hedwig, love,” came Harry’s voice from upstairs. “Is that you?”

Seth breathed a sigh. “Yeah, Harry. They’re home, but not in good shape.”

“Merlin!”

Harry raced down the stairs in a bathrobe and slippers and pelted into the study. A similarly clad Severus swept in behind him.

Harry gave his woebegone owl a commiserating look. “Oh no. I didn’t think it had rained today.”

The owls’ feathers puffed up in irritation.

Harry held his hands out. “Sorry, girl. Are you okay?”

Hedwig bobbed her head and pointed her beak at her chest. She made some kind of odd gesture Seth didn’t understand, but Harry must have. His eyes narrowed and he whipped out his wand.

“What did that meddling bastard do to you?”

She gave a relieved sort of hoot and cocked her head towards Harry’s wand.

“All right. I’ll scan you both, love. Just sit still.”

Seth watched lights of all different colours shoot from Harry’s wand and envelop both owls. The lights had barely touched their feathers before the shrieks began. Sirens and warnings of all types blared from the owls like ten of the Weasley’s Potterwatch sirens at once.

Harry cried out and cut off the scanner immediately.

“Dear Merlin,” Seth gasped out.

Harry came up panting and with that blazing emerald fury in his eyes. “Severus, there are too many spells. Some I don’t know how to combat. Can you clear them? Only leave the caster tag—I’ll clear that. After I use it to send whoever did this to our friends a nice little surprise.”

Severus frowned. “There can be no doubt who is responsible.” He looked to Odin. “Was it Dumbledore?”

Severus frowned. “There can be no doubt who is responsible.” He looked to Odin. “Was it Dumbledore?”

The owl gave him a solemn hoot and nodded.

“Bastard,” Harry hissed. “Verus, can you do it?”

Severus sighed. “Yes, but it will take more than one step if there are that many spells. I will be able to clear some via spell work of my own and chants, but the rest will require them to drink a potion. Odin will take it, I know, but will Hedwig?”

“She trusts you now, so I think so. Hedwig?”
“Right. I will cast the spell first, Harry, then you will need to send your … gift before I give them the potion. It will erase the caster tag. Just make sure you do not touch them until they have finished drinking it and the aura over them clears.”

Harry nodded and waved him on. “Have at it.”

Severus whipped out his wand and began a show of complex wandwork Seth had never seen the like of. Lights and sounds of all types emerged from Severus’ wand and hands, and Merlin, he was even chanting over them at the same time. *Gods,* the man had skill.

Judging by the fire in Harry’s eyes, Seth wasn’t the only one who appreciated it.

“They are as clean as I can make them without the potion,” Severus finally announced in a breathless voice. “*Gods. There were even spells interwoven in their core. How the bastard managed that in such a short time is beyond me.***

Harry frowned. “Well, they were there overnight. Maybe it’s in the wards.”

“Then why was Athena unaffected?”

“He might have set it only to work on our own owls. Merlin knows he’s aware of their existence.”

Odin let slip a shaky hoot, and Severus went to his owl with a deep frown on his face. The next instant, all the colour drained from his expression.

“Hurry and send your package, Harry. Odin is severely injured.” He darted out of the room, no doubt to retrieve healing supplies and his potions, and Harry’s eyes glowed again.

“He tried to kill you, didn’t he, Odin?”

The owl shivered and hooted, a low sound full of pain.

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m so sorry. We’ll never send you there again, okay? And Severus will get you fixed in just a moment. Just hang on. For this, I have an extra special present for the manky motherfu ___”

“Language, Harry!” The magically-amplified sound came from the basement and through two layers of stone walls.

Harry gaped. “Merlin, how did he do that?”

Seth snickered, but remembered Odin and shook his head. “Hurry it up, Harry.”

“Right.” Harry closed his eyes and went quiet. When he opened his eyes once more, they had gone a dull olive colour and he began chanting in a low, dark tone. Seth couldn’t quite make out the words, but he imagined Dumbledore would not enjoy whatever Harry had done.

The chant ended with a clap. As Harry’s palms met, the odd olive-green colour left his eyes and flashed between his hands for a split second. Severus came in the same moment bearing gauze and bottles of potion.

Severus frowned at the place where Harry had just completed his spell. “Was that what I think it was?”
Harry gave him a wicked grin. “I put a little ‘pox’ on him.”

Severus groaned and ran a sanitizing spell. “Do you have any idea how dangerous dragon pox is to young men?” He ran a scan on Harry and sighed. “You will be all right, but Merlin. Do not risk your own life for that bastard’s pain again!” He wrapped Harry into a hug and held him tight. “He is not worth it. Never worth you.”

Harry kissed Severus’ hair and soothed him. “Ssh. I was never in any danger. I wouldn’t have done something that might risk hurting the owls worse. But hurry and take care of Odin, Verus. He looks like he’s in a bad way.”

“Indeed he is.” Severus conjured a long drinking tray and poured in a smoking violet potion. “I know it looks frightening,” he said to the owls, “but it will not hurt you. Please drink it. Hurry.”

Hedwig shuddered at the potion, but she looked at her owlish friend—who was shaking and trying to drink the potion while in obvious pain—and set her beak to the liquid with a sigh. She shuddered again—most likely at the taste—but kept on drinking until Severus banished the tray and remaining potion, then set up a second with water for her and more potions for Odin.

A second scan pronounced both owls clear of foreign magic.

“They are clean now, Harry.” Severus rushed to his owl and began healing the poor bird with a gentle touch. “There now. Let us see this wing here. Dear Merlin! However did you fly like this?”

Odin hooted dolefully and slumped into Severus’ hands. Seth’s heart leapt into his throat. “Is he okay, Severus?”

“Yes, yes. I simply put him to sleep so I can heal him without causing him further pain. How is Hedwig, Harry?”

Harry looked up from his own examination. “Wet and shaken, but otherwise okay as far as I can tell. Does anything hurt, girl?”

She shook her head.


“Yes. Perhaps you might help me with the anti-dark magic chant?”

Harry frowned and went to Severus’ side. “That bad?”

“It appears to be resistant to usual healing techniques. I think I will need your powers.”

Seth and Hedwig watched on as the two men worked over the little black owl, and both breathed a sigh of relief when Harry slumped into Severus’ chest and muttered, “Fixed.”

Severus conjured a chair and set Harry in it, then ran shaking fingers over his owl. “Oh, he is healed. Thank you, Harry. I would not … not be the same without him.”

Harry looked at Hedwig and shivered. “I know what you mean. Dumbledore did it to demoralise you, didn’t he?”

“Most likely. Or he wanted our post.” Severus ran a shaking hand over his forehead. “If he managed to intercept that letter ….”

Hedwig let out a triumphant hoot and held out her leg, which, until that moment, had been hidden
under mounds of wet feathers. A rolled parchment was clutched tightly in her talons, a little torn and soggy, but still legible.

Harry took the letter from her with a frown. “Merlin. Did you have to fish this out of the lake?”

She gave an owlish sort of laugh and nodded. A bob of her head indicated he should look at Odin again.

“I believe I understand what happened.” Severus held out Odin’s leg, which still bore a bit of letter twine. “It appears as if Minerva originally sent the letter with Odin, but when Albus saw Odin with the letter, he attacked. The letter came loose and fell into the lake, and Hedwig, whom Albus may have not seen against the clouds, dove in after it before he could snatch it away.”

Harry grinned. “Great work, girl.” He frowned. “But how in Merlin’s name did you get away? And Odin?”

Hedwig made a low-pitched hoot and waved her wings in the air in odd, wobbling motions. Harry looked at her like she’d lost the plot, but to Seth, who, after all, still recalled the wonder of his youth, she looked a bit familiar.

“The giant squid helped you?”

Hedwig gave a chuckling hoot and nodded.

Harry scratched his head and gave Seth a wry look. “How in the world did you pull that out of your hat?”

Seth giggled. “We’re real wizards, Harry. We don’t pull things out of hats.” His laughter faded. “Well, you are.”

Severus kissed Seth’s forehead and rubbed his hair. “You still have magic. You helped Harry give you an environment, did you not?”

Seth gave him a hesitant smile. “Yeah. I, I guess I did.” His eyes flickered to the letter, and a sort of desperate hope built up in his chest. “Is it too wet to read?”

Harry frowned and gave the letter to Severus. “I think you should do it, love, but Seth and I will be right here with you.”

Severus’ hands shook as he took the letter. “As you wish.”

Severus trembled and tried not to hyperventilate as he opened Minerva’s letter, Seth perched close so the older man could feel the pressure of his hands and Harry sitting astride Severus’ lap. With a shaky sigh, he pulled the parchment open and frowned as three silver phials rolled out into his hands.

“Memories?”

Harry shrugged. “Read it and find out, I guess.”

Severus nodded and returned to his letter, his heart pounding in his ears.
Dear Severus,

What in Merlin’s name convinced you that Harry is a good person? Not that I’m complaining, mind—it’s about bloody time you saw past the prejudice—but what brought it on? I’ve been trying to get you to see reason for years, and you’ve not listened once. Yet now, I have read your letter, and I am dumbstruck. Have I gone mad, or did you mean to imply that you are in love with the same Harry-bloody-Potter you have ranted about in my office for the past six years?

How in Merlin’s name did that happen?

Well, whatever the cause, I must confess I rather hope you are in love—both of you. And, I am proud of you for accepting him either way, though I expect a proper explanation when I see you Wednesday.

Severus gasped and gripped the parchment tighter. Minerva was proud of him, and she approved of his love for Harry. Merlin, his chest felt it might explode with joy just from that thought alone. He had to blink several times before he could read further.

Now, as to this strange business with your goodbye, there is something untoward afoot, Severus. You’ve given me proof that you acted as you say you have, yet so has Albus. I received memories from both of you, and not a word alike in either. They are both enclosed along with my own memory of what occurred that evening.

I must confess I have my doubts on who to believe. Either of you could have modified your memories and made them look real to a woman unskilled in mind magics, and I do not know how to differentiate a real memory from a false one. Rest assured I will be researching that presently.

If I should find you have lied to me, Severus, there will be hell to pay.

That said, I … question Albus’ apparent need to give me memories at all. It seems quite out of character for him. He’s usually so infuriatingly vague that such candid behaviour strikes me as strange. And the fact that my own memory was clear has inspired further doubts.

I am terrified. No matter the outcome, I will lose one of you.

Harry, if you are reading this, I would like to know what you meant by giving Albus more to use against you. What has he done to you, child, to make you feel this way? If Harry is not there, Severus, please give him this message?

As for your request about Albus’ reaction to the morning paper, I will make every effort to observe him discreetly and report it to you either in my next post or when I meet you on Wednesday. Where am I going, exactly, and what time should I come?

On second thought, perhaps you should just tell me the time and ask one of Harry’s house elf friends to apparate me. It is far too dangerous to reveal your location by post.
Yours,
Minerva

P.S. Oh, and do forgive me, but I do not see how I can safely retrieve anything from Spinner’s End. We all know the Death Eaters are watching it, and if they will attack the Minister of Magic, they will have no qualms about attacking me. I am sorry.

Severus held the letter to his chest, relieved that Minerva was at least giving him a chance, but one look at Seth made him forget his own worries. The boy had gone ashen and slumped against the edge of his painting, his eyes hollow and wet.

“Oh, Seth.” Severus handed the letter to Harry and pulled the canvas into his arms. “I should have thought of the danger to her before I said anything. Forgive me, love, and do not fear—we shall find a way.”

Harry frowned and rubbed his lip. “What about her Animagus form, Verus?”

Severus shook his head sadly. “It is well known among the Death Eaters. They would not allow her near even as a cat.”

Seth sank into a corner of his painting, sheer devastation plain in his eyes. Severus’ chest ached with grief for his surrogate son as he racked his brains for solutions. There had to be a way. There simply had to.

Harry rubbed Seth’s shoulder and sighed. “And polyjuice or your glamour potion?”

Severus shook his head and winced. “No, that will not work either. Neither is perfect, and the moment she approached my house, her game would be up regardless.”

Harry crumpled, too. “Damn it. Seth, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” the boy murmured in a distant sounding voice. “I’ll be okay.”

Severus pressed his hand to Seth’s cheek. “Love, be at peace. I said Minerva cannot do it. I did not say it was hopeless.”

Seth sniffled and lifted his eyes to Severus’ face, a tiny smile forming at the corner of his lips. “Oh. Maybe, can King do it?”

Severus hesitated, but after a moment, shook his head. “No. Anyone other than a Death Eater who approaches that house will be killed, whether in their natural human form or not.”

Severus’ heart jumped. Human? That was it!

“Dear Merlin, I am an idiot.”


“It is, it absolutely is, but that is not what I speak of.” He gave Harry a wry look. “We forgot the house elves, love. Creatures that can come and go at will without alerting humans and without regard to wards.”

Harry blinked. “Oh. Oh, Merlin.”
Seth’s eyes glowed with hope. “You mean, it might be possible, Severus?”

Severus nodded. “It is indeed. We must only decide which elf to send. And whichever one we do send should also retrieve my books and potions from the house. I have nothing else of value there, but we may find some of those helpful.”

Seth nodded. “Rilen, then? He’s sneaky.”

“He is also keeping an eye on Dumbledore, and after what the bastard did to my owl, I do not want to remove him from his post.” He frowned. “We should call him in for a report soon, however.”

Harry nodded. “We might get the entire story about the owls that way.”

“Yes.”

Seth frowned. “Well, if not Rilen, then who do we send?”

Harry tapped his chin. “Did you hang around the Malfoys when you were younger, Verus?”

“Not by choice, and not until after my family died. I was perhaps eighteen when I first began visiting Lucius.”

“That’s close enough, I think. Kreacher or Dobby, then. Dobby would be best, if we can convince him to leave off his hats and socks and borrow some of our spy’s clothing for the day. He’s too obvious in his garb should someone see him, but without it, no one knows who he is except the Malfoys, and they won’t be about.”

“I will transfigure his outfit into something suitable, then.” Severus waved Harry on. “He is your elf.”

“Yup.” Harry raised his voice a bit. “Dobby.”

The elf appeared with a pop and a broom in hand. “Hello, great Master Harry Potter. And Masters Severus and Seth. What can humble Dobby be doing for you?”

Harry scooted off Severus’ lap and knelt to the elf’s level. “My friend, I have a bit of a dangerous task to ask of you, but you’ll need to dress like a spy for it. Can you be persuaded to leave your hats and socks here for a little while? I promise to keep them safe for you. And this is not an order. I don’t want you doing this if it will risk your life, understand?”

“Yes, Master Harry Potter, sir.” Dobby snapped his fingers and his garish accessories stacked and folded themselves on the post room desk. “Dobby is happy to help. What is Master needing?”

After Dobby had gone and Severus had given his still recovering owl into their animal keeper’s hands, a young male elf called Niren, Severus brought Harry and Seth outside to continue Harry’s training. Freya enjoyed playing with them as well, and after a bit of roughhousing with the thestral, Harry Summoned his Firebolt and challenged her to a race. The beast agreed with a nicker and a toss of her head, and the next instant, she and Harry were in the air, a jubilant Seth trailing behind.

Severus lounged in the backyard with a book about mage sight, watching the boys fly with an indulgent smile. Though it was a bit odd to see a painting zooming this way and that, Seth’s whoops
of sheer joy made the older man glad he had thought of it. Harry seemed to be enjoying himself, too, and Merlin, watching him fly was a wonder all of its own right.

Harry had incredible talent on a broom.

When Bindy called them for tea, served with fresh buttered scones and the best ginger biscuits Severus had ever tasted, Harry and Seth alighted side-by-side on the lawn, both with red cheeks, bright eyes, and huge grins.

“That was brilliant!” Seth bounced in his frame and grinned from ear to ear. “Harry, we’ve got to do that again. That was so much more fun than flying alone.”

“I know,” said an equally excited Harry. “It was great having someone who could keep up with me!”

Seth laughed. “I wish I could, really. But this—just getting to feel the air and move—oh! It was the best day ever.”

Severus chuckled and motioned the boys to sit with him. “I am glad you had a good time. Freya certainly seemed to enjoy the company as well.” He frowned. “We truly do need to get her home. She needs her herd.”

The thestral gave a sad nicker in agreement.

Harry patted her fetlock. “I’m sorry, girl. I don’t want you to be unhappy. I’ve really liked having you around, though.”

She chuffed and nuzzled his cheek.

Seth said, “After tea, maybe we should floo Hagrid’s hut.”

“He is rarely inside.” Severus shuddered. “Besides that, I shudder to think of the spells Dumbledore might attempt to place on any floo we used to contact Hogwarts. No, I believe we shall have to use a Patronus.”

“A Patronus with anti-tracking magic attached.” Harry patted Freya’s rump to send her on her way and ran a cleaning charm over his hands. “I don’t know if it’s possible to track a Patronus—it shouldn’t be—but I don’t think I want to find out the hard way. Especially not after what the bastard did to Odin and Hedwig.”

Severus nodded. “We should ward the entire city against tracking charms soon, then we may not need to take such precautions with every single form of correspondence.”

Harry gave him a wry smile. “Or we could just install Muggle telephones.”

“To do so would require bringing Muggles into a fully magical town.” Severus shook his head. “The convenience is not worth the risk.”

“Suppose not.”

Harry slid into the chair beside Severus, and the older man passed him a cup of tea already made to the mage’s exact liking. Harry beamed and sipped at the drink with a sigh.

“This is nice, Severus. Just having tea with my family in our backyard.”

Severus slipped his arm behind Harry’s shoulders and kissed his hair. “I am enjoying it myself. We
have had so few peaceful moments as of late, that this one seems more precious.”

“That’s one thing the war is good for,” said Seth with a shy smile.

Harry frowned. “What’s that?”

“Making you appreciate what you have.”

Harry nodded and rubbed the boy’s shoulder. “It does. Though I wish the cost wasn’t so high.”

“Yeah,” Seth said in a sorrowful voice. “Me too.”

From the way the boy curled in on himself and shielded his body, Severus understood he was thinking of his past. Severus lifted a hand, but stopped before he touched the boy.

“May I touch your hair, Seth? Only to calm you.”

Seth gave him a grateful smile and nodded. Severus stroked the boy’s hair and watched as the pain slowly left his eyes.

“Thanks, Severus.”

Severus inclined his head and went on stroking the boy’s hair and cheek. “Are you well?”

“I think so. At least I’m better.”

“Good.

A loud bark made Severus jump, and he looked up to see a huge Saint Bernard Patronus lumbering their way. He knew no one with that breed of Patronus. He whipped out his wand, just in case, and beside him, Harry did the same.

With a flick of Severus’ wrist, Seth’s painting moved to hover behind the men, where they could protect him. Severus knew of no dark magic that could be attached to a Patronus, but it was never a bad idea to be prepared.

Harry tapped the dog’s head with his wand. “Speak.”

The dog gave a happy bark, dripping silvery slobber everywhere. “Harry, Xavier, it’s Sandra from the Prophet. Your owl didn’t stop by, so I wanted to tell you the special edition about Riddle’s name has gone out without a hitch. All of Britain will know about the taboo before nightfall. Good work, guys.”

The dog vanished, and Harry turned a grin upon his love. “Well, we should probably prepare for me to have a pretty nasty headache later, hmm? He’ll be royally hacked off about this, too.”

Severus chuckled and pulled Harry into his lap. “Indeed. For now, sit and have tea with me. I would like to enjoy the peace for one moment.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Severus moved Seth to his former position and sipped at his tea, hoping with all his might that one day, all of their moments might be so serene. If only Odin was well, the day would have been perfect.

Then Harry convulsed with the pain of Riddle’s anger, and Severus gave a sad sigh. Nothing would
be perfect, not even peaceful, until they ended this nightmare of a war.

Severus vowed to himself that they would make it happen, soon.
Preparation for an Army

Chapter Summary

Warnings: none. Another laid-back chapter. Next one is where things start coming together. I hope. I'm in the process of rewriting it.

CHAPTER 21
PREPARING FOR AN ARMY

A flash of silver forced Severus to look up from where he had laid Harry upon their bed, letting him rest after his semi-vision. Another Patronus, so soon? The shape of a tabby cat darted to Severus’ feet and leapt upon the bed, settling herself upon an amused Harry’s chest. Severus’ heart leapt into his throat.

‘Minerva.’

“Well, hello there.” Harry reached for the tabby, but Severus caught his hand and held him back.

“Wait.” He cast several scanning spells, relieved when everything came back clean. “Now you may touch her.”

Harry nodded and patted the tabby’s head. “Severus and I are listening. Who are you, little one?”

The sound of Minerva’s voice from the tabby made Harry jump and give Severus a sheepish smile.

“Boys, after what I have seen this morning, I thought it best to send you a Patronus rather than risk Athena’s safety.”

Severus gasped and conjured a chair to sit beside Harry. “Merlin! Did she see Albus …?”

“Maybe.” Harry frowned. “We should bring Seth in here for this.”

Severus nodded and Summoned the portrait. Seth levitated in, a grin on his face and his hair windblown.

“Do that more often, Severus! That was fun!”

Harry laughed and sat up on the bed, lifting the cat Patronus into his lap. “Sorry, old girl. Need to be sitting up for this one.”

The cat purred and rubbed against his hand.

“Come, Seth.” Severus set the painting against the headboard and settled in beside him. “This is Professor McGonagall’s Patronus. We have not listened to her message yet, only that she said she did not feel safe sending Athena after the events she has seen today.”

“Safe?” Seth’s eyes narrowed. “She knows what happened to the owls.”

“I believe so.” Severus tapped the cat’s head gently. “Forgive us, Minerva. Do continue with your
The cat sat prim and proper. “I am contacting you because two things have happened today that I find singularly odd, and they both support what you said to me yesterday.

“You have, I hope, received your letter by now? I gave it to Odin before breakfast this morning and set some food for the owls down as well, expecting they would eat and then carry the post. I believe that is what they did; however, I was not there to observe them.

“Instead, as per your request, I went to breakfast and observed Albus discreetly while he read the Prophet. Almost as soon as Albus opened the paper, he spat his tea all over poor Filius’ head.”

Harry and Seth snorted.

“That’s brilliant,” said Seth, his hand over his mouth to control his giggles.

Harry laughed and nodded. “We’ll have to ask her to pensieve that.”

Severus shook his head. “I do not know how we shall safely ask Minerva anything when Dumbledore has our owls tagged and even sending our Patronuses may put her at risk. And I do not know how Dumbledore has the magic set up, so I do not feel safe sending Demeter, either.”

Harry frowned and held his waist, an action Severus had long since learned to interpret as a sign of intense thought—at least when he wasn’t able to pace.

Harry came out of his reverie with a tentative smile. “Severus, what if we set up a post office? This place is going to be busy eventually. We could get one of those brilliant newspaper dispensers—you have to see it, Seth. It’s wicked. Anyway, we could get one of those and set up one of the smaller shops here as an owl roost and Muggle post. There’s probably an old post office already here, actually, so we could just ask the elves to help us find and restore it. And since we wouldn’t claim those owls as Prince or Dawn owls, but rather set them to the magic of Bàn Leon itself, Dumbleberk wouldn’t be able to tag them as our own owls, would he?”

Severus rubbed his chin. “Hmm. That is an excellent idea, Harry. We could perhaps purchase two or three at this time—one would be undoubtedly lonely, but many would not have enough to do with only the three of us and our elves to use them. I think Niren would be happy to have a few more animals to look after, and until we have a full post, he would be able to handle the workload on top of our own little zoo.”

Seth frowned. “How would I use the owls, though? I can’t write letters outside of my portrait. I don’t even have any paper or a biro in here.”

Severus tilted his head in thought. “Hmm. Perhaps we could give you a dicta-quill and some parchment. That way, you could write letters without our interference. I imagine Ron and Hermione would be glad to receive them.”

Seth grinned. “Or I could write to your photo self, once Dobby gets back with him.”

Severus smiled. “I believe he would like that very much, however, do be careful what you tell him. He will not be able to read them nor reply without Mister Thomas’ help.”

Harry chuckled. “If I know Dean, he’ll set the letter up to stand on its own and let Little Sev read it that way.” He turned and addressed the newspaper photo on his nightstand. “We’re not talking about you, by the way. We mean the photo of Severus as a teenager that your … your mum loved so much.”
The photo’s eyes went blank and cold, a sign of intense Occlumency.

The real Severus’ heart plummeted into his feet. “He remembers it? I did not think photos retained long-term memories beyond the basis of who they are.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’. “That event shaped you, Severus. It altered you on a deep level. It is part of the basis of who you are.” His eyes filled with sorrow. “So, yeah, I think any picture of you taken after that year will remember it.”

Severus shuddered. “Then I suppose it is good that Little Sev was taken prior to that horrid day. I hope with every fibre of my being that he does not recall it.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand. “So do I.” He picked up the photo frame and brushed a fingertip down the photo-Severus’ hair. “Hey, it’s going to be all right, okay?”

Photo-Severus gave him a hesitant nod, and Harry petted his hair a moment before returning him to the nightstand. “You’ll be safe here, I promise.”

The photo’s eyes went glassy and empty. He was already forgetting.

Harry sighed. “Gods, I hate that. It makes me never want to take another wizarding photo again.”

Severus sat beside Harry and wrapped his arm around the younger man. “I feel much the same way. Perhaps I could fashion a spell that will prevent wizarding photos or portraits to be created of us without our explicit consent. For now, let us listen to the rest of Minerva’s message.”

Harry nodded and settled against Severus’ side. “Sorry, Verus.”

“It is quite all right.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and tapped the tabby once again. “Go on, Minerva.”

The cat nodded and resumed her message. “When Filius asked Albus what was so shocking, he made up some reply about having his breakfast stuck in his throat, but I saw his eyes, Severus. They were cold, angry. And he had just opened the paper. He could only have been reacting to the headline, which, as I am sure you know, was about the article clearing your name.

“Why on earth would he be so furious, Severus? Should he not be pleased to know that someone is still looking out for you, as I am? The entire situation has thrown me for a loop, but it was what happened after breakfast which drove me to risk a Patronus.”

The tabby yowled and shuddered, setting her fur on end. “Merlin. I am … shocked. Utterly shocked. I cannot fathom what is going through that man’s mind. Do forgive me. I am quite shaken up.”

The tabby settled in Severus’ lap, though she was trembling. Gods, poor Minerva. She must have been terrified for her Patronus to act in such a manner. Severus could not help but pet the cat’s head. The silvery cat settled down, and Severus found himself wishing that his touch might also calm her owner.

“After Albus’ display at breakfast,” the cat continued, “I took it into my head to follow him, but at a distance. So I shifted into my Animagus form and prowled behind him at the furthest distance my cat eyes could see—further than a human’s so I believed myself safe. He did not turn, so either he did not notice, or he did not fathom that I would be stalking him.

“Albus walked to the shore of the lake and watched the skies for the longest time. I had just decided that he had nothing particular planned and started to turn back when I heard the screech of an owl.
I looked up just in time to see a dark green light fade both from Odin and Albus’ wandtip.

“The man was proud of himself, Severus. Proud, for attacking your owl.”

A chill set Severus frowning. Dark green light and a hostile spell cast at a wizard’s familiar? Something clicked in his mind, something that worried him instinctively, but he could not yet put his finger on it.

Minerva’s tabby continued, “Albus drew back his wand again, and I struck. I reassumed human form and sent a stunning spell at him, but before my spell could connect, the giant squid, of all things, reached out a tentacle and smacked the man right on the bum! It knocked him down and, though I went to help the owls, they had already escaped. In all my years, Severus, I have never seen something so odd.”

Harry and Seth burst into laughter, but they kept quiet so as not to interrupt the cat for a third time.

“I went to Albus and demanded an explanation, but he said he had thought the owl was Riddle’s. I do not believe that for a moment. Why would a megalomaniac like Riddle choose a little sooty for a pet? The man would want an eagle owl or something flashier, certainly not a fluff-ball like Odin. Besides that, Albus has had correspondence from Odin before. There is no way he did not recognise him.”

The cat let slip a mournful meow, her ears drooping.

“Why is he doing this, Severus? Why lie to me—twice, by all accounts? Why try to sabotage our friendship and attack your owl? I do not understand his behaviour and begin to fear for his sanity. Please, please send a reply as soon as you can, if you have any answers.”

The tabby rubbed her head into Severus’ hand and vanished.

“Merlin,” said Harry with a wry expression. “The giant squid knocked him off his feet. That’s another memory she needs to pensieve for us.”

“Yes indeed.” Severus stood, pacing and clenching his fists at his sides. “I fear to send her further correspondence today. We may draw attention to her and put her life at risk. We shall compose a shielded Patronus for her first thing in the morning, yes?”

Harry grinned. “Actually, I have a better idea.”

Severus lifted an eyebrow. “And that is?”

“I think we now have enough evidence to bring in the Weasleys and McGonagall. Between the altered memories, the curses I took off Odin, and McGonagall’s letter, I think they’ll have to listen. Especially if we call Fawkes in.”

Severus fixed Harry with a piercing stare. “And if that is not enough? If they all insist the man is simply going senile and is not a dreadful threat, like Minerva seems to believe?”

Harry winced. “Um, then … I don’t know.”

“I do,” Seth said in a quiet voice. “Harry, we … we need to show them. What he did to us.”

Harry cringed and turned into Severus’ shoulder. “But if … if they see, if they know what they did to me, then they ….”
“They’ll what?” Seth shook his head. “Harry, they won’t turn us out, but they’ll kill Dumbledore for it. You know to the redheads, family is everything. It’s why they’re so loyal to the slimy bastard, and it’s why they accepted Severus without too many questions. This, Harry, our scars—it’s the one thing that might make Molly believe us.”

Harry curled up impossibly smaller. “But, but if they see them ….”

Severus stroked his hair. “What, beloved? What are you so afraid of?”

Tears leaked out of Harry’s eyes. “They … they’ll know … that I … I’m a ….” His voice dropped to a whisper. “A freak.”

“A what?” Severus growled and scooped Harry into his lap. “Hush this instant. I will not hear you use such terrible words against yourself.” He cupped Harry’s face. “Beloved, you are not a freak. Not in the least. You are beautiful and loving and wonderful. The Dursleys—they are the freaks. Adults who spoil their son to the point of ruin and break their nephew to pieces—they are the freaks. And Dumbledore is also one for leaving you with them.” He kissed Harry with tender affection. “But you? No. You are in no way tarred with their brush.”

“But they scarred me, Severus. I’m t-tainted.”

“Do you think I’m a freak, Harry?” Seth’s voice was small and sad. “Am I tainted?”

Harry winced. “No, no of course not. You’re just … just a boy who was abused.”

Seth said nothing and watched Harry with deep pain in his eyes. Severus would have liked to soothe them, but he feared breaking the moment. If Seth could make Harry realise the truth … well, he wasn’t about to interfere.

Harry’s gaze dropped, and he hugged his chest. “I … it feels like more, Seth. Like I’m worse because I couldn’t stand up to them. Because I was always so … afraid.”

“I know. So was I.”

“But you’re only fourteen! I’m eighteen and I never could … not once.” Harry buried his face in a shaking hand. “I … I just … why was I never brave enough? I faced Riddle time after time for crying out loud.” He lifted his head and gave Seth a heartsick look. “Why couldn’t I face my uncle?”

“Maybe because we were trapped.” Seth sighed and pressed a palm to the canvas. “Hold my hand, Harry.”

The mage obeyed.

“Now,” Seth said in a soft voice, “Harry, think back. At our best, we’re barely five feet tall and maybe eight stone. Uncle Vernon is six foot four and probably twenty-five stone. We were small, scared children who’d been abused by a giant of a man from the time we could walk. Until Hogwarts, we had no escape. And for you, Hogwarts stopped being a haven just when you got old enough and strong enough to start fighting back.”

He squeezed Harry’s hand as best as he could. “You didn’t fight back because he would have killed you, and then where would we all be? It wasn’t weakness, Harry. It was just being smart.”

“But ….”

“Love, listen to your brother.” Severus rubbed Harry’s back. “He is right. You were only trying to
survive.” He brought Harry close and held him. “I wish I had known.”

“It’s okay.” Harry murmured into Severus’ cheek. “If it brought me you, then it was worth it. But I … I’m scared, Severus. What if they see my scars and they think I was weak and pitiful? I … I don’t know if I can bear it if they change. If they start treating me like glass.”

Severus shook his head. “Love, this is your family. They would not hurt you. If they do start acting as if you will break, simply tell them to stop. Or, better yet, show them the leader you are and prove to them that you do not need their pity.”

Harry blushed. “I … am not a leader.”

“You will have to be soon, Harry. It will be easier to learn how to lead with your family who will forgive your mistakes rather than a group of people who may or may not trust you and will not be so lenient.”

Harry winced. “I … I guess.”

Seth gave him a sad smile. “Mate, I reckon you’ve been leading for a while already and you haven’t even noticed. You were great at the Prophet.”

Harry lowered his head and ruffled his hair. “I guess you’re right.” He sighed and leaned against the headboard, staring at the ceiling. “So what do you want me to do then? Just gather everyone together and strip off? That’ll go over well with Mum.”

Seth paled. “No. Not that.”

“Harry,” Severus chided.

Seth gave him a grim nod. “So you’ll do it?”

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “Yeah. I … I don’t want to, but yeah. If that’s what it takes to start building our army, then that’s what it takes.”

Severus nodded and stood, offering Harry a hand up. “Come, then. If we are to welcome the start of our Court tomorrow, then we had best start preparing the village now. At least, we must find a safehouse. And we should speak with Draco and Zabini soon. Perhaps tonight. They are in danger.”

Harry frowned and cast a Tempus. “Verus, it’s already four.”

“Yes, and that means we still have three hours before the stores close. The elves can do wonders in that time, but we must hurry to find a place for them to start from first.”
“No rest for the weary, hmm?” Harry sighed and sat, taking Severus’ hand. “Well, we need to find a post office and a studio for Dean anyway. Might as well start now.”

Severus pulled his soul-bond to his feet. “Precisely.”

Severus led Harry, Seth, and their miniature army of house elves to the town square. Four roads branched from the centre, two leading to empty shops and housing, one to farmland and a schoolhouse, and one to an abandoned fortress. A civic building with a giant bell stood between the fortress and school, and on the southern side of town, several empty shops and abandoned stalls marked what had once been a marketplace.

While Severus looked on, Harry moved to the middle of the town and let out a whistle. “All this for three people and a few house elves? Merlin. Where do we even start?”

“It will not be the three of us forever. We shall need to house an army here eventually.” Severus pointed to the fortress. “Our future base of operations. We should handle Court business there. I would prefer only our close friends to know where we live out our personal lives.”

“Fair enough. We’ll have to save that for later, though. We have to find a safehouse, a studio for Dean, and a post office first.”

Severus rubbed his lips, considering everything they had yet to do. “Yes. What do you think of using this corner shop for Thomas’ studio? It is a good location for sales, and he might make a lucrative career of his work. Even if he does not, it would offer a suitable place to paint without compromising our home location.”

Harry frowned. “A lonely one. Maybe Seth could keep him company while we’re busy.”

“That works for me,” the portrait said.

“If you are amenable to it, then I have no objections.”

Harry nodded. “We can always set him up in Seth’s room if we need to.” He conjured a Muggle-style notebook and biro. “So, we’ve found a shop for Dean. Next is the post office.” He sank to one knee and motioned the elves in closer. “I need a volunteer or two from the Dawn ranks to help us find a post office while we’re busy looking for a safehouse.”

A younger elf stepped forward, fiddling with his ears as if he feared he had done something wrong. “A-Arlen will finds one for you, Masters.”

Harry grinned. “Great. In a city like this, there’s probably already one here that’s been abandoned. If you can’t find one, then just look for a shop near the centre of town that could be converted to include a post office and owlery. When and if you find it, just make note of the location and go back to helping the Dawn elves. You can tell us about it once we’re home for the evening, okay?”

Arlen bowed. “Yes, Master Harry. What if Arlen can’t finds one?”

“That’s okay. We can keep looking tomorrow or just build something if there’s nothing suitable already available.”
Arlen smiled. “Yes, kind master. I’s be looking right away.”

The elf vanished with a pop. Harry stood and marked on his notepad.

“Well, there’s one more thing down. What’s next?”

“The safehouse for Zabini and Malfoy, and any others who need a place to escape Death Eater relatives,” said Severus.

“Right—the snake den.” Harry looked around. “Hmm. Would the town hall work?”

“No. We should keep that in case we need it for its original purpose. I thought perhaps we might find a suitable manor house down the farm road. The less populous area lends itself to a richer populace.”

Harry grimaced. “I’m still trying to work out exactly what you said there, Webster. So, a manor house for Malfoy and the others in trouble. And maybe we can just put them all on a street together if we can’t find a single manor.”

Severus nodded. “Acceptable. Now, let us divide the elves as best suits them and take a team with us to find the safehouse. We shall have to leave the other tasks for a later time.”

Seth said, “Um, S-Severus?”

He gave the boy an encouraging smile. “It’s all right, love. What is it?”

“Um, well, neither you nor Harry knows much about painting, and the house elves might not have had to deal with setting up a studio before. Um, is it okay if I stay and help them with Dean’s place?”

Severus’ heart gave a little pang, but he nodded. “Of course. Dawn elves, are you able to take care of his needs?”

The lead elf in charge of the dawn restoration team, a green-eyed female called Linna, gave Severus an affronted look. “We’s knowing how to care for portraits, Master Snape. They is not needing much looking after, but a bit of dusting now and then.”

Severus frowned and shook his head. “Linna, that is not what I meant. Of course I know you can dust a painting, but Seth is not a mere portrait. Harry and I regard him as family.”

Linna frowned. “But … he’s still only be needing dusting, right?”

Harry knelt before her. “In terms of upkeep, perhaps, but Seth is … injured inside, Linna. He’s been abused for his entire life, so he gets scared easily and needs a lot of reassurance. And even with that, he still might get scared. That’s what Severus meant, not his upkeep. Zephie will be here to help you with him, but just in case, we wanted to make sure you guys could handle his care.”

Seth blushed and grumbled, “I’m not that bad, thank you.”

“Sorry, mate,” Harry said with a wry smile. “Just trying to make sure you’re safe.”

Linna gave a remorseful bow. “I’s be understanding now, Master Potter. Please forgive me, Master Snape, Master Seth.”

“It’s okay.” Harry squeezed her shoulder gently. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You misunderstood Severus, that’s all. We aren’t angry at you.”

She tugged one ear and frowned. “He, he looks angry, Master.”
Harry stifled a snort. “No, no. He’s just a little embarrassed. He didn’t mean to offend you.”

“That is true, Linna,” said Severus in a quiet voice.

Linna smiled. “I’ve never had a human worry about offending me before. Thank you, kind masters. Linna thinks we will be liking it here.”

Harry patted the little elf’s shoulder. “I’m glad. That’s what we want. Are you ready to start on the shop, then?”

She nodded. “Yes, Master Harry. We will be taking good care of Master Seth, too.”

“Good,” said Severus. “Then please take the remaining Dawn elves with you and go to work on Thomas’ studio. The rest of us will search for a safe house.” He knelt to her level and whispered, “And if something does happen to Seth, if he becomes fearful and needs help, please come get Harry and myself right away. I do not think most house elves are trained to deal with abuse victims.” He sighed. “Well, I am not either, but I have enough experience to make up the difference.”

“Linna will be doing as you say, Master Severus.”

“Thank you.”

She blushed and rubbed her foot on the ground. “I is not being thanked by a human before, either. Linna will definitely be liking it here.”

Severus patted her shoulder gently. “I am glad to hear it.” He stood and brushed off his robes. “Be off with you now. And do recall that you may retrieve us if you need help.”

“Thank you, Master Severus.” Linna raised her voice. “Dawn elves and Master Seth comes this way.” She snapped her fingers, and the portrait floated after her.

“Bye, Harry, Severus,” said Seth with a smile. “We’ll be okay.”

“Take care, Seth.” Severus waved and watched them go.

Seth turned towards the shop after Linna and her contingent of elves, showing nothing but canvas backing, and the empty brown back with a water stain at the corner brought home his state of being to Severus like a punch to the gut. As much as Severus had begun to feel for him, Seth was only a painting, and would only ever be a painting.

Unless Harry could give him a better life.

“Merlin, I had almost forgotten he is not human.”

Harry slipped his hand into Severus’ and twined their fingers together. “I know. He really feels like my brother, especially now he’s going by a different name. Is that mad?”

Severus squeezed Harry’s hand. “If it is mad, we have both lost our wits.” The shop door closed behind the elves and portrait, and he sighed. “It hurts that I cannot truly hold him.”

Harry turned and gave Severus a beatific smile that took his breath away. “Merlin, that’s so beautiful.”

Severus frowned. “Beautiful? What is?”

“You. The way you love him.” Harry laid his head against Severus’ shoulder and slipped his arm
around the man’s waist. “So beautiful.”

Severus closed his eyes and clutched Harry into his arms. “If you make me weep in front of the house elves, you will regret it.”

Harry laughed and hugged him tight. “I love you too, you big git.” He pulled back with a sigh. “Come on. We’d better get moving if we’re going to find a safehouse before sundown.”

Severus nodded and led Harry towards the manor road, but turned back at the edge of the square. An elf was dusting the studio stoop, and a second was washing the windows, but Seth wasn’t in sight. Severus missed him.

Harry’s warm hand rubbed the small of Severus’ back. “Verus? Love, are you all right?”

“Yes.” Severus crossed his arms over his chest. “Harry, do you believe you could take the life from Seth’s painting and give him a corporeal form? A human form?”

Harry gasped. “Make him real? Merlin, Severus. I … I don’t know if I can do that.”

“I believe you might be able to. The fact that he can truly weep is promising. And Zephie mentioned something about him having the same life core as yourself. Perhaps that may make a difference as well.”

Harry frowned. “Life core? What’s that?”

“I do not know.”

An ancient, amber-eyed elf spoke up—Tinny, Severus recalled after a moment. She was the leader of their Prince household elves, being the most experienced of the lot.

“I can explain, Masters. You is knowing that your core is being the source of your wizard powers, right?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, but how do you guys know that?”

Tinny gave him a toothy grin. “We’s be knowing many things about our humans they don’t know we know.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Indeed?”

Her ears drooped. “I’s being saying this because … because you are kind masters, and I’s trust you not to hurt us for it. But I … is I wrong?”

Harry knelt in front of the old elf and gave her a reassuring smile. “Of course not. We’re just curious. What kinds of things do you know?”

“Well, many things.” She turned her hands around each other. “We’s can sense when you is hungry or sleepy, when you’s be needing something. It’s how we’s do our jobs.” She cringed away, obviously waiting for a blow.

Harry laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Ssh. It’s okay, Tinny. I think that’s amazing. I will never understand why most wizards look down on house elves. You have powers we can’t begin to understand.”

Tinny smiled hesitantly. “You do, Master Harry?”
He grinned. “Yep!”

“I’s being almost three-hundred years old and has served four families in my life. You’s being the first wizard I’s ever heard say something like that.”

Harry’s grin faded. “How sad. I have a friend who’s working to change all that, okay? To make other wizards recognise that your race are living beings who deserve to be treated fairly. She’s brilliant, so you never know. One day, maybe it’ll make a difference.”

Tinny grinned wider. “I’s hope I lives to see it.”

“We shall do everything possible to ensure that you do,” said Severus with a smile.

Harry patted her shoulder. “Yes, we will. Now, what were you on about concerning our cores? Why do you say I have a life core? Is that like my life force?”

Tinny frowned. “It is your core. Not your life force, but because it is made of life magic, it can be like a life force too.”

“Life magic?” Severus knelt beside Harry. “So you are saying that Harry’s core is attuned to life magic. To healing, saving lives ….” He looked to the studio. “And even creating them?”

Tinny beamed. “Yes, that is exactly what I’s saying.”

Harry frowned. “Does that mean I can’t do offensive magic?”

She gave a tinkling laugh. “No, no. It just means your core is being drawn to life magic. Your healing is the strongest Tinny has ever seen. Your core is the strongest Tinny has ever seen.”

Harry blushed. “Well, that’s because I’m a mage, not just a wizard, but you elves can’t say anything about that, okay? It would mean a lot of lives lost if that got out too soon. My own included, and probably Severus too.”

She gave him a solemn nod. “You has Tinny’s word, we will keep our Masters’ secrets. You is good masters. We’s do not want to do anything to hurt you.”

“Thank you.” Harry squeezed her shoulder and stood.

Severus stood as well and led the elves and Harry down the farm road, his thoughts going wild. So Harry had an immensely powerful core made of life—one Seth shared, at least in part. It explained why the boy’s painting lived—his core doubled as a life force. And perhaps that it was so strong was why he had the ability to cry, to feel, to remember so much more than a true portrait.

Seth really was alive.

Beside him, Harry seemed to have come to the same conclusion. “Severus, we … we have to help Seth. If he has the same core as me, it means he’s not just a painting. He’s really alive, and he’s trapped in there.”

Severus wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “What Tinny said gives me hope that you can do it one day, Harry, and it gives me faith that you will be able to animate the portrait of myself where no one else could. You could, perhaps, even give that photo on your nightstand a bit better of a memory.”

Harry paused. “Do you think that’s … fair? He’s stuck in there alone.”
“Well, once we have other photos, he shall be able to go between them and visit with them if he so chooses. Maybe we could take one of you so he would have a companion.”

Harry grinned. “That’s a great idea. We’ll ask him about it, yeah?”

Severus smiled. “Yes, we shall do so tonight, perhaps, if we are not too tired. What do you think about Seth, love? Do you think you could pull him out of the portrait?”

Harry shuddered. “Not yet. If I do it wrong, I’ll kill him. Let me train first, Severus.”

Severus nodded. “I shall research ways to help in the meantime.”

“Yeah. Thanks, love.”

Severus responded with a kiss to the mage’s cheek.

Harry walked on in silence for a long while, his expression troubled. Severus stroked his hair in attempt to soothe him.

“What troubles you, Harry?”

Harry gave him a look full of pain. “What if I can’t do it even with training? What if I just don’t have the ability?”

Severus kissed him lightly. “Don’t trouble yourself, love. Mage or not, you are still human, with all the limitations thereof. I do not expect miracles of you, though I cannot seem to help but hope for them. If you cannot bring him out of the painting, then we shall simply try to make Seth and my own portrait as happy as we are able to for as long as we live, and pass him on to people who will do the same after we are gone.”

“Yeah.” Harry stared over his shoulder, looking towards the square with a wistful look in his eyes. “I, it wouldn’t hurt to try, I guess, as long as we have a backup plan in case I don’t have enough power. But I’d rather wait until I’ve more of a handle on my abilities. Maybe mage sight will help. Or maybe Luna would have some ideas.” He frowned. “Or, Tinny, do you know how to train life magic?”

The elf winced and pulled on her ears hesitantly. “I’s being sorry, Master Harry. I knows what your core is, but we is being elves, not wizards. I’s not know how to train a wizard.”

Harry eased her hands from her ears. “It’s okay, Tinny. I just thought I’d ask since you knew what kind of magic I have. No punishing yourself, okay? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

She relaxed and thanked Harry. Severus slipped his hand into his soul-bond’s hair and nudged him closer.

“Harry, we will ask Lovegood about your powers, but later. For now, Seth is content as he is, and we have more immediate worries.” He pointed to a side road, leading away from the farms. A line of cypresses hid the road from the main town, but high roofs poked above them. “Come. That looks like a promising location to find a suitable safehouse.”

Harry nodded and followed Severus. “You know, love, we should probably name these roads. There aren’t any street signs.”

Severus chuckled. “Indeed we should. Hmm.” He toed at a small, yellow flower peeking through the stones. They lined the road on both sides, too, and fields stretched over abandoned farmland all the
way to the shore and the city on the mainland. “Would you object to calling this Campion Road?”

“Campion?”

Severus nodded to the flower. “They’re everywhere. Sunny campion flowers. Quite good for healing and beauty potions.”

Harry grinned. “Leave it to a potions master to name streets after ingredients.”

Severus harrumphed. “What would you call it, then?”

“Actually, Campion Road sounds good to me.” He conjured his notebook again and flipped the page, drawing a hasty map. “I should ask Remus how he made the Marauder’s map and borrow his spells.”

“Hmm?”

Harry blushed. “Er, you didn’t hear that.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Indeed? And what was this map, then?”

Harry gave him an impish grin. “Just a spare bit of parchment.”

Severus shook his head, bemused, and carried on down the road.
The Snake Den

Chapter Summary

Warnings: none. Severus and Harry finally get answers about 'Little Sev', and their first Snakes come to Bàn Leon.

CHAPTER 21
THE SNAKE DEN

They found the manor houses a little ways down Campion Road, behind the civic centre and a couple blocks of middle class homes. At the end of the manor road—they called it Verdant Way because of its green, rolling lawns—a stately manor sprawled across sweeping hills and what looked like an old vineyard. A line of cypresses bordered the back of the property, but otherwise it hadn’t a single tree. Besides the flowers and broken up grapevines, the grounds were bare.

“Looks lonely,” Harry said, hugging his chest against the chill of isolation.

“This would be an excellent safehouse,” said Severus with a nod.

Harry gave him a wry look. “It would? There’s nothing here.”

“Except that old vineyard and plenty of open space for a daylight potions garden. As Malfoy is an excellent herbologist and potions apprentice and Zabini’s family are winemakers, they could both profit from working the land here. And if there is anything Malfoy needs, it’s to learn how to make money without his father’s input. He can make a new name for himself, separate from Lucius’ taint. Working the land might bring his ego out of the stratosphere, too.”

Harry snorted. “You’ll need more than a potions garden for that.” He stepped closer and scanned the house and grounds again. “I still think it looks isolated, but maybe that’s good for your Slytherins. Shall we look inside, then?”

“Yes. Come, follow me.”

The inside felt as lonely as the outside to Harry, but Severus had obviously liked the big rooms and stately decor.

“This is a good place, Harry. There are at least ten rooms here that could be used as bedrooms or even dorms. Malfoy and Zabini would do well here, as would any student needing a place to hide.”

Harry pinched in closer to Severus, needing his warmth. “I just, it feels so empty.”

Severus snorted. “Love, it is empty. Furniture and decorations will change that, as will the presence of people.”

Harry sighed. “Fair enough. Then this will do, I suppose.”

Severus nodded and waved to the elves following close at their heels. “All right, Prince elves. The main priority here is to make the house habitable again. Please clean and prepare five bedrooms upstairs, preferably in a communal area near a loo—we shall likely have to refurbish the loos and
He motioned to the lower floors. “When that is finished, please go about preparing places to eat, study, and relax. Outfit the library with textbooks and fiction for now—Harry and I will handle the more in-depth books as needed. Do include texts on winemaking, vineyard work, potions, and herbology. Do not include anything of dark origins—best not to give Malfoy any temptation.”

He frowned and rubbed his lip, trying to think of what he might have forgotten. “I believe those are the most important tasks. Besides that, outfit the rooms as you see fit. Oh, but do leave the grounds as they are. You may clean up the debris and stock the shed with gardening supplies, but do no further gardening. Malfoy and Zabini should plan the grounds first. Understood?”

The elves chorused their agreement and went to work. Severus and Harry helped where they could, stopping for dinner at six. Harry had just reached for one last biscuit when a loud pop startled him and caused him to spill his tea. Severus had leapt to his feet and jerked out his wand, but lowered it immediately.

“Merlin, Dobby!” Harry said, panting and mopping up his lap. “Mightn’t you pop in a bit more quietly next time?”

Dobby winced. “I cannot. Dobby is bad elf.”

“Dobby!” Harry’s cry arrested the elf’s sudden dash for the wall. “No punishment. It’s okay. You only startled me, and I was whinging about it like a berk. You did nothing wrong.”

Dobby sniffled and gave Harry a solemn nod, turning his hands one over the other. “Is great Master Harry Potter being well?”

“Yes, yes. Just spilled a bit of tea on my trousers. I’ll just mop this up and—”

A flick of Severus’ wand banished the substance. The man raised an eyebrow at Harry’s surprised expression.

“Are you a wizard or not?”

Harry gave a sheepish laugh. “I don’t know why I never think of using magic for the little things.”

“Muggle-raised,” said Severus with a shrug. “I had to grow accustomed to it as well.”

Harry nodded. “Must be that.” He turned to the nervous elf and motioned him over. “Did you find the picture, Dobby?”

Dobby snapped and called an old Polaroid photograph into existence. In the photo, a boy with lank black hair peeked out from behind a tree, obviously unsure of his welcome. Harry raised an eyebrow at the older Severus and held the picture out for him to see.

“Yes, that is the correct photograph,” Severus confirmed.

Harry beamed. “You did it, Dobby! Well done.” He clapped the elf on the shoulder. “This will be perfect if we can convince Little Sev to come out. Were you able to retrieve Verus’ books as well?”

“They are already put away in the study, Masters. Dobby is not knowing which ones you wish to keep, so I’s just brought them all.”

Severus nodded. “Very good. And the potions?”
Dobby hesitated at his brusque tone. “They’s being in the laboratory, Master Severus.”

Severus patted Dobby’s shoulder. “Well done. Thank you, Dobby.”

Harry smiled and hugged the little elf. “Yes, thank you, Dobby. You’re great.”

Dobby gave them a toothy grin. “You is welcome, great masters, but there is no need to thank Dobby. I’s enjoy it.”

“We know,” Severus said with a wry smile. “You may return to your day now.”

The elf bowed low and apparated out with another loud ‘pop.’

Now that the room was quiet once more, Harry cradled the photo of the young Severus close and drank in what few details he could see. The shy teen had a lanky frame, slender face, big dark eyes that showed the depths of his soul, and a crooked nose from Tobias’ abuse.

A surge of protectiveness flooded Harry’s chest, and he swore to himself he would keep the boy safe from now on, even if only as a photo.

Severus moved closer, his eyes full of worry. “Is he cognizant, Harry?”

Harry shrugged. “Hard to tell. He’s hiding.” He softened his tone and murmured to the boy, “Severus? It’s okay, sweetheart. I know I resemble James Potter a lot, but look at my eyes. I’m not the bully you remember.”

The photograph could not speak, but young Severus’ narrowed eyes and tense posture said enough.

“Would you believe yourself?” Severus the elder hugged Harry from behind and rested his chin on the younger man’s shoulder. “He truly isn’t like James … ah, Severus. He’s healed me of so much pain, and he only wants to heal you, too.”

Harry turned his face into Severus and kissed the man’s cheek. “Thank you, love. I’m trying.” He faced the portrait again with a soft smile. “I love him, sweetheart.”

Little Sev paled and hid behind the tree completely.

“Oh, oh no. It’s okay, Sev. I didn’t mean it like that. You’re too young, sweetheart. I only want to protect you, okay? Like a friend might. Can you come out?”

Hesitantly, the shaking teen peeked around the edge of his tree.

“Good. You’re okay, Sev. It’s okay. Come on. We won’t hurt you or mock you.”

The real Severus murmured, “Love, it’s safe. Come out. I would not show my younger self to anyone I thought would use it against us.”

Little Sev crossed his arms over his chest in a protective gesture and stepped out from behind the tree. He was shaking all over, but he held his chin high and his shoulders straight.

“Well done,” Harry said with a smile. “Oh, you’re quite handsome even as a little fellow, Severus.”

Photo Severus’ cheeks reddened. He lifted his head, questioning Harry with wide eyes.

“Yes, I meant it, sweetheart. My Severus has trouble believing it, too.”
The real Severus kissed Harry’s hair and pulled him snug against the older man’s chest. “He is truly wonderful to me, little one. You’re quite safe in his hands.”

The young Severus gave him a shaky smile and stepped closer.

Harry murmured to his partner, “Severus? How many moments has it been?”

“Too many, I fear.” Severus buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. “I cannot ask. I do not have the strength. Gods, what has become of me? I have gone too soft.”

“Ssh. It’s only hard because he’s you.” Harry blinked back tears. “Well, and it’s awful.” He sighed and gathered his courage. “I’ll do it, love. Um, Little Sev—”

The photo glared and made a gesture indicating his height.

“Yes, yes. I know it’s irritating. Believe me, I understand. I’m short, so I hear that a lot. But sweetheart, we don’t have another name for you and there are two Severuses. I don’t know how else to refer to you when you’re two inches tall and sitting in my hand. Um, is it okay, just for now? Just until we think of something better?”

The boy sighed and gave him a terse nod.

“I know you don’t like it. I’m sorry. I’ll avoid it as much as possible.”

Sev gave him a hesitant smile.

“Yes, there you are.” Harry tried to smile back, but he couldn’t. The boy in the photo still hadn’t reset, and Harry had begun to think he wouldn’t.

“Listen, sweetheart, this … this is going to be a really rough question, but do you know what happened to … to your mum?”

The boy went ashen and jerked his head away. He turned so Harry couldn’t see his face, but Severus—until Harry had changed him—had trusted his emotions to no one, so the act of turning away convinced Harry that the boy knew.

“Oh gods. No. Sev … you remember it?”

The boy shuddered as if struck and refused to answer, but his shoulders shook with restrained sobs.


Tears slipped down Harry’s face, and he gently pressed the photo to his heart. Gods, the poor boy had been alone in that house for a quarter of a century, staring at the spot his entire family had died. Remembering.

And completely alone.

Harry’s Severus sank to his knees and covered his face in a shaking hand. “Oh gods, what have I done?”

Harry knelt beside Severus and took the trembling man into his arms. He held the photo against his heart and rubbed his broken-hearted partner’s back.

“Oh, Severus. Ssh. It’s not your fault, love. You were a child yourself. How could you have known?”
“I was not a child for twenty-five years, Harry!” He buried his face in Harry’s neck and shuddered. “I, I should have checked him. I should have taken him away.”

Harry glanced to the young Severus. The boy was watching the real Severus, tears running down his cheeks and a look of combined confusion and grief in his eyes. Harry gave the boy a small smile to soothe him, then nudged Severus up.

“Love, look at me. Severus—my Severus.”

The older man obeyed, and the pain in his dark eyes shattered Harry’s heart to pieces.

“Oh, Verus.”

Harry cupped the man’s chin and eased him down into a tender, slow kiss. After a long moment, Severus relaxed and sighed into Harry’s mouth, sliding a shaking hand into the mage’s hair. Harry rewarded him with more slow, gentle kisses. Harry held the man’s cheek as he pulled away and gazed into his tearful, beautiful eyes.

“Ssh. This is not your fault, love. And anyway, we’ll make it right, okay? He’s home now.”

Severus nodded and wiped his eyes. “F-forgive me.”

“Ssh. Nothing to forgive.”

Harry turned back to the photo to see an expression of unabashed wonder and hope in the boy’s eyes. Harry smiled and nodded.

“Yes, sweetheart. You’re home now. Well, I still have to … it’s not quite forever yet, but I promise you that you’ll never have to go back to that place again.”

The young Severus shuddered and blinked hard, fighting a sheen of tears, and Harry wished he was better with words.

“Um, let me just explain the situation, okay? It’s like this. I found a portrait of myself, you see, taken when I was about your age. He’s lonely, too, and he’s been through hell. An older woman kept him prisoner and, well, she abused him. Even … sexually. He’s not able to talk about it much yet, so I don’t know quite how bad it was, but what little bit he’s been able to talk about is horrible. Still, he’s slowly recovering now that he’s safe.”

The boy in the photo frowned and shrugged—though his eyes revealed his concern for the portrait.

“You want to know what this has to do with you?”

The photo boy nodded.

“Well, you see, Severus and I have taken him into our family—Severus regards him as a son, and he’s a bit like a younger brother to me—but even so, it’s not enough. He needs someone in the portrait world with him. And when we realised that he was lonely and would recover better if he had another portrait to keep him company, I thought maybe a photo of Severus when he was younger would do for a companion. And the more I thought about it, the more I knew it had to be a photo his mum had infused with her love, her life, for me to be able to transfer his spirit to a painted canvas. And that’s where you come in.”

The boy gasped and clutched at his shirt. He mouthed, “You want me?”
Harry nodded. “Yes. I do. Would you like to … I mean, do you want to try?”

Little Severus gave him a shy smile and nodded.

“Would you like to see him?”

Severus tapped his throat, clearly lamenting his lack of speech.

Harry gave him a sad smile. “He was mute when I found him, too. He’ll understand. But don’t despair, sweetheart. Once my artist friend paints your portrait, we’re going to figure out how to get everything animated and transfer your consciousness over to the new painting. You’ll be able to see Seth and talk to him, too. At least, I think you will. And if you don’t have a voice right away, I’ll work with the magic until you do.”

Severus cocked his head, eyeing Harry up and down. “Seth?”

“Oh no. My name is Harry. Seth chose a different name so we wouldn’t be getting so confused all the time. It might be best for you to pick one, too, as my Severus lives with us.”

The photo Severus gave him a curt nod. He pointed to his tree and mimed writing.

“You’re going to write your name on your tree when you think of one?”

The boy nodded.

“Good. Then, would you like to meet Seth?”

Severus frowned and shook his head, giving another gesture towards his throat.

The real Severus whispered in Harry’s ear. “He is saying he would prefer to wait until they can speak together. He does not want to appear as weak to him for the first meeting.”

“Oh,” Harry said with a smile. “I understand. Well, then I’ll just have my owl take you to Dean then, all right? That’s my artist friend. Just, no hiding. He’ll need to see you to paint you. I’ll make sure he knows to treat you with respect and kindness.”

Young Severus gave a hesitant nod.

“Good. Then we’ll meet again soon. As soon as I know how, I’ll transfer your essence from the photo to the painting so you’re not left alone like this, okay?”

Thin, shivering shoulders slumped in relief, and a shaking hand dragged across the boy’s eyes. He mouthed, “Thank you,” to them, and Harry smiled.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart. You’ll have a home and a family again soon, I promise.”

Young Severus showed a tentative smile, and Harry wished he could hug the boy.

“Just make sure you tell Dean that you’re a spy for the Order of the Phoenix once we get your portrait animated. He doesn’t know about our ragtag little family yet, and it’s safer for all of us if it stays that way for now.”

Young Severus nodded his understanding.

“Good. Then I’ll just dash off a note for Hedwig, wrap you up, and send you on your way.”
A whistle and a short note later, photo Severus was on his way to London and Harry and the real Severus had returned to work.

Near nightfall, they had managed to make the safehouse mostly habitable again. The majority of the manor was still empty and in need of cleaning, but the main living areas were usable and clean, as well as the hallways between them. They had yet to update the kitchen, but the loo had new fixtures and magical plumbing, and the elves could make do with the hearth and counter set-up until they could install updated appliances.

It certainly wasn’t the standard of living either of their snake refugees were accustomed to, but it was liveable, and that was all Harry cared about. Malfoy would adapt or he could find his own place to live.

Once Severus and Harry had warded the place against anyone with ill-intent and set up a locked floo, Harry called his stag and patted the animal’s flank. “Go to Draco Malfoy. Make sure he’s alone and out of sight of his lovely parents. Tell him to be by the floo and ready to go in fifteen minutes. Return to me once you’ve done so and give me his answer.”

On the other side of the room, Severus was composing the same sort of message for Blaise Zabini, only he had given the other Slytherin twenty-five minutes to stagger their arrivals. As Severus had moved to the floo in preparation to receive Malfoy, Harry’s stag returned.

“Potter,” it whined back, “just because you have all your worldly possessions in one trunk doesn’t mean we all do. I’ll need twice that amount of time.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Ugh. You’re sure you want to bring that one in, Severus?”

Severus snorted. “He is rather high-maintenance, hmm?”

“Understatement. He probably spends more time in front of the mirror in the morning than Hermione, and that’s saying something.”

Severus rubbed his lip. “Hmm. Granger does not wear makeup that I have noticed.”

“No, but she swears it takes her an hour to wrestle her hair into any sort of decency.”

Severus chuckled. “Ah, now that I can believe.”

“Oi! Her hair’s not … that bad.”

“No, but it is curly, and as such, requires more work than your mop.”

Harry gave a put-upon sigh. “If I were to try to tame it, I’d be in the bathroom longer than both of them put together.”

Severus snorted and ran his hand through Harry’s wild tufts. “As I rather enjoy setting it in absolute rebellion, it seems an exercise in futility to waste time smoothing it down.”

“Then I guess I’d best keep making the most of my wicked time management skills.”

Severus laughed and placed a soft kiss on Harry’s lips. “Indeed.”

A startled squeak from behind them made Harry groan. “Was that Malfoy or Zabini?”

Severus turned. “Zabini.”
“Well, it could be worse, I suppose, but I thought he was supposed to come later?”

“I can’t,” Zabini gasped out. “Please. They’ll catch me any moment.”

Severus motioned him in. “Come through. Hurry.”

The Slytherin gave both men wary looks. “Professor Snape, what did you tell me on my first night at Hogwarts?”

Severus rubbed his chin in thought. “Ah. I believe it was something along the lines of: ‘all is not lost, you will make new family here.’ You were quite homesick, if I remember.”

Zabini gave him a dark look. “Yes, well no one claims first years are intelligent.”

Severus’ expression sobered. “Come, Zabini. Hurry. It is not safe to leave this connection open for long, particularly if you are being watched.”

With a huge sigh that was half-sob, Zabini bounded through the floo and rushed to hug Severus. “Thank you, sir. Gods, thank you.”

Stunned, Severus could do little more than pat the top of Zabini’s head. “Come now, Mister Zabini. You are safe here.”

With a shuddering sigh, Blaise straightened and released Severus. “Forgive me, sir. I was overwhelmed.”

“It is quite all right. Welcome to the Dawn Safehouse, Blaise. I believe you know Harry Potter?”

Zabini ran a hand through his hair—pitch black and almost as messy as Harry’s, but as his was curly, he had more of an excuse. “I remember.” He stood tall and glared at Harry. “What are your intentions with my head of house?”

Severus’ mouth fell open and Harry gaped.

Harry choked out, “Er … e-excuse me?”

Zabini crossed his arms over his chest and glared. “I saw him kiss you, Potter. So?”

Harry looked to his partner for an explanation of this strange new world. “Merlin. I wasn’t expecting to be accosted by your students, Verus.”

“Perhaps you had best answer Mister Zabini before he gets too carried away,” said Severus. “Though I will admit to being rather stunned myself.”

Harry shrugged. “I suppose there’s no help for it.” He turned back to the glaring Slytherin boy. “To answer your question, Zabini, we’re soul-bound. I can’t hurt him without hurting myself irreparably. Not that I’ve any desire to. I’m entirely in love with him, and he with me.”

Zabini gasped. “Merlin. You … you’re serious, Potter?”

He nodded. “I don’t feel comfortable displaying it for all and sundry, but you’ll see that the longer you’re here. I don’t think I can hide it very well. At least not where I feel safe. We have to hide it around Dumbledore.”

Zabini’s eyes narrowed. “Yes. Dumbledore. I don’t understand how you could have followed him blindly for so long, Potter.” He shook his head. “What changed your mind?”
Harry rubbed his toe on the floor. “Well, I’m going to have to talk about that tomorrow already, and I’d rather do it once, if you understand. It’s too hard. I haven’t even … revealed everything to Severus yet.”

Severus slipped a hand through Harry’s hair, and the gentle touch soothed him. He leaned against Severus’ side and held the man’s waist.

Zabini’s expression softened. “I do understand, Potter. He hurt you, too?”

Harry winced. “Badly so.”

“It’s the same for me.” Zabini edged closer and offered Harry his hand. “If you’re with Professor Snape, Potter, I reckon we should be friends. At least, I’m willing to try.”

Harry gave him a hesitant smile and shook his hand. “So am I.”

Severus rubbed his lip. “Do we reveal our relationship to Draco as well, Harry?”

Harry shrugged. “If he’s going to live here, I reckon we’ll have to.”

Severus sighed. “This is going to be a long night.”

Zabini laughed. “Indeed.”

Harry grinned. “You’re all right, Zabini.”

“Blaise. If we’re friends, you should call me by my given name.”

Harry nodded. “Then call me Harry.”

“Oh, how very touching,” said a drawling voice from the fireplace. “Might someone let me through tonight?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Just step in, Malfoy. It’s not closed. Though if you continue to be an annoyance, I might just change that.”

The great prat stepped through without a stumble, making Harry a little jealous of his physical grace. As Harry closed the floo connection with a wave of his hand, Malfoy brushed non-existent soot from his robes and gave them all a seemingly bored once-over.

“Would anyone like to explain that … utterly sentimental display I just saw? A truce is one thing, but friends, Zabini? And why is he … hugging the Professor?”

Blaise shrugged. “No point in fighting with them when they’re saving our skins, Draco. And you’ll have to ask Harry about Professor Snape.”

Draco nodded. “I’m assuming you’ve already verified their identities?”

“I verified Professor Snape’s. I assumed he would vouch for Po—Harry, since I don’t know anything to ask him.”

“I do.” Draco fixed cold silver eyes on Harry. “What was it that made you turn my offer of friendship away the first time, Potter?”

“You insulted Ron.” Harry sneered. “And I still won’t stand for it. Just because you had more money than God, Malfoy, it doesn’t make you better than anyone else. I reckon my vaults would lick
yours hollow anyway.”

Malfoy blinked. “They would? I didn’t think the Potters had such a vast fortune.”

“Ah, but I’m not just the Potter heir.” Harry grinned. “Try the heir of Potter, London-house Black, Peverell, and Gryffindor.”

Malfoy went ashen. “Dear gods.”

Blaise’s eyes were popping, too. “H-how much is all that, exactly?”

Harry laughed. “Too much for one man, to be sure. Which is why I’m building this place. So we have a safe place to hide out from Dumbledore and build resistance to both sides of this war. Well, at least against the false Light supporters and the overzealous.”

Malfoy arched an eyebrow. “Overzealous?”

“My last remaining godfather is a dark creature, Malfoy. Do you really think I support the anti-werewolf and vampire regulations? Or the way people with money are given a pass to do whatever they want—no matter their crimes—while people like me suffer?”

Malfoy choked. “Potter, if you’re the heir of all those lines, then you’ve more money than the entire Malfoy line put together.”

Harry smirked. “That hurt, didn’t it?”

Malfoy glared. “Shut up and explain.”

Harry laughed. “Sorry, sorry. It was too good to resist.” He let his mirth fade. “To answer your question, I wasn’t always rich, Malfoy. In fact, I grew up in sheer hell. You’ll hear more about that tomorrow night if you decide to join the Court of the Dawn.”

Malfoy gaped. Beside him, Blaise looked just as confused.

Blaise said, “What’s the Court of the Dawn?”

Severus answered. “Our side of the war, Blaise. The side which aims to rid us of both the Dark Lord and Dumbledore, as both are equally horrendous. It is a court of war.”

Draco went ashen. “You swore I wouldn’t have to fight.”

Harry held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “And you don’t. I don’t expect Molly Weasley to fight, for example, although she’s certainly fierce enough. She’d be great for helping us keep everyone fed, though, and you have skills we could use too, whether you’re fighting or not.”

Malfoy relaxed marginally. “You swear you won’t force me to fight?”

“I already have, and that hasn’t changed.”

“And even knowing that I don’t want to, you would still welcome me to this Court?”

Harry nodded.

Severus motioned to the house. “Draco, we chose this house with you and Blaise in mind. It is a former vineyard, and there is plenty of land available for a daylight potions garden. I thought you might wish to offer your services by growing ingredients for our potion masters, or by becoming a
potions master yourself. Healing potions are always necessary in war, as well as many others.”

Draco’s eyes lit up. “Really? You … you’re offering me a place to grow a potions garden and brew? And that’s all I need to do to support you?”

“Yes. And a winery for Blaise.”

Blaise frowned. “But … my whole family—I don’t want to be like them, Professor.”

“Severus,” the man corrected. “I am not your professor any longer. That goes for you as well, Malfoy.”

“Draco.” The boy gave a put-upon sigh. “And I guess you should call me that too, Potter. If you’re building a potions garden for me, I suppose the least I can do is offer you the use of my given name.”

Harry was tempted to roll his eyes at Malfoy’s pompous attitude, but decided to be the bigger man and gave Draco a sincere smile. “Call me Harry, then. And Blaise, you don’t have to make wines if you don’t want to. We just thought it was something you would know how to do and a way to make a new name for yourself, without the ties to your family. We don’t have any winemakers either and we need people in all kinds of occupations to make this town thrive. It’s empty, except for us.”

Blaise frowned, obviously considering. “I suppose I could make wines, if I don’t need to use my family name. Zabini Wines is … the name is tainted.”

Harry nodded. “That’s fine. You could name your brand after the town—it’s called Bàn Leon—or you could name it for the Dawn. Or just give it your own flair. You’re not bound to use a name you hate. And, like I said, we need all sorts, so if you’d rather do something else, you’re welcome to. Wine isn’t a necessity, after all.”

“But it would be nice,” said Draco with a smirk.

Harry grinned. “Sure would. So what do you think, Blaise?”

The Italian Slytherin nodded. “I suppose I can try my hand at winemaking, if I don’t need to put that name on my brand. I’ll work out what I want to call it later.”

“Brilliant,” said Harry. “And the Dawn? Are either of you interested?”

Blaise’s eyes hardened. “I am. I want to fight the bastards that drove me out of my own home and made my life so miserable.”

Harry looked to Severus. The man nodded.

“Welcome to the Court, then,” said Harry. “Draco?”

Malfoy nodded. “As long as I don’t need to kill anyone.”

“You don’t. Severus?”

Severus extended his hands to both Slytherins. “Welcome to the Court of the Dawn, boys. Our first meeting will be tomorrow evening. For now, we will get you settled in. I will warn you, we only started renovating this house earlier this evening. Beyond the basic living areas, it is still much in need of work. Our elves will be here throughout the day tomorrow updating the place, but until they are finished, I do not recommend that you go exploring beyond the rooms we will show you now.”

Draco nodded. “It’s … enough. At least I’ll be able to use magic here. I will, won’t I?”
Harry paled and swayed into his lover. “Oh gods! Verus, do you think the Ministry already has tabs on us here? I haven’t exactly been shy about using magic and—”

Severus touched Harry’s lips with a gentle fingertip. “Peace. There is no longer a trace on your wand. You are an adult.”

Harry shook himself free. “But what if they left the trace on just to keep tabs on me? You know they will if they can.”

“They would indeed, but they cannot. Adult magic changes the moment you come into your full inheritance. In other words, they would have to reapply the trace to you manually, and I would not allow it. Besides that, your magic is far too powerful for anyone at the Ministry to control. We are safe here, beloved.”

A choked sort of squeak made Harry smirk.

Draco gasped out, “Beloved?”

“No thanks, Mal—Draco,” said Harry with a grin. “I belong to Severus.”

“Yes, you do,” said Severus in a dark voice. “And anyone who dares try to take you from me will meet my wrath.”

Draco’s jaw dropped. “Merlin! You’re pulling my leg. You’re not really together.”

“Aren’t we?” Severus swooped down and caught Harry into a fierce, passionate kiss. Harry gasped into it and snaked his hands into Severus’ hair, chasing Severus’ questing tongue with his own. While not typically so forward, Harry found he couldn’t care about performing for an audience when Severus kissed him like that. Dear Merlin, he was positively melting.

Draco cried, “Bloody buggering fuck!”

Severus laughed into their kiss. He pulled back just enough to kiss Harry’s forehead and brought his lover into a tender embrace.

“I love you, Harry.”


Draco was staring at them, eyes popping and jaw on the floor. “You … but … how?”

Harry chuckled. “I reckon we’ll have to explain to more than just you tomorrow. Can you wait until then? I’m really tired. And Severus and I still have work to do tonight.”

Severus frowned. “Work?”

“My scars, love. I thought … if I had a little practise ….”

Both Slytherin boys looked at Harry curiously, but neither spoke.

Severus drew his love into a gentle kiss. “Ah. I understand, and I will help you with them, my Harry. For now, let us put the snakes to bed, hmm?”

“All right. This way, guys.” Harry led them through the house, showing off the new furniture and freshly-cleaned rooms. Draco stopped him after Harry had shown him the bedrooms and was trying to leave.
“Wait, Harry. Where’s the kitchen?”

“As of yet, there isn’t one,” said Severus. “These were renaissance style homes. During that period, the family gathered in the living area to cook and eat, hence the central hearth downstairs. The elves will begin modifying a room to serve as a kitchen after breakfast, and will also be cleaning and furnishing the rest of the house.”

Draco winced. “I haven’t had anything to eat yet. I was trying to avoid everyone, just in case ….”

Harry started to call Dobby, looked at Malfoy, and thought better of it. “Maybe you should call Winky? Dobby was abused at the Malfoys. I reckon he’ll be scared of Draco.”

Draco lowered his head. “I didn’t abuse him, Harry.”

“Oh. Sorry. I just assumed—”

Draco’s eyes flashed. “Oh, yes. Just because I—”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Enough. Harry, that was rude. Draco, learn to control your bloody temper. You are better than this, both of you.”

Draco looked away, his cheeks pink.

Harry lowered his eyes, too. “Sorry, Verus.”

“Apologise to Draco, not me.”

Harry sniffed. “I just didn’t want Dobby to be afraid and I didn’t know if he had—oh.” He gasped as the implications of his tacit accusation became clear. “Oh Merlin, I see. You were only twelve then, huh, Draco?”

Draco nodded tersely.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sorry. Sometimes my mouth gets ahead of my brain.”

“Truer words were never spoken.”

A spark of anger flared in Harry’s chest, but he didn’t act on it. Draco was irritated, after all, and he was still learning how not to be an arse. Harry could let his sniping go. For now.

Severus rubbed his love’s cheek to soothe him. “Thank you, Harry. Blaise, are you hungry?”

The boy blushed. “Well, I ate dinner, but I could do with a snack. Um, that is, if it’s not a problem.”

Severus chuckled. “I am not so old and senile that I have forgotten what it was like to be a teenager myself.” He raised his voice. “Bindy!”

The elf appeared and smoothed out her tea towel—Gemmy hadn’t finished her uniform yet. “How can Bindy be helping kind masters?”

“Mister Malfoy and Mister Zabini here are in need of supper. Are you able to provide them with a light repast before you turn in for the evening?”

Bindy bowed. “Bindy always be having a meal on hand in case of trouble.”

Severus nodded. “Please bring it to the boys here and conjure a table for them. Thank you, Bindy.”
She bowed and apparated out. Once she had gone, Severus fixed the Slytherins with a hard look. “Our elves are not slaves. They are employees of the Dawn and living beings and are to be treated with respect. You will say please and thank you and you will not, under any circumstances, either drive them to self-punishment or allow them to participate in it. Are we clear?”

Draco and Blaise responded immediately, “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, go downstairs to wait for Bindy. Harry and I are going to retire for the evening and leave you to settle in.”

Harry paused at the top of the stairs. “Do you two need anything else before we leave?”

Draco shook his head. “I think we’ll be okay for tonight.” A faint blush coloured his cheeks. “Um, thank you, Po—Harry, S-Severus. This is … good.”

Harry nodded. “You’re welcome, Draco.”

The Slytherin Prince’s smile leaned towards a smirk, but he did smile at least. Beside him, Blaise beamed, relief and gratitude written all over his face. Harry searched their eyes, saw that both were trying hard to throw off the shackles of their pasts, and smiled back.

‘We did the right thing with them.’

Now, if only it would be so easy to convince the Weasleys of that. Harry shuddered as he made his way downstairs.

Severus whispered, “Are you so disgusted with them, Harry? I thought they did well, considering.”

“Oh, no.” Harry squeezed his soul-bond’s hand. “I’m not disgusted, and they did try hard. Especially Blaise. He’s all right. No, I was just thinking about how we’re going to break it to the Weasleys tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Severus shuddered, too. “Merlin, that will be unpleasant.”

“Yep.” ‘Unpleasant’ was unlikely to cover the half of it.
Open Hearts

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Revealing scars from severe child abuse, Slash sex, discussion of rape and bad BDSM experiences, with zero etiquette and a lot of pain.

Summary: Severus, Seth, and Harry finish up for the day and go home, only to find Odin is dying from a curse that could kill Severus as well. Harry saves the day, of course, calms his partner down, and then it's Severus' turn to help Harry through getting him to reveal his scars.

***AN1: I am having trouble writing lately because of mental and pain fog, and my grandmother is in the ICU. I would be with her if I could, but since I can't, I'm adding this chapter. They don't think she'll make it through the day, so I don't know how present I'll be online for a while.***

***AN2: Just to clarify, there are two photos of Severus. One is referred to as 'Little Sev' (at this point) and is the photo of Severus as a 15 year old that they rescued from his former house. The other is the photo of 23-24 year old Severus that they clipped from the newspaper. As Little Sev is underage, he is NOT the participant in this chapter, it's the adult newspaper version of Severus. Hope that cleared things up.***

CHAPTER 23
OPEN HEARTS

It was near ten before Harry and Severus could leave the snakes to their new den and bring Seth home for the night. The elves were exhausted, but the studio looked good. They had managed to almost finish it entirely in one evening. Harry shook his head and whistled at the improvement, amazed at what a handful of house elves could do in a few hours.

“Merlin, guys,” he said upon taking in the clean, furnished space. “This looks great. Dean will love it.”

The elves bowed and grinned at his praise.

“Good work, everyone. Go home and get some rest and a midnight snack if you need it, yeah?”

The elves nodded and bid their masters goodnight before popping away. Severus took Seth into a hug and gave the boy a smile.

“Did you have fun today, little one?”

His smile stretched from ear to ear. “Yeah! Zephie is brilliant, you know? She’s a lot of fun. And the other elves listened to me and protected me, and it was great to be able to help, even if I couldn’t do much beyond give directions.”

“I am sure it helped.” Severus levitated the portrait and guided him out of the shop.
“You guys really did do a great job,” Harry said with a grin. “This place looks amazing.”

Seth beamed. “I’m glad. How did it go with the snakes?”

Harry told the boy about their meeting with the Slytherins and listened to the portrait chatter on about his day as well. Severus stayed quiet, only occasionally offering a comment here and there, but his expression was rich with love and joy in ‘his boys.’

Harry slipped his arm through Severus’ as they made their way up the walk to the house. “You’re so different now that you have happiness in your life, my Verus. It’s beautiful, watching you smile like this.” He kissed the man’s cheek and held him tight. “I hope you know how much I love you.”

Severus turned his head into Harry and kissed him tenderly. “As much as I love you, I should think.”

Harry chuckled. “Yes, about that much.” He laid his head against Severus’ shoulder as they walked, contentment washing away his worries. *This* was how life was supposed to be. Now, if only they could go five minutes without some travesty to ruin their peace, all would be well.

“Severus?” Seth’s voice was soft and tentative, but hopeful.

Severus flicked his hand, directing the portrait to float in front of them so Seth could see their faces. “Yes?”

The boy gave Severus a hesitant smile. “Um … I love you too. Not like Harry does, you understand? But I do love you.”

Severus stopped dead with a sharp intake of breath. “Seth, truly? I … oh, little one.” He kissed the portrait’s cheek and blinked tears back. “I love you as well.”

Harry grinned and hugged his partner closer, thrilled with this development. Golden bubbles of joy filled his chest and spilled over. He had a true family now, a family all his own.

Seth gave Severus a shy smile. “Don’t suppose I could call you Da?”

Severus blushed. “Ah, if you wish to. I would like to hear it, I think.”

“Really? I can?” Seth beamed. “Brilliant! I thought you’d laugh at me, but I’ve wanted to call you that since you held me that night we had to portkey out. It felt like you were just *supposed* to be my da, you know? Not like Harry. He’s my brother now.” Seth frowned. “Merlin, we’re a dysfunctional sort of family, aren’t we?”

Severus and Harry burst into laughter.

“I suppose we are at that,” Harry said through snorts. “Your da is dating your brother, and not a one of us blood related. Or are we? Huh. This *is* odd.” He shrugged. “Well, as long as everyone’s happy, I can’t say I care.”

“Nor do I,” said Severus with a soft smile. “I am just relieved to have a home again.”

“You’re always going to have one with us, Severus. Always.”

Severus held Harry close and nuzzled the young man’s hair. “I am glad. I—”

A shrill, sharp voice cried, “Master Harry, Master Severus! Come!”

The call of a distressed house elf brought Harry back to reality with a thud. He should have known
the fates would never allow him a simple moment to enjoy his family. He looked up, wondering what had gone wrong now, and his heart sank when he recognised the violet eyes and denim coveralls of their animal caretaker.

“Niren?”

Severus had gone ashen. “What is it, Niren? What has happened?”

“Odin! He is being … I’s don’t know what is wrong, but he is not being well.”

Severus brushed past Harry and Seth and darted into the house. Heart cold with fear, Harry grabbed Seth up and ran in after him.

“Severus! We’re here, love.”

He made his way to the post room and winced at the sight that met his eyes. Severus stood before the little sooty, tears on his lashes and a shaking hand petting the bird’s head. He looked lost and afraid, and Harry’s heart clenched with pain for his love.

“Verus? How bad is it?”

Severus looked up, eyes wide as if he had forgotten Harry was there. Perhaps he had. No one had ever been there to help him before.

“Severus?”

Severus closed his eyes and gathered his shields about himself like a cloak. “I do not know. I was … too distraught to scan him.”

Harry nodded and slipped his hand into his partner’s, setting Seth to hover beside them. “Go ahead and check him. I’ll help you heal him once we know what we’re dealing with.”

Severus held his wand in a trembling hand and waved it over the little owl. Numbers and stats Harry didn’t understand flickered into existence over the bird, a few of them outlined in red. Severus traced the red ones with his fingertip and paled.

“Gods. This … he is seriously ill, Harry. His heart is weak, his blood is thin, and his lungs are impaired. But I do not see a cause. I do not understand. He was always healthy before now.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed and his jaw set. “Dumbledore. He must have cursed Odin and I didn’t catch it the last time. Sev, just keep him calm. I’m going to heal him and go for power this time, okay?”

Severus stroked the little sooty’s head with a trembling hand. “Hurry.”

Harry nodded and let his magic take over. He started with the anti-dark magic chant Severus had taught him, but halfway through, the words changed. He didn’t understand where the new knowledge was coming from, but something in him had supplied him with the words to heal Odin, and Harry was too familiar with the pull of magic herself to fight the change.

“Sana Magia Nexu, Sana Magia Nexu ….”

Severus gasped and sank back, his face grey with shock and terror. “No. Gods, no.”

Harry paused, fearful he had done something wrong, but Severus urged him on.

“Do not stop. I will … without it, we will both ….” His eyes closed and a deep shudder racked his
When Harry’s chant changed, Severus’ heart stopped. He recognised that spell, though Harry couldn’t have known what it was—the counter for a slow killing curse for familiars that also weakened their wizard’s spirit. Harry’s magic had instinctually chosen the right course to heal his feathered friend—and Severus himself.

After Severus reassured Harry, a willow-green light settled on the little owl, stretching partway to Severus’ chest. A shudder worked its way down Severus’ spine. The curse had come far too close to destroying them both.

Rage spiked in his chest so sharply, it was a wonder Severus didn’t set the house ablaze. How dare Dumbledore hurt his familiar like this?

“The fucking bastard,” Severus spat.

Seth and Harry whirled around and gave Severus surprised looks.

Harry slipped his hands into Severus’ and gasped. “Merlin. You’re cursing in front of Seth and shaking from head to toe. It must have been—how bad is it, love?”

Severus closed his eyes. “Odin … it would have killed him. That curse would have killed Odin and followed his link to hurt me as well. It would have cut another slash into my spirit.” He rubbed his chest, trying to gauge if the pain had worsened or if it was merely grief tearing him to shreds. “Dumbledore wanted to drive me to despair—to suicide, Harry. I am certain of it.”

Harry’s eyes blazed. “I’ll kill him.”

“I know.” Severus lifted Odin’s head with a gentle fingertip under his chin. “Any better, my friend?”

Odin gave him a weak hoot, but nodded. His eyelids drooped, and Severus let him curl up on the perch.

“Rest, Odin. All will be well now. I am here.”

The little owl nuzzled Severus’ finger and settled in. Severus petted him with tears in his eyes, remembering all the times Odin had been the only friend he had. Remembering when he could share his worries and fears and pain with no one but his owl.

“I will not let him hurt you again, my friend.”

Warm arms wrapped around his waist from behind and held him against Harry’s chest. “Come on, love. Let him sleep. He’s okay now—I checked.”

Severus could not tear himself away, not yet. “Niren, will you continue to watch over him for me? I am still afraid.”

The little elf bowed. “Niren be watching him. He is being well now, though, Master Severus. The evil shadow is gone. He is just being sleepy now.”
“Thank you.” Severus watched his owl drift into sleep, still stroking the bird’s head and unable to force his feet to move.

“Severus, come on, love.” Harry tugged on Severus’ hand. “I know you’re scared, but he needs to sleep to heal. Let him rest, love. He’s okay.”

Severus’ voice broke on a whisper, “I cannot lose him. For so many years, he was the only one I had to talk to. And that manipulative bastard knows it.”

Harry slid his hand into Severus’ and gently guided him away from the sleepy owl. “I know, but Odin needs rest, love, and we’re keeping him awake. Let’s go into the living room and have a cup of tea. It’s going to be okay. Niren is watching over him and we’ll check on him in the morning, yeah? Just come away for now and let him sleep.”

“R-right.” Severus gathered his wits and forced his feet from the post room. A quick wandless spell brought Seth with them.

As they exited, the boy called, “Da?”

In spite of his fear and grief, Severus’ heart swelled at the name. “Yes, love?”

“I … I just thought it might help if you heard me call you that. He’s going to be okay, Da. I’m sure of it.”

Severus kissed the boy’s hair. “Thank you.”

He sighed and trudged into main room, fear rendering him cold and numb. Harry led him around a set of screens and into a cozy living area with plump blue sofas and cream-coloured pillows. Severus dropped onto the nearest sofa and rested his head in his hands. Harry sat beside him and rubbed Severus’ back.

“Bindy,” Harry called.

The elf popped out of the kitchen and stood before them. “How’s can Bindy be helping—oh. Master Severus be looking upset. Is you wanting a pot of chamomile tea, masters?”

Harry nodded. “That will be perfect, Bindy. Thank you.”

The elf bowed and popped away. A moment later, she reappeared with a tray of ginger biscuits and a steaming teapot. After thanking the elf, Harry fixed a cup for Severus and gently pushed it into the man’s free hand.

“Here. Take a bit, love. It’ll help, I think.”

As if on autopilot, Severus sipped the hot brew and let the honey-sweetened drink soothe his frayed nerves.

“There you are,” said Harry after awhile. “Any better?”

“A bit.”

Harry smiled and slipped his hand into Severus’ hair. “Talk to me, love. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“We’re here for you, Da,” Seth added in a soft voice.
Severus gave a numb nod and spoke in a low, pain-laden voice. “Odin has been my familiar for fifteen years. For so long, he was all I had. He was the only one who was happy to see me when I came home, even when I was in a surly mood and in pain and afraid. Until you, Harry, he was the only being who truly cared about me.”

Harry nudged his partner into his arms. “Well, I love you, Severus. Seth loves you. And you heard Fred ask about you yesterday. He cares about you—all the Weasleys do now, even Ron. And Hermione counts as an honorary Weasley, so she does too. And I’m sure from that Patronus message earlier that McGonagall cares, too. So you’re not alone any longer.”

“Dumbledore does not know that,” Severus said with a sniffle. “He believed that the loss of Odin would be the final cut and drive me to the grave.”

Harry tipped back Severus’ chin and kissed him with slow, gentle love until Severus could not help but respond. After setting his teacup on the table, he wrapped his arms around Harry’s shoulders and held him close. Harry’s love relieved his pain and fear, and Severus drank of it until the shadows released him from their hold.

“It’s okay now, Severus,” Harry murmured against his lips. “You’re safe and loved and Odin is fine. He’s just a bit sleepy, and no wonder after fighting such a curse.”

Severus sighed and kissed Harry’s forehead. “Thank you. I would not have been able to manage without you.”

“I’m here.”

“So am I, Da,” said Seth.

“Right,” said Harry. “We’re all here, and your family is safe. How about we finish a cup of tea and go to bed, hmm?”

Severus sighed and picked up his teacup again. “Very well. It is helping.”

“Good.” Harry snagged a ginger biscuit and poured a cup for himself. “Merlin, those are delicious.” He called over his shoulder, “How did we ever manage without you, Bindy?”

A high-pitched giggle answered him. “I does not know, Masters. I was not being there!”

Harry laughed and dipped his biscuit in his tea. He finished it off and licked his fingers, catching Severus’ attention. Harry frowned at the heat in Severus’ stare, then grinned as he caught on.

“You want to leave the tea, love? I do still need your help … to prepare for tomorrow.”

“Hmm. Practise, you said.”

Harry’s cheeks burned. “Yeah. Help me?”

“But for Merlin’s sake, put me to bed first,” said Seth with a wry laugh. “And don’t forget the silencing charm!”

Severus jumped. “Oh gods. Forgive me, little one.”

“No, no. Nothing to forgive. It’s nice to see … mutual attraction, you know? It’s teaching me what it’s like when people love each other, and that’s good. But yeah, I’d rather not see much more than that, if you get my drift, so maybe you could just … float me up to bed now?”
Severus laughed helplessly. “I suppose I must, if you have so little faith in my control as that. Come then, love, and I shall, as they say, tuck you in for the night.”

Seth grinned. “I’d like that, Da.”

“Zephie, come with us, little one.”

“Yes, Master Severus,” she chirped.

Severus chuckled and floated Seth upstairs, Harry and the elf close at his heels.

With Seth and Zephie safely put to bed for the evening, Severus led Harry to their bedroom, nerves cold with tension, and tried to think of the best way to make Harry relax enough to reveal his scars. Soft and slow? Would he prefer a more direct approach? Maybe they should just talk first.

Gods, he was so bad at this.

By the time he got to their doorway, he’d worried himself so much, he decided to just dive in and hope Harry was receptive. If not, they would find something else to do, he supposed.

As soon as the bedroom door shut behind them, Severus pinned Harry against the door, holding the mage’s hands above his head, and dove straight into the young man’s mouth. His heart thudded in his ears as he kissed Harry hard and a little roughly, demanding entrance, thrusting in when Harry’s mouth opened in surprise.

Severus trembled all over. This was a far more intense kiss than he had ever shared with Harry. Would his beloved push him away? Gods, he hoped he wasn’t being too rough.

Harry melted against him with a moan, and Severus’ fear shifted into all-consuming desire. Merlin, this was good. So good. Harry’s concession of control indicated strong trust, and that was what Severus needed to finally convince the young man to reveal the whole of his body.

Harry broke away long enough to pull one hand free and dig his wand out of his back pocket. He had to move his hips away from the door to reach it, and the movement rubbed their erections together. Severus gasped at the shock of lightning through his system.

Gods, every touch with Harry, even the smallest brush, set his world ablaze.

No one who had ever touched him before could even compare. Briefly, he wondered what his past ‘lovers’ would think if they knew an eighteen year old virgin had put them all to shame, then decided he didn’t care. They couldn’t hurt him any longer, and Harry was his. Harry loved him.

Nothing else mattered.

Harry flicked his wand and muttered something indistinct, and a pale aquamarine light flashed against the walls and faded.

Harry gave him a wry grin. “Almost forgot the silencing charm again. That one should be permanent, I think, unless we’re in trouble.”

Severus whispered against Harry’s lips, “Is it ready then?”
Harry’s breath hitched. “Yesss.”

“Good.”

Severus captured Harry’s wand hand again and delved into the mage’s parted lips with alacrity. Harry’s moans tasted heady and sweet, and Severus devoured each one.

_Gods_, he needed this. He ached for Harry, yearned for him deep within his being.

Ablaze with desire, he held the quivering young man captive with hand and tongue, a press of slim hips and thigh, and intense, soul-searing passion.

Severus groaned at the feel of firm heat against his hip. “Harry, are you all ri—”

Harry shut him up with another bone-melting kiss, and Severus gave in to him with a moan. “Harry, please.”

Harry kissed Severus’ neck over his buttons. “Open your shirt for me? I don’t want to scare you.”

“Oh, yes.”

Severus opened his buttons with trembling fingers, and gasped as Harry latched his mouth on the patch of skin he revealed. Harry suckled Severus’ neck and stroked his hot, wet tongue across the older man’s throat, and _gods_. Severus’ fingers went lax around the next button, twinges of tugging heat surging through him with each stroke of Harry’s tongue.

Then Harry applied suction, and Severus’ breath stuttered with the tinges of electricity through his entire body.

“Oh Merlin,” he gasped out.

“Harry,” the young man whispered against his ear. “I’m Harry, not Merlin.”

Severus grabbed Harry up and kissed the breath from him. “Gods, I know, love. Come to the bed with me?”

For an answer, Harry kissed him again and gently guided him backwards, his hands on either side of Severus’ face, holding him with a soft touch to keep him calm.

_Gods_, Harry was so gentle. So understanding.

And Severus was on _fire_.

He groaned into Harry’s mouth and finished taking off his shirt as they moved to the bed. His legs hit the mattress, and he tossed the shirt aside.

Harry smiled into their kiss and whispered, “Beautiful.”

Then calloused palms caressed Severus’ chest, strong fingers seeking out the tingling buds on either side. Harry stroked and rubbed them between hot fingertips, and Severus threw his head back with a gasp.

Fuck. He had no idea his nipples could be so sensitive, at least not in a good way. Every stroke sent sharp, tugging heat down through his chest and straight to his groin.

_Merlin, yes._
Harry looked up at him. “Okay?”

“Y-yes.”

“Lie down for me?”

Though he felt odd about it with his boots still on, Severus obeyed and settled upon the bed, leaving his feet hanging off the edge.

Harry kissed Severus’ belly, then kicked off his trainers and socks and knelt at the side of the bed, confusing Severus.

“Harry? What are you doing?”

He had his question answered when Harry tugged off Severus’ boots and socks and took one of his feet in a firm grasp. A cleaning charm rushed over his sole, flooding him with pleasant tingles and curiosity.

“Driving you mad,” the young man murmured, and then pressed his mouth to the middle of Severus’ sole.

Severus arched and cried out at the crash of fire through his veins.

“Ghn, oh gods!”

Each stroke of Harry’s tongue, each time he suckled and caressed with tender lips, tingling heat roared through Severus and reduced him to a mewling, begging mess. His free foot kicked at the floor until strong hands captured it and curled his toes with the pressure of caressing fingertips on his sensitive sole. The twin surges of sensation proved too much, and Severus half-sobbed Harry’s name.

“H-Harry! Please, please. I need you, please.”

Harry seemed to understand Severus’ nonsensical begging and climbed to straddle the man’s hips, his emerald eyes dilated to forest green in his passion. Out of morbid curiosity, Severus flicked his gaze to the nightstand and had to suppress a gasp at the sight of his photo from the newspaper—stark naked and languidly stroking himself. As Severus stared, the man in the photo raised an eyebrow and cocked his head towards Harry, as if telling him to get on with it.

“Dear Merlin!”

Harry followed Severus’ gaze and burst into giggles. “Guess he’s enjoying the view, hmm?”

“Apparently.” Severus shivered. “I am not sure how I feel about having … an audience.”

“He’s just you, Severus. It’s okay. Just keep your eyes on me.”

Severus smiled and stroked Harry’s cheek. “That is no hardship.”

“Mm, not for me either.” Harry kissed Severus hard and came up panting. “Gods, you’re beautiful like this. Silky black hair all splayed out and messy, cheeks red, calling my name. Oh, Severus. So gorgeous.”

Severus’ face flamed, and he pulled Harry down atop him. “No. You are the beautiful one, your lips red from making love to me, hair mussed.” His heart panged with a fierce surge of possessiveness. “Promise me I am the only one who will ever see you like this.”
“I wouldn’t want it any other way, love.”

He threaded his fingers into Harry’s hair and pulled him close. “Promise me. Please. I need to hear it.”

Harry winced. “You, you’ve been hurt like that, too, haven’t you?”

Yes. He had. He still remembered the way she had treated him, stringing him along, making him believe she cared … until she announced her engagement to another man.

But Harry wouldn’t leave Severus like that … would he?

To Severus’ chagrin, doubts swirled in his mind. Why wouldn’t Harry just say it? Did he not want to stay?

Severus’ eyes filled despite himself. He needed those words, just this once.

“Harry, please.”

“Oh, love!” Harry held Severus’ cheek, leaning on one hand, and stroked his tears away. “Verus, ssh. I wasn’t refusing you. I only wanted to understand why it was so important.”

He kissed Severus with exquisite tenderness, and the knot of fear in the older man’s chest slowly melted away.

“My beautiful Severus,” Harry murmured against the man’s lips, “I love you and you only. I promise you, from this moment on, I will never show this side of me to anyone but you. You are mine, and I am yours.”

Severus growled and caught Harry up, overcome with need. “Mine.” He brought Harry into a panting, frenzied kiss and broke away gasping. “I want you now, all around me, in my very soul. Please.”

Harry’s breath hitched. “Yeah? I, how do I … what do you want?”

Severus tugged Harry closer and suckled the skin below the younger man’s ear. “I want to explore every dip and curve of your body.” He dipped lower and lapped at Harry’s collarbone. “I want to be inside you, if you will allow me to take you, to make love to you slowly and tenderly, like we have never known.” He brought Harry into a passionate, soul-melting kiss and whispered against his lips, “And I want to taste every inch of you all the while.”

Harry let slip a soft moan and panted against Severus’ throat.

“Gods, Verus. Your voice is pure sex, do you know that? If you keep talking like that, I’ll end up taking you right now.”

“Oh, Harry.” Severus swallowed a sudden surge of fear and cupped the young mage’s face. “I would allow it, for you, but perhaps this time, would you allow me to make love to you? At least until I am more secure and you are more experienced?”

Harry shivered and slipped his hand into Severus’. “Y-yeah. Will it hurt, though?”

“Perhaps a bit, but I will do everything I can to ensure that you experience as little discomfort as possible.”

He nudge closer. “D-does it feel good, having someone inside you?”
Severus closed his eyes and shuddered. “Harry … I … if your partner is careful, yes. I have … heard it is pleasurable.”

Harry sat up, green fire blazing in his eyes. “They weren’t careful with you.”

Severus winced and shook his head.

“They hurt you.”

Severus could only nod.

“And that’s why you want to top for a while?”

Severus swallowed hard and closed his eyes. “Love, I, I may never be able to—I … I am … scarred.”

Harry sighed and kissed him with tenderness. “Well, I mean, I’d like to know what it feels like—”

Severus’ heart clenched and he trembled beneath Harry.

“—But if you can’t do it, then you can’t. And that’s okay.” Harry kissed him softly. “I love you, Verus. I wish those bastards hadn’t hurt you so badly, but however I get to be with you, it’s good.”

Severus’ breath caught. “You mean you would be satisfied with never topping?”

“Whatever it takes to make you happy, love. Besides, you never know ….” Harry turned bright red. “I might r-really enjoy the feel of you … um … deep and hard inside me.”

Severus’ breath left him in a great whoosh. “Sweet Merlin, Harry.”

Harry gave him a lopsided grin. “First time I ever tried talking like that. How’d I do?”

Severus groaned and pulled him into a fiery kiss by way of response. “Mine,” he whispered against Harry’s lips. “You are mine.”

“Yeah.” Harry kissed Severus’ earlobe. “I’m yours.”

He sucked Severus’ ear between his lips and teeth and gods! Who would have thought Severus’ ears could light his entire body ablaze? With a shaky moan, he arched into Harry and slid his hands under Harry’s tee, stroking those muscled, slim sides with gentle fingertips.

Harry froze and pulled back with a whimper, shaking all over. Severus didn’t know what had gone wrong until he remembered why they had started all this in the first place.

Harry’s scars.

He kissed Harry’s forehead and gently pressed the man back onto the bed. “Do you truly think I would be so cruel, so capricious as to throw you away because you bear scars? Do you believe that I have forgotten who is responsible for healing mine?”

Harry sniffled and turned his face into Severus’ arm. “No, b-but I’m scared. Don’t want you to think I’m a fre—”

“Stop.” Severus kissed him softly. “Ssh. Do not say that word. Nothing of it applies to you. You are beautiful and loving and the brightest star in my sky.”
Harry blushed and gave him a wry grin. “That was unexpectedly romantic.”

Severus kissed his nose. “It is true.”

“Also a bit corny.”

Severus laughed. “Merlin, Harry. I am only trying to say that I love you.” He gave Harry a soft smile and a tender kiss. “I love every part of you—yes, even your scars. They only show how brave and resilient you are. That you survived, even when older and stronger people tried to kill you at every turn.”

Harry smiled back, but Severus was not so easily fooled. Harry thought he was simply being kind and making the best of a bad situation. Severus couldn’t blame him. In Harry’s shoes, he would have had trouble believing it as well.

Wait. He had been in Harry’s shoes not three weeks prior.

“Harry, do you remember the morning you healed my back from that whipping curse?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“Do you remember what my body looked like then?”

Harry’s eyes filled with sorrow. “You looked a bit like I do now, only your chest and belly had scars, too.” He traced loving fingertips over Severus’ stomach. “I’m so glad you’re healed, love. You were handsome before, but it hurt me inside to see your scars, to know how much you’d sacrificed only to be rejected by everyone. You deserve so much better.”

Severus kissed him tenderly. “I have my reward in you, love. And I ask you now, when you saw my scars, did you lose respect for me?”

“Lose it? Merlin, no. Just the opposite. Seeing the evidence of what you’d endured so long only made me respect you more.”

“And did you love me less?”

“I … I think I loved you more. Your bravery—gods, you’re a bloody hero, Severus!”

Severus cupped Harry’s cheek and met his eyes. “As are you, Harry. You are my hero. Without you, I wouldn’t have survived that night Riddle discovered me. Your voice, your kindness gave me something to hold onto, and your love gives me strength now, when my entire world has fallen down around my ears. All except our little family.”

Harry’s eyes had filled with light and tears. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Severus gave him a gentle kiss. “I love you, Harry James Potter. All of you. Your name, your heart, your body. Your scars.” He kissed the famous lightning bolt as well. “My love, will you let me see you? Will you trust me to stay and treat you with respect and care even knowing the darkest parts of you, just as you have done for me?”

Tears slipped down Harry’s face, and he glanced to the nightstand. Severus followed his gaze and his heart lurched at the look of pain on the newspaper photo’s face. Photo Severus mouthed something like “It’s okay,” and pressed a trembling hand to the glass. Harry gave him a sad smile.

“You won’t hate me for them either?”
The man in the photo shook his head, letting slow tears streak his cheeks. Harry brushed a knuckle down the glass as if to wipe them away.

“O-okay. I’ll try.”

The real Severus kissed Harry gently. “Yes, love. Try for me. I give you my word, my Harry, I will only love you more.”


Severus kissed Harry and stroked his cheek. “You are beautiful, and you are mine. I will never let you go.”

“Y-yeah. Yours.”

With a sigh, Harry nuzzled Severus’ cheek and scooted back off the bed. Once he had his footing, Harry took a few deep breaths and reached for the hem of his shirt. He hesitated, tremors visible throughout his frame, and Severus murmured encouragement to him.

“Beloved, you’re safe. I love you. I want you. That will never change.”

Harry breathed once more, closed his eyes, and tugged his shirt off. He hesitated again with his pants, but then, he was a virgin. No doubt he would be nervous about removing those even if he wasn’t scarred.

“Harry, you can leave those on if you are afraid.”

Harry’s fingers twitched, then he shook his head and squared his shoulders. “No. You can’t make love to me with these on, and if you still want me once you see, then I want to … to know how you feel inside me.”

Severus swallowed hard and clenched his hand in the sheets. “Oh, Merlin. Yes, yes I want you.”

Harry gave him a wan smile and doffed his pants. He stood slowly, naked, blushing, and trembling from head to toe.

At the removal of Harry’s last barrier, Severus’ groin filled with heat. Gods, Harry truly was beautiful. A gorgeous, sculpted man, slender and full of wiry strength, dusted with fine black hair over his arms, chest, and that perfect stomach. Severus swallowed hard and traced his eyes downwards and moaned. Harry had gone half-soft from fear, but even so, Severus had never seen a sight more enticing.

“Gods, Harry. How could you think I wouldn’t find you attractive? I can barely breathe for wanting you.”

Harry gave a nervous laugh. “You haven’t seen the b-bad parts yet.”

“No part of you is bad.” Severus moved to sit on the edge of the bed and held Harry’s waist. “Turn for me, love, if you can. I promise I will not run.”

Harry let out a sobbing kind of gasp and wrenched his body around.


He’d had no idea Harry’s scars were this bad. The mage had not an inch of unmarked skin from the
base of his neck to the back of his knees. Some of the welts in his rear end had even left valleys where they had needed stitches and hadn’t been treated. It was the same with Harry’s shoulders.

Tears blurred Severus’ vision even as his chest filled with burning rage, choking him in its intensity. How could anyone do this to his Harry? His brave, beautiful soul-bond deserved love and care, not this monstrous treatment. He glanced to the photo and saw the same horror-lanced fury in his image’s eyes, too. Even though the photo would forget this in a few moments, it relieved Severus to know that he wasn’t the only one to want to throttle the bastards who had hurt his love.

“S-Severus?”

Gods, Harry was terrified. Severus held Harry’s hips and pressed a tender kiss to his spine. Harry gasped and went rigid.

“Ssh. Do not fear. It is all right now.” Severus’ voice broke. “My love, I swear to you, no one shall ever hurt you like this again. I will protect you with my life.”

Harry trembled and hugged his chest tight. “Do you hate me now?”

Severus pressed a tender kiss to one of the worst scars across Harry’s hip, making the younger man jump. “Never, love. I only want to protect you. You are still beautiful and brave and everything to me.”

Harry broke into cathartic sobs and launched himself into Severus’ arms, tackling the man onto the bed once more.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said through kisses. “I’m so sorry I was afraid. I should have trusted you better. I, I should’ve—”

“Ssh.” Severus held Harry and kissed him with love. “You have done nothing to be sorry for. Of course you were afraid. I was, too, when I was still scarred.”

He traced both hands down Harry’s back, purposefully caressing the parts of his beloved that his monstrous relatives had only ever hurt, trying to erase some of the mage’s pain with a loving touch.

“Gods, I wish I could heal you so much, Harry. I wish I could take all these scars away, so you feel safe again.” He paused as an image of the bright yellow flowers on Campion Road flashed through his mind. “Merlin! Maybe I can. Not like you did for me, of course, but with all the campion in this area, I might be able to make a salve, and then we could—” He stopped as Harry burst into laughter.

“What?”

“Even in bed with me, you’re talking about potions.”

Severus blushed. “Oh. I only wanted to help you.”

“I know. It’s okay.” Harry kissed him gently. “I love you, Verus. Make that salve, research and experiment because I know you enjoy it, but don’t worry if you can’t remove my scars. I was only afraid I’d lose you over them. If you really still find me attractive, then I’d just like to put this all behind us and make love now.”

Severus’ breath hitched. “Gods, yes.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Severus chuckled. “I have no bloody idea!”
Harry brought Severus into an intense kiss, and heat and pressure sought out the depths of him. Severus moaned and opened for Harry, thrilling in the feel of his beloved’s bare skin under his fingertips. As Harry’s tongue plundered him—and Merlin, being kissed so hard had never felt like this before—Severus slipped his hands lower, sliding his fingertips over curved, rough skin, searching to a smooth place to caress in hopes Harry would feel safer.

Ah, there. The whip couldn’t catch the bottom of Harry’s bum, where the fold of his skin had protected him a little. He cupped Harry’s cheeks in his palms and massaged him, tracing his nails lightly over that bit of smooth skin, and Harry gasped and moaned into Severus’ neck.

“Good,” Harry panted. “Feels good.”

Severus suppressed a sigh for Harry’s sake and massaged with more confidence, exploring and memorising every curve and dip.

“Yesss!”

Harry spread his legs and buried his face into Severus’ neck, and the older man shivered.

“You wish me to …?”

Harry nodded and muttered, “Yeah. Yeah, touch me.”

“Oh, yes. I need … a spell first, so it is safe and feels good.”

“Mhn, I trust you.”

Severus cast a cleansing spell inside Harry’s bum and wandlessly coated his fingertips in lubricating gel.

“Oh,” Harry said with a gasp. “That was strange.”

“Yes, it does feel odd. It was a spell to clean you inside and lubricate your passage.”

“Oh. So, am I ready then?”

“Not hardly. Come higher.”

Harry moaned and obeyed, crawling up Severus’ body a few more inches. The young man’s heat pulsed into Severus’ belly instead of his hips, but Severus enjoyed it still.

He slipped a wet fingertip into the top of Harry’s cleft. “You are sure?”

“Y-yeah. Please.”

“Tell me to stop if you are afraid.”

“I promise. Now just touch me, already.”

Severus gave a dark chuckle and slowly moved his fingertips downwards, stroking, caressing, burying kisses in Harry’s throat. Harry gasped as Severus found his goal and slowly circled him.

“Ohh.” Harry panted into Severus’ hair and spread his thighs. “Yeah. S’good.”

Severus suckled Harry’s throat and caressed his side as he carefully pressed a fingertip inside.
“Ah. Oh, that … a little strange.”

“Mm, I know, love. Just wait.”

Harry nodded and pushed back a little into Severus’ hand. Severus winced and hoped Harry had not just hurt himself.

“Oh, Sev’rus. Yeah.”

Well, that sounded promising. Severus hesitantly stroked and pressed deeper, drawing a low moan from his soul bond.

Hmm. It did appear Harry would enjoy this after all.

With a little more confidence, Severus set about to exploring his soul-bond in earnest, preparing him along the way. Harry gasped and mewled and pleaded until Severus had gone as far as he could go, and the young man was still rocking softly into his belly.

Yet, Severus knew the next stage would hurt more, unless Harry was thoroughly aroused. So, with great care, he slipped out and turned his partner onto his back.

Harry gave a soft cry of want and opened his legs. “Please. More.”

Severus just looked his fill for a moment, taking in the sight of Harry lying naked and spread out—for him—his gorgeous body gleaming with sweat and flushed with desire.

Dear gods.

Severus let his breath out in a rush. “Beautiful.”

Harry keened and reached for him. “Please. Need you.”

Severus panted and took Harry into a fiery kiss. For a moment, it was all tongues and teeth, Harry’s breath in Severus’ mouth and Harry’s hands sliding under Severus’ trousers.

*Trousers? Why the hell was he still dressed?*

Severus groaned into Harry’s mouth and opened his trousers without breaking the kiss. With a whispered incantation, his remaining clothing flowed off his body and puddled into a folded pile at the foot of the bed.

Harry panted and kissed Severus hard. “Gods, you’re so sexy.”

Severus replied by suckling Harry’s neck and stroking his hand up the mage’s thigh. “Are you ready, love?”

Harry glared and lifted his hips. “Been ready for like ten minutes. Please.”

Severus chuckled and wedged a pillow under Harry’s bum. “All right. Take it slow, love. The first time may hurt a bit even with all the preparation I’ve done. Don’t just impale yourself, allow me to set the pace and give you time to adjust.”

“Yes, all right. Just get inside me, already.”

Severus used the lubrication spell on his erection—twice for good measure—and, with great care, nudged the tip inside his partner. Harry gasped and tensed beneath him.
“H-hurts a bit.”

“Bear down against me, love. It should help.”

Harry obeyed, and as the pain left his lover’s face, Severus slowly eased inside. He held still when he was fully seated, struggling to keep calm with the feel of that glorious silken heat wrapped all around him. With a groan, he leaned forward and brushed a clump of damp hair back from his lover’s forehead.

“Does it still hurt, love?”

Harry blinked hard and cupped Severus’ cheek. “Love you. Hurts a little, but knowing you’re inside me makes up for it.”

Severus gasped as Harry experimentally squeezed his muscles, sending heat through the older man and straight into his core. “Merlin. I will not last if you continue doing that.”

“Move. Doesn’t hurt now.”

Severus groaned and slowly pulled away, watching Harry’s face as he eased back inside. Awe and nervousness and tension played with his lover’s features, each battling for dominance in his lover’s face. Well, that was no good. He wanted Harry to enjoy their first time together, not suffer through it as Severus had done. With a frown, he canted his hips and tried again.

Harry’s eyes blew wide with shock and a shuddering gasp escaped him. “Y-yes. There. Right there.”

“Mm, all right.”

Severus aimed for that spot again, using Harry’s expressions to guide his thrusts, and his lover cried out over and over again.

“Sev’rus! Yes, more!”

A low groan escaped his control. “Harry. Love you so much.”

“Ghn, take me, Verus. Not gonna break.”

Severus growled and gave into his need, falling to on Harry’s throat and chest as he thrust into his partner like mad. “Mine, mine,” he gasped between thrusts. “Always mine.”

“Yes, yours,” Harry gasped out. “Severus!”

Harry rocked up into him, tension singing along his veins like a live-wire. He shrieked Severus’ name once more and climaxed, heat spreading across Severus’ belly and along his channel. As Harry’s orgasm clenched around him, Severus cried out and thrust hard, and the next moment, he followed his partner into bliss.

Vision greyed out with the intensity of his pleasure, he sank onto Harry with a groan. “Merlin. Can’t … too good.”

Harry panted some breathy reply Severus couldn’t make out and ran his fingers through his partner’s hair. “Yeah. Was brilliant.”

“Mhn.”

“Stay there, Sev. Stay inside me for a minute. Wanna feel you.”
Severus couldn’t have moved if he wanted to. His body felt as though it was made of rubber. He lay there, still ensconced within his lover, rapid breathing and heartrate slowly falling back into a normal range. A pleasant lassitude and warmth settled over him as Harry held him and caressed his face and hair, legs still wrapped around him and fingertips gentle.

“Need to move, Harry,” he muttered. “Going to hurt if I stay inside much longer.”

Harry nodded and motioned him up. “Come, then.”

Severus slowly eased out and, at the pained look on his lover’s face, cast a spell to ease Harry’s residual aches and a cleaning spell over them both.

Harry frowned as Severus settled beside him. “Does it always hurt?”

“I am not the right person to ask, beloved, but I have heard it becomes easier with time.”

Anger flickered across Harry’s features. “Remind me to kill all the ones who hurt you someday.”

“Hmm. Some of them are already dead.”

“Good. They deserved it.”

Severus kissed Harry’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Hmm? What are you thanking me for?”

“For loving me. For wishing to avenge my pain.”

“Yeah. I do love you.” Harry kissed Severus lightly and turned to snuggle him close. “This is nice. Don’t want to move.”

“Hmm. Perhaps we should just sleep, then?”

“Hn-uhn. I’m not ready to sleep yet. Want to enjoy you a little more.”

Severus smiled and held Harry closer. “Yes. I am here.”

“Stay.”

“There is nowhere else I would rather be, my love.”

Harry nestled his head between Severus’ chin and shoulder. “Good.”

They lay there for a few moments, just breathing in the scent of each other, enjoying the warmth of afterglow. Severus was getting pleasantly sleepy when Harry’s soft voice brought him fully awake again.

“Love, what happened? Why were you so afraid earlier, when you asked me to promise I would never show this part of me to anyone else?”

Severus shuddered. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Of course I do.” Harry leaned up so Severus was on his back and Harry lay on his elbow beside him, stroking over his chest. “It’s a part of you, isn’t it?”
“Yes, but I thought … well, if you truly wish to know, there was a woman, long ago, that I had … regular relations with. She drew me in with sweet promises, but she was false.”

Harry frowned and caressed Severus’ cheek. “What happened?”

Severus closed his eyes, wishing he could simply forget the memories and move on, but Harry had asked. “I made the mistake of caring for her. She was the first person to show me any sort of interest, and I fell for it like a fool. She brought me to her bed, but nothing was like you. Where you are gentle and warm, she was hard and cold, and she laughed at me because of my feet. Called me a dirty slut. I drew away for a time after that to nurse my wounds. Then, when I had forgiven her, she announced her engagement to Lucius and broke me into pieces.”


Severus shrunk into himself. “Do you hate me for it?”

“Oh, love. Not at all. I only wish she hadn’t hurt you. Then again, her loss is my gain.” Harry kissed Severus softly, until love melted his fears away. “I promise, Severus, I am with you and you only. You are my first and only love.”

Severus smiled and blinked tears down. “As you are mine.”

Harry blinked. “You didn’t love her?”

“I tried, but she was too cruel to me. Even at the height of our association, her coldness to me left me wary.” Severus gave a bitter laugh. “I should have told her to shove her false love and leave me alone, but I was a lonely, desperate fool. All she had wanted from the beginning was my potions recipes. She asked about them after sex, for Merlin’s sake.”

Harry winced. “Some afterglow, huh?”

Severus snorted. “Indeed. Does it bother you? That I am sharing my past with you while we are in bed together?”

Harry nuzzled Severus’ nose and kissed him lightly. “No, love. I’ve asked you before. I was hoping you’d feel safe enough to tell me someday.”

“Why? I should think you wouldn’t want to hear about my past conquests.”

“That’s the thing, love.” Harry cupped Severus’ face and held his gaze. “Your past relationships aren’t conquers, as far as I can tell. You’ve been hurt and abused, and I need to know where it hurts so I don’t cause you more pain by mistake.”

Severus turned into Harry and pulled him close, taking comfort in his warm, male scent. “I don’t believe you could hurt me. You were gentler on the first day of our cohabitation than any person has been to me in my entire existence.”

“Wasn’t your mother kind, love?”

Severus scowled. “Yes, of course, but I would prefer not to talk about her in my bed.”

Harry snorted. “Good point.” Hot palms rubbed down Severus’ back, stroking in slow circles until gentle fingertips cupped his buttocks. “Can you tell me what happened here? Why it scared you when I smacked your bum?”
Severus shuddered. “I have told you that, in my … career as a spy, I often had to seduce the Death Eaters to get information. With those skilled at mind magic, I had no other recourse. Rookwood had questionable tastes. The kind that left me scarred and bleeding when he left the next morning.”

Harry stiffened. “He raped you, love?”

Severus gave a bitter laugh. “He didn’t even penetrate me. His idea of sex was beating and humiliating me until he came.”

Harry gaped. “You, you’re serious? Merlin. That’s, it’s twisted. I’m almost glad he’s gone and can’t hurt anyone else like that.”

Severus buried his head in Harry’s hair. “I apologise.”

“For what, love?”

“For distressing you after your first time. For polluting your memory of what should be lovely.”

Harry kissed Severus with soft, tender love. “It is lovely, my Verus. You are lovely. Just you.” He nuzzled close. “Are you okay?”

Severus sighed and held Harry tight. “More than. That was the first time that love did not hurt.”

“Well, it stung a bit for me, but all I need is some practise.” He grinned. “And I’m glad to get it with you. You were so gentle.”

“I did not wish your first time to be like mine.”

“It was perfect, Severus. And, you know, I kind of gave you a new body when I de-aged you. So, in a way, this was like your first time. At least, in this body it was.”

Severus paused, overwhelmed. Was it true? Had Harry given him a new start?

He reasoned that even if it wasn’t technically true, Harry had redeemed him that night, and that was all that mattered.

“Yes.” Severus turned Harry onto his back and kissed him passionately. “Our first time was indeed perfect.”

“Hmm. Keep that up and you’ll have a randy teenager on your hands all over again.”

Severus chuckled wryly. “I am an older man, love. I do not think I could ….” He stopped, his breath stilled, as Harry cupped his shaft and slowly stroked him to hardness once more.

“You were saying, old man?”

Severus growled and pinned his Harry to the mattress. “Mine.”

“Yes, yours.” Harry grinned. “Take me, love.”

“Gods.” Severus climbed atop his soul-bond, rocking their hips together, and prepared himself for a long, busy night.
Harry was pleasantly achy when the sun woke him the next morning. Too early. With a groan, he buried his face in Severus’ shoulder and pulled the covers over his head. Severus grunted but did not wake.

Until a booming bark brought both of them out of a doze with a vengeance.

Harry gasped and scrambled for his wand and glasses, his head foggy and brains lost somewhere among their scattered clothing. A hand on his shoulder soothed him.

“It is only Sandra’s Patronus, love. Ssh.”

Harry groaned and relaxed into Severus’ side. “Whatever she wants this early in the morning, I don’t care.”

Severus snorted. “It is almost noon.” He tapped the St. Bernard’s head. “What is it? Harry and Xavier are listening.”

The Saint Bernard barked and started into her tale. “Harry, it’s Sandra—we have a bit of an emergency at the Prophet. Someone is trying to publish an article about you and Severus Snape, and it’s bad. This says something about how the Ministry should rule supreme and that you and Master Snape are Undesirables number 1 and 2 respectively, and then it goes on to say that Muggleborns who don’t register with the Ministry will face severe punishment.”

“Dear gods,” Severus breathed. “No question as to who authored that.”

“None at all,” said a sickened Harry. He tapped the Patronus again. “Go ahead.”

The dog wagged its tail and continued. “Anyway, I need your help, Harry. This boy swears he’s with the Ministry and I’ll be taken in if I don’t publish this travesty of an article. Anyone can see it’s hogwash from the ‘other’ side, but gods! I’m not powerful enough to fight off aurors. I think he might be under Imperius—he looks too young to really have the clout to pull this off—but if he really does have the ability to have us arrested, I won’t be able to fend the DMLE off. What do I do, Harry? Please help us.”
The dog whined and cocked his head but said nothing further.

Severus frowned. “You are waiting for a reply?”

The dog barked and wagged his tail.

“All right.” Harry rubbed his chin. “Tell Sandra that Xavier and I will be there in ten minutes and to stall the Ministry person as long as she can. Whisper it in her ear and don’t let anyone other than Sandra and those at the Prophet see you.”

The dog woofed and vanished.

Severus stood and Summoned a fresh robe. “So much for our lie-about, hmm?”

“Yeah,” said a disappointed Harry. “It’d really be nice if we could have just one day where there’s not a major crisis.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to put two lords in the ground before we have any real peace, love, but do not fear. I will assist however I am able.”

“Yeah.” Harry jerked a clean jumper over his head. “We might have to move the meeting with the gingers and crew to tomorrow, Severus. Can you send a message to Zabini and Malfoy letting them know we have urgent business and probably won’t be back until late, but we’ll check in on them tonight?”

Severus nodded and Summoned his Patronus. It seemed brighter than Harry remembered, and he wondered what memory Severus had thought of to call him. A small part of him thrilled at the thought that maybe it was one of him making Severus so happy.

As Severus tugged on his socks and boots, he spoke to the argent doe, repeating Harry’s message. She darted away as the man was tying his last boot and Harry was sliding on his trainers.

“Are you ready love?”

Harry Summoned two robes, one for himself and one for Severus, and transfigured both into duelling robes. “Put that on and we will be. Do we need your potion?”

Severus nodded. “I must take mine at least. You should not take it until we are ready to leave, unless you feel you are powerful enough to apparate through the Prophet’s new wards?”

“I didn’t add anti-apparition wards.” Harry shouldered into his duelling robes. “The anti-Death Eater and intent wards should’ve been enough to keep the bad guys out.”

“Or so we thought,” said Severus with a shake of his head. “Whoever snuck into the Prophet must be Imperiused then. I do not think they could bypass the wards any other way.”

“I’ll have to add that to the wards then.” Harry used spellwork to button their robes, neaten their hair, clean their mouths, and freshen their bodies as best as they could do without a shower. “Well, I suppose that’ll have to do.”

Severus gave him a wry look. “A bit of warning next time before you brush my teeth with a spell, please?”

Harry laughed and Summoned their glamour potions, tucking one into his pocket and tossing the other to his mate. “Noted. Are you ready then?”
Severus nodded. “We should buy duelling robes while we’re out. These are good, but transfigured robes are never quite as good as proper ones.”

“All right.” Harry Summoned his gender-change potion too and pocketed it. “Then that’s all we need, I think. Gemmy!”

The elf appeared with a grin. “Good morning, Master Harry and Master Severus. What can Gemmy be doing for you?”

“Good morning, Gemmy,” said Harry, kneeling to her level. “First of all, are Seth and Odin okay?”

The elf nodded. “Odin is being bouncy this morning, and Seth is being curious what is taking Masters so long to wake, but is well.”

“Good. Please tell Seth we’re okay. We just had a late night, but now Severus and I have to run out immediately to deal with an emergency at the Prophet. Riddle has forced someone through the wards and is trying to cause all sorts of trouble. Please escort Seth to the Weasleys and let them know what’s happening. As well, could you go to Draco and Blaise in the safehouse and ask them if there is anything they need from the shops? Report to us in town, but not until we’re finished at the Prophet, all right? It could be dangerous.”

Gemmy winced. “Yes, sir. I’s be doing what you said.”

“Thank you. Don’t risk your life, okay? If you think you’re in danger, just get out of it and wait for us at home. We can always shop another time—you’re irreplaceable.”

Tears welled in the little seamstress’ eyes. “Gemmy thanks you, sirs.”

Harry gave her a gentle hug. “All right, little one. We have to leave now. Good luck.”

“Good luck to you and Master Severus too.”

“Thank you,” Severus said with a bow.

The elf wiped her eyes and popped away.

Harry held out his hand. “Are you ready, love?”

Severus downed a sip of his glamour potion and shuddered. As his features shifted into those of Xavier Prince, he pocketed the phial and Summoned his katana. With his sword secured and his features set, he straightened his shoulders and placed his hand in Harry’s.

“I am now.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand and apparated them away.

Severus stayed a pace or two behind Harry—close enough to protect him if something went awry but not so close someone would gather the truth of their relationship—and kept his hand firmly around his wand. He had no idea what they would find when they arrived at the scene, but he would be ready if trouble found them.
It always seemed to, with Harry.

Harry rushed to Amanda and gave the girl a wan smile—Severus was gratified the girl had abandoned her Rita Skeeter-esque curls and let her natural wavy brown hair out.

“Afternoon, Amanda,” Harry said in an even tone despite the tension Severus read in the set of his shoulders. “Can you tell us where Sandra is? She sent us a Patronus saying she’s in trouble.”

Amanda paled and bit her lip. “Oh, I knew I shouldn’t have let that boy up. I thought there was something off about him. I’m so sorry, sir. He … I thought he had an appointment, but now that I’m looking—no, there’s nothing. Merlin. He must have Confunded me.”

“Amanda, it’s all right, it’s not your fault.” Harry patted her shoulder. “Just tell us where she is, okay?”

The girl nodded and blinked hard. “C-conference room three. First floor, back hallway by the water tower, take a right at the end of the hall.”

Harry smiled. “Thank you, sweetheart. I’ll try to set some new wards tonight to keep this from happening again. Just go back to your day—we’ll take care of it.”

Amanda gave him a relieved smile and thanked him. Harry patted her shoulder once more and led Xavier towards the hallway in question. Xavier stepped close enough to whisper in his ear.

“Must you be so familiar with that girl?”

Harry blinked. “Oh. Love, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you jealous. She’s just … so innocent, you know? It makes me want to mother her a bit.”

Severus smirked. “It’s just mothering, then?”

“Absolutely. Her gender does nothing for me, pet.”

“Then carry on. It appears I was being too possessive.”

“I don’t mind, just so long as you remember we’re undercover here.”

Severus chuckled. “I am the spy here, Mister Potter.”

“Yes, yes. A spy in love. Be careful, Xavier.”

The use of his alias brought it home to Severus that they were acting in character and he was currently out of it. Suppressing a wince for his weakened ability to spy, he whispered a quick thank you to Harry and moved back a pace. Merlin, he was playing a dangerous game like this, whispering in Harry’s ear when Xavier Prince was supposed to be engaged to a pureblood female. Severus knew them as the same person, but the public didn’t and couldn’t, or their plans to retrieve the locket from Umbridge would be ruined.

Merlin. They had best arrange that sooner than later, before Holly’s alias faltered. He would mention it to Harry tonight—the man may have forgotten about the locket in all the chaos they had gone through lately, but they could not leave the horcruxes unattended for long. As pleasant as just being a family with Harry and Seth was, they could not afford to forget about the war. Riddle certainly hadn’t.

“Here it is, Xavier,” Harry muttered. “Are you ready?”
Severus frowned at the nameplate on the door reading ‘Conference Room 3.’ “I am. Let us go sort this disaster.”

Harry nodded and knocked before pushing the door open. “Hello, Sandra. Xavier and I are here to he—Colin?”

Whatever Severus had expected to find in that conference room, a glassy-eyed, dazed Colin Creevey was at the bottom of the list. Definitely *Imperius* then.

“Hello, Harry,” Colin said in a monotone. “I’m just here to—”

Severus levelled his wand at the boy so quickly, he hadn’t time to blink. “*Libero Animi!*”

Pale blue light shot from his wand and enveloped the boy. Creevey let slip a little cry and sank back into his chair. The next moment, he sat and rubbed his forehead as if just waking up.

“Oh, Merlin. Where am I? What happened?”

“Welcome back, Mister Creevey,” said Severus with a shake of his head.

“Profes—” The boy frowned at Xavier. “Oh, sorry about that. For a moment, I thought you were one of my teachers. Um, where am I? And what are you doing here, Harry? Not that I’m not glad to see you, but what’s going on?”

Severus shuddered at the close call from Creevey. He would need to take something to alter his voice if it truly sounded that close to his normal tone.

Harry patted Severus’ arm and moved forward. “Hello, Colin. You’re at the Prophet Headquarters. That’s Sandra Longbottom, one of our best reporters, and this is my advisor, Xavier Prince. You’ve been hit by *Imperius* and forced here. What’s the last thing you remember this morning?”

Creevey rubbed his head again. “I don’t—I’m trying. Ugh.” He sank onto the table and shuddered.

“Are you suffering from a headache, Mister Creevey?”

“Colin, please. And Merlin, yes. Anyone get the license of that lorry?”

Xavier chuckled and motioned to Harry. The mage nodded and went to Colin’s side, sending a wave of healing into the boy. Colin snapped up after a few seconds, a grin on his face.

“Wow, Harry! I had no idea you could heal like that. Are you going to apprentice to Madame Pomfrey? Can I visit you if you do?”

Harry laughed. “Slow down, Colin. No, I’m not going to apprentice to her. I’m afraid I’m going to have a rather different role soon.”

He sighed as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders. With a surge of guilt and grief, Severus recognised that as truth.

Harry sat beside Colin and patted his shoulder. “Can you remember any better now?”

The young man nodded. “I think so. Let me see. I was going to look at the schedule for this week’s interns. That’s the last thing I remember doing.”

Severus sat next to Sandra and nodded in greeting. “Are you quite all right?” She nodded. “Good. Where are you taking an internship, Colin?”
“The Ministry,” he said with a frown. “Da thought it would help me in my career if I got a start there.”

Harry shivered. “Colin, aren’t you Muggleborn?”

“Well, yes, but I’ve told Mum and Da all kinds of things about the magical world. They love my photos and thought working with the magical government could only help me. Why?”

Harry shook his head. “We’ve got to get you out of there.”

“What? Why?”

Sandra pushed a big sheet of parchment over to Colin, complete with pictures of Harry and Severus at the top with giant red letters under their names. Undesirable #1 for Harry and #2 for Severus. Severus scowled and resisted the urge to burn the article to ash. Barely.

“Have you seen this yet?” Sandra tapped the parchment. “While you were under the Imperius curse, you came here trying to force that piece of garbage through. Pay close attention to what it says about Muggleborns.”

Colin paled and took the article. “Undesirable! Harry! I would never—I don’t—who would possibly think you were a criminal, Harry?”

Severus fixed the young man with a piercing look. “And Master Snape? He is deserving of this … honour?”

Colin eeped. “I—I didn’t say that either, but Harry’s sitting here and … Merlin.”

Harry shot Severus a quelling look. “Keep reading, Colin. We know you didn’t authorise this.”

Severus watched, anxious and irritated, as Colin’s face went progressively paler with each line he took in.

“‘Any Muggleborn witch or wizard who fails to register with the Ministry prior to August thirtieth will face severe consequences.’” Colin looked up, his eyes wide as saucers. “Harry … this sounds like, like when the N-Nazis ….”

“Yeah. Exactly like.” Harry plucked the article from Colin’s hand and set it ablaze while still within his grip, Banishing the remnants before it burned him. “We won’t be publishing that. But tell me, Colin. Whose is the last face you remember?”

Colin frowned and chewed on his lip. “I think … I wasn’t really paying attention to anyone else. Just checking the schedule. But when I looked up, I saw a flash of pink. Something fluffy.”

“Umbridge,” Severus said, a snarl in his tone.

“Most likely,” said Harry with a nod. “This sounds like her doing, particularly that bit about the Muggleborns.” He shook his head. “Well, Colin, we can’t have you working at the Ministry. Much too dangerous for you. But you know, we could use a new photographer here. I had to sack several people a few days ago, so the staff is stretched a bit thin. What do you say?”

Colin’s eyes bugged. “You … you’re offering me a job at The Daily Prophet? And you want to know if I’ll take it? Are you bloody mad? Of course I want it. But … wait a minute, how are you offering it, Harry?”
Harry chuckled. “I may or may not have bought the Prophet out. But that’s classified information, okay? Don’t tell anyone, not even Dennis. The place is under a Fidelius and there’s a nasty curse attached for anyone who breaks it. It’s too dangerous to spread my identity around, you know. This place is already a target, and it’s going to be more of one after Sandra and I finish our article for tomorrow’s paper. If Mouldyshorts knew I own the place, he’d be killing himself to break down the wards, so we can’t risk letting that information get out.”

Colin held out his wand. “I swear on my magic not to reveal the name of the owner of The Daily Prophet.” Yellow light flashed over him. “Good?”

Harry grinned. “Great. I’ve seen your work. Consider yourself hired, if you’ll just do one thing for me.”

“Yeah? Anything.”

“Take a photo of me—just myself. I have one at home who needs a friend.”

“A … friend?” Colin shrugged and pulled a tiny camera from his pocket. A quick flick of his wand restored it to its proper size. “All right. Is in here okay?”

“Let me take it outside so he doesn’t get bored.”

Colin gave him a bemused look. “You’re … really strange sometimes, Harry.”

Harry laughed. “Oh, shut it. Anyway, Xavier, I want you to floo call Kingsley and let him know what the Pink Bitch tried to pass through the Prophet. Tell him to try to head her off. Let Arthur know too. I’m going outside to take my photo, and then, Sandra, you and I are going to write a counter to the shite I burned up a minute ago.”

Sandra winced. “Harry … are you sure doing all this is wise?”

“I’m not going to let them take control of the Ministry, Sandra. If I have to staff it myself, then so be it, but I’ll be damned before I let the Red-Eyed Cue Ball take over Britain.”

“I know. It’s just … we’re already such a target.”

Harry let slip a heavy sigh and slumped back into his seat. “Maybe you have a point. Xavier?”

Severus shrugged. “To be honest, I doubt you could make this place a target more than it already is. Simply by refusing to print that article, we will anger them. It is my opinion that we may as well print a counter and possibly save lives. Especially since I do not believe Merlin himself could breach these wards.”

Harry nodded. “Especially once I put an anti-Imperius ward up. Can you think of any other loopholes?”

“Animagi, but that might affect your employees. And you have already blocked Pettigrew by blocking the Dark Mark. As no one with ill intent is able to enter as well, I feel this place is as safe as we can make it.”

“The Prophet may be safe,” said Sandra in a shaky voice, “but what about its employees? Our homes? Our families?”

Harry frowned and rubbed his chin. “Good point. Hmm.” He waved his hand and Colin and Sandra slumped onto the table, both unconscious.
“Harry,” Severus hissed. “What in Merlin’s name are you doing?”

“Well, first I’m going to put everyone to sleep where they are. Then I’m going to extend the wards to cover our employees and their homes.”

Severus blinked. “Can you do that?”

“I can certainly try. Help me?”

Severus sighed. “We will need to return to the lobby. And you had best make sure they are completely asleep, or the warding will wake them.”

Harry shrieked and poked Colin hard. The sleeping boy did not stir.

“Looks like he’s out,” Harry said with a smirk.

Severus rolled his eyes. “Merlin save me from overconfident Gryffindors.” He stood and offered Harry his hand. “You are going to be the death of me, love.”

Harry laughed and laced their fingers together. “Oh, but what a way to go.”

“Indeed.”

After altering the wards to his satisfaction, Harry returned with Xavier to the conference room and woke everyone up. Sandra looked around in utter confusion.

“I … fell asleep?”

Harry gave her an apologetic smile. “I had to put everyone to sleep while I worked on the wards. Couldn’t have any interference if I wanted to get them right, and I needed everyone who works here at the office so I could trace their signatures back to their homes and families. Everyone should be warded and safe now so no one can target you for simply printing the truth.”

Sandra and Colin gaped.

“You … how?” Colin stared at Harry in shock. “You’re that powerful?”

Harry gave a wry laugh. “Inheritance was a bit of a monster. Had to be if I’m to defeat Snakeface.”

“No kidding,” said Sandra with a shudder. “You’re really going to face him?”

“If I don’t, who will? Are you going to kill him? Colin? Sandra? Xavier?” As the other two lowered their heads in embarrassment, Harry flashed Severus a brief smile. He knew his mate would be right beside him on the battlefield no matter what might come—the call out was only to keep their cover.

Severus let himself appear to be as embarrassed as the others, but the discreet touch to Harry’s hand let the young man know his ruse was understood.

“Harry … I’m not really good at anything but taking pictures,” Colin said in a quiet voice. “I mean, I’ll help, but I don’t know what I can do.”
“You remember what you learned in the DA?”

Colin nodded.

“Use that if you need it. But not against Riddle. You’re not meant to go against him. None of you are. I am, and I’ll do it. But I’m not going to sit here lying about and let him take over Britain while I prepare. I’m going to head him off at every point. Which means keeping his filthy hands off of the Prophet and his ugly mug out of the Ministry.”

Harry neglected to mention that he would be working to disarm Dumbledore in both locations as well. Colin didn’t need that information when he had two years of school left with the man and he wasn’t in Harry’s closest confidence.

Colin nodded, and even Sandra had bucked up a bit.

“I’ll help however I can, Harry,” said Colin.

“Good. For now, how about that picture now that this crisis with the wards is taken care of. Don’t get too comfortable, Sandra. You’re going to be helping Xavier and I write a counter to that foul rubbish Umbridge sent Colin with. Xavier, can you contact the Ministry now?”

Xavier bowed. “Right away, Mister Potter.”

Harry gave him a secret smile before leading Colin away.

Since the article Xavier and Harry had countered with had terrified Sandra, they added the mailing lists of the Quibbler—Luna was glad to assist—Which Broomstick, and Witch Weekly, both of whom rushed to assist Harry when they learned the “Boy-Who-Lived” was taking public action against the Red-Eyed Menace. On Severus’ whispered advice, he also included Ireland’s Gaelic-speaking paper, Draoi Glas Sa Lá, Scotland’s equivalent, Rionnag na h-Alba, and Wales’ Y Ddraig Goch. A translation spell or two and a couple quiet conversations later, Harry got permission to use their mailing lists as well so long as he never used them again without consent. Harry swore an oath to the other publishers to appease them and placed the edited list before Sandra.

“It’s no longer limited to us. Now it’s a nationwide publication, not just an article in a single paper. Does that reassure you at all?”

With a sigh, Sandra nodded and took the article up to printing.

Back at the house, Harry detoured up to the bedroom before retrieving Seth or meeting with the Slytherins. Severus rolled his eyes when he realized what Harry was up to, but Harry knew the man was secretly relieved that his photo from the newspaper would not have to be alone any longer.

Harry sat upon the edge of the bed, motioning Severus to join him. With a smile, he took the photo of Severus from the nightstand and ran a magic-coated fingertip down his cheek.
“Hi there,” he said in a soft voice, watching with a heart full as the photo blushed and gave him a surprised look. Harry’s heart panged. ‘No longer. You’re not going to forget me any longer. Nor will you need to be alone.” He set the photo down once more and removed the photo Colin had taken that day from his robe pocket. “This version of me is already in love with Severus, so he should be happy to take care of you.”

Wonder and desperate, raw hope filled the photo Severus’ dark eyes.

“Yes, I meant it.” Harry watched the photo of himself look longingly to Severus’ newspaper photo. “Hold on. Let me alter your memory spans first and then you can go straight to it. Otherwise I’m afraid Severus would forget this event over and over again and Harry would be heartbroken.” He frowned. Merlin it was odd to speak of oneself in the third person. “Anyway, wait a tick while I work on your memories.”

Photo Severus shuddered and gave him a sharp look.

Harry nodded. “Yes, I know it’s not possible usually, but didn’t you know I’m a mage, love?” He frowned at Severus’ shocked expression. “No, I suppose you didn’t, did you? Well, it’s true. Seventh Day Seer and all that rot.”

Photo Harry gave a resigned sigh and nodded in his frame. The photo produced a wave of pure white magic that passed his frame and into Severus’. Both humans gasped.

“Dear gods,” the real Severus said with a shiver. “Harry … did you know your photo could ….”

“I had no idea,” said a shaken Harry. “Shite. We’d best work on that anti-photo spell soon, Verus, or my secret is going to be out sooner than I’d hoped.”

Photo Harry shook his head and mouthed, “Only for him.”

Harry’s heart slowed. “Good. Dear Merlin, that was shocking.”

Photo Severus nodded, his eyes wide. Harry frowned and held the photo again. “You’re not hurt, are you? That was pure healing magic, so it shouldn’t have hurt you.”

The photo shook his head and shivered. Just shocked then. Harry petted the man’s hair until he calmed. “All right. Rest and I’m going to fix your memory before you reset and forget all of this, Severus.”

“Not me I hope,” the real man said with a smirk.

“Your mind is beautiful the way it is, thank you very much.”

Harry kissed his soul-bond’s cheek, then focused his magic into his hands, forming it around his intent. “Give them a real memory. Proper memory, so they can be happy.”

Pale turquoise light shone on his fingertips. Harry made note of the colour and pressed both hands to the photo frames, chanting spilling from his lips unnoticed.

“Restituere Memoria … Restituere Memoria ….”

Newspaper Photo Severus and Photo Harry gasped silently and sank to their knees, both holding their heads, as the turquoise light surrounded them. They breathed it in, let it bleed in through closed eyelids, through ears and mouth and nose, and shuddered with each wisp of light they inhaled. Harry hoped the process of healing their memories was not as painful as it looked.
When they did not return to their feet after the light had gone, Harry sent a pulse of healing magic into the photos. Both men let slip a little sigh and stood, shaking their heads.

Severus lifted Harry’s photo and watched him nervously. “Are you well?”

The photos nodded and gave Harry a questioning look.

“Wait a few moments, boys,” Harry said gently. “I need to make sure the charms hold.”

They sighed and gave Harry a mutinous glare, which made Harry laugh. “Oh, come on. It’s just a moment.”

Only a moment, but then again, the photo version of Severus had been alone for days and remembered years of grief. And Photo Harry was chomping at the bit to relieve his lover’s pain. Harry held Severus’ photo and stroked his hair as a method of comforting him, and when he did not reset after ten minutes, set the photo down beside its new mate.

“All right, off with you then.”

Photo Harry waved and darted into Severus’ frame, catching the stunned young man into a tender kiss. Newspaper Severus froze, gasped, tensed as if to pull away. Harry winced and hoped he would —there. Photo Severus melted into his companion’s arms, tears streaking down his cheeks and his hands sliding into Harry’s hair. Photo Harry brushed the other man’s tears away and pressed their foreheads together, talking silently to his mate.

The real Harry smiled as he watched the photos acquaint themselves and leaned on his mate’s shoulder. “We did a good thing for him, hmm?”

Severus kissed Harry’s hair. “Lovely. Would that you had been old enough to love me in truth at that time in my life.”

Harry brought him into a soft kiss. “I know. But we’re both young again, so we have all the time in the world to make up for your lonely years.”

Severus traced a fingertip down Harry’s scar. “So I hope, love.”

Harry shivered and buried his face into Severus’ neck. “Yeah. Me too.”

Severus draped an arm over Harry’s shoulders as they sat in the safehouse’s new common room and caught up with Draco and Blaise. The boys seemed to be adjusting well enough, but Draco was worried about his mark.

“He hasn’t started torturing me yet, but it could change at any time. And what of my father?”

Harry shook his head. “I’ll remove your mark tonight, but Lucius is not welcome here nor will he ever be. He’s not like you—he didn’t turn away from evil. I won’t support him.”

Malfoy glared at Severus. “But you’ll support him? Don’t you know what he’s done?”

The unexpected attack sent a shard of grief and guilt through Severus, but he showed only his patented sneer. He didn’t trust Malfoy enough to let his guard down, after all, and with good reason.
The boy wouldn’t know honesty if it bit him on the arse.

Harry’s gentle touch on Severus’ hand relieved some of his grief. At least Harry accepted him without condition. Loved him. Merlin, it was a heady feeling to know he had a home with the young mage regardless of his past.

“Yes, actually, I do.” Harry’s eyes flashed killing-curse green again, but he contained his magic this time. Even so, his skin crackled with electric arcs of sheer power. Draco paled and stepped back.

“I know some of Severus’ past through Occlumency lessons,” Harry snapped, “and Severus has told me some himself. The difference between my lover and your father is simple. Severus was tormented and bullied into the Death Eaters’ ranks and regretted it almost immediately. He had been turned away or forced out of every sanctuary he had and, in spite of having nowhere else to go and no one left who cared about him, he still turned from the darkness and spent twenty years of his life trying to take down the Red-Eyed Menace. Lucius went to the Death Eaters in pursuit of glory. He has always been self-serving and will always be.”

Draco cried, “But that’s——”

Harry cut across him. “That’s the blunt truth whether you want to hear it or not. No, Draco. I will not remove his mark or even neutralise it, because he would then turn about and sell that information to the highest bidder. I would trust no oath from him nor would I even give him the opportunity to make one, because he would have no qualms breaking it if someone offered him enough of a price. You’re not entirely dark or unredeemable, Draco, but your father is. And it might serve you to keep a civil tongue in your head concerning my love, because the only reason I offered you or Blaise shelter at all is because he asked me to.”

Draco glared. “But … but he’s my father!”

Harry nodded. “I know, and I’m sorry, but the answer is still no, Draco. Lucius will never be welcome here. If you can’t deal with that, leave.”

Malfoy blinked hard and jerked to his feet. “Maybe I will.”

Eyes hard as flint, Harry waved to the floo. “Go ahead. But remember your oath. One word about what you’ve heard here and the consequences will be dire. I do not suffer self-serving traitors.”

Malfoy started off, but Blaise grabbed his arm.

“Don’t be a fool, Draco. I know he’s your dad, but Harry’s right. I mean, look at my parents. Or Theo’s. We can’t trust them either.”

Severus added the final blow. “No, we cannot. Draco, Lucius is as dark and evil as Riddle himself, though I know it pains you to hear it. You are the one blind spot in his self-serving quest for power, and so I advised Harry to approach you with the offer of safety in return for support of Harry’s alias. For your safety, Lucius will keep quiet. However, I cannot advise Harry to trust him for any other purpose. He protects you because you are his heir. For anyone else, he will do what serves him best, and what serves him best is destroying others so he might rule them all.”

Draco’s eyes filled. “You … you don’t know him.”

Severus arched an eyebrow. “Do you not remember what I have done for the past twenty years, Draco? It was my job to know him. It was my job to know them all!”

Draco scowled. “Well, you didn’t do it well enough then. Must be why you were caught.”
Severus froze, memories of torture and pain rushing over him.

A knife cut sharp and cold into his face, trailing fire and blood down, down, in front of his ear, around his jaw. A manic cackle pierced the night.

“Ickle traitor doesn’t need his face to talk, now does he?”

Fingernails clawed under his cheek in time with a swiping blade, cutting, tearing—

“You ever taunt him that way again, you slimy little piece of ferret shite, and I will torch your fucking insides!”

Harry’s sharp cry brought Severus out of the past with a vengeance. He gasped at the sheer force of magic swirling around them, pinning a hapless blond Slytherin to the wall while Harry hexed smoking holes into the wall around him. Draco’s eyes had gone as wide as saucers and his face was white as the dead. He was screaming, but against the force of Harry’s magic, no sound was coming out. Severus feared he couldn’t breathe at all.

A hand fell on Severus’ arm, tugging. “Sir, please. Make them stop!”

Severus rushed to Harry and caught him into his arms.

“Harry, cease and desist this instant! Stop! You are better than this!”

Harry gasped and dropped his wand. “Oh gods. I … Severus!”

The magic swell stopped and Draco slumped to the floor, shaking. He did not move, but sat staring at Harry as if he had never seen anything like him before. And, of course, he hadn’t. Blaise rushed to the fallen Slytherin’s aid, and, with Draco taken care of, Severus returned his attention to his lover.

“Ssh. I know, Harry.” Severus kissed the top of a messy head and pressed his lover’s body close. “I know you meant to protect me. Thank you, love, but there is no need to take your anger so far. You are powerful enough that your magic even in small doses is enough.”

Harry sobbed and buried his face in Severus’ shoulder. “I’m sorry. So sorry.”

“Ssh. I have you love.” Severus looked over Harry’s head and watched Blaise help Draco to his feet. “Is he in need of healing, Blaise?”

Blaise shook his head. “Maybe a calming draught. I think Harry terrified him.” He shuddered. “He terrified me too.”

Severus sighed at Harry’s wince and muffled apology. “Yes. It is quite intense when you see … his powers for the first time. He is not slated to defeat the Dark Lord for nothing.”

Draco winced. “Severus, I … I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have ….”

“No, you shouldn’t have. Are you all right?”

Draco brushed off his robes and straightened his hair, though his hands trembled. “A bit shaken, but not hurt.”
“Good. You deserved to be a little shaken, to be honest. You have no idea what those monsters did to me, and had he not fled the country beforehand, your father would have been among the worst of them.” At Draco’s half-appalled, half-defiant expression, Severus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do you think we can discuss the matter of your father like adults?”

Draco stuck his nose in the air and remained standing. “You expect me to what, just abandon him to die?”

Severus gave a dark chuckle. “I highly doubt that will happen. No, Riddle will wish to torture your father in person rather than indirectly and Lucius is slippery enough to avoid capture. As well, Harry and I fully intend to keep Riddle so busy, he will not have time to spare on defectors.”

“Still, he’s my father! And he deserves better than just to be left like this. He isn’t—all that stuff everyone’s talking about, it’s all lies.”

Severus shook his head and sat on the nearest sofa, easing a recovering Harry down beside him. “Draco, your father is not as pristine as you would have us believe. For example, are you aware that he has approached me … for sexual favours? While married to your mother? I turned him down repeatedly, but I assure you, I was in the minority. And not all of his … conquests were consensual.” He scowled in disgust at the last bit. Even the vileness of Potter and Black paled in comparison to Lucius Malfoy.

Draco paled and stepped back. “No! You’re lying!”

Severus’ eyes flashed. “Am I? Would you like to see my memories of walking in on some of his numerous affairs? Or my memories of raids where he—”

Harry laid a still-trembling hand on Severus’ arm. “Enough, love. There’s no need to go that far. He’s been through enough tonight and no son deserves to see his father in that position. It was bad enough for me. I won’t make him live through it too.”

Draco gave Harry a confused look. “Potter?”

Harry shook his head. “It’s not my story to tell. Other people got hurt that day and I don’t want to break their confidence. But suffice it to say, I know how you feel.”

Severus glared. Idiot Malfoy brat, refusing to give up on the image of his sainted father even with all evidence was stacked against him. Severus jerked at Harry’s comments, shocked at the reminder of thinking the exact same thing of his partner not so many years ago.

“Merlin,” Severus muttered and dropped his head in his hands. “History is repeating itself, Harry. Perhaps I should lay out a pensieve for Draco to ‘stumble upon’ and see if that does not cure his hero worship.”

Harry snorted. “No need to go through that again either.” He rubbed Severus’ back. “You do know I’m sorry for that, right?”

Severus returned his arm to Harry’s waist and pulled him close. “I know. I am as well.”

“I don’t know what either of you are talking about,” Draco said with a sniff, “but I don’t believe it for a second. My father isn’t so low as to associate with half-bloods, and he would never cheat on my mo—”

A silvery dolphin, weak and misty but nonetheless corporeal, nudged at Draco’s knees. The boy cut off his rant with a gasp.
“T-theo?” Draco touched a shaking hand to the dolphin’s head. “What—”

The dolphin cut across Draco, the sure sign of a desperate emergency. Before the Patronus had gotten through the first syllable, Severus leapt to his feet, dragging Harry with him, and started towards the floo.

“Draco, help me! Father found out that I’m trying to escape the mark and he’s going to take me—shite! T-tonight! Help me!”

Harry was already taking down the lock on the floo, Blaise and Severus on standby at his side. “Is he at Nott Manor?”

Draco gave Harry a white-faced nod.

Harry summoned his stag. “Hello, Prongs. I need you to take an emergency message to Theodore Nott. Tell him to be by the main floo in his manor with everything he wants to take with him as soon as possible. Within five minutes if he can. Tell him to try to remain unobserved, but we’re coming to protect him if that’s not possible. Avoid the elder Notts at all costs.” The stag bowed and vanished.

“That’s done then. Are we ready?”

Draco rushed forwards. “Wait, damn it. Y-you’re not going without me!”

Harry frowned. “Thought you weren’t interested in fighting? That’s likely what we’re going straight into.”

“He’s my friend. My brother. I can’t just leave him.”

Harry nodded, his approval obvious in the slight upwards curve of his lips. Well, it was obvious to Severus anyway.

Blaise held out a hand. “Come on, Draco. We’ve got to hurry.”

Draco bolted to Blaise’s side. Harry conjured battle robes for all of them and warned them to have their wands ready and a curse on their lips.

“Dobby!”

The elf popped in and winced at the sight of their gear. “What ca—”

“No time, Dobby. Seth is at the Weasleys’ still. Wanted to stay the night. Let him know we had to go rescue one of Sev’s snakes and it looks like it’s going to be a fight. Bring Seth home if he wants to come. Let Molly and Arthur know we’re in Nott Manor with Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini—who are on our side—and not to follow us. Between Verus and I, unless it’s the entire contingent of Death Eaters there, we should be all right, as long as the Order doesn’t give our position away. We’ll send them a message as soon as we’re back. Hurry.”

Dobby winced again. “Yes, Master sir. Be’s careful, good masters.”

“We will be,” Severus said, and the elf popped away. “Is the floo open?”

Harry nodded and tossed a pinch of powder into the flames. “Nott Manor!” The fire turned green, and the young mage disappeared before Severus could chide him for going first.

“Bloody Gryffindor idiots! I’ll kill the boy if the Notts don’t beat me to it.” Severus threw in his own pinch and followed him through.
Chapter End Notes

Ireland's paper: Green Wizard Daily
Scotland's paper: Star of Scotland
Wales' paper: The Red Dragon

Please note that I don't speak either form of Gaelic or Welsh. At all. Nor do I know the grammar rules. So blame Google Translate if it's wrong. LOL
Sins of the Father

Chapter Summary

Warnings: torture, graphic violence, implications of past rape. Summary: The Dawn goes after Theo and ends up biting off more than they can chew. They get a new member out of the mission, one less Death Eater, and three less marks. Harry has a savior complex, and Severus wants to throttle him for it. Twice.

CHAPTER 25
SINS OF THE FATHER

Harry flooed out of his Snake Den and into a war. He heard a scream and crouched down out of the way of the floo, still trying to get his bearings as Severus flooed in, followed immediately by Draco and Blaise.

“If you ever put yourself in that kind of danger again,” Severus hissed close to Harry’s ear, “I’ll bloody well kill you!”

Harry hissed back, “That would defeat the point and ssh. They’re just there.” He pointed to the room beyond.

Blaise and Draco huddled close. Draco whispered, “Is that Theo screaming?”

The red glow flared bright again and the pained shrieks grew sharper, each one cutting into Harry’s chest like swords.

Severus gave him a grim nod. “No doubt. We must hurry.”

Harry frowned. “We can’t just rush in. I’m the so-called Chosen One and you’re a traitor to the dark. They’ll come at us hard.” He smirked as an idea occurred to him. “Unless ….”

A second to focus his mind and a wave of his hand later, he had glamoured everyone’s faces and hair. Severus tapped Harry’s glasses with his wand, altering them to stylish silver frames rather than his immediately recognisable round spectacles.

“Good?”

Severus nodded. “Let us go before they kill him.”

Harry followed Severus to the parlour door, the young Slytherins close on their heels. As they came nearer to the entryway, Harry distinguished other voices under Theo’s harsh screams.

“Enough of that barbaric curse already,” someone Harry didn’t recognise said. “He’s had plenty of that kind of pain and it’s not working. Perhaps another method will … convince him?”

Harry frowned and moved faster.

“Pity Lucius isn’t with us any longer,” came a cold male voice. “And that Anton has … injured himself. Their methods work well to convince anyone rather quickly.”
The first voice snapped back, “Theo may be uncooperative, but nonetheless, you will keep your filthy hands off my son in that manner. No one will bed him until he is wedded as per the contract with Lord Parkinson.”

Draco gasped and shook his head hard, his expression one of horror. Harry moved to put a hand on the boy’s shoulder, but found Blaise had beat him to it. He patted Blaise’s hand instead and hoped the Italian understood it as a gesture of thanks. Blaise’s hesitant smile was thin with grief and disgust, but at least he didn’t seem angry at Harry. Harry found he couldn’t blame the boy for his anger. Harry was furious too.

In the other room, Nott Senior was still arguing with the cold-voiced man. Any hope Harry might have had for the elder Nott’s potential for redemption died with the man’s next words.

“You know well that any prior … dalliances—whether they be willing or not—will void Theo’s contract with the Parkinsons, and I have no plans to give up a twenty-thousand galleon dowry because you fancy a turn with the boy!”

“Dear Merlin,” Harry breathed.

Severus pressed a fingertip over Harry’s mouth, and Harry kept all further exclamations of horror to himself. Gods, Nott Senior was an utter bastard.

“I did not say I wanted a turn,” the cold-voiced man said. “Only that such methods would convince him quickly.”

A hoarse moan sounded. “No. Not … please.”

Harry shuddered, overcome with horror that Theo had heard his own father discussing him like a commodity to be passed about. Harry’s grief at losing his parents and his anger for their abuse of Severus paled in comparison to this kind of atrocity. His resolve to rescue the boy doubled. Whether it meant a fight or not, Harry would be damned before he left Theo—before he left anyone—to a fate like that.

As they reached the doorway, Harry disillusioned his companions and poked his head around the doorjamb. Theo lay at the middle of the parlour floor, blood dribbling from his mouth and nose, his body twitching from the aftermath of the Cruciatus. One arm stuck out at an odd angle and his face was pale and bruised. A patch of red and black crossed his ashy brown hair, dripping crimson onto the carpet.

A head wound. Fuck. They had to move fast then, but Harry checked his mad urge to rush in. Six Death Eaters stood around the boy, blocking every exit, including the one Harry was staring through. Their position would not make attack easy.

Severus spoke to Harry through their Legilimentic bond. “Use your mage sight to verify that these are the only threats present. Even if we disarm those we see, there may be others in the wings, waiting in case something goes awry. Simply try to see their magic—I am afraid I do not have any other advice as mage sight is not a skill I am yet familiar with. If you cannot manage it, we shall have to simply hope there are no reinforcements and be on our guard.”

Harry nodded, knowing Severus would understand through the link, and reached out with his powers just as Theo’s back bowed under a renewed assault. Harry cringed at the sound of his cries, so much louder without the barrier of a wall to mute them—raw, animalistic screams of pain. The sound set Harry’s teeth on edge and his stomach churning with revulsion. Fuck, they had to hurry. He shook off his horror as much as he could and focused on the spell light, trying with all his might
to see beyond it, deeper, to the hidden currents of magic within.

As Harry concentrated, the room ahead filled with red beyond the spell light. *Cruciatus* bolts, arced like lightning the colour of blood, glowing from one of the Death Eater’s wands, dancing in a macabre display. Like electricity, it hissed and crackled, smelling more of burning flesh with each passing moment. Theo’s shattered body was ablaze with its crimson glow.

Swallowing bile, Harry ripped his eyes away from the ghastly sight and searched the house for hidden threats. He saw no others present, neither before nor behind him, but he had the sinking feeling his mage sight hadn’t enough range yet to cover the entire manor, nor even much beyond the present room. Still, at least there was nothing to worry for in their immediate vicinity. Perhaps they could get in and out before alerting anyone beyond his range, if they were intelligent about their plan of attack.

He turned to Severus and guided the man’s face to look into the eyes he couldn’t see.Hopefully Severus would know to read him. Well, he had asked Harry to scan for threats. How else was Harry to report on them since it was too dangerous to speak?

“What did you see?”

Harry sagged in relief at the sound of Severus’ mind-voice. “I can’t see anyone else, but I don’t think I’m strong enough yet to see very far.”

Severus nodded. “I had expected as much. We shall have to be quiet and swift.”

“How? They have him surrounded.”

“If we could draw them away ….”

Harry’s stomach lurched. “Draw them. Well, I could act as bait and knock them out if they come too close.”

“Are you mad? I am not letting you attack them alone!”

Harry winced. “No. I guess you’re right. I mightn’t get out unscathed, but … maybe the idea isn’t completely impossible. Look.”

Harry’s mind showed the idea to his lover as it formed. Severus’ smirk came through their link without the need to see him.

“Brilliant, love. Do that. Or, if you cannot manage it, just throw spells and make them follow where you want them to go. I’ll warn the other two. Do nothing until I give you the signal.”

“All right.”

Severus turned, breaking the connection so that he might warn his snakes about Harry’s plan. Meanwhile, Harry concentrated all his magic in his fingers and prepared to create the most complicated illusion he had ever attempted. He didn’t know if he could manage it, but hell, even if it failed, his attempt would still have to draw the attention of the Death Eaters long enough to snatch Theo away, right? It was a chance anyway.

At a tap on his shoulder, Severus’ signal, Harry focused his power on the opposite corner of the room, the side away from Theo and the floo entrance, and worked to form a human-like shape out of illusion spells and shields. His energy flickered in and out as he worked, the complicated magic taking more power than he had hoped, but Severus’ hand on his shoulder lent him the extra magic
and strength that he needed to finish it.

One of the Death Eaters flicked a cutting curse at Theo’s stomach, and the rage that action engendered in Harry allowed him to give the apparition the ability to move.

A voice-throwing spell later, Harry cried, “Oi! Pick on someone your own size!”

The sound came not from Harry’s actual mouth, but the mouth of a false Harry, standing akimbo at the opposite corner of the room and glowing with purplish-blue light.

One of the Death Eaters cried, “It’s Potter!”

The others rushed the doppelgänger just as Harry had hoped, but the illusion wouldn’t hold long. Even now, it was draining the real Harry.

As soon as the men were out of earshot, Harry whispered, “Go! Blaise, Draco, get Theo. Verus and I will watch your backs.”

“How the hell did you—” Draco started, but Severus cut him off.

“Do as he says.”

Blaise and Draco stared wide-eyed at the spot the doppelgänger had been.

“Now,” Severus hissed, giving Draco a shove. “Harry cannot maintain that level of power for long and every second you waste is another we risk discovery. Move!”

It was enough to spur the Slytherins out of their shocked stupor, and they darted into the room unseen. As soon as he felt Blaise and Draco pass, a relieved Harry dashed to guard them, Severus hot on his heels. Harry dropped his invisibility spell long enough to show his face and sank to his knees in front of Theo.

“Ssh. We’re here to get you out, all right? Just be quiet and still.”

Theo was terrified, but knew better than to draw his attackers’ attention. “Hurry.”

“That’s the plan.”

Harry hid his face once more, but couldn’t risk hiding Theo. He was too injured—they needed to see how to manoeuver him to avoid further damage.

Harry moved to stand opposite Severus, his back to the group and his wand trained on the entrance opposite where the Death Eaters had exited. Severus had that side covered, judging by the outline of his violet-blue magic.

Draco and Blaise hesitated to lift Theo, no doubt worried about causing him further injury, but they hadn’t time to waste. The other Death Eaters were still distracted chasing the fake Potter, but the further the doppelgänger moved from Harry, the fiercer the drain on his magic. Already, he was starting to feel dizzy and grey around the edges.

“Sev, we’re out of time.”

Severus nodded and helped the boys by yanking Theo into his arms instead. “Let’s go.”

With a nod, Harry crowded them all back towards the floo, but a feminine scream from behind him made his blood congeal.
“Thomas! Hurry, someone’s taking Theo! He’s getting away!”

“Shite,” Severus cursed. He disillusioned the now unconscious Theo, but it was too late. They had already been caught.

Harry froze, his stomach tied in knots as the retreating footsteps halted, turned around, and grew louder again. ‘Shite!’ Knowing their diversion had been found out, he released the illusion. He needed his full strength if he was to face a half a dozen Death Eaters anyway.

Quick as lightning, he turned to the floo entrance. A woman with the same light brown hair as Theo blocked their way, her expression coldly triumphant. So this was Theo’s mother, and apparently as much of a monster as her husband.

“Bitch,” Harry hissed under his breath.

Thunderous steps and angry shouts came nearer, and Harry jumped to action. The bitch was drawing her wand, but Severus—always the first to gather his wits—stunned the woman before she could do more than glare at them. Harry added his own touch with a blast of raw magic, knocking the woman’s unconscious body aside and clearing the way to the floo.

He hissed to his stunned colleagues, “Go-go-go! They’re coming!”

They snapped to action. Severus darted ahead of the others, leading their team to the fireplace.

“Blaise,” he hissed, “throw in the floo powder!”

The boy tossed a pinch into the flames, and after whispering the destination, Severus hurriedly levitated Theo through the fire.

“Draco, you next!”

“Bân Leon, Safehouse,” Draco whispered into the flames, and vanished in a flare of green.

“Blaise,” Severus ordered.

The Italian boy moved to the fire after Draco, but just as he called out the destination, the Death Eaters came into the room, wands blazing. Severus gave a muffled curse and shoved Blaise through the floo the second it turned green. Merlin, Harry hoped the grate had gotten the destination right amongst all the shouting.

He hadn’t long to consider it before Thomas Nott, a dark-haired, portly, bastard of a man called, “What are you doing in my home?”

Nott shot a spell towards the fireplace, but Harry and Severus dodged it easily, keeping silent. If they were lucky, the Death Eaters would think all the team had escaped already.

“We know you’re still here,” the cold-voiced Death Eater said. “I cannot see you, but I can sense your magic.”

‘Fuck,’ Harry thought in despair.

“Rabastan Lestrange,” Severus’ mindvoice supplied. “Lethal and deadly. I have not seen the others before.”

Harry struggled on getting a reply to Severus, but perhaps the man had understood his fears without the need to ask. His voice continued after a pause to sidestep another curse.
“We must fight, Harry. Take down as many as y—”

A sickly yellow curse from Lestrange shot towards Harry, forcing the young man to duck and cutting off Severus. The wall behind Harry melted and blackened.

Terrified and angry, Harry returned fire with a curse Severus had recently taught him, one meant to cut through the victim’s hamstrings. An unknown Death Eater beside Nott Senior dropped with a scream.

Severus shot a dark red curse at Lestrange and hit him in the face, causing blood to pour from his open mouth. With a growl, Nott Senior retaliated, shooting a grayish-green curse at Severus that hit him in the shoulder before the man could avoid it. Severus managed not to cry out, but Harry had seen the spell hit the man’s magic, watched in horror as it ate away at the purple-blue colour nearest its collision point.

Harry gasped and reeled back. “Verus!” He regretted speaking as soon as the harsh whisper left his lips. Disillusionment spell or not, he had just given his position away.

Five spells shot at Harry. With a muffled curse, he dodged or blocked all but the last, a cutting curse Lestrange had somehow managed through the effects of Severus’ spell. Harry barely felt it as it sliced through his forearm, worried as he was for his partner, but it hurt enough to let him know he hadn’t come through the encounter unscathed.

‘Severus.’

Was he alive? Was he dying? Harry could not think beyond his fear for his soul-bond, and with his focus so splintered, the disillusionment spell dropped. The glamour held, but Harry hardly cared, as Severus was kneeling and panting into his arm, exposed and unable to defend himself.

‘Verus!’

He was hurt. His beautiful, wonderful Severus was hurt and in terrible danger.

Dark rage flickered to life in Harry’s soul, consuming him like black fire raging in his bones. With a primal cry, he leapt in front of Severus, shielding him, and turned to face his enemy. The curses had started flying again, but they deflected off of Harry’s growing magic like drops of water.

He hissed something in Parseltongue, but as far gone to rage as he was, he couldn’t catch its meaning.

Without warning, black-tinged fire, a strange parody of his inner rage, burst from Harry and barrelled into the Death Eaters. Like a battering ram, the raw curse blasted Lestrange and Nott Senior backwards and set them ablaze. The residual force sent the other Death Eaters sailing into the parlour too.

Among a din of shrill cries and red-black flickers, Harry realised he was screaming too.

Severus was suddenly standing before him, holding him and hissing in his ear. “Harry! Merlin, Harry, snap out of it!”

Harry shook himself out of a daze and grabbed the man’s face with his good hand. His injured arm hung limp. He was too stunned and drained to determine how injured he was. At the moment, he cared only for Severus.

“Verus! Oh gods, are you okay? Are you hurt?”
The man looked terrified and pale, but Harry supposed that was a given considering what he had just experienced. “Hurt, but I’ll live. C-come. We must go before they recover.”

Harry nodded. “Hold on.”

He took Severus by the hand and half-dragged him to the floo. After tossing a pinch of powder in and whispering their destination, Harry grabbed Severus close, ignoring a fierce, knife-like pain in his left arm, and leapt into the flames.

The floo ride banged them up a bit, having two in at once, but they came out in one piece on the other side. Mostly. The fire spat them onto the hearth, Harry landing sprawled on top of Severus, as per his typical lack of grace. If the world was ending, Harry Potter would still stumble out of the floo. To be fair, he was a bit dazed.

“Ugh,” Severus said with a moan. “Why on earth did you take us both through at once, you idiot?”

Harry coughed up soot and rolled off of his soul-bond. “Because I didn’t want to leave you there, injured and surrounded by Death Eaters, you self-sacrificing dolt.” As soon as he recovered his breath, he waved his good arm to close the wards, cradling the injured one to his chest. The expenditure of further magic left him aching and nauseous, and Harry decided he had best rest for the moment. He lay there, panting and trying to gather his scattered wits, while Draco rushed to their aid.

Draco hovered over Severus, eyes wide with alarm. “Are you okay? What took so long?”

“The Death Eaters caught us,” Severus replied with a pant. “Had to fight our way out. Draco, need an antidote. Cursed me.”

Draco paled, but answered quickly. “What spell?”

“Lymphavesco.”

What colour was left in Draco’s expression drained out. “Shite!” He Summoned a dark green phial and tossed it to Harry, who caught it with his good arm. “Make him drink it all.”

Harry nodded and dragged himself to Severus’ side, supporting his love’s head on his lap. “Here, sweetheart. Drink it.” Severus swallowed obediently and groaned as it took effect.

Draco gasped. “Potter. Mother of Merlin, Potter!”

“What?” Harry ignored him and watched colour return to Severus’ cheeks.

Draco grabbed Harry’s shoulder. “You idiot, you’re bleeding!”

Harry frowned. At the mention of his injury, he suddenly became conscious of a deep, throbbing ache along the length of his left arm. “Oh. Yeah, Lestrange caught … caught me with ….” He shook his head, suddenly feeling dizzy.

Severus sat, looked down, and let slip a little cry. “Oh fuck, Harry!”

The man sounded more horrified than Harry thought a minor injury warranted. Worried, the young man held his arm out for Severus to see, then immediately wished he hadn’t looked for himself.

Gods help him, the curse had cut halfway through his left arm, slicing him wide open from elbow to wrist, and blood was pouring out of him. No wonder he felt so light-headed.

“Dear Merlin,” Harry choked out.
“Oh gods, Harry!” Severus grabbed Harry’s injured hand, slick and sticky with blood, and pulled the mage down so his arm was flat against the floor. “H-hold still, love. This might hurt a bit.” With a grunt, Severus leaned on Harry’s upper arm, applying enough pressure to make his fingertips tingle and his upper arm bruise. “That should slow the blood loss. Draco, Summon three phials of Blood Replenisher and help him take it while I chant for him. Just one until he’s healed.”

Draco knelt beside Harry and held up a rust-red potion. “Way ahead of you.”

While Severus began chanting—*Vulnera Santentur ... Vulnera Santentur*—Draco helped Harry take the first phial. Despite the foul metallic taste, Harry forced himself to swallow it all.

“Good, Harry. That’s it.”

Draco laid the phial aside, clinking it on the hardwood floor, but the sound barely registered to Harry. Everything came to him through a grey haze of dizziness and a tinny ringing in his ears. Harry was weak, couldn’t hold his head up any longer. Sleep. Sleep sounded good. Harry drooped into Severus’ thigh and moaned.

“Harry, open your eyes,” Severus said, panic edging his voice. “No sleeping.”

“But m’tired,” Harry slurred.

“You’re not tired, you’re fucking dying,” Draco snapped. “Stay awake.”

“O ... kay.” Harry forced his eyes open. “Where’s ... Blaise?”

“Keeping Theo alive. Just focus on healing, Potter. Theo’s not in as much danger as you are right now.”

Harry’s dim gaze fixated on his partner’s pale face. “Sev’rus, are you ... okay?”

Severus blinked hard and kissed Harry’s forehead lightly. The older man’s lips seemed hot against Harry’s skin, or maybe Harry was just cold.

“I will survive, love. Hold on.”

“‘Kay.”

“Keep talking,” said Draco.

“Can’t. Tired.”

“J-just stay still and stay awake then, okay?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Harry couldn’t have moved even if he wanted to. As his eyelids fluttered shut, too heavy to keep open any longer, he turned his head against Severus’ knee and listened through to the fuzzy-sounding voices around him. Theo was moaning with pain, but the sound relieved Harry. It meant he was still alive. Blaise murmured in his soft, lilting voice to Theo, trying to hold his friend together. Draco chanted along with Severus, though his voice lacked both the skill and power of the older man. His efforts to help touched Harry regardless.

A moment later, the pain in Harry’s arm had eased and Draco was tipping another potion into his mouth. Harry swallowed the second phial of liquid obediently despite the terrible taste, but choked on the third. Severus lifted Harry into his arms and helped him take the rest.
“Better, beloved?”

Harry leaned back into his soul-bond with a groan. “Yeah. Not as dizzy.”

Severus gave him a general healing draught and rocked Harry against his chest, still chanting softly. After a moment, Harry was able to turn his head. He still couldn’t open his eyes.

“Be glad Severus was here,” Draco said in a grim voice. “They almost took off your arm and, even if I’d had all these potions available, I wouldn’t have been skilled enough to save you. You’d have bled out pretty quickly without his help.”

Severus stood, cradling Harry in his arms. “I hope I am always here.” He cast several quick *Tergeos* on Harry and laid the weakened young man on the sofa. “Drop our glamours, love. It is draining you further.”

Harry groaned and let the magic shielding their appearances dissipate. “F-forgot about it.”

“There you are.” Severus brushed a kiss on Harry’s lips. “Rest here, Harry. I must tend to Theo, but I am here if you need me.”

“But you were cursed too,” Harry protested in a weaker voice than he’d have liked. He let Severus bundle him up on the sofa anyway. “Lie down with me. Don’t want you hurt.”

Severus shook his head. “Love, I am well. The curse Nott used is ineffective in battle on its own. As he did not manage the follow-up curse and I ingested the antidote to the original within ten minutes, the damage is minimal. Though I may be susceptible to minor illnesses for a day or two, I am in no danger of death or serious injury.” He brushed a kiss on Harry’s forehead. “You are in far worse shape. You have lost at least a quarter of your blood volume and Blood Replenisher cannot cure everything.”

At Severus’ words, Harry’s eyes flickered to the floor in front of the hearth and to his soul-bond. His stomach lurched at the sight.

Dear gods, blood was everywhere. Scuffed-up dark red puddles stained the floor before the hearth, the walls, the tables. The rug under the coffee tables had soaked up a huge red blot. And Severus and Draco were covered from the neck down, their hands dripping crimson.

“Mother of Merlin,” he breathed.

As Harry swallowed a wave of nausea, Draco cast several *Tergeo* spells at the room, clearing most of the carnage away. Severus cleaned their robes and bodies as well, but after all was said and done, the rug was still in bad shape.

“Damn,” Harry muttered. “We’ve barely had that rug two days and I’ve already got to replace it. I swear you snakes are bad luck.”

Draco snorted. “It was a lion who bled all over it.”

“True.” Harry groaned. “Gods, I feel like I’ve been run over by a lorry. Is everyone else okay? How’s Nott?”

From the boy’s side, Severus said, “Not well, but he will pull through. Do not disturb me while I chant for him.”

Harry nodded and cursed when it made his head throb. “A-all right, Verus.”
Draco went to help Severus with Theo and Blaise sat in the armchair beside Harry’s sofa.

The boy said in a low voice, “Are you all right, Harry?”

Harry gave him a wry look. “Hardly. But I think I’ll be okay soon. Probably just need a good long nap.”

Blaise nodded. “Good. What happened, Harry? After I went through?”

“You mean after Severus tossed you through?”

Blaise chuckled. “Bit of a rough landing there, but I came out in one piece at least. I can’t say the same for you. What happened? I heard voices and then I was here.”

Harry shook his head and groaned at a wave of dizziness. “They caught us. Nott Senior and his merry men had us cornered. We didn’t dare use the floo and turn our backs on them while they were shooting curses at us, so we had no choice but to fight.”

“Merlin! All six of them?”

“Yeah. Well, I disabled one pretty early into the fight, but it was still five on two. Then Lestrange hit Severus, and I … I was an idiot and cried out for him. Luckily, I wasn’t stupid enough to use his proper name or they’d have ambushed him. Instead, everyone cursed me at once, but I was able to dodge all but the last one, hence having my arm half taken off.”

He shuddered. “As deep as it was, I hardly even felt it. I was so terrified for Verus. I was too scared, couldn’t even hold the disillusionment spell, and as soon as it fell, I lost it. I saw Severus kneeling and suffering, and … I don’t know. I was so angry. I shot some kind of fire curse at them and knocked them all out. Then Severus and I escaped, and you know the rest.”

Severus winced, pausing in his chants. “Harry … you didn’t knock them unconscious. At least not … all of them.”

Harry frowned. “I didn’t? Well, no. I suppose some of them were making a fuss, now that you mention it. But they were out of the way and that was my point.”

Severus gave him a weak smile. “We … can discuss it when you are better, perhaps.” He turned away and went back to working on Theo, but Harry knew him too well not to know he was hiding something. Something he wanted to protect Harry from. Merlin, what had that curse done?

“Severus. Tell me.”

Severus hesitated. “Love, I am not sure … you have only just recovered ….”

“Please, Verus. If you don’t tell me, I’m likely to imagine worse than what actually happened.”

Severus winced. “Very well. Harry, that curse … it was too powerful. Lestrange and Nott Senior took the brunt of it. I do not think they survived.”

Harry froze. “I killed them?”

“I … I do not know beyond a doubt, but I think it is likely.”

Coldness and nausea washed over Harry. “No! I … fuck! I didn’t mean … I ….”

Severus moved to go to Harry, but Blaise held up a quelling hand. “I’ll help him. I’m rubbish at
healing, but I imagine I can at least help him keep his head on straight. Theo needs you.”

Severus shuddered and sank to his knees before Theo again. “I love you, Harry. You did well, though it does not feel so now.”

‘Understatement,’ Harry thought. He felt as if he had destroyed something precious, even if he knew both men in question were monsters and the world was better without them.

“I’m s-sorry,” Harry choked out.

Blaise knelt in front of Harry and took the man’s hand. “Ssh. Those men—if you did kill them, then you did the world a favour, Harry. They were beyond horrible. Do you know Theo’s dad started torturing him for the smallest infraction at two years old? He has scars, not from beatings like you would think, but from the *Cruciatus*.”

Harry gasped. “Scars? Dear Merlin. I didn’t know it could scar.”

“Normally, it doesn’t. But when it’s used against you every single day for sixteen years? He has this sort of spider web of white lines starting from his heart and going all down his chest and back. It’s horrible. Even with as cruel as Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius were to Draco, he doesn’t have scars. That’s how evil Theo’s piece of shite dad is. Was. You know what I mean.”

“But he’s still Theo’s father. He … won’t he hate me?”

“Hate you? If you really did kill the bastard, he’ll be your best mate forever.”

Harry shuddered. “I … is it really that bad?”

“Yes. Can you imagine being tortured like that every day? It would make you hate them eventually, wouldn’t it? Whether they were family or not.”

Harry sniffled. “I don’t know. I still don’t want my uncle dead even if he deserves it. I can’t imagine how Theo will thank me.”

Blaise stiffened. “Your … uncle? Harry?”

He sighed. “You’ll see the whole truth soon, but maybe I should tell you tonight anyway. It’d be less of a shock for the others if more people can support me in the meeting tomorrow.”

“It would be good practice for the meeting too, love,” Severus said. “I am finished chanting for him, if you would like my support?”

Harry sighed. “Yeah. Can Draco give him the potions he needs?”

Draco stood and levitated Theo to one of the sofas. “Already done. Theo is awake now, though a bit dazed.”

“Potter …” Theo said in a raspy voice. “My dad … thank you.”

Harry shuddered. “I swear I didn’t mean to—I just wanted them off of Severus and … I didn’t … I’m so sorry.”

Theo gave him a wan smile. “It’s okay. I’m just … glad he can’t … hurt me anymore.”

Severus lifted Harry’s shoulders and sat behind him, holding the younger man against his chest. “I am not positive they are dead, Theo. But I should send the aurors out to the house regardless before
we discuss this further. Kingsley will need to know before the non-order aurors do. And if they are all caught, then it will keep Riddle in the dark a bit longer as to your defection.”

Harry nodded. “Good idea. It’ll give me time to brace for talking about my past too.”

“Yes.” Severus hugged Harry close. “Here, my Harry. Let me hold you while I contact Kingsley, and then we shall talk.”

Harry closed his eyes and turned, burrowing his face into Severus’ chest. A gentle arm supported him, and he listened as Severus summoned his doe and gave her a message for their auror friend.

“Shacklebolt, I am not sure if you are aware of the attack at Nott Manor already or not, but earlier this evening, we received word that Theo Nott ….”

Severus’ words blurred into a soothing rumble as Harry tried to summon the strength to face his fears. A part of him couldn’t fathom that he was even considering it. It had taken so much courage to reveal his scars to Severus, who both loved and understood him. Could Harry really reveal his suffering to these Slytherins? Boys who had, until recently, been his enemies?

But they understood too, didn’t they? Ron and Hermione—they had never known what it meant to be hurt by those who should love them. Harry’s story would be alien and horrifying to them. To these Slytherins, it would be common ground. And if they understood that Harry’s life hadn’t been all princes and ponies like the Prophet wanted everyone to believe, maybe it would cement their loyalty. Start a bond, perhaps.

Harry sighed and nodded to himself. Perhaps if he started with people who knew what it meant to suffer and wouldn’t overreact, it would make showing those who couldn’t possibly understand and weren’t likely to take it well easier.

“All right,” Harry said after he realised Severus had been silent for several moments. “I … I’m ready. I think.”

Severus helped Harry to sit in his lap. “How can I help you?”

“Just hold me. I’m … I’ve never … no one but you.”

Severus kissed Harry lightly, shocking Theo. “Ssh. I am here. And yes, Theo, we are together. We are in love. He is my soul-bound mate, so you will see more of that in the future.”

Theo gasped out, “S-soul-bound?”

Severus held Harry tighter. “Yes. It happened the night of my torture, completely by accident. However, I cannot reveal anything further, nor can Harry, without an oath of secrecy from you. Actually, I would prefer that same oath before Harry speaks of his past. More to the point, Theo, would you be willing to join us?”

Theo frowned. “I … join what?”

“A … third side of the war, if you will. One that supports neither the Dark Lord’s twisted brand of evil nor Dumbledore’s hidden agendas, some of which you are already aware of. We are neither dark nor light, but neither are we neutral. We are fighting to win, but we will settle for nothing less than a world clear of corruption, be it in the dark forces, in the Ministry, or in the light.”

“I’m in,” Theo said without hesitation.
Theo’s eyes flashed. “Draco isn’t me. He has more of a gentle nature, believe it or not, but not me. I’m ready to beat the hell out of both sides if it means people like me have a chance at a life free of manipulation and torture. I never wanted to be dark, but between Dumbledore’s secret hatred of all things Slytherin and my lovely family, I had no choice. So yes, if I can help stop others from going through the same hell I did, then, by gods, I want to. I want in.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “Good. Then will you swear our oath? Come to think of it, we need to swear you all in. Draco took an oath of secrecy, but never swore into the Dawn. And we didn’t ask Blaise for either vow.”

“I won’t tell your secrets,” Blaise said in a quiet voice, “but I’ll take the oath.”

“So will I,” said Draco, “so long as I don’t need to fight unless I want to.”

“Same here,” said Theo, “only I already know I want to fight.”

“Very well,” said Severus. “Each of you repeat after me. ‘I, state your name—’”

The boys obeyed, each giving their own title—including Harry, as he hadn’t taken any oaths yet either. With a smile at his soul-bond, Severus joined in, pausing at intervals to let the others catch up.

“I, Severus Tobias Snape, hereby swear my loyalty to the Court of the Dawn. I swear to repeat nothing given in confidence among its members to anyone outside of the Court. I swear to serve no other organisations concerning the war, excepting only if those duties are given to me by the leaders of the Dawn. If I am already involved in such organisations, my first loyalty will be to the Court of the Dawn and its goals, and I will do whatever I am able to extricate myself from the other organisations as soon as I safely can. I swear to uphold the values of the Dawn and to aid the mission of the Court as well as I am able, so long as the Court of the Dawn exists. I swear to protect my comrades in the Dawn and keep both their secrets and their lives safe, to the best of my ability, for the rest of my life. So mote it be.”

As the oath took hold, golden light settled on the chest of every man in the room.

Severus nodded to his new comrades. “Welcome to the Court of the Dawn. You are its first sworn members, though we shall be fairly overrun with Gryffindors tomorrow if we have our way.”

Draco wrinkled his nose. “Lovely. Why?”

“We are attempting to sway as many of Dumbledore’s supporters to our cause as possible, and that means getting the support of the Weasleys. Minerva McGonagall is already partially on our side—she does not know everything yet, but she is not as secure in her loyalty to Albus as she once was, particularly after she saw him curse my owl. When she knows what curse he used and what he has done to Harry, I believe it will be the last straw for her. For all of them, really.”

Blaise said in a shaky voice, “Will they accept us? And if they don’t, will we be turned out?”

“Of course you won’t be turned out,” Harry said with a huff. “This is your home now. If they can’t accept our sworn members, then they don’t belong in this organisation. The entire point of the Court of the Dawn is to erase irrational prejudices and give every wizard in Britain an equal footing. Well, to do that, we need to first eliminate the threats to Britain’s safety, but that’s the ultimate goal—equality and freedom, be it for a Slytherin or Gryffindor or someone who never set foot in Hogwarts at all.”

He frowned. “And that doesn’t just extend to pure humans. Werewolves, fae, vampires—they’re
treated terribly and it’s completely unjust. Especially when they take measures to mitigate the danger to humans. So you’re going to have to get used to having a lot of beings about, I’m afraid. You’ll be safe, of course.”


Harry nodded. “My second godfather is a werewolf. He’s never hurt me once and is a kind, intelligent man who deserves the freedom to find a job, own a house, and receive the same treatment as any other human.”

Theo let slip a shaky sigh. Beside him, Draco and Blaise looked equally uncomfortable.

“Look, we’re not asking you to share a dorm with them on the full moon, okay?” Harry snorted. “No werewolf who stays here will be allowed in without swearing to take Wolfsbane anyway—and you can be sure Severus will keep tabs on that. And no vampire will be allowed to feed from anyone but their bonded donors or a willing participant. And the Fae keep to themselves so long as we don’t take their things or hurt them first anyway. So you’re in no danger.”

“Harry speaks the truth,” Severus said. “We would not allow harm to come to you here, and we will need the aid and support of the beings to win this war. Will you accept them?”

The Slytherins shared a look.

“We don’t have a lot of choice to be honest,” said Blaise. “But I’m thinking, we grew up hearing a lot of things about Harry that apparently aren’t true. So maybe what we’ve heard about magical … beings isn’t true, either.”

“Most of it isn’t,” Harry said with a nod. “And as far as me … well, I guess we’d best get back to that before it gets too late and while I’m feeling up to it.” He took a deep breath. “Um, can I trust you? If I show you the truth about my past, you won’t use it against me?”

Draco scowled. “Did we or did we not just swear an oath of loyalty to you and your Court? We can’t hurt you even if we wanted to. And if what you’re about to reveal is what I suspect, then I’ve no desire to regardless.”

Theo and Blaise nodded their agreement.

Harry shivered. “All right. I … I’m sorry. It’s just … I’m scared.”

“I am here, love,” Severus murmured. “It will be all right.”

Harry buried his face in Severus’ throat. “Love you.”

Severus kissed his hair and whispered in his ear, “I love you as well. You are strong, my Harry. You can do this.”

Harry let slip a shaky breath and nodded. “All right. Help me turn, Verus.”

Severus nodded and guided Harry to straddle his lap so his back was to the Slytherins. Harry blushed at the intimate position and figured it was best to get this over with quickly before he embarrassed himself. With a quiet whimper, he grabbed the hem of his tee with his good arm and jerked it over his head. The Slytherins drew in a gasp as one.

“Dear fucking Merlin,” Draco swore. “Harry … gods. Who did this to you?”
Harry lowered his shirt and turned back towards the others. “My uncle. He can’t use magic, but he was as cruel to me as Theo’s father. As was my aunt. My cousin was a bastard too, but to be fair, it’s how his parents raised him to be. It’s much more their fault than his. And he’s laid off since I saved him from dementors, but ….”

Severus rubbed Harry’s shoulder. “You are rambling, love.”

Harry winced. “R-right. Sorry. I tend to when I’m nervous.”

“It’s okay, Harry,” said Blaise with a shiver. “I … we all know how it feels. You aren’t going to be rejected here.”

Harry let slip a shuddering sigh and buried his face in Severus’ throat. “S-sorry,” he muttered as tears leaked down his cheeks.

Severus rubbed Harry’s back and hair. “Ssh. You are safe, love.” He lifted his head to address the Slytherins. “As you can see, Dumbledore has been spreading lies about Harry’s life. What is worse is that he knew Harry was being abused and repeatedly sent him back to it. That is what turned Harry against the man, and he will be revealing it to his family tomorrow. If you will offer him your support, I would appreciate it.”

Draco’s voice was firm. “You have it. We know what that means and how difficult it is to reveal.”

“Thanks for trusting us, Harry,” Blaise said.

“You’re welcome,” Harry murmured. When he turned, Theo’s eyes were blazing. “Nott, are you angry with me?”

“Theo,” the boy corrected. “Call me Theo. And of course I’m not bloody angry with you. I’m angry because Dumbledore did the same thing to me. I asked him for shelter and he sent me back to those monsters again and again. So I understand, and it’s hacking me off that I wasn’t the only one he hurt like this.”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin. So did I. I asked him every year. Even the other Gryffindors did in my stead. And he still … gods. I guess we have a lot more in common than we knew.”

The Slytherins nodded.

“Apparently so,” said Draco with a sigh. “I wish now I hadn’t insulted Weasley that day all those years ago. It was what I’d been raised to believe, but I realise now I was wrong, and if we’d been friends, maybe we’d have been able to help each other sooner.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “Maybe you should apologise to Ron then tomorrow. And ‘Mione. It might help.”

“We all will,” said Theo. “I’ve said things about them too, though mostly just to keep the dark-aligned Slytherins off my back.”

“Same here,” Blaise agreed. “We’ll start by offering them peace, and maybe that’ll help them to accept it.”

“I sure hope so,” Harry said with a nod. “It’s a go—”

Kingsley’s lynx bounded into the room followed by Molly’s bear and McGonagall’s tabby, distracting Harry from whatever he was going to say.
“Dear Merlin,” said Severus with a groan. “They must have met on the way and joined forces.” He sighed and tapped the lynx’s head. “Best to get the most urgent news over with first.”

“Severus, what the bloody hell happened here? I … dear gods, I’ve never seen the like of it.” The lynx shuddered and let out a low yowl of distress. “I didn’t find Rabastan Lestrangle. He must have survived somehow and escaped. The surviving Death Eaters have all been taken into custody, minus Lestrangle and Nott Senior. Nott is definitely dead. There’s not much left of him, to be honest. I had to do a magical identification.”

Harry whimpered and buried his face in Severus’ throat.

“Severus, I’m having trouble believing that Harry did this. I don’t … how the bloody hell is he so powerful? What in the world is going on?” The lynx sighed. “I’ll need to talk to you and Harry tonight for questioning. Just come in whenever you get Harry and Theo fixed up. And let Harry know not to worry. He was saving the life of a teenager in distress. No one can fault him for attacking in self-defence.”

Harry shuddered. “Umbridge isn’t going to see things his way.”

“Kingsley will do his best to make sure Umbridge doesn’t know. After all, no one but us and Kingsley knows it was you, Harry. We were under glamours.”

“But my doppelgänger?”

Severus frowned. “You released it as soon as Madam Nott revealed us, didn’t you?”

Harry nodded.

“Then they will know it was an illusion and suspect their attackers used that guise as it was the most likely to distract them.”

Harry relaxed marginally. “You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

Harry sighed and laid his head against Severus’ shoulder. “Okay.”

As Severus moved to touch the bear, Blaise stopped him.

“Harry, are you going to tell us how you made that doppelgänger? The level of power needed for something like that ….” The boy shivered. “I don’t understand.”

Harry gave Severus a worried look.

“I think that will need to wait until tomorrow, boys,” said Severus with a shake of his head. “Harry will be revealing everything we know then, and he needs to recover tonight. Besides that, I still must go to Shacklebolt for questioning.” He laid Harry on the couch and stood. “Winky!”

The elf appeared and gasped. “Dear elfkin! What has happened, Master Severus? There is blood residue everywhere! Is Master Harry injured?”

Severus nodded. “He was. He is recovering now, as is Theo. I am afraid the rug is a loss.”

She shook her head. “We’s can clean it, so long as it is not being bloody for more than ten hours.”

“It has perhaps been one.”
Winky snapped her fingers and popped the rug away. “Ashie will be cleaning it. Should Winky help her?”

“No thank you, Winky. I have a more important job for you tonight. Theo here has been tortured and seriously injured, and while his injuries are healed and he is not in danger, he is still weak. I would appreciate it if you would help care for him and guard him tonight.” Severus turned to Theo. “Treat her with respect, Theo, as you would a human. She is not a slave.”

“Yes, sir,” Theo said.

Winky bowed and moved to stand beside Theo’s sofa. “Come, Mister Theo. Winky will take you to your room. Is you wanting to stay close to Mister Draco and Mister Blaise?”

“Yes, please.”

She smiled. “Then I’s just be putting you in next do—”

Theo interrupted her with a keening cry. His back arched and his hands clawed at his left forearm.

“Oh gods,” Theo screamed. “He knows!”

Severus cried, “Shite! Rabastan must have—move back, Winky!”

Gasping, Harry staggered to the boy’s side, ignoring his lingering dizziness, and placed his hands on either side of Theo’s mark.

“Hold on,” Harry whispered.

With a deep breath, he opened his senses to the course of magic, feeling it flow through him, through the air and his companions, and how it was tearing into Theo, ripping him apart from the inside out. With a growl, Harry followed the currents of magic into the boy’s core, and further on into the source of his pain, the mark. Gods, it hurt just to trace it, so powerful was the roiling dark magic within, but Harry persevered.

“Help Harry,” Severus called out. His voice sounded as if it came from far away. “He is not recovered yet. Lay your hands on him and share your power.”

“Yes, sir,” said Draco and Blaise. Winky added her assent as well.

Two hands grasped his shoulders and Severus’ palms held Harry’s head steady. A smaller hand held onto Harry’s wrist. From each palm, trickles of power flowed into Harry, deepening the well he had to draw from to heal Theo. He hoped it would be enough.

With a deep breath, Harry focused his energy and let out the power locked within his core, life and light and love. As the magic spilled into Theo, coursing through his veins, into his core, and centring on the Dark Mark, the boy’s struggles stopped.

Theo said something; Harry wasn’t sure what. He had interwoven himself into the magic. Instead, the steady thrum of life and crackle-sizzle of curses filled his ears.

With the immediate threat to Theo’s life taken care of, Harry focused on removing—or at least neutralising—the Mark. He took a deep breath and tried to bring up the same feeling he had when he removed Severus’ mark, that overwhelming love and desire to protect his family, but it was difficult. He simply didn’t know Theo well enough to feel that level of adoration.
Harry shuddered and squeezed back tears. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t save him.

Severus said something to his Slytherins and they talked back. Then a velvet murmur filled his ears and Harry understood each word—Severus’ mind-voice was as silky as his spoken words. Harry sighed and let the words wash over him. Perhaps it would help him save Theo.

“You are so brave, Harry. So beautiful. I love you so very much.”

He sensed a shifting beyond his consciousness as warmth settled at the sides of his hips and lower back. Severus had knelt behind him, straddling his thighs, still holding Harry’s face in gentle hands. Even in deep meditation, the feeling was heaven.

“You are my angel, my hero, my love. You are my family, and one day, perhaps we can save Seth and be a family in truth. Guide him through the remainder of his childhood together, help him heal, and little Sev too. Merlin, doesn’t it sound wonderful? A life with just the two of us and our beloved boys. I dream of sharing it with you.”

Harry’s breath hitched and a tear slipped down his face—his mage sight tracked it as a trail of pink lights dripping down the ghostly-white outline of his cheek.

Severus’ soft, gentle tones soothed Harry. “Is that a surprise, love? That I want a family with you? Merlin, I do! It is the most cherished hope of my heart. I dream of us settled here, our home, our children—a life so simple and beautiful—gods! My heart yearns for it.”

Harry sighed and let his head drop back into Severus’ hands. “Oh, Severus ….”

“Yes, I am with you. I am here.”

A soft kiss dropped onto his hair and branded Harry with love.

“Listen to my dreams now, my lovely soul-bond. Let them fill you with love.”

“Yes. Help me save him.”

“Mm, I will. Imagine it, my Harry, our family on holiday in Squire House, all curled up together by the fire. You would be in my arms on the sofa, reading a quidditch magazine, and I would read a potions journal while I hold you. The boys are lying before the fire, studying for their OWLs or playing chess together. Perhaps there is a dog with the boys, pounding its tail against Seth’s leg. Our owls are snoozing on their perch, snuggled close, and a cat is curled in my lap and purring. Lovely, isn’t it?”

Oh gods, just the thought of such a happy, loving life sent a deluge of pink-light tears dripping down Harry’s face. More warm drops slid into his hair, Severus’ tears, a mark of how deeply the older man longed for his dream.

“Merlin, can’t you see it now, my Harry? Can you feel it? Gods, it’s so beautiful.” A gentle kiss touched Harry’s temple. “Think of our dream, Harry. Our boys, safe and home. You and I, together and in love. No dark lords or light lords to harm us, just our family, content simply to soak up each other’s presence. Think of that, the deepest desire of my heart, and feel how very much I love you.”

With Severus’ final words, such a wave of tenderness and joy overwhelmed Harry that he could not help but share it. The power of his adoration spilled into Theo’s mark, quieting all traces of dark magic there. Harry wasn’t sure if he had simply neutralised it or fully removed it, but the darkness had gone.
On instinct and out of a need to share the power of his love before the surge passed—or drowned him in its intensity—he grabbed Draco’s arm and searched the darkness out within him too. It only took him a moment to find it, so deep was his meditation, and with a sigh, Harry let his love and magic spill into Draco, too.

The boy said something, Harry couldn’t hear that either, but Draco’s shock was apparent. Harry ignored it and kept showering the mark with love until he felt no trace of darkness in either Draco or Theo. Then, with a smile and a hope that one day, Severus’ dreams would come true, Harry sank forwards into a dead faint.

“You bloody idiot!” Severus caught the fainting fool just before he smacked his head against Theo’s forehead and knocked them both unconscious. “That makes the second time you have risked your life tonight, and come morning, you will feel my wrath.”

A tiny voice whispered, “If you survive,” but Severus refused to pay it any heed. Harry would survive. He had to. They still had a war to win.

And even if they hadn’t, Severus couldn’t go on without him.

With a sigh that sounded suspiciously like a snuffle, he lifted Harry into his arms and laid him back on the sofa. The young man was breathing at least and, judging by the faint throbbing in his neck, his pulse was still strong.

Behind him, one of the boys spoke for the first time since Theo had stopped screaming.

“It’s … it’s gone. Dear gods, it’s really gone.”

Draco’s voice trembled, but Severus could hardly blame him. He hadn’t forgotten how the removal of his own mark had knocked him to his knees with sheer wonder. He glanced over his shoulder to see Draco running a finger down his bare forearm, smiling at his flesh as if it were the height of beauty, but for this once, Severus supposed he could forgive the boy his arrogance. The loss of his own mark had once captivated him too, after all.

In a soft voice, he called to the Dawn’s healer elf. “Ferro.”

The grey-eyed elf popped in beside Severus and smoothed down his new uniform, neat black shoes, white slacks, and a white jacket. His jacket bore a breast signet with a golden sun indicating his allegiance and a red cross over that indicating his position. The first full outfit for their Dawn elves. The sight of it filled Severus with a sense of pride.

His family couldn’t do much for these slave-born, self-repressive elves—they refused to accept anything beyond the basics—but every small freedom and kindness they received went a long way towards giving them back some sense of agency. Perhaps one day they could truly be free employees of the Dawn. Until then, Severus was happy to see their elves looking well-cared for and content. He would have to thank Gemmy for such grand uniforms when he had a free moment.

With a nod to the little healer, Severus set both elves present to care for the more seriously injured Theo. Once they had moved to help the other boy, he cast a diagnostic spell on Harry. Thankfully, the mage hadn’t injured himself. He was still weak and anaemic from his earlier wounds, but removing the boys’ marks hadn’t hurt him further. At least not physically.
With great trepidation, Severus realised he needed to check Harry’s magic too. Harry had already used a massive amount of energy to dispatch the Death Eaters earlier that evening. Another blast so soon after a serious energy loss and dangerous injury could have damaged his core. He sucked in a deep breath and a prayer that he would find Harry’s magic as radiant as it had always been, Severus cast a core revealing spell.

Harry glowed so brilliantly white, Severus had to shield his eyes. From what little he could tell before his vision faded to black and red spots, the glow encompassed Harry’s entire body.

Well. No problem with his magic then.

“Cancel the spell, sir,” said a pained-sounding Draco.

Severus flicked his wand and opened his eyes. The room had gone back to a normal level of luminance.

“Dear gods,” said Blaise in a shaky voice. “Is that … was that really his magic?”

Severus nodded and scanned his physical diagnostic results one more time, just in case he had missed something.

Blaise frowned and looked over Harry. “Is he all right, sir?”

Severus let out a shuddering sigh. “Yes, thank Merlin. He has only exhausted himself. Harry will be well again after a solid meal, another course of Blood Replenishers, and a good long rest.”

“That’s … good,” said a stunned Draco.

Severus Banished the parchment and gave the others a wan smile. “We will explain what we can tomorrow. For now, I have an appointment with Shacklebolt and after that, I believe we could all do with a good night’s sleep.” He moved to Theo’s side and watched the healer elf cast spells. “Is there anything I can do to help, Ferro? Does he need potions?”

The elf nodded. “Another anti-Cruciatius, Master Severus, and a draught to clear dark magic.”

Severus Summoned the requested potions and helped Theo take them. The young man opened his eyes and coughed halfway through the last phial. “How are you feeling, Theo?”

“Bit better,” Theo replied with a sigh. “Harry’s okay?”

“Yes. He simply exhausted himself.”

“Good. He won’t … the Dark Lord won’t attack me again, will he?”

Severus frowned. “Well, he might in person if he manages to find this place, which I doubt, but he shan’t attack you through the mark. You fell unconscious before Harry finished, but …. He gently lifted Theo’s hand, revealing the boy’s unmarked forearm. “He set you free. Draco’s is gone too.”

Theo gasped and stared at his arm, tears slipping into his hair. “Oh gods. I never thought … I thought it would haunt me for the rest of my life. It’s r-really gone? Forever?”

“Mine has not returned yet, and there is little reason to suppose it will.”

With a cry of joy, Theo buried his face in his hand and wept. Blaise swept him into a hug and supported him, and Draco knelt beside them both, rubbing Theo’s back and shedding no small amount of tears himself. It did not take long before Blaise was crying too, his relief almost palpable.
The sight of his brave, emotionally-repressed Slytherins’ pain hurt Severus. How much these boys had suffered, before they could even be called men. He made a silent vow that they would never endure the Dark Lord’s wrath again, unless they chose to fight at Harry’s side. And Severus would not let them face it alone even if they did. He would help them, as much as he could.

To that end, he went to his Slytherins and laid his hand upon their heads briefly, one by one. “I am here,” he said softly. It was all he could manage without feeling too exposed, too vulnerable, but he hoped it was enough.

Blaise gave him a grateful smile and returned to taking care of the others without making a fuss. Severus let out a breath and hesitantly stroked Theo’s and Draco’s hair. Their tears slowed and dried up into sniffles almost immediately, to the older man’s relief. He really didn’t feel comfortable showing this side of himself to anyone but Harry and Seth. Well, and to his younger self now too. He would have to get over that soon, he mused. His snakes needed him.

“It’s all right now,” a recovered Blaise murmured to his year-mates. “We’re free.”

“Yes,” Theo said through residual sniffles. “Gods. I … thank you. Professor, tell Harry? I’ll say it myself but ….”

Severus patted Theo’s shoulder. “I will pass on your gratitude.”

“From me as well.” Draco wiped his eyes and fixed Severus with a red-rimmed, yet still brave stare. “Theo wasn’t the only Slytherin forced to take the mark. We have to help the others, Severus.”

Severus nodded. “It was not only Slytherins forced either, and we are aware. We had first to find and restore a safehouse, and since then, a crisis has occurred every other moment. As soon as Harry recovers and we have a chance to rescue the others, we will. Do you know of anyone else in immediate danger?”

Draco shook his head. “I think the rest of them are trying to play it safe.”

“Good. If you are able, send them a message to continue doing so until Harry and I are able to free them.”

“Yes, sir. They might not trust me, but Blaise and Theo should be able to help, as soon as Theo’s feeling better.”

“We’ll start as soon as Theo’s better able to cope,” said Blaise.

“Thank you,” Severus replied.

Theo whispered, “Sir … Harry, is he going to be okay? I mean, about what happened at the manor, not just his injuries. He was … devastated.”

Severus looked over his shoulder at his sleeping soul-bond, his heart aching with grief for the young mage. “Yes. I will make sure of it.”
Gathering the Troops

Chapter Summary

Warnings: none. Summary: Severus gathers together everyone they want in the Dawn while Harry recovers and plans the first meeting. Harry meets Dumbledore and the Order face to face for the first time since learning his true motives.

The people commenting on Harry's behavior at the Order meeting are right. He's acting like a brash Gryffindor here instead of what he needs to do. Therefore, I'm cutting that section, editing it, and putting the rewrite at the top of the next chapter once it's done. Sorry about that.

CHAPTER 26
Gathering the Troops

After putting Harry to bed and dispatching a Patronus to Minerva, Molly, Tonks, and Lupin, Severus went to the questioning with Kingsley. It was a fairly straightforward report, especially since Kingsley had no intention of publishing Severus’ answers to the Ministry. As far as they would know, a group of unknown vigilantes had answered a call to help Theo Nott and attacked the Death Eaters in self-defence. Kingsley just wanted the true story so he knew how best to ‘redirect’ his colleagues should they stumble too close to it.

“Now that that unpleasantness is behind us ….” Kingsley leaned back in his chair and gave Severus an assessing look. “Do you want to explain what in the hell is up with Harry’s magic? That curse was far too powerful for a wet-behind-the-ears, just-out-of-integration wizard. Even one with a six-day integration illness. You sure weren’t capable of that kind of damage fresh off the wizard press, and you had the worst inheritance of anyone I’ve ever known. So?”

Severus rubbed the bridge of his nose. “It is far too dangerous to discuss anywhere near the Ministry, Shacklebolt. Come with me for a moment?”

Kingsley nodded and allowed Severus to lead him from the Ministry. The moment they passed the anti-apparition wards, Severus offered the man his arm.

Kingsley raised an eyebrow. “Am I going to find myself on the end of one of Harry’s spectacular fire curses should I take that?”

Severus snorted. “Harry is asleep and likely to remain so until morning. Besides, I have no intention of maintaining contact any longer than is necessary for a side-along apparition.”

“Uh-huh.” Kingsley took his arm and held tight. “Where exactly are you—”

Severus spun about and deposited them at the start of his and Harry’s street, immediately releasing Kingsley the moment they landed.

“—Taking us,” Kingsley said with a huff. “A little warning next time?”
Severus smirked. “I did warn you.”

“Humph.” Kingsley shook his head, but curiosity soon overcame his obvious irritation. “So where are we then? I don’t recognise this place.”

“You wouldn’t. It was—until recently—an abandoned wizarding village Harry inherited called Bàn Leon. We are standing at the top of Renewal Road, and that is our home—Harry’s and mine—at the end of it. Harry has yet to add you to the wards, however, so we shall simply take a bit of a walk while I speak to you.”

“All right. I’m listening.”

“Yes, I should hope so, since you asked the question.”

“Severus.”

Severus sighed and, after swearing the man to secrecy, explained to Kingsley as best as he could about Dumbledore, Harry’s magic, and the prophecy.

“We need your help, Shacklebolt. Will you stand with us?”

Kingsley rubbed a shaking hand over his bald head. “All this—it’s hard to believe. But when I think about it—why was Harry left with Muggles? Albus has always touted the blood wards, but Hogwarts had as much protection. There are many wizarding families that could have kept him safe, too. And I do remember hearing about some of the things you mentioned he let slide with the Marauders. He never should have done.” Shacklebolt shuddered. “Especially after what happened your OWL year.”

Severus winced. “You know?”

Kingsley’s expression darkened. “Thank Sirius for that. He was boasting about it one evening after too many firewhiskeys. I think it rather shocked him when I beat the shite out of him for it.” He shook his head. “The Gryffindors always seem to forget I was a Slytherin.”

“It is quite likely that is how Albus wants it. Good men can never be Slytherins or his plans are ruined.”

Kingsley gave a bitter snort. “You’re probably right.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I wish now I’d done more to beat some humility into Sirius’ head. At the time, I thought, well, he’d already done time for a crime he didn’t commit. I reckoned twelve years in Azkaban plus a thrashing was probably enough punishment to be going on with, especially after Harry himself ripped him and Remus a new arsehole, but in hindsight, it wasn’t. He didn’t understand why we were so angry.” He kicked a stone in the path. “He’d be alive now if he’d listened to you that day, when we went to the DoM.”

Severus acknowledged the comment with a nod. “I thank you for your action on my behalf, but Black left for the DoM on his own will.” He sighed. “And perhaps I goaded him into it a bit. If the fault for his death goes to anyone other than Black himself, Bellatrix, and Riddle, then it rests solely with me.” Severus stopped and turned to face Kingsley. “Enough about the past. We cannot change it, but we can make the future better. Will you help us?”

Kingsley gave him a wan smile. “I’m probably going to regret this one day, but count me in.”

Severus smiled back and swore him in.
After Kingsley had gone home, Severus considered who else to invite to the Dawn meeting on the way to pick up Seth. Minerva and the Weasleys were givens, but beyond that, he wasn’t sure.

Severus did not trust any others from his own circle and found himself considering Harry’s friends. Finnegan was out, at least at this time. The boy could not keep a secret if his life depended on it. And Longbottom, well, Severus wasn’t certain of him. He was a quiet boy, true, and loyal enough to keep their secrets, but he bent too easily under pressure. Though he was sure the boy knew Occlumency—passing those skills down was a point of pride with Augusta—until Severus could trust that Longbottom wouldn’t break the first time the Headmaster asked him up for lemon drops and an interrogation, he could not risk inviting him.

As he walked up the path to the Burrow, Severus considered the younger Weasleys. No doubt Harry would want to induct them, but would it be safe when none of them—except perhaps Granger—could Occlude and they would be exposed to the Headmaster for the next ten months? No, as much as Severus wished Harry could be fully honest with his friends, it was simply too dangerous to ri—

He was shocked out of his thoughts when his spy elf apparated silently onto the path in front of him.

“Rilen! Merlin, you startled me.”

The elf paused. “Is I coming at a bad time?”

“No, no. You only shocked me a bit. It is quite all right. What news do you have?” As the elf normally reported during the Headmaster’s late afternoon nap, Severus knew something of note had brought his spy out of Hogwarts this evening.

Rilen frowned and shook his head. “The target is … angry, Master. He’s being pacing his office and growling earlier tonight.”

Severus smirked. “Good. That means our work is impeding his plans. Have you noticed anything else?”

Rilen nodded. “He is being meeting with someone from the wizard newspaper.”

“Yes, Master Severus. A human called Mister Fibbleton came into the office for a secret meeting. He was being angry. He is saying he was sacked by the new owner of the Prophet. Dumblies is being asking him if he could say who the new owner was, and Mister Fibbleton said yes, but he is choking on his next words. And then he is breaking out in ugly bumps on his face that is looking like …”

The elf blushed. “They is being looking like butts and … and male parts, Master Severus.”

Severus smothered a burst of laughter behind his hand. “That was Harry’s hex? He really hexed the liars to gain miniature … penises on their faces?”

Rilen gave a small laugh and nodded so hard, his ears flopped.

A snort escaped Severus despite his best efforts to keep silent. “By Merlin, that is too much!” He grinned wickedly. “I don’t suppose you took a photo?”
The elf shook his head slowly. “I is not having a camera.”

“Pity,” Severus said, still chuckling. “I would have loved to see it. Perhaps you would consent to show me the memory in a pensieve as soon as we have one at our disposal?”

The elf grinned. “Yes, Master Severus.”

“Brilliant. Thank you, Rilen.”

“Oh, you is very welcome, Master Severus.”

Severus took a few deep breaths in effort to regain his self-control, but still struggled with residual snickers. “What happened, after the man was—” He snorted. “Hexed?”

“Dumblies be getting angry and yelling about cursed Fideliuses being a pain in the arse. He is sending the man to St. Mungo’s and pacing and muttering before going to bed.”

“He is asleep now?”

Rilen nodded.

“Then go and rest for yourself. Thank you for your report, Rilen. You did well to tell me so quickly.”

Rilen beamed and bowed, then popped away.

Severus resumed his walk to the Burrow, grinning madly. He paused halfway to the door, the elf’s report giving him an idea. If Harry could swear the Dawn into a modified Fidelius, just as he had done with the Prophet—perhaps without the … ahem … knobhead curse—he could protect the younger Dawn members without the need for Occlumency or a separation from Albus. That way, the younger Weasleys and Granger could still attend school without giving the game away and even their Occlumency-proficient members would be protected without having to constantly shield their minds.

Severus nodded. With that protection in place, he could not only invite the Weasleys and Granger, but Thomas and Lovegood too, who would both be needed in the coming weeks. And Poppy. This evening had put it in grim relief how much they needed a healer on hand.

Severus groaned. Poppy. Merlin, he should have spoken to her sooner. The woman was bound to think whatever Albus had told her was the truth by now unless, by some miracle, Minerva had spoken to her first. Well, he would begin to rectify the situation tonight and hope she might be receptive to meeting tomorrow. If not, he would simply have to spend time repairing that relationship and send Harry in his stead.

Severus nodded to himself. That was enough of a list for the time being. The meeting would be full of sparks as it was without inviting more potential … conflict.

Molly met Severus at the door and frowned. “Hello, Severus, but where is Harry?”

Severus shivered. “Inside first, Molly.”

“Oh, of course.” She stepped aside and bustled Severus into the kitchen, where Arthur and Ron were having a cup of tea. Seth was nowhere in sight.

“Seth fell asleep a bit earlier, so we left him upstairs,” Molly said with a half-smile. “Is Harry all
right?"

“Yes.” Severus took the cup of tea she passed into his hand and sat beside Arthur. “Good evening, gentlemen.”

“Evening, Severus,” said Arthur.

“Well, sir,” said a half-asleep Ron. “What took so long tonight? We thought you’d be by ages ago.”

Severus sighed. “As it happens, I need to speak to you about it. Can I trust you to pass the message on to the rest of your family prior to tomorrow afternoon?”

“Of course.” Molly brought a plate of biscuits to the table and sat on the other side of her husband. “Now, tell us what held you up tonight, Severus.”

“Just a moment.” Severus scanned the kitchen for listening or scrying devices and came up empty. “Ah, we are safe. As to what held us up, we had a run in with several Death Eaters.”

Three sharp voices exclaimed, “What!”

Severus hissed, “Ssh!” He paused. “Unless you would like to wake the household before I explain?”

Arthur shook his head and whispered, “How?”

Severus sighed. “Arthur, you are aware that several of my former students were forced into the mark?”

Ron paled. “Merlin. They did that?”

“Yes,” said Molly, her eyes full of sorrow. “And not only to Slytherins. What happened, Severus?”

Severus sighed. “We had to rescue one of them. Theo Nott was forced to take the mark and into acting as a dark supporter. He has never wanted to be, but his family was relentless.” Severus fixed Ron with a stare. “We have already rescued Draco Malfoy, who was not necessarily forced but pressured and is trying hard to—”

“Ferret-boy? He’s in love with the dark! Why would you—”

Severus speared Ron with a glare. “—Who is trying hard to change. He has already come to a truce with Harry, as has Blaise Zabini.”

Ron scowled. “Zabini too! What is this, a club for the slimiest snakes around?”

Molly cuffed the boy on the back of the head. “Ron! Be respectful.”

“—And,” Severus continued doggedly, “without their help tonight, I do not know if Harry would have survived.”

That shut Ron up.


“While we were meeting with Draco and Blaise to assess the progress of the refugee house and see that they were recovering well, Theo Nott sent a Patronus asking Blaise for help. His father had discovered him making plans to escape and was planning that night to turn him over to the Dark Lord for punishment. Most likely, the boy would have been killed despite his father’s delusions of
Ron paled. “H-his own father?”

“His mother helped,” said Severus in a grim voice. “The Notts are disgusting specimens of wizardkind.”

“So I’m assuming as soon as Harry got this message,” said a resigned Arthur, “he rushed in where angels fear to tread?”

Severus snorted. “An accurate assessment. He lead the charge, so to speak. I have already taken him to task for it, but I doubt this is a trait I can truly alter in him. His honour will not allow him to leave an innocent in danger, even for a moment.”

Molly sighed. “No, we’ve all tried to instil some measure of caution in him. It does little good, I’m afraid.”

Severus nodded. “At least in that respect, he is Gryffindor through and through.” He sighed. “Back to the story, however, we rushed Nott Manor through the floo and came upon Nott Senior and five other Death Eaters torturing Theo. Harry managed to provide a … diversion without risking himself, then we attempted to gather Theo and get out. However, Missus Nott caught us as soon as I had the boy secured and alerted the others to our presence.”

“His own mum ratted him out?” Ron was pale and turning greener by the moment.

“Yes.”

“Not all families are as loving as ours, I’m afraid,” said Arthur with a pained expression. “Merlin, the poor boy.”

“It has … given him the desire to fight,” Severus said in a firm voice. “We Slytherins do not take well to pity. He is a strong boy and has decided to turn against his own family to fight for the right side of this war.”

Molly wiped tears away. “Well, strong boy or not, everyone needs some kind of parental guidance. Do you think he’d take well to a bit of help from us, Severus?”

Severus hesitated. “If you are careful. Come on too strong, and he will push you away for his own protection. He has never been able to trust parental guidance before.”

Molly gave a sad sigh. “I understand. Well, do let us know if we can help.”

“Thank you. I do … have need of you, but first, let me finish our story.”

Molly nodded. “Go ahead.”

Severus went on to tell of their interrupted rescue and subsequent fight for their lives, and how Harry had saved Theo later that evening.

“After expending such an enormous amount of energy so close to a near-fatal injury, Harry is quite exhausted. He is recovering and Dobby is watching over him until I am able to return.”

“Dear Merlin,” said a stunned Arthur. “The boy has never killed before now, has he?”

Severus shook his head. “Not directly. He feels responsible for Black and Cedric Diggory, but there is a difference from feeling that your decisions led to someone’s death and knowing without a doubt
it was your hand that snuffed out their lives. Theo has attempted to absolve him from his guilt. He explained what a demon Thomas Nott was and thanked Harry for killing the man, but I do not imagine Harry will truly forgive himself for it anytime soon.”

“Shite,” Ron said in a whisper, earning him a sharp look from his mother. “Imagine, being grateful your own da had been killed. I don’t think ….” He shuddered. “I can’t.”

Severus placed a hand on Ron’s arm. “It is not easy to understand such motivation when one has had loving parents, or even absent ones. But parents so abusive, they have scarred the boy from the *Cruciatus*? Physical scars from a curse that is not supposed to leave a mark?” He scowled and shook his head. “They were never his family, Ron. Draco, Blaise—they are Theo’s family. And now, I suppose Harry and I are too.” He rubbed his forehead. “I am not certain I am the right kind of man to offer fatherly advice and attention, but I fear I will find myself in that position all too soon.”

“Seth isn’t complaining,” said Molly with a weak smile. “He adores you.”

Severus’ cheeks warmed. “I feel much the same for him. It is different with my snakes, however. I feel … more like a guide than a true father.”

“And I believe that is what they will want from you, Severus,” said Arthur with a nod. “They’ve grown up with you as their Head of House, not their parent. I imagine they’ll look to you for advice and occasionally a friendly ear, but I think someone else needs to step in as a father figure. If you plan on rescuing many more—”

Severus nodded. “As many as we can, across all houses and backgrounds.”

“Then you’ll certainly need more than one parental guide. Maybe you can assign an elf to them in the meantime, but Molly and I would be willing to help as much as we’re able.”

Severus bowed in thanks. “I am sure they would be grateful, but keep in mind they are likely to be suspicious of Gryffindor kindness—the kind that expects nothing in return—for quite some time. Such generosity is alien to them.”

“It’s the same with all abused children, Slytherin or not,” said Molly with a sad smile.

Severus nodded. “Perhaps it is why so many find their way into my house. I would be grateful for your assistance with them, Molly, Arthur. And I would be grateful if you could put your prejudices aside and try to offer friendship, Ron. They have already decided to do the same for all of you, no matter their past loyalties.”

Ron gaped. “Even Malfoy?”

Severus nodded and sipped at his still-warm tea. Molly must have put a charm on the water to keep it hot.

Ron gulped. “Merlin. Well, I guess if Malfoy’s willing to put aside the past, the least I can do is try to do the same. No promises though. If he acts a prat, I’m not going to sit there and take it.”

“No one expects you to. But do recall that he has just lost his father and his mother is still in exile. Narcissa is as much a victim as Draco, and we shall try to bring her to safety as soon as it is safe to, but her husband ….” Severus shook his head. “Lucius is as foul as they come. Draco only discovered the truth of him tonight, when Nott Senior discussed his behaviour with the other Death Eaters in front of us. He is fairly well devastated.”

Arthur winced. “Draco knows then, what Lucius gets up to … on the other side?”
“He does.”

“And we’re not to discuss what that is,” said Molly with a firm glare and a shake of her head. “Not here.”

Ron huffed and crossed his arms. “I’m an adult, Mum.”

Severus nodded. “Molly, I do believe we will need to prepare the younger generation for what they may face if they are to fight in this war, however, I am willing to let it go for the time being.” He looked to the clock, one without any Weasley faces—“Past your bedtime!”—and sighed. “It is late anyway. Will you ask your family to come with us after the Order meeting that is quite likely to occur tomorrow? All of them, including Fleur and Angelina?”

Molly nodded. “We’ll get the word out, Severus.”

Ron gave him a searching look. “What are we meeting for, though? I’m guessing it’s not just a friendly visit if you want the lot of us.”

Severus shook his head. “It is a meeting as serious as the Order.” He hesitated. “I think it is best to … wait on all the information until you can see the evidence for yourself, but suffice it to say that Harry and I have … established our own council of war, if you will. We have good reason not to place all our eggs in the Order’s basket. Besides the fact that there is an active spy among the group, one I have yet to pinpoint, there are … other reasons to meet on our own.”

Molly hesitated. “But Albus ….”

Severus held her gaze. “I do understand your loyalty, but will you give us the chance to show you the truth?”

Molly hesitated, but Ron filled the silence.

“I think … Harry hasn’t been on the same page as Dumbledore for a long time,” he said in a worried voice. “He always snarls whenever the man is mentioned, and he goes about saying things like Dumbledore thinks Harry’s his pet weapon and doesn’t care for individual lives but for ‘the greater good.’”

His shoulders slumped. “And now that I’m looking back, it does seem a bit shady that the man never intervened, that he returned Harry to those horrid Muggles time after time, even after Mum stepped in and told him it needed to stop, that there were other places Harry could be kept safe.”

He played with a biscuit, getting melted chocolate all over his fingertips and paying it no heed. “I guess what I’m saying here is that Harry is one of us. Family. Pro—Severus is now too. And there’s no one who’s had to deal with more rubbish from Dumbledore than Severus and Harry. So if they think there’s a reason to doubt, then I reckon we ought to at least listen to their side. Family sticks together, right?”

Severus blinked, surprised at Ron’s defence, then bowed in acknowledgement. “Thank you.”

Ron nodded to him and finished his biscuit.

Molly sighed and gave Severus a nod. “I can’t argue with that. We’ll be there, Severus, but I … I don’t feel good about it.”

“All I am asking you for is an audience,” Severus said in a soft voice. “If you decide you do not believe us, then you are in no way required to act.”
“But I reckon it will strain family relations if we’re on different sides,” said Ron with a piercing look. “Won’t it?”

“Most likely,” Severus acknowledged. “And I will say that if you reject what Harry has to say, he will be crushed. Absolutely wrecked. So I beg you, at least listen to his experiences, if you discount my own. He needs your support desperately.”

Molly took Severus’ hand. “I don’t think he’s the only one, love.”

Severus lowered his head. “No. Will you at least listen to us?”

Molly squeezed his hand. “I will. Arthur?”

“He’s my son,” Arthur said with a fierce nod. “Of course I will.”

Severus let slip a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“It’s what family does,” said Ron with a smile.

Severus had never appreciated Ron’s stubborn loyalty more.

With Seth safely tucked in above their bedside—he had wanted to see for himself that Harry was safe after hearing what had happened at the Notts’—Severus went to the kitchen to compose one last Patronus message. Harry himself would need to ask Lovegood and Thomas, when he was well enough, and everyone else had received their message and replied in the affirmative.

But Severus had left it too long with Poppy. Her message would need a little … finesse.

With a sigh, he sipped a cup of chamomile tea, hoping it would help him sleep when he had finished his business for the evening. A quick glance at the clock over the coldbox—too bloody late—told Severus he’d best go to bed soon if he wanted to be of any worth the next day.

Severus sighed and laid his tea aside. He was stalling and he knew it.

Despite immersing himself in the memory of Harry voicing his love for the first time, his hand shook as he formed his Patronus. Like Harry needed Molly, Severus needed Poppy in his corner. She had been the one person who had never judged him unfairly, not since he had first arrived in her clinic at Evan Rosier’s urging, when he had shown up for his first year with bruises all over his too-skinny frame. She had taken him under her wing as gently as she did any Gryffindor, and that unbiased care had earned Severus’ trust throughout their entire relationship, both as student and matron and later as colleagues.

Gods, he hoped he hadn’t neglected her too long. He had been so busy, but that was hardly an excuse. He prayed she would understand as he lowered his head and forced his lips to move.

“P-Poppy, I … I hope this message finds you willing to listen. I apologise that I have not called sooner, but I am afraid I have been so busy, I have hardly had time to think. Besides that, so much has changed recently to alter my life, to alter me, that I have found myself undergoing too many changes to keep my head on straight. I hope you will forgive me.

“I have no doubt Albus has passed on a rather rude goodbye, as Minerva confirmed he had done
the same to her. I do not know what he may or may not have said, but if it was anything other than ‘I will miss you, Poppy, and goodbye,’ then it was untrue. Minerva has my memory of what was actually said, and can verify that we have seen … disturbing evidence against Albus lately. I … I hope you will listen to her, if you will not listen to me.”

Severus took a shaky breath and a sip of his tea.

“If … it is not too late to continue our friendship, I would ask for your support. There will most likely be an Order meeting tomorrow morning, but afterwards, several of us are meeting to discuss … recent events, including Albus’ behaviour. I … would be glad to have your support. Will you meet with us? Please reply, let me know whether I should send my elf after you tomorrow or not.

“And Poppy, I am sorry. I never meant for you to be hurt.”

Severus sent the Patronus on his way and dragged his hand across his eyes. “Gods, I hope she can forgive me.”

He settled into his tea and prepared himself for a lengthy wait. He would not be able to rest until he knew for certain what Poppy would do.

The tick of the clock sounded unbearably loud in the quiet kitchen and did nothing to ease Severus’ nerves. Before long, he had taken to pacing to its beat, arms crossed over his chest and heart fluttering beneath. Would she turn him away? Would she hate him for taking so long to remember her? So much had changed, so much had happened since that night when he had cast twenty years of his life aside—but it was a poor excuse. He should have messaged her sooner. He should have at least written her. He should have—

The reappearance of his doe relieved Severus beyond words. At least Poppy had given her a reply, if nothing else. Before he let her speak, Severus ran careful scans over the Patronus, just in case Albus had found a way to track them. Thankfully, she came back clear, as all the other Patronuses had done so far. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to keep checking.

He tapped the doe’s head with trembling fingertips. “I am listening.”

“Severus! Oh, I am so glad to hear from you.”

The relief in Poppy’s voice unwound some of the knots in his chest. Perhaps she didn’t hate him then.

“After you left without a word,” the Patronus continued, “I was so worried about you. Minerva told me the next evening that you were safe and Harry was looking after you, but I am rather inclined to fret, you know. She made it plain that your relationship had changed, but Merlin, I was afraid he mightn’t be aware of your needs enough to support you.

“Judging by the tone of your message, he has done that and then some. I must remember to thank him. Whatever Harry has done has worked wonders for you. Not since your first year have I heard such a gentle tone from you, and perhaps not even then. I am glad to see you happy, despite your fears.

“No need to worry your head about me, dear. I knew from the start that Albus’ message was rubbish. Not even he could hide the signs of alteration haze in his supposed memory of the confrontation. What does he think he’s playing at by giving a false memory to an experienced mediwitch? He must have forgotten that mind magic is a prerequisite of healer training, the manipulative old fool.
“I will definitely come to your meeting tomorrow, Severus. I’ll tell Albus I’ve decided to pay my sister a visit to allay any suspicions. Now, do try and get some sleep, dear. It’s much too late to be up and about, even for spies.”

The doe licked Severus’ tear-streaked cheek and faded out. He stared at the place where she had been for a long time, his heart aching with relief and the sheer wonder that Poppy had believed him without needing proof. No one but Harry had ever offered him that kind of trust, and finding it again had left him shaken. People didn’t trust Severus—it was a fact of life.

When had the world turned on its head?

He wasn’t sure how long he’d been staring at the floor when gentle arms wrapped around his shoulders and a soft kiss fell upon his cheek.

“Love? What’s the matter? I’d have thought you’d come to bed by now.”

Severus turned and pulled his rumpled, sleepy soul-bond into his lap. “Harry! What are you doing out of bed? You are still recovering.”

“Mm, I was well enough to get down the stairs. And I was worried about you. I could kind of … sense that you were upset. I’m not sure if it’s coming through our bond or if it was just my magic helping me to pick it up, but I could feel your emotions. I had to make sure you were okay.”

Severus sighed and hugged Harry close. “I am sorry. I did not intend to wake you or burden you with my confusion.”

“No, it’s all right. What happened though? Was it me?”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “No. I’m merely a bit shocked. I sent a message to Poppy tonight apologising and asking her to attend tomorrow. I hope that is all right?”

Harry nodded. “She’d be a huge asset if we can get her to join. Is she angry then?”

Severus gave him a bemused look. “That is what shocked me. She is not. She already doubts Albus, and disbelieved him the moment he told her lies about my goodbye.”

Harry grinned. “Oh! But that’s a good thing, love. Why are you so upset about it?”

“I hesitate to say that I am upset. I am happy, but also confused. This is only the second time I have had such support without the need to defend myself. I am unsure how to handle it.”

Harry smiled and kissed him lightly. “It’s all right, love. She just sees the traits in you that it took me too long to understand. You’re worthy of that kind of loyalty, Severus, and if it takes me a lifetime, I swear I’ll make you believe it.”

Severus returned Harry’s smile with a small one of his own. “You are doing so, bit by bit. Poppy said to thank you, by the way. She said you have changed me and that she could tell I was happy simply by the tone of my message.” He buried his face in Harry’s messy hair. “Thank you, my beloved. You are making me into a better man.”

Harry nuzzled close. “Mm, you’re doing the same for me. I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you too, my Harry.” Severus hugged him as tight as he dared, taking comfort from Harry’s presence, his warmth and sleep-warmed scent. “As much as I adore holding you like this, we must return you to bed. You need rest to recover your magic.”
Harry kissed him lightly. “You’re coming with me?”

Severus set Harry on his feet and stood. “Yes. Lead the way, love.”

Harry laced their fingers together and led Severus to bed. He fell asleep soon after, wrapped in blankets and surrounded by warmth, with his son keeping watch and his soul-bond spooning him protectively.

Harry awoke the next morning wrapped in strong arms. He smiled and snuggled into Severus’ chest, letting the sound of his lover’s heartbeat lull him back towards drowsing. A fuzzy sort of contentment bathed him in peace.

Gods, how he loved waking like this. And Severus—Harry loved him beyond all reason. Had it really only been a few weeks? He felt as if they had been together always, even with the memory of their past animosity.

With a soft sigh, Harry let his hopes wander, building castles of light in the air with his little family all seated around a fire. Severus’ dreams from the night before filled him with a pleasant glow, and he smiled as he basked in their warmth, fleshing out their plans with books and furniture and a baby grand in the corner.

Merlin, he ached for a life like that.

An intense glow shone right into his eyelids, painting the room red and breaking up his hazy-sweet dreams. Surely dawn hadn’t come so quickly?

Harry leaned back and looked around, and came face to face with a small argent figure. A Patronus—he couldn’t tell whose without his glasses. Merlin, he hoped it wasn’t Kingsley asking about the Notts. He wasn’t ready for that conversation.

As he reached for his spectacles, a prim, stern voice he knew well filled his chamber.

“Potter, there is an Order meeting at ten in the morning, in the Hogsmeade safehouse behind the Shrieking Shack. Meet me in the Shack with your houseguest, if he is still there.” The Patronus gave a huff in McGonagall’s voice. “Albus informed me he would make Severus aware of the time, but given that something odd seems to be afoot between them, I trust you will relay the message in case he … forgets?”

The tabby sat primly, washing her face as she waited for a reply.

Harry scowled and pressed his glasses onto his nose. “Tell your owner I said thank you, and that Dumbledore has sent no message for Severus, not that I’m surprised. I don’t think he will, either, but no matter. We’ll be at the meeting place at half-past nine. Severus and I will have to go into the meeting separately, so we’ll need the extra time. Dumbledore doesn’t know we’re together and we’d like to keep it that way as long as we can. I know it can’t be long, but any advantage over that manipulative sod is a good one.”

He shooed the cat. “Go on, now. I’m in nothing but my pants under here, and I reckon that would shock the spectacles off the old tabby’s nose.”
The cat Patronus gave a chattering sort of titter and vanished in a puff of silver smoke.

“Why am I not surprised?” Severus’ voice made him jump.

Harry whirled around. “Sorry, love. I was trying to whisper so I wouldn’t wake you.”

“Spy, Harry. Spy. I was awake the moment you moved against me.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck and laughed sheepishly. “Oh. Damn. So much for being able to watch you sleep, huh?”

Severus chuckled. “I suppose I could play along for your benefit.” He let slip a sleepy sigh and buried his face in his soul-bond’s hair. “Good morning, my Harry. Good morning, Seth.”

The boy yawned and rubbed his eyes. “If you say so. Dumbledore is at it again already, hmm?”

“Looks that way,” Harry replied. “I’m sorry, Severus.”

“It is no trouble.” Severus groaned and rubbed his face. “This is, however. Ugh. I should not have stayed up so late.”

Seth frowned. “Why were you awake so long, Da? We were worried about you.”

Severus sat and patted Seth’s shoulder. “Forgive me, love. I had to talk to Shacklebolt and then the Weasleys. They should all have the message to meet with the Dawn after the Order meeting, and have all agreed. At least, Molly, Ron, and Arthur agreed, and they promised to bring the rest of the lot. I also swore Kingsley into the Dawn last night.”

“Really?” Harry grinned. “That’s brilliant. We need him, for sure.”

“We need them all. Which was why I was awake so late, but I need your help in asking for Mister Thomas and Miss Lovegood to attend this meeting. They will likely refuse if I send a Patronus. Well, perhaps not Lovegood, but Thomas certainly will.”

Harry nodded and rubbed his face. “Just let me wake up a bit.”

“Mm.” Severus nuzzled Harry’s hair. “I rather like having you here in the mornings.”

“Me too.”

“I’m just glad I have someone to talk to,” Seth said in a soft voice.

“You do,” Harry said with a smile.

“I am here as well,” said Severus.

“Thanks.” Seth’s smile was bright and happy and warmed Harry within. Already, they were making such a difference in his life. It was beautiful to watch him grow.

“Well, I think I’m awake enough to message them now.” Harry sat and conjured his stag, using the memory of waking snuggled in Severus’ arms. “Prongs, I need you to run to Luna and Dean, and do take the usual precautions to avoid anyone dangerous. Tell them we need their help with the war and we’ll send a house elf to collect them this afternoon for a meeting. Bring back their replies, all right?”

Prongs nodded and went on his way. “Well, that’s done. Anything else we should do before the meeting?”
“Take a shower and dress, perhaps,” said a wry Severus.

Harry snorted. “Sure about that? We could just go in our birthday suits and hope it shocks the old man to death.”

Severus snorted and shook his head. “Such a plan would most likely shock more than Dumbledore. And possibly get us in trouble with the aurors. Besides, can you imagine what Molly would say if we arrived so … underdressed?”

Harry shuddered. “Good point.” He gave a mock-aggrieved sigh and clambered to his wardrobe. “Must you always be the sensible one, Verus?”

Severus laughed and moved to his own. “When I live in a household full of manic house elves and reckless Gryffindors, yes, yes I must.”

'Reckless …'

Harry paused in his search for clothing, frozen and shaking at the memory of what his recklessness had cost last night. Flashes filled his mind, memories of dark fire, faces taut with terror and pain, bodies flying. Anguished screams echoed in his ears as if he were still there, still caught in the fire, bleeding to death while Severus fought off curses and pain.


In an instant, strong arms caught Harry up and held him tight. “Beloved, I am here. What is it?”

“I was too reckless last night,” Harry said in a haunted voice. “I killed people.”

“And in doing so, saved many other lives.” Severus held him close. “I know, love. I know it hurts, but tell me, does your chest hurt? Beyond grief and remorse, does it ache?”

Harry felt along his chest and frowned. “No. But shouldn’t it? I killed him.”

“It means what you did last night was not murder. You killed a man, yes, but in self-defence and to protect me. It does not tarnish your soul. You did nothing wrong.”

Harry turned and gave Severus a confused frown. “But, Verus, why did killing your father hurt you, then?”

Severus sighed and closed his eyes. “Magic is all about intent, remember? Killing my father was unnecessary and done in a spirit of revenge. He was a Muggle. I could have used magic to overpower him easily once I had Mother’s wand, but I wanted him to suffer for what he had done to my family. You did not attack the Death Eaters last night out of a wish to kill. You attacked to drive a powerful enemy back so we could escape safely. You had little choice but to use extreme force. There is a vast difference between killing to save lives and killing to end them.”

Harry sniffled and buried his face in Severus’ throat. “Doesn’t feel that way right now.”

“No. I suppose it doesn’t.” Severus held him close and kissed his hair. “I love you, Harry. And I am proud of you for fighting so hard to save us all. We would have died if not for your quick action. Thank you.”

Harry winced. Thanking him for killing someone? It seemed so … callous.

Severus seemed to understand without the need for words. “I am thanking you for saving my life,
love. For all of our lives.”

Oh. Well, that was different.

Harry sighed and kissed Severus’ neck. “I’m glad you’re safe. If I had to kill someone to keep you in one piece, then so be it. Even if it had scarred my soul, it would be worth it as long as you’re still here.”

Severus shook his head. “Do not go that route, love. There is always a better way.”

Harry nodded and moved back. “I’d best get dressed.”

“Yes.” Severus held Harry’s face and searched his eyes. “Are you all right?”

“No, but I’ll pull through.”

Severus kissed him lightly. “I am here.”

“So am I,” said Seth, making Harry jump.

“Merlin,” Harry said with a wry laugh. “You’re so quiet sometimes, Seth. I forgot you were here.”

Seth gave him a sad smile. “Well, Da was taking care of you, and what do I know about this? I thought it was best just to let him handle it.”

“You did well, love.” Severus released Harry and ran a hand through the younger man’s hair. “Are you feeling any better, my Harry?”

Harry gave him a hesitant nod. “Still hurts, but I’ll recover.”

“Good.” Severus watched Harry rummage through his wardrobe a moment before going back to his own. “We should speak of it anyway. What will we tell the order about last night?”

Harry hummed. “Why not just tell them the truth? Or some of it anyway. They know we’re staying together after the Dursleys escape, don’t they?”

“I expect Albus thinks we have gone our separate ways by now, even if he does not know where either of us have disappeared to.”

“Hmm. Do you think giving off the impression that we’re still working together will risk everything?”

Severus paused. “No. We have more support now. I suppose it is safe to start taking the legs out from under Dumbledore’s platform, so long as we go carefully.”

Harry nodded. “Then let’s just tell them Theo sent you a Patronus message begging for help and we went in wands blazing. Well, I went in wands blazing, and of course you cleaned up the mess.”

Severus paused. “And in protecting you from your own Gryffindor foolishness, I had little choice but to use extreme force.”

Harry gave him an apologetic nod. “I really don’t like that you have to take responsibility for my mistakes, but it’s probably the only way to keep Dumbledore off the scent concerning my powers. And I definitely think it’s best to keep that under wraps for now. At least until we have the Order’s spy taken out.”
Severus waved him off. “Albus knows I would not blink at killing a Death Eater. Or so he suspects at least. Remember, he thinks the worst of me.”

“But I don’t. And I don’t want you to think that way either. So we’re telling the truth at the Dawn meeting.”

Severus shrugged. “As you will.”

“I will.” Harry rooted through his closet for a clean button-down and pulled out a dark green one. “Will this do? Maybe with some khaki trousers?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “With that colour? I think either dark grey or black trousers will work better, but yes, the shirt is acceptable.”

He tugged a black robe from his closet, and Harry sighed and gave it a glare.

“What are you glaring at me for?”

Harry smiled and shook his head. “Nothing really. It’s okay. I know you have to present your dungeon bat persona for Dumbledore. It’s just that you look so much happier in colours, and I’ll miss your smiles and the sound of your laugh.”

Severus came to Harry’s side and rubbed a thumb down his cheek, his ‘dungeon bat’ robe tucked under his elbow. “With Minerva, Poppy, or with your friends, we can be ourselves. But with Dumbledore, we must be on our highest guard.” He frowned. “Which means you must put a magic shield around your mind, or use some kind of blocking spell since you do not yet know full Occlumency. It may even work better than mind magic with your powers.”

“You think so?”

Perhaps. Do remember to blank your mind as we discussed yesterday—it is harder to do when angry, so take care not to let him bait you into dropping your guard. Keep your temper, avoid his eyes, and call forth all your best Slytherin attributes. We are going not to a meeting with friends, but to a council of war, and the enemy is in control.”

A rush of determination firmed Harry’s resolve. “Right. It’s our lives on the line. I must remember that.” He leaned up and kissed Severus hard, leaving them both breathless when he pulled away. “That’s the last one until we’re safe again. I won’t let you be hurt because of my whinging.”

Severus brought Harry close and kissed his forehead. “Mm-hmm. Let me hold you a moment, then we must prepare for battle.”

Harry buried his face into Severus’ chest and breathed his scent in deep. He held it in as long as he could, wanting to commit that scent to memory, to keep some part of Severus close even when they had to pretend to snipe at each other. No one could know he loved Severus, not if they were to stay ahead of Dumbledore’s game.

He gasped as he recalled who else was in the order.

“Merlin! Severus, I’ve got to send a Patronus to the Weasleys straight away. They know we don’t trust Dumbledore, but they don’t know that we’re keeping our relationship under wraps from the Order for now.”

Severus paled and moved back. “Damn. Hurry and send your Patronus. I will go shower while you do that. Will you also take care of the post and check on Odin while Bindy is getting breakfast for
“Of course.” Harry kissed his cheek. “I won’t be able to tell you or show it for a while, but I love you, Verus. And whatever I say about you today, know that you are my only and my hero and my light.”

Severus kissed him softly. “As you are mine. I love you, my Harry, and please do not take what I must say to heart. It is all lies.”

Harry smirked. “Actually, it’s kind of fun playing along when I know you don’t mean it and we’re in it together.” He stole one last kiss and turned back to his clothing. “Go, or we’ll be here talking about it all morning.”

“Yes, but before I leave ….” He held Harry’s hand. “You knew that Pettigrew was in the castle your third year. How? It may be useful in rooting out the spy today.”

Harry blushed. “Um, I don’t think so. I have a map that shows everyone in the castle, whether they’re disguised or not, but it doesn’t work in Hogsmeade.”

“No? Well, that is unfortunate. Perhaps you can still help, though. Focus on keeping our cover first and foremost, but when you safely can, try to see through glamours and trace people’s magic. I am not blessed with mage sight, but from what I do know of it, magic has colour based on intent and resembles particles of light.”

Harry nodded. “Shapes, too. The Cruciatus was like blood red lightning. Fear covers you in bright yellow-green spikes like hedgehog quills, and the Death Eaters had dark reddish-grey light in their bellies last night. I reckon it was hatred, but I’m not sure.”

Severus rubbed his chin. “This ability sounds more useful the more I learn of it. As soon as I am able to procure a book, I will do so. For now, look for magic particles pooling in the face and under the skin. I suspect our spy is using some kind of glamour or dark spell to hide himself. I can smell Polyjuice in a person’s skin, even if they take other potions. I had originally thought they must be hiding under Muggle makeup or a dark spell for Dumbledore to miss them too, but now, it may be possible that he knows.” Severus shook his head. “Either way, I need your help to find them. If all else fails, look for someone using magic when they shouldn’t be. When they are merely sitting or talking.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll try, but can we practice a bit first?”

“Yes, of course.” Severus sat on the bed and laid his hands in his lap. “Let us try this. I will concentrate my magic on one area of my body. I want you to open your mind to outside influences, to the feel of your magic and aura. If it works, you should be able to see a bit of colour where I’ve sent my power.”

Harry took a deep breath. “Ready?”

“Yes. Try for me, love.”

Harry closed his eyes and opened his mind to the siren call of Severus’ magic. His fierce protectiveness, sacrificial bravery, and inventive brilliance drew Harry in like a moth to flame. He stepped closer, needing to be within the warm embrace of Severus’ love.

“Open your eyes, love,” Severus murmured.

Harry did as he asked and smiled. A spot of violet light pooled in Severus’ left hand and suffused a
soft glow through his chest. He started to speak, but cut himself short as his eyes drifted towards Severus’ face. Thin black cracks crossed Severus’ breastbone, like slashes from a whip. Were those the tears in Severus’ soul? Could Harry heal them like this?

Severus frowned. “Can you see my magic, Harry?”

With a nod, Harry stepped forwards, transfixed, and traced one of the cracks with a tender fingertip. As he touched it, white light filled the void, but faded a moment afterward. So there was some kind of healing response there. If only Harry knew how to fix it.

“How?”

“Just testing, Verus.”

“Oh.”

Harry watched as his light blended with Severus’, calling his purple-tinged magic out to play with each touch. Severus swayed into him and moaned, laying his head on Harry’s belly.

“Oh, love. Whatever you’re doing feels so good.”

Harry smiled and smoothed his palm down another crack.

Severus gasped and arched back, his eyes wide with shock. “Merlin, Harry. What are you doing?”

Harry kissed Severus’ hair and leaned close. “I see them, love. Your soul-wounds. I think my love, or maybe love in general is the key to healing them. White light goes into them every time I touch you, but I can’t hold it. Maybe there’s something there I can’t see yet, or maybe I don’t have enough control over my powers, but I think I’ll be able to heal these one day.”

Severus gasped and tugged Harry down into his lap. “Merlin, I hope so. What you did just now took so much pain away.”

Harry smiled and kissed Severus with tenderness, his heart overflowing with love and desire. Gods, he wanted to heal Severus so much. It felt good to know he could, even a little.

He pulled back and opened his mouth to tell Severus he loved him, but snapped it shut at the sight of pinkish lights floating around their lips. They zoomed through Severus’ breath, in and out of his mouth, and set his hands and chest ablaze. A glance down Harry’s body confirmed the presence of the strange lights on his own body too.

“What in Merlin’s name …?” He reached for a light floating near Severus’ chest and tingling warmth diffused through his hands. “What are these things?”

Severus cocked an eyebrow. “No mage sight, Harry. I can’t help with something I can’t see.”

Harry shook his head and cleared away the strange specks and unearthly glows. “Maybe Luna will know.” He kissed Severus’ cheek. “And you had purple light in your left hand. Your chest had purple too, so I think that might be the colour of your core.”

“Purple, hmm? It fits for me, I suppose.”

“Yeah.” He stood and gave Severus a wry smile. “Guess what colour mine was.”

“Red and gold.”
Harry snorted. “No, silly. It was white.”

“I had surmised as much, my Bàn Leon. I saw your core ignite, remember?” Severus tapped a long, elegant finger against his chin. “I am glad this technique works, at least in part. For now, it will be enough. I expect with training from someone skilled or some intensive research, you will see more.”

Harry nodded hesitantly, unsure if he wanted to see more. The pink lights and seeing Severus’ core was interesting, but he wouldn’t likely forget the image of Theo’s back bowing under a bloody lightning-storm of _Cruciatus_ anytime soon.

“Still, this technique is dangerous around Legilimentes,” Severus continued in a grim voice. “You will need to take great care with it. If you are able to activate your mage sight today, do not look anywhere near Dumbledore while it is active and keep your spellcrafted shield as high as you can.”

Harry frowned. “I will, love, and I’ll take the map to the meeting too. It shows a bit of Hogsmeade—you never know. We could get lucky. But, Verus, what if we just force the meeting to move to Hogwarts instead? Then we could find the spy for certain and I mightn’t need to risk using mage sight too much.”

Severus’ eyes widened and his lips parted, as much of an expression of shock as he ever allowed himself to show. “Merlin. How, beloved?”

Harry grinned. “With a little twin power.”

Severus groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “The Weasley twins. I do admit, that is rather ingenious. Devious, but ingenious. They are quite good at foiling the best laid of plans, and if they do it this close to the meeting time, Dumbledore will not have time to arrange another place.” He stood straight and gave Harry a grim nod. “Will they be available on such short notice?”

Harry grinned wider and grabbed his wand from the nightstand. “One way to find out. I should message them anyway about the Dawn meeting.”

“Do it then,” said Severus, “and quickly, so they have time to plot.”

“Right. Go take your shower and I’ll handle the rest. Cross your fingers.”

Severus raised an eyebrow, then hurried into the loo after one last kiss. As soon as he’d gone, Harry conjured his memories of last night and cast a brilliant Patronus. To his surprise, the stag now had glowing green eyes like his own. How had he missed that change earlier?

“Green? That’s odd.” With a shake of his head, Harry called the Patronus over and started his message. “Gred, Forge, I need you to break out some good old-fashioned mischief, Umbridge style ....”

Fred almost dropped the box he was putting away in the WWW’s inventory when a green-eyed stag Patronus leapt through the shelf.

“Bloody hell, old boy,” he gasped out, “nearly made me jump from my skin.”

“Right good trick, that was,” George called from behind him. “Harry’s got the makings of a first-rate
prankster, don’t you think?”

Fred huffed. “Definitely, but something tells me Harry wouldn’t send his Patronus just for a lark, especially not an hour before an Order meeting.”

“Good point.” George pressed in close. “Your message is for us alone, old boy?”

The stag fixed its viridian eyes on George. “It is.”

“Cor!” Fred leapt back into his brother. “It talked back! Are they supposed to do that, mate?”

“Not usually, but then they don’t usually have green eyes.” George shook his head. “It’s Harry, Forge. What did you expect?”

Fred chuckled and shifted his box to rest on his hip. “Not that, obviously. Well, old boy, it’s safe to talk.”

George continued, “We’re alone and this room is warded.”

“Can’t have our secrets getting out, now can we?”

“So you can go on with—”

“—Your message now.”

The stag spoke in Harry’s lilting tenor. “Gred, Forge, I need you to break out some of your good old-fashioned mischief, Umbridge style. I have intelligence that Death Eaters will be in the area of our safehouse today and one of them has mage sight. I know it’s a bit of a long shot, but if that bloke sees us all gathered—well, there goes our safehouse and half the Order. I’d just tell Dumbledore, but you know how well he listens to me. So I need you two to make the safehouse unusable for a day or two. Don’t hurt anyone and don’t stick around too long, just in case they come early. Just do what you can to make sure no one comes to Hogsmeade today.

“Beyond that, be aware that Severus and I can’t reveal our relationship to the Order yet. We’ll have to snipe at each other like we did before, so don’t go all Mum on him when he snarks at me. Oh, and speaking of Mum, if she didn’t already warn you, we need you to meet Severus and myself for a gathering after the Order meeting. It’s important, too important to risk speaking of when there’s still a spy in the Order, so keep it to yourselves until you’re here safely.”

George moved to Fred’s side as the stag bowed. “Got it, old boy. We’ll be there—Mum already told us about the meeting this morning.” The stag nodded and vanished, and George turned to his twin with a smirk. “Well, Forge, what do you say? Up for a little … mischief?”

Fred grinned. “You know I am, Gred. Especially if it means saving ickle Ronnykin’s skin.”

“Imagine how we’ll be able to—”

“—Torment him about it later.”

“It’s enough reason for me, too.” George looked around at the boxes of prank supplies near them. “Hmm. Don’t see much here that would clear out an entire manor in a few minutes. What’ve you got?”

Fred tipped the box a little to read its contents. “Eau-Du-Skunk Everstay Gas Pellets.” He snorted. “Reckon this’ll do the trick?”
George conjured a bubblehead charm around his entire body, making him look a bit like a fish with legs. “Lasts for two days, and not even Mum’s Scourgify can banish it.”

“Just add a drop of water to each pellet—”

“And it’s stench city for a ten metre radius. How many are in there, then?”

Fred bent over to peer at a corner of the box. “Er, Five-hundred.”

George snorted. “That’ll do, Forge. That’ll do.”

Severus had just sat down to eat with Harry—Seth had gone back to sleep—when Minerva’s Patronus pranced through Harry’s pancakes and plopped atop the stack.

Harry gave the silvery beast an amused grin. “Well, what have you got for us, then?”

Minerva’s most-irritated voice came through the cat’s silvery mouth. “Mister Potter, what have you been up to? It seems the Weasley twins forgot that Fred had some Everstink Pellets or some other such nonsense in his breast pocket when they arrived for the Order meeting—far too early, by the way—and when Fred accidentally dropped a cup of tea down his front, they activated. In his panic to escape the stench, he proceeded to make the entire Order house smell like the business end of a skunk. I’m afraid the location is quite unusable for the meeting, so Albus has no other choice but to move it to the transfiguration classroom in Hogwarts.

“Oh, and, Potter? You may play innocent, but ripe skunk is not the only odour clinging to this whole affair. Something smells decidedly fishy. You will explain later why you made our safehouse uninhabitable right before a meeting, hmm?”

The cat vanished, and Harry burst into laughter. “Oh, that’s just brilliant! I knew they’d come through.”

Severus gave him a wry smile. “That was rather quick.”

“They have loads of devious stuff just lying in wait for situations like this,” Harry’s eyes lost their laughter and took on a steely gleam. “They don’t just make jokes in that shop of theirs, you know? They have plenty of stuff that’s useful for combat and stealth.”

“Do they, now?” Severus took a precisely-cut bite of pancake and pondered the twins’ potential in aiding the war effort. Perhaps if they worked together, the three of them could do great things. “I wonder if they would like a consulting partner.”

Harry grinned. “You? They’d fall all over themselves for a chance to pick your brains, and your snark just amuses them. It’d be a great match, if you can handle being pranked a bit.”

“Hmm.” Severus mused upon the idea as he ate. He had finished half of his pancakes before he spoke again. “Pranks aside, it’s quite a good plan for later in the war. Perhaps we could devise a sort of attack bomb that only went after those with the Dark Mark. If the twins, with their admittedly brilliant skill in magical limiters, could conjure up a method to then distinguish further between those who took the mark willingly and those forced into it, we would not only have a powerful weapon against the Death Eaters that the public could use—even Muggles and children—but a way of
determining and rescuing those trapped in a war they want no part in. For that, I would gladly endure being the butt of a few jokes, as long as the twins are prepared for me to reciprocate with a few tricks of my own.”

Harry dropped his fork and gasped, his eyes going wide as saucers. “Oh gods! Severus, that is absolutely brilliant!” He jumped up and clapped his hands. “If you and the twins can do this, once we’ve finished the horcruxes, you’ll have won us the war! Merlin, I love you.”

“Severus,” the man said with an amused smirk.

Harry ceased his gushing and gave Severus a bemused look. “Er, what?”

“My name is Severus, not Merlin. I believe I remember a certain mage insisting on the distinction in personal nomenclature the other night. I can do no less, can I?”

Harry laughed and ran to Severus’ side, cupping the older man’s face in gentle hands. As much as Severus thought he should pull away and prepare for the roles they must play, Harry’s loving gaze held him captive.

“Severus, you have no idea how many lives this plan of yours will save.”

“No, I have none, because there is no guarantee it is even possible.”

Harry kissed him so softly, with such exquisite love and tender affection, Severus could hardly breathe for the swelling of emotion in his chest. Peace and warmth flowed into him, and a pleasant tingle pooled in the base of his neck and spiralled down his spine and shoulders. Kissing his Harry was heaven.

Come hell or high water, Severus would never let him go.

Harry pulled back for breath and whispered against his lips, “Severus, you can do this. I believe in you.”

Severus’ breath hitched. “You do?”

“Yes, love. Completely. You’re my hero.”

Severus sighed and kissed Harry with tender love. “Merlin, I love you so much.”

Harry smirked. “It’s Harry.”

Severus snorted. “My Harry.” He sighed and patted Harry’s arms. “Up. We must pull ourselves together. We must hold our hearts back until after the meeting, or he will find a way to hurt us. Please, love. Let’s just eat our breakfast and prepare to leave.”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hands and released him. “Yeah. Sorry, Severus. I just, your plan excited me so much I lost my head a bit.”

Severus gave him a grim nod. “Something you must not do in Hogwarts, whether your emotions are strong or not. Show me the Slytherin who out-manoeuvred the entire staff of the Daily Prophet in one afternoon.”

Harry nodded. “We can do this, yeah?”

“Yes. I believe in you as well.”
With a smile, Harry took his seat once more and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Severus could no longer read the boy’s emotions in either his expression or thoughts. A sharp wave of relief washed away his niggling doubts.

“Good,” Severus said with a nod. “From this moment on, we are not Harry and Severus, we are Potter and Master Snape.”

Harry paused halfway through taking another bite. “Master … for your potions mastery?”

“Yes. And Defence. I am a master of both, though that is not well known.”

“All right.” Harry shook himself. “No. Yes, sir.”

“I am surprised you had the mental capacity to keep up, Potter.” Severus allowed a bit of emotion to show, to temper the blow of his words. ‘Forgive me, love. I do not mean it at all.’

Harry harrumphed. “I imagine I’ll surprise you a lot then, Master.”

A horrified Severus could not help whispering, “No. Never your master. Please. Not like that. Don’t call me Master like, like him.”

Harry patted his hand. “Severus, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to remind you of that.” He took a deep breath. “I won’t call you Master again, except as part of your proper title. And please understand, I don’t take your insults to heart, so don’t be afraid to act as you must. Under that cantankerous shell, I know you’ve a good heart, even if it used to turn to stone around me.”

“Yes,” Severus said, slowly relaxing. “True.”

Harry popped a bite of pancake into his mouth and washed it down with some milk. “I expect you to thrash me just like you always did before, and I won’t take offence. I know you don’t mean it. But fair warning, don’t expect me to lie down and take your ire either. I can dish it out too, though I won’t fight you nearly as hard after seeing you tortured. I respect you now, even if we’re not friends, at least not in public.” He said the last part with a wink.

Severus sighed and hoped Harry could truly take him at his worst. “Malarkey, Potter. That is nothing but a steaming load of malarkey. Do the world a favour and lodge some of that pancake in your overused windpipe.” Gods, he wished his former persona had been kinder.

‘I’m sorry, love. Please don’t hate me.’

Harry couldn’t quite contain a snort. He almost choked on his juice before he could control his mirth again. Thankfully, there would be no food or drink at the Order meeting.

“I’ll do my best, sir, but no promises.” Harry winked again and returned to his breakfast.

Severus’ fears eased at Harry’s quip, and he soon resumed eating as well. They might just make it through the meeting with their lives and sanity intact after all.

Harry strode into the meeting before Severus, hoping to catch every moment of Dumbledore’s reaction when the spy appeared ‘uninvited.’ McGonagall cornered him as he entered, but a silent shake of his head warned her to keep her questions discreet, or so he hoped.
With a hopeful gleam in her eyes, she asked in a low whisper, “Did the old man ever send his message?”

Harry shook his head once more. “Not a word.”

“I see.” She crumpled as if he had dealt her a physical blow.

He touched her hand and gave her a sad smile. “I’m sorry.”

McGonagall rallied and patted Harry’s shoulder. “Nothing to worry over. Perhaps he truly just … forgot.”

Harry heard the disbelief in her tone, and knew the veil had slipped from her eyes. “Did you have any success with the research you mentioned in your letter?”

She gave a terse nod. “I did indeed. Hogwarts library is well-stocked, after all.” Her voice wavered slightly. “It seems the haziness I noticed in … the copy I was given in person is not a favourable sign.”

Harry squeezed her shoulder. “No, it isn’t. Are you all right?”

She straightened and gave him a grim nod. “I will be. We will speak of it more after the meeting.”

“Yes. You’ll be good to … my friend, right? He does love you, you know?”

She nodded and dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. “It seems I never should have doubted him.”

Harry patted her shoulder. She allowed the touch, but soon resumed her stern demeanour and brushed him off with a smile.

“Thank you, Harry. Now, I have a question for you. Does your friend love you?”

Harry figured his blush probably answered for him. “Yes.”

“Merlin! It is mutual?”

Harry nodded.

She smiled. “I am happy for you both, but we should hurry inside. Are you ready?”

Harry motioned her on. “After you, Professor. It is your domain.”

With a small smile, McGonagall led Harry into her classroom.

Several student tables sat in a semicircle around the teacher’s desk, but instead of students, Order members filled the seats. Every seat was already full, save for one between Ron and Hermione—obviously reserved for him—and an empty table McGonagall headed for. Harry hurried to his place, greeting his friends with a quick hug.

“Glad to see you well, mate,” George said, unusually serious.

Fred continued, “We were worried after your message.”

“I’ll explain when I can,” Harry said with a wistful smile. “If I’m right, this meeting will be more than a little interesting.”
Fred and George exchanged looks.

Fred said, “It wasn’t about mage sight this morning, was it?”

“Hush,” Harry snapped and tugged the map from his pocket. He made sure to let the twins see it before he opened it under the table. Their eyes widened and they gave him sudden nods of understanding.

It wasn’t the threat outside the Order that Harry was worried about.

He activated the map and waited for the meeting to begin.
CHAPTER 27
ORDER AND CHAOS

As Harry acclimated his eyes to reading the Marauder’s Map under the cover of his ‘desk’, he considered how best to play this meeting. Severus hadn’t given him many suggestions beyond ‘act like a Slytherin,’ and while it thrilled Harry to know he had earned his soul-bond’s trust, such vague instructions weren’t much of a plan of attack. Especially since if he actually acted like a Slytherin, he might as well have painted a target on his forehead for Dumbledore to notice. ‘Look at me, I’m different!’

No, he couldn’t break his behaviour pattern so drastically, but then what should he do? With his fingertip, he traced his map, following the halls up floors while he considered his options. First of all, what would Dumbledore expect to see? What would he want to see?

Well, Harry knew what the old man really wanted, but he had no intention of being the ‘good little weapon.’ Besides that, Dumbledore knew Harry was onto that game already anyway, so pretending to be meek and mild would get him nowhere. Which meant Harry couldn’t return to the behaviour of his early years, defending the leader of the light at all costs, even against his own interests. No, Dumbledore would find a return to blind faith as suspicious as outright rebellion or sneaky serpent behaviour.

He couldn’t go back to his previous enmity with Severus either. Besides the fact that Harry doubted his ability to make it convincing, the Order would have most likely already reported Harry’s defence of the man during the Debacle of the Seven Potters. No, Dumbledore wouldn’t believe it if Harry suddenly returned to treating Severus like the scum on the bottom of his shoe.

On the other hand, Dumbledore also knew nothing about Severus’ true nature, couldn’t even fathom the depth of love and gentleness that resided under his hard outer shell. Dumbledore believed the worst of Severus, and so he no doubt expected Harry to have been exposed to fierce ire over the past month, or at least the first two weeks or so of it.

Had that been the case, Harry would certainly found loving the man more difficult. The Gryffindor he had once been would have chafed under such treatment, rebelled and refused to be seen as a child.

And perhaps that was how he should handle it. Mostly ignore Severus’ snark as Harry knew the man had a good heart underneath, but refuse to put up with anything that implied he was too young or too stupid to handle something. He tapped his finger on the map, affirming the choice of action to himself. Harry could do that. He wouldn’t like it, but he could do it. A little snap back to Severus’ worst blows wouldn’t hurt the man. And if worse came to worse and Harry said something that did
hurt Severus, he could always try to apologise over their mental connection.

He sighed and traced a hall with his finger, following it to the fifth floor—McGonagall’s classroom ought to be there somewhere.

Ugh. The idea of trying to walk the line between ‘irritated rebellious teenager’ and ‘the Boy-Who-Lived-To-Do-Dumbledore’s-Will’ was daunting. He comforted himself with the knowledge that this was the last Order meeting he would be expected to attend for a long time. He had horcruxes to hunt, and others could do his spying more easily. Not Severus this time—Severus wasn’t trusted enough, either by the Order or Dumbledore. But McGonagall, now she was in a prime position to be an excellent spy. And she had the chops to do it well.

At the sound of Dumbledore’s booming voice, Harry jumped, losing his place on the map halfway down the transfiguration corridor.

“Welcome, everyone,” Dumbledore said with a brilliant twinkle. “Thank you all for coming.”

“Figures,” Harry muttered.

Ron whispered, “What?”

“He’s leaving Severus out.”

Ron nodded sadly.

Dumbledore beamed at the order, his smile lingering longer on Harry, who studiously blanked his mind and stared at a point above the bastard’s eyebrows. “Now, since we are all present and in a skunk-free environment—” The twins snickered. “—Let us, as the Muggles say, get on with the show. First, it has come to my attention that—”

The door swung open with a bang and a heavily-glamoured Snape limped into the room, black robes billowing. He was in full dungeon bat mode, and he was glorious like that.

Harry fought back a grin. Since when had he found Severus’ doom and gloom routine sexy? That was definitely new.

He discreetly adjusted himself and doubled-down on his Occlumency. Merlin help them should Dumbledore stumble upon that thought.

Dumbledore turned to the door and gaped, his eyes going round as saucers. “Severus?”

“Obviously,” the man said with a raised eyebrow.

Severus swept his robes around him and stalked to the seat at Minerva’s left. She pretended to still be miffed but didn’t shoo him away, to Harry’s relief.

“I … I was under the impression you would not be coming today,” said Dumbledore.

The Slytherin shot him an icy glare. “Oh? Am I not still a member of the Order? Perhaps I have lost my usefulness as a spy, but I still have a rather sharp mind and potions knife. Or am I no longer welcome in such … esteemed company?”

Dumbledore’s eyes flashed with cold hatred. A flare of worry prickled Harry’s chest, but the old man covered his anger with a benevolent smile. “Of course you are welcomed, old friend.”

The old man’s slip-up hadn’t escaped McGonagall, judging by her expression. Harry had never been
so glad to see the woman’s tightly pursed lips, a sure sign of suppressed fury. He hadn’t seen her that angry since the Umbridge era.

‘We have another ally now,’ thought Harry. With any luck, they would have several more soon.

Severus held the headmaster’s gaze, his eyes piercing and sharp. “I am glad. You see, I had wondered, after a certain article, if I would be accosted when I stepped through the door.”

Albus’ eyes flashed with anger and Harry sucked in a sharp breath.

“Severus! Rein it in.”

The man did not reply mentally, but a flicker of shame crossed the former spy’s face and Harry knew his warning had been understood.

“That article was retracted,” said Arthur, trying to smooth ruffled feathers before a fight erupted. “We all know you were our spy, Severus. You are among friends here.”

“It’s all right, Severus. It’s okay.”

The man shivered, but shot a quick glare at Harry. “Don’t. Too risky.”

Harry replied by not responding at all. Severus’ tight posture relaxed.

In the meantime, Dumbledore had apparently decided to move on with the meeting in spite of Severus’ presence. “Well, now that we are all present and comfortable, back to the matter at hand.”

He motioned to Kingsley and called the auror forwards. Kingsley moved to his side as if nothing had changed, and Harry envied his ability to stay calm here when even Severus was having difficulty controlling his anger against the vile old manipulator.

Dumbledore looked over the assembled group, his expression serious. “The primary reason I have called you recently is because of an unexplained attack on Nott Manor last evening. We have little information, but from what the aurors have gleaned from the survivors, a group of unknown vigilantes—two men, from the description of those captured after the battle, though there may have been more—broke into the manor, where Theodore Nott was being tortured by his father and five other Death Eaters. We do not yet know why.”

‘Like hell you don’t,’ Harry wanted to snarl, but Kingsley beat him to it.

“Actually, Headmaster,” said the man with a piercing stare, “we do know why. I thought I’d already told you.”

Dumbledore’s smile was obviously forced. “I must have missed it.”

Harry wasn’t the only one looking at Dumbledore like he’d lost the plot. The general of the Order overlooking a detail so crucial? It was a ludicrous excuse.

Kingsley’s eyes narrowed, but he did not call the old man’s bluff. “I’ll remind you then. As it turns out, Theo was forced into taking the mark by his parents and was attempting to escape his home that night. He was caught and subsequently tortured. His own parents had planned to take him to You-Know-Who as a traitor and torture him to death, simply for trying to run away and find a better life.”

Dumbledore gave him a sorrowful expression, though Harry could swear he saw the man’s eye twitching. “Ah, how unfortunate. I take it young Theo is safe?”
“He is,” said Severus with a scowl. “Your vigilantes were Potter and myself, no thanks to another bout of reckless Gryffindor foolhardiness. That afternoon, Theo sent me a Patronus begging my assistance as he had learned what his fate was to be. Being the hero that he is, Potter heard the message and barrelled through the floo like an utter moron, and so I had no choice but to go after him and use extreme force if I planned to bring your beloved saviour back to you in one piece. It was only by sheer luck that we managed to save Theo as well. He is recuperating at a safehouse in Scotland.”

It was amazing how Severus could tell the exact truth while making it all sound like lies. No wonder the man was good at spying.

Ron opened his mouth to protest, but Harry elbowed him sharply.

“It’s the story we agreed upon beforehand,” Harry muttered.

Ron gave him a scandalised look, but said nothing, to Harry’s relief.

“I see,” said the Headmaster after a long pause. “Harry, you rushed to the aid of a boy who had spent so many years hating you?”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Our personal history had nothing to do with it. Nott didn’t deserve to be tortured to death. End of story.”

“For all you know, Harry,” said Elphias Doge, “the boy could have been lying in his Patronus message. Perhaps he had failed a mission and wanted a way to avoid punishment.”

“And you think a seventeen year old who’s never killed anyone before deserves to be tortured to death either way?” Harry fixed the doddering fool with a cold expression. “Theo is innocent. Master Snape and I tested him thoroughly. And even if he wasn’t, even if he had failed a mission and wanted out, I’ll be damned before I stand for that kind of justice. If I let that go, if I stood by and let a boy be tortured to death, I would be no better than Riddle himself.”

“But—”

Harry slammed his fist onto the table. “You have no idea what Riddle does to traitors. I’ve seen it. Pro—Master Snape has lived it. And you really expected us to sit by and let it happen again just because you have some sick sense of justice that makes it okay for a group of psychopaths to inflict as much pain as possible upon a teenage boy before they kill him? I don’t think so. Even if he had been guilty—and he isn’t—no one deserves that.”

“Hear hear, Mister Potter,” said McGonagall with a firm nod.

“Loath as I am to let Mister Potter’s obvious arrogance and disrespect go—” Harry understood Severus’ subtle warning to watch his tongue. “—I must admit that in this case, he has a point. Wonders never cease.”

“You’re welcome,” said Harry in a tone of annoyance he didn’t feel.

Severus scoffed and turned his attention back to Dumbledore. “As you know now what has happened and I have already filed my report with Kingsley, might we get back to more important matters?”

“I am afraid it is of utmost importance if Theo can betray Harry’s location, Severus,” said Albus with a grave expression. “He may be innocent, but no one can deny his ties to the dark—”
“Ties he was forced into,” interjected Severus.

“Nevertheless, I fear you took too much of a risk. He could bring Death Eaters into Harry’s location and—”

“As Theo Nott is currently far away from either Harry or myself,” said an exasperated Severus, “he is incapable of doing anything of the sort. I was a spy, Headmaster. I am not quite the fool you seem to think I am.”

Harry wanted to grin. Theo was far away from them currently. He wouldn’t be once they returned home, but Dumbledore didn’t need to know that. Merlin, Severus was brilliant.

Dumbledore sighed. “You are certain, Severus?”

Severus scowled. “Absolutely.”

“Then I suppose there is little else to discuss on the subject. I will only make it known among our members that Thomas Nott is now deceased and that Rabastan Lestrange escaped.”

“He’s seriously injured though,” Harry added. “Lestrange is. I’m surprised he survived, to be honest.”

“Some people can learn to cast a proper shield, Potter,” Severus drawled.

“And if someone I know would bloody well teach me, maybe I’d learn too,” Harry snapped back.

There. That was enough irritation to make it plain they weren’t friends even though they had gained some little respect for one another. McGonagall gave Harry a puzzled look, but he ignored it.

Severus glared. “Ten points for your cheek.”

“School’s not in session!”

“They accumulate in the summer too.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Can we just get back to the meeting, please?”

“That may be the first intelligent thing you have said all morning.”

Harry smirked. “Then why did you agree with me earlier?”

Severus scowled. “To throw you off your game.”

Harry snorted. “Sure you did, sir.” He turned back to Dumbledore. “Headmaster? What else?”

Albus frowned. “Well, there is one other matter of importance.” He swivelled his eyes towards Harry, staring hard, but the younger man forced his mind blank and his gaze to the side.

‘Nice try, Dumblefuck.’

Frowning harder, Dumbledore continued. “I think all of you saw the article this morning urging those of Muggle ancestry to leave Britain and make their fortunes elsewhere rather than registering with the British Ministry?”

Harry blinked. Had that come out this morning? He hadn’t had time to check the post before the meeting.
Most of the others murmured agreement.

“This concerns me. Not for the contents of the article, of course, because it is sound advice considering who is currently in charge of the Muggleborn Registration Commission. No, it worries me because I think we can all agree that in past weeks, the Prophet would simply have touted the Ministry line so as not to lose their support.”

The Order members frowned and muttered among themselves. Schooling his face into an expression of innocent confusion, Harry watched them ponder and had half wished he’d brought popcorn. For once, he had information the rest of them didn’t. After six years of being kept in the dark by these very people, Harry found their struggle to understand more than a little amusing.

“There have been … other questionable stories recently,” Dumbledore continued. “And so yesterday, I took it upon myself to enquire as to the state of affairs at the Prophet. As a result, I have learned that the Daily Prophet is under new ownership, and it seems the owner has put some sort of Fidelius on the reporters. I am afraid the gentleman I asked about it broke out in a most unbecoming rash that St. Mungo’s is, at present, unable to cure.”

Harry’s lips twitched, but he managed to suppress his smirk. Barely. Severus looked as impassive as ever, but Harry read a trace of unholy glee in his eyes. No one else would notice. No one was close enough to Severus to know his minute changes of expression so well, but Harry saw it and struggled not to laugh at his amusement.

“While this mysterious owner has covered their tracks well,” Dumbledore went on, “we must endeavour to find out who he or she is. We could, perhaps, turn them to our purposes given the right persuasion. With control of the Prophet, we do, after all, have among us one who might use his popularity for good.”

The beaming smile Dumbledore turned on Harry churned the bile in the young man’s stomach.

“Me, in other words.” Harry scowled at the man. “You want to use my fame—to use me—to further the Order’s goals. You know how I feel about that.”

Dumbledore nodded and gave him a sad look. “Yes, of course. It is a pity, but there is so much good we could do.” He began listing benefits, naming members in turn, and with the old man’s attention elsewhere, Harry gave Severus a questioning glance. His barely perceptible nod had Harry interrupting the Headmaster’s spiel.

“Professor,” said the young man, “that’s all well and good, but as it happens, using my fame is quite unnecessary.”

Dumbledore frowned, deep furrows digging into his beard and between his eyes. “You cannot possibly believe that a mere moment of social discomfort outweighs the value of gallons of wizarding blood, Harry. I would not have believed you capable of it.”

Harry debated the risk of blowing up for a split second before deciding to let his inner Gryffindor out. The former Harry would never have let that kind of shite slide, not even if he still believed in the Headmaster’s benevolence. And Dumbledore knew he didn’t.

“Oh, that’s nice, sir,” Harry snarled. “I only go out and lay my arse on the line for the good of wizarding kind every single end of term, how could I possibly care about people?”

Severus scowled. “Always about you, Potter, isn’t it?”

Harry understood Severus’ comment as a warning not to lay it on too thick and pulled his temper
back. He couldn’t afford to be too disrespectful, no matter that he wanted to murder Dumbledore with his bare hands.

His friends, having no such qualms, charged headfirst into the fray.

“That’s bollocks,” Tonks cried.

“What she said,” Ron yelled, and the meeting broke into chaos, every man shouting over the other.

“They’re exactly right,” said an indignant Hermione, her voice somehow carrying over the din. “Headmaster, how could you imply that Harry doesn’t care because he hates using his fame—fame people use against him at the drop of a hat, I might add—when he’s risked and lost so much trying to save us all? That’s a terrible thing to say!”

By this point, the Weasleys and Gryffindors were glaring so hard at the headmaster, the man had little choice but to walk back his patronising comments. And Harry couldn’t warn them off without looking suspicious himself. All he could do was glare at Dumbledore along with the others and hope it didn’t come back to bite him on the arse.

“Perhaps that was uncalled for,” Dumbledore said, though his eyes flashed at being so publicly rebuked. “But you must see that I suggest this for the good of wizarding kind, Harry.”

‘You suggest it for your own good, you manipulative sod.’

Harry acted flustered, running a hand through his hair and fidgeting. “Well, maybe I overreacted a bit. But I didn’t actually say I wouldn’t do it if I have to, sir; I said it’s unnecessary.”

Dumbledore gave him a bemused look. “Why do you say that?”

Harry smirked. “Because I already know the answer to your question: me. I own the Daily Prophet now.”

The mischief-maker in Harry delighted in the shouts and exclamations of shock. Ron and the twins looked amused too. Hermione just chuckled and shook her head at Harry’s antics.

“You!” Dumbledore wiped his shock and anger away with a smile. “Well, that is good to know. You won’t print what won’t benefit the light. But who put the Fidelius on the workers?”

“Er ….”

Shite. Harry hadn’t thought that far ahead. If he revealed himself as the caster, it would also reveal his power level. If he pretended like he didn’t know, it would look suspicious. And if he—

“I did,” said Severus before Harry could work out his cover story. “The idiot boy ran in there without a plan and spared not a thought to what would happen if word of the takeover spread among the Death Eaters. Once again, I had no choice but to save him from his own Gryffindor stupidity.”

“Oh! That Gryffindor stupidity saved your arse the next day, I’ll have you know. Without me, everyone in Britain would still think of you as a murdering Death Eater!”

“I never asked for your interference, Potter! Always charging in without thinking.”

Kingsley opened his mouth to speak, but a quelling glare from Harry shut him up. A good fight would distract Dumbledore from any discrepancies they might have neglected to cover, at least long enough to mislead his suspicions.
The Auror shrugged slightly and sat back, content to observe.

“I did think about it though,” Harry tossed back at Severus. “You were there, sir. You saw it.”

Severus scowled. “You did not think hard enough, obviously, or I’d not have had need to attach a dark Fidelius to the staff to save your sorry hide. That’s your problem, Potter, always going in without a plan and expecting everyone to—”


Harry and Severus pouted and turned away from each other.

Dumbledore sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Severus, since it was you who applied the Fidelius, perhaps you can undo the curse on Mister Fibbleton?”

Severus leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands over his chest. “I am afraid not. It has no antidote, but the marks will fade eventually. Perhaps.”

Harry grinned inwardly at the ex-spy’s ability to think on the spot. It certainly came in handy to have such an intelligent partner. Especially since Harry wasn’t particularly sure when the hex would wear off himself.

“Indeed?” Dumbledore shook his head sadly, as if disappointed. “Well, I suppose it is to be expected, Severus. You are not one to curse lightly.”

Severus’ glare descended into sub-zero temperatures. Harry would not stand for such lies either, even considering the role he had to play for the meeting.

“Headmaster, that’s not fair. Have you forgotten what Prof—er … Master Snape endured for us? He may be a git, and he surely doesn’t like me, but he’s a brave git, and he doesn’t deserve that.”

“Another ten points, Potter,” Snape said with a scowl.

Harry shrugged. “Worth it.”

McGonagall gave Harry a cat-got-the-canary grin. “Mister Potter, take twenty points for loyalty and standing up for your professors—whether they want it or not.”

Severus made a face as if he was sucking on a particularly sour lemon, but his eyes shone with amusement. He gave McGonagall a disgusted look. “Et tu, Brute?”

She snorted. “Oh, do get over yourself, Severus. The boy was defending you.”

“Humph. Probably expects a pat on the back for it too.”

Harry grinned, but a sudden spike of angry magic caught him by surprise. He turned and a chill washed over him. ‘Shite!’

Dumbledore wore an expression of hurt and sorrow, but particles of black and red shone through the old man’s paper-thin skin and gathered charge with every passing moment.

Harry linked to his partner. “Fuck! Time to appease the Dragon, Verus.”

Severus gave a tiny nod in response.

“Back to the point, there’s no need to worry about the Prophet any longer, Headmaster,” Harry said
as if he hadn’t noticed Dumbledore’s oncoming temper tantrum. With any luck, reminding the man of the purpose of the meeting would throw him off enough to divert his rage.

He gave the Headmaster what he hoped was a disarming smile. “After that article about Master Snape, well, I didn’t want it to print lies about any of us any longer, so I took it over myself. I had the extra money and a vendetta against that Skeeter hag anyway. And I’ve already done loads of good with it, rebutting false claims from the Ministry courtesy of Umbridge and Mouldy Shorts, for example—” The twins snickered again. “—And I’ll continue to ensure it prints truthful and helpful articles from this point on.”

“Well,” the old man said, his wrath dissipating somewhat, “that is good. At least it will no longer print lies about you, that is certain.”

Harry suppressed a sigh of relief. At least a physical one. “Whew. Crisis averted, Verus. For the moment.”

Severus pretended as if he hadn’t heard, but Harry noted the tension in his posture easing. Good.

Harry gave Dumbledore a honeyed smile. “True. I won’t miss dealing with Skeeter’s rubbish, that’s for sure. But I didn’t buy it just to protect my reputation, sir. If I have my way, it won’t print lies about anyone.”

He grinned as if excited about a new project, when really he was just enjoying sticking it to the old bastard. “I want it to be a real paper again, one with integrity, you see. So I’ve already put new rules into effect. All articles are to be sourced and vetted for truthfulness from here on out, no matter who they’re about. And anything about me or anyone else who’s high profile in the war has to come through me for approval. So, yeah. It won’t be printing lies anymore at all, not if I can help it.”

Harry smiled as he delivered the final blow. “We warded it really well, too, I mean King, me, and Professor Snape. Kind of had to after that article about Snakes-for-Brains unless we wanted it blown up. I reckon if Riddle can’t get in to trash it, then it’s fairly well airtight by this point. Which is good for other reasons than safety: no one can get in to sabotage us behind our back either. So, as far as I can see, we’re golden with the Prophet from here on out.”

“As it should be,” Dumbledore said with a faint smile, though Harry read from his eyes that the old man had understood the threat. No libellous articles about Harry would make it to print, but no untruthful stories about Slytherins would slip through under Harry’s leadership either. If Dumbledore wanted to publish falsehoods to push his twisted anti-snake agenda, he would have to do it on his own power.

‘Tough luck, Dumblefuck,’ Harry thought with a too-innocent smile.

Dumbledore said nothing else about the Prophet, but as his angry magic still simmered just under the surface, and Harry thought it best to let the man have his show. He needed to get back to smoking out the spy anyway.

Ron whispered, “Mate, you all right?”

“Yeah. Just checking ….”

Harry unfolded his map under the table once more and showed Ron a corner so he’d understand. Ron blanched and nodded, dropping his wand into his hand discreetly.

“I’ll cover you, Harry.”
Harry gave him a warm smile. “Thanks. Just keep Dumbledore off my back for a bit.”

“Er … I’ll try.”

Dumbledore had gone off onto a different subject, and Harry used the opportunity to find their location and muddle through the names present. All looked right until he made it to the man sitting one table down from Severus and McGonagall. A man who, when Harry looked up, wasn’t a man at all. Harry stared between map and not-man—stringy hair, bucked teeth, and darting eyes below an effeminate glamour—and his blood congealed.

Pettigrew! Merlin help him, the man who had betrayed Harry’s parents, resurrected Voldemort, and burned holes into Severus’ legs was sitting right next to his lover.

Fear shut down all other thoughts, and Harry jerked his eyes to Severus’ dark gaze. When he was sure Severus had seen him though the man wasn’t obvious about it, Harry lowered his eyes to the map, nodded towards the man beside Severus, and tapped his own right shoulder. He kept his gestures small enough that it might be taken as nervous fidgeting, but Harry caught the slight widening of Severus’ eyes and knew he’d understood.

“The spy is on your right, Verus.”

Severus moved so it appeared he was stretching, but Harry noticed the tip of his wand poking beneath his fingertips and relief surged through him. His lover wouldn’t be taken by surprise at least.

Under the cover of his table and while Dumbledore was talking to someone on the other side of the room, Harry cast a discreet shield around Severus, McGonagall, and the people on Pettigrew’s right, and an anti-Animagus field around the rat himself. Another spell dampened the traitor’s magic, and with his protections complete, Harry gave the subtly terrified Severus a nod and flicked his wand within view, trying to tell the man he was safe. Severus relaxed a little, and Harry judged the man was as prepared for a fight as he could be.

Dumbledore had gone off about Death Eater sightings in the Isle of Man or something like it, but, after wiping the map and tucking it into a pocket, Harry leapt up and waved him to silence.

“Not another word, Headmaster. There is a rat in this room.”

Severus’ complexion paled to a pasty white.

Dumbledore coughed and turned, giving Harry a bemused look. “A rat?”

Was it Harry’s imagination, or had Dumbledore’s eyes just flickered to Pettigrew?

“Oh gods.”

Harry’s breath hitched as a wave of sickening realization washed over him. The night they had moved Severus’ belongings, the man had told Harry that Dumbledore could see through glamours. Dumbledore himself had told Harry in his first year that he could see through invisibility spells too. And Severus could detect the smell of Polyjuice.

The only way a spy could get into the Order without alerting Severus was to use a powerful glamour. A glamour Dumbledore could see through.

Fury burned hot and reddened the edges of Harry’s vision.

‘Dumbledore knew! Fuck me! He knew all along! He’s brought the rat in on purpose, probably to
Harry would be damned if he let his one love die because of Dumbledore’s mad anti-Slytherin agenda. A surge of white-hot fury enveloped him, but before it shattered the windows or burned Dumbledore to a crisp, Harry turned his magic inward, diverting his rage into the shield around his mind. He could not hope to keep it blank like this, and his facial expressions had fallen beyond his control. His only hope was to keep his eyes away from Dumbledore’s and pray his mage-magic shield kept the manipulative bastard out of his head.

Harry took a deep breath to control himself. “Yes. A literal rat.”

He blinked as golden magic glimmered around the false witch’s skin and a web of giant black stripes cut swathes into her breast—his mage sight had activated on its own due to his high emotions. The black marks repulsed him, each pulsing with malevolence, a vile antithesis to life. Harry recognised them immediately and recoiled from their implications. Severus had two or three marks, one for his father and the others unavoidable while working as a spy, but Pettigrew was covered.

Dear Merlin. How many people had Pettigrew murdered?

With a mental shake, Harry tore his eyes away from the man’s morbidly fascinating soul-scars. Instead, he focused on the man’s heavily made-up face and flicked his wand towards the false witch.

“Hello, Pettigrew. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

Gasps sounded around the room. Severus and McGonagall leapt to their feet and edged away from the rat. The ‘witch’ s’ eyes darted to the door, but ‘she’ said nothing.

Ron’s voice roared in Harry’s ear, leaving it ringing. “That’s the traitor sicko?” He snarled and drew his wand. “Let me at ’im!” He made to leap over his table, but Hermione and Bill held him back, with effort. Harry watched impassively, despite Bill’s requests for help.

“That is enough!” Elphias Doge stood and slammed his gnarled hands on the table, stunning Ron out of his homicidal rage. “You’ve been quite disrespectful enough today, Harry.”

“Disrespectful?” Harry kept his wand trained on the rat, not daring to look away in case he tried to escape. “How exactly?”

Doge snapped, “By falsely accusing a well-known Order member of deceit, that’s how. That is Lenora Twain, not Pettigrew, as anyone with eyes can see.”

Harry scoffed. “Obviously I know he doesn’t look like himself. He’s under a glamour of sorts.”

The ‘woman’ stood and gave a nervous laugh, her eyes darting between Harry’s wand and the door. “That’s impossible.”

“Balderdash,” Doge said at the same time. “You’re out of line, boy!”

Harry’s hand twitched, but he resisted the urge to turn his wand on Doge. “Do not call me ‘boy.’ Ever. And I haven’t done anything but alerted you to a spy.”

Doge stomped his foot and scoffed. “A spy indeed. Headmaster, are you going to let him get away with this utter disrespect?”

“Elphias, please. Harry is only mistaken.” Dumbledore spoke in a soothing tone that only riled the young man further. “My boy, what do you mean about a rat? That isn’t—”
Harry resisted the urge to scream. “My name is Harry.” With herculean effort, he kept his voice calm and his wand trained on Pettigrew. Damned if the bloody coward was getting away this time. “I don’t like that … other name, sir. At all.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I shall try to desist then. But Harry, that isn’t even a man. Glamours cannot be made that turn men to women.”

Harry frowned. “It is. And spells are invented every day, sir. Especially with wizards like Riddle—twisted as the snake-faced bastard is, he’s unfortunately brilliant.”

“Lenora has been with us over twenty-five years, Harry.”

“And that means she couldn’t have been changed or been taken over just because she’s been here a long time?” Harry shook his head without looking away from the rat. “Just check. If I’m wrong, what’s the worst that could happen?”

Dumbledore opened his mouth, no doubt to chide Harry again, but Ron cut across him before he could, jerking his wand at Pettigrew.

“Harry’s right. So what do you have to say for yourself, rat?”

Harry gave Ron a weak smile. “Thanks.”

The twins took position on either side of Harry. “Family sticks together,” they said at the same time.

Bill nodded and took up position behind Harry, wand out and a warding spell already on his lips. Fleur moved to stand at Harry’s left and shielded them both. Harry blinked hard, overwhelmed at the support. Merlin, what had he done to deserve friends—siblings—like this?

Ron’s sharp tones pulled Harry back to the present. “Well? We’re waiting.” He jerked his wand at the ‘woman’ and glared.

‘Lenora’ stood, turning her hands over each other and shifting her eyes between the exit and the end of Harry’s wand. She tittered again, twitching with every breeze. “I’ve obviously n-not the right p-parts to be P-P-Pettigrew. I haven’t the s-slightest idea what y-you’re on ab-b-bout.”

Arthur’s wand jerked out towards ‘her,’ as did Hermione’s and Severus’. With a cry of dismay, McGonagall stepped away from the traitor and whipped her wand out as well.

“Dear Merlin,” the older woman said.

Severus snarled and set an icy glare on Pettigrew. “I recognize that pattern of movement and speech. That is indeed Pettigrew, though I’ve no idea how a dunderhead like Potter figured it out before myself. I suppose there is a first time for everything.”

“N-nonsense,” Pettigrew replied. “I’m a w-witch. I’m Lenora Twain, like they s-said.”

“Headmaster,” said Elphias, “this is getting out of hand. You must call an end to this! The boy is delusional, and he is taking good members down with him!”

“Perhaps you are right, Elphias. Harry, that is en—”

Harry shot the Headmaster a glare, looking away from the rat for the first time since his mage sight activated, but what he saw caused him to reel back in shock. As laced with black as Pettigrew’s chest was, it was nothing to the malefic, seething web around Dumbledore’s.
“Holy mother of Merlin,” Harry gasped out.

Hermione whispered to him, “What?”

Her voice and Dumbledore’s continued tirade jerked Harry out of his trance.

“Later,” he said in a shaky voice. Recovering his wits, he cried out to Severus, “Master Snape, please!”

Severus gave a curt nod and jerked his wand towards Pettigrew in a complicated gesture. “Animagus revelio!” At Severus’ cry, white light surrounded the ‘witch’ and her form shrank.

“Thank you, sir,” Harry called.

Severus grunted in reply, his eyes fixed on the dwindling form of the wayward witch. Pettigrew’s squeals of pain rose in pitch into terrified squeaks as the light cleared and dropped his tiny form onto the table, revealing the silver-pawed rat and Gryffindor traitor.

Ron screamed, “It is Pettigrew! You sick bastard!”

Kingsley roared, “Get him!”

The auror shot a curse at the beast, but as Severus’ spell ended and forced Pettigrew into his human form once more—without the glamours—Kingsley’s spell barely missed McGonagall. If not for Severus’ quick shove—and Harry’s shields—the curse would have struck her in the heart.

With a squeak, Pettigrew scrabbled for the exit, but thirty spells hit him and bound him in so many ropes, he looked more mummy than man by the time the last Incarcerous hit.

“Oh dear,” Dumbledore said, pale and wan. “It seems we were mistaken. Tom was indeed able to slip a spy into our ranks. How unfortunate.”

Harry barely reined in his fury at the manipulative bastard’s lies. “How did he get past the wards? I thought they were changed to lock him out.”

McGonagall paled. “They were. And polyjuice wouldn’t have let him past. It was an anti-Animagi variation on the wards that denied him entry.”

“An imperfect one then,” said Charlie with a frown.

Severus shook his head. “The ward was cast correctly. We keyed it specifically to allow all our known Animagi in but keep Pettigrew out. If he has bypassed it, then someone has been … tampering with the Hogwarts wards.”

Harry noted the faintly green colour in the Headmaster’s cheeks, but for the safety of his little family, said nothing of it. Dumbledore would get his own soon.

“Maybe so, sir. At least we know now and can fix them again.” He went to McGonagall and a subtly shaking Severus. “Professors, are you okay? Kingsley didn’t hit you, did he?”

“No, Harry,” McGonagall said with a wan smile. “We are well enough. Well spotted, Harry.”

Severus agreed by way of a curt nod.

“Are you okay, sir?”
Severus sneered. “I am not so weak as to be overtaken by a mere rat in witch’s clothing.”

Harry gave him a wan smile. “Good.”

Dumbledore had moved to their side, and Harry tensed with all that evil so close to him. He could feel it now, radiating off the man like the chill of a winter day, clawing at him. Unable to bear it so close, Harry took a discreet step back.

Dumbledore patted McGonagall’s shoulder. “Are you all right, Minerva?”

She gave him a stern look. “Ach! Don’t coddle me so. Potter just asked me, and I’ve said I’m fine. Leave it at that.”

Dumbledore nodded curtly. “You will go to Poppy if anything changes?”

“As always.”

“Good.” He turned and gave Pettigrew a look of disgust. “How nice to see you again, Peter.”

Pettigrew flinched, and Harry wondered if Dumbledore’s punishments for failing a dark task weren’t worse than Voldemort’s.

“Kingsley,” said Dumbledore, “I assume you can find suitable accommodations for our … guest?”

The Auror had already conjured Animagus-proof shackles and was strapping them onto Pettigrew’s wrists when Dumbledore spoke. He simply nodded and continued with his work. The look he gave Harry, however, spoke of questions best answered sooner rather than later.

“Not here,” he mouthed behind Dumbledore’s back. Kingsley accepted it with a nod.

Dumbledore moved back to the podium looking as if he’d lost his best friend. He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Given all the excitement, I think this is quite enough for one day. Dismissed.”

He motioned to Harry, but the young man had no desire to be cornered alone by the man and pretended he hadn’t seen. A crowd of taller redheads provided a great wall to hide behind, and once out of sight of Dumbledore, he immediately disillusioned himself, keyed specifically to bypass the charms on Dumbledore’s spectacles.

Harry sidled to his best friend and whispered in Ron’s ear, “Gather all your family, including Fleur and Angelina, and take them to McGonagall’s office. Meeting starts in half an hour, or whenever King and Remus can join us.”

“You got it, mate.”

Ron turned to Bill, Bill turned to Fleur, Fleur turned to Charlie, and within seconds, the message had made it through the entire Weasley family. Harry told Severus and McGonagall himself. After he was sure everyone who was supposed to know about the meeting did, Harry glanced up to the professor’s desk, where Dumbledore was scanning the crowd with a frown.

“Ah well,” Dumbledore said with a sigh. “Perhaps he’ll talk to me next time.”

McGonagall stood and said as she walked by, “Hmm, perhaps. I don’t suppose you know how the wards were altered?”

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. “Alas, I fear there is someone in Hogwarts we cannot trust.”
She gave him an incredulous look. “You believe there are two spies within the Order?”

“How else would Pettigrew have gotten through?”

McGonagall’s lips pinched into a thin line. “I am sure I don’t know, Albus. Perhaps you’re right.” She bid him good day and walked out without another word.

Under the cover of his spell, Harry gave a grim nod.

‘I win this match, Dumbledore.’

He slipped his invisible hand into Severus’ and led the spy out and away from the chaos. He had a headache potion to take and a Dawn meeting to prepare for.

“Let’s go, love.”

The spy gave him a barely perceptible nod and turned up the stairs towards McGonagall’s office.

Minerva was pacing and tearing what looked like a tatty catnip mouse to shreds with her bare fingers when Severus led the still invisible Harry and a wary Kingsley into her office. She looked up when Severus walked in, and the fury faded from her eyes, darkening into a shameful despair. She laid her mouse aside and dabbed at her eyes.

“Oh, Severus. My child, can you forgive me?”

Severus swallowed a sudden lump and strode to her side. “Nothing to forgive.” He took her hands and gave her a sad smile. “You are not the one who manipulated and lied to us all.”

She squeezed Severus’ hands, then pulled back with a terse nod. “Thank you. Tell me, what do you know?”

Severus shook his head and cast a powerful Muffliato, the one silencing spell Dumbledore didn’t have a way around. Severus had invented it, after all, and he guarded his secrets well.

“Not here. He has ears everywhere in this school. Even the walls talk to him, I fear. Harry, will you call your friends?”

The young man cancelled his disillusionment and nodded. “Rilen, Dobby, Bindy, Kreacher, Tinny, Gemmy, Winky, Arlen, Linna, Ashie.”

A miniscule army of house elves appeared in various states of confusion, about half with full Dawn regalia and half in their former garb. Gemmy had made excellent progress on their uniforms so far, and they were beginning to look like a cohesive contingent. Severus found he liked the look and mused that he might have her work on uniforms for the humans next, or at least those in the Dawn’s army.

Minerva leapt back. “Ach, what is this?”

“A house elf army,” Harry quipped. He knelt before Rilen and gave the elf a grim look. “My friend, be careful. Your target is angry right now. He’ll be liable to blow up.”
Rilen nodded and shivered. “Thank you, Master Harry Potter. Rilen will be careful.”

“Do that,” Harry said with a nod. “For now, I want you to stay on him hard, but only if you can protect yourself in case he lets his accidental magic go. Can you?”

Rilen nodded. “He’s not be finding me when I’s hiding under house elf magic, even with his wizard magic.”

“Good.” Harry patted Rilen’s shoulder. “Just remember, if it does get dangerous, get out of there fast, okay? Don’t risk your safety.”

Rilen sniffled and wiped his eyes. “Thank you, Master Harry. No one before has ever cared if Rilen was being in danger or tired or hungry. You is a good master. Rilen will do as you says.”

Harry smiled and stood. “Great. Please go back to work, Rilen, but be careful.”

“Yes, Master Harry.”

Rilen popped out of the office, and Harry waved the other elves over. “Okay you lot, now that’s done, I need help transporting my friends here to the new safehouse. In just a moment, we’ll need you to take us to the parlour you just furnished, okay?”

Tinny nodded. “Yes, Master Harry. Is you being ready now?”

Harry shook his head. “We need to make a detour first, but after that ….” He looked to Minerva. “Are you ready to go, Professor?”

She nodded. “Where is it?”

Severus shook his head. “We cannot reveal the location here, but we would be taking you to a parlour in a mostly unfinished manor. The parlour is cleaned and furnished as of two days ago, but you should be aware, it will not be empty, and its occupants may surprise you. They are trustworthy, however.”

Ron snorted, but a glare from Harry and his parents shut him up.

Minerva shot Ron a look, then nodded to Severus. “Take us there as soon as you are ready. I will withhold judgment.”

“Thank you.” Harry took Dobby’s hand. “Let’s go then. Everyone take an elf’s hand or hold on to someone touching an elf.”

Severus took Kreacher’s hand and watched as the others linked up, either to an elf or nearby human. Once they were all connected, he turned to the elderly elf holding his fingers.

“Elves, before we apparatus to the town, we will first need to go to a hidden location, one neither in Hogwarts nor home. Somewhere we can work a few minutes’ worth of magic without being seen.”

“The Shrieking Shack will do for now,” said Harry with a frown. “We’ll need to come up with a more permanent solution later.”

Severus nodded. “I have ideas, but we shan’t discuss them here. Kreacher, we are ready if you are.”

“Yes, Master Severus.”

The elf blinked, and the odd sensation of being squished through a tube pressed in on Severus. It
ended almost before it had begun, and he came out of the apparition panting. With a mental shake, he recovered his stance and led a trembling Minerva to a tattered chair.

“Rest there a moment.”

The witch glared at him, but did take a seat. “What are we doing here, Severus?”

“Checking for and removing tracking charms.” He turned to Harry. “Would you like to do the honours?”

Harry gave him a grim nod and took out his wand. A heavy silencing charm and several scans later, the Shrieking Shack vibrated with a siren loud enough to break glass. Harry cut the alarm charm off and seethed.

“All of us, Professor,” he spat. “They’re on every single one of the humans. On Ron and Hermione, there’s one woven so deep it’s tied into their magical cores.”

Ron squawked, “What?”

Hermione paled and gripped his arm. The other Weasleys looked sick.

Harry gave them a grim nod. “I reckon the only reason there’s not a deeper one on me is that he’s yet to see me for long since my core ignited. It must have reset the deep spells.”

Hermione frowned. “He?”

Severus pressed on without acknowledging her question. “Which means we will not be able to return to the cabin for any length of time until this is over, Potter.” Merlin, that hurt. Squire House had always been his sanctuary.

“Unfortunately.” Harry slid his hand into Severus’.

Molly was livid. “Who? Who did this to my babies?”

Harry gave her a pitying look and tried to respond, but Severus replied before Harry could get beyond a syllable or two.

“Molly,” he snapped, “it’s not something we can safely discuss until the spells are off.”

She nodded and crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes blazing. Arthur held her shoulders and looked on, his expression hard and fearful at once.

“Professor Snape,” said Harry in a low voice, “who’s handling the deep trackers?”

Minerva stepped forward. “I will remove the low-level spells. Bill, perhaps you would like to help Severus with the deeper spells?”

Severus frowned. “I should handle the deepest.” He placed a finger to his lips, shook his head, and pointed to Harry.

Hermione paled. “But he … he’s—”

Severus interjected before she could give away more information than was safe. “Miss Granger, have you ever known me to make a decision rashly?”

She sniffled and shook her head.
“Then trust me this time.”

“But—”

“He’s right, ‘Mione,” said Harry. “Professor Snape is good enough.”

Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder. Harry’s little deception might keep Dumbledore from the gleaning the truth, at least for the moment.

Hermione slumped into Ron’s chest. “O-okay. Just … be careful.”

“I am always careful,” said Severus. He gave her a nod and squeezed Harry’s arm, trying to tell him without words that he would be assisting. Hermione nodded. Ron hugged his girlfriend tighter.

“You three shall work on all the other spells but those two deep trackers,” said Severus, pointing to Bill and Minerva, then to himself. “Come.”

“All right,” said Bill.

Together, Minerva, Bill, and Severus removed all the spells they could. Once they had finished, Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder.

“Now it is my turn.” Mentally, he added, “I will lend you power and guide you. Say nothing out loud. Tell me through our link when you are ready.”

Harry nodded and took a deep breath. “Now,” he mouthed to Severus. The young man tensed and closed his eyes, and Severus felt Harry’s magic expand and reach out.

Curious, Severus spoke into his lover’s mind. “What are you doing, love?”

“Using mage sight, or trying. Thought it would make it easier.”

“It might at that. What do you see?”

Harry shuddered. “It’s … like a red, black, and dark green snake around their cores. It feels … wrong. Cold. Like it’s going to suck me in if I get too close.”

Severus held Harry tighter. “Stay back then. I wonder what the colours mean.”

“I don’t know, but the Crucius is the same kind of red. I can’t imagine it’s good, not if it has colours in common with that spell.”

Severus suppressed a cringe. “No, most likely not.” He ran a hand through Harry’s hair, an attempt at soothing them both. “I am with you, love. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Harry scooted back so he was flush against Severus’ chest. “Just stay locked into my magic and hold me close. Pull me back if that sucking spell drags me in. I’m scared of it.”

“I will ground you.” Severus took hold of Harry and pressed his magic into his lover’s. If anything tried to hurt Harry, he would be able to pull him back. “I have you, beloved. Can you see my magic around yours?”

“Yeah, actually. It looks like arms around my core. Like you’re holding me.”

Severus smiled in spite of the dangerous situation. “That is precisely what I am doing. Hold me, too, and we shall be an anchor against any storm.” Warmth entwined with him and made him feel
twenty years younger. “There you are. Are you ready?”

Harry nodded. “I’m wrapped around you now too.”

“I feel it. It’s lovely.” Severus held him tighter. “Go. I will protect you.”

“Thanks, love.”

Harry’s magic moved forwards, tugging Severus along with him, and green lights—one hue a pale viridian and the other soft jade—weaved in and around Hermione. She gasped and trembled, squeezing her eyes shut tight as Harry worked his magic.

“Severus!”

The terrified cry snapped Severus into action. The pull of a dangerous spell yanked at him, a spell Severus recognised immediately as a core leech, one of the darkest spells he had ever come across.

‘Holy fuck!’

Horror and shock shot through him, stealing his breath. In all his years, Severus had never imagined he would see a spell that volatile on a living person, let alone one his soul-bond loved and considered to be family.

He knew much about this particular spell. When applied correctly, the leech attached itself to the victim’s magical core and, through a tiny link, slowly fed the victim’s power back to the caster. It required both immense power and long-term proximity to the victim to pull off, as the spell required the caster and target to remain close to each other while the link between their cores established.

During the early years of the war, Riddle had ordered Severus to research such spells with Lucius, having had plans to turn it against Squibs and Muggleborns. However, Riddle decided to stick with torture when he realised the cost of failure was his own soul. An incorrectly cast leech would drain the caster of life just as efficiently as a dementor.

And now, said spell had turned its ire upon Harry.

“Fight,” Severus cried, and gripped Harry tight. “I have you!”

“Severus!”

Winds whirled around them, whipping their hair into their faces, but Severus stood his ground. “Hold on, love. I am here!”

Severus anchored his feet and held strong against the strange spell, whispering words of encouragement in Harry’s mind and holding him firm in body. Severus’ magic, unusually strong in its own right, anchored Harry to his core and fought the leech tooth and nail, but even so, they could only just hold their own against that dreadful pull. Fuck! How had Dumbledore managed to cast a spell with this kind of backlash?

Another core wrapped around Harry’s, one that radiated with strength and protectiveness. Severus looked up to find Bill’s eyes glowing red-orange, the colour of warding spells.

“I’ve got you too,” Bill whispered. “Fight, like Severus said.”

Harry nodded and pushed back with all his strength, and after a moment, the spell broke with a sound like the crack of a whip. The lights vanished and the winds faded, and Harry slumped into
Severus’ chest.

Fearing the worst, Severus clutched Harry tight and cried mentally, “Harry!”

“I’m okay, Verus. Just … damn. That was hard.”

Severus let slip a broken sigh and nuzzled Harry’s hair. “Merlin. I was frightened.”

“I’m sorry, love. The spell is gone now, and Hermione’s core looks good. Brighter than when I started, actually.”

“She is clear,” said Severus out loud, his relief palpable.

“Thank Merlin,” Bill said in a wavering voice, and Severus realised the man had been just as terrified for Harry. After a battle like that, there was no way the curse breaker didn’t know how close they had come to losing him.

Severus gave Bill a wan smile. “We’re all right. Only tired.”

“Can’t say I blame you.” Bill patted Hermione’s shoulder. “How about you test things with a levitation charm? Not too much power, though. Don’t want to draw any more attention to this place than we already have.”

“R-right.”

Nervously, Hermione attempted a levitation spell on a piece of broken wood. It floated a yard off the ground.

“Merlin,” she said with a gasp. “I only meant to raise it an inch or two.” Her expression turned stormy. “Maybe that spell wasn’t just a tracker.”

Harry frowned at his friend. “What do you me—”

Severus clapped his hand over Harry’s mouth. “Not until the last spell is cleared.”

Harry winced. “R-right. Well, go ahead then, Professor.”

Severus rubbed the young mage’s shoulder in a silent show of approval. Bill’s eyes glowed orange-red from the start this time, and Harry called the lights to surround Ron.

The redhead went stock still and pale as a sheet. “W-what is that?”

“Magic,” Severus said tersely. It was taking all his effort just to hold Harry back. “We need … more grounders. This one is more powerful. Anchor to my core and fight against the pull as hard as you can.” He pointed to Harry to show they were actually meant to anchor to him, not Severus.

Charlie added his power to the anchors, then Arthur, then Minerva, then Molly, Hermione, the twins, and Fleur—and finally, after an intense struggle, the spell broke.

Harry panted and flopped back into Severus. “It’s gone, Verus. That one was … much stronger. I need rest. And a whiskey. That was utterly terrifying.”

“You are finished now except for talking, love. Well done.” Severus leaned down and lifted Harry into his arms. “Ron is clear, but the effort has exhausted Harry.”

“And now that it’s safe to speak, or at least relatively so,” said a grim-faced Bill, “Hermione’s right.
Those weren’t simple trackers. They had a tracking element woven in, but only because those spells had a link to the caster. They were core leeching spells, some of the darkest, most dangerous magic on the planet.”

A general outcry arose in the shack. Minerva went ghost-white and dashed to Harry’s side. “Are you well, Harry?”

He nodded. “Just a … a little wobbly. It took a lot of power—especially on Ron. His spell was much harder to break.”

Molly choked out, “But … why?”

Fury flashed hot in Severus’ chest. “I expect the bastard who did this thought Hermione’s intelligence would make a stronger drain more obvious, and that they could get away with pulling more power from Ron.”

Ron growled. “So he figured me for a village idiot, hmm?”

Severus winced. “Ah … that is not what I meant. I—”

Ron shook his head. “Sorry, Severus. I’m not angry with you. It’s true—Hermione is brilliant. My intelligence lies outside of schoolwork for the most part, so I guess I did make for the obvious fall guy.” He shook his head. “I’d best be careful with the levitation charm.”

“Yes,” said a livid Bill. “Your drain was terrible. Use the smallest amount of power you can manage.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “Right.”

He cast a levitation charm on the same piece of wood Hermione had used. Despite Ron using a tiny motion, barely whispering the spell, and making an obvious effort to control his power level, the wood shot up so fast, it burst through the roof. Ron dropped the spell in surprise and the wood clattered down the side of the building.

“Dear gods,” he breathed. “I barely cast at all!”

“Well,” said a furious Arthur, “I believe it’s safe to say your drain was immense, Ron. I’ll kill the monster who did this to my children.”

“I’ll help,” said Molly, her eyes blazing. “But who would do this? Who could do this?”

Severus fixed her with a piercing stare. “Molly, there is only one person capable of this. Who has the motive to track Harry, Ron, and Hermione, the immense power required to place dark draining spells, and has been in long-term proximity with all three since their coming of age, save only Harry?”

She frowned. “I … I don’t know.”

Harry sighed. “Let’s just talk about it at the house, all right? The longer we stay here, the more we risk getting caught.”

Severus tugged his soul-bond closer. “Are you able to stand, love?”

“I think so. I feel a bit better now.”

“Good.” Severus set Harry on his feet, helping the mage to lean against him, and took Kreacher’s
hand. “Everyone, take hold of an elf or each other.” The group shuffled about and joined hands. “Is everybody ready?”

They all called back in the affirmative.

Severus nodded to Kreacher. “Please take us to the Safehouse now, Dawn elves.”

The elves replied, “Yes, Master Severus,” and the strange sucking, compressing feeling passed over Severus again. In a flash, he was standing on solid ground once more, this time in a clean, well-ordered common room with a freshly-washed rug.

Minerva winced and paled and, after making sure Harry was all right, Severus guided her over to an empty sofa and helped her to sit down.

“Should I fetch some catnip from the garden, Minerva?”

She gave him a wry sort of glare. “Not at the moment, Severus. I’ve left my tabby stripes behind today, thank you very much. Now, if you’ll just retract your fangs and tell us what the bloody hell is going on?”

“A moment.” He moved to his soul-bond and guided Harry to sit down beside Bill. “Are you all right, love?”

Harry groaned and flopped into the backrest. “Ugh. Yes, just exhausted.”

Bill patted Harry’s back. “Breaking a dark spell like that twice in a row really takes it out of you, hmm?”

Harry snorted. “I thought it would ‘take it out of me’ literally. If not for you guys, even with my power levels, I don’t even want to think of what would have happened to me. It felt like the pull of a hundred dementors.”

Severus shuddered. “Indeed. And that is not an … inaccurate description of the spell’s backlash.”

Harry paled, let slip a little mewl of distress, and swayed into Bill’s shoulder.

“Dear gods,” said a shaking Ron. “We could have lost you, Harry!”

Molly sniffled into her handkerchief. Beside her, Arthur’s eyes turned hard as flint. “Who did this, Severus? Who cast such horrible dark spells on my children?”

Severus shook his head. “We need the others here first.” He turned to his elves. “Dawn elves, it is time t—”

An apparition and thump into Severus’ legs startled him out of his train of thought. He looked down to find a panicked Rilen cradling his arm against his chest, his steel-blue eyes wide with fright. An angry burn covered half of his face and blood was dripping down his lip.

“Rilen!” Harry rushed to the elf, his own weariness cast aside as if it had never been. “Dear Merlin! What happened?”

Rilen shuddered. “Dumblies is being too mad to watch, great Masters. He’s saying he felt spells break, saying that someone stole his magic, and then things flew everywhere. Rilen is hurt, so I left.”

“So I see.” As Harry cast several healing spells over the little elf, the significance of Rilen’s tale was sinking in for their guests.
“Dumblies?” Minerva’s voice was a breath. “He … he means Dumbledore. Albus did this. He cast dark draining spells on Mister Weasley and Miss Granger.”

The room erupted into shouts of dismay and disbelief.

“That’s … but that simply can’t be,” said a shaking Molly. “Albus might not be perfect, but he would never—I can’t believe ….”

“Believe it,” said a grim Harry. “I have proof of more of his crimes, but you’ll have to wait until everyone’s here and Rilen’s doing better.” He snapped his fingers. “Ferro.”

The healer elf popped in and frowned at Rilen. “I’s thought Masters forbid punishment.”

Harry shook his head. “Rilen didn’t punish himself—he was injured in the line of duty. Can you take care of him, please? It seems wizard magic doesn’t work that well on elves. Or at least mine doesn’t.”

Ferro gave the mage a piercing look as he began healing the injured elf. “You have the power to heal anything. We’s just being different from humans. You need training, but you can learn, if you wants.”

Harry grinned. “Thank you. I definitely want to learn, but later. We have too much going on right now, and you do a fantastic job for us.”

Ferro blushed pink and burst into a flurry of gratitude. Meanwhile, Severus let his soul-bond handle the elves and returned his attention to the shell-shocked Weasleys.

“It’s not true, is it, Severus?” Arthur’s voice was shattered. “Albus wouldn’t betray us so badly, would he?”

Severus nodded, though he wished there hadn’t been a need. “He has done terrible things to me as well, though I hesitate to compare them to a core leech that drained your children’s magical strength and could have torn away their souls.”

Arthur reeled into his shaking wife. “No. Even as terrible as it was, your spying was not so bad as that.”

“I am not speaking of my years as a spy, but as Harry said, we will need to explain later. I’m afraid the entire situation is … well, it’s quite grim.”

Arthur sighed and took a sobbing Molly into his arms. “Grimmer than this?”

Severus nodded.

Arthur shuddered. “Then I suppose you had best hurry and bring the rest of your guests in. I would like to know the truth. The whole truth.” He closed his eyes in grief. “Even if I don’t like it.”

Severus bowed and sent his elves after the rest of the Dawn.
A United Front

Chapter Summary

Warnings: none. Summary: Harry and Severus get their house elves to drag all the potential members of the Dawn together and chaos ensues. Remus FINALLY comes home. Blame Dumbles for keeping him on all those werewolf diplomacy missions.

CHAPTER 28
A UNITED FRONT

Harry watched the elf healer cast spell after spell, searching out what made Ferro’s magic work where his own had failed. He didn’t manage to learn much about elf healing from observing—elf magic was completely different from wizarding magic, after all—but nonetheless, it relieved him to see Rilen’s injuries knitting as the healer worked.

Just as Ferro had Rilen stabilised enough to apparate them to the elves’ private quarters, Dobby came in with Seth floating behind him.

“Hello everyone,” Seth said in a too-bright voice. “How’s the meeting going?”

“We’ve yet to start it,” said Harry. “We’re still waiting on Remus to finish a meeting with the president of the German werewolf commune and King is finishing up with Pettigrew—that’s who was spying on the Order.” A pop sounded and the auror stepped inside, disgust written all over his face—considering who he’d been questioning and why, Harry didn’t blame him. “Oh, never mind, there’s Kingsley. But Dean is—” He got no further before McGonagall’s shocked cry cut him off.

“Potter?” She jerked to her feet with a gasp, wide eyes fixed on Seth. “Gods, who—how? You, you cannot be more than fifteen here.”

“Fourteen,” said Seth, lowering his eyes. “And I’m going by Seth now so we don’t get confused with two Harrys running about all the time.”

“But … but I don’t understand!” McGonagall scanned the portrait up and down and in the corners, as if looking for a signature. “How is he animated? And how was he painted at all? It’s forbidden to paint a student’s portrait.” Her eyes turned steely. “Did Albus do this too?”

Harry shrugged. “Seth is alive because my core is super powerful and made of pure life magic. It has a life force of its own. At least, that’s the best explanation we have. As far as whether Dumbledore sanctioned his painting or not, it wouldn’t surprise me, though I have to admit I can’t see the point. He didn’t gain anything by creating Seth and selling him to an abusive monster. I didn’t even know about him until a couple weeks ago, so it’s not like he could’ve used him against me. It’s just as likely someone painted him off of photos from the Daily Prophet.”

McGonagall winced. “Abusive …?”

Harry cast a nervous look at Seth. “I don’t want to break his confidence. Suffice it to say that we found Seth imprisoned and being abused by the president of the Daily Prophet. We rescued him and put his abuser in Azkaban, assuming Umbridge doesn’t get her off through some made-up loophole.
Kingsley is handling the investigation. Which reminds me, King, I need you to ask Gabblebrook under Veritaserum who painted him.”

Kingsley nodded. “Might take a little finagling to arrange a second interrogation but I’ll get it out of her.”

“Just say there has been a question of abuse or something. There has been.”

“Yes, but if I do that, Seth’s story is going to come out. I thought you said he wasn’t ready to talk about it.”

Seth cringed. “I’m not.”

“Well, then I’ll have to find another way to get it out of her. But don’t you worry. I’ll find out for you, even if I have to polyjuice myself and question her as an operative of some mysterious vigilante organisation making havoc around town.” Kingsley winked.

Harry grinned. “Dumbledore might buy it since he was the one who suggested it in the first place. And Severus and I won’t be in any further Order meetings to take the heat, so go for it if that’s what you need to do. In fact, Gemmy, can you get a uniform made for King within the week?”

Gemmy frowned. “Yous be wanting one like a house elf?”

“No, no. Duelling robes. We do want the Dawn colours and a sun on the front though, a bit like your uniforms but more practical for fighting wizards.”

Gemmy grinned. “I’s can do that, Master Harry sir.”

“Great. Then work on it as you can, please, and give it to me as soon as you’re finished. I’ll make sure King gets it without running into trouble. But stay here for now, okay?”

She bowed. “Yes, Master Harry sir.”

“Thank you.”

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “How could you order her around like that? It’s slavery, Harry.”

Harry turned a fierce glare on her. “You really think I would treat an elf who worked for me like a slave? I asked for her help, not ordered her. Besides that, these elves were all taken either from abusive homes or otherwise bad situations and given as much freedom as Severus and I can offer. I can’t set them free and pay them without hurting them, Hermione, but Severus and I make sure they’re treated as fairly as possible. And before you point to Dobby, he’s the exception, not the rule.”

“But—”

Dobby interrupted her, though he clearly looked uncomfortable about it. “Master Harry is being right. Dobby’s can be freed without dying or getting sick like Winky because he is a quarter goblin. But other house elves cannot.”

Hermione winced. “You’re telling me house elves can’t physically be freed without endangering them?”

Dobby nodded.

Harry gave her a wan smile. “That’s what Ron was trying to tell you all along, Hermione.”
She sighed and buried her head into her hands. “So I really *did* terrorise all the house elves. And for nothing.”

“You were just targeting the wrong group, Hermione,” said Ron. “Go after the wizards who hurt house elves rather than the elves who can’t protect themselves.”

Hermione gave him a wan smile. “And that, right there, is why I love you, Ron.”

Ron blushed and grinned. “Ron Weasley, up and coming master strategist for the Dawn, at your service.”

Harry snorted. “Spend more time with Verus if that’s what you’re aiming for.”

Ron sized the man up. “Care for a game of chess when this is done, Severus?”

Severus chuckled and nodded. “Strategy is more than chess.”

“Sure it is. But it’s a good start, right?”

“Indeed. Very well, Ron. Bring your best game. I do not play easy.”

Ron grinned. “Good! Harry isn’t much challenge.”

“Oi!” Harry laughed. “He’s right though.”

Severus smiled. “I am looking forward to it as well. Among the staff, only Filius and Albus were ever a challenge for me. And as I am cut off from both now, I am afraid my chess skills have been rather woefully underused as of late.”

Hermione laughed. “Ron will definitely fix that. He lives and breathes chess.”

Severus smiled brighter. “As they say in the vernacular, *brilliant*. I have been sorely wanting a good game for some time now.”

Harry pouted. “I played you.”

“I said a *good* game.”

Harry snickered and folded himself into Severus’ arms. “I reckon it’s a good thing I have skills other than my chess game to recommend me.”

Severus tipped Harry’s chin up and kissed him softly. “I did not fall in love with you for your skills.”

Harry smiled and curled up close, content to be held.

“Merlin,” Minerva said and flopped back down onto her couch. “A painted Potter who lives despite all rules of wizarding portraiture, an Albus Dumbledore who is an evil fool, and a Severus Snape who is playing games with Weasleys and cuddling with Harry Potter. This is quite a lot to take in.”

Severus went to her and squeezed her hand. “I suppose it is. Are you all right?”

She sent him a quelling glare. “I’m not decrepit yet, young man. And you’ve some explaining to do about Potter … er, Harry anyway. What changed your heart, Severus? And yours, Harry? You hated Professor Snape quite as much, but the two of you are obviously in love.”

“Yeah,” said Harry with a blush. “We fell in love maybe three days after the Dursley thing. Well, he
did. I was out with my integration illness. But I fell for him three days after I woke up.”

She gaped. “So quickly? After being enemies for so long?”

“Well, seeing Severus tortured and living it with him helped the process along for both of us,” Harry started, blushing harder.

“But we were more than lovers to start with, Minerva.” Severus wrapped Harry in his arms and nuzzled the young man’s hair. “I did not think it possible myself until he took hold of my heart and made it beat again, but we are in love. And we are also soul-bound, which is why this happened so quickly.”

Minerva made a sound somewhere between a cry and a sputter. “You, you’re—Merlin’s bollocks, Severus! Soul-bound? How?”

Harry gaped. “Did you just say ‘bollocks?’ Gods. We really did shock the tartan off of her, didn’t we, love?”

Severus snorted. “And the tabby stripes. Sure you don’t want that catnip, Minerva?”

Minerva huffed. “I think I’d rather a spot of Talisker. A large one.”

Tinny appeared with the drink in hand a second later. “Here you are, Mistress.”

She started, then knocked the drink back in one go and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “Thank you.” The elf moved as if to pour another, but Minerva waved her down. “No, I think I’d best go into this mostly sober. Thank you, however.”

Tinny bowed. “Do any of the other masters want a drink before Tinny puts it away?”

“I’ll have one,” said Harry with a shudder. “Just the one, though. Cheers.” He took a shot and spluttered, choking and pounding his chest. “Gods, that stings! You’re more of a drinker than I gave you credit for, Professor.”

She snorted. “I am Scottish, Harry. What did you expect?”

Severus laughed. “Never try to drink her under the table. Ever. Even for a spy, it does not end well. Not even Hagrid can match her.”

“Hagrid can’t?” Harry bowed, still coughing a bit. “Merlin, that’s amazing. You’ve my respect, Professor.”

She fixed him with a sharp look. “For more than my capacity to outdrink spies and half-giants, I hope?”

Harry laughed. “Of course. You also look great in stripes.”

The others laughed too, but Harry’s mirth faded fast.

“Stripes,” he said, almost to himself, remembering the black marks against Dumbledore’s chest.

“Love?” Severus held Harry close. “What is it?”

He shuddered and pressed a hand to his chest. “Wait until Luna’s here. I … I need to ask her what it means first. Just to be sure.”
Kingsley raised an eyebrow and folded himself onto a sofa opposite Severus. “You’re taking advice from Luna Lovegood? Well. This should be interesting indeed.”

Minerva snorted and shook her head. “It already is, Kingsley. It already is.”

Harry, having first explained about his relationship with Severus to those who did not yet know, waited in said man’s lap for Kreacher to return. Everyone had arrived except Remus and Dean. Dean was finishing up a Muggle lesson and Remus was still talking to the leader of a German werewolf commune. Kreacher hadn’t thought it safe or wise to interrupt his meeting, though he had reported to Harry that it didn’t seem to be going well for their werewolf.

Harry wasn’t surprised. As he had thought, the communes didn’t want to ally themselves with people who had no intention of doing anything about the terrible laws against their kind. Since Remus couldn’t prove or promise their conditions would be any better under the Light’s leadership, they had no intention of risking their lives to fight a battle that didn’t even touch their lands. Harry couldn’t blame them for being reticent. For non-British weres, it simply wasn’t worth the risk.

Soon, that would change. Once the werewolves knew they had someone with power who wanted to change their laws—once they saw Remus as a leader of this faction, verifiable proof that the other leaders meant what they said—they’d come in droves. And after them, other magical races would soon pour in.

Harry gripped Severus’ arm as he saw it happening, saw the werewolves coming to them in his mind. A huge group of them stood in their own town centre under a waxing gibbous moon, wondering where they were to stay when their change came over them, especially since Severus didn’t have enough time to make Wolfsbane for everyone.

“Shite!” Harry reeled and flopped into Severus’ shoulder as the vision released him. “Verus.”

Severus caught Harry onto his chest and gave his soul-bond a fearful look. “Harry? What’s the matter?”

“Saw it. First vision unrelated to Riddle.”

Severus gasped. “Merlin. What did you see, love?”

“Werewolves. Hundreds of them. We don’t have enough time to make Wolfsbane for that lot even if you do find people skilled enough to help you brew it. We need a safe place for them to change without Wolfsbane until we can get enough people trained to make it for over two or three hundred weres. Maybe more—I’m guessing by the size of the crowd I saw.”

Severus winced. “Merlin indeed.” He rubbed his lip and thought. “We will need to verify this with Remus, but I believe werewolves, when with their pack or other weres, are less violent than when they are alone. Perhaps if we had a large enough warehouse for them—”

Harry snorted. “A warehouse, you mean?”

Severus chuckled. “Yes, precisely. We could ask the wolfsbane-altered weres to guard the entrances from the inside and put up anti-werewolf wards to keep the lot in until morning. We would still need to make sure the building is as secure as we can get it, however. Wards can fail, and even if they
don’t, they will still hurt the werewolf who runs into them.”

“Two layers of wards then,” Harry said with a nod. “An anti-were ward right in the building’s walls so it won’t hurt the weres unless they really try to escape, and a larger, more powerful containment ward just outside that. Maybe an anti-scent ward to keep them from going mad with the smell of humans so close. Think that would work?”

Severus nodded. “As I said, we will need to discuss it with Remus later, but yes. I believe that will do. Once the meeting is over, we will need to send our elves out to look for our future ‘werehouse.’”

“Yeah. That’s good.”

With a loud pop, Dean apparated in with Winky. He did an almost comical double-take at the sight of so many people waiting for him, and a second at the sight of Harry ensconced comfortably in Severus’ arms.

“Merlin! When did that happen, Harry?”

Harry snickered. “Well, you took it better than Ron.”

The redhead called back, “Oi! It was … a bit of a shock, mate.”

“Well, yeah,” Dean said, rubbing his head. “But then, you’ve always had a thing for snarky, intelligent guys.”

Harry blinked. “I have?”


Harry smirked. “That was Severus. He’s the half-blood Prince.”

Dean froze, then burst into laughter. “So you got your prince in the end, eh?”

Harry laughed. “I suppose I did.” He kissed Severus’ cheek and pulled the man’s arms tighter around his waist. “He got me too.”

“And I am content.” Severus returned Harry’s affection with a soft kiss against his soul-bond’s temple.

Dean smiled and sat beside them on the sofa. “How did this happen? Didn’t you two hate each other last year, sir?”

Severus shook his head. “Not quite. We were still … adversarial, but I had long since begun to see Harry as a mature, brave boy and had come to respect him. I am afraid my position did not allow for kindness to him, but to be honest, I had not yet overcome my grudges with the past until recently.”

Dean frowned. “What changed?”

Harry squeezed Severus’ hands, knowing this part of the discussion troubled him. “Well, you saw the second Daily Prophet article about Severus, right? How he was a spy for the Order and Riddle tortured him almost to death for it, right?”

Dean nodded.

“And you know I’ve been having visions of Riddle for years?”
Dean paled. “Oh god. You saw it?”

Harry shook his head grimly. “I lived it. Through Severus’ eyes. We were there, together, the entire time. And it … bonded us. In more ways than one. Our souls are linked now, forever. And after living through that together—there was no room for hatred any longer. Severus came to see me as the person I really am, and I saw underneath his masks to the brave, lovely man underneath. We fell in love not long after my escape from the Dursleys forced us into hiding together.”

Dean let out a shaky breath. “Merlin, Harry. I can’t … that’s beautiful and terrible at once. But I’m happy for you. You too, sir. I reckon you’ve both been alone too long.”

Harry gave him a blinding smile. “Thanks, mate.”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s shoulder, and the mage knew Severus was overcome at this display of unconditional acceptance. He didn’t bring attention to his soul-bond’s uncharacteristic loss of control, but simply held Severus’ arms as tightly as he could and stroked whatever skin he could reach, hoping his touch would ground the man.

“Thank you,” Severus whispered after a long moment spent trembling against Harry’s back. “I … thank you, Mister Thomas.”

Dean smiled. “Dean. If you’re going to be with Harry forever, well, I reckon you ought to be calling his friends by their first names. Well, when we’re not in class, I suppose. You’ve permission with me anyway.”

Severus clutched Harry closer. “I am no longer a professor, so you will not have me in class again. And you may call me Severus, if you wish.”

Dean offered a hand. “Nice to meet you on equal ground then, Severus.”

Severus shook Dean’s hand and murmured, “Likewise.”

Harry beamed. “That’s great, you two. Thanks, Dean. For being so good about all this.”

Dean shrugged. “I’m your friend. It’d be pretty mean of me to hold a grudge when it’s clear he’s trying to put the past behind him.”

Severus’ breath hitched. “Y-yes. I am. I do apologise for the way I treated you, Dean. You were never a poor potions student. I ….”

Dean shook his head. “It’s all right. We’re going to start over, okay?”

Severus smiled, though Harry felt him shaking. “Yes. A fresh start is … good.”

Blinking back tears, Harry mouthed “Thank you” to Dean.

Dean just smirked. “Well, now that I’ve seen this … a spy painting, Harry? Really?”

Harry laughed and gave him a sheepish shrug. “Sorry, mate. I was only trying to protect us all. Didn’t know you’d take us being together so well.”

“It’s not a problem. I’d probably have done something similar in your place.”

Harry smiled. “Thanks. You brought Little Sev’s photo, right?”

Dean took the picture from a folded up piece of parchment in his lapel pocket. “He’s here. Why?”
Harry cupped the photo and gave Dean a sharp look. “Treat him better than that. He’s already been through hell.”

Dean gave Harry a bemused look, but nodded. “All right. How should I transport him, though? If I just carry him around, it’s bound to bend the photo or otherwise damage it. I was only trying to keep him safe.”

Harry’s cheeks reddened. “Oh. Well, you have a point there. I just, I thought he might have been scared in your pocket like that.”

“Perhaps we can give him a new frame to protect him, Harry,” said Severus in a soft voice, “or you could alter the photo itself to make it withstand wear and tear.”

Harry considered it. “Hmm. I’d rather make the photo stronger. That way he’s not trapped behind glass all the time.” He closed his eyes, seeking the magic of the photo, and gasped as violet-edged emerald flared to life all throughout the small square of plastic. A white human-shaped figure stood with one arm over his chest, the light pulsing like a heartbeat.

“Oh Merlin.” Harry whispered in his soul-bond’s ear. “Verus … little Sev has the same life-force Seth does. He’s a white shape in the picture—he’s alive.”

Severus paled and reeled into Harry. “H-how? Seth has your life core, but how is Little Sev alive?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe your Mum’s love had more power than we realised.”

Severus’ breath hitched and he buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. Harry held him as best as he could, his chest aching at the feel of tears wetting his back.

“It’s okay, Severus. Well, not okay, but at least we have Little Sev now, right? That makes it a little better, doesn’t it?”

Severus kissed Harry’s shoulder and held him tight. “Go on with your work, love. I am simply … overcome. I miss her terribly.”

Little Sev mouthed, “So do I.”

Harry gave the photo a sad smile. “I understand, sweetheart. Something similar happened to my mum, and while I was too young to remember it or her, I see it happen every time a dementor comes close. And they’re breeding now, so that happens a lot more often than you’d think.”

Little Sev shuddered.

“Yes, exactly.” Harry shook himself and refocused his energy on Little Sev’s magic and life force. “Merlin, your core is lovely, sweetheart.”

A pinkish-red light swirled around Little Sev’s chest and face. It looked a little bit like the pink specks he had seen when he kissed Severus that morning, and Harry wondered if Little Sev had come to care about him so soon. He hoped so. The little photo boy meant more to him by the moment. Harry was beginning to feel about Little Sev much the way he imagined Severus felt for Seth.

‘Maybe I will have a son of my own soon.’ The idea left his heart aching with hope. Someday, he hoped it would happen. For the moment, however, he needed to protect his little boy if he wanted him to survive long enough for Harry’s hopes to become reality.
Smiling to himself, he passed waves of powerful magic into the photo, making it as firm and unbending as stone, protecting it from breakage, fire, spills, smudges, and anything else he could think of, and creating a strong shield against the oils in skin.

“There,” he panted after he’d finished. “He’s as safe as I can make him. It should be okay to carry him about without a frame now, Dean, but if you have to take him up on a broom or something, it’s probably best to still keep him in your pocket until you get to where you’re going. Just don’t carry him about in the dark too often. Little Sev—he’s much more alive than your typical wizarding photo. He has a proper memory and emotions and everything. We don’t yet know the extent of his abilities, but he’s more than just a picture.”

Dean nodded and leaned forwards to look at the photo in Harry’s hands. “How did you make his photo tough like that? You didn’t say a spell.”

Harry blushed. “Um, I made the spell up myself, I suppose, going by my intent.”

Dean reeled back. “You … made a spell up—on the spot—with intent?”

Harry blushed harder. “Y-yeah. Um, I’ve changed a lot since becoming an adult. You’ll have to wait until Remus is here before I can explain.”

“Merlin. That’s … Merlin.”

Severus gave a wry snort. “Exactly.”

Dean frowned. “What?”

Harry shot Severus a look. “Wait until they’re all here, Verus.”

Severus did not look at all repentant. “Right.”

Harry shook his head at his soul-bond and returned his attention to the photo. Little Sev gave him a shy smile and moved to the edge of the Polaroid frame, leaning against Harry’s thumb. Harry tapped the photo with his wand gently, hoping the same spell he had used to give Seth his sense of touch would work on Little Sev. He covered his fingers with a bit of shielding, just in case his protective spells weren’t enough to prevent smearing, and brushed the tip of his thumb down Little Sev’s hair. The young man reeled and reached for Harry’s fingertip, sudden tears spilling down his face.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Harry murmured. “You feel that?”

Little Sev sobbed and nodded, desperately burying his face in Harry’s thumb. It felt strange, having such a tiny boy with his face pressed into Harry’s finger, but sweet, too.

“I’m here,” he said in a soft voice. “Seth can feel touch, too. Once we get you painted, you’ll be okay. We’ll figure out how to animate you and get you transferred, and then you can be with Seth whenever you’re lonely. Or with Severus and myself. I promise.”

Severus pressed his face harder against Harry’s skin and wept. Like with Seth, the photo boy’s tears wet Harry’s fingertip, stunning the young mage.

“Oh Merlin. Severus—my Severus. Look.” Harry moved his thumb away and revealed the tiny drops of wetness gathered at the tip.

Severus gasped and pulled his hand close. “Real?”
Harry nodded. “He can cry, just like Seth. There’s some kind of strange magic about them both.”

Little Sev looked up at them, still sniffling, his expression heartbreaking in its loneliness and utterly bemused at once. Harry wiped the water from his fingers and resumed stroking the boy’s hair.

“Ssh. I’m here, little one. We’re just a bit surprised because your tears are real.”

Little Sev gasped and mouthed, “How?”

The real Severus shook his head. “We do not know. Seth is also capable of it. We are still investigating the cause.”

Luna gave them a dreamy smile. “Anyone with a soul can cry, you know. Just like they can love.”

Harry frowned. “But photos and portraits?”

Luna cocked her head as if she didn’t understand the question. “Why should that matter?”

Harry gave Severus a bemused look. Severus shrugged and returned his attention to the photo.

Severus’ mental voice echoed in Harry’s mind. “Harry, he needs you.”

Harry turned back to the photo and caught his breath at the sight of the tiny boy crying unabashedly within his frame. “Oh, Little Sev, ssh. I’m here.” He stroked the boy’s hair as gently as he could and hoped it soothed the child’s broken heart. “It’s going to be all right now. You’re home.”

Little Sev buried his face against Harry’s thumb and wept hard.

“Harry?” Seth’s voice was small and afraid. “Is Little Sev okay?”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “I think so. He’s just … well, he’s been alone a long time. It must be overwhelming to feel touch after going so many years without it.”

“Can I see him?”

Severus shook his head. “Give him time to collect himself, love. He would prefer to be calm when you meet for the first time, I think.”

Dean raised an eyebrow at the term of endearment but said nothing, obviously choosing to wait and see rather than interrupt when both the painting and photo were in such need. Harry sent him a reassuring smile.

“A-all right,” Seth said, but his expression was pained. Severus gently set Harry off his lap and moved to gather Seth into his arms.

“It’s going to be all right, little one. We have Little Sev’s photo and Thom—Dean is here. It will not be much longer now.”

“I don’t want to be alone anymore, Da,” Seth said, his voice broken.

“I know, child. I know.”

Dean’s eyebrows flew up again, but his expression softened as Severus soothed the painting with gentle love. He whispered to Harry, “Da?”

Harry nodded. “Seth considers me his brother and Severus his father, and Severus loves him as a
son. It’s a bit of a complicated relationship, but it works for us.” He gave the photo a sad smile. “I hope Little Sev can find his place in our family soon. I hope ….” He sighed and left his sentence unfinished, figuring Little Sev was overwhelmed enough and probably wanted his own mother rather than a new father. Still, Harry could dream.

Dean poked his head over Harry’s shoulder and winced at the photo-boy’s tears. “Jesus. Poor little guy. I never thought about it, but they must be so lonely.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think it applies to normal photos so much. They only have about five minutes of memory time, so they can’t carry on long-term hurts really. Portraits are a bit different, but their memories are usually … limited. Not so much with Seth and Little Sev. Their memories are just the same as ours.”

Dean nodded. “In that case, how’d you fix the photo so he can feel you? If he wants, maybe I can—you know, while I’m working. Just so he’s not so entirely alone.”

Harry shrugged. “It should be permanent.”

Hermione sat beside Harry and watched him care for Little Sev, obviously intrigued. “Where did you find a spell to make him feel touch, Harry? I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

Harry blushed. “Um, I didn’t find it. I just kind of made the spell with intent like before. It worked with Seth, so I reckoned it might work for Little Sev, too.”

Hermione frowned. “You are going to tell us how you’re doing that, aren’t you?”

Harry nodded. “As soon as Remus is here, we’ll explain everything. I don’t want to go into it a hundred times.” He brushed Little Sev’s hair with a gentle fingertip. “Ssh. It’s all right now, sweetheart.”

“Do you just wanna …?” Dean waved to the photo. “I mean, it looks like he needs you.”

Harry smiled sadly. “I’ll look after him, yes.”

Dean nodded and sat with Kingsley. Severus brought Seth back to the sofa, still holding the portrait against his chest, and Harry returned to his former perch on his soul-bond’s lap. He sat astride Severus this time so as not to squish Seth and cradled the photo close to his heart.

“We’re with you, boys,” said Harry softly. “It’s going to be okay.”

Severus reached around the portrait to comfort the photo. Harry caught his wrist first and applied protective magic to his fingertips.

“Now you can touch him. I have a spell on the photo, but I’d rather test it with one that’s not so important first, just in case it’s not enough to protect him.”

Severus nodded and gently traced his fingertip down Little Sev’s face. “Have you thought of a name yet, little one?”

Little Sev wiped his eyes and gave them a bright grin. He nodded and went to his tree. With intense concentration, the boy in the photo carved into the tree with wandless magic.

“Merlin,” Harry murmured. “You were powerful even as a child, Severus.”

The man chuckled. “Watch.”
Harry nodded and traced the line of Little Sev’s finger as he wrote his new name for the first time. After a while, the boy stepped aside and waved to the tree. Harry strained to read the small letters.

“Keiran?” Little Sev grinned and nodded, and Harry smiled at his enthusiasm. “That’s a lovely name, sweetheart.”

Severus laid a gentle fingertip against the photo’s chest. “Keiran it is, then.” He raised his voice to address the rest of the group. “Everyone, Little Sev—the photo here—he has decided on a new name so he is not constantly being confused with myself. He is to be addressed as Keiran Snape from here on out.”

‘Keiran’ gave them a tired smile and rubbed his face against Harry’s thumb.

Severus kissed Harry’s cheek and smiled over the mage’s shoulder. “Keiran, would you like to meet Seth now? He greatly wishes to see you.”

Keiran shivered, but gave them a hesitant nod. He blushed hard and trembled all over as Severus turned the portrait to face the photo. Severus set Seth against Harry’s thigh and Harry held the photo so they could see each other.

“There you are, boys,” said Severus with a smile. “Seth Potter, this is Keiran Snape. Keiran, this is Seth.”

Seth gave the photo a tearful smile and pressed as close to the edge of his portrait as he could. His cheeks were red, too. “Hello, Keiran. Nice to meet you.”

Keiran gave him a stricken look and mouthed, “Can’t speak.”

Seth nodded. “That’s okay. Neither could I for several years. I learned a lot of nonverbal communication during that time too, so I might be able to understand you anyway.”

Keiran’s eyes widened and his smile was bright. “Really?”

“Yeah. Talk to me about something. We’ll see what we can do.”

Keiran grinned and talked to Seth through a mix of gestures and mouthed words. Harry couldn’t follow everything, but it seemed Seth caught most of it, and sometimes the boy slipped into nonverbal speech himself. After a while, Harry set the photo to hover at its current height and slipped his hand into Severus’ instead, thrilled to see the boys getting on so well. Watching them connect despite the obstacles was brilliant in its own right, even if Harry didn’t always know what they were saying.

“Hmm, lovely, isn’t it,” said Severus softly.

“Yes.” Harry kissed Severus’ cheeks. “I hope they can be together soon.”

“So do I.”

Dean sat next to Harry again. “I’ll set up camp here tonight if you want. That way I can get started on Keiran’s portrait first thing.”

Harry grinned. “Sounds great! We actually set up a studio for you already, so you just need to move your things in. Clothes and such. We already made up a room for you above the shop. I mean, it’s not the most spacious, but maybe we can add on to the shop soon if you’d like. There’s a couple of extra rooms too, enough room for your family when they visit, if you want. Or just Seamus. Only be
careful what you tell him about the place until he’s protected, that is, if he decides to join. You know how he likes to gossip.”

“That I do.” Dean grinned and clapped Harry’s shoulder. “But Merlin, Harry! A shop of my own for my artwork? That’s brilliant, mate. I’ll leave Keiran with you once we’re done here and move in right away. If everything goes well, I should be able to start his painting first thing tomorrow morning.”

Keiran blinked happy tears down his face and mouthed, “Thank you.”

Harry gently brushed his tears away. “Not much longer, Keiran.”

The boy smiled and rubbed his face against Harry’s fingertip.

“I’m happy to he—” Dean started, but Kreacher popped in with Remus just then, bowing to Harry once the stunned werewolf had regained his feet.

“Master Harry Potter, that is everyone you requested.” The elf hesitated. “Should we elves return to our work now?”

Remus squeaked out, “Harry? Severus?”

Harry gave his pseudo-godfather a hesitantly smile and conjured a long, elf-height sofa. “Yes, Remus. Severus. Kreacher, stay. Everyone’s trackers have been removed prior to coming here, right?”

Kreacher nodded. “Master Lupin had a core leech on him as well. Kreacher was able to remove it, but I is being tired now, Master.”

Remus paled. “That was a core leech?”

Harry nodded. “I removed one from Ron and Hermione earlier too.” With a sigh, he snapped his fingers and summoned the rest of their elf contingent. “Kreacher, go on and sit if you’re tired. I know removing those other leeches really took it out of me. The rest of our Dawn and Prince elves, Rilen is too injured to attend the meeting today and Ferro is looking after him, but the rest of you elves sit and join in, okay? You may have points to offer that we humans wouldn’t have considered. If you think of something, please do speak up.”

Kreacher clutched at his locket. “M-Master would be considering us as advisors?”

Harry smiled and patted the elf’s shoulder. “Yes. I have told you a thousand times you’re family. Now, come and help us plan—once you’re feeling better, of course.”

Kreacher wiped his eyes with a clean handkerchief—amazing how love had changed the barmy old elf—and hesitantly sat on the elf-couch, caressing its arm as if he had never rested upon anything so soft. Harry smiled sadly—probably, he never had. The other elves followed in a daze, looking a bit lost.

“It’s all right, you lot,” Harry encouraged them. “I made it for you. Go ahead and use it.”

Dobby grinned, grabbed Gemmy’s hand, and dashed to the sofa. He plopped upon the cushions, pulling a shocked Gemmy with him, and settled in a couple spaces from Kreacher. Gemmy winced, as if expecting a reprimand, but when none came, she slowly relaxed. The other elves filled in.

Once they were settled, Harry extricated himself from Severus and the boys and ran to give his pseudo-godfather a hug. “Remus! I’ve really missed you.”
“I’ve missed more than just you apparently.” Remus gave Severus a pointed look. “Mind explaining that?”

Harry grinned. “Oh. Severus and I are in love.” He went on to tell their story again and hoped it was the last time, at least for the day. “He’s really good to me, Remus, so please don’t bring out Moony on him. He’s already been through enough.”

Remus sighed. “I don’t think this is why you had Kreacher bring me, is it? Not with so many present.”

“No. This is a council of war, Remus. Please sit down and Severus and I will explain.”

“All right.” Remus went to Severus and offered his hand. “I consider Harry a son, or as close as I have had until now. Since it seems we’ll be in closer contact from now on, I would like to offer you a truce, and my friendship if you’ll take it.”

Severus stood and moved to the werewolf, but forgiveness was not on the table. His eyes were hard as he stared Remus down, and Harry prayed they would not have it out right then and there.

“Severus,” Harry murmured, his voice a plea.

Severus gave Harry a short nod and kept his voice quiet, barely above a whisper. “I have not forgotten what you did to me, Lupin, or rather what you failed to do, in school.”

Remus looked between the gathered people, all staring openly at the confrontation, and kept his reply quiet as well. “For Merlin’s sake, Severus. I couldn’t help it. I wasn’t in my right mind when Sirius tricked you into going in the shack. I couldn’t have stopped him.”

Severus’ eyes narrowed. “Not seventh form. Fifth.”

Remus went ashen and lowered his head. “Oh. I ….” He looked to Harry and squared his shoulders. “No, you’re right, Severus. I can’t forget it, either, nor can I forgive myself. It was as bad as my parents ever did to me.”

Severus and Harry sucked in a sharp breath as one.

“That was why I froze—did you realise?” Remus wrapped his arms around his chest. “I was reliving my own pain. I … I couldn’t move, but it’s no excuse. All I can do is apologize and promise I will never stand by and let you suffer again. I’m so sorry.”

Severus paled further with every word from Remus’ mouth. “Your family molested you?”

Remus nodded.

“Remus …. .”

The werewolf gave Harry a sad smile and lowered his head. “They were good parents at first—until Greyback. After that day ….” He shuddered. “They … changed. They hated me. Wanted to humiliate and hurt me as much as possible. They were trying to shock the werewolf out of me—that’s what they said anyway.”

“Oh gods, Remus!” Harry could barely speak for horror.

Remus sighed. “Do you hate me, cub?”

“No! Of course not. I just … I never knew.”
Remus shook his head. “No one did. I couldn’t even tell James and Sirius—it was the one thing I was never able to tell them. Then that day, they became what I was most afraid of, and I just couldn’t believe they would do it to you, what my father did to me.”

Tears hung on Harry’s lashes, but for Remus’ and Severus’ sake, he refused to let them fall. The others couldn’t hear their quiet conversation, but if he let them see his pain, they would want to know what had disturbed Harry so. With effort, he choked back his emotions and forced his voice steady.

“Remus, fuck. I’m so sorry.”

Remus squeezed Harry’s hand. “Ssh. There’s nothing for you to apologise for.” He sighed and turned to Severus again, who was standing stock-still, his mouth slightly open and his eyes wide. “When you warned me away from Dumbledore in your letter, Harry, I remembered that day. The moment I broke free of that nightmare, I ran straight for the headmaster. I told him everything. What my family did to me, what James and Sirius had done to Severus, that he was still hurt and needed help. He said he’d take care of it, but ….”

“But he never did,” Harry said for Severus. “Regulus Black found Severus hours after the fact and took him to the hospital wing.”

Remus shuddered. “I’d heard that later, but I was hoping it was only a rumour. Now I … I know it must be true, because Albus sent me back to that nightmare again and again. He didn’t intervene. He claimed he couldn’t help me because I was a werewolf, but ….”

Harry rubbed his eyes and sniffled, struggling not to cry. “Remus, I … I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, cub.” Remus gave Harry a hug and turned to face the shocked, heartbroken spy. “Severus, I’m sorry. No matter what hell I was going through, it’s no excuse. I just kept staring when I should have saved you. I should have intervened. I’m so sorry.”

Severus flinched. He turned to meet Keirans’s eyes and gave the stricken boy a nod. With a gasp, Harry suddenly remembered where he had heard similar words before.

“I just kept watching … like staring could put them together again.”

His heart bleeding, Harry clutched Severus close and buried his head into the man’s throat. “Oh, Verus.” There was no keeping his tears back this time.

Severus stroked Harry’s hair and shoulders. “I am here, love. It’s all right now.”

Harry nodded and struggled for mastery of his wild emotions. Once he could breathe without sobbing, he discreetly wiped his eyes and turned back to his godfather just in time to see Severus offer Remus his hand.

“Believe it or not, Lupin,” Severus said in a shaky voice, “I do understand how it feels to freeze and know you should have done something, anything, to make it better.” He lifted his eyes to meet Remus’. “We shall start with a truce then, and go from there.”

Remus smiled and shook his hand. “That’s enough for me. Thank you, for giving me a chance.”

Severus could not answer verbally, but he gave the man a short nod before returning to the couch, taking Harry with him. The young man allowed himself to be pulled into his lover’s lap and held tight. Only Harry knew what memories haunted Severus now, and only Harry could help him forget, for a moment.
He whispered in Severus’ ear, “I love you.”

Severus kissed Harry lightly and held him tighter. Remus sat beside them and smiled at his godson.

“I can see that he’s treating you well, cub. Now, will you tell us what’s going on?”

Harry shivered and gathered his courage. “That was the plan.” He shifted off of Severus’ lap, taking the older man’s hand instead. “I need to move, love. Will you be okay?”

Severus rubbed Harry’s hand and whispered, “Stay close to me?”

“Of course.”

Harry held onto Severus and shifted his weight from foot to foot, his free hand rubbing nervously down his side. This was it. It was time to show his cards and hope his family trusted him.

“All right.” He raised his voice and faced the crowd. “Listen everyone, I gathered you here today for a lot of reasons, but the first thing you need to understand is that Dumbledore has never been trustworthy. I’ve known since my first year, though it didn’t sink in until much later. And Severus has known since his school years, but this goes back even further than that.” He took a deep breath. “Because of that, because we can’t trust the man to lead the Order—or anything else for that matter—Severus and I have formed a third side of this war. Not a neutral side, but one that neither supports the Light’s hypocrisy nor the evil of the dark. So we’re basically anti-Order, anti-Ministry, and anti-Riddle, but pro-Britain. If that makes any sense.”

Hermione had gone ashen. “Harry … you’re taking them all on?”

Harry rubbed up his hair and frowned. “Well, to put it simply, yes. We are.”

Molly frowned and leaned forward as if she wanted to comfort her wayward pseudo-son—or knock him senseless. “Why? I can understand being angry at Albus—Merlin knows I am—but why are you so intent on leaving the Order itself behind?”

Harry took a deep breath and stood tall despite his terrible fear that his family would abandon him. “Because Dumbledore controls the Order—not leads, controls it—and he’s a monster, Mum. An absolute monster. And he has too much power there regardless.” A gentle brush of Severus’ thumb over Harry’s knuckles helped the younger man gather his wits. “I’ll show you what I mean in a moment.”

“But first,” Severus said, his voice firm, “we need a vow of absolute secrecy from all of you. Nothing spoken of in this room leaves it. We do not speak of this anywhere Albus has access to without checking first for spying devices and spells. We do not discuss it at Hogwarts at all as his spying devices are mostly likely built into the wards. We check for trackers and spying devices every time we or our owls leave Hogwarts or Hogsmeade and before we return here. We don’t reveal the identities of our … members.” His eyes flickered towards the library, where the snakes were waiting. “And we do not speak about the organisation or our secrets with anyone who isn’t sworn into the same vow at all.”

“Right,” said Harry. “If this gets back to Dumbledore, he could destroy us all. Do you agree?”

Molly shared a look with her husband. “Those spells on our children showed us what he’s capable of. We will agree.”

Fred stood. “Family sticks together.”
George stood, too. “If you think Dumbles is evil—”

“—Then I reckon you’ll need some master tricksters—”

“—To prank his arse into the next millennium.”

Molly cried, “George! Language!”

Fred grinned. “Mum! You’re worried about the language—”

George smirked. “—But not our plans to prank the leader of the light?”

Molly put on her sweetest smile. “Have you made any plans yet?”

George rubbed his hair up. “Well, you see, we only—”

“—Heard about it just now, so—”

“—We haven’t had time to—”

“—Come up with a really good plan yet.”

The twins winked. “Give us a week,” they said at once.

Molly smiled wider, and Harry suddenly knew who the twins had inherited their devious streak from. “Well then, I suppose I won’t be able to do anything to stop you. You see, I have no idea what plans you may or may not have, so how could I be expected to intervene? Such a pity.”

“Blimey, Mum,” said a shocked Fred and George at once.

Everyone laughed.

“We’re in,” said the twins to Harry.

Fred started, “Anything that makes Mum—”

“—Give us pranking carte blanche—”

“—Has got to be worth it.”

Harry grinned. “Great. We have plans for you as well. Talk to Severus later.”

Fred and George turned wicked grins on the potions master. “Oh, brother dearest?”

Severus raised an eyebrow and smirked at them. “You called?”

Fred started. “What delightfully cunning plans—”

“—Does the master of deviousness—”

“—Have for his innocent little brothers?”

Severus snorted. “Innocent?”

Harry laughed and waved them on. “Sit down, you great prats. I told you to ask him later.” The twins grinned, and Harry suddenly felt a bit sorry for his soul-bond. “Er, will you be all right, Severus?”
Severus laughed. “I think you meant to ask me if they will leave the meeting unscathed.”

Harry chuckled. “Touché.” He turned to the rest of the group. “Moving on, what about the rest of you? Are you with us or not?” One by one, everyone agreed. “Right. Severus, give the vow please?”

Severus nodded and swore everyone in to secrecy, but not yet into the Dawn. As soon as the light cleared from everyone’s chests, Harry continued.

“Now that it’s safe, I want to reveal the true purpose of meeting here, beyond showing you that Dumbledore isn’t to be trusted.” Harry paced the length of the couch, talking as he went. “This is the refugee house of the Court of the Dawn, the organisation Severus and I have founded. Kingsley and three others who will join us a bit later are already members. We formed this group based on a vision I received as a part of my inheritance.” Harry did not elaborate on why he had learned of the Dawn in a vision, not yet.

Ron piped up with, “You’re a Seer, mate?”

Harry nodded. “Apparently. I received my second non-Riddle vision just today, including the one about the Dawn. But moving on, we set this group up because it’s necessary. Riddle is an evil bastard, and if he wins the war, we’re all doomed. The thing is, we’re in the same boat with Dumbledore, only he’s a bit more subtle about his cruelty. Which is probably worse, come to think of it. Anyway, we’re here because we can’t let either of them rule Britain.”

He stood tall and motioned to himself and Severus. “Welcome to the first official meeting of the Court of the Dawn, assuming you’ll all join us in our fight. Like I told you before, we’re the third side of the war, neither dark nor light, but not neutral either. We’re in it to win, and to do that, I need each and every one of you. Are you with me?”

Ron leapt to his feet. “Hell yes I’m with you, mate.” He ignored his mother’s protest on his language. “We’ve been in this thing together since first year, and nothing is going to change that, you hear me?”

Hermione stood beside Ron. “I’m with you, Harry. Always.”

Harry blinked back tears. “Thank you.”

Molly and Arthur stood. “You have our support as well,” said Arthur.

“And mine,” said a ferocious Minerva. “It’s far past time someone took action to win this war. Twiddling our thumbs and arguing accomplishes nothing.”

Kingsley smiled. “You already have my vow.”

Harry nodded. “And the rest of you?”

One by one, they all stood. Severus swore them into the Dawn, using the same oath as the night before, and when the light over their hearts cleared, Harry grinned and welcomed them.

“Now that you’re sworn in, I need to introduce you to the rest of our members. They need to be here for this meeting.” He motioned for the others to sit. “However, I will stress this now. Severus and I have already tested them—thoroughly. They’re sworn in as well, and they’ve left behind their families, their homes, and their entire lives to embrace the Dawn. So I won’t have you attacking them, do you hear me?”

The others agreed, though they looked puzzled, all except for the three Weasleys who already had an
idea of what was coming.

Ron sighed. “Best get it over with, mate.”

Harry nodded. “I have your support?”

“Of course. I already told Severus I’d help.”

“Good. Then get over here and stand by me.”

Ron obeyed.

“Thanks.” Harry called his elf. “Dobby? Please retrieve the snakes from the library.”

McGonagall’s eyes narrowed. “Snakes?”

Harry glared. “Yes, snakes. Slytherins. They’re a bit outnumbered, as you can see, so I’ll thank you to keep any prejudices to yourself.”

She flinched as if he’d slapped her. “I am not prejudiced, Harry.”

“I certainly hope not.” He turned back to his unsure elf. “Go ahead, Dobby.”

The elf bowed and popped away. Harry stood with his wand at the ready, Severus, Ron, Kingsley, and the Weasley parents at his back. Harry hoped their preventative measures proved unnecessary, but he knew old feuds died hard.

The tread of footsteps sounded on the stairs, and three lanky forms appeared at the bottom of the staircase, standing close together and each shaking from head to toe.

“Mister Malfoy!” Minerva leapt up and turned on Harry. “This is who you trust with our lives, Harry?”

Harry shot her a glare. “He’s already saved mine once since yesterday, so I think I could do worse.”

She paled and sank back into her chair.

Shaking his head at her, Harry turned and motioned to the Slytherins. “Come on, you lot. You’re safe. It’s okay.” His sharp gaze told the others that they had best not prove him wrong.

“Slytherins,” huffed Charlie. “I don’t know why we should work with them.”

“Well, this is going to be a fun meeting,” said Kingsley with a wry smile. “Seems our Gryffindors have forgotten that Severus and I are also Slytherins.”

Charlie turned bright red. “Shite.”

Severus fixed the hot-headed dragon keeper with a fierce glare. “Indeed, brother.”

Harry sighed and decided that, if he could at least end the first meeting of the Dawn without bloodshed, it would be a roaring success.
Severus motioned his former students forward and sheltered them, moving to stand before them, wand drawn and eyes hard. Malfoy gave him a grateful look and pulled the still-recovering Theo behind the man, but Blaise stood his ground beside the head of Slytherin. Severus nodded to the brave boy and stood at Harry’s side.

“Have accepted me into your ranks,” he said in a deceptively soft voice. “Why should these boys be any different?”

“They’re not … they haven’t …” Hermione sighed. “They’re not like you, Severus. You risked everything to help us for years. You’re the bravest man I know. Well, except maybe for Harry.”

Harry shook his head. “He’s braver.”

She smiled. “Well, there you are then. Malfoy’s hiding behind you like the spoiled little prince he is, though I’ll give Nott a pass considering what you said he endured yesterday. Zabini is the only one willing to stand up beside you rather than hiding behind your robes. That doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence.”

Severus snarled, and Hermione paled. “Draco is supporting Theo, as his injuries will allow him to neither fight back nor stand unsupported for long.” To prove his point, he conjured a chaise at his side and motioned Theo to rest upon it. Draco took position before it with his wand out as soon as Theo was resting. His face was pale as the boy didn’t want to fight, but he stood his ground just to spite Granger. Severus acknowledged him with a nod as well.

“Besides that,” said Harry with a fierce look at Hermione, “you tell me Severus gave up everything to help us. Well, so have they. They just turned their backs on their families and lives to help us. Gave up everything they had ever known to serve our cause. Can you say the same? What have you given up? Anything other than your faith in a man who nearly murdered four of us just this morning?”

While the others winced, Draco wheeled around. “What? What did Dumbledore do this time?”

Harry shuddered. “He had a core leech on Hermione, Remus, and Ron. Kreacher broke Remus’ with elf magic and I managed to break the ones on Ron and Hermione, but gods, it was a close thing. Especially with Ron. It took … six of us to break his.”

The Slytherins went white.

“You … broke a core leech?” Theo was shaking. “Without losing your soul? But you’re supposed to use a ritual and twenty powerful wizards and—”

Harry cut him off. “I know, Theo. Well, I didn’t know all that, but I reckoned it was a powerful spell when it tried to suck out my soul for fighting it. I was already anchored to Severus and the rest of our strong warders pitched in to help. Anyway, you know how I did it—I told you about my powers last night. As for the rest of you, I’ll explain once I know we can all get through a meeting without killing each other.”

Ron offered a hand to Draco. “Welcome to the Dawn, Ferret.”

Draco smirked and shook his hand. “Welcome yourself, Weasel.”


Draco raised an eyebrow. “And how would you know I swing your way?”
“Aren’t all you Slytherins opportunists in the sack?”

Molly and Minerva screeched, “Ronald Weasley!” Ron just shrugged and raised an eyebrow at Draco.

Draco choked. “Merlin! Who told you that?”

“Er … Mandy Brockelhurst, I think.”

Draco sniffed. “And that goes to show you hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” He smiled wryly. “We dated a bit in fifth year, but it didn’t last. She wasn’t best pleased with me when it ended and made sure the world knew it.”

Ron grinned. “Pansy, huh?”

“Exactly. She doesn’t know the meaning of the word no. Of course, I couldn’t afford to use it until now. Be sure that I will employ it first chance I get the moment we return to school.”

Ron grinned wickedly. “Can I watch?”

Draco snorted and dissolved into laughter.

Harry gave his friend a shocked grin. “You two are getting on much better than I expected.”

“No reason to fight anymore, is there?” Ron gave Hermione a pointed look. “Not now as we’re on the same side.”

The other Gryffindors blushed.

“Merlin.” Hermione lowered her head, chastened. “He’s right. We should be ashamed of ourselves.”

“It’s all right,” said Harry. “To be honest, I had trouble adjusting, too.” He gave them a sheepish look. “Up until yesterday, Draco and I were still arguing. I reckon I can’t anymore, not after he saved my arse last night.”

“I’ll make sure you remember it too,” said Draco.

Harry snorted. “Never doubted it.” He conjured another sofa and motioned to it. “Sit down, you lot, and feel free to join in. You’re members of the Dawn, too.”

“Thank you,” Theo said to Harry. “I … are you sure, though? They really aren’t happy about this.”

Harry shrugged. “They’ll get over it or get out. I need everyone here to cast the Fidelius to keep us all safe. Otherwise, Dumbledore will have our plans out of the younger group before we’ve even started.”

Draco frowned. “They don’t know Occlumency, then?”

“No.” Harry frowned. “And we should work on correcting that. But first, we just need to get everyone settled.”

“I’ll help teach Occlumency,” Theo said. “I’m a natural at it.”

“I’m not a natural,” said Draco, “but every Slytherin worth his salt is taught it before fifth year. We’ll all help where we can.” He settled by Blaise. “Go on then. We’re ready.”
Harry nodded. “Thanks. We’ll need the help. I’m pants at it too.”

Blaise grinned. “What are friends for?”

Harry blushed a bit and smiled back. “You know, Blaise, you’re all right.”

Blaise laughed and mimed a bow.

Harry chuckled. “Right. Well, now that’s settled, on to business. We have a lot to discuss today and a short time in which to do it.”
Severus stood and moved to Harry’s side. “Now that we are all present, Harry is going to cast a spell to keep us safe from interference and discovery.” He motioned to his partner, and Harry took over with a nod.

“It’s the same spell I used at the Prophet,” said the mage, “only without the hex attached. That way even if Dumbledore tries to get answers from our students, he won’t be able to.”

A moment later, the spell had been cast, the members had settled down, and introductions had been made.

“Now,” said Harry, “I think it’s time to give you lot some explanations. We’ll start with my powers since everyone’s been curious about that today. How many of you have heard the legend of the Seventh Day Seer?”

Everyone but Dean raised a hand.

“Right then,” said Harry. “Ron, do you want to give him the short version?”

Ron gave him a bemused look. “All right, I guess. Well, it’s just a fairy story, really, but it goes like this: in a time when the world is in chaos and darkness shadows light, then a really powerful wizard—a mage—will be born and save us all. Remember your integration illness last spring, mate? Well, the Seventh Day Seer is so named because he’s supposed to have a seven-day integration illness and at the end of it, he’s … he’s a Seer ….” A white-faced redhead turned to stare at Harry, his eyes popping. “No. You’re serious?”

Harry set his jaw. “Go on.”

Ron gulped. “Um … and then at the end of his illness, he’s supposed to make a prophecy about saving the world. Harry … are you …?”

Harry gave him a grim nod, starting off a round of gasps.

“But … but, Harry,” said a shocked Minerva, “your integration illness was only six days. Wasn’t it?”

Harry shook his head. “Started early and ended much later than we said. Severus let you think it was six days to protect me. If Dumbledore knew the truth before we had some kind of support ….”

“He would have made certain Harry did not live long enough to complete his training, or see his
prophecy to fruition,” said Severus.

Everyone in the room went stark white.

“You … I’ll give you that the man is twisted,” said Arthur. “To use such dark spells on my children—it doesn’t bode well for him. But to believe he’d kill Harry? It all seems rather far-fetched.”

Harry shook his head. “It isn’t. Severus, maybe you could tell them what I prophesied? I don’t remember every word.”

“You were so ill, it’s a miracle you remember any of it.” Severus continued, but Remus interrupted.

“Wait just a minute, Severus. The Seventh Day Seer is supposed to be thrice prophesied. As far as I know, there is only one prophecy concerning Harry.”

Severus shook his head. “Including the one from Merlin, there are three. That one, the one Sybil gave twenty years ago, and one given to me by Miss Lovegood in his fourth year predicting Riddle’s return. I am afraid I did not take her quite seriously, and we suffered because of my folly.” He bowed his head and sighed. “I might have stopped it, if I had only been less prideful.”

Harry curled into Severus and held him tight. “Ssh. Even if you had known, there was nothing you could’ve done. She wouldn’t have Seen it otherwise.”

Severus stroked Harry’s hair and let himself be comforted.

Molly gave him a sad smile. “You were going to tell us about his prophecy, Severus?”

“Ah, yes.” Severus cleared his throat and stood tall. “He said: ‘Two duelling lords, two sides of the same coin, plot, scheme, and bleed the world with their cruel machinations. Three knights lead the rebellion to cleanse the world of the lords’ evil.

‘Lonely and overburdened, the White Lion languishes in his cave. The last of his kin, the Red Wolf dwells among the forsaken. Misunderstood and broken, the Prince of Shadow walked the line between both sides until he was left in the night to die, but now he sits in wait, disillusioned and unaware of his true self. Despite their sorrow, they remain strong. No darkness shall survive as long as they still fight. They are the Court of the Dawn, and they are coming.’

Severus fixed Lupin with a fierce look. “I believe you can understand who he is referring to by the Red Wolf and the forsaken?”

Lupin paled. “Me. I am the Red Wolf he spoke of, and the werewolves …”

“Are the forsaken, yes.” Severus touched his soul-bond’s shoulder. “Harry is the White Lion. I am the Prince of Shadow. And this town—Harry inherited it empty—it is called Bàn Leon, which is Gaelic for ‘White Lion.’”

He pressed his hands together and paced. “There is more to the prophecy, however. It goes on to say: ‘They will soon converge. A union of light, blood, nature, and forsaken brings the Dawn. A truce between lion and serpent builds safe quarters for victims and forsaken under abandoned roofs. The Red Wolf’s army arises under the full moon and darkness of night. The love of Light and Shadow heals the great mother’s pain and births a new age. Rejoice, for the Lion comes quickly, bringing Dawn on his heels.’”

Lupin gasped. “My army?”
“The werewolves,” Harry said in a soft voice. “Not just wereis, though. Vampires—that’s the blood part of the prophecy, we think, unless it refers to Seth and Keiran down the road—and Fae, too. Maybe other races. All the creatures the Ministry deems dark but who really aren’t, all those who’ve been hurt because fools like Umbridge fear what they don’t understand. They’re the forsaken. And, given the current political climate, maybe Muggleborns too.”

Dean was shaking hard. “You’re going to build an army of Fae and vampires, Harry? They’ll kill us!”

Severus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I should not be surprised that you do not know better given your class’ track record of Defence teachers.” He shook his head. “Fae harm no one unless they are first harmed. They stay in their woods out of reach of humans as much as possible and only attack if they are intentionally provoked. Vampires have bonded donors who willingly provide them with blood. Or, in lieu of a bonded donor, they are able to use a blood bank for their feeding needs, though it is not as filling or satisfactory. They do not need to ‘hunt,’ as fools would have you believe. And Lupin is proof that werewolves can integrate into society without posing a threat, so long as they take their potion once a month or take measures to restrain their wolf sides during the full moon.”

Harry nodded. “There are always exceptions to every rule, and just like wizards, some beings are evil, but we won’t be taking anyone in who doesn’t first take a magical oath not to harm anyone within the Dawn or under its protection. And we’re already working on safeguards to protect all of our future villagers regardless.”

Dean hesitated. “You … you’re sure about this?”

Harry patted his shoulder. “Of course. You’re our friends and family. We would never endanger you.”

Dean nodded tentatively. “O-okay.”

Severus looked around the room, searching for fear. “Are the rest of you amenable with dealing with supposed ‘dark’ beings for an extended period of time?”

“I don’t mind,” said Ron, “we know it’s all rubbish—look at Remus. But why are you calling them beings and not creatures?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Let’s say, gods forbid, you were to contract lycanthropy in the near future. Would you want to be called a creature, Ron?”

The boy blushed. “I reckon not. But is calling them a ‘being’ much better?”

Harry frowned. “I’m not sure. It seemed less offensive to me. They’re more than us, after all, and I imagine the Fae especially would resent being called humans. Remus?”

Remus shrugged. “I’m fine with it, so long as you’re referring to more than one kind of magical being. You need a catchall term then, but if you’re referring to a single type, it’s best to just use the name of the race itself.”

“Understood.” Severus crossed his arms over his chest. “So are we all in agreement then? I am afraid winning the war will be difficult, perhaps impossible, without the aid and support of the beings.”

“Even if it’s not,” Harry said with a shake of his head, “even if I could do this all on my own—I can’t, but if I could—I still would want to help them. It’s hypocritical to tell the public we’re advocating for a free world for everyone and leave out those like Remus who are human but for one
day a month or who are mostly human except for some extra dietary needs.”

“You will still need to take measures to protect the general public against those who remain a danger to society, Mister Potter,” said Minerva.

“The same is true of dangerous wizards,” said Severus with a shrug.

She nodded. “Just so you understand that protecting the public from monsters such as Greyback or Fingiulio will be more involved than protecting them from the likes of Mulciber.”

Harry gave Severus a bemused look. “Fingiulio?”

“ Legendary dark vampire,” Severus said with a shake of his head. “Quite the demon.”

“Ah. Well, yeah, we’ll have to make sure everyone can get along safely, and it might be difficult at first, but it’s not impossible. So are you with me then?”

Minerva smiled. “I am.”

The rest of the group agreed as well, though Draco looked as uncertain as Dean.

“ Moving on, then,” said Harry. “You’ve all guessed that one of the lords of that prophecy is Riddle. The other is clearly Albus Dumbledore, and both of them will need to be defeated—yes, defeated—as well as the Ministry cleared of corruption before we’re done.”

The group sucked in a breath as one.

Tonks gasped out, “We’re … we’re talking about killing Albus? I don’t know—I can’t really—why would you want to?”

Harry’s eyes hardened. “Because, Tonks, he’s a bloody monster. An absolute horror of a human being.”

Kingsley rubbed his chin and looked between Harry and Severus. “Hmm. Do you have proof of this? Severus has already told me much of it, but I reckon it’ll be good for everyone to hear your evidence.”

“Y-yeah.” Harry flicked his hand and levitated Seth over to his side. “Are you ready to show them, little brother?”

Seth shuddered. “As much as I’ll ever be. On three?”

Harry frowned. “Let me explain a bit first.” He turned to the group. “Seth and I are about to reveal the truth of our childhoods to you—my childhood? Merlin, this is odd.”

He shook himself. “Anyway, the point is that Dumbledore tried to make it out like I was being pampered—that’s what the Slytherin boys believed until yesterday, and it’s what everyone who hasn’t been in a community shower with me believes too. The Order only learned otherwise when Molly and Arthur reported what Ron and the twins found my second year, and again when they learned I had scars. But know this: Dumbledore knew. He knew I would suffer in that home from the moment he put me on their doorstep. And this is only the start of his crimes.”

Kingsley leaned forward onto his knees. “What … happened in your childhood, Harry, Seth?”

Severus stepped between the boys and pressed his hands to theirs. “They were abused. Badly.” He turned to Harry and the portrait. “Do you wish to tell them about it?”
“I will,” Seth whispered. “Harry’s told you what happened, but I’ve never spoken of it at all. And … maybe I should. Maybe it might help me … with other things.”

Severus nodded and pressed his palm to Seth’s. “I am with you.”

Harry pressed his hand to Seth’s on the other side. “So am I.”

Seth gave them a hesitant smile. “T-thanks.” He took a deep breath. “So … well, I guess you know from what Da—Severus—and Harry said that my aunt and uncle didn’t like me. The truth is they hated me. They hated anything magic. They wanted to crush it out of me, so ….”

Severus listened stoically to Seth’s recounting of all the traumas of his past, though inside the man was breaking. Gods, his boys had been through hell. He held Seth’s hand as best as he could and wiped rivers of tears from the youth’s cheeks, wishing he knew how to heal him. And Harry, too. The mage stared straight ahead throughout the entire tale, hardly blinking, but his shaking hands gave away his grief. Severus ached to hold him, but knew Harry needed to be strong at this moment, needed to face this on his own.

Seth’s voice broke on a sob, and he threw himself at Severus so hard, the canvas moved with him and slammed into the older man’s chest. Severus froze for a moment, stunned, then wrapped the painting up in the best proximity of a hug he could offer.

“I am here, little love,” he whispered. “I am here, and I am so proud of you.”

Seth sniffled and lifted his head from Severus’ shoulder. “Y-you are?”

“Yes, Seth. That was very brave. I am proud.”

Seth buried his face in Severus’ shoulder and trembled.

Harry met the older man’s eyes and frowned. Severus shook his head. Seth wouldn’t be able to bear more trauma today.

Harry sighed and turned his back to the group. “What I am … about to show you is what that monster did to us. What Dumbledore knowingly sent us back into every year, just to make his dear little weapon strong. And you should be aware … this isn’t the worst of it.”

Blaise gasped. “Not the worst? Merlin, Harry!”

Harry shuddered and struggled to gather his courage. He could do this. He was a Gryffindor.

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “I am with you.”

With a nod and a deep breath, Harry jerked his tee up his back and over his head, revealing the mess of scars over his shoulders and hips. A chorus of shouts and curses filled the room, and even the house elves wailed in shock at the sight of what their beloved master had endured.

With jerky movements and fast breaths, Harry yanked his shirt back on and stuffed the hem into his jeans. “S-so, that’s what he did to me.”

Molly’s eyes spilled over. “Oh, Harry!”

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Molly’s eyes spilled over. “Oh, Harry!”

Harry made himself small and shivered.

With a sad sigh, Severus folded Harry into his arms beside Seth. “It’s all right, Harry. It’s over.” He kissed Harry’s hair and held him tight. “You did well, my brave love.”
Harry nuzzled his face into Severus’ chest and trembled in his arms.

Over Harry’s head, Severus spoke softly to the rest of the group. “Do not treat him like glass. He has been through hell, yes, but he came through stronger for it. He needs you to treat him the same way you have always done.”

Severus’ hand slid into Harry’s hair, soothing him in gentle strokes. “And before you assume Dumbledore did not know the extent of the abuse, he did. Harry showed him his scars, begged him for mercy, and was still sent back into hell every single year.”

Dean called suddenly, “Harry, Keiran is a wreck. Maybe you ….?”

The photo’s grief jerked Harry out of his own. With a little sob, Harry turned, wiped his face, and floated the photo into his hands. “Hey there, sweetheart. I’m sorry I scared you. It’s all right.” Swallowing his own pain, he stroked the boy’s hair and face and wiped his tears as best as he could for one so small. “I know it hurts, but Seth and I are doing a lot better now. Aren’t we, Seth?”

From Severus’ shoulder, the younger boy replied, “Y-yeah. Yeah, we are.”

Keiran wiped his face and gave Harry a sheepish look.

“It’s okay,” Harry murmured. “You were just hurting for us. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Severus watched Harry care for Keiran, holding the portrait against his shoulder. After a moment, he turned to face the group at large and gauged that they had at least believed Harry’s story so far. That was a start.

He gently set Seth, who had calmed considerably, to levitate beside him again. “Now that the boys have calmed down a bit, let me explain our reasoning for revealing this to you. Harry showed you his past because what Dumbledore has done to Harry is just the start of his crimes. And we thought you might find it easier to believe the rest of our story if you first saw proof of his cruelty on one of your own.”

Arthur winced. “Us. You did this for us.”

Severus nodded. “You have been his staunchest supporters. We thought nothing short of seeing the evidence on your own family would convince you. Of course, at the time we had decided on revealing the truth of Harry’s past, we did not know Albus had placed one of the darkest spells in existence upon your son and his intended.”

“And Remus,” said Harry with a growl. “And I highly doubt he’s the only one.”

“He isn’t,” Luna said with a shake of her hair. “There are many.”

Severus snarled and barely resisted slamming his fist through a wall. “The man has built up his image of invincibility on the backs of others. Who, Miss Lovegood.”

“Oh, do call me Luna. We’re to be friends, you know.”

Severus’ anger abated a bit and he gave the girl a curt nod. “As you wish, Luna.”
“Thank you. It sounds ever so nice in that deep voice of yours.”

Severus’ cheeks flamed. “Merlin.”

The twins snickered. “Told you he has a brilliant voice, Ronniekins,” Fred started.

“Like silk over steel—”

“—Or dark velvet!”

Severus’ ears were burning too. “Dear gods in heaven. Enough, you idiots.”

George grinned. “Oh, please, insult me again, Professor.”

Fred batted his eyelashes. “And one for me!”

Harry thwacked them both in the back of the head. “Cut it out. You’re embarrassing him.” He lowered his voice so only the twins could hear—though Severus picked it up too. “And that is my dark velvet, silk-on-steel voice, understand?”

Fred saluted. “Clear as crystal!”

“Won’t hear a peep out of us.” George zippered his lips.

Fred said in a stage whisper, “We’d rather he do the talking anyway.”

Harry dissolved into laughter. “Gods, you two are hopeless. Severus, I’m sorry for those two idiots.” He moved to his soul-bond’s side and slipped his arm around his waist. “You do look delicious when you blush, though.”

Severus cleared his throat nervously. “H-Harry, please. We have more important matters to discuss than my personal attributes.”

Harry squeezed his waist in apology. “Actually, love, I think we need to talk about them. Not to embarrass you, but to reveal the truth of you now. Especially since we just told them I’m a mage. Seeing you—the real you—might help it sink in. You should be able to be yourself in your home anyway.”

“It helped us understand,” said Molly with a smile.

Ron gave her a scandalised look. “You knew?”

“I wasn’t in constant danger, Ron. You are at that school.” She pursed her lips. “And if this is the truth of its headmaster, I’ve half a mind to withdraw you.”

“Not yet,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “You’ll reveal our cards before we’re ready.”

Molly nodded, but her eyes were worried.

“Though you’re right to worry,” said Harry with a thoughtful frown, “Well, before they go back, I’ll give them all, um, coins. Yes. Emergency galleons that they can use to apparate here—wards or no—in case their lives are in danger.”

She gave him a relieved smile. “Thank you.”

Harry nodded and turned towards his soul-bond. “Well? Are you ready to show the world your real
Severus sighed. “Yes. I think first I should warn our guests. I am … younger than I was. And Harry has removed my scars.”

McGonagall frowned. “Severus, I’m staring at the scar on your cheek. We all are.”

“It’s a glamour,” said Harry. “Cast Finite and see for yourself.”

In a shaky voice, McGonagall cast the required spell and cried out again at the vast change in Severus’ appearance.

“S-Severus! You look the same as when you left Hogwarts!”

He nodded. “I am. Harry took fifteen years from my age and removed every single scar on my body. Even down to this.” He revealed his unmarked forearm, and McGonagall gasped. “Somehow I’m twenty-three years old now, and free of Riddle once and for all.”

Severus found himself the recipient of a sudden bear hug by a weeping Scottish woman and a jubilant English Mediwitch. At his soft cry, Harry stayed close, rubbing Severus’ back under his shirt and cradling Keiran with the other hand. He levitated Seth out of the way, too.

“Oh, Severus,” McGonagall said, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. “Oh, I’m so relieved.”

Severus patted her back awkwardly. “Relieved?”

Poppy squeezed Severus’ shoulder. “Minerva and I worried he would try again to kill you through it. We never knew what stopped it before. Clearly, we were wrong to worry, but I must say I’m relieved it is no longer an issue.”

Severus smiled and lowered his head. “Harry saved me, both times. He fought Riddle off at the end of his vision with me. I think his love neutralized Riddle’s ability to drain me through it. And thank you. I am relieved to be rid of it as well.”

McGonagall nodded and straightened, acting as if she had never revealed the strength of her emotion. “Yes, well, so are we all, but—” She gasped and met his eyes. “Oh, child. The mark was woven into your magic, was it not? You haven’t lost your powers, have you?”

For an answer, Severus turned her tartan robes black with bat-shaped buttons. Harry and the Weasley twins snorted.

“The bat does have a sense of humour, Gred,” said Fred with a grin.

George guffawed. “Good thing he does, Forge, or I’d have something to say about him dating our little brother.”

“For knock it off, you two,” said Harry with a laugh.

“Well,” said a half-amused, half-annoyed McGonagall, “I suppose that is one way to prove your skill, Severus.” She turned her robes back to her red and grey tartan. “Now, I think you had best tell us what you know about Albus.”

He nodded. “First, Miss—ah, Luna, whom do you know of for certain with a core leech?”

“I’m not sure I know everyone,” she said with a dreamy smile, “but Neville has one. His is so bright, I can hardly see his core at all.”
Harry gasped. “You do have mage sight.”

“Yes, of course I do. What did you think I was talking of all this time?”

Harry coughed. “Er, I’m not sure I know. But more to the point, can you train me?”

“You developed it in your inheritance?”

“Yes. Along with the ability to just create magic out of nothing and heal pretty much anything. Theo’s and Draco’s marks are gone now too.”

The boys showed their mark-free forearms for good measure.

Harry turned to his friend. “Who else has a leech, Luna?”

“Seamus Finnegan, Hannah Abbott, Eloise Midgen, Professor Flitwick, and Professor Trelawney.”

Madame Pomfrey. “He has them on professors?”

Harry’s eyes were cold with fury. “One so batty, he thought he could get away with it, I’m sure. Though how he pulled it off against Professor Flitwick is beyond me. The man is tiny, but he has more power in that tiny body than most full-size men.”

Luna chirped, “Oh, I can tell you that too.”

Harry gaped. “You can?”

She nodded. “Professor Flitwick is small because he’s one quarter goblin. Dumbledore wanted his goblin magic, so the leech is only attached to that part of his core. Since Professor Flitwick lives among wizards, he doesn’t use his goblin skills often and so hasn’t noticed the drain.”

Minerva paled. “Dear Merlin. Miss Lovegood, why in the name of Circe have you not reported this sooner?”

She gave Minerva a dreamy smile. “Well, you wouldn’t have believed me. Everyone does seem to think I’m quite mad. I don’t mind, really, but it does make it ever so hard to make people believe what they don’t want to hear.”

The room went silent at her declaration, innocently given and yet so very honest. Every eye except Harry’s was downcast, every face flushed. He grinned at her.

“Besides,” she continued as if she hadn’t noticed the tense atmosphere, “I knew Harry would see it himself eventually. I thought it best to let him discover it on his own rather than setting everyone against the possibility and maybe causing people to die or lose their souls.”

Kingsley stared at her. “So you really are a Seer”

She smiled. “So is Harry now.”

Harry nodded. “Can you help me train it?”

She shook her head sadly. “That isn’t possible. I can help you understand, perhaps, and I can teach you a few skills that come from the Sight, but I can’t teach you to have visions on demand or improve their quality. The Sight is either there or it isn’t. It’s not something you can teach, however hard poor Professor Trelawney tries.”
Ron snickered into his hand and coughed something that sounded mysteriously like: “*Batty old fraud.*”

Luna tittered. “Oh no. She’s not actually a fraud. She does truly have the Sight. It’s only that the core leech has sapped most of her abilities and, well, I think the sherry isn’t doing her any favours either.”

Harry grinned. “Merlin, Lu. I love you.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Oh?"

Harry chuckled and buried his face into Severus’ chest. “Nothing to be jealous over. I most definitely don’t swing her way.”

“Pity,” said Luna with a sigh.

Harry snorted. “You don’t swing my way either!” He blinked and turned, facing the girl. “Wait a minute, how did I know that?”

“Well, because I told you, silly, though you didn’t get it quite right. I meant to say you weren’t my type, not that I didn’t like men in general. Perhaps I put too much power into the fribbet-gibbets.”

Harry blinked. “Um … you didn’t say anything at all, Luna.”

“Through the Sight,” she said with a grin. “That’s one thing I can teach you to do, only with fellow Seers though, so I’m afraid it won’t work with Professor Snape. Keiran is receptive, though.”

Harry looked to the photo. “He *is*? But shouldn’t he just have Severus’ powers?”

Luna frowned. “Well, why would he when his soul is his own?”

“His soul …? But he ….” Harry frowned at the boy, who shrugged. “Lu, sometimes I really just don’t follow you.”

She laughed. “You will in time.”

He nodded. “Right.” Harry started to turn back, then paused. “Luna, with mage sight, do you know what the colours mean?”

She smiled. “Most of them. I’m sure there are plenty I haven’t yet seen.”

Harry looked to his soul-bond. “What do pink specks mean? Around people you love?”

“Ah! Those are amifadas. Love lights.”

Harry blinked. “That’s one of your creatures, isn’t it? I think I’ve heard you speak of them before. You called them fairies.”

“Mm-hmm. Well, they look a bit like tiny fairies to me. And some of the new things I talk about are mage lights, some are spirits, and some are real creatures. Though they’re not all real right now.”

Harry frowned. “Merlin. Luna, I swear, you’re more out of the world than in it.” He shook his head. “Anyway, besides those lights … there are … well, I’ve seen people with black marks on their chests, like stripes. Severus has … a couple. Pettigrew had … probably thirty. I have an idea of what they mean, but I want to ask you for sure.”

Severus froze. “Harry—they … they will think ….”
“We’re going to have to explain some of it anyway, sweetheart,” Harry soothed him. “It’s all right. They know you’re a good man, love.”

Severus stood stock-still, his heart thundering in his chest and his expression carved in stone. Murder marks. Harry was asking about the murder marks. And in a moment, everyone would know.

“Da?” Seth’s voice was soft and reassuring. “It’s okay. I love you and so do Harry and Keiran. It’s going to be okay.”

Severus held his hand against the portrait’s shoulder, needing that calming influence if he was to survive the coming conversation intact.

Harry slipped his arm around Severus’ waist. “It’s okay. I’m here.”

Severus nodded tersely and stared ahead. Harry rubbed his back and nodded to Luna.

“Go ahead. Severus is scared because he’s had to do … terrible things as a spy, and once to protect himself, but we all know he’s a man of honour, right?”

Everyone called back in the affirmative, and Severus relaxed a fraction.

“T-thank you,” he whispered.

Harry rubbed his side gently. “Okay, Luna. Those marks. What do they mean?”

She winced. “They’re terrible things, Harry. They’re tears in a person’s soul. They only happen like that … after a murder.”

Severus closed his eyes and waited for the fallout. Harry rubbed the man’s shoulders gently.

“Severus, should I explain?”

Severus gave him a terse nod.

Harry continued to rub Severus’ shoulders and back as he spoke. “Severus has three marks. One was for his father—who murdered his mother and baby sister right in front of him and then tried to kill Severus. And yes, Dumbledore knew how abusive and dangerous Verus’ father was too.”

“Dear gods,” said Remus, his voice shaky. “And we … you went home to that, and we … shite, Severus. I’m so sorry.”

Severus hesitantly opened his eyes. Everyone was staring at him with expressions of horror, but sympathy filled their eyes, not hatred.

“The second mark was for Charity,” Severus said in a quavering tone. “I did not kill her myself, but neither did I stop her death.”

“You couldn’t, love, not without risking us all.”

Severus lowered his head. “It has always felt like a poor excuse, when she was crying out to me for help and I did nothing.” He spat the last word like it was poison.

Harry soothed a gentle hand over Severus’ chest, tracing directly over the worst of his soul-pain. No doubt, the mage was trying to heal his wounds.

“That’s it, Harry,” Luna said softly. “That’s how to cure it. Love.”
Harry smiled. “I’m working on it. Is it helping?”

“Yes,” Severus murmured. “They do not hurt as much when you touch me like this.”

Harry nodded and traced his hand down a mark across Severus’ breastbone. “Can you tell me what the last one is for?”

Severus winced. “It was … there was a man in the Order many years back, whom Riddle captured and ordered me to kill as a test of my loyalties. The man knew I was a spy and that I had no choice but to kill him or reveal us all. He … he told me not to hate myself for his death and gave me his forgiveness, but … but I have never been able to let it go.”

Harry turned into his soul-bond and nuzzled his chest. The gentle affection eased some of the cold pain there that never quite seemed to abate.

“None of those sound like deaths you had any power to prevent, Severus,” said Arthur. “So you’ll hear no condemnation from me.”

“Nor me.” Molly wiped her eyes and came to him, wrapping him in a hug. “I’m sorry you’ve had to endure so much pain to save us all, dear.”

Severus gasped. “You … you’re sorry for me? But I ….”

“Had no choice. It’s all right. It’s over now. Let Harry heal your heart and try to forgive yourself for what you couldn’t prevent.”

Severus closed his eyes around a surge of tears. “T-thank you.”

Molly patted his cheek and returned to her seat beside Arthur.

“She’s right,” Harry murmured to him. “Forgive yourself, love. You are one man, and in those terrible situations, you couldn’t do anything to help. It’s okay. Let it go now.”

Severus buried his face in Harry’s hair. “I will try, if you will help me.”

“Of course, love.”

With a sigh, Severus stood tall and blinked hard. “Why did you ask about the marks, Harry? Was it to heal me, or did you have another reason?”

Harry’s eyes hardened. “Partially for you, but mostly ….” He shivered. “Severus, can you pull up a memory of mine and project it so everyone can see?”

“I do not know how, love.”

“I can,” said Luna. “Part of the Sight again. That one I can teach you too.”

Harry grinned. “Great. Can you tell me how?”

She smiled. “Of course. Hold the memory you want to show in your mind, right here.” She pointed to the centre of her forehead. “Have you got it?”

Harry stuck out his tongue in concentration, and Severus was hard-pressed not to laugh.

“Er, I think so?”
Luna smiled. “A bit to the left, Harry. Ah, there you are. Now. I want you to picture a window there. A window to the outside world. Good, good. Your magic changed colour—that means you’re doing it right. Now, open that window and imagine your memory floating out like the amifadas do. Nice and softly. Let it form in front of you so we can all see it.”

Harry furrowed his brow, and after a moment, an image of the meeting appeared. At first, it showed Pettigrew in his stolen guise and with a web of black lines on his chest, looking around nervously for an exit.

“Dear gods,” Tonks breathed. “So many ….”


Elphias Doge’s disembodied voice floated to Severus’ ears from somewhere on the left. “Headmaster, this is getting out of hand. You must call an end to this! The boy is delusional, and he is taking good members down with him!”

From a bit closer to centre, the Headmaster’s voice said, “Perhaps you are right, Elphias. Harry, that is en—”

The memory’s focus swerved, taking in glimpses of members of the Order, and settled on Albus’ form. And below the man’s beard, sat a mass of blackness so thick it seethed with malevolence.

The room erupted into chaos, shrieks and cries of disbelief and horror resounding on all sides.

Severus’ breath left him in a rush and he staggered back into his soul-bond. “Dear mother of god,” he choked out.

Harry gave a bitter snort. “Yeah. That’s pretty much what I said.”

It took a shrill whistle from Harry to bring the meeting back into order. He left the image of Dumbledore up a little bit, just so they could not deny what their eyes had seen.

“This magic can’t be fooled. You can’t hide from it. You can’t lie.” He fixed Tonks with a glare, who was chanting over and over again that it just couldn’t be true.

“It is true,” said Luna with a frown. “Dumbledore is an evil, evil man. His soul is cut up into so many pieces—”

“No, no,” Tonks muttered, interrupting her. “It’s … gods, I think I’m going to be sick.”

Remus went to her side and pulled the woman into his lap. “Pet, I know it’s shocking, but you’ve got to calm down. Think of our son, love. He needs you to stay healthy.”

Tonks buried her face in Remus’ shoulder and took several deep breaths. “I’m sorry. I … is it really that bad?”

Harry nodded, though with Tonks’ face hidden, she couldn’t see it. “Yes, it’s that bad. Albus Dumbledore has murdered so many people, I can’t even tell where one mark ends and another begins. He isn’t a kindly old grandpa with lemon drops—he’s an absolute monster.”
His voice dropped into sub-zero temperatures. “And know this right now: I will not stop until he’s dead and all his cronies are removed from power. So if any of you have a problem with that, you had best stand up now. You’ll be Obliviated and sent on your merry way. Of course, if Dumbledore suspects you know something, well, you may just end up being the next tally on his chest, so I’d advise you to think long and hard about it before you go.”

Tonks gave a little squeak of dismay, but did not stand, at least.


Harry nodded. “Sorry. It’s the truth though. Obliviation isn’t perfect. It leaves an obvious hole. And while the Fidelius will protect us, it won’t keep anyone safe who breaks faith with the Dawn. Dumbledore will find the hole eventually, and then … well, I don’t think that person will be alive for long when Dumbledore tries to extract their secrets and fails. Not if he realises it’s something to do with him.”

“Harry is correct,” Severus said in a grim voice. “The situation here is dire. Tonks, will you believe us?”

Tonks sobbed into her hands. “I’ve no choice, do I? Look. Just look at it!”

Remus gave Harry a sharp look, and the mage drew his memories back into his mind and closed the mental window.

“Tonks, it’s gone now,” Harry said in a gentle tone. “But we do need to know if you’re okay.”

“I … I don’t know.”

Kingsley smacked her on the back. “Get over yourself, Tonks! Remus is right about that baby, and for Merlin’s sake, you’re an auror, woman. You know Harry’s telling the truth and we deal with darkness like this every day.”

She sniffled and lifted her head, and Harry winced at the streams of tears running down her face. “Yeah, I know. But it’s just … I can hardly believe it. We all thought he was good.”

Remus wiped her tears away and held her gently, but deferred to Kingsley. Harry hoped the brave auror could get through to her.

“We were wrong,” Kingsley said in a sad voice. “As far wrong as it is possible to be. But panicking and crying over it isn’t going to change the situation, particularly since Dumbledore is a calculating bastard with a tonne of public support.” His voice gentled. “Remember, we have a duty, Tonks, to protect the people first and foremost, over any personal feelings we might have.”

Tonks straightened and wiped her eyes. “You … damn it, I hate it when you’re right, old man.”

Kingsley snorted. “So that’s a yes then? You’ll help us?”

She sighed. “Of course I will. That was never in question. It was only such a shock that I lost my head a bit.”

Harry flushed. He shouldn’t have been so hard on her.

“You could always switch to a new one,” George piped up.
Fred smirked. “It’s a great way to get ahead.”

“It’s the tops!”

Tonks chuckled. “Gods, that was awful, boys.”

“Well, we can’t all grow new heads like you,” said Fred.

“Some of us are stuck with the brains we have.”

Tonks laughed. “Right, right.” She wrinkled her nose, and in an instant, suddenly there were Weasley triplets.

“Dear Merlin, that’s terrifying,” Severus said with a shudder.

Harry could only agree. Two were already akin to a force of nature.

Seth, however, thought it immensely entertaining. “Good one, Tonks!”

She bowed theatrically, stumbling over her robes in the process.

Fred and George sidled up to her and wrapped an arm around each shoulder, making Harry shake his head at the eerie sight.

“Enough of that.” He returned to Severus’ side. “Now, are all of you ready to hear the list of crimes? Do we even need to go through them?”

Draco shook his head. “I don’t need it. It’s plain he’s evil. Even if I didn’t know what the man does to Slytherins, I’d believe it after seeing what Harry showed us.”

“Mate,” said Ron with a shudder, “as much as it hurts, I’m going to have to agree with Ferret here —”

Draco cried, “Watch it, Weasel!”

“— And say we’ve seen and heard enough. It’s plain as day that Dumbledore is as evil as they come. So let’s get down to business. What’s the plan?”

Harry rubbed his hands together. “Let’s get to it then.” He conjured a table and chairs for everyone and invited them to sit down, levitating the photo and portrait to hover beside Severus and himself. “Well, for now, there isn’t a solid plan, or at least not enough of one. Severus and I really just found out what kind of monster he is a couple weeks ago, and at that time, it was only the two of us. We couldn’t act on our own, so up until this moment our plan was to bring in more support.”

He motioned to those gathered. “We’ve gotten that, so now we need to come up with the next step.”

Severus stood. “We have broad plans for the future, however, that you should be included in our discussion today. Our first wish is to make this a safehouse for any student who is threatened at Hogwarts or beyond, whether by Riddle and the Death Eaters or by Dumbledore and his forces.”

Hermione paled. “Forces? Dumbledore has forces?”

Severus shrugged. “Until today, he had all of you, if you will recall. And while those here represent many of his strongest allies, we are not his only allies. Nor am I foolish enough to believe he has placed all his pawns within the Order.”
She sank into her seat. “Oh.”

“To answer your question more directly, Hermione, no, I do not believe Albus has a full army at his back, but neither do we have one. And while he does not have soldiers that I am aware of, that does not rule out spies or assassins.” His expression darkened. “Albus simply has too many murder marks to have committed them all at his own hand. After all, I was marked for Charity Burbage and I did not hold the wand that killed her.”

“Understood, sir.”

Severus nodded.

“Right now,” said Harry, “in terms of military strength, Riddle is the far more dangerous threat. However, that doesn’t mean we can sit on our thumbs and let Dumbledore play quietly in the background while we take out the other side. He does have weapons, and he can use them.”

Severus took over. “Dumbledore’s primary weapon is his universal popularity. If he rallies the public to fight with him against a cause, he will have militias and Ministry aides falling all over themselves to do his dirty work. He could have laws passed behind our backs, could have us outed as vigilantes, and with enough support, he could have us placed under arrest or even killed. It would not be difficult to blame our deaths on the Death Eaters, after all.”

He paused. “Come to think of it, I can remember several attacks against members of the Light that were so blamed, but Riddle seemed to have no prior knowledge of them. It angered him, and when I reported it to Albus, the man put it down to a copycat crime and left it at that.” He shook his head. “I should have suspected.”

Harry squeezed his hand. “You weren’t to know, Severus. He manipulated us all.”

Severus nodded and stood tall. “Precisely, and that is his most dangerous weapon. The man can convince anyone that his way is the right way, even if they don’t agree. And if he tries and fails, well, he would have them … removed from the equation.” His grim expression left no doubt as to his meaning. “And with the kind of unimpeachable image Albus has, no one would suspect him.”

“Except me, of course,” said Harry with a grin.

“You always were brave to the point of being suicidal,” said Severus, though his smile let Harry know it was meant as a joke. “But truth be told, you are right, Harry. You will need to be the one to counter his public image and take him down. You’re the only one with the kind of backing we need for that.”

Harry shook his head sadly. “The problem with that theory is that Skeeter has done so much damage to my reputation over the years, my popularity still might not be enough. Not yet. Not until we can remove her stain from my image.”

Severus folded his hands in front of himself and sighed. “Then we shall continue working to do so. In the meantime, there are the issues with the Ministry to deal with. Just yesterday, Harry and I stopped Colin Creevey from forcing an article through the Prophet declaring Harry and myself as Undesirables numbers one and two, to be killed or apprehended on sight.”

“Colin!” Ron leapt to his feet. “Merlin, are you sure it was Colin?”

“He was Imperiused,” said Harry with a shake of his head. “We’re almost positive it was Umbridge behind the article, as he saw a flash of pink before he went down. That and the rest of the article was trying to get Muggleborns to register with the Ministry.”
Hermione slunk into her seat, her face white.

“But … they want us to register?” Dean frowned. “Why?”

Harry gave him a grim look. “Doesn’t it sound like what the Nazis did to Jewish people, Dean?”

Dean blanched. “Oh God. It does. So they mean to ….”

“Round you up and kill you, yes,” said Severus in a quiet voice.

Hermione and Dean made sounds of dismay. Their partners grabbed them into hugs.

“We stopped this attempt,” said Harry with a shiver, “but that doesn’t mean they’re done. There’s no question who was behind that article, and he doesn’t stop. Doesn’t know the meaning of the word.”

He hugged his chest. “The good news is that I don’t think he can use the Prophet that way again—we fixed the loopholes in the wards—but he’ll get word out some other way eventually. He’ll make it a law to register, something punishable by death if refused, unless we take him down from within the Ministry too.”

“Well, you can count on me for that,” said Arthur.

“And us,” said Tonks, pointing to herself and Kingsley. As she still looked like a third Weasley twin, the effect was a bit disconcerting.

“Good,” said Harry. “I want you to keep us posted on everything you can. And make all efforts possible to circumvent Dumbledore and Umbridge from interfering.”

“Will do,” said Kingsley, “but it would help if we had eyes in the Wizengamot too. Might I suggest meeting with Augusta Longbottom and Amelia Bones? They have a lot of influence and might be able to warn us if they try to slip new laws in while our backs are turned.”

Severus nodded. “We shall do so as soon as we are able to arrange a meeting.”

“Thanks, King,” Harry added.

“No problem,” said the auror. “But what do we do about our duelling Lords?”

“Hmm.” Severus paced a bit. “For the moment, I think we shall use the Order to do our dirty work against Riddle. Until we are better established, they still have better ability to fight him than we do. And Harry and I have a secret mission to strike down his protections against death. We may reveal more about it later, but at the moment, we do not have enough information to make it worthwhile regardless.

“As for Albus, our best plan of action is to let him go about thinking we’re still in his pocket while undermining him in secret. Taking out his support one peg at a time. And, after what Miss Lov—forgive me, Luna—has shared with us, I believe Filius and Mister Longbottom should be our next targets for recruitment.”

Harry nodded. “Flitwick—” McGonagall shot him a glare. “Sorry, Professor Flitwick needs to know about the core leech anyway. He’s a professor and a master dueller. What happens if he’s in a battle and he thinks, ‘well, this Death Eater doesn’t know I’m part goblin and won’t be expecting a goblin attack,’ but when he goes to use it, the magic isn’t there? He could die from this. And as much as I can’t stand the woman, we maybe should help Professor Trelawney too.”
“I will carry the message to Filius,” said McGonagall. “Albus won’t think it strange for me to meet with him outside of the castle.”

“Thank you, Minerva,” said Severus. “You cannot do so with Sybil, though. Do you have a suggestion?”

Remus interrupted. “Actually, Severus, I’m going to argue against helping Trelawney at this juncture. While I do agree she needs to be freed eventually, we all know how loose her tongue is when it’s marinated in sherry. Besides that, if Dumbledore is keeping her around for her powers as a Seer—and she did prophesy about you that night he interviewed her—then she’s probably under tighter surveillance than the rest of them. I think it’s safest to leave her where she is until we have more support and can offer her reasonable protection.”

Harry nodded. “Seems reasonable, though I hate leaving those things on anyone. Luna, if you see any other leeches we don’t know of yet, let us know right away. Dumbledore might try to sneak more onto other people now that we’ve removed some.”

Luna nodded. “Yes, General Potter.”

The others tittered, but Harry shushed them with a serious look. “She’s actually speaking in terms of the future. I’m nowhere near there yet, but that’s what I will be to this organisation soon. Severus is also our spy and stealth master. And Remus will be the commander of our armies.”

“Wait a moment,” said a pale Remus. “I … are you sure about that, Harry? I’m … people don’t really look up to me, you know.”

“Actually, they will soon. And yes, I’m sure. Prophecy, remember? But to be honest, I’d pick you anyway.”

“But—”

Harry folded his hands in his lap and sighed. “Remus, tell me this. Why are the werewolf diplomacy missions failing?”

The man blushed. “Well, er, it’s because no one is willing to change the laws. The weres overseas have nothing to gain by risking life and limb for us, so they don’t have a reason to fight in a war that doesn’t threaten them directly.”

“Hmm. And what do you think they would do if they saw a known werewolf as a leader of a major political faction?”

Remus gasped. “Oh Merlin. They would … they’d be utterly shocked.”

“Exactly,” said Severus with a slow smile at his soul-bond. “They would then have undeniable proof that said faction is working to change the laws, or at least regards werewolves and non-humans as equals. Would they then have something to gain by joining us, Lupin?”

Remus’ eyes hardened. “They would indeed. I’ll do it.”

“Great,” said Harry with a grin. “You’ll be brilliant for it too. Only don’t be too soft on the soldiers, hmm?”

Remus chuckled. “Yes, yes. I’ll learn to keep them in line. Or perhaps you can do it for me, eh, General?”
“Wash your mouth out,” said Harry with a laugh. “Luna gets a pass because she talks for the future sometimes. You’re just being cheeky.”

Remus barked out a laugh. “Is it just me, or is it odd to be called cheeky by a man twenty years your junior?”

“It is odd,” said Severus with a chuckle. “But moving on. Besides stealing support from Dumbledore and recruiting humans and non-humans alike, there is one other plan on the agenda: making this place a self-sustaining magical town.

“Harry and I would ask that as many of you who can safely and are willing, please relocate to Bàn Leon. Draco, Theo, and Blaise already have plans on what services they will offer and will be living here for the time being. As for the rest of you, we have many homes that simply need refurbishing. We are restoring them on our own, so you need not fear the cost. I will not ask you to leave your homes behind unless you are threatened there, but if any of you are looking for a place to stay, we have rooms to offer and a desperate need for willing hands in all fields. Figuratively and literally.”

Ron cast Hermione a look. “Well, as it happens, I was … thinking about trying to find a place for myself. Didn’t think I’d be able to for a few years because, well, you all know. But if you’d be willing to trade labour for a place to kip, I’ll take that deal.”

“Same here,” said Charlie. “I’ve been looking to come back home for a while, but it’s too hectic at the Burrow. I’m too used to nothing but the sound of my own voice and the dragons.” He grinned. “Speaking of, I reckon I could train a few drakes for your armies, if I can bring in some help to handle them.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at Severus.

“That would be lovely, Charlie,” said Severus. “There are several large farms about the town that would suit for that kind of work. However, your friends will still need to take oaths of secrecy concerning the town and its occupants, even if they do not swear into the Dawn.”

“I think I can wrangle that.”

“Good. Then bring your friends when you are able and we shall find a place for you. You as well, Ron.”

“But not until you’re either finished with your schooling, Ronald, or ….” Molly frowned. “Or you must leave it early, understand?”

“Well, we need hands over the summer, Molly,” said Harry with a worried look. “I was hoping I could ask them all to help us build. And it would be easier to stay here ….”

“Easier, but not wiser,” said Severus with a shake of his head. “Dumbledore would know if they were not at the Burrow for at least part of their days. No need drawing suspicion where it can be avoided.”

Harry winced. “Right. Well, then listen to your mum, Ron, and we’ll get you set up once we’re ready to pull out of Hogwarts.” He paused. “Actually … you’re going to need to pull out of Hogwarts anyway. You and Hermione both. Unless you do, Dumbledore’s going to know I went with someone else after the … artefacts.”

Ron grinned. “Works for me.”

“Don’t think you’ll be getting out of your schooling, young man,” said Molly with a scowl. “You’ll
be studying from home, won’t you?”

Ron grumbled, “Yes, Mum.”

“Don’t worry, Mum Weasley,” said Hermione with a sweet smile. “I’ll make sure he stays on top of all of his subjects.”

Ron banged his head on the table, and Harry suppressed a snicker lest her sharp gaze turn on him.

A deep voice murmured, “And I will be tutoring Harry.”

Harry shot Severus a look. “Traitor.”

Severus flinched. “Yes, so I am.”

Harry shook his head and crawled into Severus’ lap. “Hush. I didn’t mean it like that. You’re my hero and you know it.”

Severus smiled into Harry’s neck. “Mm. Well, then I suppose you shan’t mind learning from me, hmm?”

Harry grimaced. “A-as long as you’re fair to me, yeah.”

Severus hugged Harry tightly. “I will not hurt you again.”

Harry leaned back on his partner. “Then we’re good. You should teach Seth and Keiran too, since they have full memories. It’s not fair to let them be bored all the time.”

Severus nodded. “That sounds like a plan.”

“Sounds nice,” Harry said with a smile. “We’ll have our whole family working together then.”

Severus frowned. “Our family … no, there is one member missing. Harry, do you think we should call him home?”

“Hmm? Who?”

Severus tapped his chest. “My last familiar.”


Severus gasped and leapt to his feet. “Shite!” With a deep breath to calm himself despite encroaching panic, he helped Harry to stand with him and laced their fingers together. “Send love through me. When I called him before, he said my love for you broke the spell keeping him captive. Yours is so powerful, there is no doubt it will help.”

Harry turned into Severus’ chest and wrapped his arms about the man’s waist. With a sad smile, Severus tangled one hand in Harry’s hair and wrapped his other arm around the mage’s shoulders.

“Severus,” Harry whispered, “I love you. Forever and always.”

With Harry’s soft words, powerful, tender emotion spread through Severus’ chest and warmed him
down to his toes. Harry bathed him in love, from his feet to his hair, and tears brimmed in his eyes at
the power of it. He buried his head in Harry’s hair to hide his face.

“Oh my,” said Luna. “That is quite a lot of amifadas.”

Severus took that as a sign that he was doing something right and whispered, “Fawkes. Come to me,
my friend.”

He waited, breath held and heart racing for a tense moment, until flames burst in the air before him
with a sound like breaking glass. A phoenix flew from the fireburst, but Severus gaped at the bird’s
colouration. Along with the yellow and red plumage, the ends of his feathers had a deep violet
colour, as if someone had dipped them in ink. The bird was beautiful, like the first break of dawn on
a twilit horizon. Even so, he looked haggard and weak.

“Fawkes?” Severus held an arm out for the bird and petted his head, ignoring the gasps and shouts
from their audience. “Welcome home, but what happened to your feathers?”

The phoenix gave a sound that sounded halfway between a chuckle and a sob. “Thank you,” he said
into Severus’ mind. Judging by Harry’s jump, the younger man could hear him, too. “My feathers
changed to reflect the colour of your ambient magic, Companion, and Dumbledore knew the
moment they began to change that I had found my true human. He has kept me under lock and key
and binding spells since. I have gone through a death cycle twice from lack of food and water since I
left you last.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed, and stroked the bird’s head. “I’m so sorry, Fawkes. We didn’t know your
feathers would change, or we’d have kept you back.”

The bird shook himself. “In light of your illness and my relief to have found Severus, I had forgotten
as well. Thank you for rescuing me.”

Severus lifted the bird to his shoulder and patted his wings gently. “Had we known you were
suffering, we would’ve rescued you sooner.”

Kingsley’s annoyed call interrupted them. “Would you two stop tweeting like bloody birds and tell
us what in the world a purple phoenix is doing with Severus?”

Harry frowned at Severus. “We were tweeting? Do you suppose it’s like Parseltongue?”

Severus shrugged. “Must be.” He turned to the others. “Forgive us. We were unaware you could not
understand. Apparently the words Harry and I speak to my familiar work like the snake language, in
that it sounds like English to us but bird sounds to others.”

Fawkes said, “Yes. It is very similar.”

“Fawkes said we’re right,” said Harry.

“Fawkes!” McGonagall turned ghost white and held a hand out to the bird. “You, oh no. But he
must be. If Dumbledore is false, then Fawkes would never serve him willingly … but how? His soul
—” She shook her head wildly. “Severus, I do not understand. If Dumbledore had taken Fawkes
against his will, the pain would drive him mad.”

Harry nodded. “It’s true though. Dumbledore kept Fawkes prisoner.”

Blaise leapt to his feet, eyes popping and face stark white. “But that’s impossible, Harry. It would set
his soul on fire, like she said!”
Harry looked to their lone Ravenclaw, a sick, creeping feeling growing like ice in his gut. “His soul … oh Merlin! Luna, when you said Dumbledore had cut his soul to pieces, did you mean that literally, or just that he’s destroyed it with murders?”

Luna shuddered. “Literally, I’m afraid. He has no pieces left to burn. He’s cut them all away and put them … elsewhere. Phoenix Fire only tingles a bit when there is no soul present.”

Harry shuddered and sank back into Severus. “Horcruxes,” Harry breathed so only his mate could hear. “Dear gods, he made horcruxes. Love, our job just got so much harder.”

A shaking Severus murmured, “So it would seem, Harry.”
A Heavier Load

Chapter Summary

Warnings: discussion of dark magic and murder. Summary: Harry and the crew try to figure out how to handle the bad news about horcruxes and start settling in Bân Leon.

***AN1: took awhile for me to be semi-happy with this chapter, but the meeting that never ends is finally finished, and we can start getting back to the action. I had a fem pairing pop up I didn’t expect to add, but when I thought of it, it was too cute to resist (MM/PP). And in more personal news, I had a procedure done on my spinal nerves this week which is supposed to help with the pain. They burned the sheath of my nerves, so it's actually hurting more lately. It's supposed to be a long-term solution to pain relief once it kicks in, though. We'll see. Anyway, here goes nothing.***

CHAPTER 30
A HEAVIER LOAD

Horcruxes. The word rang in Harry’s ears like the toll of a funeral bell. His funeral, because his foes could never die unless Harry found each and every scattered bit of soul and destroyed them first. But how? He knew where the locket was—it would be hard to get it, but between Severus, Kingsley, and Tonks, he was confident they could—but had no idea how to destroy it or any of the others.

They needed help, but telling the wrong person of his need could prove disastrous, and who among them knew more about dark magic than Severus? If he didn’t know how to destroy them, what hope did they have of finding answers among those of the light?

Harry frowned. Perhaps none, but those who had seen much of the dark—or much of things others didn’t understand—might have some insight. Still, the idea of revealing the most dangerous part of their plan to people who had once been so close to the dark unnerved him.

He chided himself for the thought straight away. Hadn’t he told Hermione that Draco and his friends had given up their entire lives to come here and help? They had earned his trust, and Harry really needed to put that old prejudice to rest.

The thought that it was Dumbledore who had encouraged such prejudice in the first place was the final nail in the coffin to his mistrust, and Harry resolved to ask the boys about what they knew the first chance he got. He wasn’t particularly hopeful considering Severus was far more experienced than any of the other Slytherins and even he didn’t know how to destroy the damn things, but it was a chance he couldn’t afford to pass up. He looked around the room, wondering if anyone else might have information he could use.

Wait. Bill was a curse breaker. He might know something. Or if he didn’t, he might know where to look.

Satisfied, Harry went to call the chattering, frightened group to order only to find Severus was already in the middle of doing so.

“Be quiet!” His strident shout reminded Harry of Severus’ days as a potions master, but it did bring
everyone’s focus away from their panic. Once Severus had their attention once more, he softened his tone. “Thank you. Now, I do realise what Luna has shared with us is indeed terrifying, but we will solve nothing by panicking.”

He turned to the elves. “Bindy, would you mind to bring tea and ginger biscuits for us, if you have enough on hand? And enough for you and your fellow elves, of course.”

Bindy bowed elegantly, smoothing her new uniform with a loving touch. “Yes, Master Severus. I’s making plenty of biscuits this morning since Masters said many guests would come later.”

Severus smiled. “Thank you. Ah, Winky, Gemmy, if you would help her please? Oh, and will you also bring some of the special feed mix I prepared for Fawkes?”

The other elves bowed and popped out after Bindy. A moment later, the elves reappeared, three pots of tea, a giant stack of teacups, a tower of ginger biscuits, and a tray of condiment dishes levitated before them. The elves sent the tea and biscuits to the table, divvying them up between the attendees and setting their own pot on a conjured table before them.

The elves hesitated to take their refreshment, and Harry knelt before them, pouring a cup for his elf friend. “Dobby, how do you take your tea?”

Dobby squeaked and blushed. “Um, D-Dobby is liking lots of sugar and milk.”

Harry smiled. “Er, so … two sugars then? And a splash?”

“Three! And two splashes.”

Harry chuckled. “That’s more milk than tea, but to each their own.” He made the drink according to the elf’s specifications and passed it and a saucer with a ginger biscuit to him. “Go ahead, Dobby. It’s okay. I made it for you.”

Dobby sniffled and blinked fat tears down his little cheeks. “T-thank you, kind master Harry.”

“Well, right now I’m acting as your friend. Now, Gemmy, come and sit by Dobby and tell me how you like your tea.”

Blushing pink, she squeaked and rushed to the sofa. “G-Gemmy likes one sugar and two splashes of milk like Dobby.”

Harry nodded and fixed a cup and a biscuit for her. “Is tea like butterbeer for you then? It’s mild for humans but strong for elves?”

“Exactly so, Master Harry,” said Tinny. “We’s cannot be drinking our tea too strong or we will not stop running until dawn.”

Harry chuckled. “Merlin! Well, we’ll be careful not to give you too much. How do you like yours then?”

Tinny gave him a tearful smile. “In all my years, I’s never thought I would live to see the day I would be served by my master. I’s take it like Gemmy does.”

Harry patted her hand and prepared her cup and plate. On his other side, Severus knelt down and gave Harry a knowing smile.

“Winky,” Severus said in a soft voice, “how do you like your tea?”
A fierce hug and an elfin kiss on his cheek answered him.

In such a manner, Harry and Severus served all the elves before returning to the human table. When they returned, Hermione was sniffing into a handkerchief and smiling.

“Toward you think I’m barry, Harry,” she said softly, “but that was one of the loveliest things I’ve ever seen.”

Harry gave her a wry smile. “Well, I did try to tell you we don’t treat them like slaves.”

“You treat them more like friends,” she said with a hiccup. “Sorry, sorry. It’s just good to see them being taken care of for once rather than stomped on.”

Harry nodded. “So we thought too.” He slipped his hand into Severus’. “So … are we all ready to move on? Unless you need a minute, Hermione?”

She shook her head and waved him on.

“I think we are well now, Mister Potter,” said McGonagall. “We had our tea while you were tending to the elves, so I think we are sufficiently refreshed and ready to continue.”

Severus shuddered. “I am not sure I will ever be ready to speak of such horrors, but such is our duty.” He beckoned his phoenix and poured a plate of seeds onto the table before him, filling a clean teacup with conjured water as well. “I haven’t a perch for you yet, Fawkes, but we shall amend that as soon as possible. Will this serve in the meantime?”

For an answer, the bird gave a grateful trill and dropped his beak right into the teacup. Harry petted the phoenix as he ate, soothing him with gentle hands. The bird had been through a nightmare, and he needed comfort. Fawkes’ warm feathers offered some solace to Harry too.

Severus gave Harry a tired smile and turned to face the group once more. “Now that we are all suitably calmed and able to approach the subject in a rational manner, I would like to offer you some reassurance. What Luna mentioned concerning Albus is … it is the darkest magic known to wizardkind. However, it is breakable, and Harry and I do have a plan to combat it, both for Riddle and Albus.”

Ron and Hermione went ashen.

“Oh, Severus,” Hermione gasped. “You … you don’t mean …?”

Severus gave her a grim nod. “There is only one way that I know of to remove one’s soul from its proper place yet leave the mind intact.”

Hermione’s hand flew to her mouth. Ron looked as if he might be sick.

Remus murmured, “Severus, can you tell us what this magic is?”

Severus winced. “Not yet.”

“But we’ll need to keep several of you after the meeting to question about it,” Harry said with a shiver. “Remus, I think you should be one of them as you’ll need to take a position of authority here. I also want Hermione, Ron, Luna, Bill, King, Tonks, and our snakes. I think you will have the best chance of knowing what we need to know, or finding it if none of us do. Dean, if you want to hang around too, I’ll show you to the studio when we’re done here.”
Dean nodded. “Why can you not reveal it if this entire meeting is being kept under _Fidelius_? It’s not like we could blab about it even if we wanted to.”

Harry rubbed his foot into the floor. “Well, it’s just that … I … it’s terrifying.”

“And Dumbledore being evil enough to murder masses of people and tear his own soul to pieces isn’t?”

Harry flinched. “Well, it is, but …”

“We can’t talk about it, so why can’t we know? We might be able to help.”

Harry shook his head. “I doubt it. Most of you have never even thought of magic this dark. And even if you have, Charlie, if the slightest _hint_ of this gets back to either Dumbledore or Riddle, we’re lost. The war is over. They’ll never die and we’re stuck with their murdering ways forever. And the _Fidelius_, while it might prevent you saying something, doesn’t prevent hints. It doesn’t stop you from accidentally starting to say something and suddenly having your tongue freeze midsentence.”

Severus took over. “Harry is correct. Consider our foes, too. Both Riddle and Albus are far too good at discovering what we do not want them to know. We are all aware that none of you would betray our secrets on purpose, but even a stuttered stop midsentence might be enough to give away that we are aware of their tricks, and that will get us all killed.

“We are not trying to keep you in the dark as Albus so loves to do, but the fewer people who are aware of these details in particular, the safer we all are.”

“But—” Charlie started another protest, but Bill laid a shaking hand on his arm.

“No.” The curse breaker had gone as white as a ghost and his eyes were wide and full of horror. “They’re right, Charlie. Let it go. What they’re speaking of, it’s so incredibly dangerous, that even telling us all what they have done could still get us all killed. Please. For the sake of us all, don’t press.”

The dragon keeper took one look at his older brother and gave him a shaky nod.

“Thank you,” said Harry in relief. “I know you hate it, and I’m sorry, but it really is far too dangerous to say anything further.” He frowned at the curse breaker. “Bill, are you going to be okay?”

Bill shook himself. “Y-yeah. Have to be. It’s only I never thought anyone would be mad enough to ….” He shuddered and wrapped his arms around his waist. “Merlin. I’ll help where I can, Harry, but make it quick, all right? I don’t want to talk about it more than I have to.”

Fleur soothed him by running her fingers through his ponytail. “I am ‘ere, my love.”

Bill kissed her and buried his face in her shoulder.

Arthur gulped and turned wide eyes on Harry and Severus. “Anything that can make my oldest son look like _that_ is too dark for my tastes.”

“You have no idea,” Severus said in a grim voice.

“No,” Bill replied. “And none of you want to. Trust me.” He sat tall again and, with a deep breath,
gained mastery over his fear. “I will tell you this. If he’s truly done … what you’re thinking of so much, it’s obliterated what soul remains in him, that’s the reason he could cast those core leeches without being sucked in. If all he has left is enough soul to retain his mind and core, then there was nothing for the backlash to latch onto.”

“Which means, theoretically,” said a pale Severus, “he could continue to cast them for the foreseeable future with no real ill effects. He could place drains on an army and make himself as powerful as Harry.”

“Unless we stop him first,” Harry said, holding his posture and expression firm. Damned if he would bow to fear for the likes of Riddle and Dumbledore. He was better than that.

Severus nodded. “Unless that. Which means we will need to begin Harry’s training right away. I am teaching him duelling. Luna, I would like you to help him develop his mage sight and divinatory skills. Bill, if you will teach him what you can about curses and how to break and cast those he might need in battle. Lupin, you will be quite busy with your own missions, but if you can help us train him in diplomacy and strategy when you are able, as well as help us both gain better understanding of dark creatures, that would help.”

Each person nodded in turn.

“That will be enough to start with then. If you would like to remain here, please stay after the meeting and choose a home before you leave today. Take one of our elves with you and they will let us know which house you have chosen. We will outfit it with modern facilities and provide basic furnishings so you can move in right away and decorate it however you wish. If you would prefer to bring your own things, let the elf with you know.”

Bill shook his head. “For the time being, Fleur and I are happy and safe in our home. Should that change in the future, I’ll be sure to let you and Harry know right away.”

Severus nodded. “And the rest of you?”

Remus raised an eyebrow at Tonks. She nodded.

“Tonks and I don’t have a good place to stay right now,” Remus said in a soft voice. “The restrictions against my kind make purchasing property … difficult. So we would be happy to accept your offer.”

Severus nodded. “Arlen, please stay with Lupin after the meeting and help them choose a suitable home.”

“I’ll stay here too, Professor,” said Luna with a dreamy smile. “Harry will need me close by when the trouble starts.”

“Trouble?” Severus shivered. “Do you have any specifics that we can prepare for, Luna?”

“No, sir. I only see that darkness is on the horizon and Harry will need my support.”

“Call me Severus, and thank you. We will prepare as best we can in the meantime. Ashie will attend you after the meeting and help you choose suitable lodgings.”

Luna smiled. “If it’s quite all right, I would like to open a shop, sir. For divination. I am rather skilled at it.”

“We do not yet have a skilled diviner, so that would be fine. Only choose a home and property and
let Ashie know where you would like them. We will prepare both for you as best as we can.”

“Thank you ever so much, sir! I’ll do my best to repay you quickly.”

Harry gave her a bright smile. “You already have, Lu. Don’t worry about it.”

She beamed. “Oh, I knew I was making the right decision when I made you my friend.”

Harry chuckled. “I’m sure you did.”

He questioned the others to see who wanted to relocate and who would rather stay where they were. Kingsley had said he would like to move, but he needed to check with his wife and children first. Everyone else decided to stay put for the moment.

“Well then,” said Harry with a nod, “I think we’re finished for the day. Everyone except those we asked to stay behind is free to go. Especially you, Professor McGonagall. If you stay much longer, Dumbledore might get suspicious.”

The professor stood. “Then I will take my leave. Thank you for including me today, Harry. I fear I would not have been able to protect myself without this knowledge.”

“Thank you for believing me, ma’am.” Harry bowed in gratitude, with Severus quickly mirroring him.

“Not at all, gentlemen. Not at all.” McGonagall left, and the others soon filed out after her.

“Right,” said Harry once the others were gone. “I don’t think I need to tell you how dangerous this topic is. If even a whisper reaches either Riddle’s or Dumbledore’s ears, we’re finished. So be damn sure you’re ready to keep this absolutely secret. If you don’t think you’re capable, by all means, say so now.”

The others exchanged nervous looks, but no one spoke.

“Very well,” said Severus. “Then know we have kept you behind because we need your assistance. The magic that Dumbledore and Riddle have used to mutilate their soul is the darkest in existence. Essentially, what they have done is … is by using the rift created during the heinous murder of an innocent—” He shuddered. “They have carved a piece of their soul from the whole and, through a dark ritual, encased it in a series of objects. Until we can destroy each and every one of those soul pieces—horcruxes—they are immortal.”

Every face in the room paled.

Remus said, “H-how do we defeat them then?”

“By first destroying their horcruxes, then destroying them.” Severus crossed his arms over his chest. “But there is a problem. Besides the fact that we do not know either what their horcruxes are or where they might be—though we do have information on at least three of Riddle’s—we do not know how to destroy these objects once they are found. That is why we have called you here, to see if you are aware of any way to destroy a horcrux.”

When no one spoke immediately, Harry took over. “Lu, do you know anything about them?”

She shivered. “Their magic is ugly. Sickening.”

Harry gasped. “You’ve seen one?”
She gave him a sad shake of her head. “No. But I have sensed them in the school.”

Severus reeled. “Hogwarts! There are horcruxes in Hogwarts?”

Luna nodded. “The mortaniums always hover too close when they’re near.”

Harry shuddered. “Merlin. Um, what are mortaniums?”

“Death spirits, death magic.” She shivered again. “They’re so cold.”

Harry nodded. “What colour?”

“Black or dark grey, depending on the strength. The darker the colour, the more powerful the mortanium.”

Harry frowned. He’d seen black light around something recently, hadn’t he? He scanned his memory for the object, but couldn’t put his finger on it.

“Hmm. So a horcrux would have black and grey light around it, right?”

“Black, mostly. That kind of magic is powerful.”

“Right. Well, once I have my mage sight trained, that could help.”

Luna frowned. “I don’t think it’s just going to be black. There’s also soul magic involved, but I’m not sure what colour it is.”

Harry rubbed his chin. “So black and another colour we haven’t identified. Then as far as tracking them goes, it’d be best to get me trained on mage sight as soon as possible.” He sighed. “But the problem is, I still don’t know how to destroy them even if we did find some. Do any of you have any ideas? Anything at all?”

Bill leaned forwards in his chair as if he wanted to hug himself. “I can only tell you this: to destroy a horcrux, you have to break it beyond magical repair. You have to use something so potent, so powerful, not even a mage would be able to Reparo it back together.”

Draco gave Harry a searching look. “That journal—the one my lovely father gave Ginny. I never knew, but it was a horcrux, wasn’t it?”

Harry nodded. “It was.”

Severus gasped. “Mother of Merlin, Potter—we are idiots!”

Harry frowned and looked to his partner. “Er … we are?”

“Yes! The journal, love. The journal was a horcrux. And you—”

Harry went rigid. “I’ve already destroyed it!”

“Exactly. So that means—”

“Basilisk venom!”

Severus grinned. “Yes, we can use it to destroy them!”

Harry shuddered. “S-Severus, that’s all well and good, but isn’t it incredibly rare? How exactly are
we going to get our hands on enough basilisk venom to do the job without going down to the Chamber of Secrets and grabbing another fang? And that’s only assuming the venom inside hasn’t dried up after all these years.”

Severus rubbed his chin. “You killed the basilisk with the Sword of Gryffindor, did you not?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, why?”

Bill answered for him. “The sword is goblin-made. And goblin-made weapons always imbibe what makes them stronger. Which means Gryffindor’s sword now carries the venom of Slytherin’s serpent.”

Harry grinned. “So all we need is the sword?”

“Yes, Harry, all,” said Severus with a sigh. “Who has ownership of the sword right now, pet?”


“Yes, shite indeed.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “So either we hunt down another basilisk, break into the Chamber and hope the fangs are still good after five years of decay, or we try to steal the sword right under Dumbledore’s nose.”

“Nothing doing,” said Ron with a shudder. “That bloody beast was terrifying enough the first time and I didn’t even see it, and going into the school is much too risky now.”

“There’s also ….” Theo gulped. “F-Fiendfyre. Nothing is going to fix something burned up by demon fire.”

Severus scowled. “And almost nothing can extinguish it either. We shall not be doing that.”

Hermione frowned. “So what do we do then? How do we destroy the horcruxes without the sword, a fang, or Fiendfyre?”

The room fell silent.

Harry sighed. “Well, let’s just put that part aside for now. Having a way to destroy the horcruxes really won’t do us any good until we have horcruxes to destroy anyway.”

Luna gave him a solemn look. “You will find them. Sooner than you would like.”

Harry winced. “Merlin, Lu. Can’t you predict butterflies and rainbows for me for once?”

She tittered. “I predict your mate will bring you much joy.”

Severus smiled and hugged Harry’s shoulders. “There is that.” He kissed Harry’s hair. “In that case, we shall simply focus on acquiring the horcruxes for the time being, at least until a path to destroying them becomes clear. And to that end, Shacklebolt, I should like to advise you that Xavier Prince and Holly Black, his fiancée, will be making an appointment with Delores Umbridge soon. I need you to be ready for trouble.”

Kingsley frowned. “Umbridge?”

“She has a horcrux,” said Harry with a scowl. “She’s wearing it like a bloody necklace.”
“The locket of Slytherin,” Severus explained. “Holly and I will be taking it from her via force.”

Kingsley cringed. “Severus, don’t leave a mess to clean up, all right?”

“Oh, there will not be a body. Not yet. We will simply stun her, take the locket, and Obliviate her on our way out. There will be little violence to speak of.”

Kingsley nodded, though he still looked wary. “All right. Just let me know and I’ll make sure to clear the way as much as I can.”

“Excellent.” Severus squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “Then, if you are amenable, why not take Luna to find her house and premises yourself instead of Ashie, Harry, and use the walk to learn more about your mage sight powers?”

Harry smiled. “Sounds good to me. Luna?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

Harry turned to Severus and gave him a kiss. “We’ll be going then, but what will you do?”

Severus looked to his bedraggled familiar. “I will be brewing medicines, I think. Theo and Fawkes are both in need, and it would not hurt us to have a store on hand.”

Harry nodded and kissed his cheek. “I’ll be back to help you soon, okay.” He waved to the others. “The rest of you are free to go hunt down your own homes or go back for the day.” He Summoned Keiran and Seth and gave them a smile. “Are you ready to go, boys?” The boys nodded, and Harry set them to hover close to him. “Luna, Dean, are you ready?”

“I sure am,” Dean said, shuddering. “I never knew magic could be so evil.”

Luna patted his arm. “Magic can also be lovely, and I will tell you about some of it on the way to your studio. Harry should know anyway. Oh, it’s quite nice, by the way, your studio.”

Dean gaped. “But … you haven’t been there yet, have you?”

“Oh no. This is my first visit to Bàn Leon.”

“But then how—”

Harry tapped his forehead. “Seer, Dean.”

Dean gave a wry laugh. “Oops. Forgot about that.” He patted her shoulder. “All right, Luna. I’ll take your word for it.”

Harry chuckled. “I think we’d all be better off if we did that more often.”

Luna beamed and led them away.

Minerva swept in to dinner that evening with Poppy at her side. Neither woman’s unflappable stern demeanour gave any hint of the turbulent emotions swirling inside. When she had first realised Albus was lying to her, Minerva had thought the old man was simply going senile. Never in a million years
would she have imagined him capable of murdering another human being. Particularly not so many that his chest was black with the marks of his sin.

Poppy had been even less sure of Albus, having realised he had altered his memories from the start. And, after seeing the damage he had inflicted on Severus, Remus, and Harry first-hand, she had known the old man wasn’t what he was cracked up to be, but even she had been utterly shocked to realise the depth of Albus’ deception.

It was one thing to deal in prejudice and manipulation. Mass murder and serial killing was a horse of a different colour.

And to have cut his soul into bits! Not simply cut it into pieces even, but removed those pieces from the whole and housed them elsewhere? That was beyond terrifying.

Harry and Severus hadn’t wanted her to catch on, they were trying to protect her, she was sure, but Minerva was no fool. She might not know much of dark soul magic, but she had enough intellect to know that if Albus’ soul couldn’t feel the pain of phoenix fire, it wasn’t within his body any longer. She had no idea how the man could have removed his soul and left his mental faculties intact, but somehow he had managed it, and the idea was so horrifying, she kept expecting to find her hair on end every time she caught her reflection.

Just like her friend and long-time partner, she looked as staid and prim as ever on the outside, even if her insides were a heaving mess.

Minerva found herself needing to know it had really happened, that this wasn’t all some horrid nightmare she would soon wake from to find Severus had never left and Albus was just an annoying old meddler with lemon drops.

She turned and, unable to speak about the situation at Hogwarts where the very walls did Albus’ bidding, gave Poppy a weary look. The aging matron took her hand and gave her a smile, one so faintly grim, only someone as close to her as Minerva was would have seen the quiet fury bubbling underneath.

“Come, Minnie. Let’s get some food in our bellies, and then we’ll see if Filius feels up to a friendly date with a couple of old ladies.”

Minerva gave her a thin smile. It was real then. She had promised to recruit Filius at the Dawn meeting.

“Ah, that does sound lovely. Come, do you know what is on the menu for the evening?”

“Roast beef and potatoes.”

Minerva winced. She doubted she could stomach something so heavy at the moment.

“However,” continued Poppy, “there’s also supposed to be a nice vegetable soup for those of us who aren’t inclined to carnivorous tastes.”

Minerva nodded. “I believe we might best stick with the soup if we are planning to visit with Filius later.”

There. Should any portraits be listening, Albus would simply think the ladies had plans that evening and chose to eat a lighter meal so as not to ruin their date.

Poppy squeezed Minerva’s hand before letting her go. “Hmm, yes, that sounds like a good idea.
Perhaps we should warn Filius about it before dinner.”

Minerva gave a forced chuckle. “Poppy, dear, for all that the man is three feet tall, his stomach can contend with Hagrid’s. He will be fine. He may have other plans as well.”

Besides, Minerva wasn’t certain they could reach Filius before Albus caught up with them. And it was a good thing too, as just as they had turned the corner to the Great Hall, a silver-bearded, spangled phantom slipped in place beside them.

“Ah, good evening, ladies,” Albus said with his usual congenial manner.

“Good evening, Headmaster.” Minerva had to struggle to keep her tone free of hatred or accusation, though Poppy’s mild manner assured her she had managed it.

“May I ask where you are headed this evening, ladies? I have no plans of my own and might join you, unless I am unwelcome?”

Poppy hid a sudden paling of her complexion behind a bright smile. “Of course you are welcome to attend, though I’d wager you’ll feel a bit like the odd man out. Minnie and I were planning on asking Filius and Aurora to join us for the evening. Bit of a couples’ night. Unless you’ve a paramour of your own in hiding?”

Minerva wanted to cheer Poppy’s brilliance. Merlin, it was things like this that had drawn her to the mediwitch in the first place.

Albus gave her a sad smile Minerva saw straight through. “Alas, I am afraid we dotty old men have little time to be considering new relationships. Though I will certainly compliment Filius’ taste. Aurora is quite the catch. Though … is there not forty years of difference between them? I am quite curious as to how they work past their differences.”

Minerva snorted. “Do be fair, Albus. You know quite as well as I do that Filius is part goblin. His ancestry puts them at approximately the same age, as you are well aware. You are only trying to stir the pot.”

‘And weasel your way into our plans.’ She kept her eyes averted and struggled to keep her rising temper in check. ‘Meddler just wants to know where we’ll be heading so he can post some kind of surveillance.’ She suppressed a scowl and made a note to apparate somewhere believable before removing their trackers and going somewhere else for the evening. Somewhere completely safe, like Bàn Leon itself.

“Ah, well,” said Albus with a smile. “Then I won’t interfere. But do be a dear and allow me to place a spell of protection on you? There are still Death Eaters running amok, you know, and I would feel safer if you had some sort of guardianship if you are going to be away from the castle at night.”


“We are quite capable of protecting ourselves—”

But Albus brushed her off. “Of course, of course. Consider it insurance, if you will, that my two favourite ladies will return to the castle in one piece.”

Poppy gave a titter that would have convinced anyone but Minerva. “If you insist, Albus.”

A white light settled on them, but Minerva had sensed the darker edge behind it and knew they would be removing this ‘protection spell’ before they said anything of interest again.
Behind Albus’ back, Poppy slid her hand back into Minerva’s. Outwardly, the woman looked as unruffled as ever, but her fingers trembled in Minerva’s and her hand was cold. Minerva rubbed her fingertips in effort to soothe them both.

‘Hold on, dear. As soon as it is safe, we will take this horrid spell off and start bringing in the rest of our flock. Just bear with it a little longer.’

She only hoped they could truly convince Filius and Aurora to come out with them or all of this trouble would be for naught.

Harry watched as Dean put in a supply order with Mazie, the Dawn elf he had assigned to assist the young artist while he was working on Keiran’s portrait. He was considering giving her to Dean, as the young elf did not seem happy being bonded to a group as a whole. The situation would bear watching. If Mazie blossomed with Dean, then Harry would let her go where she was happiest.

For the moment, he was simply amazed at how much went into a wizarding painting. Besides the usual supplies of paint, canvas, brushes, and various other odds and ends, Dean needed herbs, a certain kind of candles, and a potion for cleaning his brushes and applying the animation effect. Harry assured him Severus would brew the required potions and sent a Patronus to the man asking for the brush cleaning potion as soon as possible.

“As soon as Winky returns with a batch of white asphodel, which is not in my current stores, I will begin it immediately.”

Dean grinned as the doe faded. “Harry, you have to teach us how to use our Patronuses like that.”

Harry frowned. “I really should. It’s dead useful as a method of communication.” He sighed. “Merlin, there’s so much I can hardly keep track.”

“I’m sorry, mate.” Dean held Keiran’s photo out. “Er … do you think you could watch after him while I set up shop? I don’t mean to burden you, I just don’t want him to get hurt.”

Harry took the photo with a smile and a shake of his head. “Keiran isn’t a burden. I’ll gladly spend time with him. Much rather that than try to figure out how to weasel a horcrux off of the dictator bitch.”

Keiran gave Harry a bemused look.

Harry shook his head, his expression grim. “You really don’t want to know about her. No one but Filch liked that cow,”

He frowned and reached towards Harry, his hand tracing tiny lines on Harry’s thumb. The man sighed. “Oh, all right. But not here, okay? It’s hard to get into and I’ll need Severus to keep me sane.”

Keiran nodded and pressed his whole hand against Harry’s thumb.

“For now,” Harry said softly, looking at the little teenager, “Dean, do you have any idea why Keiran is … more?”
Dean frowned. “Um, any hints?”

“Well, we have an answer for me,” Seth said with a shrug. “Since Harry’s core is life magic, it gave me a mind of my own, so to speak. But as for Keiran, we’re lost.”

Harry nodded. “Really, all we know for Keiran is that Severus’ mum loved his photo and kept it close to her heart all the time, but that doesn’t explain why he’s cognizant. Lots of people have photos they cherish and none of those photos are real like he is.”

Dean shook his head. “I know less than you do, Harry.”

Luna gave them a bemused look. “Keiran and Seth both have souls. Why should they not have life?”

Harry gaped. “Souls? They do? I … Merlin.” He bit his lip and traced a gentle fingertip along Keiran’s cheek. “We have to help them. But how? I don’t even understand how they came across souls of their own, or how Keiran even has life at all. How do we help them then?”

“Well,” said Luna, “for Seth, it’s quite simple. Where there is life, there is a soul—unless Dementors or horcruxes interfere. When Seth inherited a life-force, a new soul was born into him.”

Harry gave his little brother a smile. “That’s … that’s beautiful, Lu. And a relief to know he’s really his own person.”

Seth nodded ferociously. “I’m glad of it too, but what about Keiran?”

Luna frowned. “Keiran … I cannot say for certain. It seems that love primed him for life, but did not give it to him. An event other than his mother’s love changed him, but I cannot see what it was. Let me look into it more. Perhaps the colour of his core will explain things.”

Harry cocked his head. “His core?”

Luna nodded. “Two colours I have never seen—emerald green and dark purple. I have no idea what either means. A bit of research into the matter might clear things up. It couldn’t hurt, anyway.”

Harry frowned. “Wait a moment. Severus’ core is dark purple, so Keiran probably just inherited that one from him. But emerald—I could swear I’ve heard of someone …. Again, whatever he had remembered slipped through his mind like sand in a sieve. And no wonder, with everything he had to concentrate on lately. He felt torn in a hundred directions these days, so it was no surprise he had trouble focusing on any one thought.

Luna gave him a bright smile. “Don’t worry, Harry. Secrets on the tip of our tongues always find their way out eventually.”

Seth gave her a bemused look. “Uh … all right.”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe you’re right, Lu.” He sighed and gave her a wry smile. “It’s not as if I don’t have enough to worry about anyway.”

Luna chanted, “Dark lords, werewolves, and horcruxes—oh my!”

Harry burst into laughter. “And Umbridge stars as the witch of the west!”

Dean snorted. “Something tells me you’re going to need more than a bucket of water to do that wicked witch in.”

Harry’s mirth dissolved into a groan. “Don’t suppose I can just drop a house on her?”
“The aurors would probably not take kindly to that,” said Luna with a chuckle.

“Pity,” said Harry with a sigh.

Somehow, Minerva and Poppy had convinced Filius and Aurora to a double date in Hogsmeade after dinner without tipping off Albus. They had chosen Hogsmeade because it was well-attended and rumours would place them exactly where they had said they would be for the duration of a meal and friendly conversation between couples. Once the meal had ended, however, Minerva motioned to her colleagues to follow her towards the Shrieking Shack.

“Minerva, dear,” said a bemused Filius, “why—”

She placed her finger over his lips and shook her head. Her grim expression must have convinced him that something more serious than dinner was on the table, as he simply nodded to Aurora and followed the ladies into the shack.

Once they were safely inside, Poppy first began removing the tracking and listening spells from Minerva, then herself. Then, without a word, they turned to Aurora and Filius and began removing what spells they could. Minerva did not dare touch the core leech on Filius’ magic as it did not actually give Albus any ability to listen in, and disturbing it might well lead to a state worse than death for all of them. No, best to let Potter take care of that monstrosity.

At least Aurora was relatively clean, though the spell to wear her nerves thinner than usual and to make her more susceptible to manipulation made both women see red.

“Now that those vile spells are off of us,” Minerva said with a grimace, “I confess Poppy and I had an ulterior motive for dinner tonight. We have discovered some truly disturbing revelations about our employer today and recently, and thought you had best be aware of them.”

Filius went stark white and Aurora swayed into his shoulder.

“A-about Albus?” The woman looked as though she might vomit. “But ….”

Poppy sent a healing spell at the woman and conjured a seat for her. “Sit down, Aurora.”

The witch obeyed with a little whimper of fear.

“Before we say anything further,” said Minerva in her sternest tones, “I must ask that you take a vow of secrecy. Anything we reveal tonight could get any number of people killed if you reveal it to the wrong people, Harry included. If you feel you cannot be trusted with such risky information, we will have little choice but to Obliviate you and send you on your way.”

Filius hopped into Aurora’s lap and stared at the women, clearly trying to make heads or tails of this strange information.

“Minerva, do you have proof of these accusations?”

She gave a bitter laugh. “More than I ever wanted, but if proof is what you require, Filius, then you need look no further than your own core. However, I must warn you, do not attempt to alter what you find there. That kind of … damage requires the powers of a mage or a powerful ritual to
correct.”

Filius paled. “My … my core? What on earth is wrong with it?”

“Look for yourself, Filius,” said Poppy with a grim expression. “You will never believe it from our lips. But do heed Minerva’s words and do not try to alter such a dangerous spell. The backlash will kill us all.”

Filius swayed. “A core leech. You are surely not suggesting ….”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” Minerva said with a huff. “Just look, Filius. Or if that will not convince you, attempt to use your goblin magic.”


Aurora rubbed the man’s shaking shoulders. “What did the spell do, Filius?”

“Nothing,” Filius breathed. “It did nothing, when it should have turned the wood here to metal. My powers ….”

“He truly has stolen them,” said Minerva, her expression full of sorrow and betrayal. “Aurora, Filius, I do understand your hesitation, but you know me well, my friends. You know how staunchly I have defended Albus over the years. Do you think anything less than absolute proof of his guilt would have turned me against him?”

Filius and Aurora exchanged a look. She nodded, and Filius turned back to Minerva, his expression grim and his eyes hard as flint. “We will take your vow of secrecy, then.”

“Thank Merlin,” said Poppy with a sigh.

Later that night, a tabby Patronus leapt onto Severus’ chest and nuzzled him awake. The man groaned and cast a Tempus. Two in the morning.

“This had better be good,” Severus muttered. “Harry, pet, wake up.”

The young man grumbled but sat beside Severus and leaned against his bare chest. “Mm. Don’ wanna.”

Severus petted Harry’s hair. “So I see, but Minerva has sent us a Patronus. I think it is best that we listen to her.”

Harry nodded and rubbed his eyes. “Okay. I’m up. Sort of.”

Severus snorted and tapped the cat’s head. “Go on, Minnie. Harry and I are listening.”

The tabby gave them a distinctive cat-got-the-canary grin. “I would like to report that two more supports have been knocked out from under Albus’ platform. Poppy and I just swore Filius and Aurora into the Dawn. And the four of us have decided to offer ourselves as instructors when the city needs them. I do apologise for interrupting your rest, but Poppy thought you would wish to know immediately. We have informed Remus as well. Goodnight, boys.”
The cat licked their hands and vanished.

Harry let out a whoop of glee. “Hah! We’re really starting to get our army together, huh, Verus?”

Severus smiled and tucked his mate into his arms. “So it seems, love. Now, let us return to bed. We shall have a busy morning. Again.”

Harry shivered and snuggled close. “I still think we should just drop a house on the bitch and be done with it.”

Severus frowned. “A … house?”

Harry snickered. “It’s nothing really. Let’s just get some sleep.”

Severus shrugged and held Harry tight. The morning to come would be dangerous, but knowing he had two more friends on his side gave him the confidence to face the Ministry without fear.
Warning: Umbridge. She’s so foul she deserves her own warning. Also, Harry disguises himself as a woman again.

Summary: Harry and Severus infiltrate Umbridge’s territory, ferret out her plans, and discover that the woman is even more evil than they had thought. A desperate rescue attempt at the Atrium turns dangerous, and in his determination to save Harry, Severus discovers abilities he never dreamed existed.

***AN: This is the second to last chapter of the first book in the series, but more is coming soon. Sorry for the delay on this. Pain has been stealing my focus again.***

***AN2: Please note that the section where they’re talking about Harry’s disguise isn’t meant to demonstrate how either man believes a woman SHOULD dress or act, it’s just an attempt to help Harry blend in with the upper echelons of pureblood society. No offense is intended.***

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CHAPTER 31
ACROSS ENEMY LINES

Harry, currently in Holly’s form, glared at Severus, holding up the tube of fabric by the tips of his fingers as if it was toxic. “You can’t be serious.”

Severus chuckled darkly. “Oh, I am indeed.”

“But … but I’m not a girl! Not really.”

Severus sighed. “Harry, pet, I know. And once we are finished with the meeting, I will transfigure it into trousers for you. But at least until we are done with Umbridge, you must wear a skirt this time.”

Harry scowled at the black fabric, half-wishing his gaze could make it catch fire. “I don’t understand why a blouse and a pair of pants isn’t dressy enough.”

“Because you’re going into a meeting with the frilliest and most hypercritical bigot in the entire Ministry. If you expect to be taken seriously, I’m afraid you’ll have to make do with the skirt this once.”

Harry sighed and tugged off his sleep pants. “Merlin, I hate it when you make sense.”

Severus laughed and kissed Harry’s cheek. “It is only for a short while. I will assist you out of that as soon as possible.”

Harry’s breath caught. “Is that a hint that I shouldn’t take the gender swapping antidote today?”

Severus closed his eyes and shook his head. “I believe it may still be too early in our relationship to take such a step. You do tend to fear that I will prefer you as a female over your natural body, and I
think we shall need to conquer that fear before I will be able to take you as a female with no serious repercussions for our relationship.”

Harry pressed his legs together around a surge of heat and desire. “Talking about taking me either way is not helpful, Verus. I mean, I suppose it’s good I can’t get hard in this form but Merlin, I can still feel it!”

Severus smirked. “Just think of who we are about to meet and that should take care of any issues that may arise. Or not.”

That absolutely took care of Harry’s issues. He groaned and shot Severus a glare. “Of all the ways to kill the mood, did it have to be her?”

“Frills and kittens, Harry. Frills and kittens.”

Harry shuddered and put the skirt aside to pull on his stockings instead. “She’s ruined me for cats forever.”

Severus nodded. “At least the fluffy, gambolling kind, to be sure. Hurry and get dressed. We cannot afford to be late.”

“All right.”

Harry struggled with his stockings—Severus had to help get them over his hips—and slipped on his flats. After a quick brush of his hair—he kind of liked it long—and tucking his blouse into his skirt, he thought he was ready.

“Unfortunately, we’re not quite done. Sit there.” Severus motioned to the desk chair and conjured a mirror on the wall behind it. “Be grateful a spy must pick up many skills, else we would need to rely on one of your female friends for this, I fear.”

“Uh ….” Harry stared bemusedly at the black bag in Severus’ hand. “For what?”

Severus removed a tube of rouge and gave Harry a wry look. “Makeup and jewellery.”

Harry gulped. “I … I have to wear makeup too? And what kind of jewellery?”

“Just a necklace for today. I cannot pierce your ears half an hour before the meeting, but it may be something to think about if you wish to continue with a female persona.”

Harry blanched. “Severus, I … aren’t we taking this a bit far? I’m not sure I’m ready for ear piercings and such.”

Severus kissed Harry’s forehead. “I will not force them on you. Many women choose to avoid piercings. It is only that, as a spy masquerading as a woman, the more you appear to be a woman of means, the fewer will question you. There is also the fact that many men pierce their ears, so it would be potentially helpful for either gender. However, as I said, I will not push you if you would prefer not to.”

Harry nodded uncertainly. “Okay. I’ll … think about it. But I’m not ready for today. The skirt and the makeup is odd enough.”

“I know, love. I will keep it light.”

“Thanks.”
Severus tipped up Harry’s chin and applied a light layer of powder—it felt dry—a bit of itchy brown eyeliner, and some pink lip gloss. He pulled out a black tube and frowned at it.

“I am not sure if I should use this or not.”

“What is it?”

“Mascara. Most women do tend to use it when they wear makeup and without it, your reddish hair makes your lashes too light, but with it, being your first time, it may irritate your eyes even with a spell.”

Harry hesitated. “How long would I have to wear it?”

“Throughout the meeting, however long that might take, and long enough to find an empty loo or hideout.”

“So … maybe an hour and a half?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Do it then. I’d rather be safer and deal with itchy eyes than otherwise.”

Severus nodded and pulled the wand out. “I will heal your eyes discreetly whenever I notice irritation. Look up.”

Harry obeyed and tried not to blink as Severus applied the lightest possible coat. Even so, Harry’s eyelids felt heavy and sticky when the man was finished.

“I believe that will do.” Severus replaced all the makeup and conjured a mirror for Harry.

Harry frowned at his appearance. “I don’t look that much different from usual. Well, for Holly’s usual anyway.”

“I did not put much on you. It is only your first time, and women tend not to wear as much makeup during the day or to professional settings anyway. Not all do, of course, but we are going for blending in here and dramatic makeup would make you stand out. None at all might bring unwanted attention too, so this, I think, is the safest option.”

Severus cast a spell on Harry’s face, sending cool tingles over his skin that dissolved after an instant. “That will hold the makeup in place so you need not reapply it every ten minutes.” He sent the cosmetic bag back to a corner of his wardrobe and Summoned a pearl necklace from a small jewellery box beside it. “And this will give the impression of a high-class woman without being too flashy.” Harry tipped his head up for Severus to slip the pearls around his neck.

“Ah, now stand up. Let me have a look.”

Harry obeyed, blushing and tugging at the hem of his skirt.


“Well, as I am uncomfortable ….”

Severus frowned. “Would you prefer to lay this identity aside? I will appear as our female alter egos if you wish.”
Harry gave him a wry smile. “I’m fine, love. Just whinging because I’m not used to it and a little embarrassed.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s cheek. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about. You are lovely, male or female, and I adore you in all your forms. Now, do you think you can do this with confidence, pet? Holly cannot appear to be uncertain or we have already lost the game.”

Harry squared his shoulders and nodded. “I’m ready.”

“Then let’s go.”

Umbridge worked as the head of the Improper Use of Magic Office in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, a fact which Severus greatly appreciated as it gave Shacklebolt a reason to position himself and Order-sympathetic aurors near the bitch’s office that morning. The head auror nodded as Severus entered the department, ‘Holly’ at his side.

“Morning, Xavier, Miss Black. You here on business?” The man was really asking: ‘Are we starting the mission now?’

Severus gave the man a barely perceptible nod. “Of course—it’s always business at the Ministry. How is your unit doing this morning? Not too busy, I hope?” ‘Yes. Are your units in place? Any trouble to be aware of?’

“All fine. It’s a nice quiet morning.” ‘We’re ready and the coast is clear.’

“Good to know,” said Harry. “We’ll be off then—don’t want to be late for our meeting.” ‘We’re on our way. Watch our backs.’

Kingsley nodded and waved them on. Severus cast a surreptitious healing spell on Harry’s eyes, just in case, and led his partner to the head’s office, where a giant porcelain plaque bore Umbridge’s name and titles and an obscene amount of pink frills.

Severus shuddered. What kind of ninny turned their nameplate into a doily? “Merlin.”

“Indeed,” Harry replied, disgust clear on his features.

Severus steeled himself and knocked at the door.

“Who is it?”

The high, prissy voice of the bitch herself sent a trickle of revulsion down Severus’ spine. Merlin, he’d heard more than enough of it in Harry’s fifth year.

“It’s Holly Black and Xavier Prince, Madam,” Harry said with a scowl. “We’re here to discuss the advancement of the Muggleborn Registration Committee, as we discussed in our letters yesterday.”

“Oh, yes. Do come in.”

Severus forced his face into a mild expression and checked that Harry had controlled his scowl before opening the door. As soon as he stepped inside, he thought his eyeballs might try to gouge themselves out of their sockets.
It was like walking into a demented doll house. Umbridge had whitewashed the standard Ministry beige walls, but Severus might not have noticed for the explosion of pink atop it. The infamous kitten plates hung over a wall of lace-decorated plaques and accolades, and a dainty tea caddy with a fresh tea service and kitten-covered biscuit trays sat beneath that. An antique white bookcase with doilies on every shelf sat in the corner by the window, boasting titles such as *Crazed Creatures: Werewolves and the Risks They Pose to Civilised Society*, *Banishing the Beasts: It’s for Our Own Good*, and *Segregation and You*.

And at the centre of this twisted juxtaposition of hyperfemininity and evil, was the wicked witch herself, decked out in her usual pink cardigan and with the same gaudy bow perched atop her hair. She sat at a delicate white desk, papers arranged in orderly rows and secured with pink ribbons, sipping at a cup of tea. With a simpering smile, she stood and curtsied as her guests came into the office.

“Ah, Holly, Xavier, good morning. Please, do help yourself to some tea and have a seat.”

Severus bowed. “Thank you, Madam. We will gladly take of some refreshment.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at him and Severus made a note to be careful about his speech mannerisms—few people took such pains to be articulate and formal. He would have to relax his rules a bit to keep his cover.

As he made his way to the tea service, Severus spoke to Harry over their Legilimentic link. “Swallow nothing. Do not even let it touch your skin.”

Harry poured a cup for himself and dropped in a sugar cube. “Yeah, I’ve endured enough of ‘tea time with Umbridge’ to know better than to swallow anything she offers. I’ll put a barrier around the tea so we can make it look like we’re drinking without actually touching the stuff.”

“Yes, do.”

“We’ll pass on the biscuits, if you don’t mind,” Harry said out loud, giving a charming smile. “We had a rather large breakfast and I’m watching my figure, if you understand.”

“Oh, but you simply *must* try one of the raspberry medallions.” Umbridge waved at the confections and smiled back. “My house elves made them fresh this morning—it’s a family recipe, quite delicious with a spot of hot Earl Grey.”

Harry gave a little titter that sounded for all the world like Narcissa Malfoy. “Oh, well in that case, I suppose one wouldn’t hurt.”

Severus warned, “*Don’t touch it. Levitate it.*”

“Okay.”

Severus watched him closely, ready to clear a spell from his system should the cookies have a hex or potion that activated on contact with skin, but Harry moved his hand to hover over the biscuit and levitated it to his plate without a hitch. He levitated one to Severus too.

“There you are, love,” ‘Holly’ said with a cheeky grin. “If I must cheat on my diet, I’m taking you down with me.”

Severus gave him a wry smile. “I have no idea why you think you need to diet, but I’ll play along if it makes you happy, love.”
Harry flashed him a grin. “Good, it’s best that you learn who wears the pants in the family before the wedding.”

Severus chuckled. “My dear, you are wearing a skirt.”

“Technicalities, love.”

Severus smiled and led Harry to a chair before Umbridge’s desk, seating him before taking his place beside his partner. Harry pulled out his skirt and crossed his legs, sitting prim and proper as a lady of the manor. That, plus Holly’s little comments about her figure and such had established her as a prissy, uppercrust pureblood—exactly the type of woman they wanted to portray to Umbridge.

“Dear gods, Harry. You’re bloody amazing.”

The only sign Harry had heard was a slight upwards quirk of his mouth, the fluorescent Ministry lights glinting on his glossy lips. “Now that we’re all settled—” Severus felt a prickle of magic wash over his cup. “—and have some lovely tea to refresh ourselves with—” Harry sipped at his cup and set it down. “Let’s get right to the purpose for this meeting.”

Now that Severus could touch his wand without giving the game away—the desktop hid most of his hands—he checked their cups surreptitiously. The spell he used was one of his own invention, perfect for spying in enemy territory. After a quick, invisible scan, the presence of any potions, poisons, or other unsavoury elements added to food or drink would announce itself to his hearing alone. No one else could hear or see anything.

As Severus had suspected, the tea wasn’t just for drinking.

“Veritaserum in the tea. Act dazed.” He ‘sipped’ his own cup, making sure no drop touched his skin just in case the spell had missed something. After a moment, he let his eyes unfocus and his jaw go slack.

“Enjoying your tea?” Umbridge tittered. Severus ached to strangle her. “Oh, I do so love a good strong cuppa in the mornings.” She sipped her own cup and smirked. “Well, let’s get down to business, shall we?”

Harry and Severus stared into space.

“Good, good. Looking just right.” Umbridge took out a lace-covered journal and a bright pink quill. “Now then, if you will, tell me your name, Miss Holly.”

“Holly Maureen Black.”

Umbridge frowned. “What is your real name, dear?”

“Holly Maureen Black.”

“Hmm. Very well. And you, sir, what is your real name?”

“Xavier Sebastian Prince.”

Umbridge scowled. “I thought for sure ….” She shook herself. “Well, never mind it. What is your opinion of Muggleborns, Miss Holly?”

“Some can be nice individually, but as a whole, they are a threat to our society and the purity of our blood.”
“Good answer, Harry. She’ll lap that up like milk for her kittens.”

“Her turn is coming. I’ve spelled the Veritaserum into her cup.”

“Good. As soon as she drinks, the charade ends.”

“Understood.”

Severus and Harry let the ruse continue while Umbridge questioned them on blood purity—both theirs and their opinion on the subject as a whole—creature rights, their opinion of the war, the Ministry, and Riddle, who owned the Prophet, and if they knew the location of Undesirables 1 and 2. Severus and Harry were careful to walk a neutral line, presenting themselves as people who did not pose an immediate threat to her goals but who also weren’t useful enough to collect.

Umbridge had a moue of discontent on her face as she switched out their tea with fresh cups. By her expression, Severus reckoned they had done their job well. She wasn’t pleased, but she also wasn’t livid. As the woman had absolutely no control over her temper—if they had completely infuriated her, they would know it. And so would the rest of the department.

“Well, that’s all I needed to know,” she said with a sigh. “Do eat your biscuits before they go stale.”

Another quick scan set Severus on edge. “Do not eat the biscuit. It contains the antidote to Veritaserum, but also a powdered form of Obliviate.”

“I’ve put a barrier around them. Pretend to take a bite but Banish the end instead.”

“Well done.”

Severus obeyed, Banishing his ‘bite’ into an evidence bag in his pocket. He banished a bit of the tea from the tainted pot into a phial there as well.

Meanwhile, he pretended to be dazed and confused as someone just Obliviated would act. Beside him, Harry had assumed the same affect.

“Now, we’ve just finished a lovely conversation on your backgrounds,” said Umbridge with a satisfied smile, “and we’re just about to start talking about your ideas for the Committee. Do take a bit of your tea. You look parched.”

Severus scanned the cups. “They’re clean this time.”

A wash of barrier magic swept over his cup anyway. “I’m taking no chances, not with her.”

“Good plan.” Severus lifted his cup to his lips and, as before, pretended to sip, just as Umbridge took a drink of her own tea.

The effect was instantaneous. The moment she swallowed, her jaw went slack and her toady eyes unfocused.

“Gotcha.” Harry fastened her wrists to the chair with a wandless sticking spell and bound her legs together with rope. Another spell warded the door and silenced the room. Severus cast a third to disable any monitoring devices on the room, and Harry added his power to it as well.

“Okay, Xavier. We’re good to go.”

Severus Summoned a Dicta-quill and a stack of parchment from Harry’s purse. With a grimace, he licked the end of the quill and set it to record all voices within the room.
“For the record,” Severus said in a clear, authoritative voice, “the date is 27 August, 1997, 10:36 in the morning. Undercover agents for the Court of the Dawn, Xavier Prince and Holly Black, are currently in the office of Delores Jane Umbridge, head of the Improper Use of Magic Department for the Ministry of Magic of Britain. Madam Umbridge is suspected of conspiracy to commit genocide, conspiring with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and a host of other crimes, the full list of which is too long to mention here.

“Agents Black and Prince met with Madam Umbridge under the pretence of furthering her anti-Muggle regime. At the start of the meeting, Madam Umbridge offered tea and biscuits to both agents. Through the use of the Mysterincepere charm, Agent Prince was able to identify Veritaserum in the tea and a Veritaserum antidote and a powdered form of Obliviate within the biscuits. Agent Black conjured a magical barrier to prevent ingestion of the tainted food and drink. Once their safety was assured, both agents pretended to partake of the tea and acted as if the potion had taken effect.

“While the agents emulated the effects of Veritaserum, Madam Umbridge interrogated Agents Black and Prince on their identity, as well as several suspicious questions as to their position in the war. Pensieve memories will be included in the evidence files from both agents.

“Madam Umbridge is now under the influence of Veritaserum batch SS-534 herself, administered through her own tea. Samples of the unauthorised potion are included with this recording, as well as the potion administered by Agent Black.

“This begins the official Dawn interrogation of Delores Umbridge, taken at 10:45 A.M. on 27 August, by Agent Prince, with Agent Black assisting.”

Harry smirked. “Merlin, you’re amazing, Verus. You sound like a real auror.”

Severus suppressed a chuckle lest the quill record it. “Yes, well, when you’ve been questioned by them as often as I have, you learn their techniques.”

Harry frowned. “One day, I’ll fix that for you, love.”

“One day. For now, let us get back to our own investigation.”

“Right.”

Severus cleared his throat. “Madam Umbridge, what is your real name?”

Harry snorted.

“Delores Jane Umbridge,” the woman answered in a monotone.

“And where do you work?”

“The Improper Use of Magic Office, in the Ministry of Magic.”

“Good. And who do you work for?”

“The Minister of Magic and the Dark Lord.”

Severus scowled. “That is not surprising in the least.”

“Right foul witch,” Harry muttered. “Well then, if you’re working for Riddle, Umbridge, what’s the real purpose of the Muggleborn Registration Committee?”

“To eradicate all wizards and witches of Muggle descent and restore purity of blood to Britain.” That
she spoke of such terrible crimes with no evidence of emotion, potion or no, made her confession all the more terrifying.

Cold dread trickled down Severus’ spine. “Dear gods,” he breathed.

Harry nodded, eyes wide and staring, and slipped his hand into Severus’.

The former spy’s training helped him recover his wits quickly. He cleared his throat, swallowed his horror, and focused on the interrogation with brutal efficiency.

“What have you, as of this moment, murdered any Muggleborns?” Severus took pride that he was able to speak the words without his voice shaking despite the icy pit of dread in his chest.

“None as of yet,” Umbridge said. “The Prophet’s interference blocked our adverts and no one has come.”

Severus frowned in thought, trying to be sure that he covered all his bases. “Hmm. And how do you plan to circumvent that problem?”

“The Snatchers and the WWN will bring the thieves of magic to the Ministry, whether they come voluntarily or not.”

Severus swallowed hard. “So, to clarify, you are planning to abduct Squibs and those of Muggle descent and force them to register at the Ministry?”

“Yes.”

Harry scowled, but kept whatever diatribe he wanted to unleash to himself.

Severus laid the parchment on the desk, fearing his trembling hands might interfere with the quality of their transcription. “I—indeed. And what will you do with them when they have been registered?”

A twisted smile crossed Umbridge’s face. “We will purge the impure from society.”

Harry narrowed his eyes and leaned forwards. “How exactly do you plan to do that?”

“They will have a trial where it will be proven they stole their magic, and then they will be stripped of their wands and fed to the Dementors.”

“Mother of Merlin,” Harry gasped out, reeling back in horror. “She’s demented herself!”

Severus took Harry’s hand. “Do not worry, pet. They will not succeed, not now. With this information, we will send out an emergency broadcast on the WWN and ensure that every Muggleborn and Squib in the United Kingdom knows the true purpose of this vile Registration Committee.”

Harry nodded, holding a hand over his mouth as if he were going to be sick. Severus felt much the same.

“Miss Umbridge,” said Severus in a cold voice, “I believe that is enough information for the moment. This concludes our investigation.” He clicked the Dicta-quill and packed both the interrogation results and quill away in Harry’s purse once more. “The official investigation, at any rate. Now, off the record. Where is the locket you wore to the square in Diagon Alley some weeks ago when you first met Holly and myself? The locket of Slytherin?”

“I am wearing it.”
“Good. Is it warded?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“It is warded to my blood.”

“Are there any other wards?”

“No.”

Severus scowled. “Well, that is easy enough to remedy. Holly?”

The mage nodded. “Would you like to do the honours?”

“Gladly.”

Severus flicked his wand at the woman’s hand and collected a small amount of blood into a phial. While Harry restrained the woman, Severus carefully spelled open the top two buttons of her blouse—he would sooner gnaw off his own fingers than touch that foul hag—and dropped the blood on her locket. It gave a hiss and clicked, then fell to the floor.

“That’s that then.”

Severus duplicated it and fastened the false locket onto Umbridge’s neck, then Harry Summoned it and tucked it away in his purse. Concentrating hard, Severus performed a bit of complicated chanting and took three more drops of blood. When he had finished his spells, the locket bore the same aura of evil without actually being a horcrux and was warded in the exact same manner. She would not know the difference.

Harry nodded. “Done?”

Severus sealed the wound in the woman’s hand, Banished the blood, and spelled her blouse closed. Then he petrified the bitch and, with a grimace, forced her mouth open and fed her the Veritaserum antidote. From the relative comfort of his seat, he Obliviated and Confunded her before removing the petrification spell and releasing her bonds.

Umbridge smacked her lips and blinked toady eyes at them. “Ah, hem-hem. Where … what …?”

Severus assumed a polite smile. “Ah, did you zone out there for a moment?” There. Let her attribute a vernacular phrase such as that to Severus Snape. “No trouble, I don’t mind to recap. For the time being, we’ve all come to the conclusion that the Muggleborn Registration Committee, as it stands, is just too much of a bother. What with the Prophet getting in the way and spreading lies about our noble goals, we’ll need a different method to cull the impurities from wizarding society.”

Umbridge shook herself lightly. “Yes, we must find a new way to cull the impure.”

“Just as we said,” said Harry with a nod. “This Committee of yours is simply too bulky. You need something more streamlined, more efficient.”

“Yes, streamlined.” Umbridge shook her head once more and looked to a ghastly kitten clock above the bookcase. “Well, I thank you for your time, but it looks like I’m late to meet the Minister. Another time, perhaps?”

Harry gave her a false smile. “Looking forward to it.”
“Good day, madam.” Severus stood and offered Harry his arm. His partner slipped his arm around Severus’ elbow and let the older man lead him from the office.

Harry pursed his lips all through Severus’ meeting with Tonks, who had switched places with Shacklebolt as per the plan.

“Hello, Dora,” Severus said. “I have the papers you asked for.” Which translated to: ‘The mission was a success.’

Tonks smiled. “Good, good. Remus will be glad to hear it.” ‘As will the Dawn.’

“Stop by tonight and I’ll give it to you. Don’t want to interfere with your work.” ‘We’ll discuss it at the meeting tonight.’

“Sure thing. Have a good day, Xavier. And you, Holly.”

“Later, Tonks,” Holly muttered and dragged Severus away. He made it to the lifts—thankfully empty at the moment—before he started cursing. “Of all the vile, foul, disgusting bitches, she’s the worst. Do we have enough to put her away permanently?”

Severus sighed, his expression pained. “If we were aurors or the Ministry wasn’t entirely corrupt, absolutely.”

Harry winced. “So it’s going to have to wait.”

Severus switched to mental speech. “Perhaps not. If we list this information in the Prophet, or even simply run an exposé of all the crimes she committed against—”

The lift dinged. “Level one: Atrium.”

Severus led Harry from the lifts and continued. “—committed against the students while acting as headmistress of Hogwarts, it might be enough to take her down.”

Harry nodded. “But if we use all our ammunition now when the Ministry is still corrupt, we won’t have any shockers for when we actually have a solid chance of success. Right now, the Minister is under Imperius. He’ll just pardon her, and then we’ll have nothing to charge her with when we do have a proper administration.”

“In that case, perhaps we should simply publish the information about the Registration Committee. Corrupt Ministry or no, lives are in danger. We must take action before they—”

“Move along there, you lot.”

Severus looked up at the sound of a familiar voice.

“Oi! I said move it.”

Ahead, a large group of people huddled by the ‘Magic is Might’ statue—vile monstrosity—and whispered among each other. Fear and confusion marked their expressions, but Severus did not have time to search for the owner of the familiar voice before Harry gasped, yanked on his arm, and dragged him away down a side corridor.

“Pet? What’s wrong?”

Harry whispered in his ear. “That group of people—there were Death Eaters with them. Looks like the Registration list just got a jumpstart.”
Severus winced. “Merlin help them.”

Harry’s face set in a grim smile. “That’s exactly what I have planned.”

Harry led his soul-bond into an empty alcove and cast several intense wards to shield them from notice. “We’re not going to let them die. I won’t stand by and let them die.”

“I retract my former statement,” said Severus with a groan. “Merlin help us.”

Harry smirked. “I’ll do my best.”

“This mage situation has gone to your head, you know.”

Harry laughed. “Just hand me a new glamour potion and the gender change antidote. I’m no good trying to fight like this.”

“Fair enough.”

Harry took both bottles and gritted his teeth through the gender change. Once he was a man again—and dressed like a man, though with longer hair—he doffed the glamour potion and assumed the appearance of a slender, blonde male.

“I look like a Malfoy.”

Severus snorted. “Your hair is not pale enough.” He cast a cleansing charm at Harry’s face and a spell to remove irritation. “You are now free of feminine wiles.”

“Except for the purse,” he said with a wry look at the object in question.

“There is no time to worry about it.” Severus took it himself, though he lengthened the strap to wear it like a messenger bag. After taking another glamour potion, Severus was a redhead.

“Good enough,” said Harry with a nod. He removed their wards, grabbed his wand, and stepped out into the corridor. “Signal Tonks and King, will you?”

“Already done.”

“Ah, good.”

As Harry passed the lifts, the aurors had just emerged. Harry whispered to Tonks, “Hey, it’s us. Severus and Harry.”

Tonks whispered back, “Oh, you changed! Er … what’s the plan, exactly?”

Harry frowned. “Um … run in there and yell ‘Death Eaters?’”

“That would cause a panic to be sure,” said Kingsley with a nod. “As long as you shield us and the innocents first, Harry, it might just work to our advantage.”

Severus gaped. “Just run in there and … that is the most Gryffindor, moronic, brainless plan I’ve ever heard!”
Harry grinned. “Good. I’ve had enough of being a Slytherin. Let’s do this Gryffindor style.”

“Works for me,” said Tonks with a feral grin. “Badgers play both sides, you know.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “May the gods have mercy on our souls.”

“Amen,” said Kingsley, and raised his wand.

Harry bolted into the Atrium, cast a heavy shield over the Muggleborns and bystanders, and cried, “Death Eaters! Run!”

Pandemonium broke out. People screamed and made mass runs for the floo exits, spells fired off left and right, and curses rang off the walls. Tonks and Kingsley bolted after the actual Death Eaters, Kingsley roaring with anger.

“Yaxley! I’m onto you this time!”

Yaxley cursed and grabbed a fleeing captive, using the terrified teenage girl as a shield.

“Curse me and the girl dies!”

“Shite,” Harry breathed. “Verus, get the captives out and warn them not to come back. I’m going to help the girl.”

Severus winced. “Pet, I ….”

“I’m shielded. I’ll be fine. Just hurry.”

“A-are you sure?”

Harry pushed him along a bit. “Yes, go! I’m fine, they’re not!”

Severus hesitated a second longer, then nodded and ran after the terrified, confused Squibs and Muggleborns.

Over jangling worry for his soul-bond, Severus shouted, “The Registration Committee is a lie! It is an excuse to execute anyone who is not of pure blood! Run, go—get out of Britain if you must, but do not come back here!”

Harry listened to Severus’ urging with his eyes on the girl. He had just managed to stun Yaxley and free the girl—“Run! Get out of here!”—when a wand lodged itself at his temple.

“You will pay for disrupting my plans, foolish boy,” a cold voice said in Harry’s ear.

“Fuck me,” Harry cursed.

The voice behind him chuckled darkly. “Perhaps, after I have shown you the cost of defying our lord.”

Stuffing down a sickening jolt of panic, Harry snarled, “Over my dead body.”

He began building a spell, but before he could complete it, cold steel snapped over his wrist and the thrum of his power crackled and fizzled out. Harry looked down, appalled, and winced at the sight of a prison cuff on his wrist. A magic-dampening cuff.

“That can be arranged,” the voice growled, and Harry’s heart stuttered.
Merlin help him, without his power, he was no better off than a Squib. And Harry had no idea how to fight like a Muggle. At least, not against a bear of a man like Runcorn. What on earth was he going to do now? Severus. He needed Severus.

“SE—”

The Death Eater behind him cast some kind of strange spell that turned Harry invisible and silenced him.

A raspy voice whispered in his ear, “Wouldn’t want you to give away my prize now, would you?”

Shite-shite-shite! Harry tried to elbow the man, but the bear just laughed and twisted Harry’s arm back until something cracked. Pain ripping through him from his shoulder to his ribs, Harry tried to scream, but the spell kept his anguish silent. He couldn’t even whisper.

And yet, he still had one way to communicate.

With all his strength, Harry screamed into his mind. “Severus, help me!”

Just as Severus led the last hostage to safety, a chill settled in his chest. He frowned, confused as to the source, and rubbed his ribs, but the chill did not abate. Harry? Was it his link to Harry that had gone cold?

Mother of Merlin, it couldn’t be! Harry was a *mage*! He could handle a single Death Eater, couldn’t he?

*Couldn’t he?*

Terror for his love tore through him and Severus cried out in his mind—even now, he could not risk revealing Harry’s true name, not here.

“*Harry? Are you all right?*”

Only silence answered. Severus’ pulse quickened. Harry was most likely out of range of his Legilimency powers, but nevertheless, the creeping dread chilling his veins would not be denied. Something was wrong.

“*Harry! Answer me!*”

Heart thundering in his ears, Severus whipped around and scanned the Atrium for any sign of his partner, but the man had vanished without a trace, as had the girl and Yaxley. Severus’ stomach dropped into his feet.

“*Merlin, no! Harry, where are you?*”

He followed the source of coldness in his chest, racing towards what appeared to be an empty stretch of tile despite telling himself he’d gone mad with fear, and—*there!*

A broken, pained voice cried into his mind. “*Severus! Help me!*”

Severus’ breath hitched and his heart stuttered. Gods help him, Harry *was* in trouble.
For Harry’s sake, Severus forced his voice steady despite the white-hot edge of panic cutting his insides to ribbons. “Where are you, pet? I cannot see you.”

Harry sobbed in relief. “B-by the fountain. Disillusioned or s-something. Weird spell I’ve never heard of. A Death Eater l-locked my magic and is dragging me toward the floo. I’m f-fighting but we’re hidden. Arm is hurt, badly. Please help. Hurts s-so much.”

Severus veered towards the fountain and dashed towards the sound of Harry’s mental voice, chest aching with the knowledge that his lover was defenceless and injured. Gods, he had to hurry. Any moment now, the Death Eater would get away with him. Then the Dark Lord would …. “Oh, Harry! Hold on, love. I’m coming!”

Harry sobbed back, “Hurry, Verus. I-I’m so scared.”

Severus had reached the fountain, but without being able to see or sense his soul-bond—at least not well enough to pinpoint his location—he had no idea where Harry was. Shite! Where was he?

“I know, love. I … I’m trying to find you.” Heart pounding in his ears, tears stinging his eyes, Severus chanted the first spell that came to mind. “Corporis Revelaro!” The spell broke the cover of an approaching auror, but Harry was nowhere to be found. “No! There must be … Fragmenscutum!!”

Nothing. In desperation, Severus tried spell after spell in rapid-fire succession, even resorting to a chant, but nothing worked. It was no use. Whatever spell the kidnapper had used, it wasn’t responding to Severus’ skills, and he had no idea what to do.

Harry screamed, “Sev’rus, please!”

Severus choked back a sob. “H-hold on, love. I’m trying. I swear, I’m t-trying!”

Tears blurred his vision, but Severus blinked them harshly away. He had to keep looking, but … but how? He couldn’t break through the disillusionment spell, Tonks and Kingsley had gone after the other Death Eaters, and the fountain area was huge. Severus was already running about, searching blindly, but by the time he found Harry, it would likely be too late.

Harry let slip a soft sob. “Verus … I’m sorry. Got overconfident.”

Terror stilled Severus’ heart. “No. Don’t apologise! It’s not over yet.”

Harry’s mental voice sobbed, “Never forget—I love you, Severus.”

“Harry, no! Don’t—please!”

“So s-sorry.”

Severus cried out, “No!”

Harry’s voice was fading, getting further away, and Severus’ heart shattered into a million pieces. He was gone. His beautiful, loving Harry was gone. Someone had stolen him away, and Severus was helpless to save him this time. Harry had saved Severus from the darkness, and now—

And Severus was sitting here weeping about it instead of getting him back! To hell with that. He was no maudlin Gryffindor to let fear and pain make him fall apart. No. He was a Slytherin. A cunning, brilliant, ruthless Slytherin.
And fuck all if he would repay Harry’s love for him by giving up.

Fury and determination burned to life in his chest and Severus raked a hand across his face. No. It couldn’t end like this, damn it! He refused to let their lives, their love end like this. He was a wizard, wasn’t he? Maybe he didn’t know the right spell to undo the spells hiding his beloved, or maybe spells wouldn’t work, but he was only one step below a mage, for Merlin’s sake. He had missed the transition into magehood by a mere hour. If Harry could tap into his intuition to find the right spells then by gods, so could Severus.

“Please,” he begged his magic. “Please help me find him. I must find him!”

Holding that goal in mind like a benediction, Severus slammed all his power into his core, igniting every magic receptor he had. It hurt like hell and knocked the wind from him, but the instant his power connected, he knew it had worked.

If only he knew how.

A moment ago, he had stood in the midst of an almost empty Atrium, cavernous without its usual influx of humanity. The few remaining people had darted every which way around him, screaming, clutching children to their chests, all making beelines for the floo exits. Aurors had just arrived on the scene and were scouting for Death Eaters.

As soon as Severus could open his eyes, he reeled back and stumbled over the edge of the fountain. The marble floors and stone walls of the Ministry had gone, replaced with teeming black caverns and streaks of violet shadow. Orbs of light of all different colours zipped here and there, all dashing towards the black caverns and disappearing.

He whipped around, searching for a landmark, somewhere to tell him what strange world he had fallen into, and discovered the grey shape of the fountain just visible under a stippling of violet streaks. The Magic is Might statue hulked just beyond, its white marble rendered in dark grey and the same violet streaks over it as everything else.

He was still in the Ministry then, but … what had happened? Had he done this? Was it a spell, an alternate dimension? What in Merlin’s name had he done?

“Harry?”

Harry’s voice came back distorted, but Severus could still make out his words.

“Sev’rus, so scared. Can’t fight much longer.”

“I’m coming, pet!”

Severus raced towards the sound, or at least where he thought the sound had come from, but gasped and skidded to a halt as he caught a glimpse of his own legs.

Mother of Merlin, he was entirely black. Light did not react with his body at all—there was no shadow, no highlights, just unrelieved black. He looked like a Severus-shaped cut-out.

“The hell?”

The shock of his condition and Harry’s situation might have caused him to entirely lose his head, had he not noticed the white and red lights bobbing about next to the west side floo exits. He’d seen that somewhere before and every fibre of his being, every instinct he had screamed at him that it was important. Where? Where had he seen it?
Then, he remembered. He’d seen a similar scene the night he tried to rescue Harry from his own mind. When Twycross had died, and Severus had pulled Harry out of his visions before Riddle could torture him, Harry had been a white light and the Dark Lord, gleaming red. In Harry’s mind, the lights had seemed like eyes, but this wasn’t a vision—it was life.

And that meant Severus had just found his soul-bond.

“Harry!”

He dashed to the white light and his heart leapt at the sight of his lover’s shadowy form, struggling for all he was worth against his captor. Severus could have wept in relief, but had no time to waste on emotional release; Runcorn had Harry by the hair, pulling the screaming, struggling Harry inevitably towards the floo, and there was only a metre to go. Harry was struggling—smacking, kicking, giving it all he had and doing a hell of a job despite his injuries—but he hadn’t been trained to fight like a Muggle yet. He didn’t know how to escape a man twice his size without the use of his magic.

 Thankfully, Severus did.

One well-aimed punch to Runcorn’s face, and the bulky man went down. The Death Eater cursed and grabbed at Harry, but Severus whipped his partner away and ran towards the fountain. Runcorn cursed again and escaped through the floo, damn him, but at least Harry was safe.

Harry clung tight to his neck with his uninjured arm, eyes wide and staring through Severus. His left arm hung useless at his side—broken or dislocated, probably.

“Verus? What the … where are you?”

“Right here, pet. I’ve got you.”

“That’s you? You’re holding me?” Harry sobbed and melted into Severus. “Oh, thank Merlin!”

Severus’ heart lurched. “Harry, can’t you see me?”

“N-no. I can’t see anything at all—just darkness.”

Severus’ chest felt as if someone had carved it out. “Oh gods, no! Tell me he did not blind you, love!” If Runcorn had blinded Harry, Severus would never forgive himself.

Harry whimpered. “I d-don’t think so. I could see f-fine until you grabbed me.”

Severus shook his head. “It must be this strange power. Hold on.” With focused effort, he concentrated on shifting out of this frightening place of shadows and lights and back into the Ministry he knew. With a sound like a pop and the feeling as if he had just tumbled through a wall of ice water, Severus staggered into place a few yards from the fountain, holding Harry tight. A visible Harry, thank Merlin.

“Verus,” Harry breathed into his neck. “You saved me.”

“Always, love.” Severus held him tight, weeping his relief into Harry’s hair. He was safe. Harry was battered, cut, broken, and bruised, but he was alive.

“Merlin save you if you ever terrify me like that again!” Severus sobbed into Harry’s hair and clutched his head close. “You brainless idiot, rushing headlong into danger like a fool. I thought I had lost you!”
Harry was crying too. “I’m s-sorry. So sorry.”

With a hushed murmur of love, Severus kissed his mate’s tears away. “Ssh, ssh. Don’t cry, pet. You are safe now. I am … I was only frightened for you. I’m s-so relieved you are safe.”

“Love you, Verus, so much.”

“I love you too.”

Severus kissed him hard, not caring that someone might see. All he cared about was his soul-bond at that moment. Everything else could go to hell.

A deep voice called from somewhere at Severus’ left. “Xavier!”

Severus turned to see Kingsley tearing in, his eyes wide with horror and tears on his lashes. He cast a Notice-Me-Not and silencing ward around them, then dashed to Severus’ side.

“Oh gods, I’m so sorry! Is he okay?”

Severus cradled Harry’s head against his shoulder. “His arm is broken, I think. Beyond that and his obvious injuries, I do not know yet. I cannot perform a magical scan or heal his injuries until that is removed.” He nodded towards Harry’s limp left wrist, shackled with a magic-restraining cuff.

Kingsley cursed and tapped his auror code into the cuff. It dropped off and he pocketed it. “There should be a registration on this. Might help us track down the bastard who did it.”

“It was Runcorn,” Severus said with a scowl. He paused to chant an immobilisation charm and healing spell over Harry’s broken arm. Between the two of them, they got him into a makeshift sling, though not without causing the poor man terrible pain.

“Oh, love. Forgive me.”

“N-not your fault.”

“It is. I should have stayed at your side.”

“No.” Kingsley patted Severus’ arm. “I know you, Severus. I’ve seen how much you adore him. You had no choice but to help those Muggleborns, and none of us knew Runcorn was skulking about.” He frowned. “How did he catch your beloved here, though? Runcorn is no match for him in terms of power.”

“Snuck up behind me and b-bound my power.” Harry moaned in anguish. “I’m useless without my magic.”

“Something we will set about working to correct the moment you are recovered.” Severus held Harry close. “Oh, love. I was so sure I had lost you forever.”

Kingsley gave them a concerned frown. “What did Runcorn do to him, Severus?”

“All I know is that he placed some kind of unbreakable disillusionment ward on him. I … I am still not sure how I found my love here, but when I did, he was a metre from the floo exit. Runcorn escaped while I was getting my … partner here to safety.” Even under silencing charms, Severus still did not dare to say Harry’s name here. There were probably alarms and charms of all sorts hiding in the air.

Kingsley swore. “That bastard—slippery as they come.”
Severus gave a dark laugh. “Perhaps we will be fortunate and Riddle will kill him for failing to capture … his target.” He scowled. “Then again, we are in disguise. The demon will not even realise who Runcorn missed. Damn it.”

“Honestly, I don’t think Riddle can afford to kill any other Ministry spies.”

“Probably not.”

Kingsley sighed. “Is your partner okay?”

Severus scanned Harry and sighed at the results. “He has some internal bruising, many external bruises and cuts, and his left shoulder is dislocated, but there is nothing life-threatening. He will recover.”

“M’sorry,” Harry whimpered into Severus’ throat. “Just wanted to save them.”

Severus kissed his hair. “It’s all right, pet. There was no time to make a better plan. We did what we could, and at least the Muggleborns and Squibs all got away. Did the other attackers escape? I hadn’t an opportunity to identify them beyond Runcorn.”

Kingsley shook his head. “Not all of them. Scabior slunk away before we could catch the bastard, but Yaxley didn’t get by me. He’s getting acquainted with the inside of a maximum-security holding cell. Tonks and Matthews are taking care of his arrest as we speak.”

“Good,” said Severus with a nod. “At least we cost the Death Eaters one Ministry spy today.”

Kingsley gave Severus a sad smile. “Until Thicknesse pardons him, at least.”

“Yes, well, we will deal with that as it comes.”

Kingsley nodded. “For now, let’s just get him to safety. We’ll heal him and take your statement at HQ.”


Severus nodded. “Good thinking, love. Kingsley, the same place we used to clear spells the last time will do.”

“Understood. See you there in about half a minute.”

“Yes.” Severus clutched his mate tight and kissed his temple. “All right, pet. Let’s get you home.”

Harry sniffled and buried his face into Severus’ chest. “Yeah. Home sounds good.”

Severus kissed his beloved and carried him to the floo.
CHAPTER 32
THE BIRTH OF A LEADER

Once Severus had returned home with Harry, he apparated them to the house and set Harry down on a chaise in the living area.

“Ferro!”

The healer elf appeared and winced at the sight of his injured master. “Elfkin! What has happened, Master Harry?”

“Death Eaters at the Ministry,” Harry said with a groan.

The elf’s ears drooped, but he did not ask further questions.

Severus knelt beside his mate and gave the elf a worried look. “What potions does he need? Should we remove his glamours first?”

The elf nodded. “Best to be taking the glamours off, Master Severus.”

“Right.” Severus lifted Harry’s head and helped him swallow the antidote. Harry cried out as his body shifted to its proper shape and colouring.

“Merlin, I am sorry, love.” Severus kissed his forehead. “I am here.”

Harry choked out, “Take your own potion! Weird to have a stranger kiss me.”

Severus gave a wan chuckle and obeyed, shuddering as his own body shifted. “Better?”

“Much.”

Severus kissed the man once more and moved back, letting the healer elf do his work. In the meantime, he Summoned Keiran and Seth—who were anxiously awaiting news of the mission’s success—and sent Kingsley a Patronus with the apparition coordinates to their home. A moment later, the boys came zooming downstairs, wind whipping their hair around their faces.

“Dad!” Seth called. “How’d it go at the Mi—Harry?” He gasped and pressed his hands against the canvas. “Oi! What happened?”
Keiran couldn’t speak, but his face had drained of all colour and his posture had gone rigid.

Severus took the photo in hand and rubbed Seth’s shoulder. “He will pull through, boys. We had a run in with Death Eaters in the Atrium and Runcorn managed to get an anti-magic bracelet on Harry while I was attempting to rescue hostages. However, we saved the hostages and Harry, and took at least one of the Death Eaters into custody.”

Seth winced. “Merlin. Are you okay, Harry?”

Harry grimaced as Ferro shifted his arm. “Okay is definitely a stretch, but I’ll live.”

Just then, Kingsley walked into the living room and nodded to everyone. “Tonks says to let you know Yaxley’s been safely put away and they’re questioning him as we speak, not that it will do much good under this Ministry.”

“Thank you, Shacklebolt.” Severus hardly looked up from the image of his injured lover’s drawn face.

Kingsley clucked at the sight of him and took a seat on the sofa opposite Harry and the elf. “How is he?”

“Been better,” said a grimacing Harry.

“So I see. Is it broken after all?”

Ferro answered for the man. “No, sir auror.” He cast one more spell and turned to Severus. “Master Severus, I’s needing you to hold Master Harry still. It be hurting to push the bones back in place.”

Seth went ashen. “Bones? You just said it wasn’t broken.”

“It isn’t,” said Harry with a wince. “It’s dislocated. Verus, I’m really not looking forward to this.”

Severus floated Keiran into Kingsley’s care and settled behind his soul-bond, wrapping his arms around the man’s waist and uninjured arm. “I am with you, though I, too, hope there is never a need to repeat this experience.”

“Given that we’re in the middle of a war, I’m pretty sure that’s too optimistic.”

“Are you honestly accusing me of optimism?”

Harry snorted. “Well, if the shoe fits.”

“Wash your mouth out.”

Harry laughed, but immediately choked it off with a groan. “Oh gods, that was stupid.”

Severus cradled his head in gentle hands, his expression remorseful. “Forgive me. I only meant to take your mind off the pain, not make it worse.”

“It’s okay. Worked until I laughed.”

“I shan’t make you laugh again then.”

“Promises, promises.”

Ferro gave them a solemn look. “Master Severus, you’s need to hold him tight, so he’s cannot
Severus hugged Harry as tightly as he could. “I think this is the best I can do without a binding spell.”

“No, spell is not good. It be making the muscles too stiff.” Ferro waved his hand one more time. “You’s should be feeling relaxed now, Master Harry.”

“Sur’m,” Harry slurred.

“I believe that was a yes,” Severus said with a chuckle.

Ferro nodded. “Are you ready, Masters?”

Severus nodded. “Ready as we will ever be, I fear.”

Ferro conjured a strip of hard leather. “Bite that, Master Harry.”

Harry obeyed and closed his eyes tight.

“One ….”

The elf sent the spell through Harry before he got to two, an obvious attempt to prevent him tensing in apprehension. Even so, the pain ripped a scream from the young man’s throat. The sound tore the heart from Severus, and he clutched his mate against his chest.

Hoping to soothe him, Severus whispered against Harry’s ear. “You are doing well.” He kissed Harry’s neck lightly and held him tight. “I love you.”

Harry leaned against him, panting, beads of sweat dotting his brow. “Mother of Merlin, that hurt like hell.”

“I is sorry, Master Harry,” said an anxious Ferro. “I’s tried to be gentle.”

Harry gave the elf a wan smile. “S’not your fault. I’m the git who got overconfident and almost threw it all away.”

Seth gasped. “Harry, what happened?”

“Long story,” said the mage with a sigh. “We got through ‘tea with Umbridge’ without a hitch, but when we got to the Atrium, Death Eaters had rounded up a bunch of Muggleborns and Squibs ….”

Once Harry could move without feeling his arm would rip out of the socket, he Summoned his school trunk into the living room and, with some assistance from Severus and Kingsley, created a heavily-warded pocket along the lid for the horcrux. With it safely stored—at least until they learned how to destroy the damned thing—and Harry’s injuries mostly healed, he felt more ready to deal with the repercussions of what they had discovered in Umbridge’s office.

Severus called to Kingsley, his expression grim. “Now that we are finished with Harry’s healing and Tonks has had sufficient time to deal with Yaxley, will you see if she, Lupin, and Arthur are available to meet us here?”
Kingsley nodded and sent a Patronus to those he had mentioned. As the lynx bounded away, Harry sent a message of his own to the Weasley twins.

Severus settled beside his mate and leaned the young man against his chest. “Who are you contacting, love?”

“The twins. I figured we’d best get that emergency broadcast out now.”

“We should at that. The article we sent yesterday was nowhere near a strong enough warning.”

Harry shuddered. “Yeah, even we didn’t think them horrid enough to feed them all to dementors.”

Kingsley dropped Keiran’s photo into his lap. “Dementors?”

“Yeah.” Harry Summoned the photo and cradled Keiran in his uninjured hand, sweeping his magic-coated thumb along the frightened boy’s arm. “Umbridge revealed that’s what she plans to do to everyone of Muggle descent, and the Squibs too. So the sooner they know to be on guard or get out of Britain, the better.”


Keiran nodded vigorously.

A pop made everyone jump. The twins came around the screen into the living area and sat beside Kingsley.

“Afternoon, Harry, Severus,” said George.

“Merlin, mate!” Fred winced at the sight of Harry’s arm, still wrapped in a sling. “What happened?”

Harry gave him a grim look. “Runcorn almost got me. Bastard dislocated my shoulder.”

“Ouch,” said George with a cringe of sympathy. “That hurts.”

“We know—”

“—All too well.”

“One too many—”

“—Experiments gone wrong.”

Arthur and Tonks came around the screen just then. “We heard,” said Arthur with a shake of his head. “Are you all right, son?”

Harry nodded. “I will be. Still hurts, but it’ll be okay in a few days. Thank Merlin for magic!”

Arthur chuckled. “Yes, that injury wouldn’t heal well without it.”

Remus apparated in, his face a picture of concern. “Did the mis—Harry! Merlin, what happened, cub?”

Harry sighed and explained his mistake again, though each time he had to repeat it he felt more like a complete dunderhead. Gods, he should have listened to Severus. The man had tried to warn them, but no. Harry had to go play the hero.
Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. Would he never learn?

“How did Runcorn catch you, Harry?” Tonks shook her head and sat beside Kingsley. “I didn’t think he’d be a match for a mage.”

Harry scowled. “Wasn’t much of a mage with an anti-magic bracelet on my arm, now was I?”

Remus shuddered. “Merlin, cub.” Frowning, he sat beside Tonks and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “How did you get out of that? They’re made to be indestructible.”

Harry looked to his soul bond, frowning at the memory of cold darkness stealing his sight and solid arms carrying him away. “That’s … a very good question, come to think of it. Verus, how exactly did you save me? What kind of power was that? I went blind there for a minute. Thought some other Death Eater had caught me until you started talking to me.”

Severus grimaced. “I have no idea, love. I am shocked that it worked myself.”

Every eye focused on the former spy. Arthur sat on a conjured armchair near the door and gave Severus a searching look. “You’re shocked at your own magic? Was it accidental?”

Severus rubbed his chin in thought. “I do not think so. I have done something similar once before, when I dove into Harry’s mind to spare him having to endure Twycross’ torture and death.”

“You were in his mind at the Ministry?” Tonks frowned. “How? I thought you had to have eye contact for Legilimency.”

“Well, Harry and I have a Legilimentic bond compounded by a soul bond. We can speak to each other mentally without eye-contact.”

Kingsley frowned. “Yeah, but wouldn’t you still need it to enter his mind to find him via Legilimency? I couldn’t see him—I was looking everywhere and it was like he’d vanished off the earth. No revealing spell was working, either.”

Severus shuddered. “I know. I have not felt such terror since the night I was captured.”

Harry slipped his good hand into Severus’ and rubbed his fingers. “I’m sorry, Verus. I should’ve been more careful.” He squeezed Severus’ hand in apology. “But how did you find me if not through our bond? I thought you’d used it too.”

Severus shook his head. “I tried, but the mind link was not specific enough to locate you with its power alone. I used … a new magic. I was … somehow, I became a shadow.”

“A shadow?” Remus’ eyes boggled. “How on … what on earth do you mean, Severus?”

“What I said.” Severus shook his head wryly. “Perhaps I should start at the beginning. Harry was disillusioned and silenced, and, as Shacklebolt said, no spell I could think of would break it. Through our bond, he had managed to communicate that he was seriously injured and Runcorn had him bound with an anti-magic bracelet. We were both terrified—I thought I would lose him, I had almost given up.”

He lowered his head, squeezing Harry’s hand to his chest. “I was terrified we would both die.” He wrapped an arm around Harry’s waist and gently shifted him into his lap. “But at the last moment, I could not let him go.”

Tears pooled on Severus’ lashes. Harry soothed him with a gentle kiss. “I’m here, love. You saved
me—you always do.”

Severus laughed softly and blinked his tears back. “True.” He laid his head against Harry’s. “I would not have survived without you. Please, never frighten me like that again.”

Harry slipped a hand into the older man’s hair. “I’ll do my best.”

“Good.” Severus took a deep breath. “As for how I found you, Harry, I suppose, in part, it may have been wish magic.”

Arthur gasped. “Wish magic? How? Adults don’t generally have access to it.”

Severus held Harry tighter. “I had no other choice but to try, Arthur. Harry’s ability to invent magic inspired me. I thought, since I missed the mage transition myself by only one hour, perhaps I could invent spells of my own. It was my only chance regardless. So, as Harry does when he invents new spells, I called upon my magic to help me find him, and … and it was as if the entire world shifted.”

Kingsley’s eyes went wide. “What do you mean, the world shifted?”

Severus shivered. “I was still in the Ministry, but it looked as if I had stepped into another dimension. It was violet and black everywhere, and I could see core lights everywhere—that is how I found Harry. And myself—when I moved towards Harry’s core light, I nearly fainted. I had become like a shadow. I was completely black—no light or reflection at all. I was like … like a hole, only shaped as myself.”

Fred grinned. “Wicked!”

“Utterly brilliant!”

“Smashing!”

“Fant—”

“We get it, boys,” said Tonks with a snicker.

Seth and Keiran burst into laughter—silent on Keiran’s part. Harry gave them both a warm smile.

“So Seth likes it,” said Fred with a wink.

George smirked. “And we have a duty—”

“—To keep our fans laughing!”

Arthur shook his head at the irrepressible twins. “Later, boys, when we’re not in the middle of a serious strategy session.”

The twins nodded and settled down.

Tonks gave Severus a searching look. “You became shadow, huh? Kind of like I can shift into other people?”

Severus frowned. “Perhaps a bit, only the world shifted with me.”

Remus shivered. “Merlin. That’s a strange power, Severus. I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

“No, have I, and I have studied many unusual branches of magic.”
Kingsley hugged his chest, obviously thrown off kilter. “Well, it’s a bit eerie, to be sure, but if it
helped you find Harry, then I won’t complain. Whatever it is, it’s damned useful.”

Severus nodded in acknowledgement.

“Maybe Lu will have an idea about what it is,” Harry said with a shrug. “I’ve never heard of
anything like that either.”

Seth nodded. “She might, or Hermione. She reads everything she gets her hands on. She might have
read about it somewhere.”

Harry chuckled. “Understatement. The woman is a walking library.”

Severus snorted. “Well, we shall ask her about it too then. Perhaps she can help me find answers,
even if she does not yet have them.”

“True.” Harry grinned at his mate. “I have to say, though, either way, you’re bloody brilliant,
Severus. And that’s sexy as hell.”

“Gods, not right in front of us, Harry,” said Kingsley with a groan.

Fred smirked. “I wouldn’t mind a show.”

“Same here,” George said with a wink.

Remus winced. “You’re talking about my cub, boys. Merlin.”

Severus’ cheeks reddened. “Dear gods. I am hardly an exhibitionist.” He smirked and shot them ‘the
eyebrow.’ “Besides, this is our home. If I wish to have time with my mate, I will simply throw the lot
of you out.”

“Us too, I hope,” said a blushing Seth.

Keiran nodded, his cheeks bright red.

Severus laughed. “Of course, children. We would never scar you in that manner.” His mirth faded.
“You have already suffered enough, and I have vowed to take care of you.”

“Me too,” Harry murmured, running a fingertip down Keiran’s hair. “You’re always going to be safe
here. Safe and loved.”

Keiran reeled, eyes wide and glimmering. He mouthed, “You love me?”

Harry smiled and petted his hair, or tried to. It was difficult with such a tiny picture. “I love you. We
both do.”

Severus nodded. “I do as well, little one.”

Keiran gave them a tearful smile and buried his face against Harry’s thumb.

Seth watched the photo with worry in his eyes. “Keiran, you’re happy, right? Not upset?”

Keiran nodded and wiped his face. He made some kind of complicated gestures at Seth, and Seth
translated with a sad smile.

“He just said he hasn’t heard it since his … family died.”
Harry turned into Severus and soothe his sudden grief with a gentle kiss. “I’m here,” he whispered to his soul-bond. “We all are.”

Severus nodded and closed his eyes. “Harry, if you will care for Keiran, we must move on. We have little time.”

Harry gave the photo a sad smile. “Yeah, of course. He’ll be all right though, Verus. I think he’s just overwhelmed.”

Keiran nodded and laid his head against Harry’s thumb.

“Yes, I understand.” Severus ran a careful fingertip down Keiran’s hair, then turned back to the twins, his expression grave. “Fred, George, we need another emergency broadcast.”

The twins’ usual joviality vanished in an instant. “Yes, sir,” said George.

Fred conjured a notepad and a Dicta-quill. “Go on, then.”

“We’re ready.” George pulled an oddly-shaped wire instrument from his pocket. It looked somewhat like a bronze compass pen. He started chanting a low string of Latin words into the compass pen, giving it a peculiar teal glow.

“Communication spell,” Fred explained. “It takes a long time to prepare, so we’ll have the broadcast up faster if he does that while I record your message.”

“Fair enough,” said Harry with a grin. “Merlin, you two are brilliant.”

Fred beamed. “Wait till we start working with your professor, mate. We’ll have the war won in a week.”

Harry laughed. “That’s the spirit.”

Severus shook his head. “We will win nothing until we find a way to kill the bastard. But let us hurry on with the message. Lives are on the line.”

Fred nodded and sat tall. “Go on then.”

Severus straightened and spoke in his classroom voice, authority saturating his tone. “An undercover agent infiltrated the Ministry this morning and discovered the true purpose behind the Muggle Registration Committee ….”

As soon as the twins had the information needed for the broadcast, they left, glowing coil and notepad in tow. Harry watched them go, then settled closer into Severus’ side and sighed.

“Well, that’s one thing done. Now what?”

“Now we decide what to do about the Ministry,” said Severus, his expression grave. “It is clear that the problem of corruption from within is growing out of control. If Umbridge has the power to organise a genocidal committee with the intent and ability to wipe out the entire Muggleborn and Squib population of Britain, then it is clear Riddle’s reach goes far deeper than we had anticipated. Shacklebolt—”
“Call me Kingsley, Snape.”

Severus gave him a wry smile. “Call me Severus, then. As I was saying, Kingsley, who do you know of that is operating under the _Imperius_ curse?”

“Thicknesse is, I have no doubt about it. The man is, well, much too _thick_ to have gone so far on his own power.”

Severus nodded. “I would have to agree, from what little I know of him. Who else?”

“I’m pretty sure someone got to Robards this morning.” Tonks twisted her hands over each other, her eyes full of worry. “He was acting … really odd. Never even yelled at me for being a klutz once. I meant to tell you after the mission, Shack, but then all hell broke loose.”

“That _is_ odd,” said Kingsley with a deep frown. “Robards’ favourite thing to do is wonder how you passed your cadet training with three left feet.”

Tonks glared. “Thanks.”

Kingsley snorted. “I’m quoting what he said to me at lunch yesterday.” His mirth faded. “It’s possible someone did get to him. I’ll check it out.”

Harry frowned. “Robards is the chief of the auror department, right?”

“Yeah. I’m the head as far as field work goes. Robards handles the deskwork and politics behind the DMLE.” Kingsley shook his head, his expression grave. “Which means Yaxley will be out on a pardon by tonight if Robards really is _Imperiused_.”

Severus winced. “And that will make your position even more precarious, Kingsley. Do be careful.”

“You got it,” the auror said with a shudder. “If I can get Robards alone, I’ll clear him myself. Evidence or no evidence, it’s too bloody dangerous to have the chief auror under the control of the dark.”

“Or Dumbledore,” said Harry in a grim voice.

“Or that,” Kingsley agreed with a wince.

Severus nodded. “Is there anyone else you suspect has been tampered with, Kingsley—by either side?”

Kingsley sighed and ran a hand over his scalp. “Other than Robards and Thicknesse, it’s a fair assumption to make that Riddle and Dumbledore most likely have several moles in the Wizengamot. I’m not sure who at the moment, but I’ll find out. As for the rest of the Ministry, I’m positive Riddle has Ludo Bagman, Mariana Edgecombe, and Amos Diggory under his control. I suspect Dumbledore got to Mafalda Hopkirk, or that could be Riddle again too. One of them has her under their thumb for certain.”

“Not good,” said Severus with a wince.

“Not at all,” Kingsley agreed. “And those are only the few we’re certain of. There are several others we suspect have been controlled but cannot prove it. Besides that, there are others who aren’t cursed, but have been coerced or threatened into supporting his whims.”

Harry winced. “Riddle has Mister Diggory under the _Imperius_? He hasn’t he taken enough from that
Severus hugged Harry tight and ran a comforting hand down his side.

Arthur gave them a sad nod. “I keep trying to get close enough to break it, but whoever cursed him is smart enough to avoid those of the Light as much as possible. None of us have been able to break it yet. Not to worry though—we will soon enough.”

“Might be better to leave it,” said a grim Tonks. “If he stays under it, he stays safe.”

“Unless his captor orders him to go to his own death,” said Severus with a shake of his head. “Or have you forgotten the Crouch debacle already?”

Kingsley nodded. “Severus is right. We need to release all the victims as soon as possible and place them and their families into the protection programme.”

“No, not the protection programme,” said Harry with a grimace. “It’s under Ministry control and the Ministry likes to leave paper trails. If Robards really is under Imperius, he would have access to the victims’ information: identities, family members, where they’re staying now. They’d all be sitting ducks. And even if he isn’t being controlled, there might be others hiding in the wings—and they don’t need to be cursed to spy for the dark.”

Tonks winced. “Merlin. You make a good point, but what are we supposed to do with them then? We can’t just turn them loose—they’ll be killed or cursed all over again.”

Harry waved his good arm at the space around them. “Bring them here, no records, no paper trails. We can keep them safe.”

“Harry is right,” said Severus. “Anyone who is under the curse should be first questioned to determine their innocence and then evacuated here, with a vow of secrecy never to reveal either the location of their safehouse or the identities of their neighbours, though we will need a spokesperson of a sort so they can send others who need help to us. We shall work out the wording of the vow before you leave here today.”

Tonks nodded, though she looked uncertain. “That’s going to be difficult to manage, Severus. Especially undercover.”

“There is little other choice. If we leave the victims to the Ministry, they will become targets for the other Unforgiveables. If we do not first vet them and swear them in, we become the targets.”

Remus nodded. “Yes, I agree. However, not everyone will want to take an oath. Is there anywhere we can send those who don’t agree to secrecy?”

Kingsley shook his head. “Unless they have relatives or properties outside of Britain or go through the system, I don’t know of any feasible way to protect them.”

“For now, we have little other choice than to leave those who do not take the oath of secrecy to their own devices,” said Severus. “There is simply too much at stake to risk it and to use the protection programme will sign their death warrants. We may, in time, be able to procure a second hideout for those unwilling to take the oath, but for now, Bàn Leon is all we have to offer.”

Guilt and horror choked Harry’s throat. “No. That means some people might die because we can’t take them in, and I can’t accept that.”

Beside him, Seth’s voice came out broken. “Da, we can’t … we can’t just let them die.”
Severus took the portrait into his free arm. “We will do everything possible. But I cannot risk my family or our … friends, for someone who is unwilling to keep our secrets.”

“Then, then we’ve got to stop it!” Harry rubbed a hand across his eyes. “We’ve got to stop it now before anyone else gets hurt!”

“How, Harry?” Tonks shook her head. “I know where you’re coming from and I know it sucks, but Severus is right. We can’t save them all.”

Harry jerked to his feet, shaking and cold from head to toe. “We have to try! There must be a way.”

“This is war, Harry.” Tonks’ voice was firm, though her eyes were gentle. “You have to remember that. We’ll do our best to save everyone we can, but our power is limited. In the end, people are going to die. It’s just the way it is.”

“You don’t understand,” Harry whispered, making himself as small as he could with his arm so injured. “They’re dying for me. It’s my fault—”

“Potter!” Severus grabbed Harry’s good shoulder and his chin and forced the young man to look into his eyes. “Must everything revolve around you?”

Harry cringed away, and Severus’ tone softened. “Shite. Forgive me, Harry.”

“Severus,” said Remus in a warning tone.

Severus winced and guided Harry to sit beside him. “Harry, I know you do not think that way. I am only afraid for you. I apologise for my sharp words.”

Harry nodded, wary and uncertain.

“I do love you, Harry.” Severus’ gentle kiss on his brow eased the rest of Harry’s hurt.

“Why did you snap at me like that, then?”

“Because you are wrong and you frightened me.” Severus cupped Harry’s face. “I know you feel as if the world is dying for you, but it is simply not true. You must learn that the guilt for Riddle’s victims lies with him and his Death Eaters. You are in no way responsible.”

Shame settled in Harry’s stomach, cold and heavy as lead—and twice as toxic. “But it is true! He’s so obsessed with me, Severus! How can you say I’m not responsible when he kills people trying to smoke me out, and—”

Arthur’s gentle voice interjected, “And that is exactly Severus’ point, Harry. Riddle is obsessed. He kills people. You’ve never harmed them.”

Severus wiped tears from Harry’s face. “Precisely. You are innocent.”

Harry shuddered, unable to escape the cold weight of his guilt. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

Severus stroked up and down Harry’s back. “I understand. But if the crimes you forgave me of do not apply to me, then these do not apply to you.”

Harry winced as the truth of Severus’ words hit him hard. The man was right. Harry couldn’t blame himself for the same crimes he had absolved Severus of and his logic still apply.

But even so, the thought of more people dying for Riddle’s twisted obsession left an icy void in his
chest. “S-sorry. I just … I want it over. And I can’t just sit back and let people die.”

“And we won’t.” Kingsley patted Harry’s shoulder. “We’ll save as many as we can, but we can’t rush in, Harry. We have to be careful, especially with enemies on three sides. Rash decisions will get us all killed.”

Harry winced at the reminder of his recent failures. “As I should have learned earlier. Gods, I’m such a fool.”

He lowered his head, the crushing weight of his inadequacies bowing his shoulders. The Seventh Day Seer indeed. He couldn’t lead people—Merlin, he couldn’t even manage to keep himself whole. How could he become a general? He’d only get everyone killed, just like he had always done. Cedric, Sirius, his parents—more would fall, and Harry couldn’t bear the burden of their lives. He couldn’t do this.

Gentle pressure rubbed against his thumb. Harry looked down to see Keiran rubbing his hands over the pad of Harry’s thumb. Concern and love marked his expression. Harry gave the boy a weary smile and traced a fingertip down his hair.

“Harry ….” Severus held his soul bond’s face. “Love, do not do this to yourself. You are a good man, and one day, you will be a good leader.”

“How can you say that, Severus? Look at me!” Harry nodded to his shoulder, winching at the pain the movement caused. “Look what my leadership got me. I almost got us all killed!”

Severus brought Harry in to rest against his chest. “Ssh. You are still learning, love, and we all bear some responsibility for this. We put too much on your shoulders too soon. And we shall not do so again.”

“He’s right, Harry,” said Kingsley, his eyes full of remorse. “I got so caught up in your power, I forgot you’re still learning how to lead, how to fight. It was our duty to protect and teach you, and we forgot that.”

“I should have been able to stop him,” Harry argued. “What good is all this power if I can’t even stop a low-ranking Death Eater?”

Remus shook his head. “Harry, you’re being too hard on yourself. Even a mage can be taken off guard by a clever opponent, especially a new mage just discovering his capabilities.”

“No one is invincible,” Tonks agreed. “But one mistake doesn’t make you a failure, Harry. And really, the mistake was ours in the first place. We should have stayed with you instead of leaving you to face them on your own.”

Her face fell. “Merlin, that’s what the Order’s done to you your whole life, isn’t it? Just left you to deal with him alone while the rest of us twiddle our thumbs.” She shook her head, hair turning blue with sorrow. “No wonder you feel so responsible.”

Harry squirmed and looked away, unwilling to admit the truth of that statement. He was supposed to face Riddle alone, wasn’t he?

“Harry,” Seth said with compassion in his eyes, “it’s not your place to take responsibility for everything.”

Harry winced. He should have known Seth would understand. They shared too much for him not to know exactly what Harry was thinking.
Harry stared at his lap, eyes brimming and his chest tight. “It’s just … the Prophecy said it’s me or him. So it has to be me in the end. And that means we’re all screwed! I can’t—I can’t even—”

A smack landed against his thumb, and Harry looked down to find Keiran glaring at him.

Severus snorted. “Yes, indeed, Keiran. Harry is being a dunderhead at the moment.”

Keiran smirked.

Harry shoved off of Severus’ lap, ignoring the pain in his shoulder. “It’s true, Verus. You heard the prophecy—I’m the only one with the power and—”

Severus grabbed Harry by the hand. “And your own bloody prophecy foretold of an entire army to help you take them down, Harry! Merlin! I swear I will break you of this bloody martyr complex if it’s the last thing I do!”

Seth gave a laugh choked with tears. “Good luck with that, Dad. It’s been beaten in there that everything is our fault since we were babies. Harry’s dealt with it much longer than I have. It’s going to be tough to get past that.”

Remus winced and lowered his head. “Merlin, Seth. We’ve all failed you and Harry, haven’t we?”

Harry shook his head. “No. No, it’s my fault. I should have—”

“Stop.” Severus stood, set Keiran to hover beside Harry, and tugged his distraught soul-bond into a gentle embrace. “Peace, beloved. Those thoughts you are having—that this is all your fault and you are responsible for healing it—they are poison left over from foolish people who have failed you.” He tilted Harry’s chin up to his face and gave him a sorrowful look. “I am one of them.”

“Severus, no,” Harry whispered. “No, you didn’t—”

“I was the worst of them, Harry. I hurt you terribly and treated you worse than rubbish. I deserve nothing but your scorn.” Severus traced a fingertip down Harry’s face. “And yet, you forgive me, do you not?”

“I love you,” Harry insisted, tears brimming his lashes. “I don’t care what you did in the past. I love you, so of course I forgive you.”

Severus brushed Harry’s tears away and kissed his scar. “How is it that you can be so forgiving towards me, and yet so unyielding with yourself?”

Harry cringed and looked away.

“Harry, look at me.”

Slowly, Harry obeyed.

Severus rubbed a fingertip along Harry’s chin. “Your prophecy said you would be a leader, yes, but not a lone fighter. You will have a position of importance in the war, but that does not mean you will fight it alone, nor does it mean you bear responsibility for every person who does not survive. Lupin and I are prophesied to lead as well, remember? Do we bear responsibility for those who do not make it?”

Tears spilled over and slipped down Harry’s cheeks. “No,” he whispered.

“Then neither do you, beloved.” Severus held Harry’s face and rubbed away his tears. “You are
“strong, my Harry. You can do this. I believe in you. And we will not let you face it alone.”

“No, we won’t,” Remus agreed. “We’re in this together, Harry.”

Severus kissed Harry with a feather-light, loving touch. “See, beloved? You have all of us to support you. Please, do not take the entire burden on yourself. Let us help you. Let us share your load.”

Harry stared into Severus’ eyes for a long time, unable to speak. The wisdom of Severus’ words, the love in his touch worked inside him, unravelling the web of guilt he had carried all his life, piece by piece. The Dursleys had convinced Harry long ago that he was a hopeless freak, but Severus believed in him. Severus loved him. As did Seth, Keiran, Remus, the Weasleys, and everyone in the Dawn. Even the Slytherins were coming around.

Was Harry truly going to listen to his idiot relatives over his soul-bond, family, and friends?

No. No, it was time to let that hatred go. They had hurt him, but Harry wasn’t alone any longer. He wasn’t that scared little boy in a cupboard anymore. He was a mage, a fighter, and someday, a leader.

Harry let his breath out in a rush and gave Severus a nod. His mate was right. Harry could accept his family’s help. He loved them all, and if they wanted him to lean on them, if they wanted to support him, then the least Harry could do was trust in their judgment.

Merlin help him, he couldn’t do this alone anyway.


Severus kissed his forehead and held him close. “Thank you.”

Harry sighed and nuzzled his mate’s chest, then stepped back. “But I still need to … I have to do better.” He motioned to his injured arm. “I’ll get people killed like this.”

“The mistake was ours,” Severus said, indicating himself, Tonks, and Kingsley. “We knew you were still learning. We should not have left you alone.” He held Harry’s good shoulder and placed a gentle hand on his injured forearm, just barely touching so as not to hurt him. “We placed too much faith in your magical ability, forgetting that you have no Muggle training nor do you know how to break out of magical binds, but we shan’t make that mistake again. I promise you.”

Harry gaped. “You can break out of an anti-magic cuff?”

“I?” Severus shrugged. “I do not know if I am capable of it. You, however, have the kind of power to potentially overload magic dampening charms and escape that way. It is something we should practise, along with teaching you to fight via Muggle means.”

Harry nodded, wrapping his good arm around his waist. “I thought that today—Runcorn mightn’t have been able to get away with me if I’d known how to fight. He hurt my arm early on, but I still had my legs. If I’d known what to do, maybe I could’ve escaped. But as it was, the guy was taller and heavier than me and I didn’t have the strength to break free though I fought like mad.”

“We’ll work to correct that,” said Kingsley. “Can’t have you vulnerable when Old Ugly has it out for you.”

“Tell that to Dumbledore,” Seth muttered.

“He will not be in power much longer,” Severus assured him. “As soon as we deal with Riddle, he is
next.”

Harry gave him a worried look. “What if I can’t, Severus? I’m … maybe I’m not cut out for this.”

Severus shook his head. “No one is born knowing how to fight or how to lead. You have all the qualities a good general needs. We will teach you the rest. Will you trust me? Trust us?”

Harry looked around the room and sighed, resistance slipping away. “I do trust you.”

Severus led him back to the sofa. “Come then. Rest, and help us plan. You have more cunning than you give yourself credit for, my little snake in the grass.”

Harry chuckled in spite of himself. “Yeah, I guess.” He sat beside Severus, Summoning Keiran back into his hands. The boy gave him a reassuring smile, taking away some of Harry’s uncertainty.

Everyone had faith in him. He couldn’t ignore that. He wanted to make them proud.

Resolution stiffened his spine. He would make them proud. He would fight this war—he would do whatever it took to win, for Severus. For Keiran and Seth. For his family and friends. For the hope that one day they might have a future without the need to fight for it. And he would trust them all to help in their own ways, both to teach and to fight alongside him.

He had faith in them, too.

Harry nodded to himself, steeling his resolution, and gave Keiran a wry smile. “Thanks for snapping me out of it, Keiran. Though you had better not slap me when you’re big enough to do some damage. I’m still working out a way to ground Seth if he misbehaves. Don’t think it won’t apply to you as well.”

Keiran laughed and nodded.

Severus chuckled and hugged Harry’s waist. “Are you well now, love?”

Harry gave him a half smile. “Better anyway.” He sat tall, refusing to give into doubt when he had people depending on him. He was stronger than that. “I’ll be okay, but the Ministry isn’t. We’ve headed off their plans to murder Muggleborns for now, but they’ll come up with a new one eventually. And in the meantime, we have Riddle controlling the Minister and Death Eaters and dark supporters scattered all through the Ministry itself, not to mention Dumbledore’s moles. How do we fix it? Stage a coup and throw out the baddies?”


“Phenomenally bad idea, kiddo,” said Kingsley.

Tonks’ hair went green with fright. “Merlin forbid!”

“Okay,” said Harry with a wince. “Tell me why, though. Wouldn’t it be better to just take them out fast before they can do too much damage? They’d probably listen to me if I took the lead at the Ministry, much as I’d rather not, and I could clean out the rubbish. So why is it such a bad idea?”

Remus shook his head. “The problem with a coup, cub, is that it’s violent and bloody. Both sides would incur incredible losses. And besides that, a hostile takeover of our standing government—even one with good people behind it—is still a hostile takeover in the end. It gives our enemies a foothold to weaken our position. People would fear us, and those people could easily use the same channels we have to spread doubt and resentment for our leadership.”
Arthur took over the lesson. “Yes, and purebloods, especially, will be violently opposed to such tactics—and before you say good riddance to bad rubbish, I’ll remind you your own family is pureblooded through your father, Severus’ mother, and Molly and myself, of course.”

Harry blushed, as the words had been on the tip of his tongue. “S-sorry, Dad Weasley.”

“Not at all,” said Arthur with a chuckle. “I know you didn’t mean us. But there are others like us, too. It’s true that many purebloods support You-Know-Who’s tactics, but just as many don’t. We’re more diverse than Riddle seems to think. The one thing we have in common, Harry, is that most purebloods believe in tradition and the sanctity of authority. You’ll lose their support if you take over like this and trample all over the laws we put in place for our own protection.” Kingsley nodded. “Worst case scenario, you lose everyone’s support and leave openings for people like Lucius Malfoy to worm their way back into power. Merlin help us then.”

Harry winced. “Well, we definitely don’t want that, so let’s just scrap the coup idea. It wasn’t really a serious suggestion. I just asked why it was a bad plan to learn more about tactics.”

Severus rubbed Harry’s side in encouragement. “I will find some books for you. There is one Muggle book that I know of with good information, though of course you will need to adapt it to Wizarding society. For now, keep asking questions, love, even if they seem foolish. That is how you learn.”

Harry nodded and leaned into Severus’ touch, relieved he had done the right thing. “Good to know. But we still don’t have an answer about the Ministry. How do we stop them?”

“The same way we have been thus far, Harry: one step at a time.”

Harry frowned. “But is that enough?”

Severus nodded. “It may not seem like much, Harry, but we have made great strides. It is true that Riddle and Dumbledore have all the power at the moment, but through the Prophet and our missions, we have been steadily rerouting support. Riddle’s platform is already crumbling. Soon, we will be able to remove him from the equation, and once we have the power of that accomplishment under our belt, the Dawn will then have enough support to focus on pulling the rug out from underneath Dumbledore and the Ministry.” He shook his head. “But even then, we will need to take it a step at a time and utilise legal means as much as possible.”

“I … I guess you’re right,” said a disheartened Harry. “It’s just so slow.”

Tonks patted his arm. “Slow is the way to go. Move too fast, and we look like tyrants. We don’t want that, Harry. Tyrants tend to be overthrown.”

“Hence our operation to overthrow the two biggest tyrants Britain has ever seen,” said Kingsley.

Harry sighed and leaned on his knees, holding Keiran’s photo carefully. “I … I know. I don’t want to be a tyrant either. If I had my way, I wouldn’t be in power at all. Severus and I would go retire to the countryside somewhere with our boys and figure out a way to bring them home.” He stroked Keiran’s hair and gave Seth a sad smile. “That’s all I want, really.”

Seth pressed a hand against the canvas and smiled back. “Someday, we’ll be free. I know it. I believe in you, Harry.”

Keiran kissed Harry’s thumb and nodded. “Me too.”

Harry swallowed a sudden surge of emotion. His voice came out rough when he could finally speak.
“Thank you, boys.” He cleared his throat and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I will free you someday, but it mightn’t be anytime soon, no thanks to that bloody Seventh Day prophecy. I don’t want fame, I don’t want to be a leader, and I sure as hell don’t want to lead an army of weres and vampires against the dark, but that’s what fate has planned for me, whether I like it or not.”

Severus comforted Harry with a gentle hand through his hair. Harry smiled at his soul-bond and pulled himself together.

“I would rather just have a peaceful life in the countryside, but since that isn’t an option, since I have to be a leader, I want to be a good one. I want the darkness in Britain gone. I want this to be a country we can all be proud of. And I guess … it just really sucks that I can’t do much about it yet. I feel powerless and scared, and I don’t like it.”

Severus tugged Harry into his lap. “I know, pet, but—”

The wireless crackled and popped and the twins’ siren spell drowned out all attempts at speech. Harry covered his ringing ears and leaned into Severus’ chest until the siren faded.

“Hello, Wizarding Britain,” came the voice of Fred Weasley. “This is another emergency broadcast from those of us at Potterwatch. I’m Rapier, and I’m joined today by ….”

“River,” said Lee Jordan.

“Rosa,” said Angelina.

“And Rapscallion,” said George.

“Smart idea to use aliases,” Remus observed.

Harry nodded and listened to the broadcast.

“We’re here today to warn folks about the latest undercover scheme Mouldy Shorts has put into play against those with Muggle ancestry.”

“That’s right,” said Lee. “You may have heard about the Ministry’s new Muggleborn and Squib Registration Act? If you’ve also heard of the holocaust and how Muggle Jews were forced to register by the presiding government during Grindelwald’s war, I think you can see where this is going.”

“Exactly, River,” said a shaken Angelina. “The Ministry claims the intent of the act is to keep track of Muggleborns and Squibs and provide them with the assistance they need to thrive in wizarding society, but thanks to our undercover agents working at the Ministry, we discovered the true purpose behind the act today. Be warned, it’s absolutely horrific. If you have young children, you might want to lead them out of the room now. We will give you a moment.”

The broadcast paused, but no one said a word.

“That’s all the time we can afford to give,” said Fred. “Every moment we wait is another moment someone may die.”

“And to that end,” said Lee, “onto our message. This morning, an undercover agent questioned those in charge of the Muggleborn and Squib Registration Act, and what they learned was chilling. The Noseless Nuisance’s Ministry has no intention of helping Muggleborns or Squibs, not that it should come as a surprise. Death Eaters and the people in charge of this vile Registration Committee see those of Muggle ancestry and Squibs as vermin, a scourge on Wizarding Britain. And what do people do to vermin? They exterminate them.”
“It’s a terrifying prospect, River,” said George, “but that’s the gist of it. Those who obey this mad law and register with the British Ministry will, according to the official herself, have a trial to prove they have stolen magic, be stripped of their wands, and fed to Dementors. And it won’t be a fair trial, people. The minute your name is on that Registration list, it’s off to the death chamber for you.”

Fred took over for his twin. “We’re here to warn our Muggleborn and Squib population that Britain isn’t safe for you. Either go underground or get out of the country—and do it fast. They’ve already begun capturing people. This morning, our undercover agents discovered several Death Eaters and Snatchers—the Snatchers are Captain Cue-Ball’s Muggleborn kidnapping crew, in case you’ve forgotten—in the Ministry Atrium. They had already gathered over thirty victims. Between our agents and the aurors, all the potential victims made it out to safety and aurors apprehended Corban Yaxley at the scene, but this isn’t over, folks.”

“No, this was only their first attempt,” said Angelina, “and the next one might—”

Harry shrieked as a lance of white-hot anguish cut his brain in two. A blinding miasma of impotent rage choked his blood and ripped from his throat in a scream of fury.

He came to lying on the sofa with Severus hovering over him, holding a phial of potion to his lips.

“There you are, pet. Drink up. You will feel better soon.”

Harry swallowed the potion and groaned. “That bloody hurt.”

Severus scooped Harry into his arms and settled him back on his lap. “I am sorry, love. Is it better now?”

Harry nodded and buried his head in Severus’ shoulder. “I don’t think he liked our little surprise.”

Severus gave a dark chuckle. “Wait until he sees the newspaper tomorrow. I shall give Sandra an insider exclusive Skeeter would die for.”

Harry laughed weakly and snuggled closer to his mate. “Yeah. I just wish we could do more.”

“More?” Arthur shook his head. “Harry, that broadcast my impetuous sons just sent out will save thousands of lives. I understand how that might feel like a small thing when you consider how much more we have to do to oust the dark side from power, but I assure you, son, the hundreds of Muggleborn families who can be safe with their children tonight will think otherwise.”

“Arthur is right,” said Kingsley with a nod. “This was a huge step towards taking down Riddle and his forces, Harry.”

“And once I bring in the werewolves,” said Remus, “we’ll be that much closer to our goals.”

“It’s the battles that win the war, love.” Severus kissed Harry’s forehead and held him tight. “And this was a major victory for the Dawn.”

Harry blinked back a wave of tears and hugged his soul-bond tight. “I love you, Verus. I’m so glad you’re here. All of you. I thought I’d have to do this on my own and … and ….”

“And now we have an entire court of people to support us, and more coming every day,” said Severus with a smile.

“All those things we’re working towards are starting to happen, Harry,” said Tonks with a grin. “It’s amazing what you two have done in such a short time, and now you have more people to help.”
“Thanks.” Harry’s voice shrunk into something small and terrified. “It’s just, there’s so much yet to do before we can make this world a safe place. It’s … I’m scared.”

Severus cupped Harry’s face, holding his gaze. “It is an enormous task, yes, and it won’t be easy, but take heart, pet. We have the advantage of knowledge of both sides and the best of Britain’s fighters in our ranks. We may lose a few battles, but I have confidence that we will win the war. And, thank Merlin, whatever happens, we do not have to face it alone.”

Harry gave Severus a tearful smile. “Yeah. You’re right.”

Severus kissed Harry lightly. “It’s going to be all right, love. We will face this together.”

Harry slipped his hands over Severus’ and held him tight. “Together.”

~…Part 1 Fin…~
Artwork: Night of the Harrys

Chapter Summary

Added a chapter with a new artwork for the escape from the Dursleys'. The artwork has been added to the appropriate chapter too, but I wanted to give those who've already finished the book a chance to view it if they want to.

Night of the Harrys

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!